

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

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190842475.013.9> Pages 144–163**Published:** 08 January 2019

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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