

Edited by JEREMY BILES  
and KENT L. BRINTNALL

# Negative Ecstasies

*Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York* ■ 2015

Copyright © 2015 Fordham University Press

“The Traumatic Secret: Bataille and the Comparative Erotics of Mystical Literature”

copyright © 2015 Jeffrey J. Kripal

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Fordham University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Fordham University Press also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Visit us online at [www.fordhampress.com](http://www.fordhampress.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Negative ecstasies : Georges Bataille and the study of religion / edited by Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall.

pages cm. — (Perspectives in Continental philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-6519-0 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8232-6520-6

(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bataille, Georges, 1897–1962. 2. Religion. 3. Religions. I. Biles, Jeremy, editor.

B2430.B33954N44 2015

200.92—dc23

2014047800

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

*For Helen Tartar,  
1951–2014,  
who gifted us exuberantly with so many glorious words*

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<i>xi</i>
<b>Introduction: Sacred with a Vengeance</b> Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall	<i>1</i>
<b>Movements of Luxurious Exuberance: Georges Bataille and Fat Politics</b> Lynne Gerber	<i>19</i>
<b>Sovereignty and Cruelty: Self-Affirmation, Self-Dissolution, and the Bataillean Subject</b> Stephen S. Bush	<i>38</i>
<b>Erotic Ruination: Embracing the “Savage Spirituality” of Barebacking</b> Kent L. Brintnall	<i>51</i>
<b>Desire, Blood, and Power: Georges Bataille and the Study of Hindu Tantra in Northeastern India</b> Hugh B. Urban	<i>68</i>
<b>The Religion of Football: Sacrifice, Festival, and Sovereignty at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa</b> David Chidester	<i>81</i>
<b>Violent Silence: Noise and Bataille’s “Method of Meditation”</b> Paul Hegarty	<i>95</i>

<b>Georges Bataille and the Religion of Capitalism</b>	<b>106</b>
Jean-Joseph Goux	
<b>Sacrifice as Ethics: The Strange Religiosity of Neoliberalism</b>	<b>123</b>
Shannon Winnubst	
<b>Bataille's Contestation of Interpretive Anthropology and the Sociology of Religion</b>	<b>138</b>
Alphonso Lingis	
<b>The Traumatic Secret: Bataille and the Comparative Erotics of Mystical Literature</b>	<b>153</b>
Jeffrey J. Kripal	
<b>Foucault's Sacred Sociology</b>	<b>169</b>
Mark D. Jordan	
<b>Bataille and Kristeva on Religion</b>	<b>182</b>
Zeynep Direk	
<b>Bataille, Teilhard de Chardin, and the Death of God</b>	<b>202</b>
Allan Stoekl	
<b>Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?</b>	<b>217</b>
Jeremy Biles	
<b>Afterword</b>	<b>239</b>
Amy Hollywood	
<b>Notes</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>List of Contributors</b>	<b>303</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>307</b>

## Acknowledgments

*Negative Ecstasies* had its genesis over a breakfast at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, more years ago than the editors are comfortable remembering or admitting. We were strangers then, and the risk we took in working together produced not only this collection of essays but, as important, camaraderie and friendship. One of the losses of this project's coming to fruition will be fewer excuses for laughter-filled phone conversations, for e-mail exchanges littered with movie and novel recommendations. For many reasons, production of this volume has been a source of much joy.

We are exceptionally grateful that our contributors decided to take this risk with us. The quality of their work speaks for itself, but we want to speak to their patience in sticking it out across many fits, starts, and delays. We are particularly pleased that so many established scholars—many known for their work on Bataille—have contributed, but we are also pleased we could provide a forum for emerging voices.

We express thanks to the University of California Press for permission to reprint David Chidester's essay from *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa* (2012) and to Stanford University Press for permission to reprint those portions of Mark Jordan's essay that appear in *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (2014). We also thank the André Masson estate and the Artists Rights Society for permissions to reprint images that adorn the cover and interior of this book.

After deciding upon the title for the present volume, the editors were reminded that a similar phrase—“negative ecstasy”—appears in Jean Baudrillard’s essay “The Ecstasy of Communication.” In light of Baudrillard’s engagements with Bataille, this echo is not surprising, but neither is it intentional, nor should it signal any particular connection to Baudrillard.

It has been both easy and a pleasure—or, perhaps, it has been a pleasure because it has been so easy—to work with Fordham University Press. Much of the credit for this goes to Tom Lay and Eric Newman. We thank John Caputo for making a home for *Negative Ecstasies* in his Perspectives on Continental Philosophy series.

When we initially submitted the manuscript to Fordham, we entrusted it to the capable hands of the inimitable Helen Tartar, who shepherded it through the review and approval process. During the production phase, Helen died in a car accident. Her death was a shock to everyone connected with this volume and a huge loss to the world of academic publishing generally. It is to her memory that we dedicate this volume.

# Movements of Luxurious Exuberance

## *Georges Bataille and Fat Politics*

LYNNE GERBER

We lie to ourselves when we dream of escaping the movement of luxurious exuberance of which we are only the most intense form.

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1

Our refusal to acknowledge that we are limited beings has devastating and often fatal consequences for others.

—Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh*

America's fascination with body size, weight loss, and fatness has decidedly religious overtones.<sup>1</sup> The development of dieting as a cultural imperative has been marked by a moral intensity that, in the view of some historians, grew in direct proportion to the decline of religious authority in American life.<sup>2</sup> By the early twentieth century, "fat," writes the historian Peter Stearns, "became a secular sin, and an obvious one at that."<sup>3</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, the weight loss–religion connection was being expressed in the popular media. A 1960 *Vogue* article opined: "Weight control is emerging as the new morality; fat one of the deadlier sins. The bathroom scales are a shrine to which believers turn daily. Converts are marked by their usual unctuous zeal. Doctors become father confessors to whom grievous sins are whispered."<sup>4</sup> In the early twenty-first century, those sins are no longer whispered. Approximately ten million viewers tune in each week to watch fat people go through the stations of the weight-loss cross as established by the producers of the popular moral drama/television show *The Biggest Loser*.

This sacred aura that permeates weight-loss struggles, dramas, and spectacles is difficult to pin down. Religious language in the United States



tends to be reserved for what we most value, what we most strive for, what we hope to be. While the argument can certainly be made that thinness is all of those things, that line of analysis and that kind of religious language fail to touch the elements of dread and disgust that bind us to the dramas of weight loss, the sacred repulsion that gives the pursuit its power, that highly charged, almost holy revulsion at its center: the potent fear and hatred the culture reserves for fat, fatness, and fat people.

That a certain revulsion stands at the center of what has become, in many ways, a secular sacred in American culture would be of no surprise to Georges Bataille. “It is obviously the combination of abhorrence and desire,” he wrote, “that gives the sacred world a paradoxical character, holding the one who considers it without cheating in a state of anxious fascination”—an apt description, perhaps, of the state of *The Biggest Loser’s* audience.<sup>5</sup> Indeed there is much in Bataille’s thought and language that can help us think through the many contradictions, problems, and possibilities of fatness, fat subjectivity, and fat politics in the age of the loudly trumpeted “obesity epidemic” and its increasingly powerful prerogatives.

Fatness and fat people are associated with a variety of excesses. Fat bodies are considered “bodies out of bounds,”<sup>6</sup> bodies that traverse the boundaries of standard clothing sizes, public seating, and recognized aesthetic forms. “The obese,” Jean Baudrillard famously wrote, “is not only large, of a size opposed to normal morphology: he is larger than large. He no longer makes sense in some distinctive opposition, but in his excess, his redundancy.”<sup>7</sup> Fatness on bodies is also associated with excessive eating. People are presumed to get fat because they eat far more than is necessary for their energetic needs, and bodily fatness is widely perceived as tangible evidence that the person who carries it consumes food in immodest, excessive ways. In part because of this perception, and the associated presumption that weight and body size are largely under an individual’s direct control, fat people are also popularly depicted as social excesses. In a time of heated debate over scarce social resources such as jobs and health care, fat people are depicted as a drain on the economy; they are presumed to be less productive workers and greater consumers of health care, evoking popular resentment at the alleged price the rest of society pays for such excessive needs.

Fatness is also associated with the excesses of consumer capitalism. According to Stearns, concern over fatness and the regulation of body size developed in the United States in tandem with industrialization, the modernization of production, and the concomitant economic and increasingly social demand that Americans consume more goods more freely and more

excessively. This demand came into conflict with older, religion-based concerns about indulgence and calls for moral comportment and restraint. The loosening of restraints regarding consumer consumption was accompanied by an increase in those regarding eating and body size.<sup>8</sup> Fat also became a symbol of a rising middle class that was perceived to be unable to conduct themselves properly amid newfound excess.<sup>9</sup> This tension between demands for indulgence and for restraint has continued to shape advanced capitalist societies, the practices of those who live in them, and their bodies. The neoliberal demand for continuous, ongoing consumption, according to the sociologists Julie Guthman and Melanie Dupuis, has shaped both the food market and food consumption, “both produc[ing] obesity and produc[ing] it as a problem.”<sup>10</sup> For critics of American overconsumption, fatness has become “a tribal stigma,” a symbol of its excesses and horrors.<sup>11</sup>

Resistance to this cultural dread of fat and the depiction of fatness as excess has taken different forms. Most are rooted in efforts to sever the association between fat people and excess and to redeem fat subjectivity from the personal and social ravages of spoiled identity. Perhaps the most popular has been the call for size acceptance, articulated most unequivocally by the advocacy group the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). For over forty years, NAAFA has challenged the social denigration of fat people, contested the practices that cultivate it, and provided a social harbor for fat people from the storms of fat hatred.<sup>12</sup> Fatness, in their view, is a natural human variant and the connection between fat and excess an ugly stereotype that needs to be dispelled if fat people are to achieve acceptance and inclusion. A related and increasingly visible site of resistance is the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement. This effort addresses the issue of body size and health by trying to uncouple the two. By encouraging healthy behaviors independently of weight loss or weight gain, this movement makes space for the possibility of health for fat people *as* fat people and cultivates that space by maintaining neutrality regarding weight per se and relying on other measures to evaluate health. The emerging academic field of critical fat studies has also taken up the call to disrupt discursive connections between fat and excess<sup>13</sup> and position “an inhabitable subjectivity for fat people,”<sup>14</sup> even if there is some ambivalence about the kinds of subjectivities some fat activists are trying to rehabilitate.<sup>15</sup> All of these efforts share the underlying aim of forming a socially legible and legitimized fat subjectivity, one that can take fat people out of the realm of the excessive and make a place for them in the world of the respectable.<sup>16</sup>

Bataille provides us with another way to think about fat politics and practice, a way explored in some arenas of fat culture and analyzed by some fat studies thinkers, a way of, in the words of the writer Dorothy Allison, “embracing the scary, embracing being unacceptable.”<sup>17</sup> Bataille’s work revolves around a vocabulary of words, ideas, meditative practices, and religious sensibilities that are often used in relation to fat—indeed is the vocabulary that many fat people despise—but that is refigured within his broader mystical and social vision. Excess, dread, monstrosity, filth, disgust, and death are words that saturate his writings in a way that embraces, rather than expels, the kind of personal and social dissolution each connotes. They point to the way in which fat and fatness have become sources of the sacred in American culture: prohibited and therefore powerful, dangerous yet strangely alluring, a source of disgust but also of desire. Bataille’s work can be extremely generative in analyzing fat hatred, understanding practices that seek to expel fat and their necessary limitations, and formulating a fat politics that goes beyond the demand for a legitimized fat subjectivity within our deeply flawed liberal capitalist culture and points us toward possibilities simultaneously greater and humbler. His understanding of excess, and related notions of expenditure, and sacrifice can be used to understand the religiosity that infuses American discourse on fat and dieting, critique the project of weight loss and its dominance in our culture, and fund a fat politics of excess, monstrosity, and generosity.

Bataille’s work is not without its problems in relation to fat, though, and this chapter will discuss those as well. Some of those problems raise questions that are critical for fat politics to explore. Specifically, his discussion—some might say valorization—of death and the kind of religious and human possibilities that come from representational, if not literal, proximity to it has both possibilities and problems related to fat politics. The case of fatness, its hyperassociation with death, and the varying death threats, real and rhetorical, that fat people face as a result highlight how experiences like dread and disgust can be generated not just by the existential contingency of human life but by powerful social forces, social hatreds, and social interests that shape our responses to that contingency. In overlooking the social production and allocation of disgust, Bataille’s work can obscure the disproportionate price paid by those who evoke those experiences as a result of their social designations. His valorization of inner experiences generated by “com[ing] *as close as possible* to death” becomes problematic in a social context where particular groups, fat people among them, are consigned to carry the dread of death for a culture that prefers to deny it.<sup>18</sup> Bataille’s continual return to death and the problems with that

return underscore the importance of developing a critical understanding of death as part of fat politics.

The chapter begins with a discussion of some of Bataille's central concepts and how they might be applied to an analysis of fat phobia, a critique of dieting in American culture, and the possibilities of a monstrous fat politics. I then look at some examples of monstrous fat politics at work in publications and performances by fat artists, writers, and activists, namely in the work of Divine, the novelist Susan Stinson and the 1990s zine *FaT GiRL*. In the last section I turn to the question of fat and death. I look at Bataille's discussion of death in conversation with the dominant discursive connection between fatness and death in order to point to some political problems with his analysis. I conclude with a call for fat activists to use Bataille and his work to develop an analysis of death and generosity as part of fat politics.

### **Fat, Excess, and the Project of Dieting**

Bataille's work offers fat scholars and activists ways to resignify fat's excesses. In his three-volume work *The Accursed Share*, Bataille takes on questions of economy, religion, and eroticism. In his view, the central problem of human economy is not scarcity, as posed by classical liberal economic theory, but abundance.<sup>19</sup> Energy is abundant in the world, life is profligate in its effusion, and wealth is marked by its excess. The sun is Bataille's exemplar of this exuberance, throwing off energy with no sense of purpose and no need for return. "The sun," he writes, "gives without ever receiving."<sup>20</sup> Social systems, once they have used the energy they need to grow, must address the issue of excess. "If the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth," according to Bataille, "it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically."<sup>21</sup> Excess will be dispersed somehow; in his view it must be. The question is how it will be dispersed: more specifically, whether it will be spent in gloriously nonproductive ways, what he calls expenditure, or whether a society will try to make use of its excess by redeploying it for productive ends. Bataille makes the case for the former, that this excess needs to be expended splendidly, burnt out, given of itself until it is exhausted, with no reason, no end, and no purpose in view. This kind of expenditure can be seen in transgressive, nonreproductive sexuality, festivals of indulgence and abundance, transgressive violence, and sacrifice.

Expenditure and sacrifice, in Bataille's view, are contrasted to utility and project. In rational models of economic development, excess is deployed

back into the system for useful purposes. Profits are not squandered in bacchanalia that undo the logic of productivity that generated them; they are put back into the machinery of production to garner even greater profits. Excess is used toward planned, measured ends, encouraging belief in the possibility of a system of production based wholly upon reason and that can eventually encompass and make use of all energy. Systems based on such notions of utility, in Bataille's view, do not recognize or validate the expenditure of excess except in limited or grudging ways: "humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle *nonproductive expenditure*."<sup>22</sup> But despite the fantasy of utility, he notes that no society can avoid useless expenditure, pointing to the insistent presence of factors in economic life that exceed the principles of utilitarian thought, such as honor, duty, and altruism.

The kinds of expenditures Bataille favors involve the transgression of the world of work, of things, of rational planning for useful ends, and entrance into a world of intimacy, where wealth is expended with no productive end in view and where the illusions of human separation and discontinuous selfhood are shattered in a sometimes violent excessive exuberance. This can be seen in his discussion of sacrifice. In his view, sacrifice is about transforming the object to be sacrificed from its status as an object and returning it to a place where it is beyond use, a sacred, if accursed, place, one that he identifies as intimacy. Sacrifice does not need to destroy the thing sacrificed, but it destroys its utility, its function as a thing related to the world of work, productivity, and labor.<sup>23</sup> Human intimacy, the sense of continuity between people and the world, is generated through the destruction of utility. "Sacrifice," he writes, "is the heat in which the intimacy of those who make up the system of common works is rediscovered."<sup>24</sup> Expenditure and the generation of this kind of intimacy have, in his view, been a central function of religious rites, rituals, and festivals.<sup>25</sup>

But in contemporary society, Bataille argues, these forms of expenditure no longer exist.<sup>26</sup> This is because of the pervasiveness of economic models, capitalist or Marxist, that insist on channeling all excess back into systems of productivity. These models, as any reader of social theory might guess, are aided and abetted by Protestantism, a religious system that expels all excess from the worldly sphere, deploying wealth only for productivity, never for transgressive splendor.<sup>27</sup> This does not result, as these models might posit, in a lack of excess, with all extra wealth efficiently producing further wealth; it merely results in ways of dispersing excess that are, in his view, highly undesirable and ungenerous, ways that refuse to recognize the limitations of utility, of reason, and of planning and that, in that refusal, run even greater risks. "In trying to maintain sterility in regard to expen-

diture in conformity with a reasoning that balances *accounts*,” he writes, “bourgeois society has only managed to develop a universal meanness,”<sup>28</sup> rather than the generosity of expenditure.

For Bataille, excess happens—thus expenditure must. What we get to decide is how excess is expended: the kind of squander we can live with. “Excess energy,” he writes, “if it cannot be used for growth, is lost. Moreover, in no way can this inevitable loss be accounted useful. It is only a matter of an acceptable loss, preferable to another that is regarded as unacceptable: a question of *acceptability*, not utility. Its consequences are decisive, however.”<sup>29</sup> For him, acceptable means of expenditure generate intimacy by taking people out of the logic of productivity and into the intimacy with the world that they crave. Social structures founded on utility will disperse their excess too, but those dispersions may run much higher risks than the dispersions he prefers. In the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, he illustrates the contrast with two historical cases: the Marshall Plan and Hiroshima. The former expended excess through a radical redistribution that confounded the logic of national self-interest and the illusion of separateness; the latter reflected a denial of limitation and an insistence on the usefulness of excess that ultimately exploded, annihilating life itself.

Bataille’s notion of expenditure can be used in at least two ways in thinking about fatness. From the perspective of critics of modern industrial capitalism, of fatness, and of the connection between the two, there is a reading of Bataille that supports their view. For those with a certain critique of consumption and consumer capitalism, fat could be seen as yet another way contemporary society and its economic structure denies excess and refuses its useless expenditure, channeling it instead into the bodies of fat people who then become living sacrifices of a sort to a society that has reached but will not recognize its productive limits. In our denial, we will deal with our excess by having a nonproductive segment of the population that, presumably because ill health will kill fat people before reproductive age, will eventually deplete it. We see a version of this view in Allan Stoekl’s application of Bataille to the crisis of energy, energy production, and energy consumption, a crisis that threatens to undo energy-dependent societies. Using Heidegger as a guide, Stoekl argues that Bataille made a critical error in failing to distinguish between energy that can be quantified, measured, and reserved for future use versus “heterogeneous” energy, a bodily energy that can only be dispersed.<sup>30</sup> In applying this distinction to contemporary life, he contrasts stockpiled energy, such as oil, gas, and electricity, with “muscle power.” The latter, exemplified in bike riding and walking, is an expenditure in ideal Bataillean fashion because it forces us to be intimate with our energy, our bodies, our sweat,

and our smells, whereas the former is seen in driving and its denial of the limitation and depletion of resources. In discussing driving, he writes: "In the car we do not need a body, we have no thought for energy flows and expenditures. Cursed flesh is miraculously transformed into an idea. The body's energy is stored as immense amounts of fat, it can barely move on its own, barely breathe; fewer and fewer people notice."<sup>31</sup> In this view, fat is simply stockpiled energy that, rather than being gloriously expended in excessive fat lives, is simply inert, waiting for the application of muscle power to dissipate it. This view overlooks the kind of charge with which fat has become invested in American culture, the charge of disgust and desire that marks Bataille's notion of the sacred. Bataille's work helps us recognize that sacred quality of fat and fatness, opening the possibility of a fat-positive application of his work. Because he addresses so many things that are central to the construction of fatness in American culture, because fatness is a symbol of excess, a source of social dread, and holds such discursive proximity to death, it becomes even more important that fat studies scholars and thinkers interrogate Bataille for new fat possibilities.

His understanding of excess and expenditure, utility and project can also be used to understand and formulate a critique of dieting and other weight-loss practices. In our world, food and the desire for it is supposed to be regulated by highly rationalized programs balancing intake and expenditure. Food should exist for fuel only and any excess eliminated. Diets are practices of measurement and planning; dieted bodies are efficient bodies, productive bodies, bodies governed by reason and control. But dieting can also be viewed as an utterly nonproductive expenditure. It does not actually do what it purports to do, and frequently it does nothing at all.<sup>32</sup> The pursuit of weight loss is most often an exercise in futility, with weight lost regained and time, energy, and money squandered toward an end never reached. The level of squander is excessive, with an estimated \$58 billion dollars spent on weight loss per year in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Thus weight-loss culture can be seen as a way of dispersing excess even when it purports to be primarily about its elimination.

Weight loss is also an activity that can be seen in sacred contexts. Taboos about food, eating, and consumption frequently originate in religious beliefs and practices. In American culture, food practices have long been intertwined with Protestant Christianity. Movements touting healthy eating and restrictive practices ranging from fasting to vegetarianism had their origins in religious movements, and the two have frequently been intertwined.<sup>34</sup> Contemporary weight-loss practices, observers have noted, frequently take religious forms, including ritualized behavior, the genera-

tion of feelings of virtue and vice, and of temptation, transgression, and redemption.<sup>35</sup> In a more recent turn, religious groups have taken up weight loss in explicitly religious contexts, with groups like First Place offering weight-loss programs in churches around the country.<sup>36</sup>

The excess and dispersion of weight loss, however, is caught up in the logic of utility. It may provide the opportunity to touch the sacred, accursed share of fat, fatness, and the excesses of eating that are associated with it, but in a way that tries to recuperate it within its own utilitarian scheme. War, Bataille suggests, contains and thereby destroys the mystical possibilities that its proximity to death and violence generate by using a logic of utility and an investment in project to overcome its inherent horror.<sup>37</sup> In a similar way, dieting sanitizes the left-hand sacredness of fatness through the logic of productivity that structures the encounter. But its utility is belied by the excesses it generates. Its lack of efficacy only stimulates the generation of more and more unproductive dieting programs, weight-loss schemes, and the like. And there is reason to believe that dieting itself produces the excessive bodies it despises; weight loss often leads to greater weight gain, and yo-yo dieting raises the body's original set point to a higher one. Highly regulated eating systems cannot consider fat as exuberant excess, seeing it only as more fuel for its nonproductive system. Dieting, then, can be seen as a dispersion of excess that, in its interest in efficiency, utility, and rational calculation, destroys rather than sacrifices: Hiroshima rather than the Marshall Plan. These failures of dieting would not have surprised Bataille. "The extreme limit," he wrote, in opposition to asceticism, "is accessible through excess, not through want."<sup>38</sup>

### **Fat Monsters: Turning Toward Excess**

In addition to providing a new way of understanding dieting, its relationship to capitalist culture, and its ambivalent relationship to fatness and excessive eating practices, Bataille's work provides the possibility of resignifying the excess with which fat is so closely identified. By doing so, it can provide some language, analysis, and support for the impulse in some strands of fat politics that unflinchingly moves toward fat, the monstrosity it represents, the dread it evokes, seeing in its excessiveness an opportunity for generosity and intimacy. It also makes space for an ambivalence toward fatness that can turn toward fat without insisting that fat subjectivity be fully redeemed in the culture's terms. I will sketch these possibilities first by discussing Bataille's notion of the left-hand sacred. I will then discuss the possibilities he sees in turning toward, rather than away from, the left-



hand sacred as a means of generating inner experience, communication, and intimacy. Finally, I will discuss how some of these themes are played out in three different sites in fat culture: the film partnership of John Waters and Divine, the writings of the novelist and fat activist Susan Stinson, and the 1990s zine *FaT GiRL*.

Bataille's understanding of sacrifice is deeply connected to what is called, following Durkheim, the left-hand sacred. According to both, the sacred has two dimensions. The right-hand sacred is connected to wholeness, recuperation, cohesion, order, and stability; the left-hand sacred is connected to filth, brokenness, dissolution, and that which we dread: our monsters. Christianity, Bataille argues, made a crucial mistake by recognizing only the right-hand sacred as sacred and relegating the left-hand sacred to the realm of the profane.<sup>39</sup> Bataille's view of expenditure and sacrifice are based on a turn toward the left-hand sacred as a resource for inner experience, his atheological, atheistic mysticism. Turning toward the left-hand sacred means turning toward our monsters and the strange combination of anguish and ecstasy they provoke. This is most evidently accomplished through the Bataillean mystical position of "joy before death."<sup>40</sup> This notion of turning toward the left-hand sacred, toward what is most monstrous, and toward death gives Bataillean mystics an opportunity to challenge much that is problematic in the social order, starting with fantasies of coherence, wholeness, and order itself.

For those associated with dread, with filth and defilement, with uselessness, excess, and the anxiety of death, Bataille's work points to the particular possibilities in their position of effecting sacrifice and the inner experience associated with it. "Through the 'throwing out of their own parts,'" writes Alexander Irwin, "Bataillean mystics explode the myth of social organicity, perform their refusal to function as docile members of the social body. Their sacrifice is an expulsive rupture for which Bataille had offered a crude but apposite metaphor . . . : vomiting."<sup>41</sup> Bataille's writing gives those associated with the accursed share, by designation or identification, a vision for how a turn toward excess might generate new artistic and political possibilities. Fat artists and activists attempt this "throwing out of their own parts" in various ways: through explorations of the excessive fat body, excessive eating practices, and resisting the move toward a restored fat subjectivity based on the fantasy of individual coherence and completeness.

Jeremy Biles writes that one important possibility that Bataille points to is the power of the monster in evoking inner experience. He writes: "The presentation of monstrosity—the showing of the monster—*provokes* a sacrificial experience. Beholding the monster incites affective contradic-

tions, a rupturing experience of both life and death, joy and anguish.”<sup>42</sup> The move toward excesses of the body can be seen in the ways that fat artists and writers play with fat monstrosity, endowing fat characters with excessive size and excessive powers, some of which are monstrous, some that appear monstrous, and some of which are simply superhuman in their imagined powers, but all of which have the potential to generate the kind of rupturing experience Biles and Bataille discuss. At the end of the film *Multiple Maniacs*, for example, the fat drag queen Divine sings of how she has become a monster: “You’re finally there, Divine . . . You can stamp out shopping centers with one stub of your foot! You can wipe out entire cities with a single blast of your fiery breath! You’re a *monster* now, and only a monster can feel the fulfillment I’m capable of feeling now!”<sup>43</sup> In Susan Stinson’s novel *Martha Moody* the title character, a fat shopkeeper in a small town in the nineteenth-century West, is imagined by her lover as endowed with excessive powers: “She flew. She spoke with angels. She played Jesus in the Bible. She carved a canyon with her tireless hands. She shook and brought forth waters. She sang whales into the ocean. She ploughed the ground with her knee while she rode a ridge and stroked her hands along the surfaces of grasses in the field.”<sup>44</sup>

But perhaps the most intentional deployment of the fat body as image of both fear and comfort, desire and repulsion is the image of Fat Girl, emblem, totem, and guardian protector of the zine *FaT GiRL*. Her image graced the cover of its initial publication: a fat woman with spiky hair and multiple piercings dressed and posed in superhero style. She charges out of the logo with an outstretched, leather-gloved fist, revealing a wildly hairy armpit. She wears a skimpy bikini, with an F and G printed on each breast, and her fat belly hangs over the bottom. She is both the frightful embodiment of the fat lesbian stereotype and a desirable and desirous fat supergirl. By way of introduction, a piece in the zine addresses readers:

Who is Fat Girl? If you need to ask this question, I think it’s time we sat down and had a little chat. Sit back and relax. Think back, think back just a few minutes to the moment you picked up this ’zine. What made you do it? Are you fat? Remember back a few minutes further to the last time you didn’t fit into a chair and had to ask for a different one. Who kept you above your shame and humiliation? Remember the last time some creepy guy hurled insults at you and you told him to fuck off and die. Who was that moving your mouth for you, keeping you from sinking into deep depression and self-hate? Remember the last time your great belly shook with the thunderous

roar of an orgasm. Who helped you get rid of that brainwashing bullshit about fat women having no sexuality? Who? Come on, say it! Who? Fat Girl that's who.<sup>45</sup>

By turning toward fat, these artists are able to channel some of the power of the left-hand sacred in their work, creating characters and stories that force the reader to face some of the dizzying contradictions of fat and fatness, its excesses, its monstrosities, and its potential generosity.

Fat art also plays with excesses in relation to eating, provoking anxiety and dread and also a sense of celebration and communication that goes past what eating is supposed to do within the logic of utility. Michael Moon and Eve Sedgwick write about how John Waters and Divine disrupt the recuperative impulse of size acceptance by insisting on, rather than decoupling, the association between fat bodies, excessive eating, and waste.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps the most iconic image of this connection is the infamous final scene of *Pink Flamingos*, where Divine follows a small dog along a city street and eats a pile of shit it leaves. Fat bodies, eating excesses, and waste are all fused in this image, which has left viewers perennially wondering if the scene was “real.”<sup>47</sup> Readers of the novelist Susan Stinson’s short piece “Drink” have asked her similar questions about the “reality” of her tale. The story depicts an annual ritual in which fat women gather in a low-budget hotel and collectively drink the contents of a swimming pool.

When it happens, the swimmers howl and swallow. The rest of us reach into the water, motioning it toward us with great wet swoops of our arms. We lower our faces and open our mouths. Then we drink. As the water level drops, we lean farther out. Women go on falling into the water. Some slide in, or, carefully, jump. We float, slurping like thirsty animals. Some of us lick each other’s skin. We stay away from the suits, which are, in general, conservatively cut. Some of us stand in the shallow end and bend to drink. When the water is low, some kneel. We lap until our faces are pressed to the damp blue bottom. Then we turn on our backs and stare at the ceiling, sated.<sup>48</sup>

In this strange rite of excessive bodies and excessive consumption, drinking an entire swimming pool is an opportunity for intimacy, communication between fat women. Excessive eating is intertwined with excessive bodies and excessive sexuality throughout *FaT GiRL*, which is as well known for its images of fat women eating as it is for its images of fat lesbian S/M sex. In one of many examples, the Kitchen Slut column contains images of a woman licking icing and cake off of naked women’s bodies. In a moment exemplary of Batailleian excess, the subtitle reads, “Dinner has ended and

you are stuffed with good food and sparkling conversation. Perhaps you think you are sated . . . but wait! Your presence is requested in the next room.”<sup>49</sup> Dessert awaits.

Images of fat women eating have become powerful sites of allure and disgust: they have such a transgressive charge that they support an industry of fat food pornography centering exclusively around fat women eating.<sup>50</sup> Images made by fat women themselves that highlight not just eating but excessive eating, mysterious eating, repulsive eating have, like images of the monstrous, the capacity to provoke sacrificial experiences in those acculturated to its emotional contradictions. Using those contradictions to effect change in how fatness is perceived is a particular possibility posed by fat art and the turn toward fat that a Bataille view suggests.

But perhaps one of the most striking Bataille aspects of *FaT GiRL* in relation to other fat political strategies is the resistance to positing a fat subject that is healed and made whole as a result of accepting her size. In contrast to both size-acceptance and fat-liberationist strains of fat politics, the jumble of fat politics that was *FaT GiRL* made space for the profound ambivalence regarding fat, fatness, and living as a fat person that often marks the fat experience but tends to be squeezed out of or squeezed into recuperative narratives in other fat political projects.<sup>51</sup> The collective member, artist, and *FaT GiRL* visionary Max Airborne expresses her own ambivalence, confusion, and struggle in relation to fat beginning in the first issue, where she says, “I think of myself as fat; ever since I came out as a dyke I’ve called myself a fat dyke and tried to be proud about it, whether I actually felt that way or not.”<sup>52</sup> This acknowledgment that the position of fat pride is a difficult one to keep up in the face of the struggle of living in a fat-hating society was a radical move in the context of a fat politics that is, at times, insistent on fat pride and fat positivity. *FaT GiRL*’s willingness to linger in the confusion, pain, and difficulty of fat identity in the midst of a fat-phobic society that insists on the conflation of fat with death was, in my view, intimately related to its stance of turning toward fat in all its “infinitely ruined splendor” in order not necessarily to resolidify a positive fat identity but to explore the possibilities of the left-hand sacred of fatness.<sup>53</sup>

## Fat Death Threats and the Distribution of Dread

The ambivalence expressed in *FaT GiRL* is in part a reflection of the psychic difficulties of living under a perpetual death sentence. Fat people in American culture face death threats from all sides: real and imaginary, physical and discursive, biological and social.<sup>54</sup> In a society that both fears and denies death, the fear of death is frequently projected onto fat and

fat people, and dieting and exercise are infused with the fantastical ability to ward off death for the deserving. It is difficult to read anything in the popular media regarding fat and weight loss that does not underscore the threats to life that fat is supposed to pose. The discursive oversignification of fatness with death creates a powerful, dread-filled cultural context that fat people continually must navigate in order to live their daily lives. To do so successfully, they must work to tease apart the actual risks of death from those merely threatened.

Physically, body size is correlated with some conditions that can shorten life. But the actual number of excess deaths in the United States directly attributable to larger body sizes is considerably lower than once thought (although the higher numbers are still frequently bandied about) and are roughly the same as those that result from below average body sizes.<sup>55</sup> The insistence of the fat/death connection, some postulate, could contribute to a “nocebo” effect, where negative health messages result in negative health outcomes.<sup>56</sup> In a context where body size may be correlated with some, but not many, excess deaths, fat people need to take care to distinguish real mortal threat from purported threats that are continually and loudly directed toward them.

This need becomes more acute when the potential medical and health costs of this discursive threat are taken into account. Fat people face risks of literal death through this rhetorical association, risks rarely accounted for and thus difficult to judge and avoid. Because of this association, and the correlation between BMI and some medical conditions, for example, fat people have more difficulty gaining access to health insurance. As a result, existing health problems are less likely to be treated, particularly in a timely fashion, and more likely to have highly problematic, and perhaps lethal, effects. In some cases, fat people are denied health care, even when they have insurance, by doctors reluctant to take them on as patients.<sup>57</sup> When health care can be accessed, fat people face another set of death threats. The use of body size as a proxy for health leads to an overemphasis on fat as causal in a range of health concerns and a concomitant reluctance on the part of many medical practitioners to investigate other possible causal issues. Stories of fat patients who have had grave medical problems overlooked with blithe advice to lose weight are evident both anecdotally and in documented research on anti-fat bias on the part of health care workers.<sup>58</sup> When fat people heed weight-loss advice, they face further potentially lethal risks that are often drowned out by the insistence on the deadliness of fat itself. Weight-loss drugs like phen-fen at times lead to lethal complications.<sup>59</sup> Weight-loss surgery has high levels of mortality associated with it.<sup>60</sup> And the health risks of dieting are hinted at in the

literature on weight loss but are left largely unexamined; the deaths of fat people who engage in extreme dieting practices or who have histories of weight cycling are often considered death by fat rather than death by weight loss.<sup>61</sup> The insistence on the lethality of fat itself obfuscates the real threats to life and health that are faced by fat people either by the lack of access to health care, inadequate health care, or by the most common treatments prescribed to fat people.

In addition to threats to physical health, fat people also face the threat of what the sociologist Orlando Patterson termed “social death.”<sup>62</sup> As highly stigmatized persons, fat people face the ongoing possibility of being disconnected from a range of social institutions and cultural contexts that make human life livable. The pervasiveness of anti-fat stigma is well documented. Fat people face difficulties finding and keeping employment and are often economically penalized for their body size.<sup>63</sup> They find extensive difficulty in their romantic pursuits and are continually informed by the culture that they are undesirable, a poor choice of mate, and destined for perpetual social isolation. All fat people are susceptible to public and private acts of fat hatred, ranging from verbal street-level assaults, to criticism and shame in the family, to fat-specific acts of social hatred such as hogging.<sup>64</sup> Recent media speculation on fat as socially contagious both reflects and encourages the marginalization of fat people from social life and social connectivity.<sup>65</sup> The death threats faced by fat people are social as well as physical.

These various, pervasive, and disproportionate death threats are important to consider when thinking about the application of Bataille’s work to fat politics. Death is central to Bataille’s thought and to his insights into the possibilities of sacrifice, the left-hand sacred, and the accursed share. His mysticism relies on the contemplation of death and the full experience of its anguish and desire, without the safety net of a redemptive theology or a restored subjectivity. In order to experience the realm Bataille points us toward, he writes, “You have to come *as close as possible* to death. Without flinching. And even, if necessary, flinching.”<sup>66</sup> The depths of inner experience are achieved when we are willing to encounter death, dissolution, the dirt and disorder to which we are destined, and to find the anguish/ecstasy there. “The extreme limit of the ‘possible,’” he writes, “assumes laughter, ecstasy, terrified approach towards death; assumes terror, nausea, unceasing agitation of the ‘possible’ and the impossible and, to conclude—broken, nevertheless, by degrees, slowly desired—the state of supplication, its absorption into despair.”<sup>67</sup> Encountering death in this way allows for intimacy, for communication, for the kind of human connection that is possible only when brokenness, vulnerability, contingency

are the shared basis for it. This encounter with death need not be literal; indeed, subjectivity must remain sufficiently intact for the experience to be experienced.<sup>68</sup> But it does need to be visceral, experiential, evocative of the dread, laughter, ecstasy, nausea, “unceasing agitation of the ‘possible’ and the impossible” that is the core of inner experience.<sup>69</sup> Because death is a fate we all share, this inner experience has the potential to be accessible to all: death ultimately makes no distinctions and neither need inner experience, Bataillean mysticism, or its turn toward excess, expenditure, and anguish/ecstasy.

But what Bataille does not adequately acknowledge is that, in a society that fears death, persists in fantasies of overcoming its limit, and is enthralled to the logic of project and utility, not all members share that dread equally. Managing the fear of death is a social project, one that is most often effected by assigning certain groups of people with its discursive (and at times literal) burden and allowing the rest of society to pursue the project/fantasy of longevity—not by a collective Bataillean experiment with the horrors and ecstasies of inner experience. While death is a fate we all physically share, we are socially able, and more than willing, to manage that threat by projecting it onto particular groups that are called upon to carry a disproportionate share of its dread. Those consigned to carry the cultural burden of death are consigned to live in super-fear, super-dread, super-anguish. Those lines of social management become charged with the power of the sacred, and those conflated with death become charged with its disgust and revulsion. Sacrifice in this context becomes less about restoring subjectivity to that which has been rendered a thing than about making tools for the management of the fear of death out of the subjects socially assigned to carry that burden.

There are Bataillean possibilities in this discursive, if not always—although sometimes—literal proximity to death. Some fat activists and artists have played with this proximity to provoke the dread and fascination that fat has come to represent. The fourth issue of *FaT GiRL*, for example, takes death as a theme, with an editorial about the losses recently faced by Barbarism, one of the collective members; an article in memory of Joanna, a young, fat heroin addict; and a photo spread of Barbarism in a cemetery, naked, eating, masturbating. Lesley Kinzel and other fat activists have started using the term “death fat” as a self-designation, in part to counter the terror of being continually designated “morbidly obese” by others, especially those with power over their health and medical treatment, by injecting much-needed humor.<sup>70</sup> The possibilities in a politics of death have been suggested by some queer writers, perhaps most famously by Leo Bersani when he writes, “if the rectum is the grave in which the mas-

culine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.”<sup>71</sup> But in the next sentence he points to the problem of this proximity when discursive death threats become literal, as they have with AIDS.

This is the problem that fat politics faces in relation to Bataille and to death. The possibilities of communication, intimacy, interhuman connection on the basis of shared vulnerability, and incompleteness in the face of death are powerful. And those who are discursively associated with death may be in a particularly powerful position to effect these possibilities through art, activism, and radical fat expenditure. But the death threats that fat people continually face—literal and discursive, social and biological, evident and confusing—often put them in a state of super-anguish, super-despair, super-dread in relation to death. The Bataillean balance between dread and desire becomes, as Bataille himself suggests, more difficult to achieve when dread is disproportionately assigned and continually re-evoked:

I will take for granted the assertion that every horror conceals a possibility of enticement. I can then assume the operation of a relatively simple mechanism. An object that is repugnant presents a force of repulsion more or less great. I will add that, following my hypothesis, it should also present a force of attraction: like the force of repulsion, its opposite, the force of attraction will be more or less great. But I didn't say that the repulsion and attraction were always directly proportional to one another. Things are far from being so simple. Indeed, instead of increasing desire, *excessive* horror paralyzes it, shuts it off.<sup>72</sup>

This kind of paralysis in the face of the continual assignment of death dread can be seen in Max Airborne's ruminations on fat and exercise: “I tell myself that I'm out of breath for lack of exercise, but the truth is I don't exercise because I am afraid to find out. . . . My fears take over, and as I get older and fatter, my fears grow. The longer I go, the harder it gets. I'm only 28. I am terrified of my future.”<sup>73</sup> People who are culturally assigned a disproportionate share of the dread of death touch that dread continually, often under circumstances they do not choose and cannot always opt out of. Asking them to take up the possibilities that discursive proximity to death allows may well be asking too much, may be too paralyzing for people who are already continually being frightened to death. Turning toward fat, its excess, its simultaneous attraction and repulsion may offer sublime Bataillean opportunities. But turning toward vulnerability, dread, dissolution, and death may be too high a price to pay for people and



groups already burdened with discursive associations with death and the actual death threats that often accompany them.<sup>74</sup>

### **Fat Generosity and Redistributing Dread**

In thinking through the relation between Bataille's work and feminist politics, Amy Hollywood writes: "Just as there are two conceptions of history standing alongside each other in Bataille's text, perhaps we should distinguish two conceptions of political action: one that would contest power and injustice through narrativizations, and one that would contest those very narrativizations themselves in the name of that which is unassimilable to redemptive political projects—the bodies of those who can never again be made whole."<sup>75</sup> Fat politics has generated numerous projects that attempt to challenge fat hatred and social stigma by telling new stories about the meaning of fatness and the lives of fat people. Fat people, these projects tell us, can be whole, beautiful, healthy, and productive, all virtues in our project-driven culture. Their subjectivity can be restored and their personhood legitimated. And these stories are true, or at least possible, as far as they go.

Bataille's work, however, as I have argued, points to the possibilities for fat politics in taking the second path. By resisting redemptive resignifications of fatness and turning toward fat excesses, fat culture and fat politics has the potential to be a critical site for the kind of disruptive, generous politics that Bataille imagines. Not flinching from the dread, disgust, and desires generated by the left-hand sacred provides opportunity for communication, human intimacy, and forging new possibilities based not on the limitations of scarcity but the abundance of excess. "I wanted experience to lead where it would," Bataille writes, "not lead it to some end point given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense)."<sup>76</sup> A fat politics that offers no harbor either in the promises of future scientific knowledge or the comforts of a reconsolidated fat subjectivity has the potential to generate transgressive possibilities that could take us to places we can not yet imagine. But, as I have also argued, it is problematic to eliminate the possibility of a harbor for those who are so often deprived of shelter from dread. The dominant discursive association between fat and death, along with the actual death threats fat people continually need to navigate, make the necessity of a harbor perhaps more pressing. And leave me ambivalent about Bataille and his work in relation to fat.

This ambivalence, I suggest, points to the need for fat politics to take the question of death more seriously. Not by taking exaggerated claims

about the morbidity of fat more seriously and getting to the project of weight loss but by more fearlessly approaching the tangle of death threats fat people face, the ceaseless dread they generate, and potential strategies for resistance and change: “a thinking that does not fall apart in the face of horror, a self-consciousness that does not steal away when it is time to explore possibility to the limit.”<sup>77</sup> Addressing that question in conversation with Bataille may help us see possibilities in a politics of death that might be otherwise invisible when we are in thrall to its fear.<sup>78</sup> It may help us develop a fat politics that has space for insufficiency, for ambivalence, for the kind of brokenness that comes from carrying more than one’s share of the fear of death without becoming a maudlin celebration of a victim status. With his help, we may find ways of calling on our excess, expending the abundance we represent, in ways that redistribute the dread of death more equally, that allow others to face it, touch its dread and desire, without the need to recoup their wholeness at our expense. Thinking fat and death with Bataille may help us generate the kind of generosity that excess, brokenness, and dancing with death facilitates, one that resists the unproductive excess of weight loss and its fantasy of utility by turning toward our excesses and, rather than trying to make them useful, expends them gloriously. A Bataille-informed fat generosity might resist the lie that death can be overcome by projects like weight loss by using our proximity to death to insist that everyone face its possibilities with the kind of glorious expenditure that our bodies represent. “One might say,” or one might hope, “that the lie destines life’s exuberance to revolt.”<sup>79</sup>

71. Lingis, "Foreword: Why Bataille Now?" in *Reading Bataille Now*, xi.

72. Taylor, *Refiguring the Spiritual*, 199n.h. On the other hand, religious studies scholars are becoming increasingly attuned to the visual and material dimensions of religion and the crucial, if sometimes implicit, ways in which religion animates art. See, for example, Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity*; Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*; and Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects*.

## **Movements of Luxurious Exuberance: Georges Bataille and Fat Politics**

### **Lynne Gerber**

1. This chapter was imagined and written in continual conversation with Kent Brintnall, Sarah Quinn, and Susan Stinson. As always, they have my immense gratitude.

2. Seid, *Never Too Thin*; Stearns, *Fat History*.

3. Stearns, *Fat History*, 64.

4. Leslie Blanch, quoted in Fraser, *Losing It!*, 57.

5. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 2:95.

6. Braziel and Lebesco, "Editor's Introduction," *Bodies Out of Bounds*.

7. Baudrillard, "Figures of the Transpolitical."

8. Stearns, *Fat History*, 64.

9. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 7.

10. Guthman and Dupuis, "Embodying Neoliberalism," 429.

11. Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 7.

12. *Ibid.*, 137–171; Sobal, "The Size Acceptance Movement and the Social Construction of Body Weight."

13. Braziel and Lebesco, "Editor's Introduction," 1.

14. Lebesco, *Revolting Bodies*, 3.

15. See, for example, Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics."

16. Efforts like these belie Lauren Berlant's assertion that "there is nothing promising, heroic or critical" about the alleged "obesity epidemic." Berlant, "Slow Death," 767.

17. "Difficult Seductress!" 14.

18. Bataille, quoted in Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, 33.

19. Bataille recognizes that scarcity exists in some human locations and that it is a genuine concern. However, he is trying to view the economy from a general perspective rather than a particular one. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:23.

20. *Ibid.*, 1:28.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:21.

22. Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 117.

23. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:55–56.

24. *Ibid.*, 1:59.

25. *Ibid.*, 1:57.

26. "Today the great and free forms of unproductive social expenditure have disappeared. One must not conclude from this, however, that the very principle

of expenditure is no longer the end of the economic system. A certain evolution of wealth, whose symptoms indicate sickness and exhaustion, leads to shame in oneself and petty hypocrisy. Everything that was generous, orgiastic, and excessive has disappeared.” Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” 124.

27. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:122.

28. Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” 125.

29. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:30–31.

30. Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak*, 135.

31. *Ibid.*, 184. Baudrillard’s work on obesity can also be seen as a fat-negative reading of fatness and excess grounded, in part, in Bataille’s work. See Baudrillard, “Figures of the Transpolitical.”

32. On the limitations of dieting as a weight-loss strategy, see Mann et al., “Medicare’s Search for Effective Obesity Treatments.”

33. Marketdata Enterprises, “U.S. Weight Loss Market.”

34. Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*.

35. For parallels between contemporary dieting practices and religion, see Hesse-Biber, *Am I Thin Enough*, chap. 1; Stinson, *Women and Dieting Culture*, chap. 5.

36. Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow*; Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, chaps. 4–5.

37. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 45.

38. *Ibid.*, 21.

39. See, for example, Bataille, *Erotism*, 117–128.

40. Bataille, “The Practice of Joy Before Death.”

41. Irwin, *Saints of the Impossible*, 35.

42. Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, 4.

43. Cited in Moon and Sedgwick, “Divinity,” 251.

44. Cited in Stinson, “Fat Girls Need Fiction,” 232.

45. “Who Is Fat Girl?” *FaT GiRL* 1 (1994): 41.

46. “Indeed,” they write, “it is his absolute refusal of such a move that makes the center of gravity of his inimitably hefty thematics. In a late-capitalist world economy of consumption, the problematics of waste and residue, hitherto economically marginal, tend increasingly to assume an uncanny centrality. . . . If an ecological system includes no ‘out there’ to which the waste product can, in fantasy, be destined, then it makes sense that the meaning-infused, diachronically right, perhaps inevitably nostalgic chemical, cultural, and material garbage—our own waste—in whose company we are destined to live and die is accruing new forms of interpretive magnetism and new forms, as well, of affective and erotic value.” Moon and Sedgwick, “Divinity,” 235.

47. This question of the “reality” of these excessive acts echoes some responses to Bataille’s work on violence and whether he “really” advocated it or was simply discussing it as metaphor, representation, or the like. This question became especially pressing after World War II made the valorization of real violence nearly impossible for anyone who had lived through it. For a discussion of Ba-

taille and violence in the context of the war, see Chapter 4 of Irwin's *Saints of the Impossible*.

48. Stinson, "Drink."

49. "You Are Cordially Invited to the Join the Kitchen Slut for Dessert," 12–13.

50. Kulik, "Porn."

51. Murray, "(Un/Be)coming Out?"

52. "Oh My God, It's Big Mama! Interview with Max Airborne and Elizabeth Hong Brassil," *FaT GiRL* 1:15.

53. This fat ambivalence became a controversial issue among readers of *FaT GiRL*. In issue 3, in an interview on fat/thin relationships titled "Deva and Laura," Deva expressed her fat ambivalence, saying "So we've all got great fat politics, we know what's up. And fuck that, we all still feel like shit, I don't care what you say. A lot of fat women still feel like shit no matter how much they're up on their politics, and no, they're not 'supposed' to feel like shit, or have fucked up feelings about food, and all that. And I'm sorry, but we still do." (3:31). The next issue contained a letter from a reader responding to Deva's statement by saying "To me, saying you feel like shit only keeps the hatred inside and then the culture wins. It made me sad to read Deva's statements. I've come across similar sentiment in other *FG* stories and interviews. I'm not suggesting we not deal with self-hatred. I'm only suggesting we acknowledge it and push forward to self-love." (4:4). *FaT GiRL*'s willingness to dwell in moments of self-hatred without requiring the concomitant move toward self-love was, in my view, part of its riveting power.

54. My use of death threats is quite different from its traditional usage, which designates threats made on the life of an individual by another individual who intends to carry out the threat personally or to supervise its implementation personally. In my usage, it refers to the generalized, diffuse sense many fat people experience that their life is under continual, often imminent threat. In the case of fatness, this threat is often depicted as self-inflicted (your life is at risk because of your self-evidently dangerous eating/exercising/other personal habits), but it is disseminated widely through a range of social institutions, most prominently in the media and in medicine. The plausibility of those threats is extremely difficult to ascertain and thus extremely difficult to defuse, and thus the threats have a significant impact on people's lives independently of their literal truth.

55. Flegal et al., "Excess Deaths Associated with Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity."

56. For more on the nocebo effect, see Barsky et al., "Nonspecific Medication Side Effects and the Nocebo Phenomenon."

57. LaMendola, "Some Ob-Gyns in South Florida Turn Away Overweight Women."

58. For example, see Fabricatore, Wadden, and Foster, "Bias in Healthcare Settings."

59. On the health debacle that was phen-fen, see Kolata, *Rethinking Thin*, 21–26.

60. On death rates associated with weight-loss surgery see B. I. Omalu et al., "Death Rates and Causes of Death After Bariatric Surgery." Death risks, the article notes, include a quadrupled suicide rate compared to the general population.

61. See Fraser, *Losing It!*, 195.

62. Patterson used the term to describe the strange social status/nonstatus of slaves (*Slavery and Social Death*, 35–76). The term has been taken up by the queer theorist Judith Butler to conceptualize the threats of discursive illegibility and social nonexistence. See Butler, *Antigone's Claim*.

63. Janna Fikkan and Esther Rothblum, "Weight Bias in Employment"; Ernesberger, "Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?"

64. Prohaska and Gailey, "Fat Women as 'Easy Targets.'"

65. Kolata, "Study Says Obesity Can Be Contagious."

66. Bataille, quoted in Biles, *Ecce Monstrum*, 33.

67. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 39.

68. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 2:108–109; Bataille, *Erotism*, 18–19.

69. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 39.

70. Kinzel, "It Was Supposed to Be Funny."

71. Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 29.

72. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 2:96.

73. Airborne, "The Fat Truth," 49.

74. Bataille shows some recognition of this problem when he writes about extreme poverty and the difference between transgression and hopelessness. He writes: "Extreme poverty releases men from the taboos that make human beings of them, not as transgression does, but in that a sort of hopelessness, not absolute perhaps, gives the animal impulses free rein. Hopelessness is not a return to animal nature. The world of transgression which swallowed up humanity as a whole is essentially different from the animal world, and so is the restricted world of hopelessness." *Erotism*, 135.

75. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 84.

76. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 3.

77. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 2:14.

78. "To solve political problems," Bataille writes, "becomes difficult for those who allow anxiety alone to pose them. It is necessary for anxiety to pose them. But their solution demands at a certain point the removal of this anxiety." *Accursed Share*, 1:13–14.

79. Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 1:77.

### **Sovereignty and Cruelty: Self-Affirmation, Self-Dissolution, and the Bataillean Subject** *Stephen S. Bush*

1. De Sade "emerged with no revelation, but at least he disputed all the easy answers." De Beauvoir, *Must We Burn Sade?*, 89.

2. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 82–84, 94.

3. *Ibid.*, 84.