



Culture, food, and the body

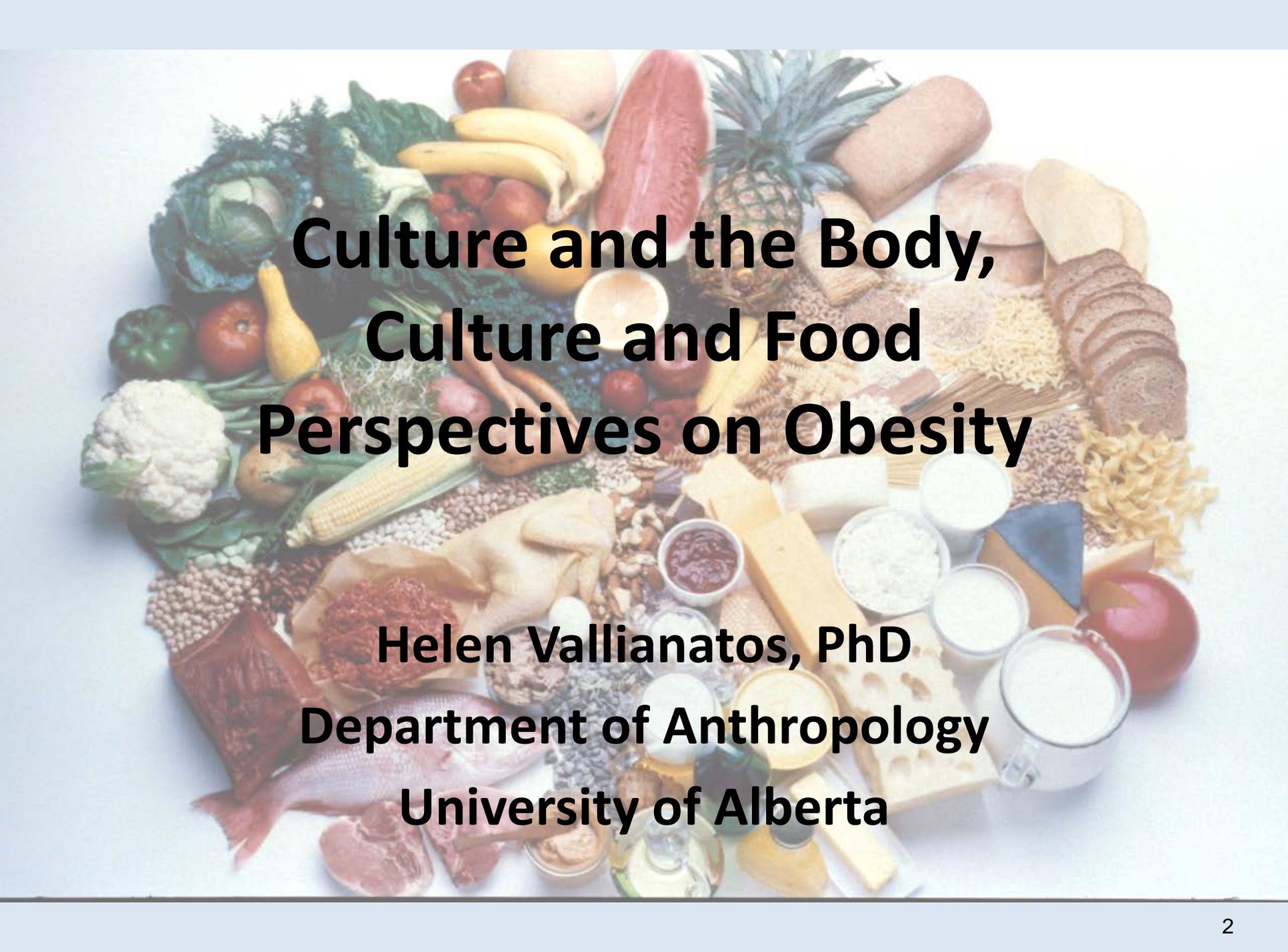
5As Team learning modules

Culture is a key part of how people understand food, their body, and their social surroundings. People's cultural background might need to be considered when discussing lifestyle, food choices, and how the body is viewed. For example, different cultures may hold very different ideas about how a male or female body should look at different times in a person's life. Culture can also impact a person's family structure and who it is within the household that makes decisions about shopping and meal plans, in-laws for instance may be making key food choices, or one spouse may be in charge and the other have very little input. Food also has cultural meaning; food taboos, special events, or the relation between illnesses and certain food categories could influence a person's choices.

This session's speaker is Dr. Helen Vallianatos, a cultural anthropologist who has worked with Edmonton's immigrant community around the subject of obesity.

This module contains:

- A link to the video culture, food, and the body
 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgjehj_3-w
- A PowerPoint presentation (page 2-19) that covers the following topics:
 - What food is in different cultural contexts
 - A discussion of how food can carry particular social meanings
 - The social role of food within cultures
 - The different ways that cultural groups can conceptualize their bodies
 - A discussion on bodily aesthetics
 - A discussion on the value of fatness and cultural examples of how fat is understood in different groups.
- A discussion guide for further reflection (page 20)
- A resource list for additional information (page 21)



**Culture and the Body,
Culture and Food
Perspectives on Obesity**

**Helen Vallianatos, PhD
Department of Anthropology
University of Alberta**

What is food?

CRICK-ETTES

- What one culture may consider food, another sees as inedible
 - How do you define food, non-food?
- Food preferences: learned or reflect “wisdom of the body”?
 - Consider arguments around taste for salty, sweet foods...

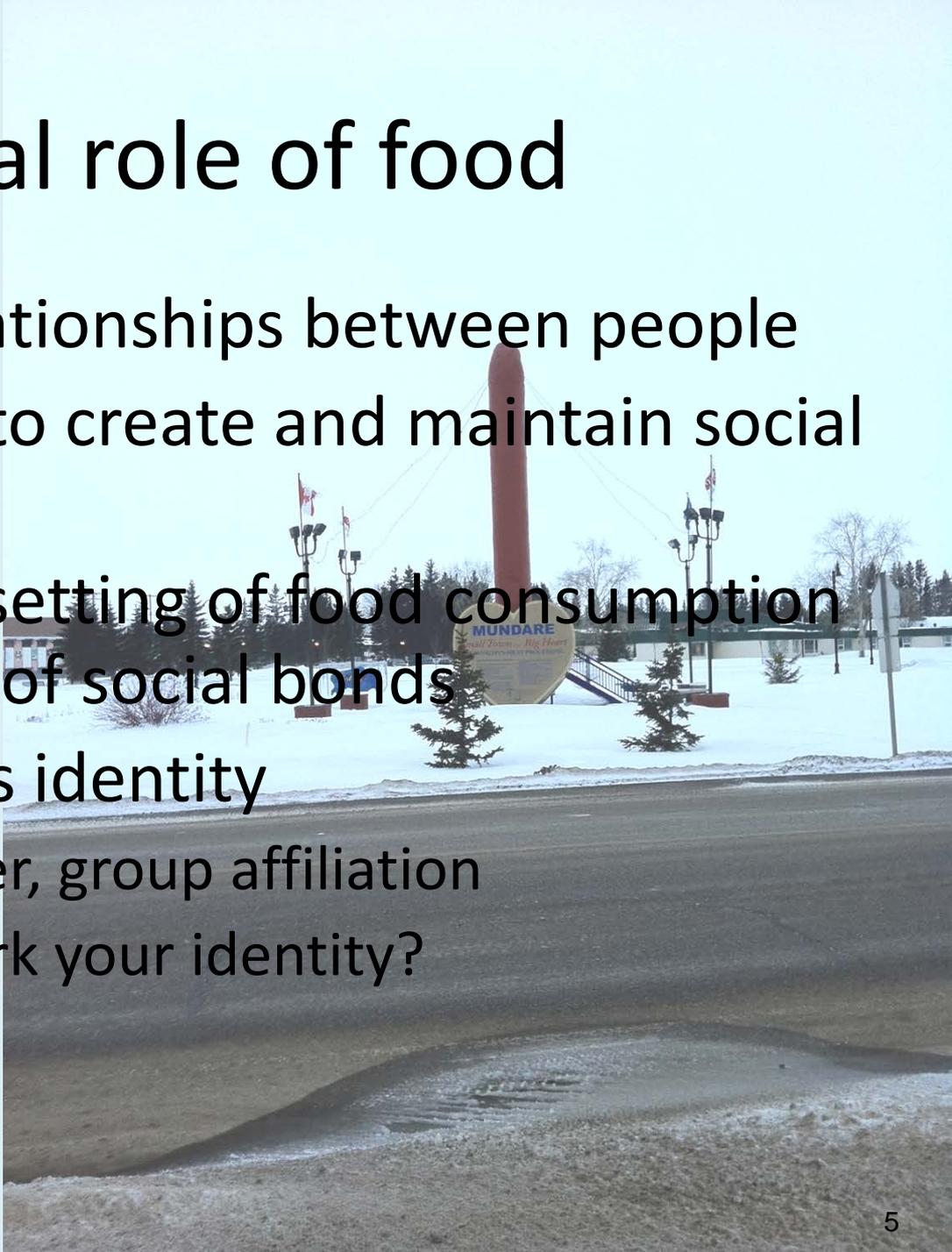
Bacon & Cheese

Cultural Meanings of Food

- Food is cultural
 - Learn what to eat, how to eat, how to procure and prepare
 - Symbolic (e.g. status marker, identity)
 - Food taboos & sacred foods
 - Geophagy & pica
 - Food as medicine
 - Drug foods
- Cuisine
 - foods & cooking methods of a culture

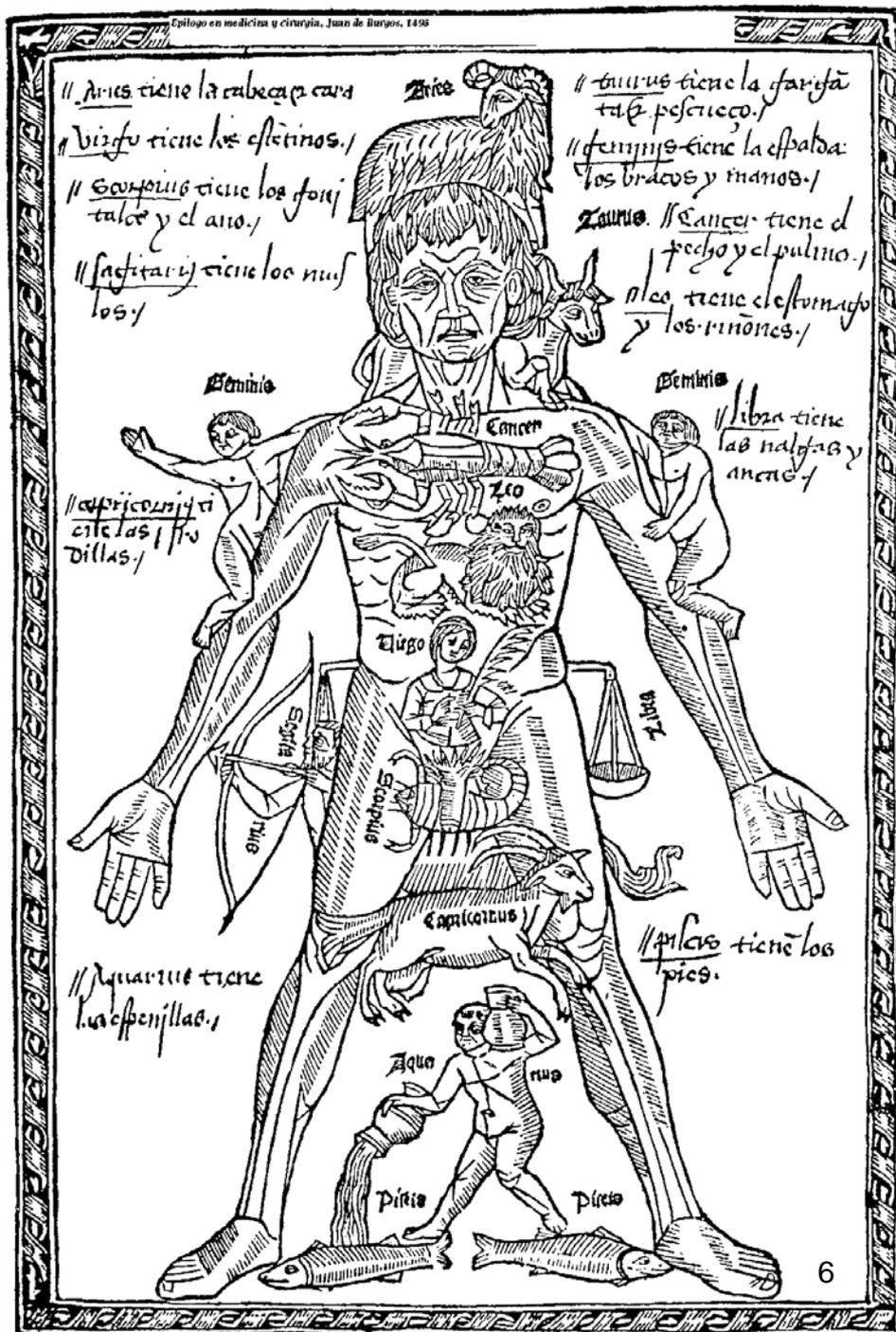
The social role of food

- Food expresses relationships between people
- Food sharing used to create and maintain social bonds
- Kinds of food, and setting of food consumption symbolize strength of social bonds
- Food also expresses identity
 - Social status, gender, group affiliation
 - How does food mark your identity?



Thinking About Bodies

- How do you conceptualize your body?
- Alternate ideas:
 - Plumbing/mechanic metaphors
 - Permeable bodies – transient boundaries

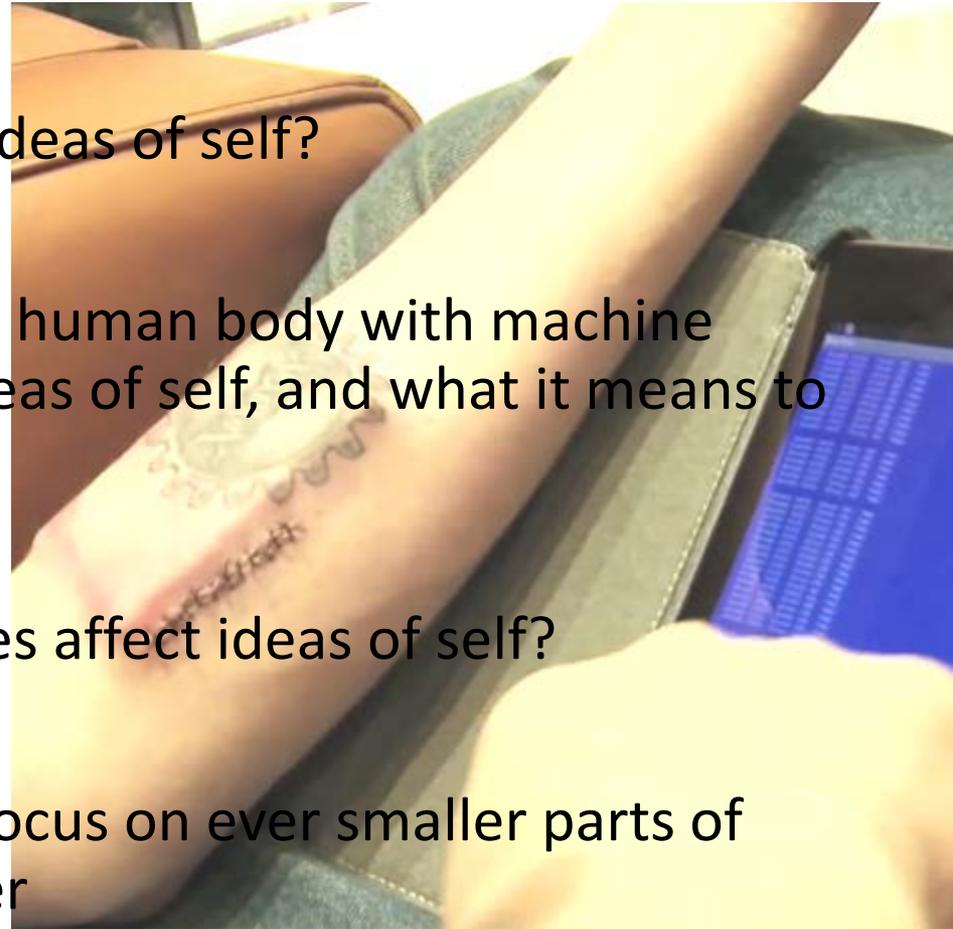


Multiple Bodies

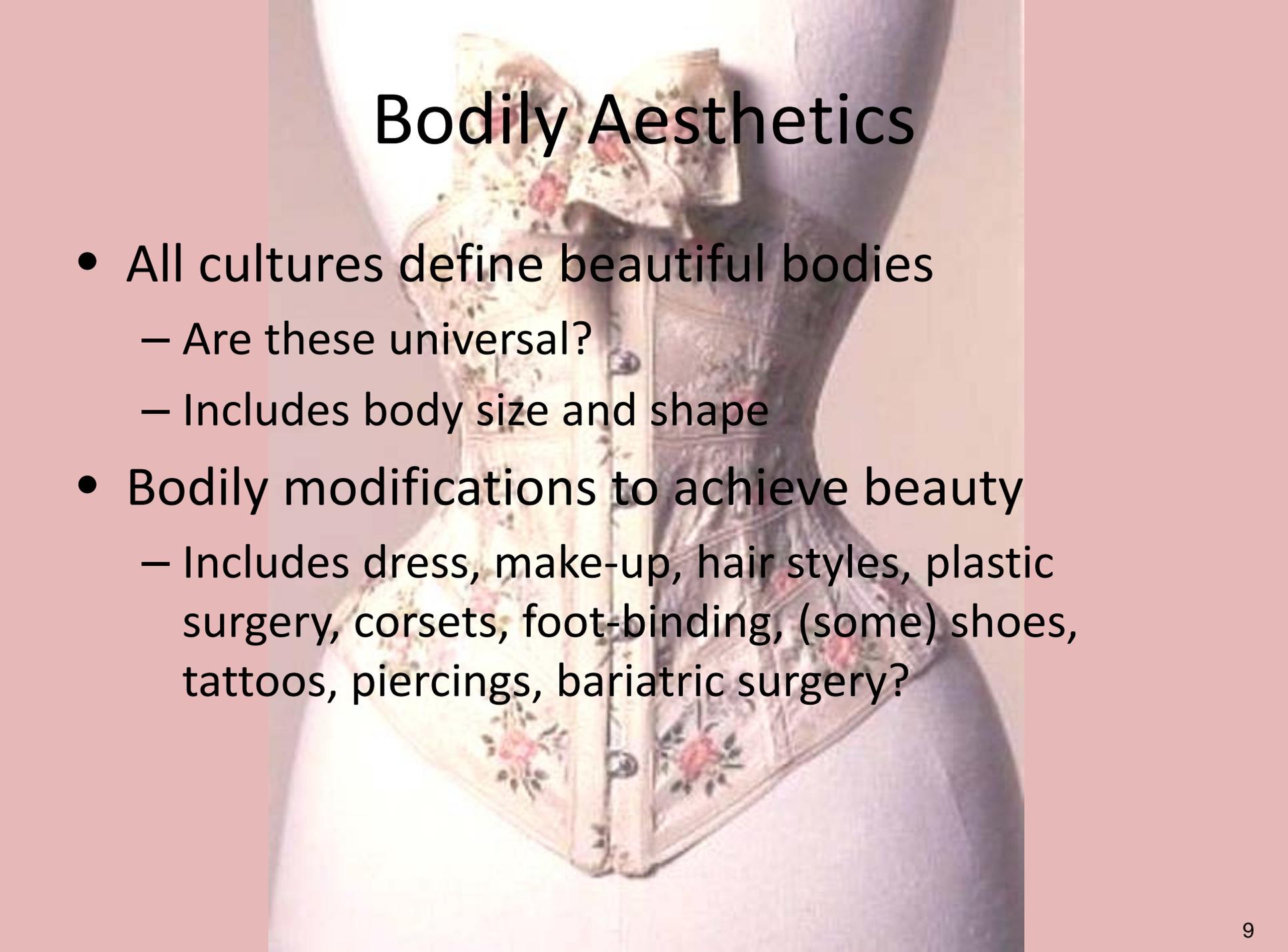
- Individual Body
 - Lived experience of the body-self
 - Can't assume that what constitutes body and how these elements interact is the same cross-culturally
 - Site of reflection (i.e. embody culture) and resistance
- Social body
 - Unique to a particular time/space/culture thus provides way of making sense of bodily experiences
 - Communicate social place through body
 - Body as symbol
 - How do different ideas of time influence bodily experiences and in turn, health?
- Body politic
 - Social structures regulating/controlling bodies

Other Bodies

- Composite body
 - How do transplants affect ideas of self?
- Cyborg body
 - How does the fusion of the human body with machine parts alter body images, ideas of self, and what it means to be human?
- Virtual body
 - How do disembodied bodies affect ideas of self?
- Medical body
 - Reductive gaze on body – focus on ever smaller parts of body in non-holistic manner



Bodily Aesthetics

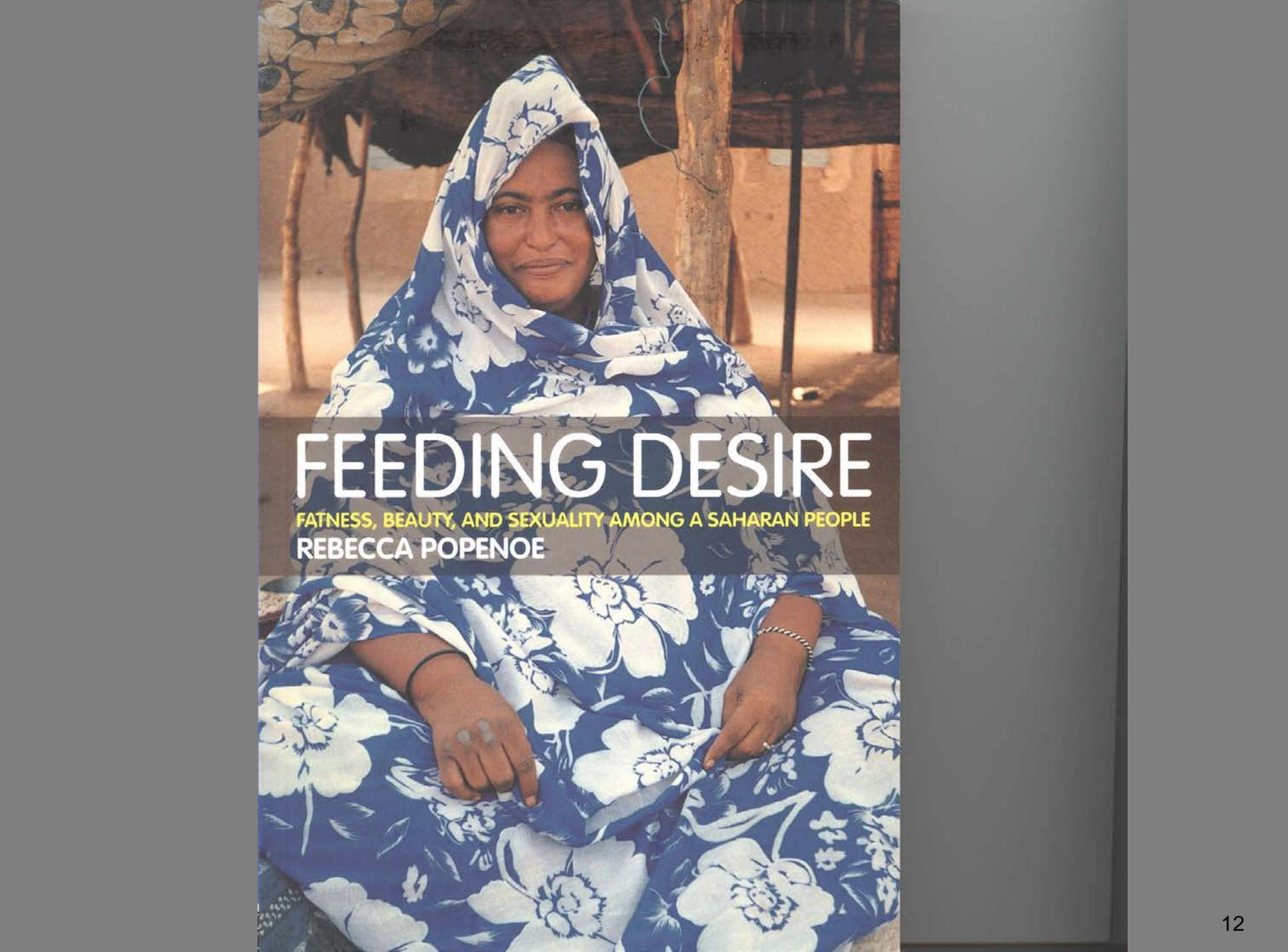


- All cultures define beautiful bodies
 - Are these universal?
 - Includes body size and shape
- Bodily modifications to achieve beauty
 - Includes dress, make-up, hair styles, plastic surgery, corsets, foot-binding, (some) shoes, tattoos, piercings, bariatric surgery?



Value of Fatness

- Most societies have valued fatness
- Language connotations
 - Fatness versus obesity
- Meanings of fatness
 - Beauty and sexual attractiveness
 - Health
 - Happiness & success
 - Life stage
 - Place within community
 - Degree
- Gendered meanings
- Key point: meaning of fatness varies by culture



FEEDING DESIRE

FATNESS, BEAUTY, AND SEXUALITY AMONG A SAHARAN PEOPLE

REBECCA POPENOE

Fatness among the Azawagh

- Fat is sexy, beautiful – gendered meaning
- Womanly bodies
 - Sexy, beautiful, subdued, controlled
 - Arouse male desire, suppress women's desire
 - Social status
 - Bring honour to family
 - Note fattening seen to mature girl at younger age, thus making her ready for marriage – fattening turns her into a woman
 - Closed, still, wet inside but dry outside
- To understand gendered meanings of fatness, must place is social context
 - Family, religion, society
 - Social change

Fattening Process

- Time and the body
 - With loss of first two baby teen, start
- Force fed
 - Start with milky porridge
 - At puberty, balls of couscous swallowed with aid of water
 - Never is the mother the supervisor—instead, grandmother, (paternal) aunt, mother-in-law if married
- Associated behavioural changes
- Wealthier girls do this today, and if think she may have a harder time finding a husband

Moralizing Fat & Fatness

- Historical variations
 - Sin of gluttony
 - Relationship between social class and size
- Policing fat bodies
 - How is fat and fatness judged in our society?
 - Health as moral judgment...thin is good
- Critical obesity researchers, fat studies scholars, challenge such judgments on weight, fat and fatness + consider social contexts (i.e. do not focus blame on individual)

Fat as Performance or Objects?

- Across time:
 - Fat circus lady
 - Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus
 - Celebrity wasting syndrome
- “Positive, realistic, and even sympathetic images of fat women are few and far between. Fat women are still vilified and mocked in popular culture and theatre, most often used as a source of humor or farce.” (Jester 2009:252)





Lewis et al. (2011:1352)

Experiences of Stigma

Direct stigma

Verbal abuse and being laughed at when exercising

Verbal abuse when eating in public or buying groceries at the supermarket

Verbal abuse when using public transport

Teasing and bullying at school

Discrimination within the workplace and within healthcare settings

Environmental stigma

Unsuitable seating in workplaces, medical settings, cinemas, public transport, aeroplanes

Seatbelts on aeroplanes

Lack of 'plus size' clothing, particularly exercise clothing and sports uniforms

Exercise and gym equipment and facilities that do not accommodate for bigger people

Indirect stigma

Feeling that friends and family members are embarrassed to be seen with participants

Fearing public humiliation if they exercise in public spaces

Fearing public humiliation if they eat in public spaces

Feeling watched and judged when eating or buying food in public spaces

Feeling ignored by customer service staff

Friends and family members who criticise their own weight in front of participants

Friends and family members who ridicule other fat people in front of participants



Ferraro & Holland (2002)

Health outcomes of stigmatization

- Found discrepancies between anthropometric measures and labeling as obese:
 - 17% respondents obese, but 23.3% classified as obese
 - “false negatives”: ~19% with BMI >30 not classified as obese
 - “false positives”: ~12% with BMI <30 were classified as obese
- Factors shaping physician’s diagnosis:



Applications for Practice

- Health at every size
 - Challenge equation that weight = health
 - Do not ask people to control what is uncontrollable
 - Prevent body neglect/abuse, not obesity
- Challenge focus on individual and recognize role of social structures and histories in shaping contemporary individual/social bodies
- Cultural variations in ideas on what is a health, attractive body
 - Vary by age, gender, etc.

Discussion guide

This is a guide for questions and topics to consider after viewing Dr. Vallianatos' video and slide show on the topic of Culture, Food, and the Body. These questions can be discussed in a group or on your own.

1. **Please take a moment on your own and consider what are the key messages you took from the speaker today** (tips, messages, tools).
 - Of those tools and tips – how do you see yourself applying it in your practice?
 - Was anything surprising in the talk? Is there anything you disagree with, why?
 - What cultural groups do you serve at your clinics / have you ever had to deal with a cultural barrier in your practice?
 - How can you address the connection between culture and food, or culture and the body during your weight management visits? Is this even necessary?
 - Is there anything you would like to learn more about on this topic?
 - In what ways was this talk relevant to your current practice?

2. **Goal Setting**
 - Take a few moments of quiet time to come up with your own goal concerning a change you feel you can implement in your practice regarding patient culture.
 - Can you anticipate difficulties with achieving this goal?
 - Are you confident you can reach their goals?

Resources

Books

- Kulick, D. & Meneley, A. (Eds.) 2005. *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*. New York: Tarcher-Penguin.
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Articles

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