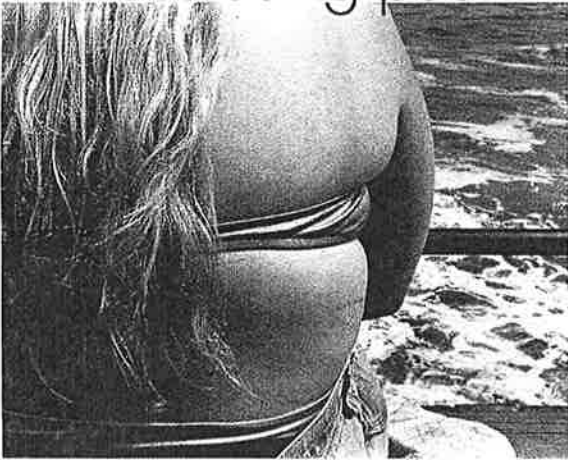


the body as status symbol

Does being poor make you fat—
or does being fat keep you poor?



A friend took me swimming at her country-club beach last summer, and standing there on the hot, pebbly sand I had an epiphany about the little town we both live in. A window opened in the back of my mind, and I could see the intricate, unspoken layers of class, money, and exclusivity that quietly operate here, shuffling people into their appropriate slots like coins in a bank teller's machine. The realization that sprang the window was simply this: There are no fat people here.

At this club, where prospective members must be nominated to join (at the cost of thousands of dollars) and can be blackballed by any existing member, aerobics is the order of the day. Women watching over their one, two, or three children sport teeny bikinis, baring expanses of shapely thighs and flat tummies.

Meanwhile, at the public pool at the town's junior high, there's cellulite aplenty. Hefty moms sitting in low-slung poolside chairs shout "Jo-ey!" at their wayward toddlers, and most of the women's figures range from average to extra-large. No question about it: Fatness and thinness carry with them implications about class in this country, which is part of the reason why so many of us so abhor the former and covet the latter.

As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her book *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (HarperCollins), this notoriously insecure sector of society is always

looking for ways to recognize and retain status. One way is through education (witness the intelligentsia's parental anxiety over prospects for Harvard and Yale); another is thinness. "Being fit in the fullest sense was a proof of having money," Ehrenreich writes, "and, beyond that, almost certain proof that one had not earned that money through manual labor or muscular exertion." On the other side, Roseanne's obe-



sity is an integral aspect of her TV character's working-class authenticity.

Of course, thin wasn't always in—its desirability was announced officially the moment the Duchess of Windsor made her oft-repeated pronouncement about richness and thinness. What's in, in a classist sense, depends on what's hard to get—the less attainable something is, the better a tool it is for indicating high position. So when meat was expensive and only rich people ate it, being larger was fashionable. Excavations of eighteenth-century New York showed the remains of heavy meat bones in the high-rent districts, while the poorer areas, where people ate cheap vegetables and fish, had few bones. Now it's the fish that's expensive, and the emaciated well-to-do (Tom Wolfe's "social X-rays") who are eating it, grilled, at four-star restaurants.

One can deplore such capricious standards, which leave those born to a certain shape stranded on the wrong side of the sociological tracks, but they do offer some interesting insights. For instance, observations of the correlation between socioeconomic class and body weight (first

pinned down in 1965, when a study showed that obesity was five times more common among the lowest economic group than the highest) fly in the face of the recent obesity-as-genetics trend. When researchers isolated a hormone that made genetically fat mice lose weight, many speculated that such a hormone could help humans who were genetically programmed to be fat. But if inheritance is such a determining factor, how do we explain the easily observable connection between class and fatness, and the fact that within a century that connection has completely flip-flopped?

I suggest that there's at least some level of free will and prioritizing involved here. If self-denial, discipline, and hours on the exercise machines are what's required to be a member in good standing of the upper middle class, the effort is well worth it: The prize is clearly visible. Those with less money may or may not have less leisure time for exercise, but they may also face different social prerogatives. If more than thinness keeps the country-club gates closed to them, then thinness may not be at the top of the to-do list.

Is the self-conscious shapeliness of the ruling class ultimately healthy or shallow? Probably both. I won't make a case that eating carefully and exercising is wrong. But when one's body becomes something more akin to a possession, like a buffed BMW, its caretaking becomes a source of anxiety instead of pleasure. What's perhaps more disturbing than the class symbolism of fat and thin is the disparity between the two. If the clubby and sophisticated set is creating a tyranny of boniness, there's something equally awry in the ever-widening girth of middle America (average weights have increased by eight pounds in the last decade). One's body shouldn't have to be a status symbol, but it also shouldn't be a shrine to the Big Mac. What we need here is some cross-pollination: a little pride of ownership mixed with an appreciation of diversity and, at water's edge, enough forgiveness to go around. □