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Weightier Issues Than Diet Await the New Century

by Susan Stinson

People ask me if I think I was born in the wrong century. I understand why. I am a novelist and poet whose experiences as a fat woman shape my work. The only place most people have seen fat female bodies portrayed with detailed tenderness is in the figure painting of the European past. It might be easier to go through life being perceived by those whose sensibilities were shaped by the nudes of Rubens, Rembrandt or Renoir, instead of, say, moviegoers still giggling from the eating-naked- in-bed scene by the comedian in a fat suit in the latest Austin Powers movie.

I live in a time and place in which it is necessary to explain that when I say "fat" to describe myself and others, I am not being impolite, but simply direct. It is a word that has gathered a strong charge of taboo, but I need it. The fact that I am fat is visible to everyone I meet, and it's a physical quality that my culture finds deeply meaningful. Current attitudes about fat affect everything from my employment prospects to my love life to whether I would be considered suitable to adopt a child. I have to be able to use the word.

It is a relief to turn to the fluency of paint. In the seventeenth century, Peter Paul Rubens had a supple vocabulary of folds, ripples, tautness, swells, shadow and muscle. In the same century, the nudes of Rembrandt van Rijn had full bellies, hips, thighs, with the strong presences of individual women, suffused with eroticism or dignified grief. In the late nineteenth century, Pierre Auguste Renoir painted idealized bathers with an abundance of radiant flesh.

Still, I don't dream of life in a past century, when my volume of beauty might have been more widely appreciated. The histories of some of these paintings suggest that appreciation was far from guaranteed. And, off canvas, things could get ugly. Another seventeenth century painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, was tortured in thumb screws at the trial of her painting teacher, who was convicted of raping her. Artemisia went on to an influential career, during which she painted fat women as vigorous and heroic figures, but I don't envy her the constraints that her period's attitudes toward gender placed on her life. In the nineteenth century, the poet Byron wrote, "A woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be lobster and champagne, the only truly feminine and becoming viands."

According to Hillel Schwartz, author of the brilliant book, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (Doubleday, 1986), Byron, himself on a vinegar diet, was at the end of hundreds of years during which "the archetypal

public dieters" were most often male. Schwartz examines diets in contexts that extend well past more traditional analyses of ideal health and beauty:

No diet comes without a larger social agenda. Every diet program is both conservative and prophetic; conservative because its strategies and rationale are deeply embedded in the era in which it first appears; prophetic, because its agenda is invariably visionary, a picture of the world as it must be when we are...thinner, sleeker, lighter. (p. 37)

When Schwartz looks at the turn of the previous century, he sees a shift away from acceptance of a fat person as healthy and influential. Ellen Swallow Richards, organizer of the first conference of the National Household Economics Association, expressed the belief "that the well-to-do-classes are being eliminated by their diet, to the detriment of social progress, and they and not the poor are the most in need of missionary work." The well-to-do classes have hardly been eliminated, but the focus on the diet of the affluent rather than the problems of the poor is familiar. The twentieth century saw the advent of calorie counting, the bathroom scale, and the coining of the term "ideal weight." Later innovations included the use of amphetamines, liquid diets, group dieting, and diet foods. Diet drugs are currently having a big impact. Six million Americans took the fen-phen diet drug combination between 1994 and 1997, when it was withdrawn because of possible heart valve damage.

Nothing has worked. Despite all of this time, effort and money, and in the face of the medical and social emphasis on slenderness which deepened as the decades passed, 55% of American adults are now officially fat according to standards recently adopted by the federal government. Call me lazy, but I think that in the next century, it might make sense for a bunch of us to concentrate on something else.

I recently read an Associated Press article headlined, "Study: Obesity Can Shorten Lifespan." Whether or not being fat may make your life shorter has been the subject of controversy in medical research but not in the popular imagination, so most interesting to me was that the study found even the fattest black women did not have a significantly higher rate of premature death than slender black women.

The researchers did not want to encourage complacency about size based on race, and so pointed out that "slender, non-smoking black women have a higher risk of death to begin with than their white counterparts, probably because they have less access to health care than white women and more undetected disease."

To me, that's the real headline, a subject for widespread consideration in the twenty-first century. In thinking about the health of black women, there are enough pressing concerns to keep more people than have been on diets during the last hundred years obsessed for the next hundred. To help me with context, I found it useful to consult *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy*, a book by James Heintz, Nancy Folbre and the Center for Popular Economics, which will be published in April by The New Press.

I learned that about half of poor full-time workers in the U.S. have no health insurance, and that even in 1997, a year of exceptionally low unemployment rates, more than a quarter of all black people lived in families with incomes below the poverty line. In a terrible number linking inequalities in health care to race, the mortality rate for black infants was 14.7 per 1,000 live births in 1996, compared to 6.1 for whites. Even though the U.S. spends far more of its gross domestic product

on health care, people here, regardless of race, don't live as long as people in other industrialized countries.

But, overall, the inequality within the global economy far surpasses that within any individual nation. The richest fifth of all countries enjoy 86% of worldwide consumption while the poorest fifth barely gets 1%.

For every 100,000 people, industrialized countries have 20 times more doctors and 30 times more nurses than the least developed nations. Worldwide, air pollution kills about 2.7 million people each year. More than 1.3 million people lack access to safe drinking water and over 2.5 million lack adequate sanitation.

Thinking about the human consequences of so much inequality based on class, race and nation is painful. It doesn't make me want to turn to sexism, which is surely also a factor in the health of black women. It makes me want to take a walk.

The day is cold, but it feels good to move. I walk to the cemetery near my house. I love the old trees and the uneven ground. The names on the stones--Dorcas, Seth, Abigail, Elisha--and the succinct, carved records of their relationships and years of age are poems to me as much as the chosen phrases about departing and rising and sleeping in dust.

The prospect of my own death is slippery, something my mind evades. The undeniable presence of fat as part of my corporeal self is literally easier to grasp. I see my body as delicate, vulnerable and expressive, but I needed the guidance of great artists and to participate over many years in movements for social change to even begin to recognize my own textures. I understand why a twentieth century woman would give so much of her time, money and energy to struggling against the fact of her fat. But the odds against success are steep, and the results in terms of length and quality of life are unclear.

I'm planning to buck the odds in the new century, but I want the stakes to go beyond the limits of my imperfect body to be as big as addressing environmental damage, poverty, sexism and racism. I'll be looking for conversation, models, inspiration and company. For now, though, I lean my weight against an old tree, a little tired and absorbed with having this single, specific body to tend.