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Amy Erdman Farrell
Dickinson College

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"The White Man's Burden"

Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the Place of the Fat Woman in Early 20th-Century U.S. Culture

Amy Farrell

While doing research at the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection at Penn State, Harrisburg, I came across an entry reading "FAT WOMEN." Hoping to find information on dieting products and schemes, I had not expected such an explicit reference to my research on fat stigma. What I found were two huge notebooks that Marshall had meticulously filled with tourist postcards of fat women, dated from the 1910s through the 1940s, sent from beach destinations or national parks. Pictured on the cards are cartoon images of fat working women, of fat homemakers doing the laundry or getting dressed, of fat middle-class women traveling on trains and ships, and many, many of fat women sunbathing at the ocean.

These postcards reveal an important irony in the history of U.S. women. They mark the growth of tourism in the United States and of an increasingly mobile population, one that travels not only to follow work (which had been true for centuries) but now, with money and new opportunities, also for pleasure. Often written by women, these cards also provide evidence of the increased mobility and independence of women, particularly those who were white and middle class, enhanced by the strong feminist movement of the first decades of the century as well as the advent of car travel in the 1910s and 1920s (Scharff, 1991; Shaffer, 2001). (African American women still faced the danger and discrimination of Jim Crow laws; working-class women had less money available for leisure travel.) These cards, however, also reveal the decreased figurative and literal space available to any woman who did not toe the line of bodily control. The fat women in the postcards are all white, some middle-class consumers and tourists, some working-class or middle-class homemakers, some clearly "ethnic" and immigrant women; the images, however, mock all the women for their fatness. In other words, they demonstrate the establishment of the symbolic place—or rather, no-place—of the fat woman in the 20th century.

By the beginning of the 20th century, fatness for women became associated less with prosperity, healthful fertility, or attractive sensuality than with a body out of control. These postcards illuminate this shift in the cultural meaning of fat. Many
of the postcards mock middle-class women, who have, according to these images, indulged too excessively in the growing consumer culture of both tourism and purchased goods. One shows a young fat woman on the beach, asking “Have I been places? See the labels on my trunk?” Instead of a suitcase with stickers, we see her bathing suit-clad body covered with labels, her stomach labeled “Danger Point, U.S.A.,” her breasts labeled “Petter’s Paradise, U.S.A.,” and her round bottom marked “Lover’s Seat, U.S.A.” A typical saying on the postcards reads, “Travel Really ‘Broadens’ One”; in one, for instance, a small, dismayed man looks on as a fat woman bends over, trying to stuff herself into a too-small car. Her tiny feet accentuate the size of her bottom. The trunk is stuffed with suitcases, too full to close, suggesting that this woman both eats and buys too much. Another shows a fat woman dressed in furs and hat sitting astride a train, hanging on unsteadily. A skinny man, presumably the conductor, looks out at her with big eyes. The caption reads, “I expect you’ve treated yourself so well they’ll have to put you on top of the train when you come home!” In another a well-dressed woman bends over, her huge bottom taking up nearly a quarter of the card. She points to a chair in a furniture store but tells the salesman, “It won’t do, it’s not large enough for my big sittin’ room.” We’re supposed to laugh at the double entendre, referring both to her big buttocks and to her huge living room.

As scholars such as Hillel Schwartz (1986) and Joan Brumberg (1988) have argued in their histories of dieting, the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States were marked by significant cultural and social changes. As we moved from a primarily rural, farm-oriented nation to a primarily urban, consumer-oriented nation, many critics feared the loss of older habits of thrift and economy. These fears were exacerbated once again after the Depression, when new consumer options of buying on credit and spending beyond one’s income became normative. It was within this context of concern over consumer excess, Schwartz and Brumberg argue, that both anorexia and the diet industries were born. Interestingly, what we see in the postcards are the ways that these fears over overconsumption were projected onto women. The men looked on but did not participate in the excess.

The work of philosopher Susan Bordo helps us to understand why the women in these postcards would be portrayed as fat and as the recipients of a judgmental and horrified male gaze. As Bordo reminds us in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), the 20th century inherited from the Enlightenment a dualistic and oppositional relationship of mind to body that continues to project the hatred of the body onto the female while associating the male with the rational. (This is not to say that men are not also concerned about their bodies or their weight, but that the force of the obsession and hatred falls particularly on women.) At the same time that females have been seen at most risk for exhibiting body and cultural excess, however, they have also, at least since the development of the cult of true womanhood in the 19th century, been expected to maintain civilization through their behavior, their clothing, and their relations with men and children. In terms of fatness, what this means is that women were considered more likely than men to exhibit “bodily excess” because their rational qualities were not sufficiently developed to control their bodies. Fatness also
posed a bigger transgression for women than for men, however, because women were expected to maintain that line of civilized control.

In these postcards we see that women who did not toe this line of bodily control were presented as so comically excessive that they literally overcome the elements, blocking out the sun, stemming the tide, or causing tidal waves of their own. One shows a fat woman wearing a bathing suit at the edge of the ocean; a baby rests in the shade of her bottom as a thin male and female couple looks on. "Found a shady spot here! Take the sun a bit to get through this!" the caption reads. In another two dogs rest under the bottom of a woman bending over to pick up a beach ball. "Found the shadiest spot on the beach!" the card reads. Another features a male police officer lecturing a fat woman who lounges on the beach in her swimsuit and bathing cap: "Get up, Missus, and let the tide come in!" Certainly one can understand from these postcards that the fat female body is not supposed to enjoy the pleasures of the beach and sunbathing that were newly available to middle- and working-class Americans in the first half of the century. Moreover, they suggest that the fat female body is so gross (in both senses of the word—disgusting and huge) that it literally has the dangerous power of controlling natural forces of sun and sea. The fat female body is not welcome in this geographic space because it takes up too much geographic space.

The butt of many of the postcards' jokes—literally and figuratively—is women's voluminous buttocks. Sometimes the cards mock women's breasts or stomach, but the incessant focus is on the women's bottoms. In postcard after postcard we see women bending down—to look for a shell, to do the laundry, to reach over the railing of a ship, to put on her stocking; we see the round cheeks of her bottom, often clad in some absurdly decorated and lacy undergarments. The poses of these women—bending down, buttocks on display—suggest the position of female animals in heat, who "present" themselves to interested males. More specifically, their huge buttocks are reminiscent of the early 19th-century representations of the African "Hottentot Venus," also known as Saartje Baartman. Baartman was the African woman brought to England in 1819 and exhibited in London and Paris for many years. Both physicians and the public incessantly commented on her buttocks and labia. Cartoons from the time showed men viewing Baartman from behind, with her buttocks exposed. To look or act like a "Hottentot," meant, in Anglo-American terms, that one was primitive, "Black," and overly sexual (Hall, 1997, p. 264).

The fat women in these postcards, then, not only take up too much geographic space; they also are portrayed as taking up excessive sexual space. Sometimes this overabundant sexuality seems to please the men in the postcards. Indeed, we often see the face of some amused—and presumably aroused—man spying on the woman. In a 1907 postcard, a tall thin man looks away from a fat woman who, while bending down, has split open her skirt; "This is enough to give a fellow palpitation," the caption reads. In a 1930s postcard we see a raggedy hobo sitting on railroad tracks, with a big blonde woman sitting on his lap, nearly knocking him over. "I'm on the right track—and everything is going along on schedule!" the caption reads. In one from the 1940s, we see a smiling plumber with a very large housewife sitting on his lap. "They told me to take care of the big tub in the kitchen!" the caption reads. One
particularly interesting postcard shows a tropical island where a U.S. marine, grin on his face, grabbing a fat “native” girl, who looks shocked and worried: “The U.S. Marines Get Around A Lot! Leave the Heavy Work Up to Us!” In this one, the fat, the sexual, and the primitive are all clearly linked.

With the exception of the U.S. marine, whose exuberant manliness presumably excludes him from “civilized” behavior, the men in these postcards who look happy with fat women are either poor (the hobo), working class (the plumber), or silly (the comically small or thin). Most of these men in the “comic fat women” postcards look overcome by the fat women in their lives and on their laps. In one from 1909, a beleaguered man sits on a chair with a very fat, huge buttocked woman on his lap. “Our eyes have met Our lips not yet But O, You kid; I’ll get You yet!” the caption reads as the woman presses forward toward the man’s face. In a 1911 postcard a woman sits on a chair, her buttocks extending far beyond the edges of the seat. The man sits atop her, holding on tightly. “Just able to get around” the caption reads. In a 1930s postcard a fat woman embraces a thin balding man, who looks nervous and unhappy. “Don’t worry about me. None of the guys up here can get around me,” she says. Clearly this fat woman both threatens to crush the man and is oversexed, allowing numerous men to “try” to get their arms around her.

Medical and popular literature from the late 19th and early 20th centuries helps to make sense of the images in these postcards, particularly the ways that the fat women are portrayed as out of control and overly sexual. This literature also helps to explain why middle-class men would appear to abhor fat women, while working-class and poor men seem to enjoy them. Throughout the 19th century, political cartoons sometimes lampooned fat people, usually the “fat cat,” the successful businessman or the rich politician. By the early 20th century, however, this was no longer the primary image. Indeed, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, physicians and cultural thinkers linked “obesity” to lower levels of civilization and the primitive, and thinness to progress and civilization. In other words, thinness becomes associated with the middle class and the wealthy, whereas fatness becomes associated with the poor. These writings coincided with significant fields of study popular in the 19th century—phrenology, which classified “types” of people by their physical features; anthropology, which grouped racial and national “types” into hierarchical structures of civilization; and, finally, eugenics, the science of human breeding for “improvement.” All three areas of study emerged during a period of widespread fear about the contamination threatened by the influx of immigrants to the United States and by the newly emancipated African Americans. Attempts to control the “contamination” often centered on issues of “hygiene and eugenics,” particularly on matters relating to separating the “better” people from the “inferior” people (Brown, 2001, pp. 101–132).

Within the context of increased waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and migration from the South, nativist critics and health professionals argued that everything from health and fortitude to intelligence and character were inherited traits, in low supply among the immigrants and migrants, and in high supply among native-born Americans of Northern European stock. These professionals looked for signs that supposedly identified the “superior” versus the “inferior.” Within
this context, fatness became yet another signifier of inferiority, a line demarcating the divide between civilization and primitive cultures, whiteness and blackness, sexual restraint and sexual promiscuity, beauty and ugliness, progress and the past. In the early 20th century, an American physician, Dr. Leonard Williams, pointed to the supposed link between civilization and obesity: "It is to be admitted that there exists a settled belief among the uneducated, and even among many of the educated, that it is a man's duty to eat as much as he possibly can, in order to keep up his strength. This belief probably reaches back to the most primitive days when food was scarce and its enjoyment intermittent" (1926, p. 4). According to this theory, lower-class people harbor unconscious memories of times when worries about food supply shaped desire. According to many thinkers on fat and weight, the wealthy, the educated, the more civilized and advanced people literally had this tendency toward fatness "bred out" of them. They reasoned that "plumpness" would soon be solely a vestige of more primitive cultures. In Girth Control, a 1923 text published in both the United States and England, Henry Finck explains that beauty standards among the Africans, Polynesians, the Turkish, and the Aborigines of Australia valorized fatness; he described the ways that many of these cultures even encouraged their men and women to become fatter (pp. 2-3). He quickly reminds his British and American readers that "our standards of good looks are different from those of Hottentots, Moors and Turks" (p. 9). It is no surprise that Finck would use the Hottentots as examples here. Reminding his Anglo-American readers that they were not "Hottentots or Moors," but rather modern and British American citizens, Finck used fatness as a marker dividing the civilized from the primitive.

All this medical and popular literature, then, can be seen as cultural tools used to teach Americans to see fatness in women as a sign of primitive, out-of-control impulses. Yes, perhaps men do find fatness attractive, these discussions and images seem to note, but if the men are civilized, are middle class, are "white," then they shouldn't. Only the hobos among us would find a fat woman attractive. As Dr. Williams wrote in 1926, "Certain it is that in many savage tribes, and even among people who are by no means savage, the men prefer fat women." (p. 77). He argued, however, that "civilization" was changing men's "natural" sexual instinct. They were beginning to realize that they preferred thin women. And to accommodate this preference, he explained, women were taking part in slimming campaigns, fighting their natural—that is, primitive—"endocrinal" tendency to gain weight. As Williams approvingly noted, white women in "civilized countries" were beginning to realize (and presumably men were "learning" it too) that men preferred slim women. As Williams concluded, fat women were "repulsive sights, degrading alike to their sex and civilisation" (p. 67).

By the early 20th century, then, physicians and cultural commentators increasingly valorized the superiority of the thin body as one showing "correct" attitudes of control, both in terms of sexuality and appetites for food. According to this literature, the "thin ideal" needed to be taught to the "primitive," meaning immigrants, the working class, people of color, and women. Indeed, some of the postcards represent visually the same kind of rhetoric that the physicians were using at the turn of the century. They go beyond suggesting that middle-class men hold fat women in disdain,
suggesting that it is men's responsibility to discipline fat women and their overabundant sexuality. In one of the postcards we see a big-bottomed young woman bending down to garden, her lacy underpants and stockings showing; a young man looks like he's about to paddle her with a board from the fence he's fixing. "Obey that impulse!" the postcard reads. "Come on down here and have a SMACKING good time!" In an earlier and more erudite card (from the clothing it looks like it was published in the 1910s) we see a photo of a white, well-dressed man sitting in a drawing room with a heavy woman on his lap. Under their feet is an animal skin rug, suggesting vacations to exotic locations. The caption reads, "THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN." Evoking the title of Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, this postcard suggests that not only do more civilized white men abhor a fleshy and sexually exuberant woman, but also that it is his "responsibility" to tame her. In Kipling's poem, he urges the United States to bring colonial rule to the Philippines, as it is necessary for "the best ye breed" (white Americans) to control the "Folly" and "Sloth" of the Filipino people, whom he describes as heathens, "half-devil and half-child." Of course, just as the British imperialists, with whom Kipling grew up in India, enjoyed the privileges of their rule, the men in these postcards also seem to enjoy their "responsibility" to tame fat women. The first postcard promises a "smacking good time"; the second shows a man whose cheeks press into the woman's fleshy body and whose hands seem at any moment to reach for her breasts. Dr. Williams suggested in his treatises that civilized men were learning not to "enjoy" fleshy women; perhaps what they were learning instead, these postcards suggest, was to frame and express their conflicted enjoymen as a duty to discipline the "primitive."

In Bodies Out of Bounds, Jana Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco call for more work that "unravel[s]" the "discourses that have most intransigently defined and fixed fat bodies" (p. 1) and explores the ways that the meanings of fatness are linked to cultural ideas about race, gender, class, and sexuality (p. 12). This set of postcards from the first half of the 20th century, set in the context of the medical and popular literature from same period, begins to point to the deep historical roots of contemporary fat stigma and conflicting ideas associated with fatness. They suggest that as women gained more political and geographic freedom in the early 20th century, they were increasingly curtailed by a set of body disciplines that mocked and denigrated all those who did not seem to display proper modes of bodily control. The comic portrayal of white men both hating and longing for the enjoymen of fat women suggests a shifting culture whose conflicts are perhaps still at work, as the diet industry booms at the same time that there still exists a lively, if relatively underground, business of fat women's pornography. The body of the fat woman in these postcards represents the primitive, the excessive, the uncontrolled. We see similar representations of fat women today; indeed, recently I picked up a postcard, published in the late 1990s, that shows two white fat women, wearing bathing suits, looking out onto the ocean. The caption reads, "Having a whale of time." Like the early 20th-century postcards, this one represents fat women as animals, grotesque in size, too large to have the right to enjoy the pleasures of the beach. Like Dr. Williams, we are to understand that these fat women are a repulsive sight to women and to civilization. Such images
permeate our culture. Scholars and cultural critics who study the machinations of the contemporary "obesity epidemic" and its "treatments," then, need to be cognizant of the strong historic threads that work their way through current popular discourse about fatness.

REFERENCES


