

9 Fat as a Floating Signifier: Race, Weight, and Femininity in the National Imaginary



Sabrina Strings

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Abstract

Studies on the development of fat stigma in the United States often consider gender, but not race. This chapter adds to the literature on the significance of race in the propagation of fat phobia. I investigate representations of voluptuousness among “white” Anglo-Saxon and German women, as well as “black” Irish women between 1830 and 1890—a time period during which the value of a curvy physique was hotly contested—performing a discourse analysis of thirty-three articles from top newspapers and magazines. I found that the rounded forms of Anglo-Saxon and German women were generally praised as signs of health and beauty. The fat Irish, by contrast, were depicted as grotesque. Building on the work of Stuart Hall, I conclude that fat was a “floating signifier” of race and national belonging. That is, rather than being universally lauded or condemned, the value attached to fatness was related to the race of its possessor.

Keywords: [women’s studies](#), [race/ethnicity](#), [whiteness](#), [blackness](#), [bodies](#), [embodiment](#), [qualitative methods](#), [discourse analysis](#), [race](#), [sexuality](#)

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It could not be denied that Ann Switzer had fine, large rolling black eyes, glossy, dark hair, a well-rounded, plump little figure, the prettiest feet that ever tripped over a cowslip, and as neatly moulded an arm as was ever shaken over a milk-pail.

—Godey’s Lady’s Book, “The Recorder of the Ballyopreen. An Election Record,”
December 1833

If you chance to look in at the door of any of the rooms you pass,
you will see ... an entire Irish family ... all plump, rosy, and thriving
... on plenty of heterogeneous food, and superfluity of dirt.

Did not I hear you talking on the stairs, yesterday, with some of
them Irish cattle?

—Godey's Lady's Book, "Fanny McDermot," January 1845

IN the two foregoing vignettes, there are at least two things that stand out. First are the contrasting representations of "plump" figures. In the 1833 article, the voluptuous woman was deemed an undeniable beauty, respected throughout the small farming town she inhabits for her "well-rounded" appearance. In the 1845 essay, however, the plump people, described begrudgingly as thriving in the rudimentary sense of health, are clearly plying themselves with a large share of food, while failing to observe the minimum standards of hygiene. These plump people, far from being like the undeniable beauty who floats above the local farming populace, are instead likened to the cattle the farmers have to herd.

Second is the role of race in the differential assessment of the robust individuals. Ann Switzer, the voluptuous beauty, is revealed in the essay to be an Anglo-American Protestant woman. Her marriage to an Irish man is treated as inexplicable. Conversely, the Irish people who form the center of the second essay are viewed as coarse, unwashed fat persons. In the eyes of the narrator, they are akin to farm animals.

In this chapter, I underscore the underappreciated role of race in the disparagement of fat persons in the United States. Several scholars have considered the centrality of gender and class (Banner [1983](#); Bordo [2003](#); Friedan [1963](#); Klein [2001](#); Wolf [1991](#)) within our fat-phobic culture. However, many fewer have interrogated the centrality of race and race-making in the chrysalis of the American anti-fat posture. I show that during the nineteenth century, the era in which scholars have shown the anti-fat sentiment in the United States was on the rise, the fear of racial Others played a critical role in the growing horror surrounding corpulence.

Background

In *American Beauty*, a landmark study on the history of American aesthetics, Lois Banner showed that the mid-nineteenth century marked a critical moment in the reassessment of fat bodies, especially those of women. In the United States prior to the mid-nineteenth century, a plump and rounded feminine form would have been considered pleasing to many American women and men. It would have represented the ideal form in the eyes of

many doctors as well as respected figures in the mainstream media (Banner 1983).

But by the 1830s, rounded and curvaceous feminine bodies were increasingly a contested aesthetic ideal. Figures described as “ultra-attenuated ... frail, and slight” figures were gaining esteem (Banner 1983, 45). Many women cultivated physiques deemed delicate, graceful, and slim as marks of refinement (Banner 1983, 45).

As to the question of what led to the contestation surrounding voluptuousness, as well as the growing treatment of slenderness as a sign of cultivation, Banner provides a largely class-based argument. “Slim waists,” she intones, “were the luxury of a social class that did not have to live on a heavy starch diet” (1983, 53). In other words, economic changes within the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution gave the middle and upper classes more freedom of choice where diet was concerned. In an effort to show their freedom from want, the cultured classes now chose lighter foods. The working poor, by contrast, still had to rely on heavy, cheap, and starchy foods that would keep them sated, and also cause them to grow stout. Therefore, even though fleshy figures did not immediately and entirely fall from grace, the period witnessed a growing aversion to fatness due to its association with poverty (Banner 1983). Banner’s assessment resonates with that of other scholars on the early class-based origins of the American aversion to fatness (Klein 2001).

Yet, while class played a part, it is evident in the vignettes at the start of this chapter that it was also the racial identity of those persons deemed commonly corpulent that made fatness an increasingly undesirable form of embodiment for the well-to-do Anglo-Saxon woman. In other words, it was not necessarily the fatness in and of itself that proved problematic. It was the growing association between fatness, poverty, and racially Othered women. Indeed, one of the more striking revelations from Banner’s own work is that German women, deemed racially related to American Anglo-Saxons, were routinely praised for their robust figures. Frequently arriving in the United States with greater financial means than the average Irish immigrant, it was common to see German women, described as “ready to burst with plumpness ... wholesome, handsome and agreeable” (1983, 58). At the same time, the Irish were depicted as “wild,” “unkempt,” and unrestrained in their oral appetites.¹

In this chapter, I show that it was not just gender and class that were key to the contestation surrounding fat and fleshy forms in the nineteenth century but also race. That is, the plump forms of German and Anglo-Saxon women were commonly lionized. However, the putatively fat figures of Celtic Irish immigrant women, who were believed to have racial kinship with Africans, were demonized.

To put this in sociological terms, I argue that fatness became a “floating signifier” of race (Hall and Jhally 1996). In other words, the meaning of

fleshy female bodies varied by the race of the bearer. This made fatness unstable and politically contested among elites.

In the sections that follow, I explain the meaning of my assertion that fatness was a floating racial signifier. I explain that since the meaning of fatness was floating and thus unstable, it was being used by elite white people in competing “racial projects” (Omi and Winant 1994). Next, I explain my methodology. Finally, I explain the significance of this project, in that it underscores the centrality of the combined ideas of race and weight in our inherently gendered notions of national citizenship.

Race as a Floating Signifier

Social scientists have long argued that race is a social construct that is used to create relationships between physical embodiment, behavior, and biology. Race, in this way, functions by masquerading as if it were a natural or innate quality of persons (Cornell 1998; B. J. Fields 1990; Glenn 1999). By connecting nature and culture, making them “correspond with one another, in such a way that it is possible to read off the one against the other,” race maintains its validity and authority as an organizing principle (Hall and Jhally 1996, 13).

This explanation for race as a biological fiction—or as cultural ideas attached to the bodies of various groups—helps us to grasp the staying power of the construct, as well as how it is perpetuated over time. However, it does not help us understand their transformation. In this regard, sociologist Stuart Hall added a critical element to our understanding of race. According to Hall, race is not just a construct, it is a discursive *concept*. It is a signifier, one that implicates certain bodies (e.g., signs) and attaches to them an entire slate of characteristics (e.g., signifieds).² Moreover, because race is based on a fiction, it is not fixed. It is a “floating signifier,” meaning that the bodies they comprise and the traits that attach to them are in constant motion, and “can never be finally or trans-historically fixed” (Hall and Jhally 1996, 8).

Hall’s work provides critical insights into the volatility of race, noting that though it is embodied, it is never fixed. Yet we do not get from this analysis an understanding of *how* racializations shift and move. Under what circumstances do racializations, or the bodies and qualities attached to a particular race, change? And significantly, *who* changes them, and who is changed by them?³

Racial Projects, Gendered Bodies

Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's approach, as articulated in *Racial Formation in the United States*, can contribute useful analytical insights to Hall's theory of race as a floating signifier. Per the authors, racializations shift and move as a result of key actors engaging in "racial projects." Racial projects are the efforts by one group to (re)define themselves or others, leading to new understandings of racial identities.

Significantly, a crucial component of racial projects is the attempt to modify the relationship between the physical "signs" of race, including the shape, size, and form of the body and the traits to which they refer (Feagin and Elias 2013, 933). Said differently, a common goal of racial projects is to alter the meaning attached to particular forms of embodiment. This is often done in an effort to shore up or improve the racial group's social position.

The theory of racial formation can help us to understand the role of agents and their racial projects in shifting the meanings of bodily signs. In other words, we understand something about the who and how of the transformation of racial signs, signifiers and signified. But curiously, as exposed by Feagin and Elias (2013), there is little consideration of the role of power, or domination, in the racial formation perspective.

That is, per Feagin and Elias, the racial formation theory obscures the power dynamic between racially dominant white people as powerful actors, and nonwhites. This, they assert, ignores the hierarchical nature of race relations as a system founded on embodied difference, "In general, mainstream and racial formation analysts neglect thoroughly and systematically studying the actual white architects and promoters of the USA's systemic racism" (Feagin and Elias 2013, 938).

Instead of jettisoning racial formation theory and the role of racial projects, it is possible to view Feagin and Elias's work as adding a further element to the analysis. It shows that *powerful actors* (i.e., "white architects") are often those engaging in racial projects that are largely responsible for the shifting bodily signs of race (Feagin and Elias 2013, 938; Hall and Jhally 1996). Hall and Jhally (1996), Omi and Winant (1994), and Feagin and Elias (2013) can help us understand how, and by whom, a particular physical feature can change meaning.

This work suggests white architects challenge and attempt to shift the meaning of physical features (i.e., voluptuousness) in an effort to maintain racial hierarchies. Nevertheless, there remains an undertheorized element of herein: the role of gender. This is not for nothing. Scholars have long suggested that women are treated as "the body" (Spelman 1982). This has been the case, arguably, since the dawn of patriarchy (Lerner 1987). But significantly, women's objectification as "the body" intensified during the eighteenth to nineteenth century, as there were a proliferating number of ways women were expected to maintain an appealing appearance (Herzig 2016). This was the same moment during which the "race-craft," or racial projects by white architects who were attempting to (re)define the meaning

of bodily signs, were at their height (Fields and Fields 2012; Stepan 1986). This suggests that attempts by elite actors to shift the *racial* meaning of a physical sign (e.g., plumpness) would have, historically, centrally involved *women's* bodies.

Fat as Contested

The contestation surrounding the racial meaning—and related aesthetic value—of voluptuous feminine figures can be partially attributed to the shifting notions of race in the nineteenth century. Carolus Linneaus had crafted one of the most widely disseminated racial cartographies in the world in the eighteenth century. In the 1758 edition of *Systema Naturae*, he ordered the races hierarchically, placing white people at the apex (Bohls 2013). Moreover, Linneaus made “European” and “white” synonymous, attributing to this group the qualities of pale skin, muscularity, and rationality. In the same text, Linneaus equated the terms “African” and “black.” He characterized people in this group as indolent, unintelligent, and significantly “indulgent” (Bohls 2013, 60).

This purported relationship between blackness and indulgence was instantiated through repetition. It also appeared in the work of Linneaus’s protégé, Andrew Sparrman. Sparrman specifically claimed that black people were indulgent in food, as evinced in South Africa, where the “Negroes” he claimed “[have] no moderation in either eating or drinking, but whenever it is in their power, indulge themselves in either to the greatest excess (Kindersley 1777; quoted in Merians 2001, 177). Indeed, owing to the scientific racism suggesting a link between blackness and indulgence, there was a visible link made between blackness and fatness, and by the 1800s, “Africa and Africans would become closely linked with fat in the European cultural imagination” (Forth 2012, 221).

But, in the early nineteenth century, in the context of conflicts between European nations (and in particular those between England and Ireland), a hierarchy *within* whiteness was devised. The new intrawhite hierarchy suggested that individuals of Germanic-English, or so-called Anglo-Saxon origin were the superior, “pure” white group. The Irish were said to be of Celtic origin. The Celtic Irish were purportedly a “hybrid” white group, whose blood was corrupted by an ancient, if still perceptible, “Africanoid” ancestry. Importantly their black ancestry was made manifest by physical and behavioral signs affiliated with blackness, including skin color, laziness, propensity to indulgence, and body size.

Esteemed British ethnologist James Cowles Prichard was one of the first race scientists to make such claims. In his 1841 book *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, Prichard described Anglo-Saxons as “robust” and fair-skinned. This robustness was intended to convey a vigor and strength of

constitution, a firmness à la Linneaus. The Irish, by contrast, were deemed “swarthy” with “dark hair, dark eyes” (1841, 189, 391). Their stature was weak and small, as opposed to the vigorous outlines of the Anglo-Saxons. If their skin color and weak constitutions marked them as decidedly *off-white*, per Prichard, this was due to the fact that Celtic people are a part-white people who are racially kin to black Africans. “[W]hatever else they may be,” he writes of the Celtic Irish, “[they] are, in the first instance, African.” Other British theorists would make related claims. Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle, for instance, suggested that there was no racial distinction between Irish and black people. Carlyle famously lambasted the Irish for being lazy and indulgent. In his estimation, the Irish should have been “black leaded” and shipped off to work in the colonies (C. Hall 2000). Just as black people’s presumptive gluttony was believed to make them prone to obesity, by the nineteenth century the demi-African Irish too were thought to be unduly corpulent. One of the most revered ethnologists of Victorian England, John Beddoe, described the unruly, not “pure” white, bodies of the Celtic people. In his book *The Races of Britain*, Beddoe described the Anglos (English) and Saxons (Germans) separately. Nevertheless, Anglos were “tall, large, muscular” and “rounded,” and Saxons were “plump and rounded” (Beddoe 1885, 274–276). The Celtic Irish by contrast, being an “Africanoid” race, were short and lamentably “stocky” (Painter 2010, 215). Evidently, the reorganization of whiteness made the *racial* value of a plump form ambiguous. Racial discourse had long suggested that robust and rounded physiques were proof of white racial superiority. When Anglo-Saxonism was first articulated as a racial position, a certain robustness of outline was imputed into the category. However, “excess” in terms of eating and body size had been identified as an African trait. Therefore, the decreed stockiness of “Africanoid” Celtic Irish was used as evidence of their racial inferiority. In reality, there was no hard and fast mechanism to distinguish between a beautiful “rounded” form and gross “stocky” form.

This, I argue, is how fatness itself became a floating signifier of race.⁴ That is, given the necessary ambiguity of the race-craft, the meaning of fatness (as beautiful or grotesque) became politically contested and unstable. In this context, various elites—those preferring what was sometimes called Anglo-Saxon affiliated robustness, and those who were averse to a fleshiness they deemed proof of racial inferiority—engaged in competing racial projects to either exalt or reject fat female bodies.

The opposing racial projects, I suggest, were not inconsequential. They existed to offer further *embodied* proof of who could or should have access to the privileges and benefits of whiteness. As Cheryl Harris has articulated, whiteness has been “the basis for allocating societal benefits both public and private” as “the system of racial classification operated to protect entrenched power” (Harris 1993, 1709). In other words, the competing (racial) meanings of plumpness had, at its root, questions regarding the

rights of citizenship, fellowship, and belonging in the American body politic (dually signified).

According to Banner, the central figures implicated in the competing logics of fleshy forms as desirable or reprehensible were German (i.e., Saxon) and Irish (i.e., Celtic) *immigrant* women. The rounded body was used as alternately as a sign of women who were “one of us” or women who are “one of them.” Interestingly, elites on *both* sides of this debate, those treating plumpness as a sign of either “white” wealth and beauty or “Other” primitivity and depravity were using them as a means of consolidating the existing racial hierarchy and their position as Anglo-Saxons.

In the following section, I detail my method for investigating whether and how fatness became, in the mid-nineteenth century, a floating signifier of race.

Methods

To investigate whether fatness was a floating signifier of race among well-to-do Americans in the nineteenth century, I examined representations of women’s bodies in mainstream publications. Previous scholarship described Irish and German immigrant women as essential to this very contestation surrounding voluptuous forms (Banner 1983). Thus, I investigated representations of German women and Irish women from 1830 to 1890. This period encompasses the high period of contestation surrounding appropriate body size for elite American women, as well as the high-water mark for Irish and German immigration to the United States.⁵

I performed multiple archival searches. In the first round, I performed a keyword search for the terms “German AND plump” and “Irish AND plump” in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. *Godey’s Lady’s Book* was the premier women’s magazine of the nineteenth century (Okker 2008). It was notable, among other things, for its advice to young middle-class women on proper appearance and comportment, which included dictates on correct diet, dress, and body size.

I chose the term “plump” for the keyword search because during the nineteenth century this was commonly used when describing women’s appearance (Banner 1983). I was interested in examining any difference in frequency and or connotations in the usage of this term as it pertained to German versus Irish women. These terms yielded a total of forty-six results for all available years. I excluded from the analysis any hits in which the term surfaced in an article, but it was not used to describe the appearance of girls or women. Of these, seventeen proved relevant to the current analysis. In the second round, I performed a search of the terms “German girls AND fat OR stout,” “Irish girls AND fat OR stout” (849 hits), and for the terms “(German OR Irish) AND (fat OR stout) AND (girls OR women) AND (health

OR gout OR dyspepsia⁶) in Proquest Historical. The available newspapers for the search were *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. I selected to review only the first 100 hits of each search, as after this the pertinence to the topic reduced considerably. Again, I excluded from the analysis any hits in which the term emerged in an article but was not used to describe the appearance of women or girls. The Proquest searches yielded only sixteen total relevant results. The analysis that follows thus includes data from thirty-three articles.

Analysis

This chapter builds on Hall's depiction of race—and the qualities it signifies—as discursive, and therefore unstable. Therefore, I performed a critical discourse analysis of all thirty-three relevant articles. This involved reading each article carefully, attending to narratives pointing to any relationship between fatness, racial/national identity, beauty, ugliness, health, or illness. These qualities were chosen given that, as detailed earlier, there were competing views of the social value of fatness. Some believed fatness was a sign of health and/or beauty; others suggested it was sign of grotesquery and/or illness (Schwartz 1986; Stearns 1997). Thus, my objective was to examine if the qualities associated with fatness varied by the racial group under discussion.

Following van Dijk's (2015) analysis in *Racism and the Press*, I was primarily interested in what was being said about the connection between fat and immigrant racial minority groups during the period. I was further interested in how “white architects” (Feagin and Elias 2013) or “white in-group members tend to express and communicate their ethnic attitudes to other members of the group and how such attitudes are spread and shared in society” (Dijk 2015, 6). In terms of the who, the white elites who would have had access to the means of production during the nineteenth century would typically have been categorized as Anglo-American or Anglo-Saxon (Smedley 1993).

I found the same number of articles describing the appearance of Irish women as compared German women (8 each). Of these, Irish women were much more likely to be described derisively (6 of 8, or 75 percent), whereas German women were somewhat more likely to be described positively (5 of 8, or 63 percent). Perhaps the most surprising finding was that a high number of articles describing fat women using these search terms produced results that were about the good qualities associated with fleshy Anglo-American women (9 total). The remaining articles detail the horror of fat racial Others (black women = 1, Czech women = 1), fat American women as freaks (= 2), the beauty of English (i.e., Anglo) immigrant women (= 1), and

the loveliness⁷ (= 2) or debility (= 2) of slender Anglo-American women. Overall, I found that that racial Others were more likely to be described negatively (8 of 10), and racial familiars positively (seventeen of twenty-three), regardless of weight.

As it pertains to the specific concerns about what fatness signifies, I found the following themes to be most relevant: Fat as a sign of beauty, Fat as a sign of health, Fat as a sign of grotesquery.

Fat as a Sign of Beauty

The slight majority of the articles (17 of 33, or 52 percent) describe fleshiness as a sign of beauty. Of these, 15 (88 percent) describe white Anglo American or German American women. Most common were depictions of the former (9 of 15).

Plump Anglo women were commonly depicted as comely and as possessing an air of gentility. Evidence of this comes from an article from *Godey's* titled "Kate Leonard's Great Match," from 1866. The author, S. Annie Frost, says of Kate that she,

[H]ad the tall, stately figure of her father's family, rounded in the most beautifully developed proportions. Her dress was a rich garnet merino, fitting tightly over the bust, waist, and arms, and falling in full folds to her feet. A narrow collar and cuffs of lace relieved it, at throat and wrists. Her wealth of hair was made into a rich knot behind, and braided low on the glowing cheeks.

Kate's figure is marked as attractive specifically because of its fleshiness. The fact that it is "rounded in the most beautifully developed proportions" is what provides its air of stateliness. Moreover, the exquisite garb of rich merino and delicate lace shows that Kate hails from a family of considerable means. While we do not learn much about Kate's family outside of their apparent wealth, we do find that her last name is Leonard, a Germanic last name meaning "brave lion" that was believed to have made its way to England by the Normans.⁸ We can thus see how Kate Leonard's rounded figure in this instance was a physical sign of wealth and beauty. That it is also described as "stately" and representative of her esteemed father's family shows it also signaled their recognized status in the community. This portrayal of weight well-carried as regal was traditionally valued within the realm of elite femininity (Klein 2001).

Kate's opulent curves were described as beautiful and treated as a sign of her family's wealth, Anglo-American heritage, and social standing. Indeed, in all of the articles (9 of 9) in which the class status of attractive voluptuous women was mentioned, they were noted as being members of the cultivated classes. And, if the racial heritage was sometimes inferred, as in the Kate Leonard piece, in others it was stated outright. A case in point is a piece in

Godey's from 1849, "Falling in Love. A Bundle of Other People's Experiences." The author describes a "Mrs. Middleton ... a regal-looking creature was she, with her grand figure, her pale, classic face and her languid attitude, as she half-reclined on a softly-cushioned sofa." Mrs. Middleton's "classic" face and "regal" frame while she lounges on a sofa clearly marks her as a member of the cultured classes. Moreover, Mrs. Middleton is lounging in the same room as a young woman "who was a short, plump, little figure, with a peculiarly English face and air—a fine bust and arm, lovely hands, a fair neck, blooming cheeks and lips, blue eyes and blonde hair." Consider here the centrality of the young woman's ethno-racial identity. That is, the young woman's distinctive charms—her plump, attractive figure, lovely face, blue eyes, and blonde hair—are all connected to her "peculiar" Englishness.

All nine articles about fleshy, Anglo American women reveal that a rounded physique was, for these women, a physical sign, or "sign vehicle" (Goffmann 1959) for beauty. Fatness was attractive *specifically* when describing well-to-do women of Anglo descent, who fit seamlessly into an elite American community. It reveals a body privilege (Kwan 2009) that is patterned by gender, class, and ethno-racial belonging.

And, if all nine articles lauded plump, high-class Anglo women, German women as so-called racial familiars (Painter 2010), were also frequently portrayed in a positive fashion. Five of eight (~63 percent) articles describing German women as fleshy viewed their proportions as praiseworthy. One noteworthy piece from 1876 published in *New York Times*, titled, "Beauty of German Women," leaves no room for subtlety:

German girls are often charmingly pretty, with dazzling complexion ...[as is] the splendid matron, the sound, healthy, well-developed woman, who has lost no grain of beauty, and gained a certain magnificent maturity, such as we see daily with daughters who might well be her younger sisters.

Interestingly, the point of the piece is not just to praise the health and beauty of "well-developed" German women. The author is clearly invested in the racial project of promoting plump figures as the correct Anglo-American (ethno-racial and national) form of embodiment. In this way, German women are seen as potential models for their Anglo-American sisters (Banner 1983). Writing during an era in which relationship between body size and beauty was contested, he explains that when it comes to voluptuous figures, too many Anglo-American girls are falling short of the mark: "of such women the Fatherland has few specimens to show. The 'pale, unripened beauties of the North' do not ripen, they fade" (*New York Times* 1876).

Godey's too found much to praise in the curvaceous physiques of German women. In the 1833 piece included in the epigraph earlier, Ann Switzer is

described as a woman with a “well-rounded, plump little figure” who comes from a local German town. But, although Ann is clearly from a rural area, and is not stated to possess the same air of refinement as the aforementioned plump Anglo-American women, she did come from a respected family, as her father was noted as a leading political figure in the town. Her plumpness, then, becomes a physical sign of beauty, given her standing in the community and racial (i.e., German-Saxon) identity.

The articles in this category of analysis reveal that fatness was a “sign vehicle” for attractiveness specifically among Anglo and/or Saxon descended women. In other words, it was a facet of these women’s appearance that conveyed loveliness as a peculiarly racialized artifact. Said differently, fatness was a physical sign of beauty and a signifier of race.

Attractiveness was the number-one quality signified by a plump woman of these (purportedly related) racial groups. But there was second, related, meaning to the fat female body for Anglo-Saxon women as represented in these data: good health.

Fat as a Sign of Health

The health of a fat woman’s body was celebrated in four of the thirty-three articles. In two of the four, the woman under discussion was an Anglo-American. In one, she was an English immigrant. In the remaining article, the woman was Irish and described in fashion that was explicitly Othering.⁹ In a *Godey’s* article from 1843 the author describes a group of country girls (seemingly native-born Anglo-Americans) who start going gaga for the new boy in town. The girls were described thusly,

You always admire Rosanna Freeland and her sisters, —they have such blooming complexions, and such plump, healthful figures, which you have often told us was owing to the country air. There can be no doubt it would be much better for our health if we were to try it.

(*Godey’s* 1843)

In this piece, the voluptuousness of the Freeland girls was a physical sign for good health. The opulence of their physiques bespoke a dually signified “stoutness” of constitution. The linguistic unit of fat (sign), Anglo (signifier), and health (signified) deployed here represent the view of plump feminine figures that reigned prior to the mid-nineteenth century (Klein 2001).

It is also worth mentioning that in this tale, these spirited country girls fall not just for any boy, but a *German* boy, who is described as “A young foreigner ... German, upon my word.” In the assessment of the girls, he is “no doubt one of distinction ... perfectly easy and gallant” (*Godey’s* 1843).

This was an era during which there were considerable restraints regarding whom a woman might take as a partner, including those pertaining to race. The view that Germans might be not only acceptable, but sought after, speaks to their racial and social capital.

There was only one article in these data that described a plump woman as healthy who was neither Anglo nor Anglo-Saxon, but in fact Irish. This piece, “Romance is Life” was from 1856 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Per the author, “[m]ost of our citizens are acquainted with Ann Gleason, a stout, healthy, good-natured Irish woman who is frequently employed by merchants and owners of buildings to clean stores.” An Irish cleaning lady being complimented for her general affect and good health was a rare find. It was one of only two articles in the data to describe fleshiness, when found on an Irish woman, in a plauditory fashion. And yet despite this, the author places Ann outside of the imagined community of readers. The phrase “most of our citizens” marks Ann as decidedly *outside* the citizenry. Therefore, unlike the “perfectly easy and gallant” German boy who was a desired member of the community, the stout Ann is treated as a nonthreatening, good-natured appendage to it. Scholars have shown that a similar distancing and desexualized position attached to “Mammies,” or black housekeepers, who were commonly beloved even as they were prevented from full communal participation (Shaw 2006).

In the overwhelming majority of articles, positive relationships between fatness, attractiveness, and well-being applied to Anglo-Saxon American women or their supposed German kin. The individuals promoting this aesthetic were invested in the “racial project” (Omi and Winant 1994) of maintaining the association visible since at least Linnaeus between whiteness, robustness, and beauty. Still, the relationship between the signs, signifiers, and signified of race are not fixed. All of the representational elements of race are unstable and constantly in motion (Hall and Jhally 1996; Omi and Winant 1994). In this way, it is not too surprising that there is some slipperiness that would allow for a rare (yet still racially Othered) Irish woman to land in the fold of a “good” fat woman.

But, again, this was atypical. There were several articles written about fat Irish women found in these data. Most of them were derisive. In fact, it is the disparity between “good” Anglo/Saxon fat women and “bad” Irish and “Other” women that revealed the quality of fatness not just as a sign (with the fat body being a sign vehicle), but fatness as a floating signifier of race. That is, it is an abstract quality whose presence indicates different things, when applied to different racial groups.

Fat as Grotesque

In thirteen of the thirty-three articles (39 percent), fatness was described with contempt. Eight of the articles using derogatory language (62 percent)

described fat racial Others. Of these, six (6 of 8, or 75 percent) described stout Irish women, one described a big black woman, and a final described a fat Czech woman.

An article exemplary of anti-fat sentiment comes from 1885. The essay "Heavy-Weights: Not Fighters, but Females Whose Excess of Avoirdupois Makes Them Curiosities," appears in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (see Figure 9.1). The author profiles several women who participated in a fat women's convention.

HEAVY-WEIGHTS.: Not Fighters, but Females Whose Excess of ... Makes ...
Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922); Mar 24, 1885; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune
 pg. 9

HEAVY-WEIGHTS.

Not Fighters, but Females Whose
Excess of Avoirdupois Makes
Them Curiosities.

They Are in Convention Assembled
in a West Side Dime
Museum.

One Delectate, Although Wearing a Dress,
Also Has Whiskers—Other Fat
Ones.

A few weeks ago Kohl & Middleton held a fat-woman's convention at their South Side museum, and the delegates in attendance were from all parts of the country. The affair attracted such widespread attention that it was deemed advisable to call a second convention, the delegates to which were to be chosen in this city. Chicago is ahead in almost everything, and it was determined to ascertain her standing in the matter of fat women; so the second convention was called to meet at the West Side Museum yesterday noon. Again the Garden City has triumphed. Her fat women are far in advance of the obese females of any other city, both in point of flesh and beauty. And in the matter of ravishing toilets they may be favorably compared with any fat women in this broad land.

Fifteen fat ladies answered to the roll-call yesterday and sat upon platforms that had been especially braced for the occasion. It would be impossible for the most finished and fervid word-painter to convey to the public

the fleshy fairies would not permit of its assignment.

A PROFESSIONAL.



Mrs. Carver, who weighs 527 pounds, and whose huge bulk is her daily bread, she being a professional fat woman, is the No. 10. She has with her her son, who is what is known among freaks as a midget. Frequenters of beer-saloons on seeing these two will readily detect the likeness between them and the "schooner" and "smit." They came from Bridgeport, Conn.

SHE HAS WHISKERS.



Alongside of these two is the No. 11, Miss Cuddle of Philadelphia. She weighs 510 pounds and is blessed with a full beard, representing so much extra per week.

The Prussian twins, Mary and Peter Banyon of Arentzville, Ill., are the Nos. 12 and 13, respectively. Mary weighs 430 pounds and Peter tips the hay scale at 450 pounds. They carry their 880 pounds quite gracefully.

PLENTY OF CHIN.

Figure 9.1. Heavy-weights: not fighters, but females whose excess of avoirdupois makes them curiosities.

Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1885

Of the women, more than a few are marked as non-native-born or non-Anglo Americans. Two of the women are Prussian (i.e., German), and another is from Amsterdam. Yet another's race is revealed largely through coy descriptors of her outfit and her admirers: "There is a suggestion of a verdure-clad hillock in Mrs. M. Kellogg of South Clark street.... She wears green in various shades and hues, and is almost certain to carry the bulk of

the Irish vote.” Treating the color green as synonymous with Irishness is a well-worn trope. What may be less known to the contemporary reader is that a common way in which European and white American men in the nineteenth century attempted to insult racially Othered men was by the suggestion that they fetishized obesity, which was treated as a grotesque and primitive affectation (Forth 2012). Thus, not only is Mrs. Kellogg’s fatness treated with disdain, but her presence there and blatant attempt to win the “Irish vote” bespeaks a backward aesthetic position among Irish people generally. No other race of person received similar treatment in this article. Mrs. Kellogg’s (seemingly Irish) fatness carries meaning outside of itself. It serves as a sign of backward Irish aesthetic ideation and primitivity (Curtis 1997).

This article is only one of the six making a connection between Irishness, barbarism, and fatness. Three of the six articles were found in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. One of the *Godey’s* essays used in the introductory vignettes went so far as to question the humanity of fat Irish persons. In “Fanny McDermot,” the author describes an Irish family as oversized in both the number of family members and their physical proportions. She relates the scene of

an entire Irish family, father, mother, half a dozen children, more or less, with a due allowance of cousins, all plump, rosy, and thriving (in the teeth of the physical laws), on plenty of heterogeneous food, and superfluity of dirt.

While the multitude of Irish children is described as “thriving,” it is only in the most limited sense, or “in the teeth of the physical laws.” More to the point, they are marked as multiplying rapidly, eating a good deal, and being filthy. They are presented as not just outside of polite society, but arguably scarcely human. The titular character of the essay, Fanny, is asked, “Did not I hear you talking on the stairs, yesterday, with some of them Irish cattle?” Seemingly guilty, Fanny makes no reply. The accuser continues, “I won’t have it, Fanny; you’re no company for Irish, and never shall be; the Lord made ’em, to be sure, but that is all; you can scarce call them human creturs (sic)” (*Godey’s* 1845).

The caricature of the Irish as filthy, boisterousness, enjoying food and drink, and prone to procreation has been noted by other scholars (Curtis 1997; McClintock 2013). We find within this anti-Irish medley that their corpulence (i.e., sign) is an integral part of their savagery (i.e., signified). As noted by Hasia Diner (1983) and others, Irish women were very commonly domestic servants for Anglo-Saxon women. In the present study, only one relevant article made explicit (and derogatory) reference to a fat Irish maid. In an essay in *Godey’s* from 1853, titled “Henry Morely. Chapter 1,” the author describes Henry’s Irish maid as such:

Biddy ... has become quite an important personage in and about the sick room of Henry. We hear of waving auburn hair, of chestnut tresses, silken, golden ringlets, and jetty masses of luxuriant hair. Now Biddy's locks were the color of a fallen, faded oak-leaf, and in flexibility resembled the wisps of a pine bough. In figure, she could scarcely be called either sylph, fairy, or seraph-like, as she was trop d'embonpoint to answer either description. Her complexion was extremely florid, and her large gray eyes shone out beyond her plump cheeks like between black clouds.

(Godey's 1853)

"Biddy" was evidently not the woman's name, but a derogatory moniker of womanhood that was commonly applied to Irish women during the era. This "Biddy" had nothing in common with a good-looking gal. Good-looking girls had luxurious hair, while hers was "wispy." In a move that reinscribed the slender ideal that some authors during the era challenged, we find that a pretty lady will be "either sylph, fairy or seraph-like." This was not Biddy. She was "trop d'embonpoint" a French expression meaning "too fat." Her entire manner was the opposite of beautiful; it was foreboding, as even her eyes "shone out beyond her plump cheeks like between black clouds." From the texts on Irish women, we find a clear link showing the fat body as a sign for savagery. Whether identified as primitive, unattractive, and/or ominous, fatness was more likely to signify grotesquery when related to Irish women than any other group of women who appeared in these data. The authors of articles vilifying fat Irish women were invested in the competing, post-nineteenth-century "racial project" of linking fatness to an "impure," qua ancestrally part-black, whiteness. For these reasons, I would be remiss if I did not mention the sole article on black women that materialized in the data.¹⁰ The essay appeared in the *New York Times*, from 1874, and was titled "Colored Women: Types of Southern Character." The article delivers precisely what it promises: a consideration of the author's estimation of the different forms and features of black femininity. It begins, "No close observer who visits Huntsville ... can fail to appreciate the significance of the term 'colored women.'" With an emphasis on the plural "women," the author intends to show us how the variation among the group of "colored women." Per the author, all "colored women," are not created equal. They should, be, per the author, hierarchically ordered. At the lowest of end of the spectrum are fat, dark-skinned women, such as one woman he saw in Huntsville: "In one corner a fat old creature may be seen seated beside a chestnut stove her face as black as the coal she puts into the fire." Invoking, again, the image of an agamic Mammy, this woman's weight, age, and dark skin are yoked together in what Saussure might call a linguistic unit (Sharpe 2010; Shaw 2006). The unity of the trio is freighted with disgust.

As I have tried to show throughout, the actual size of the body (the sign) is never in itself the point. It is the combination weight *and* race (sign and signifier) that leads racially Othered (e.g., Black and Irish) women to be grotesque and primitive. Plump Anglo/Saxon women were signified as beautiful and healthy.

This text provides a useful reminder that part of the fear of the fat Irish body was that Irish people were also “Other,” and of purported low, coarse African blood. When Anglo-Saxon blood is added to the mix, even the fat Irish could be considered lovely. This is borne out in the data, as the one lonely article to depict fat Irish women as beautiful comes from an 1888 *Washington Post* piece titled “Artists’ Models in Boston: Many Called and Few Choses—Their Pay and Their Duties.” The column runs:

The supply of young girls with really good figures who are willing to pose never equals the demand. Any young beauty can obtain employment of this sort in Boston. [Several] are Irish-American—that cross breed so productive of plump figures and pretty faces—and so on. These are the handsome women of the modern Athens. The indigenous race does not go in much for beauty.

(*Washington Post* 1888)

The “indigenous race” here seems to refer to the women of modern Greece. At that time, Greeks were also racial Others, being considered part of another quasi-African breed, the “Mediterranean” race, per late nineteenth-early twentieth-century race science (Brodin [1998](#); Painter [2010](#)). Per the author of this *Washington Post* disquisition, the addition of pure white Anglo-Saxon (i.e., “American”) blood gave the plump Irish “cross breed” their glory.

Conclusion

Fatness overwhelmingly signified health and beauty when related to Anglo/Saxon women (including German women) and grotesquery when related to Irish/Other women. I argue that this reveals fatness as a floating signifier of race. In other words, the fat body (as a sign) would not have any specific meaning by itself—it was roving. But, once it was applied to a particular racial group, it became imbued with positive or negative valuation (signified). Since fatness in women, during the mid-nineteenth century, only had meaning when attached to the race (signifier), and shuttles between races constantly (Saussure [2013](#)). And, since the qualities of a linguistic unit can shift and move, we can understand how *fatness itself becomes a floating signifier of race*.

But the intervention here is not just in the semiotic nature of the embodied elements of race, which we already knew from Hall and Jhally ([1996](#)) were

changeable. We learn how, when, and by whom they shift. Here, they changed—at least in part—as a result of global dispersion of persons, which led to a rearticulation of racial categories and identities in Europe and the United States. At that historical moment, the mid- to late nineteenth century, the character of the American republic was itself shifting. And elite white persons, or per Feagin and Elias (2013), “white architects,” engaged in competing “racial projects” (Omi and Winant 1994) to promote the traditional, Old World European view of opulent beauty, or the newer fear of fatness as linked with racial primitivity.

It is important to state here that racial projects are not social movements. They do not necessarily involve an organized group of actors sharing an identity, cause, or purpose, or advancing a particular goal. In this way, the unallied individual journalists and essayists, described here as “white architects,” can be identified as engaging in racial projects. Indeed, “individuals’ practices may be seen as racial projects” so long as they reflect and respond to “the broader patterning of race” in society (Omi and Winant 1994, 125).

There are some limitations to this study. The first is sample size. Despite having reviewed hundreds of articles, very few related to race, weight, and beauty arose in the mainstream press. Future studies using digitized archives are needed to see if a keyword search leads to greater precision. Second was the use of two different databases. But significantly, I did not find any difference in the association between weight and race across publications. Third, there was no way to tell from these data if German or Irish women were, in fact, as Banner suggested and I am working from, *all* immigrants. But that may be less of a problem than it seems. Given their high level of immigration as a group, whether they were all immigrants, or only described in ways that marked them as perpetually “foreign”—as Latinx persons are commonly described in America today—nevertheless reveals them to be outside the purview of American citizenry and thereby alien (Jiménez 2010).

The latter point is critical. As Banner and many other scholars have shown, by the turn of the twentieth century, the battle over the “right” look for American women had subsided. The competing projects presenting the racial value of fleshiness of the mid-century faded, ceding to the view of fatness as evidence of racial alterity. As the view that fatness (sign) was evidence of blackness (signifier) and thus grotesquery (signified) became codified by the early twentieth century, slenderness became the more favorable form of embodiment for Anglo-Saxon American women.

Notes

1. Banner does recognize that there were differences in the reception of Irish and German immigrants. She argues that “in contrast to the Irish, viewed as unkempt

and wild, the Germans generated a positive image” (1983, 58). But again, she describes this difference in gender and class terms.

2. In the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, there are three parts to a linguistic unit: signs, signifiers, and signified. The sign is the physical object, in this case the fat body. The signifier is the concept, in this case, the racial group. The signified are the qualities, in this case *either* beauty or ugliness, health or illness, self-care or self-indulgence.
3. He commented elsewhere that dominant racial groups make the effort to box-in subordinated groups in ways that delimit their social mobility (S. Hall 1980; Hall and Jhally 1996). Nevertheless, we do not understand from this when and how racial categories and meanings evolve.
4. Because there is no logical relationship between physical objects and concepts, signs and signifiers are constantly shifting, or “floating,” as are the qualities that are signified. And, because the components of a linguistic unit do not have a one-way relationship, physical signs (e.g., fatness) may themselves become signifiers (Saussure 2013).
5. Germany and Ireland were the no. 1 and no. 2 immigrant-sending countries, respectively, during the nineteenth century (Painter 2010, 138).
6. During the nineteenth century, dyspepsia, typically referred to today as indigestion, was one of the most commonly discussed and treated illnesses. It was believed to be caused by immoderate eating.
7. As the codes were not mutually exclusive, one of them in this category overlapped with one in the category of fat Anglos as good, since slenderness and plumpness were both praised.
8. See <https://www.ancestry.com/name-origin?surname=leonard>.
9. In all of the pieces describing the relationship between fat and good health, none of them in these data described German women. This was somewhat surprising, as the health of plump German women had been praised by doctors at the time, including the eminent Dr. George Beard, as detailed by Lois Banner (1983).
10. In works currently under preparation, I explain that it was rare for black women to be discussed in nineteenth-century publications about beauty. Being that they were enslaved for much of the time in question, and confined to the South, they were not often mentioned in most northern-originating periodicals with a broad readership.

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