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Writing the History of Fat Agency

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English abstract: The article takes up current scholarship on fat history and outlines three aspects of fat history as a critical “history of the present.” Firstly, it points to a crucial shift in the politics of fat at the end of the 19th century. In the course of fat becoming a biopolitical vanishing point, fighting fat became an intersectional terrain for individuals to perform their ability to conduct themselves successfully. Secondly, it stresses the fruitfulness of dis/ability studies for a critique of fatphobia’s reiteration of an unattainable ideal of able, healthy, and productive bodies. Thirdly, the author critically discusses problems and promises of writing histories of agency and suggests an engagement with the agency of matter.

Analyzing fatness in contemporary culture means analyzing a productive regime of fatphobia in western, liberal societies. Scholars of fat studies have highlighted how the talk of an “obesity epidemic” pathologizes fat bodies by linking fatness to individual and social illness, laziness, lack of control, egoism, risk, and danger.¹ Next to the scandalization of “obesity” as being extremely costly for individual bodies and the healthcare system, it has even been linked to climate change with the argument that fat people contribute to global warming. In this light, fat bodies have been regarded as a threat to the health and well-being of individuals as well as the community, the nation, and even the global order.² Given this current fatphobia, a range of scholars has delved into its history, particularly in the US, the alleged center of the “obesity epidemic.” They have stressed how recently fat became such a pervasive cultural concern, and that

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- 1 Next to the other contributions to this issue, see, for instance, Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000); Elena Levy-Navarro, ed., *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010); Amy Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Natalie Boero, *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American “Obesity Epidemic”* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Abigail Saguy: *What's Wrong with Fat? The War on Obesity and its Collateral Damage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 2 Elena Levy-Navarro, “Changing Conceptions of the Fat Body in Western History,” in Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat*, 4; Guthman, *Weighing In*, 7.

fatness has embodied very differing meanings over the course of history.³ They have also pointed to the long history of fat stigma and to the extent that this helped to build the modern social order by linking fatness to self-indulgence and sickness and thus building it up as an antithesis to liberal citizenship.⁴ Thereby, the historiography of fat echoes the classic problem regarding the purpose of history in contemporary critique: Is it more important or constructive to question present fat shaming by highlighting alternative understandings and, thus, the historicity of fat? Or can the dynamics of exclusion by fat shaming be better illuminated by showing the historical persistence of fat stigma? Elena Levy-Navarro, for instance, published her collection *Historicizing Fat* in search of alternative understandings and experiences of fat bodies, “hop[ing] that they will challenge our modern categories.” Giving fatness such a history, she suggests, complicates its use as an objective, ahistorical problem, while at the same showing how it came to embody such meaning.⁵ In a review of Levy-Navarro’s anthology, Amy Farrell stressed that she sees the purpose of fat histories not merely in highlighting shifted meanings but also in telling the long and, in her view, relatively stable history of fat denigration: “[...] I do not think we need to downplay the ways that fat has been viewed as a sign of moral failure and social disruption in order to challenge contemporary fat denigration. Indeed, [...] recognizing the deep roots of fat denigration [...] may help to explain why it is so difficult for us to think clearly about fat.”⁶

Writing from the perspective of critically questioning current fatphobia myself, I support both claims. I deem it important to acknowledge the contingent and hence highly historical character of fatphobia as well as its productivity and viscosity across history. And looking closer at the ways bodies are historically fabricated (again and again) does, in my opinion, necessarily entail both perspectives, if we think of their

3 Such as Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied. A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986); Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat*; Katharina Vester, “Regime Change: Gender, Class, and the Invention of Dieting in Post-Bellum America,” *Journal of Social History* 44 (2010): 39-70; Alan J. Bilton: “Nobody Loves a Fat Man: Fatty Arbuckle and Conspicuous Consumption in Nineteen Twenties America,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 57 (2012): 51-66.

4 Such as Sander L. Gilman, *Obesity: The Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Christopher E. Forth, “The Qualities of Fat: Bodies, History, and Materiality,” *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (2013): 135-154.

5 Levy-Navarro, “Changing Conceptions,” 5, 2.

6 Amy Farrell, “Searching for a Usable Past. Reviews of *Eating to Excess: The Meaning of Gluttony and the Fat Body in the Ancient World*, by Susan Hill, and *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, by Elena Levy-Navarro,” *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 1 (2012): 227f.

materialization as performative processes.⁷ I am interested in making fat part of a critical “history of the present”; that is, to carve out the contingency of historically stabilized fat politics.⁸ By discussing important arguments in fat studies, this text suggests three cornerstones of writing critical histories of body fat. Firstly, it means to take into account the way in which people are governed – and govern themselves – via body shape and health. Thus, I want to point to the second half of the 19th century as an era of crucial change in the politics of fat. Then, fatness became a biopolitical vanishing point, increasingly associated with sickness, and fighting fat became an intersectional terrain for individuals to perform their capacity for successful self-conduct. Secondly, I turn to dis/ability studies to critique the strong link between slimness and health as well as the notion that people’s corporeal appearance provides information about their health or character. This is also intended to point to the consequences of this equation: the reiteration of an unattainable ideal of able, healthy, and productive bodies. Thirdly, I will focus on the question of agency. While histories that show how people have challenged fat denigration may doubtless yield emancipatory narratives, I will point to new problems that arise from this and suggest an engagement with the agency of matter as a possibility to approach them.

A History of Bodies and Selves

My first remark concerns the subjectivating effects of fat politics.⁹ Although the density of current claims of an “obesity crises” is striking, fat has for some time now been historically productive, especially since the second half of the 19th century. Fat scholars usually point to the decades between 1860 and 1920 as the timeframe of a crucial shift in the meaning of fatness from a symbol of wealth to a marker of immobility and self-indulgence.¹⁰ Fat becoming a problem was part of a crucial biopolitical

7 On performative materialization of bodies, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975]), 30-31; Jürgen Martschukat, “Eine kritische Geschichte der Gegenwart,” *WerkstattGeschichte* 61 (2012), 26.

9 On subjectivation, see Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” afterword to *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208-226; Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003 [1997]); Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

10 While Peter Stearns, Sander Gilman and Katharina Vester see its apex after 1900 (especially in regard to women’s dieting, as Vester argues), Amy Farrell stresses that

turn in the 19th century: the turn to science and the idea of a struggle for the *survival of the fittest* as guiding principles of progress in modern societies.¹¹ New nutritional knowledge and scientific theories of bodily morphology supplied a “new buttress for traditional sizism”¹² and created a modern body that became the most powerful signifier of one’s evolutionary fitness. The development of this “compulsory able-bodiedness,” as Robert McRuer has called the imperative to have (and care for) an able, productive, and healthy body,¹³ went hand in hand with techniques to measure, classify, and govern foodstuffs, individuals and populations as seen, for example, in the categorization of nutritional values, calories, and height-weight-charts.¹⁴ Moreover, the emerging disciplines of physiology and nutritional science provided an allegedly objective knowledge about eating and weighing “right.”¹⁵

In this context, body weight and shape gained the power to express health and fitness – as well as citizenship status. In the process of delineating alleged scientific causalities between diet, fitness, and size, able-bodiedness was connected to Enlightenment ideals of self-government and willpower. Those ideals were and are especially virulent in the United States as a liberal society – the first country to proclaim itself to be based on free, self-governing citizens endowed with the right to pursue happiness.¹⁶ More precisely, in the late 19th century, the ideal of a

fat loss products were already heavily advertised in the last decades of the 19th century. Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2012 [1997]); Sander L. Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), Vester, “Regime Change”; Farrell: *Fat Shame*.

11 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

12 Pat Rogers, “Fat is a Fictional Issue: The Novel and the Rise of Weight-Watching,” in Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat*, 33.

13 Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Sharon L. Snyder (New York: MLA Publications, 2002).

14 Patricia Vertinsky, “‘Weighs and Means’: Examining the Surveillance of Fat Bodies through Physical Education Practices in North America in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Journal of Sport History* 35, 3 (2008): 449-468; Rogers, “Fat is a Fictional Issue.”

15 Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Nina Mackert, “‘I want to be a fat man / and with the fat men stand’ – U.S.-Amerikanische Fat Men’s Clubs und die Bedeutungen von Körperfett in den Dekaden um 1900,” *Body Politics* 2, 3 (2014): 215-243; Vester, “Regime Change.”

16 Jürgen Martschukat, “‘The Necessity for Better Bodies to Perpetuate Our Institutions, Insure a Higher Development of the Individual, and Advance the Conditions of the Race.’ Physical Culture and the Formation of the Self in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century USA,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, 4 (2011): 472-493.

successful self became increasingly connected to the body, which seemed to provide “key evidence” of one’s ability or inability to “effectively [manage] the modern world.”¹⁷ Numerous scholars have pointed to this era as characterized by power struggles. Not surprisingly, the modern body and ideal citizen was white, heterosexual, middle-class, and male, and deviations from this physical norm were framed as threats to civilizational progress.¹⁸ Fat was right in the middle of these struggles and became a powerful part of an intersectional matrix of categories producing distinctly classed, gendered, and raced bodies. As Farrell and others have pointed out, fat shaped understandings of gender, sex, class and race, “in particular the historical development of ‘whiteness,’” for instance, by marking fatness as “primitive” in contrast to a slim, white body.¹⁹

Katharina Vester’s historical account of dieting practices vividly illustrates the intersectional politics of problematic fat – particularly its role in the rise of the modern subject. Fat loss diets, as she states, emerged in the US in the 1860s as a practice of white, middle class men. These diets resonated with ideals of restraint and efficiency and a critique of “conspicuous consumption” that characterized the American capitalist economy and work ethic as well as ideal bodies and selves at that time. By showing their ability to control their minds and bodies by regulating their food intake, dieters could perform the core white middle-class ideal of self-control and, thus, claim status. Women were denied this ability to reign over their appetite – one of the reasons why experts warned them not to diet. However, as Vester argues, at the end of the 19th century, white women claimed the right to diet as a means to show that they too were capable of exercising self-control and, thus, were eligible for political participation. The fight against fat could embody the nexus of self-control, middle-classness, and whiteness, and symbolize a modern self.²⁰

Not least because of the highly interdependent character of fatness, it is necessary to account for the historicity of *size*. In the late 19th century, fat came to signify the challenges and dangers of modernity as well as

17 Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 83, 27. See also Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Mackert, “I want to be a fat man.”

18 Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*; Jackson Lears: *Rebirth of a Nation. The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

19 Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 5, and esp. chapter 2-4. On the intersectional signifying power of fat, see also Vester, “Regime Change,” Veit, *Modern Food*; Biltekoff, *Eating Right*. Alex Evans places special emphasis on class (Alex Evans, “Greedy Bastards: Fat Kids, Class War, and the Ideology of Classlessness,” in Levy-Navarro, *Historicizing Fat*, 146-172).

20 Vester, “Regime Change.”

bodies and selves that did not seem able to handle them. Fat politics constituted a highly productive regimen of performing certain norms of (bodily) functions and abilities. And this regimen increasingly included health.²¹

Fat, Health and Ability

Secondly, in my opinion, historicizing fat should inquire into its close connection with ill health as well as into historical health ideals. In 2000, the US Department of Health declared “obesity” to be a “Leading Health Indicator,” a “high-priority health issue” that needs to be “overcome” in order to “[improve] the health of all Americans.”²² This was not the first institutionalized connection made between fat and illness; as Sander Gilman shows, the genealogical roots of an understanding of fatness as a disease date back to ancient times.²³ The 20th century saw different strategies of medicalization and medical intervention into fat bodies – from diet pills to abdominal surgery – either portraying fatness itself as illness or stressing numerous ailments associated with fatness.²⁴ Even if no connection between fatness and ill health was made, fat still appears as something in the need of treatment: Historical diet practices time and again aimed to attain beauty and upward mobility by slimming down bodies, even when a slim body was regarded as an outward sign of closeness to God.²⁵ Moreover, numerous issues of access arise in a fatphobic environment, for instance, the narrowing and norming of public spaces, transportation, or garment sizes.²⁶

My point is this: Questioning the pathologization of fatness, the imperative for treatments as well as the disabling impact of fatphobia prompts to write fat history from the perspective of disability studies.

21 See Mackert, “I want to be a fat man.”

22 Boero, *Killer Fat*, 16; US Department of Health: Healthy People Website, accessed December 10, 2014, <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/Leading-Health-Indicators>.

23 Gilman, *Obesity*.

24 Nicolas Rasmussen, “Weight Stigma, Addiction, Science, and the Medication of Fatness in Mid-Twentieth Century America,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 34 (2012): 880-895; Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*; Gilman, *Fat*; Farrell, *Fat Shame*; Boero, *Killer Fat*.

25 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*; Marie Griffith, “Apostles of Abstinence: Fasting and Masculinity During the Progressive Era,” *American Quarterly* 52 (2000): 599-638; Vester, “Regime Change.”

26 Joyce L. Huff: „Access to the Sky: Fat Bodies and Airline Seats as Contested Spaces,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 176-186; Anna Mollow, “Disability Studies Gets Fat,” *Hypatia* 30 (2015): 205.

Disability studies have given us crucial insight into the emergence of health as a norm, and they have critiqued historical understandings of “whole,” “normal,” and “healthy” bodies as well as the cultural concepts of dis/ability.²⁷ In light of these contributions, it is fruitful to analyze fatness as an aberration from compulsory able-bodiedness.²⁸ Especially since the second half of the 19th century – catalyzed by new knowledge and practices of nutrition, physiology, and economy – this ideal of healthy and fit bodies became pervasive and established itself, shrouding its historicity by scientific and medical evidence.²⁹ In neoliberalism, the imperative of able-bodiedness, demanding health, fitness, the ability to work as well as to enjoy, is profound, “emanating from everywhere and nowhere.”³⁰ It is the reason why fat shame is more than “just” fat stigma. It is the result of a hegemonic project that governs essentially everyone. Its critique allows us to question, for instance, the close discursive link between health and slimness, the causal relationship between slimness and a diet of fresh fruits and vegetables, and, more generally, the “assumption that health is intimately connected to, and ultimately defined by, a person’s appearance.”³¹

One problem in equating health and body size that numerous scholars and activists have pointed out is the fact that fatness itself is so morally charged. Fatness seems to stand not only for the inability but also

27 Paul K. Longmore/Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001); Elsbeth Bösl/Anne Klein/Anne Waldschmidt, eds., *Disability History: Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte. Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010); Sebastian Barsch/Anne Klein/Pieter Verstraete, eds., *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). It is important to acknowledge, however, that “cripping” fat history (cf. Mollow, “Disability Studies Gets Fat”) is quite a controversial issue. Since fat rights activists fight to uncouple fatness and illness, some of them shun the label “disability”. April Herndon, “Disparate But Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies,” *NWSA Journal* 14 (2002): 125; Anna Kirkland, “What’s at Stake in Fatness as a Disability?,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 26 (2006). Ultimately, “[b]eing pinned with a disease has consequences, which can include denial of health care or relegation to victim status” (Guthman, *Weighing In*, 12). On the other hand, these consequences and the discriminatory practices around health and healthcare are precisely the focus of the critique of disability studies which seeks to question normative understandings of health and illness.

28 McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness,” 91-93.

29 See Nina Mackert, “Feeding Productive Bodies: Calories, Nutritional Values and Ability in Progressive Era US,” in *Histories of Productivity: Genealogical Perspectives on the Body and Modern Economy*, ed. Peter-Paul Bänziger and Mischa Suter (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

30 McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness,” 91-92.

31 Jonathan M. Metzl, “Introduction: Why ‘Against Health’?” in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, ed. Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2; see also Mollow/McRuer in this issue.

unwillingness to treat, cure, slim, and better one's body. When health is not only "a desired state, but [...] also a prescribed state," allegedly not aspiring it renders one unintelligible. In other words, who on earth could be "against health"?³² It is this imperative for rehabilitation that stands at the heart of disability scholars' critique. And as Anna Mollow has argued, a critique of compulsory able-bodiedness should entail more than pointing to the exclusions that result from this imperative ideal. It should also involve challenging the drive to function, to optimize, and to be productive – a teleological drive that Mollow has called "rehabilitative futurism."³³ She thereby modifies queer theorist Lee Edelman's controversial thoughts on the regime of "reproductive futurism," an ideological nexus of teleology and heteronormativity, signified by the figure of the "innocent child."³⁴ In Mollow's argument, "rehabilitative futurism" is responsible for the abjection of disabled bodies, meaning that the politics of disability liberation must challenge this logic if they are to effectively undercut "rehabilitative ideals: procreation by the fit and elimination of the disabled." This entails an unsettling of basic assumptions regarding progress and ability: "[C]an we envision a politics not framed in terms of futurism or a futurity not grounded in reproductive (or, I ask here, rehabilitative) ideology?"³⁵ Mollow's remarks are of particular use for a critique of a "modern form of temporality" and progress that characterizes most historiography as well as narratives of slimming: the striving for a future order in which ideals will be achieved, fat is gone, and health, beauty, and productivity are (re)gained. "[F]at is made to occupy the position of the 'before' to the thin 'after'," Levy-Navarro writes.³⁶

One manner by which historicizing fatness can trace the emergence of and disrupt this "rehabilitative futurism" is by scrutinizing the problematic historical connection between fat and disease, and healthiness and thinness, and by making visible those who eluded the imperative to *become* (healthy and thin).

32 Metz, "Introduction," 2-3. See also Saguy's critique of "healthism" (Saguy, *What's Wrong With Fat*, 63-65).

33 Mollow, "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive," in *Sex and Disability*, ed. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 288.

34 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

35 Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 288, 291.

36 Levy-Navarro, "Changing Conceptions," 5.

Agency: What's the matter?

My third comment on making fat part of a critical “history of the present” deals with agency, its ambivalent character for emancipatory histories, and the turn to matter. Although it is important to account for the “oppressive construction” of fat, it is equally important not only to focus on fatphobia but also on its challenges.³⁷ Especially because fat people are often portrayed as lacking agency (as having little self-control or a disease), the majority of fat studies scholars have stressed that one must avoid reiterating stories of victimization and helplessness, and instead focus on the agency of fat people.³⁸ This entails talking about acts of explicitly proclaimed resistance and disruption (like the example of Wilma Kuns in this issue)³⁹ as well as about the seemingly mundane practices of (historical) actors.⁴⁰ Those histories are, admittedly, even more complicated to grasp and certainly not always a story from the margins. The Fat Men’s Clubs, for instance, that formed in the middle of a shift in the meanings of fat in the late 19th and early 20th centuries US, can be historically apprehended mostly because they formed around a defense of the fat body. And the club members were white, wealthy men who could not only afford to infringe on contemporary body ideals but who also performed their elite status precisely by embodying fatness.⁴¹

Hence, histories of agency are difficult to write. Even more, as Jürgen Martschukat and I have remarked in the editorial, calling for agency also coincides with the neoliberal imperative of agency: “[A]gency is not necessarily and exclusively tied to oppositional acts of resistance or withdrawal, but it is also a premise of the social and political organization of liberal societies: exerting agency performs our compliance with its demands.”⁴² This problem of agency had already arisen (though to a lesser extent) in the 19th century when diet and sports emerged as techniques of bodily change. When “size [came] to seem an effect of choice,” choosing –

37 Levy-Navarro, “Changing Conceptions,” 5.

38 Such as Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts University Press, 2004); Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice*; Levy-Navarro, ed., *Historicizing Fat*.

39 Kreuzenbeck in this issue.

40 See, for both, Levy-Navarro, ed., *Historicizing Fat*; Solovay/Rothblum, *The Fat Studies Reader*; Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, *Culinary Capital* (New York: Berg, 2012).

41 Mackert, “I want to be a fat man.”

42 See Mackert and Martschukat in this issue. See also Huff in this issue for the argument that having control over one’s body is an important trope of western culture – also in emancipatory movements.

and choosing “right” – became a responsibility.⁴³ Stressing the malleability of bodies is especially problematic when it comes with the duty of optimization, treatment, or cure. Interestingly, current fat-positive critiques intervene in this problem of agency by stressing the impossibility of fully controlling one’s body weight. I am reading McRuer’s and Mollow’s reference to genetics in this issue also as a strategic argument that is more fully explored in another paper by Mollow. There, she challenges the notion of “corporeal agency” as an “ableist idea” that reiterates the imperative to have strong, will-powered control over the desires, antics and impulses of one’s body.⁴⁴

These critiques call for another concept; namely, for a revised understanding of agency that scrutinizes the role of bodies and matter and looks closer at the fabrication of the *black box* “obesity epidemic.” Black box is a term coined by sociologist Bruno Latour that fat scholar Natalie Boero has used to describe the dynamics of the “obesity epidemic” as “encase[ing] issues that are considered to be accepted scientific wisdom and no longer open to debate.”⁴⁵ They are stabilized in complex networks in which different human and non-human actors act through each other to produce meaning and materiality.⁴⁶ Because these black boxes are so influential especially by embodying scientific “facts,” by referring to the forces of matter, it is promising to leave the classic terrain of cultural history and to incorporate other actors than human ones into our stories. To deconstruct these black boxes, to write their histories, then, requires us to examine the “techniques, laboratory practices, conventions, observational methods, instrumentation, and measurements that produce scientific facts.”⁴⁷

Latour has suggested a way of science studies (or history) that weaves together the actions of human and non-human actors. In this perspective, objects are not merely props that make up the backdrop for human actors but rather are themselves actors, creating such a close network with bodies that their boundaries aren’t discernable.⁴⁸ Latour removes the idea of intentionality and determination from agency and redefines it as “mak[ing] a difference.” Actors act when they make others act, when they

43 Rogers, “Fat is a Fictional Issue,” 35.

44 Mollow, “Disability Studies Gets Fat.”

45 Boero, *Killer Fat*, 42.

46 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 23, 183.

47 Guthman, *Weighing In*, 15.

48 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Maren Möhring, “Essen,” in *What Can a Body Do? Praktiken und Figurationen des Körpers in den Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Netzwerk Körper (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012), 54-55.

“authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, [or] forbid” other actions.⁴⁹ Non-human actors, in Latour’s account, aren’t simply the objects of human will and control but are instead complex, intractable participants of cultural practices. For him, every action is a complicated “node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled.” It is from this nuanced understanding of actors and agency that Latour speaks of actor-networks.⁵⁰

This understanding allows us to re-conceptualize agency in contrast to neoliberal and ableist accounts of bodily self-control. And this approach corresponds with Christopher Forth’s call for an unessentialist approach to fat history that acknowledges the materiality of fat, inside and outside of the body.⁵¹ Extending Judith Butler’s understanding of the discursive production of matter, Forth focuses „on the complex and often ambiguous *material* and *experiential* dimensions” of fat, highlighting not only the ambivalent character of fat but also its materiality.⁵² Recently, the question regarding “what matter is capable of doing” has been posed in regard to fat.⁵³ Instead of conceptualizing fat as a passive effect of discursive practices, one could understand it with Karen Barad “as an active agent participating in the very process of materialisation.”⁵⁴

What does this mean for historical research? What are the questions and new insights that arise from this? For instance, I am myself embarking on such a project in regard to the history of the calorie. It is possible to understand the calorie as another black box that is encapsulated in, among others, the black box of “obesity” and hence itself forms a complex network of human and non-human actors. I am interested in how the calorie was fabricated, to use Latour’s term; which is to ask, how it became a reality and how it developed agency, not only in the laboratory but also in the in the quotidian dietary practices of everyday people.⁵⁵ When and how did the calorie emerge as an “inscription” – a term that denotes categories of scientific knowledge that stabilize it? Which “inscription devices,” such as the famous

49 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71-72.

50 Ibid., 44.

51 Forth, „Introduction,” 8.

52 Ibid., 5.

53 Ibid., 6, quoting Rachel Colls, “Materialising Bodily Matter: Intra-Action and the Embodiment of ‘Fat,’” *Geoforum* 38, 2 (2007): 355.

54 Karen Barad, „Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, 3 (2003): 820; Colls, “Materialising Bodily Matter,” 356-357. See also Joyce Huff’s understanding of fat as “recalcitrant” matter in this issue (75-93).

55 Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, esp. chapter 9.

“calorimeter,” made a difference in fabricating it?⁵⁶ Which experimental set-ups assembled the black box calorie and which transformations did they undergo? When did people start to argue with it? How did it act in and on laboratories, dieting practices, or hospital nutrition? The moment the calorie made its entry on the stage of history, one could argue that it *made a difference* by making others act. Such a history of the calorie could, among other things, provide a more nuanced understanding of fat history by avoiding references to either nature or culture and instead tracing the fabrication of each through the other.⁵⁷

Historicizing fat politics and diet practices with the focus on different actors in a complex network promises to shed new light on the assemblage of the social as well as the character of the black box “obesity epidemic.” Historical studies that focus on the active role of matter could help us to circumnavigate the imperative for (corporeal) agency in a liberal society, while at the same account for the material effects of the politics of fat.

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56 Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986 [1979]), 43-69.

57 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993 [1991]).