5 Not just 'a white girl's thing'

The changing face of food and body image problems

Susan Bordo

When you think of eating disorders, whom do you picture?

If your images of girls and women with eating and body image problems have been shaped by *People* magazine and *Lifetime* movies, she's probably white, heterosexual, North American, and economically secure. If you're familiar with the classic psychological literature on eating disorders, you may also have read that she's an extreme 'perfectionist' with a hyper-demanding mother, and that she suffers from 'body-image distortion syndrome' and other severe perceptual and cognitive problems that 'normal' girls don't share. You probably don't picture her as Black, Asian, or Latina. Consider, then, Tenisha Williamson. Tenisha is black, suffers from anorexia, and has described her struggle on 'Colors of Ana,' a website specifically devoted to the stories of non-white women dealing with eating and body image problems. Tenisha, who was raised believing that it was a mark of racial superiority that Black women are comfortable with larger bodies, feels like a traitor to her race. 'From an African-American standpoint,' she writes, 'we as a people are encouraged to "embrace our big, voluptuous bodies." This makes me feel terrible because *I don't want a big, voluptuous body!* I would rather die from starvation than gain a single pound' (Colors of Ana, http:colorsofana.com//ss8.asp).

Also on the 'Colors of Ana' site is the story of 15-year-old Sami Schalk. Sami is biracial, and attended a virtually all-white grade school: 'At school, stick-skinny models were the norm,' she writes, 'and I was quickly convinced that my curves and butt weren't beautiful. Instead of seeking help, I turned to binge and emotional eating, and at around 11 years old began purging after I ate' (ibid.). When Sami's mom finally took her to a doctor, he put her on a 'safer' diet. The diet only made Sami gain more weight – which in turn led to diet pills and laxative abuse.

Eighteen-year-old Jun Sasaki's eating problems developed after her father was transferred from Japan to the United States. Sasaki, who like many Japanese girls was naturally slim, did not have a problem until one day, when she was 12, a friend hit her slightly protruding stomach playfully and said, 'You look like you're pregnant.' Jun was appalled. She intended

at first to lose only a few pounds, but when she began to receive compliments from friends and neighbors, she started a regime of 800 calories a day. Ultimately, as Jun describes it, she lost the ability to 'eat normally.' 'I ate from day to night, searching for every piece of food in the house, consuming every piece of fat I could find. I was never hungry, but I ate, I ate and ate and ate' (ibid.).

As someone who has tracked the world of popular culture for the last 25 years, I'm not surprised to see that clinicians are seeing more and more ethnic, racial, and sexual diversity among their anorexic patients (see Renfrew Center Foundation for Eating Disorders, 2003; see also Franko et al., 2007, for discussion of statistics). When I wrote *Unbearable Weight* (1993) however – one of the first multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary studies to take a cultural approach to eating problems (see also pp. 51–52 below for a summary of my arguments) – I was virtually alone in viewing eating and body image problems as belonging to anyone except privileged, heterosexual white girls.

Where did this idea come from? Several factors played a role

As with many other scientific and social-scientific explanations of various disorders, the first paradigms for understanding eating problems were based on populations that were extremely skewed, both in terms of race and in terms of class. Most of the initial clinical data came from the treatment of white, middle- and upper middle-class patients (see also Saukko, this volume). They were the first ones to seek out treatment; the ones with the money to do so; the ones with the cultural support for doing so. And so, the way their eating problems presented themselves became the standard – of diagnosis, profiling, and explanation. This, of course, resulted in a very limited picture. Most of these patients were brought in by their parents, which meant that the problem had become desperate – which is to say, among other things, highly visible, and an enormous source of family struggle. Emaciated, refusing to eat in circumstances of plenty, often engaged in fierce battles with parents at dinner-time, these girls presented with what would become stamped in many people's mind as a rich, spoiled, white girl's disease: anorexia nervosa.

From this initial paradigm, a number of ideas about eating problems flowed. Dysfunctional family dynamics began to be defined as paradigmatic of eating disorders. So did physical, perceptual, and psychological criteria that reflected the extreme nature of the classical anorexic syndrome. Emaciation. Never seeing oneself as thin enough, even when skeletal – a perceptual distortion that came to be picked up in the popular media as the hallmark of this 'bizarre' disease. An 'addiction to perfection'. And so on.

Who was left out of this picture? For one thing, the many young college women, of all races and ethnicities, who looked just fine, but were privately throwing up and abusing laxatives regularly to keep their weight under

control. Ultimately, this type of disordered eating became better known. But because of the dominant anorexic paradigm, within which binging and purging was subsumed as a variant – called bulimia nervosa – clinicians failed to see how normative such behavior had become. More than half of all college girls were doing it; and it was still conceptualized as a 'disease' to which only certain kinds of young women – with the expected family profile, 'anorexic thinking,' 'body image distortion syndrome,' and so on – were vulnerable.

Also left out of the picture were the growing numbers of young black women who were struggling with body-image issues. Early research *had* shown a much lower incidence of eating disorders among African American women, and both black women *and* black men, in interviews and studies, have consistently expressed distaste for the hyper-skinny models that many anorexics emulate. From this, many specialists postulated that black women were permanently 'immune' to eating problems. The conclusion was based on a perspective that viewed eating problems as cast in an unchanging mold, rather than the dynamic and shape-shifting phenomena that we have witnessed over the past decade, as more voluptuous styles of bodily beauty that had been excluded from the dominant culture have gained ascendancy, due to the popularity of stars such as Beyonce Knowles and Jennifer Lopez. As video director, Little X, maintains, 'Black folks . . . now have influence, and we're able to set a new standard of beauty. We've flipped the mirror. The old standard of the superskinny white woman doesn't really apply.'

The new standards, however, can be equally self-punishing, and have expanded the repertoire of eating problems from starvation diets and the dream of a body as slender as a reed, to exercise addictions and the dream of a body that is curvaceous but rigorously toned. Probably more college girls today – of *all* races and ethnicities – aspire to some version of this body than they do to the hyper-skinny body. Here, the rise of the female athlete as beauty icon has played as significant a role as racial aesthetics. Ours is now a culture in which our sports superstars are no longer just tiny gymnasts but powerful soccer and softball players, broad-shouldered track stars: Mia Hamm, Sarah Walden, Marion Jones, Serena Williams. It's also a culture, however, in which female athletes are presented as sex goddesses by Nike and *Vogue*, their muscular bodies feminized and trivialized, turned into fashion accessories and erotic magnets for male eyes. The young girls who emulate these bodies are 'passing' – they look great and many may seem to be eating healthfully, too. It's hard to see that there's anything wrong. But the hours spent at the gym are excessive, and when the girls miss a day they are plunged into deep depression. Their sense of self-acceptance, although you can't tell just from looking, in fact hangs on a very slender thread.

In believing Black, Latina, and other ethnicities to be 'immune,' the medical literature often conflated class and race. Poor people didn't get eating disorders – so how could black people get eating disorders, they

reasoned – fallaciously. For of course there are plenty of young black women who come from privileged families, attend private schools, and are subjected to the same competitive pressures as their white counterparts – a fact which slipped by those eating disorders specialists who declared eating problems to be 'virtually unknown' in their homogeneous notion of 'the black community.'

Some also may have been unconsciously influenced by the image of the plump, maternal Mammy as the prototype of black womanhood. Only Scarlet has to worry about fitting into a corset; mammy's job is to cook the fried chicken and lace her baby in. Her own girth is of no consequence – she has no romantic life of her own; her body exists only to provide comfort. Does this sound like a relic of a time long gone? In an article in *Essence*, Retha Powers (1989) describes how she went to her high-school guidance counselor, seeking help managing her weight, and was told she shouldn't worry because 'black women aren't seen as sex objects.' It's highly unlikely, of course, that such a comment would be made today in the era of Beyonce and L'il Kim, but many people *do* still believe that just because a woman is black, she has greater cultural permission to be large. Here, generational as well as class differences are being ignored – differences that are highlighted in a piece by Sirena Riley (2002: 358–359):

> As a teenager, I remember watching a newsmagazine piece on a survey comparing black and white women's body satisfaction. When asked to describe the 'perfect woman,' white women said she'd be about five foot ten, less than 120 pounds, blond and so on. Black women described this ideal woman as intelligent, independent and self-confident, never mentioning her looks. After the survey results were revealed . . . the white women stood, embarrassed and humiliated that they could be so petty and shallow. They told stories of starving themselves before dates and even before sex. The black women were aghast! What the hell were these white women talking about?
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> I was so proud . . . Black women being praised on national television! There they were telling the whole country that their black men loved the 'extra meat on their bones.' Unfortunately, my pride also had a twinge of envy. In my own experience, I couldn't quite identify with either the black women or the white women.
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> Raised by a single mother, independence was basically in my blood. But in a neighborhood of successful, often bourgeois black families, it was obvious that the 'perfect woman' was smart, pretty and certainly not overweight. As a child, no one loved the 'extra meat' on my bones. I was eight years old when I first started exercising to Jane Fonda and the cadre of other leotard-clad fitness gurus. I now have a sister around that age, and when I look at her and realize how young that is, it breaks my heart that I was so concerned about weight back then.

> [. . .] If we really want to start talking more honestly about all women's relationships with our bodies, we need to start asking the right questions. Just because women of color aren't expressing their body dissatisfaction in the same way as heterosexual, middle-class white women, it doesn't mean that everything is hunky-dory and we should just move on. If we are so sure that images of rail-thin fashion models, actresses and video chicks have contributed to white girls' poor body image, why aren't we addressing the half-naked black female bodies that have replaced the half-naked white female bodies on MTV?

Also left out of the 'anorexic paradigm' were compulsive or binge eaters who do *not* purge, or whose repeated attempts to diet are unsuccessful. To have an 'eating disorder,' according to the anorexic paradigm, means being thin – and since most compulsive eaters are overweight, it took a long time for clinicians to recognize that compulsive eaters, too, are suffering from an eating disorder. Class bias played a role here, too, for a growing body of research has shown that people who have gained the most weight in the last decade – and the largest population of bingers – have tended to have the lowest incomes. The reasons, once you know them, make enormous sense: people who work long, hard hours have little time or energy for cooking, and feeding a family at McDonald's, although it may not be the most nutritious way to go, is the most affordable alternative for many people. Processed foods rich in sugar and fat are now far cheaper than fresh fruits and vegetables. In the ads, they beckon with the promise of pleasure, good times, and satisfaction, to lives which have very little of those in any other domain.

I include myself among compulsive eaters. Although I have never binged to the degree of excess represented in media depictions of bulimics, I, like many women, especially those from cultures for whom food represents comfort, safety, home – Black women, Jewish women, Latinas – often find myself unable to control my end-of-day longings to be soothed and pleasured by food. I may not empty the cupboards, but as I watch late night junk-television, my daughter asleep and my immediate pressures dealt with, every commercial becomes a cue to leap up and go to the kitchen. My choices are benign at first – a slice of rolled up lo-fat ham, some leftover tabouli, fat-free chips. Then, a slice of fat-free cheese makes its way into the ham roll-up. I have a couple of those, dipped in honey mustard. Fat free or not, cheese is a trigger for me; soon I am microwaving it with salsa, and dipping the chips, then my fingers, into it. The creaminess unhinges me, and I'm at the freezer, after the Edy's slow-churned (50 percent less fat) French silk ice cream. I eat so much of it that 'less fat' becomes laughable; by the next commercial my rational mind has been put fully on hold. I sprint into my office, open my desk drawer, and make it back to my chair with the chocolate truffles that I bought for my daughter's teacher.

Probably the most significant factor, however, in the failure to conceptualize eating problems in an inclusive way has been ignorance of (or, in some cases, resistance to acknowledging) the awesome power of cultural imagery. Fiji is a striking example of that power. Because of their remote location, the Fiji islands did not have access to television until 1995, when a single station was introduced. It broadcasts programs from the United States, the UK, and Australia. Until that time, Fiji had no reported cases of eating disorders, and a study conducted by anthropologist Anne Becker (Becker et al., 2002, reported in Snyderman, 2002: 84; Becker, 2004) showed that most Fijian girls and women, no matter how large, were comfortable with their bodies (see also Nasser and Malson, this volume). In 1998, just three years after the station began broadcasting, 11 percent of girls reported vomiting to control weight, and 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting during the previous months. Becker was surprised by the change; she had thought that Fijian cultural traditions, which celebrate eating and favor voluptuous bodies, would 'withstand' the influence of media images. Becker hadn't yet understood that we live in an empire of images, and that there are no protective borders.

Asia is another example. Among the members of audiences at my talks, Asian women had for years been among the most insistent that eating and body image weren't problems for their people, and indeed, my initial research showed that eating disorders were virtually unknown in Asia. But when, a few years ago, a Korean translation of *Unbearable Weight* was published, and several translations of chapters appeared in Chinese publications (a Chinese edition of the book is currently in preparation), I felt I needed to revisit the situation. I discovered multiple reports (see also Nasser and Malson, this volume) on dramatic increases in eating disorders in China, South Korea, and Japan. Eunice Park, in *Asian Week* magazine, writes: 'As many Asian countries become Westernized and infused with the Western aesthetic of a tall, thin, lean body, a virtual tsunami of eating disorders has swamped Asian countries' (reported in Rosenthal, 1999).

The spread of eating problems, of course, is not just about aesthetics. Rather, as I argued in *Unbearable Weight*, the emergence of eating disorders is a complex, multilayered cultural 'symptom,' reflecting problems that are historical as well as contemporary, accelerating in our time because of the confluence of a number of factors. Eating problems, as I theorize them, are overdetermined in this culture. They have not only to do with new social expectations of women and the resulting ambivalence toward the plush, maternal body, but also with more general anxieties about the body as the source of hungers, needs, and physical vulnerabilities not within our control. These anxieties are deep and long-standing in western philosophy and religion, and they are especially acute in our own time. Eating problems are also linked to the contradictions of consumer culture (see also Gard, this volume), which continually encourages us to binge on our desires at the same time as it glamorizes self-discipline and scorns fat as a symbol

of laziness and lack of willpower. And they reflect, too, our increasing 'postmodern' fascination with the possibilities of reshaping our bodies in radical ways, creating new selves that are unlimited by our genetic inheritance.

The relationship between problems such as these and cultural images is complex (see also Part III, this volume). On the one hand, the idealization of certain kinds of bodies foments and perpetuates our anxieties and insecurities – that's clear. But, on the other hand, such images carry fantasized solutions *to* our anxieties and insecurities, and that's part of the reason why they are powerful. As I argued in *Twilight Zones* (1997), cultural images are never 'just pictures,' as the fashion magazines continually maintain (disingenuously) in their own defense. They speak to young people not just about how to be beautiful but also about how to become what the dominant culture admires, values, rewards. They tell them how to be cool, 'get it together,' overcome their shame. To girls and young women who have been abused they may offer a fantasy of control and invulnerability, and immunity from pain and hurt. For racial and ethnic groups whose bodies have been deemed 'foreign,' earthy, and primitive, and considered unattractive by Anglo-Saxon norms, they may cast the lure of being accepted by the dominant culture. And it is images, too, that teach us how to *see*, that educate our vision in what is a defect and what is *normal*, that give us the models against which our own bodies and the bodies of others are measured. Perceptual pedagogy: 'How To Interpret Your Body 101.' It's become a global requirement.

A good example, both of the power of perceptual pedagogy and of the deeper meaning of images is the case of Central Africa. There, traditional cultures still celebrate voluptuous women. In some regions, brides are sent to fattening farms, to be plumped and massaged into shape for their wedding night. In a country plagued by AIDS, the skinny body has meant – as it used to among Italian, Jewish, and Black Americans – poverty, sickness, death. 'An African girl must have hips,' says dress designer, Frank Osodi, 'We have hips. We have bums. We like flesh in Africa.' For years, Nigeria sent its local version of beautiful to the Miss World Competition. The contestants did very poorly. Then a savvy entrepreneur went against local ideals and entered Agbani Darego, a light-skinned, hyper-skinny beauty. Agbani Darego won the Miss World Pageant, the first black African to do so. Now, Nigerian teenagers fast and exercise, trying to become 'lepa' – a popular slang phrase for the thin 'it' girls that are all the rage. Said one: 'People have realized that slim is beautiful' (Onishi, 2002).

It's incorrect, however, to imagine that this is simply about beauty. When I presented the example at a college whose faculty included a Nigerian, she pointed out that Nigerian girls were dieting well before Agbani Darego won her crown, and that, in her opinion, the allure of western body ideals had to do primarily with the rejection of traditional identities and the system of male dominance that they were anchored in. It

was for men, she explained, that Nigerian women were encouraged to be full-bottomed, for men that they were often sent to fattening farms to be plumped into shape for the wedding night. Now, modern young women were insisting on the right of their bodies to be less voluptuous, less domestically 'engineered' for the sexual pleasure and comfort of men. Hearing this was fascinating and illuminating. Here was a major similarity in the 'deep' meaning of slenderness for both the young Nigerian dieters and the first generation of (twentieth-century) anorexics in this country. Many of them, like the young Nigerian women, were also in rebellion against a voluptuous, male-oriented, sexualized ideal – that of the post-World War II generation (see also Saukko, this volume). Significant numbers of them had been sexually abused, or witnessed their mothers being treated badly. To be a soft sexual plaything, a Marilyn Monroe, was their horror; Kate Moss and others (like Agbani Darego for the young Nigerians) provided an alternative cultural paradigm to aspire to.

Clearly, body insecurity can be exported, imported, and marketed – just like any other profitable commodity. In this respect, what's happened with men and boys is illustrative. Ten years ago men tended, if anything, to see themselves as better looking than they (perhaps) actually were. And then the menswear manufacturers, the diet industries, and the plastic surgeons 'discovered' the male body (see Bordo, 1999). And now, young guys are looking in their mirrors, finding themselves soft and ill defined, no matter how muscular they are. Now they are developing the eating and body image disorders that we once thought only girls had. Now they are abusing steroids, measuring their own muscularity against the oiled and perfected images of professional athletes, body-builders, and *Men's Health* models.

Let me be clear here. I've got nothing against beautiful, toned, bodies. I also realize that many people come by their slenderness naturally, by virtue of genetics, and that not all models are anorexics. Nor am I anti-fitness. I know that I am happier and healthier when I'm exercising regularly and trim enough to feel comfortable and confident in the form-fitting clothes that I like to wear when my husband and I, who have been doing ballroom dancing for three years, do our rumbas and mambos. The issue for me is not fat versus fitness, but moderation, realism and appreciation of human diversity versus the excesses, the obsessions, the unrealistic expectations that make people sick and treat others as cultural pariahs. Unfortunately, it's the extremes, excesses, and obsessions that our culture fosters. It's a breeder of disorder.

In 2009, I would think this should be obvious. And yet, the prevailing medical wisdom about eating disorders has failed, over and over, to acknowledge, finally and decisively, that we are dealing here with a *cultural* problem. Initially, in the early 1980s, when I first began attending conferences on the subject, eating disorder specialists were very grudging – and most designers and fashion magazine editors in downright denial, and still are – about the role played by cultural images in the spread of eating and

body image problems (see Bordo, 1997, 2004). In the early 1990s, when Kate Moss and Calista Flockhart were in ascendancy, we saw a brief flurry of accusations against the fashion industry and the media. But astonishingly (or perhaps predictably), the more indisputable the evidence of the central role played by culture, the more the medical focus has drifted toward genetic and bio-chemical explanations – as, for example, in this *Newsweek* story on anorexia:

> In the past decade, psychiatrists have begun to see surprising diversity among their anorexic patients. Not only are [they] younger, they're also more likely to be black, Hispanic or Asian, more likely to be boys, more likely to be middle-aged. All of which caused doctors to question their core assumption: if anorexia isn't a disease of A-type girls from privileged backgrounds, then what is it? Although no one can yet say for certain, new science is offering tantalizing clues. Doctors now compare anorexia to alcoholism and depression . . . diseases that may be set off by environmental factors such as stress or trauma, but have their roots in a complex combination of genes and brain chemistry. . . . The environment 'pulls the trigger,' says Cynthia Bulik, director of the eating-disorder program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. But it's a child's latent vulnerabilities that 'load' the gun.
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> (Tyre, 2005)

It doesn't make sense; you have to torture logic to come to this conclusion. But although logic is tortured, the empire of images is let off the hook; the culture is merely a 'trigger'; 'it's the child's latent vulnerabilities that load the gun.' Well, I don't buy it. I'd put it this way instead: 'Some studies show that genetic vulnerabilities may play a role in which children develop the most serious forms of eating problems. But the incredible spread of these problems to extraordinarily diverse groups of genetic populations, over a strikingly short period of time, and coincident with the mass globalization of media imagery, strongly suggests that culture is the "smoking gun" that is killing people, and that the situation will not change until the culture does.'

What do I mean by 'the culture'? I mean many things. 'Culture' includes those who made the decision to present an actress like Tony Collete as the 'fat sister' in the otherwise charming film, *In Her Shoes*. Collette gained 25 pounds for that role, and even so, there's nothing remotely fat about her body in the movie. 'Culture' includes directors like David Kelley, who pressure their actresses into losing weight (see Gumbel, 2000; Keck, 2000; Van Meter, 2006). 'Culture' includes the manufacturers of Barbie who, despite a brief flurry of interest some years back in making a more 'realistic' body for the doll, are now making her skinnier than ever. 'Culture' includes those companies that would have us believe that computer-generated thighs are ours for the price of a jar of cellulite control cream. 'Culture' includes

Men's Health magazine, and all the merchandisers and advertisers who have suddenly recognized that men can be induced to worry about their bodies, too (see Bordo, 1999). 'Culture' includes the contradictory and extreme messages we are constantly receiving about eating, dieting, and fitness. Open most magazines and you'll see them side-by-side. On the one hand, ads for luscious – and usually highly processed – foods, urging us to give in, let go, indulge. On the other hand, the admonitions of the exercise and fitness industries – to get in shape, get it together, prove you've got willpower, show that you have the right stuff. And don't settle for mere cardiovascular fitness, but insist on the sculpted body of your dreams – go for the gold, make it your new religion, your life. It's easy to see why so many of us experience our lives as a tug-of-war between radically conflicting messages, and why it's not a 'paradox,' as it is often represented, that we have an epidemic of obesity alongside increases in anorexia, bulimia and exercise addictions in this culture.

'Culture,' is, of course, the fashion industry. The average model is 5'10" and weighs 107 pounds; the average American woman is 5'4" and weighs 143 pounds. With a gap like this, it's a set up for the development of eating disorders, as girls and women try to achieve bodies that their genetics, for the most part, just won't support. It's true that more and more merchandisers are beginning to realize that there are lots of size 12 and over girls and women out there, with money to spend, who will respond positively to ad campaigns that celebrate our bodies. But as potentially transformative images, campaigns that single us out as 'special' still mark us as outside the dominant norms of beauty, requiring special accommodation.

What we need, instead, is a transformation similar to what has been going on in the world of children's movies and books, which have normalized racial diversity far more consistently and strikingly than their adult counterparts. Disney's *Cinderella*, for example, without presenting it as remarkable in any way, has Whoopi Goldberg and Victor Garber – a white actor – married, as the queen and king; their son is Asian. Brandi plays Cinderella; her mother is Bernadette Peters. One of her stepsisters is black and the other is white. This is a movie that tells my Cassie, the biracial daughter of two white parents, that there is nothing unusual or improbable about her own family. From this, and from many of her books, she's learned that families are made in many different ways, and that looking like each other is not a prerequisite for loving each other. I would like to see a visual world that will tell her, similarly, that healthy bodies are made in many different ways, and that looking like Beyonce or Halle Berry – or even Marion Jones – is not a prerequisite for loving oneself. A world in which voluptuous models are not only found in 'Lane Bryant' and 'Just My Size' ads.

Unfortunately, and with a few notable exceptions – such as Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, for example, and the brave, and quite unique, resistance of teenage television fashionista Raven Simone – instead of

this happening, I'm seeing a lot of backsliding among once-progressive forces. *Essence* and *Oprah* magazine used to have fashion spreads that featured a range of bodies; they hardly ever do anymore. In 2002, *YM* magazine, an up-beat fashion magazine for teen readers, conducted a survey that revealed that 86 percent of its young readers were dissatisfied with the way their bodies looked. New editor, Christina Kelley, immediately announced an editorial policy against the publishing of diet-pieces and said *YM* would henceforth deliberately seek out full-size models for all its fashion spreads (www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/833/context/journalistofthemonth; Carmichael, 2002. For an interview with Christina Kelley, see NPR, 2002). It hasn't.

'The culture' includes parents, too. A study in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Associations* found that five-year-old girls whose mothers dieted were twice as likely to be aware of dieting and weight-loss strategies as girls whose mothers didn't diet (Abramovitz and Birch, 2000). 'It's like trying on Mom's high heels,' says Carolyn Costin, spokeswoman for the National Eating Disorders Association, 'They're trying on their diets, too' (Choi, 2006). But this is even to put it too benignly. 'Self-deprecating remarks about bulging thighs or squealing with delight over a few lost pounds can send the message that thinness is to be prized above all else,' says Alison Field (Field et al., 2001), lead author of another study, from Harvard, that found that girls with mothers who had weight concerns were more likely to develop anxieties about their own bodies.

I've been guilty of this. A lifelong dieter, I've tried to explain to my eight-year-old daughter that the word diet doesn't necessarily mean losing weight to look different, but eating foods that are good for you, to make your body more healthy. But the lectures paled beside the pleasure I radiated as I looked at my shrinking body in the mirror, or my depression when I gained it back, or my overheard conversations with my friend Althea, about the difficulties we were facing, as a Jewish and Black woman respectively, who had habitually used food for comfort. When Cassie saw me eat a bowl of ice cream and asked me if I wrote down my points, I knew she understood exactly what was going on.

So far, Cassie has not yet entered the danger zone. A marvelous athlete, she has a muscular, strong body that can do just about anything she wants it to do; she loves it for how far she can jump with it, throw a ball with it, stop a goal with it. Looking at her and the joy she takes in her physical abilities, the uninhibited pleasure with which she does her own version of hip-hop, the innocent, exuberant way she flaunts her little booty, it's hard to imagine her ever becoming ashamed of her body.

Yet, as I was about to serve the cake at her last birthday party, I overheard the children at the table, laughingly discussing the topic of fat. The conversation was apparently inspired by the serving of the cake. 'I want to get fat!' one of them said, laughingly. But it was clearly a goad, meant for shock and amusement value, just as my daughter will sometimes

merrily tell me 'I want to get smashed by a big tank!' and then wait for my nose to wrinkle in reaction. That's what happened at the party. 'Uggh! Fat! Uggh!' 'You do not want to be fat!' 'Nyuh, huh, yes, I do!' 'You do not!' And then there was general laughter and descent into gross-talk, 'Fat! Fat! Big fat butt!' and so on.

No one was pointing fingers at anyone – not yet – and no one was turning down cake – not yet. But the 'fat thing' has become a part of their consciousness, even at eight, and I know it's just a matter of time. I know the stats – that 57 percent of girls have fasted, used food substitutes or smoked cigarettes to lose weight, that one-third of all girls in grades nine to 12 think they are overweight, and that only 56 percent of seventh graders say they like the way they look. I also know, as someone who is active at my daughter's school – a public school, with a diverse student population – that it actually begins much, much earlier.

Already, Cassie sometimes tells me that she's fat, pointing to her stomach – a tummy we all would *die* to have. Recently, we were watching TV, and she sucked in her gut and said, 'This is what I'd like my stomach to look like.' At such moments, the madness of our culture hits me full force. I know that I am up against something that cannot be fought with reason or reassurance alone – or even, I'm afraid, with body-image workshops. As gargantuan as the task may seem, as helpless as we may all feel to do much to change things, we cannot let our culture off the hook.

No one strategy will suffice, because the powers that have created and continue to promote body image disorders – and here I refer to not only eating disorders, but the over-use and abuse of cosmetic surgery, steroids, exercise addictions, our cultural obsession with youth, and on and on – are multi-faceted and multiply 'deployed,' as Foucault would put it. That is, they are spread out and sustained in myriad ways, mostly with the cooperation of all of us. There is no king to depose, no government to overthrow, no conspiracy to unmask. Moreover, the very same practices that can lead to disorder are also, when not carried to extremes, the wellsprings of health and great deal of pleasure – exercise for example. This is one reason why it has been so difficult to create coalitions – for example, between different generations of feminists – to work for change. But there is also tremendous potential for inclusiveness here; for, as I've argued, these are issues that are far from limited to the problems of rich, spoiled white girls, but that reach across race, class, ethnicity, nationality, age, and (as I've shown elsewhere) gender. I don't have a master plan for how to alter or resist what seems to be our inexorable drift into this culture in which it *seems* as if our choices to do what we want with our bodies are expanding all the time, but in which we increasingly exercise those 'choices' under tremendous normalizing pressure. But then, neither do I know what can be done to alter some of the larger social and political injustices, dangers, and absurdities of our lives today. Not knowing what to do about those, however, doesn't prevent people from analyzing, complaining, organizing,

protesting, working to create a better world. I'd like to see more of that sort of spirit operating in this arena too – if not for ourselves, then for our children.

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