

## **‘We’re kind of devolving’: visual tropes of evolution in obesity discourse**

Francis Ray White  
University of Westminster

### **Abstract**

In recent years analyses of mainstream media constructions of the obesity ‘epidemic’ have proliferated within fat studies. Of less attention has been the visual representation of obesity. This paper presents an analysis of one particular form of graphic representation of obesity, that of the ‘fat (d)evolution’ image. This image parodies the iconography of the ‘march of progress’ – a series of figures of ascending height illustrating the evolution of mankind from ape to modern man. The fat (d)evolution image features an additional fat figure (and in some cases a final stage represented by a pig) frequently of declining height, thereby visualising obesity as a ‘kind of’ devolution. The paper analyses a sample of eighteen such images that have appeared on book covers, websites and in media reports. It explores the confluence of discourses that produce the images’ multiple meanings and locates them within the narratives of evolution and the ‘obesogenic environment’. Given the often comedic intent of the images, the analysis subsequently discusses the function of this humour, before considering how the images’ construction of fatness is also underpinned by discourses of gender, race and class. The findings suggest that the rhetorical success of these images relies on a radical ‘othering’ which intensifies the dehumanisation of fatness.

**Keywords:** obesity epidemic, fatphobia, visual representations, evolution, obesogenic environment

In his three minute talk in the popular TEDtalk series, Dr Dean Ornish, clinical professor at the University of California, San Francisco, gives a rapt audience his take on the global obesity ‘epidemic’ and its various evils (2006). He cites some statistics on childhood obesity in the US and offers the standard warning that this may be the first generation of children to die younger than their parents. Using PowerPoint to its best advantage he flips through the famous Centres for Disease Control (CDC) slides that show rising rates of body mass index in the US since the 1980s. Then, as the CDC maps hurtle towards the present Ornish delivers his coup de grâce – a slide showing a cartoonish parody of the classic evolution of mankind image. Where the original ‘march

of progress' concludes with the upright, muscular modern man gazing triumphantly into the future, Ornish's version features two extra figures of declining height and increasing girth, and finally a pig. The audience erupts with laughter and applause. 'It gets worse', Ornish announces, 'we're kind of devolving'.

We are not, of course, devolving that is. Even those accounts that assert the facticity of the obesity 'epidemic' and attempt to explain it in evolutionary terms do not suggest obesity is a 'kind of devolution', or that obesity is indicative of speciation in progress (see Power and Schulkin 2009, Wells 2006, Popkin 2009). However, Ornish is not alone in deploying this 'fat (d)evolution' image in the service of establishing obesity as both an epidemic and a serious individual and public health concern. Over the past decade numerous versions of this image have graced book covers, weight-loss websites, media articles and even t-shirts. This article will attempt to explore the proliferation of such images, and ask how it is possible for them to make a 'kind of' sense, one that also functions as humour. The aim is not to impose a fixed or singular meaning on the images. Rather, it is to locate them in relation to existing discourses and representations of evolution, obesity, gender, race and class.

The role of images in the discourses of the obesity 'epidemic' has been relatively neglected in the critical literature. With the exception of Cooper's (2007) critique of the 'headless fatty' trope, there is little work that addresses the considerable power of images to convey complex and implicit messages about fatness, fat people and the place of fatness in the world. For example, in their otherwise meticulous deconstruction of (written) obesity 'epidemic' discourse Gard and Wright (2005) reprint a fat (d)evolution image from an Australian newspaper (p. 31). However, they have little to say about the image itself and why its cautionary message about obesity is articulated via a parody of the 'march of progress'. Two more recent studies by Heuer *et al.* (2011) and Gollust *et al.* (2012) do specifically attend to images within media reporting of obesity. Both studies conduct quantitative analyses of news media images and find them to be unrepresentative, stigmatising and likely to restrict fat people's access to, 'appropriate and effective strategies to promote healthy lifestyle behaviours' (Heuer *et al.* 2011, p. 984). These analyses not only problematically posit obesity as requiring a 'cure', which is not the principle animating the analysis to follow here, but limit the role of images to their ability to represent 'reality'. It would certainly be possible to offer an analysis of the fat (d)evolution images' failure in this respect. However, this would do little to engage with their seeming popularity, nor would it elucidate why the fat figures in the images are, for example, always male and white, often bald, and quite likely to be wearing saggy underpants.

An alternative approach to the fat (d)evolution images is suggested by Melanie Wiber's (1998) feminist analysis of images of evolution. She argues such images, 'create stories about things, people, animals and objects which are contested not

because “nothing is real,” but precisely because they become real’ (p. 148). Making these ‘stories’ explicit as stories, rather than as false or ideologically suspect versions of some underlying reality, may offer a better understanding of the ways in which they ‘work’ rhetorically. This deconstructive orientation is also taken up by Deborah McPhail (2009) in her analysis of the construction of ‘abject’ white, male, middle-class obesity in Cold War era Canada. Her reading of anti-obesity measures as functioning ‘symbolically to re-articulate the breadwinner husband, homemaker wife division of labour and to reposition Canada as a nation of white, middle-class nuclear families’ (2009, p. 1022) not only helps to explain the sole representation of white male bodies in the fat (d)evolution images, but also offers a model of how those bodies are constituted within wider societal discourses and anxieties.

In order to conduct the analysis I collected a sample of eighteen fat (d)evolution images. Of these images four are illustrations from book covers. Three of these, Power and Schulkin’s *The Evolution of Obesity* (2009), Popkin’s *The World is Fat* (2009) and Roberts’ *The Energy Glut* (2010) could be categorised as popular works which seek to explain the causes of, and propose solutions to, the contemporary obesity ‘epidemic’. The fourth, Harcombe (2011), is a weight-loss diet book for men. Of the remaining fourteen images four were sourced from websites advocating weight-loss, three were used to illustrate media articles on obesity, four were produced by independent illustrators (see Figure 1) and the final three were designs available as ‘hilarious’ t-shirts. A number of additional images were excluded from the sample on the basis that they were reworked versions of one of the images already included, but the re-use and re-appropriation of some of the images in the sample was widespread (the cover image from Popkin’s book, for example, was also used on a diet website and available elsewhere as a t-shirt design). As far as it is possible to ascertain, the images in the sample originated from the UK, US, Canada and Australia.

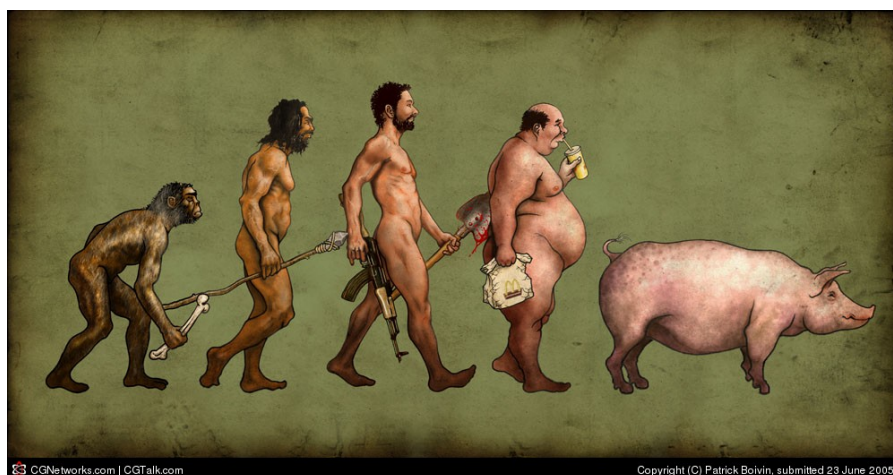


Figure 1: ‘Evolution’ (2005) by Patrick Boivin. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Images were included on the basis that they depicted a series of figures 'marching' from left to right, beginning with an ape-like figure, followed by a number of intermediate figures of increasing bipedalism and uprightness preceding the figure of modern man and then subsequently one or more fat figures and in four cases, a pig. Guided by existing analyses of 'march of progress' illustrations (Wiber 1998, Shelley 2001) and the salient elements of existing studies of obesity 'epidemic' imagery (Heuer *et al.* 2011, Gollust *et al.* 2012) the sample images were coded for indicators of progress and (d)evolution, gendered, raced and classed traits, and for props such as clothing, tools and foodstuffs. The following discussion will first identify and locate the contexts in which these images emerge, namely in discourses of evolutionary progress and in environmental accounts of obesity, secondly suggest why the fat (d)evolution images are supposedly humorous, and finally explore the deployment of gendered, raced and classed discourses in the images.

### **(D)evolution and the 'march of progress'**

The fat (d)evolution images work so effectively to induce instantaneous recognition and laughter in Ornish's audience because they parody the well-known iconography of the 'march of progress'. Dating from the 1960s this image presents human evolution in the form of a linear progression from ape to modern man. While critiques of its accuracy in terms of the fossil evidence for evolution abound (Wiber 1998), these are in no way a rejection of the basic premises of evolutionary theory. Rather, the critique of the 'march' that is relevant here is, as Shelley notes, that it 'demonstratively suggests a set of changes in hominid physical stature that it rhetorically explains as progress in quality' (2001, p. 86). This is visually conveyed in the depiction of the figures in motion, striding from left to right (never statically facing the viewer), and in order of ascending height and uprightness. Not only does this formula construct evolution as linear, but it suggests that developments in hominid forms are improvements, and the result of successive moves towards an ultimate goal (Shelley 2001). Such a view of evolution is profoundly *Homo sapiens*-centric (Wiber 1998) in that it positions Man as the pinnacle, indeed the purpose, of millennia of species evolution, and as the standard by which all others are judged. It is in this context that it becomes possible to view any deviation from the standard as 'devolution'.

The fat (d)evolution images depict just such deviations employing subtle, and not so subtle, visual cues to convey the message that 'we're kind of devolving'. In over half of the images analysed the fat figure is significantly shorter than the modern man, producing a visible peak and decline in the profile of the figures. What is notable about this feature of the images is that decreasing height is not cited as a related factor in the obesity 'epidemic' or evolutionary accounts of obesity (e.g., Lev-Ran 2001, Wells 2006, Pijl 2011). Its inclusion in the fat (d)evolution images serves the rhetorical

purpose of suggesting devolution within a context where increasing height is analogous to qualitative progress. Supporting this allusion, in around half the images the fat figure is shown with a downward gaze and a slumped or hunched posture, as opposed to the modern man who is always fully upright with head held high and shoulders confidently thrown back. In addition to this, in the majority of images the fat figure 'marches' with a shorter gait or stands still (see Figure 1). Where the other figures appear to be speeding up, the fat figure halts that 'progress'. If this is insufficient to signal the decline in quality between modern and fat man, then, in the minority of images that depict the figures in clothing, it is overwhelmingly only the fat figure who is dressed, usually with a grossly distended belly spilling over a tight waistband. The somewhat Biblical allusion to the fall from grace does little to trouble the secular evolutionary narrative here. However, what it exemplifies are the multiple rhetorical devices deployed in the images to constitute fatness as devolution that are less related to the actual fatness of the body than to moral and ideological norms.

### **The obesogenic environment**

For the fat (d)evolution images to successfully illustrate the idea of fatness as devolution not only must they operate within an evolutionary logic that equates evolution with progress, but also within a cultural context that views fatness as inherently negative. It is no coincidence, therefore, that these images have emerged at a time and in places where fatness has been recast as the social problem of 'obesity', and where a particular environmental approach, that of the 'obesogenic environment', has shaped this thinking. Said to characterise life in Western societies, an obesogenic environment is one in which large numbers of people will become obese due to lack of access to spaces/facilities for physical exercise, increasingly sedentary work and leisure pursuits, urban planning that privileges car use, and most of all the high availability of 'junk' foods and caloric beverages. In recent years both anti-obesity researchers (e.g., Popkin 2009 and Roberts 2010), and government research and policy (DIUS 2007 and DH 2009) have utilised the idea of the obesogenic environment to explain the emergence of the obesity 'epidemic'.

Environmental accounts of obesity do not directly suggest that fat people are devolving. However, the explanation of why an environment becomes obesogenic is often given in evolutionary terms, an aspect which is relatively under-discussed in the critical literature on the obesogenic environment (e.g., Guthman 2009, Evans 2010, LeBesco 2011) despite its frequent repetition elsewhere. Power and Schulkin, for example, offer a typical iteration:

Human obesity is an inappropriate adaptive response to modern living conditions. The ancestral genus *Homo* evolved from scavenger-gatherers to become hunter-gatherers and eventually agriculturalists. Their descendants are now patrons of fast-food restaurants. There is a mismatch between our evolved biology and our modern

life. The advantages of fat storage in the past have become significant disadvantages today (2009, p. 11).

This kind of explanation plays a significant role in the narratives of all the books featuring fat (d)evolution images on their covers. Roberts, for example, states that the problem for today's human, 'is that you were adapted to survive on a low-energy African savannah, and not in the energy banquet of the twenty-first century' (2010 p. 50). Such arguments make indirect reference to the 'thrifty gene hypothesis' – the idea that our bodies are genetically programmed to store energy for (now non-existent) lean times. Originally proposed in the early 1960s by the geneticist James Neel (Pijl 2011) the theory is subject to contestation, but continues to exert considerable explanatory power over accounts of obesity that contend we are maladapted to life in contemporary environments (Lev-Ran 2001, Gard and Wright 2005).

Emblems of the obesogenic environment approach to obesity are clearly evident in the fat (d)evolution images. Most frequently it is symbolised by fast food – in nine of the eleven images that feature the fat figure holding something, that prop is a burger or fizzy drink. The covers of the Power and Schulkin (2009) and Roberts (2010) books also convey the sedentariness of 'modern life'. The fat figure in Power and Schulkin's illustration carries a set of car keys, while in Roberts' image there are two fat figures shown sitting down, one using a laptop computer and the other driving. The inclusion of these features could be read as an endorsement of the environmental account's ostensible provision of, 'an alternative to rhetorics of personal responsibility' (Guthman 2009, p. 187). For its advocates (for example Yancey *et al.* 2006 and Heuer *et al.* 2011) the obesogenic environment thesis has the potential to inform public health policies which shift the burden of blame for obesity away from individuals and are sensitive to structural, political and economic factors.

However, despite the apparent influence of the obesogenic environment approach, the fat (d)evolution images can also be read as reinscribing a more individualist account of obesity. In their frequent representation of the fat figures in the dual acts of both eating and standing still the images blur the line between, 'human biology...being overwhelmed by the effects of today's "obesogenic" environment' (DH 2007, p. 1) and a more prevalent notion of fat people as sinfully greedy and lazy. It is precisely this slide back into individualisation that has garnered criticism of the obesogenic environment approach. Kirkland argues that,

The environmental approach to fighting obesity is supposed to be collective, not responsabilizing. Responsibilizing individuals is not really environmental in the obvious sense of the word, after all. But because the animating problem is that poor people are fat, the focus on weight loss becomes the metric of success. The aim,

then, is to get the poor and the fat to make virtuous personal choices to combat a contaminated world (2011, p. 467).

Thus environmental accounts fall back on castigating those who cannot (or will not) be(come) thin. This is frequently justified with reference to the large percentage of people in even the most obesogenic environments who manage not to be fat (Guthman 2009). Subsequently, by conveniently disregarding any references to thrifty genes or environmental maladaptation, the ability to remain thin can be attributed to effective, rational control of one's food intake.

Barry Popkin provides a clear example of this. He argues that although, 'obesity is so widespread and intractable,' it is still the case that 'individuals can make a major difference'. How? 'Clearly, we can all make better choices that will help us to be thinner and healthier' (2009, p. 145). He then recommends eating less and eliminating caloric beverages, desserts and fried foods from one's diet. But where does this leave the fat, fizzy drink consuming man depicted on the cover of Popkin's book? His fat body becomes symptomatic not of a genetic shift in the Homo genus but of his lack of control and failure to tame his fat and sugar hungry genes. As Kirkland (2011) and Guthman (2009) suggest then, the 'obesogenic environment' is mooted, only to be constructed as something which can and should be mastered by the weight-loss oriented, wilful individual.

### **Laughing matter?**

Following this initial discussion, what can now be made of Dean Ornish's audience and its uproarious reaction to viewing the fat (d)evolution image? Given the generally apocalyptic tenor of obesity 'epidemic' discourses, and the framing of obesity as a step towards the extinction of the human race, it is perhaps curious that the fat (d)evolution images are frequently treated as comedic rather than terrifying. A possible reading of this could view laughter working as a mechanism to neutralise the threat of fatness. For example, in an examination of comedian Dawn French's performances, Hole (2003) suggests that the fat female body shifts from being 'looked-at' to being 'laughed-at' in a process which allays its threatening presence. She argues that 'the horror, fear, and anxiety which could be produced by the fat female body is diffused by making a jest about/against the fat woman' (2003, p. 321). Though the fat (d)evolution images depict male bodies, which are subject to different meanings and codes of representation (Gilman 2004, p.6), Hole's theory provides one explanation for Ornish's audience's laughter.

However, there are aspects of the images' humour that Hole's analysis cannot account for. Foremost, as the preceding discussion has implied, the images appear in contexts where the fat body is positioned as 'other' or as abject. Not only is it less

human, signalled by its positioning outside the category of modern man, but its fatness is construed as an individual failing and not as a threat to general human survival. This othering is reflected in the mode of address of the textual arguments accompanying the fat (d)evolution images. Popkin (2009), for example, employs a superficially universal mode of address, using 'we' and asking, 'is the availability of processed foods just about everywhere making *us* fat and unhealthy?' (p.3 emphasis added). However, this inclusivity belies the deeper sense in which fat people are not who 'we' are. When he later states that, 'with all the public concern over obesity we might ask why close to half of those who are obese think their body weight is not an issue' (p. 149). Here it is clear that 'we' are not 'those who are obese'. Thus, the threat of devolution is displaced from 'us' and onto the abjected fat body, meaning that 'we' can laugh with impunity at those foolish or unknowing enough to be bringing about their own demise.

Drawing on Michael Billig's (2005) social critique of laughter and ridicule it is further possible to propose a that this humour serves a disciplinary function. He argues that ridicule is used to police those who would step outside normative standards relating to social class, ethnicity, behaviour, dress and so on. 'In this way,' he states, 'disciplinary humour, in ridiculing those who fail to comply with the codes of appropriateness, stands guard over rules, which are not assumed to be funny' (2005, p. 207). Hence, a fat person, especially one devolving into a pig, is funny, but the rule that compels one to stay thin is not. Clearly in order to act as a disciplinary mechanism this type of humour will be purveyed by those who make the rules and not those who transgress them. The extent to which fat people themselves are excluded from and made the object of this laughter is perfectly exemplified by the author of the *Badass Fatass* blog in a post commenting on Ornish's TEDtalk. 'Imagine, if you will,' she asks, 'being a fat person in the audience or in a college classroom when this sort of image is put on the screen' (Withoutscene 2012). Understanding this experience as nothing less than dehumanising illustrates how punitive and far from universal Ornish's quip that 'we're kind of devolving' actually is.

### **Fat white men**

The fat (d)evolution images' ongoing construction of fat people as radically, humorously, 'other' is not only accomplished in terms of the representation of fatness. The 'fat figure' is never just fat, rather its fatness is marked by the discourses of gender, race and class underpinning the narratives of both evolutionary theory and contemporary obesity discourse. From the outset, the fat (d)evolution images are parodies of a 'march of progress' model of evolution which has been subject to intense feminist criticism for its masculinist and ethnocentric bias (Haraway 1989, Wiber 1998). Critiques of these evolutionary narratives reveal how the fully evolved, rational human is both white and male in character. Wiber (1998) contends it is almost unheard



of to see a 'march of progress' image where the final figure is not Caucasian or male and argues that,

Women, children, 'coloured' racial categories and the 'primitive' are all grist for the mill which links the adult, white, male, Euro-american with evolutionary progress. All others are coded as contrasting to some degree or other with that exemplary progress (1998, p. 108).

The parodic 'march of progress' images faithfully reproduce this central white, male figure, however, they also indicate that when a body is male and white, but also fat, it joins the ranks of those 'others' unable to achieve 'exemplary progress'.

The deployment of gendered and racialised characteristics within the fat (d)evolution images supports this othering. In all but two of the images analysed the fat man's body is exaggeratedly fat, offering a stark contrast to the slender and well-muscled figure that precedes him. The accentuation of rolls of flesh, especially on the belly, chest and buttocks has a distinctly feminising effect, such that Durgadas (1998) argues, 'fat men are automatically suspect: they are visibly, palpably soft and round, neither lean and lithe, nor robustly muscular, enjoying a physically questionable male status...fat men are already suspiciously womanish' (p. 368). While Durgadas embraces the radical potential of his gender-binary troubling body, femininity is more often constructed as an inappropriate male characteristic and operates as a means of 'discrediting' (Monaghan and Hardey 2009) or 'hobbling' (Gilman 2004) the fat man. The devolutionary character of the fat body is constructed not only in its fatness, but in its erosion of the gender binary that has produced 'progress' as a specifically masculine accomplishment.

It is not only sheer size that situates the fat figure as 'less' of a man, but other markers of gender. The images reveal marked differences in the hair patterns of the figures, namely that the fat man has often lost the body hair and beard of the modern man. There is some debate as to when and why humans evolved to be relatively hairless (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006), and the representation of a less-hairy modern man in 'march of progress' iconography is a rhetorical flourish signifying his more highly evolved state (Wiber 1998). The hairlessness of the fat figure, though, provides another opportunity to construct his gendered inferiority. The feminising effects of male body hair removal (Durgadas 1998) as well as the characterisation of hairy women as 'unfeminine', 'masculine' or even 'monstrous' (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006, p. 1-3) constitutes hairlessness as distinctly unmanly. Unless, that is, it is head hair, the significance of which has different gendered connotations. While in some contexts male baldness can be considered a sign of hyper-masculinity, the frequent depiction of the fat man in the images as bald or balding, when read in conjunction with other visual

markers of emasculation, signifies a distinct lack of vitality or more likely virility (Gilman 2004, Bell and McNaughten 2007).

The attack on fat male virility echoes McPhail's (2009) identification of male fatness as signifying a crisis in masculinity in Cold War era Canada. McPhail discusses the differences between two military inspired weight-loss and fitness programmes (the 5BX and XBX regimes) aimed at men and women during this time and notes that, 'unlike the 5BX for men, the XBX programme [for women] did not purport that physical fitness was necessary to counteract the "physical deterioration" of the nation, but rather included a page-long section on how physical fitness could help appearance' (2009, p. 1038). This suggests a specific threat to the nation posed by male, but not female, fatness that is also reflected in the fat (d)evolution images. Indeed, it is notable that the single diet book featuring a fat (d)evolution motif on its cover is a diet book for men (Harcombe 2011).

Whereas in McPhail's analysis male fatness threatens the nation, in the fat (d)evolution images it apparently threatens the species. One exception to this is Boivin's image (2005, see Figure 1) in which modern man is shown carrying a machine gun, alluding both to his militarisation and, like McPhail's ideally slender Cold War male, his readiness to defend the nation, here in the context of contemporary anxieties about Western security in the era of the 'War on Terror'. Roberts (2010) makes a similar move in his attempt to link obesity to climate change, another apocalyptic cultural anxiety (see White 2009). In both cases fears about social collapse are transposed onto the fat, white, male body and it is this which is subsequently visualised in the fat (d)evolution images. The masculinist evolutionary narratives underpinning the images produce men as the pinnacle of evolution whilst simultaneously charging them with responsibility for preventing devolution and, ultimately, species extinction.

The spectre of that extinction is further alluded to by the hue of the fat figures' skin in the images. While the figures in all the images analysed are unmistakably Caucasian, there are patterns of increasing whiteness resulting in a whiter-than-white fat figure in nine of the ten images where skin hue is represented. The significance of very pale white skin is discussed by Richard Dyer (1997) in his study of the representation of whiteness. He argues that while whiteness is the unmarked racial norm of humanity, ultra-whiteness is 'exceptional, excessive, marked' (p. 222) and can signify death, for example the 'deathly white' of a corpse, a zombie or a vampire. Such a hue can construct whiteness as blank, meaningless or pointless in a way that associates it with nihilistic anxieties about the devolution of the human race (see also White 2012).

Dyer (1997) also discusses differences of skin-tone in images of whiteness in terms of gender where invariably women are represented as 'whiter' than men of the same 'race'. In the fat (d)evolution images this enhanced whiteness may again signal

the fat man's compromised masculinity, but equally there are connotations of class in the modern man's more tanned form. Traditionally, Dyer argues, tanned white skin was an embodied outcome of having to work hard for a living. However, contemporary meanings of tanning are more likely to reverse this class schema and ascribe value to tanned skin as an outcome of healthy outdoor pursuits and perhaps travel, all purchased with a middle-class disposable income and the requisite cultural capital (Dyer 1997). The uber-white fat body thus works to signify a sedentary, indoor lifestyle, one of the key factors of the obesogenic environment. In this sense his pale white skin is another marker of his inability to rationally control or master his environment.

While the fat figure's paler skin can be acknowledged as indicating a classed hierarchy of whiteness, it does little to challenge ethnocentrism of the original 'march of progress' which envisages evolution as the story of whiteness (Wiber 1998). The manner in which fatness is marked as inferior in the images arguably universalises white standards of bodily value. Gross (2005) gives the example of prominent US fat black rap artists to illustrate a context in which, 'fatness is not viewed as a sign of lack of control but as a means by which control is attained' (cited Bell and McNaughten 2007, p. 125). Similarly Shaw (2006) argues that for diasporic African women, 'fatness is a metaphor for access to resources as well as a rebuttal of Western hegemonic efforts to decorporalize the black body' (p. 79). In both cases fatness fails to signify devolution and instead offers both black men and women access to the symbols of progress denied to them by ethnocentric and masculinist constructions of evolution.

## **Conclusions**

Although the eighteen fat (d)evolution images analysed here vary in their individual features they all engage the tropes of evolution and the obesity 'epidemic' in order to impart a message that fatness is, in different ways, deviant and destructive. While few may take seriously the superficial implication that obesity will end the human race as we know it, and others may dispute that these images will have any consequential influence, they nevertheless offer a fascinating insight into the elaborate and complex stories about obesity circulating in contemporary Western societies.

By parodying the 'march of progress' the fat (d)evolution images stage fatness as a threat to evolution in a very particular way, making the absence of women and non-white people in them far from coincidental. What fatness is figured to threaten is the very masculine and 'civilised' ability to master oneself and one's environment, hence as women and racialised 'others' have never symbolically possessed these abilities, it is not their fatness that is troubling. As in McPhail's (2009) analysis of obesity in Cold War era Canada, fatness is constituted in the fat (d)evolution images as a particular response to wider societal anxieties. Fatness in the images can thus be read, not as a general threat to humanity, but as specifically threatening the dominance of Western,

imperial/militarised, white, middle-class, reproductive, masculinity. The ostensible fear of devolution masks a profound conservatism and fear of progressive change specific to the historical and geographical contexts in which the fat (d)evolution images have emerged.

Ultimately, the fat (d)evolution images are so compelling because as images they appear to offer such a simple disciplinary warning, 'we're kind of devolving', but in fact have to tangle with some of Western culture's core binaries to do so, exposing their limitations in the process. If in an obesogenic environment we must 'curb our instincts' (Pijl 2011, p. 165) to remain thin, how can thinness also equate to naturalness where fat is cast as unnatural and pathological? And if the fat man is less than Man, but not quite woman (or pig), is gender still strictly binary? As Donna Haraway notes, 'the tools for producing the body as a narrative and as text are themselves complex and multiple, requiring dense description and critical interrogation' (1989, p. 188). The more these processes are revealed and understood, the greater the possibility that new and better stories about fatness will evolve.

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