

CONCEPTIONS OF THE BODY IN OBESITY EPIDEMIC DISCOURSES

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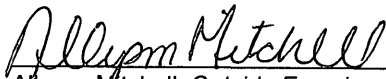
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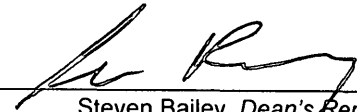
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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

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Abstract

Competing explanations of the obesity epidemic identify either individual or systemic causes, blaming the failure of fat people themselves or larger societal problems as the cause of increasing rates of obesity. Yet, despite important political differences between these frames, both characterize the fat body similarly and use the fat body to symbolize the same things: loss of control, lack of moral fortitude, and irrationality. This thesis traces the cultural roots of the denigration of the fat body, and analyses the meaning of the fat body in contemporary critiques of industrialized food production, finding that food activist literature, a variant of the systemic frame, is as reliant on the stigmatization of fat and the fundamental distrust and rejection of the body in general as is the individualizing frame. Both these frames, and the very concept of an “obesity epidemic”, emerge from and continue the long tradition of somatophobia in Western culture.

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Introduction: What Kind of Problem Is Obesity?

According to media headlines and public health messages, we are in the midst of an obesity epidemic. We – Canadians, North Americans, members of wealthy or Western societies, or perhaps the whole of humanity – are getting fatter, with disastrous consequences for our health and our economies. Whether the cause is laziness and moral decay, the vast junk food and fast food industries, car-dependent lifestyles, video games, or high-fructose corn syrup, the effect is near-unanimously agreed-upon: an epidemic of unprecedented fatness. Our fatness reveals us as weak-willed over-consumers, at the mercy of corporate greed, unable to discipline our or our children's voracious appetites and consequently spilling out into piles of repulsive, flabby flesh.

Yet while there is widespread consensus that an obesity epidemic is happening, the origins and the meaning of this increasing fatness are subject to controversy. While some view obesity as a personal problem, caused when lazy people eat too much and can't be bothered to exercise, others argue that it is a problem caused by the social environment, with its over-abundance of cheap and unhealthy foods, uneven access to nutritious food, and lack of opportunities for physical exertion both in regular daily life and as planned exercise. These two positions represent more than a simple disagreement about the objective conditions of a growing health problem: in this thesis I explore these competing frames of the obesity epidemic as articulations of conceptions of the body and its place in society. These conceptions sometimes contrast, but very often concur: as I argue in this thesis, despite a distinct political difference between these two positions,

both are rooted in shared ideas about the body, and a shared denigration of the fat body.

I position this research within the emerging field of critical fat studies. Scholarly work critiquing the anti-fat bias of Western culture began with second-wave feminism in the 1970s (Wright, 2009, pp. 5-6), but has grown into a distinct sub-field of cultural studies in tandem with, and likely in response to, an increasing cultural hysteria about the obesity epidemic. Critical fat studies challenges the assumption that fat is a problem, an assumption which scholars locate in medical, public health, and governmental discourses, in news and entertainment media, and in everyday public opinion. Researchers analyze and criticize the science behind the obesity epidemic, pointing out the ways in which it is biased by anti-fat cultural values and ties to the weight-loss industry especially via funding (Gard and Wright, 2005; Gard, 2011; Wright and Harwood, 2009; Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, and Gaesser, 2005). Gard and Wright (2005) argue that the pervasive anti-fat ideology in Western culture has led both scientists and the general public to exaggerate the significance of the very limited evidence connecting fat and ill health, constructing an epidemic out of a conviction that fat is bad, rather than out of actual scientific evidence. Other scholars focus less on the empirical evidence for or against health risks of fatness and more on how messages about health are deployed to discipline, categorize, and evaluate bodies and persons. In this approach, which makes up most of critical fat studies, the hard data about body weight and health is secondary to the cultural implications of how we talk about body size and health.

This latter approach is the one I take in this project. I am not, here, primarily concerned with assessing or debunking the claim that obesity is a disease, or that as a

disease it can be classified as an epidemic. Rather, I take as a starting point that the obesity epidemic is a cultural construct, and that how it is constructed reveals something meaningful about how bodies are understood in Western culture. In this project, I analyze the two approaches to understanding obesity outline above, which, on one level, are starkly dissimilar, and are rooted in opposing political ideologies. However, through a detailed analysis, I demonstrate that at a more fundamental level, these approaches share a conceptualization of the body, and especially a denigration of the fat body, that is rooted in the “profound somatophobia” that Elizabeth Grosz (1994) identifies at the heart of the Western cultural tradition.

Framing the obesity epidemic: individualizing and systemic frames

In a 2004 article, Regina Lawrence examines the competition between what she terms the “individualizing” and “systemic” frames of the obesity epidemic: the former comprises arguments that the obesity epidemic results from poor choices on an individual level, and the latter that a variety of systemic factors, beyond the control of obese individuals, have caused the epidemic. These two frames are not mutually exclusive, but rather act as ends of a continuum, with many positions between the two involving some combination of individual and systemic responsibility for the obesity epidemic. As Lawrence explains, who or what is blamed for a social problem is a crucial question, because with blame comes the burden of action. Lawrence’s concern is to understand how the terms of public discourse about obesity may be shifted towards the systemic frame, so that government, corporate, and other powerful actors may be required to enact

systemic solutions.

In this research, I have adopted the two frames as Lawrence defines them. My project is not, as hers is, to advance the systemic frame against the individualizing frame, nor even strictly to counterpose the two, but to understand how they converge on the body: what kind of body both frames represent and address. The political differences between the two frames are significant: as Lawrence describes, the individualizing frame of the obesity epidemic aligns with a generally individualistic worldview, opposed to government intervention and regulation, while the systemic frame fits into a more collectivist worldview, supportive of government intervention and asserting a responsibility to care for others. This ideological divergence has concrete results when it comes to social policy; Julier (2008) comments that “this [individualizing] framing of obesity is useful for those whose ideological commitments are focused on ‘individual responsibility’ rather than universal health insurance” (p. 494). However, beyond their competing policy implications, the two frames share a common basis in a way of understanding the body. Because of this important common ground, I will argue, both frames perpetuate and reinforce not only stigmatization of fat bodies and discrimination against fat people, but an impoverished and conflictual relationship with all bodies.

In this thesis, I analyze and compare the concepts of the body that are articulated in the systemic and individualizing frame of the obesity epidemic. After outlining my theoretical and methodological approach in Chapter 1, I address the individualizing frame and its implications for the body in Chapter 2. For this analysis, I draw on the existing critical fat studies literature to analyze what messages about fatness and bodies are

embedded in the individualizing frame, connecting these to the central concepts identified in my theoretical framework.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I turn to the systemic frame. This section is my original contribution to the growing body of scholarly work critiquing ideas about obesity and fatness. For this project, I have selected a variant within the systemic frame for analysis: food system critique. I analyze in-depth the writings and films of a selection of food activists. In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the main arguments that food critics make about the causes of obesity, explaining how their analysis fits within the systemic frame. In Chapter 4, I explore how the body is represented in these works, and connect this representation to the recurring themes in the individualizing frame, to argue that despite their strong contrasts in some respects, these two competing frames share a basis in a specific understanding of the body, one that simultaneously reduces the body to the status of object, to be dominated and controlled by the mind, and reads the body as a meaningful and revealing signifier of the inner state of the person as well as the state of society as a whole.

I have narrowed my focus to food system critique partly due to the constraints of the scope of this project, but also because books and films criticizing the industrial food production system have become highly popular and influential in recent years. Journalist and food activist Michael Pollan was listed as one of TIME magazine's 100 most influential people of 2010, as was psychologist and obesity researcher Kelly Brownell in 2006. The films *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) and *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004) were each nominated for an Academy Award in the "Best Documentary" category, in 2010 and

2005 respectively. *Super Size Me* in particular had great commercial success, grossing \$11.5 million, placing it in the top twenty highest-grossing documentaries of all time. The popularity of the food system critique is also increasingly reflected in food advertising, which emphasizes real food, fresh ingredients, and domestic products, key themes promoted by food activists. The fast food chain Wendy's has recently adopted the slogan "You know when it's real", sung cheerfully in advertisements featuring images of whole potatoes and dewy tomatoes, with references to fresh "Maplewood smoked bacon" and "North American beef". McDonald's newest slogan is "What we're made of" and its ads, like Wendy's', feature shots of whole foods – apples, eggs, heads of lettuce, potatoes – and references to the domestic origin of the meat. Though a thorough analysis of this trend is beyond the scope of this project, it appears that a shift is occurring in food culture away from valuing novelty and creative processing, towards simple, recognizable ingredients and products, something advocated strongly by the food system critics I engage with in this project, reflecting their increasing cultural influence.

Also significant is the fact that food system critique has emerged as a politically left position, opposing corporate power and urging government regulation and intervention in food production and marketing. Food activists are motivated by environmental concerns, such as the depletion of fertile farmland, impacts of pesticides and chemical fertilizers on ecosystems, and damage to biodiversity that result from industrial agriculture. They also take on animal welfare issues, including over-crowding and unhealthy conditions for livestock in agricultural feedlots. And, of course, they tackle

the obesity crisis, casting it as a result of a dysfunctional food system that prioritizes corporate profit over human health.

What initially piqued my interest in this topic was a personal observation that, in discussions with friends and peers, food system critique and other politically progressive positions were sometimes used as a justification for anti-fat discrimination. People are fat because they don't ride bicycles and instead drive pollution-spewing cars everywhere, for example, or fat people over-consume at the expense of malnourished people in poor countries. These arguments were especially prevalent during Rob Ford's recent (successful) run for Toronto mayor, during which the progressive media, as well as my self-identified leftist friends and acquaintances, mocked Ford's fat body and connected it to his penchant for McDonald's food and his hostility to bike lanes. It is deeply troubling that even within otherwise politically progressive discourses, the fat body is taken up as a symbol of laziness and gluttony, as it is in the more right-wing individualizing frame. This problematic equation of fat with greedy and immoral is implicit – and occasionally explicit – in the work of food system critics analyzed in this thesis, suggesting that despite a very stark conflict at a certain level of politics and policy, the individualizing and systemic frames share an ideological foundation at a deeper level, in their common conception of the meaning of the fat body.

Food system critics' opposition to the individualizing frame is genuine. Proponents of each of the systemic and individualizing frames sharply disagree about what has caused the obesity epidemic and how to fix it, and, as Lawrence (2004) argues is most significant, who is to blame. But despite these disagreements, they agree on other

very important points about the obesity epidemic. First, that it exists and is a problem: all uncritically accept that body fat is a health risk and obesity a disease in its own right, despite a lack of solid evidence (Gard and Wright, 2005; Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, and Gaesser, 2005). And second, that it is not only a health problem but a moral problem: in the individualizing frame the fat person is immoral, while in the systemic frame the moral crisis is more generalized, in the form of corporate greed and a consumerist society. Yet, in both frames, the fat body is taken as a symbol of something wrong at the level of morality, culture, and social values. Both the individualizing and systemic frames address the body as an object of control and the fat body as evidence of a failure of control: in the individualizing frame, the fat person must but fails to control her own body; in the systemic frame control should be in the hands of the individual but is wrested away by powerful corporations who inflict damage in the pursuit of profit. Though the systemic frame is more progressive in some senses, as I've described, it perpetuates and reinforces repressive ideas about bodies, and in fact offers a justification for stigmatization of and discrimination against fat people in the name of social justice. Whether the obesity epidemic is framed as a problem of individual moral failing or a systemic problem of consumer capitalism, positing the fat body as a problem of any kind draws on and reinforces longstanding cultural prejudices against not only fat bodies, but bodies in general, underscoring what Grosz (1994) calls the "profound somatophobia" at the heart of Western culture.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework & Methodology

History of the subjugation of the body

The concept of the body as separate from the self has very deep roots in Western culture. Bordo (1993) and Grosz (1994) both trace the origins of the mind-body dualism, and the denigration of the body, to ancient Greek philosophy. Grosz (1994) states, "Since the inception of philosophy as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundation of a profound somatophobia" (p. 5). In Plato's doctrine of the Forms, the Idea is the true reality, and matter is merely an imperfect version, a perversion of the Form. Following this principle, the body, in its materiality, is "a betrayal of and prison for the soul, reason, or mind" (Grosz, 1994, p. 5). For Plato and other Greek philosophers, the body is an obstacle to reason: as Bordo (1993) describes, Plato conceived of the body as an "epistemological deceiver" (p. 3) whose unreliable senses fool us into "mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and real" (p. 3).

This basic mistrust of the body carried into Christian thought: in the cultural context of Christianity, the Greek distinction between the realms of Idea and Matter shifted to a distinction "between a God-given soul and a mortal, lustful, sinful carnality" (Grosz, 1994, 5). Augustine was a key figure in developing and elaborating this view of the body, regarding the body and especially its sexuality as rebellious, dangerous, and needing to be tamed (Bordo, 1993, p. 4). As exemplified in the figure of Christ, the body

is above all associated with mortality and suffering, while the mind, soul, or immaterial aspect of the self is linked to transcendence and spiritual perfection (Grosz, 1994, p. 5).

In the seventeenth century, Enlightenment thinkers challenged Christian dogma on many fronts, but they did not reject the dualism of mind and body nor the denigration of the latter in favour of the former. In fact, the emerging sciences of the seventeenth century did the opposite, even more strictly entrenching the subordinated position of the body. Seventeenth century science and philosophy understood the human body as a machine: “a purely mechanical, biologically programmed system that can be fully quantified” (Bordo, 1993, p. 4). As a machine-like thing, the body is to be directed and controlled by the mind. Grosz (1994) emphasizes Descartes’ role in establishing the terms for the mind-body dualism of the seventeenth century, terms which persist in rationalist and scientific thinking today. Descartes cannot be credited with separating mind from body; that was already well-established. His innovation was to position the body as part of nature, subject to scientific laws, and the mind as separate from the realm of nature, able to stand outside, objective, able to analyze and evaluate. True knowledge can only come from the abstract cogitations of the mind, since the senses of the body are too enmeshed in the world to be its judge.

With Enlightenment science and philosophy emerged the idea of the human body as fundamentally knowable: transparent to scientific inquiry and predictable in its responses to stimuli and inputs. But scientific knowledge of the body is not an inert collection of facts; it is a basis for power over the body. With the development of modern sciences and the modern state, the subjugation of the body became more and more the

objective of apparatuses of power. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) describes the development in the 17th century of a biopolitical regime in which power and knowledge were increasingly focused on control of the body: “its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (p. 138). The bearing of power on the body and the exercise of control through bodies form a repeated theme throughout Foucault’s work. He traces the development of the juridical and penal systems, the modern medical system, and modern conceptions of mental health, all of which form parts of a new way of addressing the body.

Foucault (1975/1995) describes how, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, human bodies became subject to a discipline and control that was based on a “‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them” (p. 26). Foucault calls this matrix of knowledge and power “the political technology of the body” (p. 26): the diffuse and disparate set of institutions, apparatuses, and practices that impose upon and shape the meaning of the body. Scientific, codified, official knowledge becomes a mediating tool between those institutions and human bodies; knowledge is how power is enacted on bodies. Grosz (1995) describes “the increasing medicalization of the body, based on processes of removal (incision, cutting removing, and reduction) or addition (inlaying, stitching, and injection), [that] demonstrate a body pliable to power, a *machinic* structure in which ‘components’ can be altered, adjusted, removed, or replaced” (p. 35).

Through medical and other scientific discourses, practices, and institutions, the human body is formulated as a manipulable and controllable object.

Foucault (1978) notes that disciplining the body was essential to the development of capitalism and its acceleration in the eighteenth century. The expansion of capitalism, he argues, “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production” (p. 141). Along similar lines, Marx identifies the mind-body split as an essential component of wage labour in capitalism, in which the body becomes an instrument for the production of labour-power, a possession of the self to be sold on the market. As Marx (1844/1959) describes, engaging in wage labour turns “man’s [sic] species being, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being alien to him, into a means to his individual existence. It estranges man’s own body from him, as it does external nature and his spiritual essence, his human being.” A split develops between the self and the body – while the self remains (in theory) autonomous, the body comes under control of capital via wage labour. This distinction is a central innovation of capitalist political economy, as it distinguishes capitalism from slavery and serfdom in which the whole person is owned or controlled, not merely the labour power. As Bordo (1993) notes, Marx was the first to “reimagin[e] the body as a historical and not merely a biological arena, an arena shaped by the social and economic organization of human life” (p. 33). While the idea that the body is a material object to be directed and controlled by the immaterial mind has a very long history in Western culture, it became entrenched in the economic and political organization of society with the rise of capitalism.

For Grosz (1995), this process culminated in the body culture of the 1980s, fixated on body modifications of all kinds including physical fitness, body-building, piercing, tattooing, and plastic surgery. This culture appeared, on the surface, to celebrate the body, but in fact was founded on a “profound, if unacknowledged and undiscussed, hatred and resentment of the body” (p. 1). Despite a seeming embrace of difference, the ideal body of the 1980s was narrowly restricted: the body must remain “under control, pliable, amenable to the subject’s will” (p. 1), hence the emphasis on a tight, toned body, as well as, Grosz argues, the excitement generated by the possibility of transcending the body via cyberspace. In the heyday of postmodern culture, which was supposed to be all about fluidity, difference, possibility, and multiple realities, in fact body norms became ever-stricter and the body’s status as object, and not active agent, became more entrenched (p. 2).

Across these historical permutations, the body is invariably perceived as something separate from and problematic for the self. The body may be a source of deception or evil, or simply brute matter that requires civilizing ministrations, but regardless it is set apart from the immaterial aspect of the self, to be directed, controlled, or suppressed. The dualistic way of looking at the body, taking the body to be material, subject to laws of nature, manipulable, and predictable in its stimulus responses, has had a positive legacy in many ways. Advances in medical science have enabled us to cure diseases and prolong lives, and a penal system aimed at reform and rehabilitation is surely an improvement over public humiliation and the infliction of suffering. The demystification of mental disorders, understood to be results of biochemical imbalances

or other neurological malfunctions rather than supernatural phenomena, has facilitated treatment and social acceptance. However, the mind-body dualism carries cultural baggage: dualism of mind and body is aligned with dualisms of other sorts that function to divide and stigmatize.

The dichotomous thinking that pervades Western culture traditionally and persistently aligns body, materiality, sin, passion, and femininity against mind, spirit, purity, reason, and masculinity. Thus, any individual or group that is perceived as overly-embodied, as fat people are, is positioned on the negative side of this organizing dualism. Bordo (1993) addresses the implications for women: “If, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (p. 5). Gendered ideas about the body have implications for men as well; fat men are perceived as offensively womanish, and the over-abundance of their soft flesh undermines their status in the patriarchal hierarchy (Durgadas, cited in LeBesco, 2004, p. 39). Racialized people are positioned similarly, aligned with the body and constructed as “‘primitive,’ ‘savage,’ sexually animalistic, and indeed more *bodily*” than whites (LeBesco, 2004, p. 5). Farrell (2011) describes how embodiment, and fatness in particular as excessive embodiment, is a consistent marker of the uncivilized other: colonized peoples, women, workers, the poor, and above all people whose identities are informed by a combination of these categories.

This stigma is apparent in cultural constructions of and reactions to fat bodies. If bodies in general cannot be trusted nor left to their own devices, but instead are properly objects for careful control, fat bodies stand as evidence of what happens when control fails. In the individualizing frame, the blame for this failure rests with fat people, who do not exert the necessary will power or self-discipline to reign in the untrustworthy impulses of their bodies and give in to urges, impulses, and desires. In the systemic frame, the question of blame is more complicated and culpability is shared among corporations, government officials, the capitalist system in entirety, and fat individuals themselves. The issue of blame aside, however, both of these frames position bodies as objects to be controlled and the obese body as evidence of a failure of control.

The body as signifier

If it is possible to shape our bodies, to direct them to act and appear in particular ways, then the ways they act and appear should reflect the directions they have been given, and therefore display the values, desires, and characteristics of the mind, spirit, or other immaterial aspect of the self. Therefore, in addition to the *capacity* to control the body, the mind-body dualism engenders an *imperative* to control the body, since the body is read as an expression of the self. Grosz (1995) writes: “The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read and read into... bodies are textualized, ‘read’ by others as *expressive* of a subject’s psychic interior” (pp. 34-35). She describes the body as “a kind of *hinge* or threshold” (p. 33) through which outer and inner can communicate: it is the medium through which the exterior world inscribes meaning onto the person, and

through which the person's inner self extends its identity out into the world. In this context, our outward appearance is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference, but carries a heavy symbolic burden.

The body is something more complicated than a canvas for personal expression; its traits are interpreted to place it in a matrix of social hierarchies determined by gender, race, sexuality, and class. Grosz argues that, through forms of adornment like clothing, makeup, hairstyle or tattooing, but also more integral and seemingly natural or innate body characteristics like posture, gait, size, shape, colour, and ability, "the body is more or less marked, constituted as an appropriate, or, as the case may be, inappropriate body" (1994, p. 142). For Bourdieu (1979/1984), "the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste" (p. 190): its size and shape, among other characteristics, express a relation to the body that indicates class position. The visible traits of the body are construed as evidence of not only a person's inner traits, but, corresponding to these personal inner traits, a person's standing in society: the racialized, gendered, sexualized, or otherwise marked as *different* traits of the body place a person in a certain location within the hierarchies that organize society.

It is important to note, especially for a study of the meaning of fatness, that it is not enough to modify or adorn our bodies to indicate this or that particular aspect of identity; rather, the overwhelming imperative is to limit the body. The division between mind and body does not merely separate the two; it positions one above the other. As described above, it aligns mind, spirit, purity, reason, and masculinity against body, materiality, sin, passion, and femininity. Bodily urges are thus dangerous to and interfere

with the mandate of the mind to control the body. Fatness, as an excess of corporeality, reveals an inability to subordinate body to mind. The threat it poses is not only to cardiovascular functioning, government healthcare budgets, or the ability of a state to raise an army of physically-fit soldiers, but to the dominance of reason over emotion. Beyond the more generalized imperative to direct the body to display particular, culturally appropriate traits of gender expression and racial and ethnic identity, bodies must be kept trim and slender: bodies must be limited and restricted in order to display the self-discipline valued in our society.

The double bind of the consumer body

Consumer capitalist culture adds another dimension to the imperative to restrict the body and to exercise self-discipline. Complicating the straightforward, if oppressive, stricture to limit the appetites as well as the physical presence of the body, the values of consumer capitalism urge unbridled indulgence – yet forbid displaying this indulgence on the body. Bordo (1993) explains the “double bind” of consumer capitalism, in which we are exhorted both to consume boundlessly and to strictly control our bodies, which she describes as the “agonistic construction of personality” (p. 199):

On the one hand, as producers of goods and services we must sublimate, delay, repress desires for immediate gratification; we must cultivate the work ethic. On the other hand, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse, we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. (p. 199)

For producers, fit and vigorous bodies indicate a capacity to perform labour, as well as to exercise the self-discipline required of productive workers. A slender body is read as demonstrating control of appetites and repression of bodily urges, self-denials which condition the worker to subordinate needs and desires originating from within herself to the demands of the employer, the workplace, and capital. For consumers, the situation is opposite: a good consumer should not restrict appetites or deny urges, but indulge them to their limits and beyond. This combination of the ideal of the managed self, displayed in a slender body, and a consumer culture “has made the actual management of hunger and desire intensely problematic” (Bordo, 1993, p. 68).

Farrell (2011) traces the history of this central tension in the cultural attitude towards consumption, describing the growing conflict in the nineteenth century between a new imperative “to buy, to spend, to enjoy” (p. 44), arising with the growth of the urban middle class, and a more traditional ethic of delayed gratification and hard work. In response to this tension, a derogatory stereotype of the fat nouveau riche emerged, mocking those who had the economic means to eat well, travel, and luxuriate, but neither the cultural refinement nor the personal strength of character to moderate any of these indulgences. As Farrell describes, the cultural conflict between the demands to consume and restrict “got played out—and continues to get played out—on the body” (p. 44).

To a degree, the tension between imperatives for self-discipline and unrestrained consumption is resolved through the diet, weight-loss, and exercise industries. Through these industries, consumers can, we are promised, create slender bodies by consuming more: signing up for weight-loss programs, purchasing diet pills and packaged diet foods,

joining gyms, buying the latest Lululemon yoga gear, and so on. In a context where a thin body is the result not of under-nourishment but of the consumption of a variety of expensive goods and services, slenderness becomes, paradoxically, akin to a technique of conspicuous consumption. The thin, fit body demonstrates the capacity to purchase diet supplements, weight-loss programs, gym memberships, or even the healthful foods advocated by the food activists whose work I analyze in this project. Although a fat person would seem, by simple logic, to be an ideal consumer, and therefore valorized in a consumer culture, a thin person is one step better: the thin body—not necessarily in reality, but in the cultural encoding of body shape and size—indicates a person who indulges, enjoys, and consumes, but then consumes even more, in the form of fitness or diet products, to maintain thinness.

These tropes of the body as both a material object and a meaningful symbol, and of the double bind of consumer culture, are the focus of my analysis of the individualizing and systemic frames of the obesity epidemic. In particular, I explore the problem of reason and the fat body: how the fat body is read as a failure of rationality, and how reason is deployed as a solution to the obesity epidemic. In each frame, the fat body is treated as something simple, a straightforward manifestation of, respectively, poor personal choices and weak individual will, or a toxic food environment dominated by corporate greed. Yet, on closer inspection, the construction of the body in both frames is complicated and often contradictory. In both frames, why some (thin) people possess the moral fortitude and self-discipline to remain thin while other (fat) people do not is only obliquely addressed, and usually caught up in ideas about race, class, and gender

difference that are not made explicit. Questions of control, who has it and how they exert it, are similarly hazy, implying the need to control people who cannot control their own bodies and justifying the further stigmatization and subjugation of fat people in a fat-phobic society. In both the individualizing and systemic frames, the fat body is read as a symbol of moral and cultural failings, and the fat person as needing intervention, whether in the form of punishment (in the individualizing frame) or protection (in the systemic frame).

Methodology

For my research, I have engaged in a textual analysis of mass-market nonfiction books and two commercially successful documentary films that criticize industrial food production and link it to the problem of obesity. The works I analyze in this thesis are journalist Michael Pollan's books *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and *In Defense of Food* (2008), nutritionist and professor Marion Nestle's books *Food Politics* (2002) and *What to Eat* (2006), journalist Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* (2001), psychologist Kelly Brownell's book *Food Fight* (2004), the film *Super Size Me* (2004) directed by Morgan Spurlock, and the film *Food, Inc.* (2008) directed by Robert Kenner. These are prominent works on the topic, and are inter-related through back-cover blurbs (Schlosser on *Food Politics*), appearances (Pollan and Schlosser in *Food, Inc.* which Schlosser co-produced, Brownell and Nestle in *Super Size Me*, and Schlosser in an interview added to the *Super Size Me* DVD release), and cross-citations (too many to list). Brownell includes an extended discussion of food corporations' threats against

Nestle in his book. Nestle, Pollan, and Schlosser have all appeared together in forums and media features, and each has blogged or written in publications about the others' work. The film-makers Kenner and Spurlock are less entangled in this web of associations, as food activism has been the focus of only one of their respective films, rather than their entire oeuvres. But in general, these works form a well-defined grouping of prominent criticisms of the food industry, and articulations of the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic. Although of these only Brownell is principally concerned with obesity, all address obesity and use it as an emblem of the broader problems they analyze.

To understand how these works address the body, I have drawn on the concepts that I identified in theoretical work on the body, primarily from Grosz and Bordo: as described above, these are the complementary ideas of the body as object and the body as symbol, and the tension between the imperatives of consumption and restriction in consumer capitalism that play out on the body. In reading and viewing these critiques of industrial food production, I identify the manifestations of these cultural concepts of the body. I examine both the explicit statements food system critics make about bodies and obesity, and the metaphors and visual images they deploy that involve or represent fat bodies, in order to understand how fat bodies, and bodies more generally, are conceptualized in this literature.

Before coming to my analysis of the systemic frame, I first establish how the individualizing frame addresses the body. For this component of my project I draw on existing fat studies literature. A robust and thorough literature exists critiquing mainstream ideas about obesity and fat bodies, exposing the moral and ideological

assumptions embedded in cultural, scientific, and governmental discourses on obesity. Some of this literature explicitly names the “individualizing frame” and refers to Lawrence’s (2004) research on the topic, but much of the literature that does not explicitly refer to the individualizing-systemic dichotomy nonetheless addresses the arguments that make up the individualizing frame.

I analyze each frame’s conception of the body through the lens of the theoretical concepts I have laid out in this chapter. In this project I interpret commentary on and implicit assumptions about fat bodies as indicative of a broader way of understanding bodies and our relationships with them more generally, one that is shared between these otherwise contrasting ideological approaches to the obesity epidemic.

Chapter 2: Individualizing Frame

Yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other . . . because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room — just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroin addict slumping in a chair.[...] But . . . I think obesity is something that most people have a ton of control over. It's something they can change, if only they put their minds to it. (Kelly, 2010)

In autumn 2010, a blogger for the women's magazine *Marie Claire*, Maura Kelly, made the comments above in response to the new sitcom *Mike and Molly*, whose eponymous protagonists are a fat couple who meet at Overeaters Anonymous. The blog post sparked controversy: after a huge number of angry comments on the post, as well as complaints to the magazine, the writer edited it to add an apology and the magazine invited fat-activist blogger Lesley Kinzel to write a reply (Kinzel, 2010). The backlash showed that blaming and shaming fat people is not universally accepted, but the initial publication, and the author's sincere surprise at the negative response, showed that the idea that fat bodies represent failures of personal will is well-established.

The individualizing frame, as encapsulated in Kelly's comments, conceives of the obesity epidemic as resulting from bad choices by fat people, whose lack of self-control

and immoral behaviour are displayed on their fat bodies. In this frame, the choices that make people fat are bad for individual health, but also, as I will describe in this chapter, bad for individual and cultural morality, and bad for national interests including economic productivity and military strength. In this chapter, I draw on the work of critical fat studies scholars including Amy Erdman Farrell, Samantha Murray, Katherine Sender, Julie Guthman, and Kathleen LeBesco, to analyze not only the content of the individualizing frame, but what its assumptions and assertions mean for a broader conception of the body. I argue that the stigmatization and denigration of fat bodies in the individualizing frame results from the dualistic conception of mind and body laid out in the previous chapter: in addressing the body as an object to be controlled, and as a meaningful signifier of the inner self, the individualizing frame reads the fat body as indicating a failure of personal control, and reads the fat person as a failed subject and failed citizen (Elliot, 2007). This failure, I argue, takes on a heightened meaning in the contemporary neoliberal moment, which “demands self-disciplined, self-directed, *willing* citizens” (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 580), exactly the traits the fat body is presumed to lack.

Body as object of control

In the individualizing explanation for obesity, the culturally entrenched notion of the body as an object to be manipulated is manifested as an imperative to limit the size of the body: to lose weight. This approach to the body is exemplified in weight-loss shows like *The Biggest Loser*, which display the physical transformation of the body, the re-

shaping and reduction of its physical properties. *The Biggest Loser* employs a number of visual devices that emphasize the materiality and manipulability of the body. The computer-animated imagery of the body morphing at accelerated speed from the 'before' to the 'after' form – fat to thin – reflects our interest in the body as a changeable thing. In an oddly compelling contrivance, finale episodes of some seasons show each contestant striding across the stage accompanied by an edited-in 'before' self, with whom the really present 'after' self interacts, sometimes simply with a disapproving shake of the head, other times with a push or flick, rejecting the fat body. Another common scene that similarly communicates the rejection of and triumph over the fat body has successful contestants enter onto the stage by bursting through a larger-than-life 'before' picture, often punching or kicking their way out. In these images, the juxtaposition of fat and thin bodies underscores the possibilities of dramatically altering the physical properties of the body, reinforcing the idea that the body is an object to be controlled and manipulated.

The Biggest Loser provides a collection of exceptionally blatant examples, but the imagery of the fat body as the 'before' state of a project of transformation is present not only in the weight-loss TV genre, but in all manifestations of the individualizing frame of obesity. Murray (2005) describes this state of being as "the necessary impermanence of [the] fat body" (p. 155): "the fat body exists as a deviant, perverse form of embodiment and... is expected to engage in a continual process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, unbecoming" (p. 155). As such, the fat body is perceived as the target of a project, as requiring control and manipulation. The idea of body as object is inherent in the individualizing frame, since its foundational premise is that the individual has a

responsibility (which has been abdicated) to control the body and limit its size. In the individualizing frame, we are fat because we are weak and lazy, because we fail to tame the body's impulses towards sloth and gluttony.

Body as symbol of inner self

Corollary to the idea of the fat body as an object of control is the symbolic power of the fat body to reveal a failure of self-control, what Sender and Sullivan (2008) call an “epidemic of the will.” If the body is properly an object to be subordinated to the imperatives of the mind, which should conform to cultural and societal expectations, the fat body signifies a failure – through inability or immorality – to control the body. Thus, fatness is read as “laziness, gluttony, poor personal hygiene, and a lack of fortitude” (Murray, 2005, p. 154), and “the physical manifestation of self-indulgence and a lack of self-discipline and moral fortitude” (Halse, 2009, p. 47). Murray (2005) notes that condemnation falls especially harshly on the fat woman: she is “lazy, she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average” (p. 14). The visible deviance of the fat body is perceived as a reflection of an invisible, inward deviance of character traits.

Graham (2005) coined the term “lipoliteracy” to describe the pervasive belief that we can read body fat to know the inner character of a person, in terms of both health and morality (pp. 178-179). Murray (2009) explains: “Visible bodily markers (such as fat flesh) are read in ways that position subjects on either the ‘acceptable’ or ‘unacceptable’

side of the normal/pathological binary equation” (p. 78). Fatness is incessantly pathologized, both in the strict sense of the term, in clinics by medical professionals, and more broadly in society: the fat body, especially the fat female body, is read as a “‘confession’ of a deficient self” (Murray, 2009, p. 79): “this confession is one of necessary pathology, indulgence and excess, and before the ‘fat’ subject even speaks, this confession is produced as a truth” (p. 83). In the individualizing frame, the visible aberration of the fat body unambiguously signals a more fundamental, inner aberration of the self (p. 79).

Significantly, fatness is read not only as a sign of a private failure, but as a problem for society: “the threat this [obesity] ‘epidemic’ poses is constituted...not simply as endangering health, but as fraying the very (moral) fabric of society” (Murray, 2008, p. 15). Fatness indicates a failure of the individual to properly care for the self, and by extension, to perform the duties of a good citizen (Throsby, 2009, p. 201). Wright (2009) describes the stigma placed on fat bodies as a “moral opprobrium directed at those who are perceived (through the reading of their bodies) not to be making appropriate lifestyle decisions and thereby abandoning their responsibility (and therefore their rights) as citizens contributing to the general good” (p. 3). This “general good” is usually linked to the higher costs of health care incurred by fat people and of lost productivity due to obesity-related illness. In this regard, Herndon (2005) recounts former US Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson’s exhortation that “all Americans—as their patriotic duty—lose ten pounds” (p. 128). Elliott (2007) cites a similar concern on the part of Canadian authorities, although with less flamboyantly nationalistic rhetoric.

As Sender and Sullivan (2008) describe, panicked reactions to fat bodies reproduce more generalized anxieties about the economic and political dominance of the United States in late capitalism, as productivity in other nations increases. LeBesco (2004) corroborates this claim, citing comments in the American conservative magazine *The American Spectator*, worrying about rising body weights, “What chance has America in the long run...that it can ever compete with those wiry Filipinos and Koreans?” (p. 55). Elliott (2007) and Biltekoff (2007), respectively in the Canadian and American contexts, note long-standing anxieties about fatness and military strength, historical and contemporary concerns that a fattening population will not be physically fit enough to fight.

It is important to note, as these authors do, that there is scant empirical evidence that fatness impedes workplace productivity nor military readiness. When both working and war-making are highly technology-dependent, as they are in contemporary Western societies, there is little reason to assume that physical fitness is crucial to either. Elliott (2007) comments, “In an economy driven by technology and intellectual labour, the failure of the fat Canadian has been reconfigured into a failure on economic terms” (p. 138). What seems to be truly at stake is not concrete concerns about manpower and muscle, but a more abstract cultural anxiety about national identity: as bellies get softer and flabbier, does the national character get “softer”, too? The anti-fat bias on which the individualizing frame rests, and which the individualizing frame reinforces, is deeply rooted in the Protestant ideology of hard work and self-discipline, representing fat people as “willful violators” of these cherished values (LeBesco, 2004, p. 55).

Perhaps this connection to labour and productivity goes some way to explain the emphasis on work that Sender and Sullivan (2008) detect in popular cultural representations of and reactions to weight loss. In their study of viewer responses to *The Biggest Loser*, they note that viewers commented favourably on the show's repeated theme of hard work, contrasting the show's rigorous workouts and strict dieting with other programs, such as *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, that feature surgical interventions: in those shows, in the words of one viewer, "most of the 'fixing' was done externally to them, not like Biggest Loser where the contestants have to work to change" (p. 580). For these viewers and in media discourses, medical interventions like plastic surgery or gastric bypasses are seen as "cheating" and "the easy way out" (Wilson, 2005, p. 252); Wilson (2005) finds that media coverage of weight loss surgery insists that "being thin takes hard work, sacrifice, and willpower" and derides weight loss surgery as "'surgically induced self-control'" (p. 252). Because a fat body reveals a person as lazy, the only morally correct and actually effective antidote, addressing the root of the problem, is hard work.

In a political, economic, and cultural context that "demands self-disciplined, self-directed, *willing* citizens" (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 580) as does the neoliberal moment, the fat body, read as undisciplined and lazy, fails to meet the requirements of citizenship. The intense focus, even insistence, on free will as the fundamental determinant of both individual and collective social lives, a central tenet of neoliberal ideology, shifts the imperative to control and limit body weight from an issue of abstract morality, with roots in Christian and especially Puritan religion, to an issue of national

productivity and “the demands of neoliberalism for empowered, employable, consuming citizens” (p. 580). LeBesco (2004) describes the “failure on the part of the fat body to register as a fully productive body in a capitalist economy” (p. 55): the denigration of the fat person is not merely a matter of morals or aesthetics (weak, ugly) but significantly also of politics and economics (bad citizen, bad worker, non-contributor).

A tension exists, however, between the demands of the contemporary capitalist political economy for individuals to produce and, equally or more importantly, to consume. For citizens within consumer capitalism, consumption is at least as necessary a task as production. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, then-president Bush urged Americans to do their patriotic duty by continuing to consume. “I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy,” he implored in a September 20 speech; on September 27, he encouraged Americans to “fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.” While firefighters and rescue workers, and within weeks soldiers heading to Afghanistan, were celebrated as national heroes, everyday Americans were told they could participate in protecting their nation, too, by not allowing this traumatic occurrence to disrupt their consumption patterns, which would cause the economy to falter.

Yet, at the same time that unfettered consumption provided citizens an avenue to support America's war on terror, the nation was embarking on a second war, against obesity, which mandated self-denial and restriction. Biltekoff (2007) explores the symbolic connections between these two contemporaneous wars: both waged against an

amorphous enemy, both with an indefinable end-point, both discursively constructed to deny any link to systemic inequalities and injustices, and both feeding into and growing out of a culture of fear. Further, she describes an important complementarity between the two 'wars': she notes that while most wars engage citizens in campaigns of material sacrifice, especially in the form of food rationing, the war on terror generates just the opposite imperative. This is problematic, because these campaigns historically played a crucial role in emotionally investing citizens in the war effort through daily rituals of preparing food and eating, above and beyond the actual need to manage the food supply. Fortuitously, attention gravitated to the rising rates of obesity at this same historical moment, and "the war against obesity provided the focus for communal effort and self-sacrifice that the war on terror lacked" (pp. 34-35). Tommy Thomson's call for Americans to lose ten pounds as a patriotic gesture came just months after September 11, enacting a "displacement of the calls for wartime sacrifice from the war on terror to the one against obesity" (p. 35): in the post-9/11 context, "the responsibility of citizens to lose weight coexists with encouragement to consume more as a form of patriotism" (Julier, 2008, p. 493). Thus, while the calls for both consumption, to support the wartime economy, and restriction, to reduce body fat and strengthen national moral fibre against obesity, appear to conflict with one another, their relationship is oddly complementary.

Beyond the specific context of the US war on terror, neoliberalism in general generates a complicated tension between imperatives to consume and to restrict consumption. As Elliott (2007) notes, "Despite the fact that consuming is both a core value and a core function of an individual, there is a near-visceral disgust at those who

show their (over-)consumption on their fleshly bodies” (p. 142). The individualizing frame of the obesity epidemic draws on and heightens the “double bind” that Bordo (1993) describes, in which citizen-consumers are required both to repress and indulge appetites, “emotionally compelled to participate in society as both out-of-control consumer and self-controlled subject” (Guthman and Dupuis, 2006, p. 444). The individualizing frame, in which the individual fat person is wholly to blame for and responsible for correcting her unacceptably fat body, is at the heart of this culture of bulimia (Bordo, 1993, p.201), because it is in the individual body that the conflicting imperatives to consume and control meet and attempt a resolution.

The medicalization of fat

Advocates of the individualizing frame often explain their disapproval of fatness as fundamentally motivated by health concerns. Maura Kelly (2010), the blogger quoted at the opening of this chapter, likens an obese person to an alcoholic or heroin addict who engages in behaviour that is not only immoral but damaging to health. Fat people are routinely subjected to comments and lectures from family, friends, and even strangers, who feel that the size of a fat person’s body is, first, unambiguously a sign of bad health, and second, an indicator of the inability or unwillingness to make good choices. Thus, hectoring fat people about food choices and activity levels is presented as an act of caring, whether the person doing the hectoring is truly motivated by (misplaced and intrusive) concern for the fat person’s health or, more likely, concerns about moral qualities and social or cultural anxieties.

But while many justify the blaming-and-shaming approach of the individualizing frame as a sincere effort at health promotion, fat studies scholarship shows that health concerns function to mask and validate moral concerns and social anxieties. Farrell (2011) traces the changing meanings ascribed to fat bodies, and concludes that the connotations of the fat person as “lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, lacking in willpower, [and] *primitive*...preceded and then were intertwined with explicit concern about health issues” (p. 34). Anti-fat cultural values were entrenched prior to the medicalization of fatness. Farrell describes how, rather than the medical profession raising the alarm about the detriments of body fat, the growing middle class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries pressured doctors to take fatness seriously. The newly wealthy became convinced that “fat is not just a state of matter, or even a health risk factor, but is a sign of one’s character flaws, even immorality” (p. 36). In a period of rapid social change and a shift in class dynamics, fatness provoked anxieties about social mobility: middle class people who were unable to properly regulate their enjoyment of wealth were targets of ridicule, primarily through mockery of fat bodies eating, traveling, driving, and otherwise indulging in the privileges of their new socioeconomic status. Emergent middle class values emphasized disciplining the body to demonstrate one’s deservingness, one’s ability to fit properly into social norms for the wealthy.

Today, the class connotations of the fat body in the individualizing frame persist. Bordo (1993) argues that fatness signals not class location itself but qualities that confer social mobility, so that class position is perceived as *deserved* because of the fat body’s display of lack of self control. She states,

When associations of fat and lower class status exist, they are usually mediated by moral qualities—fat being perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform, and the absence of all those ‘managerial’ abilities that, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility. (p. 195)

LeBesco (2004) concurs: “If fat people are understood as antithetical to the efficiency and productivity required to succeed in our capitalist economy, then their presence haunts as the specter of downward mobility” (p. 56). In the individualizing frame, fatness does not straightforwardly mark a person as lower class, but rather reveals that the fat person deserves a lower class status due to personal failings.

The class connotations read on the fat body in the individualizing frame fit well within the values of neoliberal culture, in which health is conceived as a predominantly individual, private responsibility. While many systemic critics argue that the causal link is *from* poverty *to* fatness, the individualizing frame, buttressed by the neoliberal ideological framework, posits the opposite causation, from fatness – and the personal failures and weaknesses it indicates – to poverty. Although, as described above, maintaining health (and the corollaries of productivity and good citizenship) is a responsibility owed to society at large, it is a responsibility held by the individual, and any failure to uphold it is squarely the fault of the individual. Attributing the obesity epidemic as an effect of bad choices and weak will on the part of fat subjects has a powerful appeal in the neoliberal context, and plays a role in reinforcing the rejection of collectivist values.

In addition to this close link to classist prejudices, the medicalization of fatness in the individualizing frame is bound up with racist ideologies. Julier (2008) argues that the individualizing frame of the obesity epidemic provides a way to express social prejudices without naming them, “a means of talking indirectly about poverty, race, and immigration without appearing to be racist or classist” (p. 493). By talking about fatness as a health issue rather than a cultural or social problem, taboo topics can be addressed implicitly and oppressive positions articulated through euphemism. Julier explains,

New versions of racism and sexism are played out through national discourses and programs aimed at reducing fat rather than poverty. Fear of obesity is yet a new way to vent anxiety about changes in the gender or racial order without fear of reproach. (p. 493)

Because fatness is constructed as an individual failure, rather than a racial characteristic, the individualizing frame offers an avenue to express consternation about the bodies and selves of racialized people, without having to directly name race as the problem. Further, because fatness is constructed as a medical issue, with all the connotations of science and objectivity that medicalization brings, the racist and sexist roots of anti-fat sentiment can be re-framed and expressed as legitimate, even compassionate concerns about the health of marginalized people.

In the blurry and interconnected categories of race and class in contemporary capitalist society, discourses of the obesity epidemic that locate its cause in individual behaviours provide a tool for sorting and ranking citizens and subjects, deciding who is an autonomous and worthy person and who is not. The individualizing frame enables the

articulation of racist, sexist and classist ideologies, masking these via the medicalization of fat bodies. At the heart of this stigmatization is the mind-body dualism that positions the body as irrational, untrustworthy, and inferior to the mind, an object needing control and domination. In the individualizing frame, obesity results when individuals fail to properly control their bodies, to suppress urges and restrict indulgences. Thus, the body is also read as a symbol, one that reveals the flawed inner state and weak character of the fat person. Further, as I've described, the failure of will read on fat bodies in the individualizing frame is constructed as a social, cultural, and national problem, in which fat people are blamed not only for their own despised state, but for broader problems including faltering economic and military might of once-dominant Western nations. Finally, in the neoliberal context, in which individual agency is emphasized and self-control is valorized, the failure inscribed on the fat body takes on a heightened intensity of meaning: the fat person, visibly demonstrating her lack of willpower and responsibility on her body, is perceived as a failed subject and failed citizen, as having abdicated the responsibility of self-management that is owed both to the self and to the nation.

Chapter Three: The Systemic Frame

Although the systemic explanation of obesity contrasts with some aspects of the individualizing frame, it retains the two central premises of a dualistic conception of mind and body: it addresses the body as an object, subordinate to mind or will, at the same time that it reads the body as a symbol, a visible indication of an invisible state of being. The systemic frame shifts the responsibility for the obesity epidemic from the individual self to larger social, cultural, political and economic forces, but it does not significantly challenge the conception of the body established in the individualizing frame. Neither does it diminish the symbolic burden placed on the fat body. In the individualizing frame the fat body represents a flawed inner self, a failure of personal responsibility; while the systemic frames rejects the ‘personal responsibility’ narrative of the individualizing frame, it does not free the fat body from its representational function. Rather, the fat body is reinterpreted as a symbol not of personal moral failing, but of cultural, social, economic and political failures; the fat body signifies not only something wrong within the fat person, but something wrong with Western culture and society as a whole. In this chapter, I provide an overview of food system critics’ main arguments, summarizing and commenting on the kind of problem they perceive obesity to be. In the next, I analyze what these arguments have to say about the body, how they at times challenge but mostly reinforce the mind-body dualism and its implications, extending the stigmatization of fatness and the fraught relationship with bodies that pervades Western culture.

Overview of the systemic frame: food activists on obesity

As Lawrence (2004) identifies, the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic places the blame for obesity with government and corporate actors. In food system critique, a variant within the systemic frame, the targeted actors include the food corporations themselves, the government agencies that regulate (or fail to regulate) the food industry, and the system of corporate capitalism itself. In the systemic analysis of the obesity epidemic put forward by food activists, all of these actors work together to undermine self-discipline and encourage indulgence of bodily impulses, leading to over-consumption of food in general as well as consumption of unhealthful foods in particular, which leads, in turn, to the epidemic of obesity about which these critics are concerned.

The corporations that produce, process, distribute and market foods are central actors in the systemic explanation of obesity. Food companies, their critics assert, make unhealthful foods and are more concerned with the bottom line than they are with health, environmental, or social consequences of the foods they sell. Critics point to the brutality and suffering that industrial farming inflicts on animals, the dangerous working conditions and low pay of workers in food processing and fast food restaurants, and the negative environmental impacts of industrial agriculture. And, of course, they point to detrimental effects of food industry practices on the body, primarily manifested as obesity. To lure consumers in an era of abundance of choice, food companies develop foods that are sweet, high in fat, and salty, knowing that these are the most appealing tastes despite health consequences (Nestle, 2002, p. 17). They keep serving sizes high

and costs low, since the marginal cost of the added food is slight and large portions have proven to be an effective marketing tactic – again despite health consequences (Pollan, 2006; Nestle, 2002). They make foods that are convenient, quickly warmed in the microwave or eaten with one hand while driving a car (Pollan, 2006; Nestle, 2002). Food companies can, and do, defend these practices by claiming to make what the consumer demands, and food system critics acknowledge that making products that sell is the top priority for all companies in capitalism. However, food system critics are not so ready to accept what they consider dishonest and unethical marketing strategies, both through misuse of science to mislead customers, and through targeting children with aggressive and often manipulative marketing campaigns.

Nestle (2002) focuses her discussion on food companies' disingenuous use of nutrition science to sell products. She claims that, despite a consensus among nutrition experts (at least, experts who aren't on the payroll of food processors or marketers) that good health results from healthful overall dietary patterns and not isolated nutrients, food companies fund and promote research into the properties of isolated vitamins, minerals, anti-oxidants, fatty acids, and so on, and then use these limited findings to sell products. Food companies fortify and engineer foods to include trendy nutrients – at the time of writing *Food Politics*, popular additives supposed to be health-promoting included folic acid, fibre, and herbs like ginkgo biloba, ginseng, and Echinacea; today the list might include acai, pomegranate, and omega 3 fatty acids. However, these “functional foods”, according to Nestle, often are simply sugary or highly-processed junk foods masquerading as health foods. Nestle charges that this disingenuous marketing strategy is

a result of food companies' successful lobbying efforts to reduce government restrictions on health claims (p. 317).

As Nestle (2006) describes, US restrictions on health claims for foods and dietary supplements have steadily loosened since the 1990s. Today, oversight of health claims in the American food system is handled by two separate agencies: the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) governs food and supplement labelling, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates advertising. Because of this distinction, health claims printed on the front of a package are subject to much weaker FTC standards, while the detailed nutrition information on the back of the packaging must adhere to the stricter standards of the FDA. While the FDA requires that all claims be substantiated by “authoritative statements published by federal agencies of the National Academy of Sciences” (cited in Nestle, 2006, p. 228, Table 27), the FTC will accept any scientific evidence, including a single study funded by the food company seeking approval for a particular health claim. Further, the FDA draws a distinction between health claims *per se* – claims about a specific relationship between an active ingredient and a disease – and the broader category of “structure/function” statements, claims that a product supports a function of the human body, such as the immune system or heart health, or promotes general well-being, rather than treating any defined disease. Structure/function statements are held to a much lower standard of evidence than health claims, even within FDA regulations (Nestle, 2002, p. 227-228).

This may seem to be an appropriately complementary relationship: vague yet enticing claims on the front of a package, with the hard data in the nutrition label on the

back. However, studies have found that consumers generally do not read nutrition labels, that consumers tend to believe all health claims because they assume that anything permitted to be printed must be true, and that health claims sell products (Nestle, 2002). Nestle (2002) provides the example of Kellogg's All-Bran, which experienced a 47% increase in market share after the FDA reluctantly approved – and the FTC enthusiastically encouraged – a marketing campaign implying that the fibre in All-Bran would reduce cancer risk. Nestle (2002) details the unflagging efforts of the National Food Processors Association, the Council for Responsible Nutrition (a euphemistically-named trade association for supplement manufacturers), the American Council on Science and Health (a non-profit organization heavily funded by industry), and the food companies themselves, like Kellogg's, to undermine and eliminate regulations that would restrict the food industry's ability to make health claims about their products and use them to sell more, resulting in proliferation of “a wide range of claims for which scientific support [is] limited, weak, or nonexistent” (p. 247).

In addition to this misleading use of nutrition science, the other marketing tactic decried by food system critics is marketing to children. Pollan, Nestle, Schlosser, Brownell and Spurlock all disapprove of fast food companies, among other food-industry players, aggressively marketing their products to children. Schlosser (2002) describes marketing strategies aimed at children in great detail. These range from the mildly disturbing approach of fostering a feeling in “Kid Kustomers” that the brand in question is trustworthy and parental, to the downright creepy practice of researching children's dreams and then using this information to generate mascots that match the dream imagery

of the target age group (p. 45). Market researchers conduct surveys and run focus groups, but they also hang out where children congregate and stage slumber parties where they gather data about kids' feelings, ideas, and product preferences. The internet, Schlosser reports, has opened up new avenues for gathering data about children: as of 2000, it was no longer legal for websites to solicit personal information from children (usually a mascot would do the soliciting; on the McDonald's site, children were encouraged to email Ronald McDonald their name and favourite menu item); however, with the advent of social networking (which came after the publication of *Fast Food Nation*), direct solicitation is no longer as important, since children and teenagers willingly post their names, ages, favourite fast foods, and other valuable market data on their Facebook pages.

Nestle (2002) describes advertising targeted at children as "simply breathtaking in its comprehensiveness, level of detail, and undisguised cynicism" (p. 179); Brownell (2004) calls it "powerful in presentation, overwhelming in amount, and pernicious in outcome" (p. 127). To the list provided by Schlosser, they add some very clever tactics on the part of food marketers. Companies produce books that teach counting using brand-name cookies, candies, and sugary cereals: the food items are used as counting tokens or placed in shapes on the pages, and the books come with coupons for the featured products (Nestle, 2002, p. 185). In another gambit, Coca Cola sends "Coke cards" to teenagers it considers influential among their peers, such as athletes, cheerleaders, and student council members, for them to pass on to friends. When teenagers use the cards to purchase Coca Cola products, they are rewarded with discounts to local retail businesses

(Nestle, 2002, pp. 185-186). Even infants are targeted: a company called Munchkin Bottling manufactures baby bottles with soft drink logos, from which infants are four times more likely to consume soft drinks than from other bottles (Brownell, p. 115). These tactics are designed to incite children not only to consume the advertised product in the present, but to develop brand loyalty and remain life-long customers. John Banzhaf, an anti-obesity campaigner and legal expert featured in *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004), relates that advertisers call this strategy “brand imprinting for later activation in life”: the toys, cartoons, bright colours and playgrounds that McDonald’s uses to appeal to children create and cement a positive feeling about McDonald’s that the company hopes will keep these children coming back as adults with families of their own.

Advertising to children is a main target of critique in *Super Size Me*. Although fast food companies and government regulators alike insist that it is the role of parents, not corporations, to monitor children’s food choices and feed their children healthfully, Spurlock objects that in an age of constant bombardment by advertising, parents have diminished opportunities to intervene and redirect their children’s food preferences. The film notes that while children view 10,000 advertisements for food products per year, on average, even if a parent ate every meal, every day with their child, that parent would only get about a thousand chances to counter-act the advertisers’ messages. To demonstrate the power of this ubiquitous advertising, Spurlock re-enacts a sociological experiment in which young children are shown images of iconic people and asked to identify them. A couple of the children recognize George Washington, one recognizes

Wendy (of the fast-food chain), none recognize Jesus (one guesses he is George Bush), but all recognize Ronald McDonald. The film shows the children smiling happily and reacting with delight to the picture of the McDonald's mascot. It seems that McDonald's campaign to present itself as a "Trusted Friend" (which Schlosser quotes from a McDonald's marketing plan, 2002, p. 50) has succeeded.

With corporations engaging in questionable tactics, these critics of the food system challenge that the state has abdicated its role of protecting citizens and providing a check on corporate power. In addition to failing to ban advertising to children or better regulate food product health claims, government agencies engage in a number of other activities that advantage food corporations at the expense of the public. In *Food Politics* (2002), and again in a re-cap in *What to Eat* (2006), Nestle details how food companies manipulate political processes in order to gain approval from government agencies and endorsement from nutrition professionals for their products. Nestle describes the legal and illegal processes by which food companies gain control of a system that should, in her view, be aimed at protecting consumers and public health. As described above, food company influence has resulted in a set of official nutrition guidelines that is confusing and often contradictory, as well as in the approval of health claims with scant scientific grounding.

Consumer confusion is beneficial for news media: as Nestle notes, "'eat your veggies' is old news" (2002, p. 20); new studies with dramatic but often questionable findings, which usually isolate single nutrients and have ambiguous implications for whole dietary patterns, make for much more gripping headlines. But most of all,

consumer confusion is beneficial for food producers and marketers, because when consumers are not sure what is good or bad to put in their bodies, they are more likely to accept questionable health claims and other suspect marketing tactics (Nestle, 2002). Food companies prefer nutritional guidelines that evaluate single nutrients rather than whole foods or dietary patterns, because this approach offers more opportunities for value-added processing: breakfast cereals with antioxidants, or packaged smoothies with extra calcium, for example (Nestle, 2002). Most significantly, food industry influence has fostered nutritional guidelines that never, ever tell consumers to eat less, neither of a certain food nor in general. In response to direct pressure from meat producer lobby groups, guidelines encourage consumers to “choose meats...which will reduce saturated fat intake” (2002, p. 78) or “choose 2 to 3 servings of...lean meats” (2002, p. 44) rather than the more direct and nutritionally sound “decrease consumption” of meat (2002, p. 78). Similarly, the dairy industry has worked hard to achieve the guideline “Choose fat-free or low-fat dairy products” (2002, p. 79), with two to four servings set as the needed intake, despite the lack of clear evidence that dairy products confer particular health benefits. The excessive power of food corporations to dictate government food and nutrition policy, specifically to push for ever-increasing consumption of food beyond the requirements of human nutrition, is an important causative factor in this frame of the obesity epidemic.

For Pollan (2006), the chief culprit behind the obesity epidemic is corn: more specifically, decades of agricultural policy that have subsidized the production of corn, flooding the market with cheap calories. Pollan gives a nod to other contributing factors:

sedentary lifestyles, rising affluence, spreading poverty, technological changes that limit our physical exertion, marketing to children, supersized portions, and dietary changes including an increase in processed foods. Yet in Pollan's view none of these contributors to obesity provides a sufficient explanation on its own. "The cause behind the causes," for Pollan, is very simple: "When food is abundant and cheap, people will eat more of it and get fat" (p. 102). The reason food is abundant and cheap is also simple: corn. "Before the changes in lifestyle, before the clever marketing," Pollan argues, "comes the mountain of cheap corn" (p. 103). In the 1970s, USDA policy shifted from protecting farmers by purchasing surpluses and keeping prices high, to protecting food industry corporations by paying farmers to produce excess thus keeping commodity prices artificially low. The result was a glut of cheap commodity crops, prime among them corn. Needing a way to dispose of this excess and turn a profit in the face of the falling prices generated by overproduction, the food industry developed a myriad of ways to process and repackage corn, to the point that more than a quarter of the 45,000 food products in the average American supermarket now contain corn (p. 19). For Pollan, it is this pro-business, and specifically pro-big business, stance on the part of government that has led to over-eating and obesity.

Yet food system critics generally acknowledge that food companies do nothing abnormal or deviant when they pursue profit above all else. Schlosser (2002) reminds us, "The executives who run the fast food industry are not bad men. They are business men" (p. 269). Spurlock (2004) concurs that loyalty to stockholders is and always will be the top priority of any company, adding that this fiduciary duty is enshrined in law. Nestle

(2002) also agrees: “Companies are in business to make money; that is their job. From the perspective of stockholders, it is irresponsible for companies to make decisions that will *not* lead to increased profits” (p. 362). To a certain extent, the obesity-inducing practices these companies engage in are normal, acceptable, and even necessary in a capitalist economy. Therefore, some critics turn their attention to the present form of the capitalist economy itself as an important cause of the malfunctioning food system and obesity.

Although none of the writers and film-makers addressed in this thesis identify themselves as anti-capitalist, most do take issue with the way capitalism is currently organized. This literature identifies specific problems in the contemporary American political economy that lead to obesity, including the constant push to over-consume food, growing poverty, under-funding public schools with multiple consequences for kids’ health, and the cultural changes wrought by free market capitalism. Brownell’s claim that “the epidemic of obesity cannot be understood or reversed without recognizing the fundamental role of modern economic conditions” (p. 199) is supported throughout the literature. Each author emphasizes different factors, but all share the conclusion that there is something fundamental happening to Western society at the heart of which lies – although they don’t use the term – neoliberal capitalism.

Nestle names both the demand for growth in capitalism and corporate greed as central problems, without differentiating between the two. In her analysis, the push for constant growth, an essential element in a capitalist economy, is especially problematic when it comes to food, since there is a limit to how much people can consume, even

when they over-consume. In a 2003 editorial for *Science*, Nestle argues explicitly: “Market economies...turn people with expendable income into consumers of aggressively marketed foods that are high in energy but low in nutritional value, and of cars, television sets, and computers that promote sedentary behavior. Gaining weight is good for business” (p. 781). This suggests that capitalism intrinsically and inevitably creates the conditions for an obesity epidemic, pointing to a fundamental problem that cannot be resolved by better corporate social responsibility. Yet, Nestle insists she is “not against business”, just against “unchecked greed” (2006, p. 511). While her analysis implies an irresolvable tension between the demands of a capitalist economy and the health of human bodies, Nestle directs her criticism at “corporate greed” and insists that with the proper checks on “the excesses of capitalism” (Bioneers.org, n.d.), both human bodies and capitalist growth can flourish and be healthy.

Schlosser (2002) similarly pledges loyalty to capitalism while condemning its supposed excesses. “The market is a tool, and a useful one,” (p. 260) he tells the reader. “But the worship of this tool is a hollow faith. Far more important than any tool is what you make with it” (p. 260-261). He predicts that, parallel to the twentieth century’s struggle against state totalitarianism, the twenty-first century will “be marked by a struggle to curtail excessive corporate power” (p. 261), and “to find a balance between the efficiency and amorality of the market” (p. 261). Schlosser’s main complaint against contemporary capitalism is that it is not true to its own principles: he charges that “during the past two decades, rhetoric about the ‘free market’ has cloaked changes in the nation’s economy that bear little relation to real competition or freedom of choice” (p. 260),

pointing specifically to government subsidies to industry and monopolistic corporate mergers. The mechanisms by which this illegitimate form of capitalism generates obesity are multifaceted, but his focus is of course on fast food. The fast food industry, capitalizing on falling commodity prices (as Pollan describes), has made available an overabundance of cheap, high-fat foods. As people turn to these convenient foods, and away from home-cooked meals, they consume ever more calories, sugar and fat. In short, the fast food industry exemplifies how market capitalism pushes the most profitable products and modes of delivery, not the most beneficial to the consumer or society, in terms of health, environmental, and social impacts. Combining this inherent tendency of capitalism with contemporary capitalism's infidelity to its own free market principles results in the toxic food environment that has led to the obesity epidemic.

Beyond specific business practices, capitalism has a broader effect of transforming society and culture in a way that Pollan, for one, sees as detrimental to health and contributory to obesity. Pollan (2006) cites Daniel Bell's critique of capitalism's tendency to erode cultural traditions in the name of the pursuit of profit. Long-standing cultural values and practices "that steady a society but often impede the march of commercialization" (p. 302), including the family dinner and other rituals around eating, are now diminishing or gone. Without our taboos, rituals, and traditions, we eat unhealthful foods in unhealthful ways: eating on the go, eating at any time or place, eating highly-processed foods with added fat and sugars, and gorging on super-sized portions all contribute to over-consumption and therefore obesity. All of these

behaviours are facilitated by the rapid social change and crumbling of traditions engendered by late capitalism.

There is also a strong class dimension to the systemic analysis of the obesity epidemic, noted by all of the authors included in this study. The flip side of obscene corporate profits these authors condemn is the impoverishment of workers, who can't afford healthy food on their low wages. Brownell (2004) expresses concern about access to healthful food in low-income neighbourhoods, noting that research has confirmed a lack of supermarkets in poor and black neighbourhoods (pp. 208-209). *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) profiles a working-class Latino family, the Orozcoss, who share their struggle to eat healthfully on a tight budget and with little spare time. The family is shown at a supermarket, where the father decides a head of broccoli is too expensive, and the two daughters return a Bartlett pear to the shelf for the same reason. In contrast to the high prices of fresh fruits and vegetables, the family is able to eat for \$11.48 at a Burger King drive-through. The father is diabetic, but the family cannot afford to purchase the healthy foods that might alleviate his condition, especially given the cost of purchasing his medication without socialized health care. *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004) introduces a similar personal story illustrating class as a barrier to healthy eating. Spurlock interviews an overweight teen and her mother, who have just seen Subway spokesperson Jared Fogle speak to the girl's high school about healthy eating. The mom shares that she desperately wants her daughter to avoid the shame and stigma that she has experienced as a fat woman, but the family can't afford to eat Subway like Jared. The daughter is discouraged by the message that there's a simple and healthy way to lose weight that she

can't afford; she has tried other methods and worries they have harmed her body. These vignettes are presented as case studies, first-hand accounts of a widespread problem that is endemic to the growing class divide in contemporary capitalism.

While average incomes for workers have fallen steadily over the past couple of decades, food system critics charge that funding for social programs that could fill in the gaps in supporting health has also declined. Spurlock (2004) notes that in many low-income neighbourhoods, the local McDonald's is the site of the only playground around, and the only safe, indoor place for kids to play. He also criticizes the Bush-era "No Child Left Behind" policy, whose overwhelming emphasis on standardized test results led many schools to cut physical education time in favour of more test preparation. (It's worth noting that the hard push to raise standardize testing scores and the score-dependent funding model have only increased under the present Democratic administration.)

Nestle's and Schlosser's critiques of fast food in schools similarly point to funding cuts for public schooling as a contributor to obesity, arguing that dwindling funding has left school administrators so desperate that they enter into Faustian bargains with food producers and marketers, trading captive audiences of schoolchildren for funding, equipment, and teaching materials. Though companies defend these actions as responsible and generous contributions to needy schools and children, Nestle argues that "the line between philanthropy and exploitation is very fine indeed" (p. 188) and is often crossed in these kinds of arrangements. Both Nestle and Schlosser decry the "pouring-rights" deals schools and districts are increasingly entering into, in which Coca Cola and

Pepsi provide funds in exchange for exclusively selling one company's brands. Brownell (2004) charges that "Coke, Pepsi, and the other companies dangle the bait and the schools must bite, even knowing a sharp hook lurks beneath the prize" (p. 161). These deals can be extremely lucrative for the companies, but schools sometimes find that their students don't meet the consumption quotas required to receive the promised funds. School administrators end up in the awkward position of choosing between student health and funding: either they can encourage students to drink these brands' beverages so that the school gets the funding on offer, or they can encourage students to limit consumption of sugary drinks and lose their much-needed funding.

These authors, among many other critics, also condemn the "Channel One" program, through which schools are provided TVs and equipment worth in the range of \$17,000 (Nestle, 2002) to \$25,000 (Brownell, 2004) in exchange for a guarantee that eighty percent of classrooms, on ninety percent of school days, will view Channel One's twelve minute program, containing ten minutes of news and information and two minutes of advertising. Schlosser notes that Channel One's audience of over 8 million teenagers is fifty times larger than MTV's, which explains why this outlet is so popular with food companies who, Nestle claims, "view schoolchildren as an unparalleled marketing opportunity" (p. 188). Food system critics worry that the erosion of the welfare state has expanded opportunities for food companies to exploit children, poor families, and other marginalized individuals. If schools cannot afford equipment, food companies step in and offer pouring rights deals and Channel One; if families cannot afford nutritious meals, food companies are there with dollar menus at the drive-through; if municipalities aren't

providing safe play areas in parks, McDonald's builds indoor playgrounds at its restaurants. In all of these situations, what might have been an imperative of the state to provide services to the people becomes an opportunity for food companies to market or sell their products, in turn harming health and increasing obesity.

Contextualized by their exposés and analyses of these various systemic factors contributing to obesity, food activist writers and film-makers make explicit arguments against the claims of the individualizing frame. Appearing in *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008), Pollan charges that the food industry “blames obesity on a crisis of personal responsibility” yet engineers foods specifically to manipulate consumers into over-eating, undermining the freedom of personal choice. In *In Defense of Food* (2006), he rejects claims that “the individual bears ultimate responsibility for whatever illnesses befall him [sic]” (p. 71), pointing to social class as a more significant determinant of health than personal choices about diet or exercise, a point he reiterates in his appearances in *Food, Inc* (Kenner, 2008). Nestle similarly asserts that the food industry has created a food environment that undermines personal responsibility, focusing on the power of marketing: while what we choose to eat is “a matter of personal responsibility, ... we do not make food choices in a vacuum. We select diets in a marketing environment in which billions of dollars are spent to convince us that nutrition advice is so confusing, and eating healthfully so impossibly difficult, that there is no point in bothering to eat less of one or another food product or category” (p. 360) Spurlock, too, acknowledges the role for personal decision-making, but wonders, “Where does personal responsibility stop, and corporate responsibility begin?” Brownell discredits the personal responsibility

emphasis of the individualizing frame, noting that “as the pressure to be responsible (and thin) has grown, the prevalence of obesity has risen” (p. 49), and that even if we did accept the individualizing frame, we would be left with no useful course of action beyond nagging, which has so far proved fruitless.

Food system critique, as one variant of the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic, rejects the main tenets of the individualizing frame and positions itself as a more socially-conscious, politically-progressive, compassionate alternative. Instead of castigating fat people and blaming them for their own fatness, food activists describe a very powerful network of social, political and economic relations that create an environment conducive to over-consumption. In the place of the figure of the lazy fatty, we are offered the greedy corporate boss as the bogeyman behind the obesity epidemic. Fat people, personally flawed and morally corrupt, are a small part of an entire system that is flawed and corrupt; fat bodies are a symptom of a larger problem, not *the* problem in and of themselves. The obesity epidemic cannot be resolved by shaming fat individuals, but only by taking action at the level of government policy and food industry practice. In the next chapter, however, I will explore the implications of the systemic frame not just at the policy level – where the two frames do contrast – but at the more fundamental level of what it means for our understanding of the meaning of fatness and the nature of the body.

Chapter 4: The Meaning of the Body in the Systemic Frame

In the individualizing frame, obesity indicates a failure of personal will. An obese body reveals the individual as gluttonous and slothful, unwilling or unable to control her bodily impulses. In the systemic frame, obesity still represents a failure, but perhaps a more understandable failure because the obese individual's personal will is up against a more formidable foe: the obese person has succumbed not merely to the untrustworthy impulses of the body but also to the well-financed, powerful machine of the food industry, not least its lobbyists and marketers. Brownell (2004) argues, "Choices people make are important, but the nation has played the willpower and restraint cards for years and finds itself trumped again and again by an environment that overwhelms the resources of most people" (p. 5). Personal choice over what and how to eat is exercised in an environment designed to have us over-consume. Because of this obesogenic environment, which includes not only a proliferation of unhealthful and cheap foods but also limited opportunities for outdoor recreation, communities planned around car travel, and over-reliance on exertion-saving technologies, individual obese people are viewed as less personally guilty for their fatness.

Despite this shift in who is to blame for the epidemic of obesity, the systemic analysis shares problematic features with the individualizing frame in its conception of the body. In the systemic frame, the body continues to be cast as machine-like, with quantifiable attributes and predictable responses to inputs. This is sometimes explicit, as when Brownell (2004) tells the reader: "You are an exquisitely efficient calorie

conservation machine” (p. 6), and other times implicit. Although the systemic frame posits a different macro-level cause of obesity than the individualizing frame, at the level of internal biology of the human body the explanation is the same: eating too much food. Nestle presents body weight as an “equation” (2006, p. 9; 2002, p. 8), wherein caloric intake (food) minus caloric expenditure (activity) equals body size, the vagaries of genetic makeup aside. In advice offered in *What to Eat* (2006), Nestle states that reducing energy intake by 500 calories per day will result in a loss of one pound of body fat per week (pp. 290-291), despite the fact that no reliable studies have found this to be the case in human subjects (Gard & Wright, 2005). Spurlock (2004) makes a similar assumption: when, in one of his weekly weigh-ins, he discovers he has lost rather than gained weight on his all-McDonald’s, high-calorie diet, he is certain that this must be lost muscle mass, since the direct, causative connection between energy intake and body fat is unquestionable for him. Spurlock’s film is regularly punctuated by weigh-ins, blood tests, and fitness tests, presenting his body as a thing to be measured, whose quantifications reveal something meaningful.

In an apparent contrast, Pollan (2008) critiques the input vs. output, machine-like model of the body. Specifically, he rebuts “nutritionistic” thinking, which emphasizes the intake of isolated nutrients rather than whole foods and “encourages us to take a simple mechanistic view of [eating]: put in this nutrient, get out that physiological result” (p. 63). Yet, he continues to rely on this assumption when it comes to body weight, insisting that the cause of obesity is that “when food is abundant and cheap, people will eat more of it and get fat” (2006, p. 102). Not only are human bodies mechanically predictable in

their conversion of energy to body fat, human decision-making about food is mechanically predictable and crudely economic.

Pollan uses biological terminology to underscore his point that the body is, in Bordo's (1993) terms, "a biologically programmed system" (p. 4). Humans are vulnerable to overconsumption of added sugars because of "the mammalian omnivore's innate desire for sweetness" (2006, pp. 103-104). Pollan tells us that processed food products are engineered to "push our evolutionary buttons, fooling the omnivore's inherited food selection system. Add fat or sugar to anything and it's going to taste better on the tongue of an animal that natural selection has wired to seek out energy-dense foods" (2006, p. 107). With buttons to push and wiring determining our actions, humans, in Pollan's account, resemble the 17th-century model of the machine-like body described by Grosz, Bordo, and Foucault. Pollan ventures into more current biological determinism too, telling readers that we like to consume fat and sugar not simply because they taste good or fill us up, but because they offer "the biggest neurobiological rewards" (p. 108). Brownell uses similar biological terminology and arguments, claiming that obesity happens because "humans are locked into a biology that responds poorly to the modern environment" (p. 27). Like Pollan, Brownell underscores the animality of the human body and human impulses, stating, "Animals and humans are drawn naturally to an energy-dense diet" (p. 27). In this framing, human bodies are instinct-driven and biologically determined, a position that aligns clearly within the mind-body, rational-irrational dichotomy that organizes Western thought about bodies and frames the stigmatization of the fat body.

In the analysis of these food activists, bodies are predictable, measurable and directly manipulable. Unfortunately for us, bodies are also untrustworthy. Plato warned millennia ago that sensory information can be deceiving, and this belief persists in the systemic explanation of obesity. The whole project of critiquing the food system rests on a distrust of the body: if our bodies could accurately assess the goodness of foods, we wouldn't need books and films like these to tell us the truth about what we eat. Nestle (2002) states outright that "humans do not innately know how to select a nutritious diet" (p. 16). Her book *What to Eat* (2006) follows up this revelation with detailed guidelines for selecting foods from each section of the supermarket. Though the central principles are straightforward – eat less, move more, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and go easy on junk food – the book itself is a 624-page tome detailing everything from the additives in baby foods to the moral implications of eating factory-farmed meat. Pollan, similarly, offers a directive in his book *In Defense of Food* (2008): the simplicity of his mantra "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" is belied by the fifty pages of elaboration it receives as the final section of the book, not to mention Pollan's 2009 follow-up *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*, a one hundred-page guidebook to food selection. Our omnivorous-mammal instincts to consume sweet and energy-dense foods may lead us astray without this expert guidance.

Compounding the problem of our untrustworthy bodily impulses is the existence of massive industries designed to exploit these misleading impulses in order to generate corporate profits. Agriculture, food processing, food distribution, fast-food, and food marketing industries encourage rather than suppress our bodies' instincts to over-

consume. Nestle's (2002) premise is that obesity "can be traced to the food industry's imperative to encourage people to *eat more* in order to generate sales and increase income in a highly competitive marketplace" (p. 4). Because American agriculture is extremely productive, supply tends to outstrip demand; to generate growth, food industry corporations continually develop new products and new marketing campaigns to get consumers to eat them. Food companies use large campaign contributions, intensive and expensive lobbying, gifts to key politicians, and aggressive lawsuits against critics to ensure that regulations and nutritional guidelines do not interfere with their "eat more" marketing message. The food industry's aggressive lobbying has resulted in nutritional guidelines that are confusing and often contradictory, despite the fact that informed nutritional advice ("eat more fruits and vegetables", p. 20) has remained the same for half a century.

Pollan, too, points to food industry corporations' manipulative practices that play into the weaknesses of human instincts. The invention of high-fructose corn syrup is of particular note: its appealing sweetness "induc[es] people to consume more calories than they otherwise might [and] gets them to really chomp through the corn surplus" (2006, p. 104). Supersizing, invented by McDonald's to circumvent the taboo against ordering more and appearing gluttonous, taps into our "thrifty gene" (Pollan, 2006, p. 106): people will eat as much food as is presented before them, beyond the point of discomfort, because "our bodies are storing reserves of fat against a famine that never comes" (p. 106). The problem is worsened by highly-processed foods, which contain fats and sugars in concentrations not found in nature (Pollan, 2006), and especially by artificial

flavouring, by which our naïve bodily senses are all too easily seduced. Pollan (2008) warns, “Foods that lie to our senses are one of the most challenging features of the Western diet” (p. 104). Through these and other tactics, the companies who make and sell food play into our bodies’ natural desires and impulses, but turn these against us, damaging our health, society, and environment.

Nature, culture, industry and the body

In this context, the struggle for control of the body is best understood as three-sided, among the body, the food industry, and the self-disciplining mind. The body is at best naïve, too easily manipulated by food industry trickery, and at worst sinful, driven by sloth and gluttony to sabotage the self’s good intentions. In this three-sided struggle, the body’s natural impulses to eat or cease eating can be manipulated for good or ill by the self or by the corporation. The urgency of controlling bodily impulses is heightened within the systemic frame because, in addition to the body’s natural impulses being untrustworthy, the self that controls the body must contend with the bad influence of the food industry, which seeks to exploit and capitalize on our bodies’ vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

This dynamic is a central theme of Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), in which he contrasts three competing forces: nature, culture, and industry. Each of these is presented in one section that explores, respectively, the “personal”, “pastoral”, and industrial food chains. The industrial food chain, linking the corn fields of Iowa through the massive industrial feedlots of Kansas to fast food drive-through restaurants across the

United States and the globe, exemplifies the worst of industry: industrial food production depletes resources, destroys ecosystems, inflicts suffering on non-human animals, destroys the cultural tradition of the family farm, dismantles rural communities, and of course harms bodies through its unhealthful products. At some points, Pollan contrasts industry with nature, arguing that “there exists a fundamental tension between the logic of nature and the logic of human industry” (p. 9): while the logic of nature is to build resilience and good health through complexity (of ecosystems, organisms, and practices of consumption and production), the logic of industry is to simplify and homogenize. This tendency to homogenize results in the large-scale and environmentally devastating corn fields and concentrated animal feeding operations Pollan visits.

But nature on its own is not a strong enough antidote to the ills of industry. Nature, as represented by the “personal” food chain of hunting and gathering, is imperfect, unreliable, and vulnerable. Pollan’s forays into mushroom gathering and boar hunting are difficult to coordinate and psychologically taxing. He faces deep anxieties about which mushroom to eat, unable to trust his knowledge of wild nature, and he faces even deeper anguish about the moral status of killing a wild animal. In addition to these psychic hurdles, Pollan faces physical danger: his attempt to harvest abalone involves a treacherous and unpleasant expedition along a rocky coastline as strong, cold waves threaten to dash him against the rocks. The salt he gathers by evaporating sea water has a repulsive, metallic taste, irreversibly tainted by industrial effluent. Pollan concedes that both the industrial meal, McDonald’s take-out eaten while driving on the highway, and the personal meal, his hunted and gathered food painstakingly prepared and shared at

home with his foodie friends, “are equally unreal and equally unsustainable” (pp. 410-411). Nature on its own is too capricious to provide proper sustenance without some human intervention.

The proper defence against the ills of the industrial food system, and the industrial way of being more broadly, is not nature but culture. In Pollan’s description, culture is how humans learn from and build on nature, enhancing its strengths, buttressing its weaknesses, and refining its crudenesses. To represent culture, Pollan traces the pastoral food chain through Polyface Farm, a “beyond organic” (p. 132) farm in rural Virginia that uses natural processes but manages them intensely to produce a food supply that is healthful, stable, and accessible to the eater. At Polyface, as Pollan poetically describes, “a half dozen different animal species are raised together in an intensive rotational dance on the theme of symbiosis” (p. 126). In Pollan’s view this careful blend of nature and culture is the ideal human habitat. Taking in a view of the farm while resting in a pasture, Pollan rhapsodizes: “Our culture, perhaps even our biology, disposes us to respond to just such a grassy middle landscape, suspended as it is halfway between the wilderness of forest and the artifice of civilization” (p. 124). This “middle landscape” allows us to remain connected to nature while improving and humanizing it through culture.

Eating is at the centre of our cultural connection to nature, as mediated through the body: “daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds” (2006, p. 10). Eating food is how we engage directly with nature, and it is a process best governed by culture. Pollan argues that the impulse to eat, like the impulse to have sex, “must be carefully channelled and socialized for the good of

society” (2006, p. 298). Our bodies on their own, without the management of culture, will lead us astray. The root of this problem, as implied by the book’s title, is our nature as omnivores who will eat just about anything and therefore need strict rules to keep us from eating the wrong things: “If nature won’t draw a line around human appetite, then human culture must step in, bringing the omnivore’s eating habits under the government of all the various taboos (foremost the one against cannibalism), customs, rituals, table manners, and culinary conventions found in every culture” (Pollan, 2006, p. 298). Cultural traditions that govern food transform eating, an animal function, to dining, a uniquely human experience (2006). Following time-proven cultural traditions, he argues, will protect the eater both from the trickery and manipulation practiced by the food industry, and the bodily impulses that are so easily misled (2008). Thus Pollan’s framework posits the body as an object to be controlled. This is consistent with the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic as a whole, in which the problem of bodily control is as central as in the individualizing frame, and even heightened in intensity. No longer a two-sided struggle between mind and body, the dynamic of self-discipline is a tug-of-war between the individual self and the manipulations of the food industry, with the body caught in the middle.

The symbolism of the fat body

In addition to continuing to adhere to the concept of the body as subordinate, manipulable object, the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic retains the central premise that the outward appearance of the body reveals something meaningful about the

inner state of the person, as in the individualizing frame. Because of this, the articulation of the systemic frame continues to use the fat body as a symbol for less immediately visible problems. In some instances, a fat body indicates the flaws of the individual, while in other cases it stands for broader social ills and even the decline of American or Western culture. Most problematically, throughout the systemic critique the fat body signifies ignorance and irrationality, both of the fat person and more generally in the increasingly fat society.

Although food activists can be taken at their word that they are motivated by concern for individual health and environmental and social well-being, they nonetheless draw on the language of the obesity epidemic and related body symbolism that stigmatizes fat bodies (Farrell, 2011, pp. 14-15). In particular, Farrell accuses certain food activists – she focuses on a PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) campaign and *Super Size Me* – of using catastrophic language and “the motif of the fat person” (p. 15) as attention-grabbing gimmicks and facile over-simplifications of their more complex arguments against consumerism and industrial food production. LeBesco (2004) charges that “even work that contains an implicit critique of capitalist consumerism still oozes anti-fat sentiment” (p. 57), in that it represents fatness as an obvious result and indicator of the ills of capitalism. The fat body is all too easily appropriated as a symbol of everything wrong with our society.

In the food activist literature examined in this study, the assumption that the body reveals the inner state of the self is sometimes subtle and implicit, and other times more blatant. Pollan and Schlosser, in particular, avoid statements or images that directly

denigrate the personhood of the obese. However, through their consistent message that the body's appetites are animalistic, and that it takes a civilizing dose of culture to tame these instincts, they establish a framework in which the obese body can only be read as insufficiently rational, more animal than human. Pollan's regular use of biological terminology and emphasis on the traits of humans as species underscores the connection between body and raw nature, and positions the obese body as inappropriately close to nature. In one statement, Pollan (2008) refers to fat people as novel and bizarre creatures: "A diet based on quantity rather than quality has ushered a new creature onto the world stage: the human being who manages to be both overfed and undernourished, two characteristics seldom found in the same body in the long natural history of our species" (p. 122).

Recalling, however, that Pollan's view of the relationships among nature, culture and industry is complicated, here too there is not a simple correlation between nature and obesity. Instead, culture provides the ideal balance between mind and body that enables bodily health; too much industrial living causes obesity just as much as too little disciplining of natural impulses does. As illustration of this principle, Pollan provides an intriguing example of an Aborigine community in Australia whose members experienced high levels of obesity. As both treatment and scientific experiment, a researcher engaged the members of this community in a project where they returned to their traditional lands and ate only their traditional foods: their levels of obesity and incidence of diabetes dropped and their health increased. In this case study, it was the excess of industrial living that damaged health and caused obesity. Interestingly, though, it wasn't a return to

nature per se that cured these people, but a return to culture, to their traditional culture. Thus, the obese person is simultaneously too industrialized, that is, too far from nature, and too beholden to the body's natural urges, too close to nature.

Alongside these subtle messages about the meanings of fat bodies are more blatant examples of anti-fat sentiment. Spurlock, as Farrell (2011) notes, is a main offender. For the most part, his film does not make direct derogatory statements about obese people, but the power of film lies in its visuality and this film contains many meaningful images that communicate denigration of fat people. His film is dominated by images of bodies, fat and thin. Early on, we are introduced quite intimately to his own body: before he begins his experiment, he is weighed, measured, probed, and tested. The results of these tests are impeccable. A non-smoker and regular exerciser cohabiting with a vegan chef, Spurlock has a thin, fit body that reveals him as disciplined and virtuous. As such he is ideally positioned to undertake the experiment, since there will be a clear distinction between the before (pure, virtuous) and after (tainted, compromised) versions of himself. He is also ideally positioned to tell his own story, since his thinness indicates he has the necessary self-mastery and virtue to act as authority. We couldn't trust a fat person to describe a month of eating McDonald's, since a fat person's motives for undertaking this project would be suspect, as would her ability to objectively assess the impact of the food on her body. After all, if she could properly judge the impact of food, she wouldn't be fat.

Spurlock's fit body, a paragon of health and virtue, contrasts with the many fat bodies that appear in the film. With three exceptions – two teenage girls and one adult

bariatric surgery patient – these bodies exist in the background and do not speak. Almost all of them have faces blurred or cropped out of the frame, both indicating that fatness is shameful and hinting at the incomplete subjectivity of the fat person. What matters about these fat people, in this film, is not who they are or what they have to say for themselves, or even what or how they eat, but simply that they have fat bodies. In a particularly disturbing image, Spurlock shows an anonymous, older fat person in a motorized scooter-type wheelchair, and accuses fat people of “rely[ing] on machines to get around.” In one bizarre scene, Spurlock sits in a lunchroom eating his McDonald’s as a fat man (this time with an unobscured face) enters behind him and uses a microwave. Spurlock stares blankly into the camera, raises his eyebrows, and then after the man leaves, gives an ambiguous nod. The scene is accompanied by a song with the repeated lyric, “I hope you got fat.” Viewing the film, I was confused by this scene, unsure what its purpose is in the narrative or argument. However, the representation of the fat body is consistent with the rest of the film’s imagery: fat bodies are mute in the background; already such a meaningful symbol, they can communicate without voice or explanation.

Cooper (2007), an academic and fat activist, calls this imagery of the anonymous obese body the “Headless Fatty phenomenon.” She notes that images of fat bodies with heads cropped or blurred out of the image have become ubiquitous in news stories about obesity, and argues that these images present fat people as objects and problems to be talked about, not human beings with ideas and perspectives to be engaged with. Fat people “are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the

body, the belly, the arse, food.” Rather than a picture of a person, the headless fatty is a picture of a cultural symbol. The headless fatty phenomenon also reflects the surveillance culture that surrounds fat people, “whose bodies are policed by glares, and disapproving looks,” constantly subjected to scrutiny: any time, anywhere, especially while eating but even while innocently standing next to a billboard advertising sandwiches, as one woman is in the images Cooper analyzes, a fat body is available for the photographing, ready to fill in as an anonymous emblem of all that’s wrong with society.

In addition to the parades of headless fatties, *Super Size Me* also features mocking cartoon images of fat bodies. The first of these accompanies the story of two teenage girls whose families sued MacDonald’s for endangering the girls’ health: a cartoon image shows the girls, one at a time, ballooning from their imagined sizes as small children to their height and weight at the time of the lawsuit. The second cartoon is more explicitly derogatory. Spurlock illustrates his discussion of the advertising budgets of large food with pictures of men in suits standing next to piles of cash. McDonald’s, Pepsi, and Hershey are represented by fat men, greedily clutching their bellies and eyeing their fortunes. Next to them, the Five-a-Day campaign encouraging more fruit and vegetable consumption is represented by a thin, sad-looking man, standing downcast next to a single coin while the others laugh cruelly at him. Drawing on the long-standing cultural symbol of the greedy “fat cat” capitalist, these cartoons show fat bodies as avaricious and immodest, contrasted with the morally righteous thin body. Through these images, Spurlock establishes fat bodies as symbols of laziness, greed, lack of discipline, and immorality.

Spurlock's own body is also caught up in this symbolism. As the month-long experiment progresses, he experiences a moral decline along with the decline of his physical health. He becomes cranky and lazy, and he fights with his partner, a vegan chef who is clearly distressed by what Spurlock is doing to his body. In one of the confessional scenes, a repeated device in the film, he tells the audience, "This is the best part of the day – when I get to be fat on the bed with my quart of coke." He indulges in the laziness and gluttony that the fat body, and now his fat body, unambiguously indicates.

Spurlock's use of the image of the fat body is the most blatantly disparaging of the food system critics I analyze here, and perhaps this is because he is the least committed to the systemic frame. He begins his film by questioning whether corporations or individuals are to blame, and though most of his evidence comes down against corporations, he does not wholly reject the individualizing frame. It is likely that his inclusion, at least to an extent, of the ideas of the individualizing frame makes his work more open to representing obese bodies as individual failures, indicators of sloth and gluttony on a personal level. However, using the fat body as an image of personal and societal degradation does not clash with the more strictly systemic positions of other food activists, and in fact others use similar images.

In a particularly striking example, *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) shows a timeline of human evolution of the sort often parodied on novelty t-shirts: first an ape, then what appears to be a male homo erectus, next an early homo sapiens, penultimately a fit-looking homo sapiens sapiens wielding a primitive knife, and finally reaching the present,

an obese white man wearing boxer shorts, holding a super-sized cup of pop and surrounded by fast-food wrappers. These images are superimposed on what at first glance seems like the expected chronology line, marking off millions of years, but is actually a weight number line, beginning with the 95-pound ape and culminating in the 320-pound modern man. Here, the fat man unambiguously represents decline, not only of American or Western culture but of the human species. He is morally degraded, too, tossing litter around him even as the earth's ecosystems reach crisis points.

Food system critics repeatedly use fat bodies as symbols of problems of American culture, both domestically as a faltering of American national character, and globally as a symptom of American cultural imperialism. In Pollan's (2006) chapter on obesity in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, entitled "The Consumer: A Republic of Fat", fatness is a problem of the American way of being, so integral to American political economy that it is a national trait. Pollan compares the obesity epidemic to the rise in alcohol consumption in the early nineteenth century, arguing that both resulted from a glut of cheap corn: corn whiskey was that era's high-fructose corn syrup, an inexpensive, easy to transport, less perishable, value-added vehicle for disposing of excess corn. Pollan asserts a historical continuity between these episodes: "The Alcoholic Republic has long since given way to the Republic of Fat; we're eating today much the way we drank then, and for some of the same reasons" (p. 101), those reasons being corporate power and the profit motive trumping public and individual well-being. In the Republic of Fat, a fat body is not just a fat body; it is a symbol of all that is wrong with the way the country is run, the over-powerful corporations and the failures of government and society.

Brownell puts the problem of fatness and American culture in a way that echoes concerns about good citizenship raised by the individualizing frame. He warns that not taking drastic action against the obesity epidemic will “place [the] nation at a strategic disadvantage” (p. 5), and argues, “People deserve an environment that promotes good health; it is fundamental to the country’s vitality, productivity, and security” (p. 51). In Brownell’s systemic formulation, the cause of this threat to healthy citizenry is not individual moral failing but systemic failures. Nonetheless, he continues to pose fatness as a problem for the success of the nation on the same fronts as in the individualizing frame: his reference to “security” echoes the concerns articulated elsewhere about raising a physically fit military force; his worry about “productivity” points back to LeBesco’s (2004) observation that the fat body fails to “register as a fully productive body in a capitalist economy” (p. 55); and his inclusion of the vague term “vitality” may reference actual physical health, or the more abstract concept of a morally strong, robust and energetic national character.

But Brownell and other food system critics are not only concerned about their own nation; rather, they see America at the leading edge of a dangerous global trend towards gluttony, sloth, and their consequence, fatness. Brownell frames the problem as one of American cultural imperialism. In a sweeping homogenization of all non-American cultures, he claims that “people in China, Australia, Spain or the Bahamas may buy a Big Mac or have Kentucky Fried Chicken not only because the food tastes good, but also because it represents the perception of a good life” (p. 57). When non-Americans buy American fast food, he says, “they buy a dream” (p. 57). Yet, buying into the

American dream brings with it shades of a nightmare: “American food also represents the bloated U.S. lifestyle and American domination of the world. It may portend, in the eyes of non-Americans, obesity, poor health, and disability, along with takeover of local culture and further enrichment of America” (p. 57).

Schlosser (2001) shares Brownell’s concern about American cultural imperialism and its effect of spreading obesity. Schlosser argues that one of the causes of “globesity”, as it has been called by other authors (Delpeuch, Maire, Monnier, and Holdsworth, 2009), is the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to “an unprecedented ‘Americanization’ of the world” (p. 240). According to Schlosser, Americanization can be seen in the adoption of American popular culture including fashion and entertainment media, but also and most importantly in the adoption of American eating habits and expanding waistlines. Though Americans are still champions when it comes to overweight and obesity – Schlosser quotes alarming statistics at some length – “by eating like Americans, people all over the world are beginning to look more like Americans, at least in one respect” (p. 240). After describing rising obesity rates in China and Japan, Schlosser adds the peculiar remark that “eating hamburgers and French fries has not made people any blonder, though it has made them fatter” (p. 242)—obviously this remark is meant tongue-in-cheek, but it nonetheless hints at the recurring idea, in both individualizing and systemic frames, that the visually perceptible traits of bodies reflect national character. In this framework, fatness represents the colonization and decline not only of diverse national cultures, but of actual bodies, in the face of the overwhelming crush of

“Americanization”. Here again, a fat person is not just a person with a larger body, but a symbol of drastic social and cultural problems.

Reason, Knowledge, and the Fat Body

As noted previously, the systemic frame appears to ease some of the shame and stigma attached to fat bodies because, in the systemic analysis, the odds are stacked steeply against the fat person when it comes to controlling the body. The size, resources, and determination of the food industry, not to mention the fact that the government and the very structure of the economy are on industry’s side, would seem to make obesity all but inevitable. However, instead of actually reducing stigma, the systemic frame merely shifts the terms of fat stigma: while the fat person in the individualizing frame is lazy or immoral, the fat person in the systemic frame is a pitiable dupe. Fat people are fat because they don’t know better: if they had the needed knowledge, surely they would be thin. Perhaps it is kinder to extend pity than moral censure to fat people, but both are stigmatizing.

The pitying stance of the systemic frame denies the subjectivity and rationality of fat people. As LeBesco (2004) describes, positioning fat people as innocent victims – of genes, of hormonal or other disease, of poverty, or of ignorance – fosters pity, and positions fat people as failed subjects who lack the agency to shape their lives, selves, and bodies (p. 115). She warns that, for those who oppose anti-fat discrimination, portraying fat people as innocent victims “is futile as a political strategy, for while it makes fat people more sympathetic, it also paints them as incompetent and powerless” (p.

116). Fat people lack the rationality—whether because they lack specific knowledge or because they are stupid—to make the correct food choices, and this lack of rationality shows up on their bodies.

Since the body is so vulnerable to the pressures of the food industry in this version of the systemic frame, it is all the more important to keep the mind in control of the self. To keep the mind in control, these critics of the food system provide knowledge to strengthen rational decision-making. A central premise of food system critique, often articulated explicitly, is that if only people knew the truth about industrial food, they would change their eating behaviours, ending obesity and other ill effects. The frequent inclusion of class considerations, most particularly the inability of working-class families, like the Orozcoss in *Food, Inc.*, to purchase healthy foods even when they'd like to, contradicts this emphasis on knowledge. In fact, the mother in the family says explicitly, "We used to think everything was healthy. Now that I know that the food is really unhealthy for us, I feel guilty giving it to my kids." However, the family simply can't afford to change their eating habits. Knowledge has not rectified the problem, only increased the anxiety around it.

However, this tension goes unexplored and knowledge retains its primacy.

Consider this evocative vignette in Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001):

Pull open the glass door, feel the rush of cool air, walk in, get in line, study the backlit color photographs above the counter, place your order, hand over a few dollars, watch teenagers in uniforms pushing various buttons, and moments later

take hold of a plastic tray full of food wrapped in colored paper and cardboard. (p.

3)

Schlosser book-ends his argument with this standard version of the generic fast food experience, and a different version, one presumably influenced by the experience of reading his book:

Pull open the glass door, feel the rush of cool air, walk in, get in line, and look around you, ... study the backlit color photographs above the counter, think about where the food came from, about how and where it was made, about what is set in motion by every single fast food purchase, the ripple effect near and far, think about it. Then place your order. Or turn and walk out the door. It's not too late.

(pp. 269-270)

In this second vignette, the key difference is the cogitative activity of the subject.

Schlosser's message, which he also makes explicitly in the book's final chapter, is clear: the system is not going to change; the only space for change is within the minds of individuals. It is especially revealing that the imagined customer in the second vignette might go ahead and order the food: this suggests that the act of thinking, the exertion of mental will, is a more necessary outcome for Schlosser than even the boycotting of fast food. In the first vignette, the mindless consumer goes through the motions of the fast food experience, while in the second, despite possibly identical actions, the consumer is an active, discerning subject, making a choice with the mind and directing the body to follow up on the choice.

For Pollan, too, knowledge of the food chain can make all the difference: he implores the reader, in the final paragraph of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), "Imagine for a moment if we once again knew...these few unremarkable things: what it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in a true accounting, it really cost" (p. 411). If we had this knowledge, he claims, we could stop thinking about and discussing these things – why we could stop is not explained, but he appears to assume that the knowledge itself would be so powerful that it would change our whole approach to eating and solve all the problems the book raises. *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) places a similar emphasis on knowledge to counteract the ills of the contemporary food system. Close to the beginning of the film, Eric Schlosser (the film's narrator) articulates the central concern of the film: "There's this deliberate veil, this curtain that's drawn between us and where our food comes from. The industry doesn't want you to know the truth about what you're eating, because if you knew, you might not want to eat it." The film concludes with text stating the key messages of the film, which include "Know what's in your food. Read labels. Know what you buy." This premise, that knowledge is the essential missing ingredient that will allow the individual to exercise personal agency in the face of a food system and a political economy determined to manipulate her body, has some troubling implications for an understanding of obesity and the position of the fat subject.

The systemic frame, in shifting from a blaming to a pitying stance towards fat people, may be a kinder, gentler approach to fatness, but the result of this kindness is a stark distinction between the self-mastered, knowing and acting thin subject, and the

weak, ignorant, passive fat body. In contrast to the lesser status of the fat subject, the thin person who thrives in the obesogenic environment is conferred a special status: Guthman and DuPuis (2006) argue, “Those who can achieve thinness amidst this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline that those who are fat logically lack” (p. 444). If we are situated in a food system where every powerful actor and every component of society conspire to make us fat, it takes an exceptional will and intelligence to resist and maintain a thin body. Guthman (2007) accuses food system critics, specifically naming Pollan, Spurlock, and Nestle, of “see[ing] themselves as morally superior to fat people in the sense that they characterize fat people of being short of subjectivity” (p. 78). She draws a direct parallel between the role of the aggressive and paternalistic fitness trainers on *The Biggest Loser* and Pollan’s stance in his books: like these trainers, positioned as “super-subjects” (p. 78) who dole out life lessons even as they yell repetition counts, Pollan takes on the “messianic quality and self-satisfaction” of the super-subject, delivering wisdom from above as he “waxes poetic about his own rarefied, distinctive eating practices” (p. 78).

While Guthman (2007) argues that Pollan positions obese readers as “objects of education, intervention, or just plain scorn” (p. 78), Farrell (2011) points instead to the absence of the obese reader as even more revealing. The stigmatizing way food system critics address the fat body – using it as a simplistic symbol for all they see wrong in the world, or as an alarmist marketing ploy to grab readers’ attention, for example (p. 17) – alienates fat people and indicates that they are not the intended audience for these books and films. Ironically, fat people are excluded as readers and viewers even while the

information conveyed through them is precisely what they are supposed to lack, the missing knowledge that keeps them from properly controlling their bodies through rational will. Within the literature critiquing the food system, fat people are the irrational other, their bodies serving as warnings to the intended audience but not themselves included in the audience, according to Farrell.

The personal agency of fat people is a tricky subject in the systemic frame. On one hand, all the writers and film-makers analyzed here explicitly insist upon the power of personal choice, and on the agency of the individual as an essential factor shaping society. Most of these books and films end with a section telling the audience what they can do about the problems that have been exposed, and the advice is invariably to choose different foods. All do include some points about systemic change, but they all finish on the note of the power of personal choice, informed by knowledge. Schlosser (2002) describes needed policy changes in great detail – banning advertising to children, toughening food safety laws, improving working conditions at meatpacking plants and fast food restaurants, among other initiatives – but also asserts that the American government probably won't do any of those things. Therefore it is up to the consumer to change her eating habits and pressure fast food companies to make changes using boycott tactics. He assures the reader, "Even in this fast food nation, you can still have it your way" (p. 270), if only you will walk out the door of the fast food restaurant as in the previously related vignette. Spurlock (2004) makes a very similar argument, telling the viewers at the end of his two-hour indictment of the fast food industry, "If this ever-growing paradigm is going to shift, it's up to you." Nestle (2002) encourages "voting

with forks” (p. 372), and lists sixteen questions to consider and investigate when choosing food ethically (p. 372). Nestle and Pollan have both published detailed eating guides so that their readers may enact personal choice and influence the food industry. As described above, *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) concludes with direct instructions to the viewer, as well as the encouragements, “You can vote to change this system three times a day” and “You can change the world with every bite.” The personal, small-scale, private act of eating is where maximal political agency is located in the food system critique.

However, on the other hand, while personal choice is important or even essential to food activists’ politics, only one choice truly exhibits agency, and only one kind of body, the thin body, marks one as having made this proper choice. While in the individualizing frame the possibility remains that a fat person has (wrongly but freely) chosen to indulge in unhealthful eating, savouring a delicious McDonald’s cheeseburger or relishing an ice-cream binge, from the systemic perspective, anyone who consumes these foods has been tricked into wanting them by a collusion of evolutionary impulses and food marketing. Against the charge that she is anti-business and anti-consumer choice, Nestle (2006) insists, “I most definitely do believe in personal choice—when it is informed” (p. 511). Spurlock (2004) makes a similar point when he criticizes McDonald’s for not making nutrition information available in restaurants: law professor and anti-obesity campaigner John Banzhaf, who is repeatedly presented as an expert in the film, asserts “You can’t argue that people should exercise personal responsibility and then not give them the information on which to base it.” Spurlock and Banzhaf then visit a number of McDonald’s restaurants together, searching for nutrition pamphlets or

posters and mostly not finding any. The assumption that Spurlock and other food activists make is that full information and full knowledge will place the mind properly in control of bodily impulses, and then only one decision – the rational one, to reject fast food, junk food, processed food, non-organic food, and so on – can possibly be made. A fat body implies that the wrong choice was made, and the wrong choice is explained by a lack of knowledge, leading us back to the fat body as a marker of ignorance and passivity, and the fat person as a dupe.

The position of fat people as inadequately rational within the systemic frame explains the emphasis on children as victims that recurs throughout food system critiques. As I described above, all of the authors included in this study condemn marketing to children, detailing and decrying the manipulative tactics food companies use to sell their products to children. Saguy and Riley (2005) observe that “attacks on the food industry tend to stress how children are victimized” (p. 889) because of the prevalent view that children are more susceptible to industry pressures. Brownell explicitly lays out the rhetorical value of focusing on children in the systemic frame: “Even those who feel adults bring on their own problems will soften when thinking of children. Children are vulnerable and are a protected group in our culture” (p. 286). Food system critics themselves may be drawn to child-protection arguments because of our cultural values about children, but these arguments serve a further purpose of reinforcing the interpretation of fatness as indicating irrationality, fat people as especially vulnerable to food-industry machinations as well as the untrustworthy impulses of the body, and fat as a social problem requiring intervention.

Food system critics allege that these tactics take advantage of children's undeveloped capacity for reason, an argument that fits within the larger framework of fatness indicating irrationality. The arguments that children are irrational and that irrationality makes people vulnerable to the pressures that make them fat underscore the idea that fatness is a sign of irrationality, weakness, and incomplete subjecthood. Food system critics describe food marketing as "big business aimed at uncritical minds" (Nestle, 2002, p. 179), "deliberately targeted to the youngest and most impressionable children" (p. 176). Children are "easy prey for the food companies" (Brownell, 2004, p. 49); the food industry "both feeds and feeds off of the young" (Schlosser, 2002, p. 9). Because of their uncritical, impressionable minds, food system critics argue that children simply cannot resist the marketing tactics of the big food companies.

Because children cannot make good choices on their own, they are in need of protection from adults. Nestle argues: "The blatant exploitation by food companies of even the youngest children raises questions about the degree to which society at large needs to be responsible for protecting children's health in a free-market economy" (p. 174). Schlosser quotes the head of the FTC, who argues that children "cannot protect themselves...against adults who exploit their present-mindedness" (p. 46). Brownell uses particularly rousing language to make the same point: "Children need us; the nation can afford to fail them no longer. They need protection from the giant that looms over them. They need a giant of their own to defend them" (p. 287). Brownell calls for public opinion – the giant children need – to rise up against unethical food company practices and defend children's health and well-being. Children would be right, he says, to ask of

adult society, “Why do you let this happen to me?” and “Why don’t you protect me from the food companies?” (p. 7).

The role of parents in the problem of children and the food industry has particularly important implications for the systemic frame of the obesity epidemic. Food system critics worry that food marketing, and an unhealthy food culture more generally, undermines the proper role of parents to control their children. Nestle (2006) claims, “Marketing to children does more than make them want certain products; it is meant to change society. It aims to put kids in charge of decisions that you should be making.” (p. 384). Marketing aimed at children undermines the role of parents to guide their children’s choices: it undermines the control that the rational adult must have over the impulsive, naïve child. Of course, it is a sound and reasonable position that parents ought to help children make healthy decisions – this is the nature of the parent-child relationship, although that process of support can take many forms and have different boundaries in different contexts. But what is troubling in terms of concepts of obesity and bodies in general is how these concerns about the parent-child relationship fit into the systemic frame as a whole. The parent-child relationship, as it is described by food system critics, closely parallels the mind-body relationship as well as the conceptual relationship between thin and fat bodies, where the former in each dichotomous pair is imbued with reason and control while the latter is weak, irrational, troublesome, and in need of discipline and domination. The emphasis on protecting vulnerable children underscores the nature of obesity as a problem of rationality and discipline and reinforces the inferior position of the body in relation to the mind, and of the fat body in relation to the thin

body that demonstrates a powerful, properly self-disciplining mind. It also easily feeds into the notion that just as children need oversight and guidance, so do fat people, who, like children, are seen as less knowledgeable, sophisticated, and emotionally mature.

The systemic frame, like the individualizing frame, continues to posit body fat as revealing something meaningful – and in the systemic frame, politically crucial – about fat people. In a generous interpretation, fat people simply have less knowledge, and perhaps reading Pollan, Nestle, or Schlosser, or viewing Spurlock's or Kenner's films could correct this problem. In a harsher light, fat people are irrational and weak-willed: thin people somehow manage to resist the crushing pressure from the entire food system to over-consume, but fat people display on their bodies that they lack the self-discipline and intelligence to withstand it. This literature reinforces the millennia-old conception of the body as machine-like, quantifiable, and predictable, as well as the belief that the body cannot be trusted. To the long-standing mind-body struggle, the contemporary food system critique adds a third party: industry. In addition to the unruly, possibly sinful impulses of the material human body, the mind must now also fight against the food industry, among other modern industries that tap into and exploit humans' natural drives to over-consume and under-exert. A thin body reveals an individual as having vanquished both these foes in a triumph of mental strength and will, while a fat body reveals weakness and failure.

Conclusion

Though recent evidence suggests that obesity rates are plateauing, not climbing exponentially as many feared (Gard 2011), the frenzied cultural response to the obesity epidemic continues unabated. The obesity epidemic is a powerful trope above and beyond any empirical evidence of expanding waistlines; it taps into deeply-held cultural values and the long history of somatophobia in Western culture. Across historical and cultural permutations, from ancient times to the present day, the body is cast as the negative side of the dichotomies between reason and emotion, purity and sin, masculine and feminine, and, of course, mind and body. Discourses of the obesity epidemic cannot escape this cultural framing, even when they contrast in other ways. As I have shown in this thesis, despite starkly opposing political ideologies, the individualizing and systemic frames of the obesity epidemic are both enmeshed in this somatophobic thinking, and both address obesity, the fat body, and bodies in general in ways consistent with this cultural tradition.

The systemic frame of the obesity epidemic challenges the values and beliefs that underpin the individualizing frame: the systemic frame emphasizes collective and state responsibility to care for the greater good, including physical health and well-being of the population, environmental protection, sustainability, and justice for workers. These values contrast with the individualizing frame, which emphasizes personal responsibility for meeting one's own needs, not placing a burden on others or on the state welfare system, and unfettered corporate competition as a social good. The opposing political

ideologies of the two frames imply opposite solutions to the obesity epidemic. While the individualizing frame asserts that responsibility and agency lie with fat individuals, who must be pressured, cajoled, or shamed into changing their bodies, the systemic frame places responsibility with state and corporate actors, who must change regulations and corporate practices to reshape the social environment. These two frames can be and are often combined, so that both systemic and individual factors are blamed and changes at both levels are called for. However, understood as end points of a spectrum of views, the two frames represent opposing worldviews, in which individualist and collectivist values, respectively, are advocated.

Yet despite this important contrast, both frames share a similar conception of the body, which is central to the arguments of both. The systemic frame maintains the foundational somatophobia found in the individualizing frame, and continues to deploy the fat body as a symbol of social, cultural, and moral problems. Both frames are rooted in the Western cultural tradition of dualistic thinking about the body, in which, as I've described in this thesis, the body is conceived of as something distinct from and inferior to the mind. The mind-body dualism both degrades the body to the status of a passive object, to be controlled and disciplined by the mind, and elevates it to the status of a meaningful symbol, through which the inner state of the person and the moral well-being of a society might be read. In the individualizing and systemic frames of the obesity epidemic, both of these ways of representing the body – object and symbol – abound.

The notion that the body is an object of control is central to obesity epidemic discourses: without it, obesity is merely a medical issue, and one with very little scientific

evidence of actual harm. With it, however, obesity is a moral issue, a struggle for reason to tame impulse and spirit to conquer base matter. This struggle is presented straightforwardly in the individualizing frame: it is each individual's responsibility to control her body, to subdue its urges for consumption and discipline its inclination to sedentary living. The obesity epidemic has occurred, in this frame, because certain people, fat people, fail to exercise the necessary control over their bodies, wantonly indulging appetites and displaying this excess on their bodies. Although the systemic frame rejects the notion, central to the individualizing frame, that the fat individual is morally culpable for her own fatness, it does not challenge the assumption that the fat individual is insufficiently rational. Nor does it reject the reading of the fat body as evidence of the failure of reason and mind in the face of bodily impulses. Rather, the systemic frame inserts a third party into the struggle for control between mind and body: in the sub-set I have examined here, the food industry. In the systemic frame, the mind's task to subdue the unruly body is complicated by the influence of profit-seeking food corporations, who play into the inherent weakness and corruptibility of the body to undermine rationality. Thus, while the fat person is less morally culpable as blame is shifted to the food industry, the fat person remains insufficiently rational to withstand the tactics of food marketers and manufacturers, tactics that appeal to and exploit the body's inherent urges to over-consume and to consume the wrong things. The systemic frame understands the body as fundamentally untrustworthy, entirely in keeping with the somatophobic cultural tradition from which it emerges.

Because the body is, or ought to be, controlled by the self who inhabits it, the state of the body is read as a symbol the state of the inner self. Again, in the individualizing frame the connection between the appearance of the fat body and the moral status of the inner self is direct: a fat body indicates a self either too weak or too lazy to enact proper discipline, to limit consumption and enforce exercise. Fat bodies are read as symbols of lack of moral fiber, as abandoning personal responsibility, as failure. In the systemic frame, the symbolism of the fat body is less directly denigrating to fat people, but possibly even more negative. Fat bodies represent not just flawed selves, but the flaws of an entire political economy. Fat bodies represent the failure of individuals to withstand the pressures of the food industry, but also the failure of the state to regulate the food industry to protect consumers, and more broadly the failure of society as a whole to organize itself in a way that more justly distributes power and resources.

In discourses of the obesity epidemic, the fat body is read as a symbol of moral and cultural failings, whether on the part of the fat person herself in the individualizing frame, or of society as a whole in the systemic frame. Thus the fat person is seen as requiring intervention: in the individualizing frame, the fat person needs discipline, guidance, or punishment; in the systemic frame, the fat person needs protection and support. In both frames, that fat person is insufficiently rational; her fat body reveals that her mind is not in control of her body as it ought to be. Following the tradition of dualistic thinking that casts the body as the negative term in the dichotomies of reason and emotion, Form and Matter, male and female, and so on, the fat body is read to reveal a failure of mind, spirit, and reason to properly control and dominate the impulses of the

body. For Augustine in the Christian tradition, sexuality and especially the phallus were the primary threat to self control; purity and chastity were constantly threatened by sexual bodily urges. Today, body fat plays a similar role, as gluttony and sloth threaten the self-mastery demonstrated through dieting and physical exercise. Thus, body fat is not merely or even primarily a health problem, but a moral problem.

While this denigration of the body is not new, it does take on new significance in the contemporary context of consumer capitalism. As Bordo (1993) identifies, the body is at the centre of an irresolvable tension within consumer capitalist economic and cultural dynamics: that between the roles of producer and consumer. Since the body is read as a symbol of the inner traits of the self, it is expected to display both the proper traits of a good producer and a good consumer. However, these conflict. Producing bodies should be thin and fit, displaying self-denial and subordination of the internally generated desires of the body to the external commands of the workplace and capital. Meanwhile, consuming bodies should indulge desires, and it might be expected that this indulgence would be displayed through fatness, as it indeed has been in past and different cultural contexts. However, Bordo notes that the ideal body in consumer capitalism is not the obese body, consuming without limits (or read as doing so) nor, of course, the anorexic, denying all consumption, but the bulimic, who consumes and purges in order to consume more. Transposed to discourses of the obesity epidemic, the ideal body is one that does consume a great deal, but in specific ways that maintain the appearance of a trim, disciplined body. In the individualizing frame, the obese person is exhorted to consume diet pills and weight loss programs, gym memberships and trendy workout gear, lap-band

or gastric bypass surgery, meal-replacement shakes, and so on. In food system critique, the emphasis is on food, of course: consuming the right kinds of food—organic, local, fair trade—in the right ways—at the dinner table with family, as opposed to the drive-through or food court—will lead to the right kind of body. Through these boundaries around the correct types of consumption, the conflicting imperatives to both consume as much as possible, in our essential economic role as consumers, and avoid displaying over-consumption on the body, are awkwardly reconciled.

Both the individualizing and systemic frame continue to address the body simultaneously as passive object and meaningful symbol, and both fit comfortably within the cultural bounds of consumer capitalism. This continuity across opposing ideologies carries on a historical pattern: as Christianity supplanted classical ideologies, and then again when the Enlightenment challenged Christian dogma with science and rationalism, the denigration of the body survived and flourished as other aspects of culture and ideology were rejected or transformed. Across these cultural upheavals, a pattern in thinking about the body has persisted, and continues to persist in discourses of the obesity epidemic. The body is used as a symbolic tool for dividing people within social hierarchies, marked by race, class, and gender. Fat is an especially useful symbol, as it can be explicitly linked to personal moral characteristics in a way that gendered and racialized traits no longer can. Fat people are assumed to possess diminished rationality, their bodies read as evidence of their failed subjecthood. The somatophobia that underpins our negative cultural attitude to fat, manifested in discourses of the obesity epidemic, is not only a problem for fat people. Fat people bear the brunt of the

stigmatization of fatness in the forms of discrimination, rejection, and shame. However, the concept of the obesity epidemic is a potent manifestation of a wider problem in relation to the body. As long as bodies are understood as objects to be controlled, a peaceful relationship with our bodies is impossible to achieve. As long as bodies are over-burdened with the symbolic task of representing our true inner selves, we remain unable to simply be in our bodies. The obesity epidemic and its attendant cultural anxieties are merely one expression of a fundamentally conflictual and impoverished relationship with all bodies.

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