In *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, Christopher E. Forth offers an extensive and detailed overview of the meaning and constitution of „fat“ throughout history, from Graeco-Roman times until today, a period regulated by modernity and neo-liberalism. With this publication, Forth claims to be complementing the scholarship on fat by stressing its „materiality, virality and animality“ (p. 15). He asks his readers to „think about fat in terms of touch, taste, and smell as well as sight“ (p. 13), not only in terms of its social perception and cultural representation. And indeed, in the realm of „fat history,“ a term used by other historians of fat such as Peter N. Stearns and Elena Levy-Navarro, the study of the material history of fat has remained in the margins of the larger cultural history of fatness, as provided for instance by Levy-Navarro, Stearns, Hillel Schwartz, Amy Erdman Farrell and Sander Gilman. With this specifically material history of fat and fatness, Forth continues his work on the materiality of fat, which was preceded by the edited volume *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, co-edited with Alison Leitch in 2014.¹

Forth aims to establish a parallel between fat – its materiality and the concurrent conceptualization – and human and embodied fatness. Human fatness, following the argument in this book, has been stigmatized due to imagined similarities it bears to the perception of its materiality. Throughout ten chapters, Forth mainly illustrates the ambiguity of fat, literally the „stuff“ of life, of fertility and growth, but also the „stuff“ of decay and death (pp. 38, 192). He bridges fat-as-material and fat-as-human-characteristic through the analysis of an emotional response that supposedly unites the conceptualizations of both the material and its embodiment: disgust. Disgust, he suggests, can serve as a „conceptual springboard“ (p. 283) for thinking fat, and is caused by the viscosity, lubricity, sensuality, and unctuousness of fat. Here, he clearly builds on Sara Ahmed’s work on disgust in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), in which she establishes the ambivalence of disgust, „involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent.“² Fat has historically been categorized as „repellent,“ because it „materializes ambivalence about the fact that humans are embodied“ (Forth, p. 12), the fact that human bodies are subject to organic (de)generation. This is a convincing argument, which Forth elaborates on in his discussion of fat, „the agricultural imagination“ and its intersections with „vegetation and animal husbandry“ (p. 38) that are projected onto the human body.

Forth’s fat history dates back to pre-modern times and disturbs a common procedure when historicizing fat and fatness, namely the division between fat stigma before and after modernity. Levy-Navarro has argued that „fat […] has played an important role in the development of modernity in the West.“³ Reciprocally, modernity has also played an important role in the development of fat stigma, as exemplified by Farrell in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (2011): „The development of fat stigma […] related both to cultural anxieties that emerged during the modern period over consumer excess and, importantly, to prevailing ideas about race, civilization, and evolution.“⁴ Indeed, numerous historical publications are devoted to the ways in which the current „lipophobia“ (Forth, p. 242) in the western world (with particular interest to the U.S.) emerged from developments in culture and society since the late nineteenth century. Farrell argues that until this period, „fatness was often linked to a generalized sense of prosperity, distinction, and high status“, an observation that is shared by Laura Fraser in *Losing It: America’s Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds on it* (1997), or by Levy-

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Navarro’s intriguing analysis of the fatness of Shakespeare’s dramatic character Sir John Falstaff. While historians of fat, including Forth, rightly mark the late nineteenth century as a turning point for the conceptualization and perception of fat and fatness, Forth insists that this does not suggest a positive connotation of a time “before;” “the cultural history of fat in the West does not reveal eras of history when fat, fatness and fattening were valued without qualification” (p. 56). He aims to offer this qualification by introducing a material history of fat to the reading of embodied fatness. This endeavor is this publication’s distinctive offer to the field of fat history: The “agricultural imagination” of fat (chapter 2) transitions to its projection onto the fat bodies of philosophers (chapter 3), saints (chapter 4), and kings (chapter 5). Research on fatness and masculinity is still scarce, and Forth’s occasional focus on the perception of male fat certainly offers new perspectives on the gendering of fatness in western history.

One gap in fat history that Forth does not stress as much as its neglect of material and pre-modern history, is the “imperial and racial subtext” to fat and the “contemporary tendencies to demonize corpulence” (p. 209). Predominantly, his writing looks at fat in the West, but it also offers space to the intersections of fatness with imperial and national fantasies of the West. According to Sabrina Strings in Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia (2019), historically and today, these fantasies have also been played out through “fat phobia and thin fetishism” that are interrelated with corporeal ideals of whiteness. Forth specifically refers to an “imagined purity of whiteness” (p. 196) that has relied on the fear of contamination by a fat, and consequently non-white Other (p. 203). In the chapters dedicated to these intersections, Forth’s fat history is the most convincing, as it takes a relevant step towards acknowledging the role of whiteness in historical and current expressions of “lipophobia.”

Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life proposes “that the building blocks of our contemporary anti-fat imagery have some of their sources in the distant past, long before the ‘war of obesity’ was declared” (p. 283). There is much more to discover though, the spotlights on fat masculinity, the intriguing parallel of the materiality of fat and the perception of human fatness, in addition to the interplay between fat stigma, disgust and imperialism qualify this book as an essential reading for the study of fat, bodies, race and gender.

