

# ‘Laugh and Grow Fat’<sup>1</sup>: Resistance, Complicity, Fat Bodies and Community Amongst Rural Women in Interwar Western Australia, 1934–1939

Jessie Matheson  
University of Melbourne

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## Abstract

In 1934 rural Western Australian women began writing letters into the women’s pages of the *Western Mail*. These letter writers quickly formed a community—the self-proclaimed ‘Virgilians’ of ‘Virgilians’ Friendly Corner’. The letters of ‘The Corner’ suggest new avenues for the ways in which public women-only spaces can be understood, particularly in contexts that are coded as conservative. In its study of the fat women who made up a significant portion of the Virgilian community, this article finds that the social and cultural conditions of ‘Virgilians’ Friendly Corner’ allowed these women to create a space to share their experiences of their non-conforming bodies. These stories often resisted, but would also sometimes reinforce, dominant cultural narratives about their bodies. This demonstrates the ways in which these kinds of women-only public spaces do not fit comfortably into traditional radical/conservative binaries, suggesting that they should be redefined by this ambivalence.

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1 My thanks to Joy Damousi and Mary Tomsic who offered invaluable advice on early drafts of this article. This research was undertaken during my PhD candidature at the University of Melbourne, in partnership with Museums Victoria as part of the ‘The Invisible Farmer Project’ (ARC Linkage LP160100555). Thanks also to the two anonymous referees for their helpful feedback. Teach ‘Em, ‘Laugh and Grow Fat’, *Western Mail*, 13 June 1935.

On a cool, sunny autumn day in 1935 in the Western Australian wheatbelt, a woman who went by the penname of ‘Wheat Ears’ wrote into the women’s pages of the *Western Mail*. She was fantasising about meeting the editor of the pages, ‘Virgilia’. The trip to Perth would be difficult for her, she reasoned—she was ‘outsized’ and dreaded the hostile looks she received when moving through busy public spaces and on public transport. It made her ‘blue’ just to think of it. She wrote her thoughts in a public letter, addressed to ‘Virgilia’ and her fellow readers. If she ever did visit, she joked, ‘[you] couldn’t miss me even if you wanted to, there is so much of me!’<sup>2</sup> Yet the experiences of ‘outsized’, or fat, women like ‘Wheat Ears’ have often been missed by historians.

In 1934 rural Western Australian women, mostly white farming women, began writing letters into the women’s pages of the *Western Mail* in what became known as ‘Virgilians’ Friendly Corner’. ‘The Corner’ was enthusiastically adopted and soon became a fixture in the newspaper, with a community of dedicated contributors, many of whom wrote in for decades. ‘Wheat Ears’ was one of the first women to write regularly to ‘The Corner’; many readers wrote back to applaud her recipes, her poetic reflections on life on the wheatbelt, and, significantly, what they termed her ‘laugh and grow fat’ mentality.<sup>3</sup> Soon other women began sharing their experiences of their fat bodies in public spaces and their own ideas about what it meant to be a fat woman. In doing so, these women both resisted and perpetuated many of the dominant cultural narratives of conforming femininity that governed Australian cultural ideals throughout the interwar period. As a public space that was coded as an extension of the private home, and as an overwhelmingly conservative space that accommodated many radical ideas, ‘The Corner’ undermines assumptive public/private and conservative/radical binaries. This article will explore ‘The Corner’ as a space where women both resisted and sometimes reinforced popular (mis)conceptions about women’s bodies—in particular, fat bodies.

In its early years ‘The Corner’ became a space where women with large bodies began to share their experiences. Usually identifying themselves as ‘O.S.’ (outsized), these women used ‘The Corner’ to reflect on their common experiences as ‘O.S.’ women. They often would air their dismay and disillusionment with the disjuncture between dominant cultural narratives

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2 Wheat Ears, ‘The Virgilian’, *Western Mail*, 4 April 1935.

3 Zora, ‘Camp Life’, *Western Mail*, 4 July 1935.

about women whose body size fell outside of the arbitrary ideal and what they knew about their own non-conforming bodies. Others, like 'Wheat Ears', found joy and humour in their bodies and used their space in 'The Corner' to express this. By undertaking a detailed textual analysis of the letters of these women and how they responded to this perceived disjuncture, this article suggests that the 'O.S.'-identifying women of 'The Corner' should be incorporated into a 'pre-history' of the 'fat activist' movements that began in the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> It analyses three key letters, which formed part of a much larger, vibrant world of 'O.S.' women sharing their experiences. By taking a look at how women experienced and responded to dominant interwar discourses of the fat body, this article suggests that histories of fat, resisting bodies must go beyond studying sites of explicit resistance and incorporate what Jennifer Jones refers to as a 'quiet form of activism'—sites of personal resistance and community solidarity.<sup>5</sup> The 'O.S.' women of 'The Corner' offer a rare insight into how popular discourse surrounding fat bodies was experienced by people with these bodies. It also represents the quiet resistance to these discourses that preceded movements of explicit fat activism, modern identity politics, and body positivity rhetoric.

## Finding Rural Australia in Fat History

Interdisciplinary fat studies has been growing steadily since 2004, when early conferences in the field were first held in the United States.<sup>6</sup> However, these studies have been largely based in the social sciences. Histories of fatness have been less pervasive and tend to situate themselves in four categories. First, there are those studies that theorise 'obesity' as a rising social problem of which contemporary culture is the pinnacle or take a pitying look at fat-bodied people.<sup>7</sup> Second are activist histories of early fat liberation movements such as *The Fat Underground*.<sup>8</sup> Third are histories

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4 Nina Mackert and Jürgen Martschukat, 'Introduction: Fat Agency', eds. Nina Mackert and Jürgen Martschukat, *Body Politics*, 5, no. 3 (2015): 10.

5 Jennifer Jones, *Country Women and the Colour Bar: Grassroots Activism and the Country Women's Association* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015), xi.

6 Marilyn Wann, 'Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution', in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther D Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), xi, doi.org/10.1177/0959353510396340.

7 For example, see Georges Vigarello, *The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity*, trans. C Jon Delogu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2015.1041332.

8 For example, see Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, 'Introduction', in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 4, doi.org/10.1177/0959353510396340.

of fat oppression, such as those of dieting or of commercialised beauty.<sup>9</sup> Finally, there are those studies that seek to locate different attitudes to fatness across time, thus exposing the ways in which contemporary notions of ‘fat’, ‘obesity’ and ‘health’ are culturally contingent and undermining an assumption that there is a naturalness to fat stigma or an ideal ‘healthy’ body.<sup>10</sup> While fitting most comfortably with the latter categories, this article takes a different approach. It suggests that resistance/oppression dichotomies do not reflect the embodied experiences of fat people, particularly women.<sup>11</sup> It also suggests that within cultures of fat stigma, women find creative (and often covert) languages of resistance, yet may also be complicit in the perpetuation of that which seeks to oppress their bodily autonomy. Elena Levy-Navarro has termed this approach a ‘fattening’ of history—locating sites of joy and exuberance in histories of fat people, which may ‘sustain’ modern scholarship.<sup>12</sup> There is something inherently linked to queer theory in this stance; as a study of non-conforming bodies and of questions of assimilation, a fat history suggests challenging the natural state of idealised thinness or notions of ‘normal’ body sizes.<sup>13</sup> Much as heterosexuality and history are rendered indistinguishable from one another by the former’s supposed naturalness (as Eve Sedgwick has suggested), ‘average-sized’ bodies represent a central assumption of most histories.<sup>14</sup> Levy-Navarro proposes that fat histories should both challenge the unnaturalness of the fat body and offer new ways toward exploring relationships with bodies.<sup>15</sup>

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9 For example, see Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

10 For example, see Laura Fraser, ‘The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States’, in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 11–14, doi.org/10.1177/0959353510396340; or the recent uncomfortable work on the pre-history of anti-fat attitudes: Christopher E Forth, *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019).

11 Elena Levy-Navarro, ‘Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go From Here?’, in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 20, doi.org/10.1177/0959353510396340. This includes discussion of early modern poet Ben Jonson and is a good example of this approach.

12 *Ibid.*, 15.

13 Indeed, histories of fat liberation and queer politics are also entwined. See Zora Simic, ‘Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History’, in *Fat Sex: New Directions in Theory and Activism*, eds. Caroline Walters, Helen Hester, and Meredith Jones (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 15–37, doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2016.1094979.

14 Eve Sedgwick in Levy-Navarro, ‘Fattening Queer History’, 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 17.

Little work has been done on fat resistance that precedes the explicit 'fat activist' movements of the late twentieth century. Very little work has been done on the history of Australian women's fat bodies.<sup>16</sup> Histories of 'fat activism', in its various forms, must find ways to look beyond explicit languages of resistance.<sup>17</sup> This article will explore the ways in which more covert, and therefore more ambivalent, communities of women developed around strikingly similar principles to fat liberation movements of sharing their experiences and their stories about their bodies. It stresses the contingency of fat experiences by centring on the ways in which Western Australian interwar culture, and the physical characteristics of a large and profoundly isolated state, influenced women's bodily experiences. These communities were not coded as radical, but nevertheless implicitly questioned hegemonic and patriarchal assumptions about idealised femininity.

'Fat' is not a universal experience; discourses of fat stigma vary more significantly than is often presumed and are reflections of particular cultural conditions. The letters to 'The Corner' on which this article focuses are an expression of the very specific cultural context of interwar Western Australia, which, in many respects, was contending with its status as a newly established (white) 'frontier' and with oncoming waves of modernity and migration.<sup>18</sup> The dominant historiographical question of Western Australia is, arguably, the extent to which 'consensus' can be understood as the primary ideological goal of Western Australians in the interwar period.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Bolton argues that the particular cultural context of Western Australia as a highly isolated part of Australia and the British Empire led to a situation whereby solidarity, or 'consensus', was prioritised over any discussion of division or tension. While, he argued, this created a situation whereby the dominant ideological position was

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16 Australian fat theorists have made significant contributions to transnational approaches to fat studies. Simic's 'Fat as a Feminist Issue: A History' is a good example of transnational approaches to histories of fat activism. Samantha Murray's *The 'Fat' Female Body* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008) on contemporary fat female embodiment has significant implications for fat histories.

17 Samantha Murray discusses this in the contemporary context. See Samantha Murray, '(Un/Be) Coming out? Rethinking Fat Politics', *Social Semiotics*, 15, no. 2 (2005): 153–63, doi.org/10.1080/10350330500154667.

18 An exemplar of this cultural shift is the post-war group settlement schemes. For greater discussion on this, see Mark Brayshay and John Selwood, 'Dreams, Propaganda and Harsh Realities: Landscapes of Group Settlement in the Forest Districts of Western Australia in the 1920s', *Landscape Research*, 27, no. 1 (2002): 81–101, doi.org/10.1080/01426390220110784.

19 Geoffrey Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In*, 2nd ed. (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1994), xviii.

unusually accommodating to different views and experiences, particularly in terms of issues relating to class, it also led to a more extreme ostracisation of anyone who resisted these assimilative practices or was perceived as disruptive.<sup>20</sup> While some historians have challenged this consensus theory, my study of letters to 'The Corner' finds they were likely an expression of this idiosyncratic type of in-group.<sup>21</sup> They demonstrated both the flexibility and the conservatism Bolton describes. Virgilians fashioned themselves as a welcoming group that encouraged debate; however, the responses to more radical letters both from 'Virgilia' and from other contributors suggest that women who did not conform were alienated. This particular consensus culture created conditions where more expansive discussions about non-conforming bodies could, at least partially, thrive.

'The Corner' is both an illustration of the unique cultural context of Western Australia in this period and of how women on the land, Australia-wide, experienced global and local pressures. It is an example of the kinds of communities many rural women constructed in response to these various pressures. Letters to 'The Corner' are also a reflection of a culture of rural press that was developing across Australia and, in particular, of women's pages within these newspapers, which were offering new spaces for women on the land to express their experiences. They also add to a study of the ways in which anxieties surrounding the health of Empire was reflected on anxieties over fattening bodies.<sup>22</sup> Studies of this very particular moment of transition, in which Western Australia was contending with post-war modernisation, may be informed by studies of fatness, as anxiety over fatness is often tied to anxieties over moments of transition and pressure where discourses of morality, consumption and cohesion thrive.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Ibid., xix.

21 For discussion of the reaction against the consensus theory, see Jenny Gregory, 'Western Australia Between the Wars: The Consensus Myth', *Studies in Western Australian History*, 11 (1990): 1–16.

22 Elena Levy-Navarro, 'Changing Conceptions of the Fat Body in Western History', in *Historicising Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2010), 2, doi.org/10.3366/soma.2012.0069.

23 Ibid.

## The *Western Mail* and the Women's Pages

In July 1934 a young Mary Durack took her first paid writing assignment as 'Virgilia', the conductor of 'Women's World', the women's section of the *Western Mail*.<sup>24</sup> Durack went on to become a prominent writer and historian, and as a member of one of Western Australia's oldest farming families she was aligned strongly with the public image of the *Western Mail*. The newspaper was an early addition to the fledgling Western Australian newspaper and literary traditions, firmly linked to the dominant ideologies of local newspaper magnates that the future of Western Australia would be reliant on primary industries.<sup>25</sup> Like most Western Australian newspapers in this period, it perpetuated a conservative yet optimistic vision of the future whereby 'the public and private spheres of human life merged and conformity to social norms and expectations presupposed personal happiness and material well-being'.<sup>26</sup> In this way, it distinguished itself from those publications that featured more diverse political voices and technology, such as the wireless radio that was beginning to host more varied visions of Australia's future.<sup>27</sup> A focus on primary industries presupposed an audience of nuclear families that were tied to visions of closer settlement farming and mining. Most of the newspaper was aimed at men; the women's pages imagined their wives as the audience and had a decidedly domestic focus. Within these pages, there is little sense of the growing connections between Western Australian feminists, who were increasingly using print and radio to develop their networks across the state in this period.<sup>28</sup>

Durack's initial edition represented a fairly standard collection of recipes and beauty tips that did little to distinguish itself from other suburban-focused women's columns. However, coupled with an opening article by 'Virgilia' on the pleasures of country life was a call: 'country women are

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24 Brenda Niall, *True North: The Story of Mary and Elizabeth Durack* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2012), 59.

25 Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile, *The Gate of Dreams: The 'Western Mail' Annuals, 1897–1955* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990), 13.

26 *Ibid.*, 11.

27 Jeannine Baker, 'Woman to Woman: Australian Feminists' Embrace of Radio Broadcasting, 1930s–1950s', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 32, no. 93 (2017): 292–308, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1407643; Diane Kirkby, "'Those Knights of the Pen and Pencil": Women Journalists and Cultural Leadership of the Women's Movement in Australia and the United States', *Labour History*, 104, (May 2013): 81–100, doi.org/10.5263/labourhistory.104.0081, are both good examples of the progressive public communication spaces of the interwar period, and the opportunities they represented to feminists.

28 Baker, 'Woman to Woman', 295.

invited to send in short paragraphs of interesting happenings which they think will appeal to other readers'.<sup>29</sup> At this time, the *Western Mail* was still one of the only forms of contact many women in remote districts had outside of their immediate families.<sup>30</sup> 'Virgilians' Friendly Corner' hoped to reach out to a new generation of farming families, many of whom were beneficiaries of various new farm settlement schemes that were established in Western Australia during the interwar period.<sup>31</sup> It was hoped that 'The Corner' would serve to 'foster friendships between lonely people and to provide a medium of exchange of ideas'.<sup>32</sup> The popularity of the section soon surpassed 'Woman's World', with more and more space dedicated to 'The Corner'. Durack would publish letters from contributors, usually paired with a short response from herself. 'Virgilians' Friendly Corner' would go on to even outlive Durack's time at the paper, as the persona of 'Virgilia' was taken up by a number of different women.<sup>33</sup> Some women wrote consistently to 'Virgilia' in 'The Corner' for decades, and a whole culture was built around self-proclaimed 'Virgilians'. Every week, back-to-back pages of dozens of letters would be crammed into the little space dedicated to women in the *Western Mail*. Badges were distributed so fellow writers could identify one another, parties were held where Virgilians could meet, advice and services were swapped, and, most often, stories of lives, mostly in rural and remote Western Australia, were shared.<sup>34</sup>

## Identifying a Fat Positive Space

To an uninitiated reader, 'The Corner' does not appear to discuss weight or fatness. The language of body size is usually coded, with contributors almost uniformly applying the widely popular euphemism 'O.S.' or 'X.O.S.' to indicate they identified as 'outsized'. Fat studies scholars have heavily critiqued the use of euphemisms to describe fatness; Marilyn Wann, for example, has suggested that 'you only need a euphemism if you find the truth distasteful'.<sup>35</sup> The designation 'outsized' is rendered doubly problematic,

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29 Virgilia, 'Virgilia', *Western Mail*, 5 July 1934.

30 Ibid., 24; Niall, *True North*, 15.

31 Virgilia, 'How the Friendly Corner Began, and Grew', *Western Mail*, 2 September 1954.

32 Ibid.

33 The penname 'Virgilia' was said to be a derivation of 'Virgil' who they believed captured the spirit of the endeavour. See Virgilia, 'How the Friendly Corner Began, and Grew'.

34 'Virgilian Badges', *Western Mail*, 28 January 1983.

35 Marilyn Wann in Johnanna J Ganz, "'The Bigger, the Better': Challenges in Portraying a Positive Fat Character in Weeds', *Fat Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2012): 215, doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2012.651613.

as it gestures towards the existence of one appropriately normal size from which fat people are excluded.<sup>36</sup> Yet, in the world of Virgilians, there is little sense that to be 'O.S.' is distasteful, as women spoke openly and comfortably about their size.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, to be critical of these euphemisms for 'fat' would obscure the extent to which 'The Corner' was a world of code and euphemisms. Most contributors to 'Virgilians' Friendly Corner' used pennames, as was customary (but not compulsory) for public letter writing. Sarah Pederson, working with Scottish women's letters to the editor, has argued that in the early twentieth century the use of pseudonyms in newspapers allowed women to construct a civic identity and, by stressing their femininity in their chosen names, extended their private spaces into public discourse.<sup>38</sup> While the policy of using pennames was initially introduced to combat shyness from contributors, the recurring nature of letters to 'The Corner' enhanced the process Pederson describes, and names were often chosen to reflect a public identity.<sup>39</sup> Contributors from the Western Australian wheatbelt, for example, often went by names such as 'Wheat Ears' and 'Wild Oats'; (the few) male contributors often chose names that reflected their constructions of masculinity such as 'Viking' and 'Ladies' Man'.<sup>40</sup> Most popular was the construction of an identity in relation to family, such as 'Bush Mother', 'Digger's Wife', and 'Mater Familias'.<sup>41</sup>

The diversity of these chosen names reflected the disparate goals of the letter writers and highlights how conscious this mode of identity construction was. For the Virgilians, their pennames performed much the same goal as the letters themselves, as they represented a creative opportunity where women were empowered to define themselves in relation to their values. Ironically, the obscuring of identities became an expression of both individualism and literacy in the shared practices of the Virgilian community. As such, the use of euphemisms such as 'O.S.' should be considered in the same terms—as something coded in privacy, respectability and even safety, yet was in reality a feature of a consciously cultivated in-group who shared both language and community, and, importantly, tied their fatness to their civic identity. Much like the

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36 Esther D Rothblum, 'Why a Journal on Fat Studies?', *Fat Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2012): 4.

37 Teach 'Em, 'Laugh and Grow Fat'

38 Sarah Pedersen, 'What's in a Name? The Revealing Use of Noms de Plume in Women's Correspondence to Daily Newspapers in Edwardian Scotland', *Media History*, 10, no. 3 (2004): 184, doi.org/10.1080/1368880042000311537.

39 Virgilia, 'How the Friendly Corner Began, and Grew'.

40 Old Pickle, 'Noble First Hundred!', *Western Mail*, 13 January 1938.

41 Ibid.

feminist publications of the early twentieth century, 'The Corner' was creating a community of women, but one defined by safety and even the illusion of conformity. This here is the ambiguous space of women letter writers: the pages were, in many ways, radical in their support of women and the space it created for women who identified as 'O.S.' to share their experience, yet by obscuring their discussion in euphemism, this radicalism is tempered by more conservative questions of respectability. These spaces should be considered within a history of resistance as neither comfortably conservative or radical, but rather—as Jones identifies in a different community of rural women—as a 'quiet form of activism' often associated with women's use of their power and space to achieve progress and reform or, at least, to create safer communities.<sup>42</sup> The community created by Virgilians expands the history of fat activism and suggests that fat positivity can be located in a wide variety of communities that, whilst not explicitly political, were creating spaces for fat women to share their experiences and resist discourses that sought to undermine and alienate them.

## **'Nil Desperandum' on the Medical Establishment, Women's Work and Fat Women**

In 1936 'Nil Desperandum', a woman from a sheep farm in the central wheatbelt region, wrote to 'The Corner' asking: 'As most of the Virgilians seem to be "O.S.", I wonder what they will say when I tell them that a Harley-street specialist says that most of the "O.S." women of today are the arm-chair type'.<sup>43</sup> 'Nil Desperandum' clearly established this dichotomy between Virgilians (whom she significantly identifies as mostly 'O.S.') and medical doctors, before responding to herself: 'If I had him here for a week, I bet he would eat his words'.<sup>44</sup> These ideas were not coded as radical, yet within 'The Corner', which had comfortably encoded itself as the prescriptive social space of the majority, women such as 'Nil Desperandum' had begun expressing the ways in which the standards of morality and health of which rural women were often made icons were not only untrue, but were limiting and hurting them.

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42 Jones, *Country Women and the Colour Bar*, xi.

43 Nil Desperandum, 'Cheap Ice', *Western Mail*, 30 July 1936.

44 Ibid.

The medicalisation of the rural ideal became a focus around which some Virgilians framed their critique of fat-shaming and embraced their own healthy 'O.S.' bodies. 'The Corner' was a space in which women resisted these discourses. They shared their experiences and their frustration with the disparity between what doctors told them about their bodies and what they knew about their lives and lifestyles. Many histories of fat have found that cultural attitudes around fatness as signifier of laziness and lack of control preceded and informed the slow move of the medical establishment toward habitual weighing and recommending weight-loss to patients, a practice that was firmly established by the 1960s.<sup>45</sup> While loss of weight was associated with a number of 'wasting' diseases such as tuberculosis in the late nineteenth century, the early twentieth century was a period in which doctors were attempting to discern if weight gain was also a sign of un-healthiness or simply an inevitable part of the ageing process.<sup>46</sup> The early decades of the twentieth century may be characterised by an ambiguity over the extent to which fatness and poor health were linked. This confusion over what weight gain, or fatness, signified in medical terms was dramatised in public discussions surrounding fatness. Many women viewed dieting as a dangerous and unhealthy fad, and confusion over these increasingly mixed messages were played out in spaces such as 'The Corner'.<sup>47</sup> The *Western Mail* is a typical example of this disjuncture, as while in the women's pages women were encouraging one another to simply 'laugh and grow fat', in other sections of the same newspaper doctors sternly warned 'Laugh and Grow Fat: But Length of Life is Diminished'.<sup>48</sup>

In his study of diet cultures in the United States, Hillel Schwartz argued that Depression conditions led to a general valorisation of 'reduction', which was embodied by weight-loss narratives. Weight-loss and frugality coalesced in a newly moralised economic culture.<sup>49</sup> Diet pills—some of which contained toxins found in wartime-era explosives—flooded the market; meanwhile, there were growing discourses that stated only 'natural' foods could be considered healthy.<sup>50</sup> Psychologists also participated in this boom,

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45 Amy Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 34–5, doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2012.629138.

46 Ibid.

47 Wheat Ears, 'The Virgilian'.

48 Teach 'Em, 'Laugh and Grow Fat!'; 'Laugh and Grow Fat: But Length of Life Is Diminished', *Western Mail*, 9 May 1940.

49 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 192.

50 Ibid., 191.

pathologising fatness as an expression of mental anguish, associated with lethargy, anxiety and depression—a kind of mindless consumption to satiate more substantial emotional shortfalls.<sup>51</sup> This coincided with the rise of Western psychoanalytic approaches to questions of ‘fat’.<sup>52</sup> Discussions of weight became increasingly gendered, whereby fatness in women and men began to take on important distinctions.<sup>53</sup> The new sexual cultures of the interwar period also influenced medicalised misunderstandings of fat. In Western Australia, much as in the rest of Australia, new connections between healthy conforming sexuality and healthy conforming bodies developed.<sup>54</sup> Consumerism, moralism and the medical industry met in this period to create a tangle of messages, which resulted in the resounding sense that fat women were responsible for their fatness, and that fat was a medical problem that could, and therefore should, be solved.

‘Nil Desperandum’ paired her critique of the medical establishment with a comment on women’s work, concluding:

I have an acre of garden to look after, and I grow all the vegetables for the house, bake 16 loaves of bread a week, do all the other cooking, and keep a six-room house clean; two children to look after, and one to teach, and 100 fowls to care for. So you can imagine how much arm-chair I enjoy. And at present, I have a nice bundle of sewing and darning waiting on the machine ... Last week I made dozens of jars of pickles and chutneys, as the frost killed the tomato bushes ... The garden party frock competition sounds very nice, but, alas, I will be missing again this year, as we are shearing a month later this year, and, as usual, the cook’s job falls to me.<sup>55</sup>

Discourse on the health and bodies of rural women often centred around notions of farm work. Kathryn Hunter has described at length the evocative debates undertaken in the Victorian rural newspaper the *Farmers’ Advocate* surrounding the work of women on family farms. She describes a generational divide between those holding pronatalist fears of physical labour unsexing women and risking their reproductive capabilities and (usually) younger women, who appealed to images of hardy and healthy

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51 Ibid., 194.

52 Sander Gilman, *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 191–4.

53 Peter N Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 74, doi.org/10.1086/ahr/104.4.1325.

54 Richard Nile, ‘Eroticism, Sex and the Politics of Imagination’, *Studies in Western Australian History*, no. 11 (1990): 120.

55 Nil Desperandum, ‘Cheap Ice’.

Australian girlhood to advocate for their right to work on the land.<sup>56</sup> Both these positions drew upon the contradictory medical discourses of the period, and when placed in conversation reveal the disparity between these cultural ideals of rural womanhood and the realities of women's labour on farms. Kate Darian-Smith and Sara Wills have discussed how during the interwar years the institution of the 'Show Queen' was utilised to mask the productive work women did in rural communities, emphasising their symbolic role as signifiers of passive femininity.<sup>57</sup> Emphasis on women being needed or active, Darian-Smith and Wills argue, threatened to emasculate men, whose own gender identities had been made vulnerable by rural downturn.<sup>58</sup>

'Nil Desperandum' clearly defines herself here by her work, which she talks about openly and frankly. This is an example of the power Virgilians claimed by extending the private sphere of their homes into the pages of a newspaper. She seems to believe that the medicalisation of her body is predicated on the invisibility of her work and counters this by exposing the constant work of women on farms. I argue that by stressing their work, indeed, their over-work, in response to cultural assumptions about their weight, Virgilians were attacking the rural ideal of passive femininity that Darian-Smith and Wills describe, threatening to expose the myth that work and gender had ever represented a neat dichotomy in rural life, as the media and dominant cultural ideals suggested.

## 'Nota Bene' on the Male Gaze

'Nil Desperandum's' letter elicited a number of responses, particularly from farm women who likewise rejected the assumption that there was a connection between their 'O.S.' bodies and their (perceived lack of) work. 'Nota Bene's' response to 'Nil Desperandum' contrasted the medicalisation of women's bodies with their sexualisation and identified the ways in which the sexualised and the dismissive or ridiculing gazes came from the same presumptive authority to look:

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56 Kathryn M Hunter, 'The Drover's Wife and the Drover's Daughter: Histories of Single Farming Women and Debates in Australian Historiography', *Rural History*, 12, no. 2 (2001): 191, doi.org/10.1017/s0956793300002430.

57 Kate Darian-Smith and Sara Wills, 'From Queen of Agriculture to Miss Showgirl: Embodying Rurality in Twentieth-century Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 25, no. 71 (2001): 19, doi.org/10.1080/14443050109387717.

58 Ibid.

I second “Nil-Desperandum’s” remarks re “O.S.” figures and armchairs ... I have gained weight when I have not had time to even think of an arm-chair, let alone sit in one. But, why worry? In my youthful days I had a figure that looked like an imaginary line drawn through a princess frock, and one kind (?) neighbour said I looked like two boards tacked together! Now, after twenty-odd years, that same, neighbour views my Mae West curves with a pitying “Ain’t she fat” sort of expression. So you see there is no pleasing ‘em!<sup>59</sup>

The letters of Virgilians show the ways in which institutional discourse and localised experience were linked. They are a comment on the multiple fronts upon which myths such as the link between fatness and laziness or low self-discipline are perpetuated.<sup>60</sup> They also implicitly suggest the ways in which this was a particularly gendered process linked to the qualities women were expected to display, such as submissiveness to control and surveillance of their bodies.<sup>61</sup> The media has consistently played a crucial role in endorsing and perpetuating both the institutional and local surveillance and sexualisation of women’s bodies, fostering the connections between the moralities of indulgence and transgression with women’s eating.<sup>62</sup> In spaces such these, women reclaimed print media spaces, rejecting this myth of connections between fatness and laziness with personal narratives of their own active lives of work and movement.

This article has consciously not focused on men and their perspective on fatness in public spaces. It is significant that one of the few times weight was discussed in negative or aesthetic terms in this period was by a male Virgilian, ‘Viking’, who suggested that if ‘Virgilia’ told her male readers she was ‘X.O.S.’ she would ‘pour cold water on most of our fond imaginings’.<sup>63</sup> No male Virgilians identified themselves as ‘O.S.’. Male Virgilians were a minority in ‘The Corner’, which practically functioned as a women-only space. The ways in which individual men used fat jokes to encroach on this women-dominated space is not the focus of this

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59 Nota Bene, ‘A Matter of Form’, *Western Mail*, 24 September 1936.

60 Ganz, “‘The Bigger, the Better’”, 210.

61 Ibid.

62 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminsim, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 112.

63 Viking, ‘Blame “Virgilia”’, *Western Mail*, 13 June 1935.

discussion of solidarity among women. However, it should be noted that the experience of fat men has frequently collided with aesthetic notions of hegemonic masculinity, and this is a fruitful area for further research.<sup>64</sup>

'Nota Bene's' comment on her neighbour and objectification is an example of the ways in which Virgilian women used 'The Corner' as a space in which they could express experiences of the male gaze and how this gaze changed the way they experienced space. The letters of the Virgilians are an archive of the ways in which women created communities and resisted discourses imposed upon them. Virgilian women spoke openly and comfortably about their size, suggesting that 'The Corner' was a personal, safe community. However, their stories also represented how this category was imposed upon them; narratives of discrimination and ridicule were shared, and many women expressed anxiety about interactions with men in public spaces, which were determined by their size.<sup>65</sup> The experience of Virgilian women who identified as 'O.S.' reveals a larger point about rural women and the male gaze. The resigned way in which these women reported being looked upon is contrasted with the freedom and relief they convey in sharing their stories. It suggests that popular discourses about rural life had implicitly endorsed the right of the public to assess rural women's bodies, yet that women were seeking their own ways to resist this. Virgilians' letters about their weight reveal the multiple focalisations of the male gaze, from the institutional to the personal. Yet, they also suggest multiple sites of resistance, including those like 'Nil Desperandum' who explicitly resisted these narratives about fat bodies, to more subtle forms of resistance whereby, through sharing their fear and their anxiety, women created a community of support.

'The Corner' offers a valuable insight into how patriarchy and the male gaze were experienced and resisted by rural women. Throughout the interwar period, rural women were subjected to discourses regarding what constituted healthy modern womanhood. In the face of the ever-growing influence of the cities, the supposed moral health of the country was inscribed onto the physical health of rural women's bodies. In her chapter on the 'embellishment' of rural life, Kate Murphy describes the ways

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64 Bethany Phillips-Peddlesden, "A Stronger Man and a More Virile Character": Australian Prime Ministers, Embodied Manhood and Political Authority in the Early Twentieth Century', *Australian Historical Studies*, 48, no. 4 (2017): 502–18, doi.org/10.1080/1031461x.2017.1323932. This is an example of recent exciting work in this area.

65 Climber, 'Suggestion for Beach Authorities', *Western Mail*, 27 February 1936; Frolic, 'Why Not Women Porters?', *Western Mail*, 21 July 1938.

in which the interwar period incorporated a specific type of femininity into the notion of a rural ideal.<sup>66</sup> In response to the moral panic over the disproportionate growth of Australian cities and (supposedly linked) declining birth rates, rural women began to be held up as icons of natural femininity.<sup>67</sup> As women who were both close to nature and closely linked to their homes, they were a site upon which the contradictions of panics over cities and the increasing pressure upon women to conform to domestic consumerism could be reconciled. For women like 'Nota Bene' and 'Nil Desperandum', this was experienced locally, publicly and, increasingly, in medicalised discourse.

## 'Climber' and the Ambiguity of 'The Corner'

The letters of 'Climber', from the mid-western beach town of Geraldton, suggest the ways in which Virgilians could be both responsible for the creation of a community of radical acceptance and complicit in the othering of non-conforming bodies. She writes:

Do you know, 'Virgilia,' if ever I get a seat among the Councillors or other Powers-That-Be, I'm going to do my best to have a portion of every beach reserved for O.S. and X.O.S. bathers. (Did I hear a hearty 'Hear, Hear?') We love bathing just as much as our slim sisters—and need the exercise far more; but by the time one has procured a suitable costume, and braved the giggles of sundry small boys and girls, and tried to preserve one's dignity under a storm of remarks about tidal-waves, playful porpoises, etc., well! I ask you ... wouldn't you find the bath tub more enjoyable?<sup>68</sup>

Amy Farrell has found that between 1910 and 1940 there was a distinct shift in the nature and focus of jokes about fat women in the United States.<sup>69</sup> Increasingly tied to narratives of excess and women out of control, Farrell explores the ways in which jokes about women's bodies can be read

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66 Kate Murphy, 'Rural Womanhood and the "Embellishment" of Rural Life in Urban Australia', in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, eds. Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2005), 4.

67 *Ibid.*, 11.

68 Ellipses in original. Climber, 'Suggestion for Beach Authorities'.

69 Amy Farrell, "'The White Man's Burden': Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the Place of the Fat Woman in Early 20th-Century US Culture', in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther D Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 256, doi.org/10.1177/0959353510396340.

as a combative response to the increased political and geographic freedom women were enjoying in this period.<sup>70</sup> Jokes about women's bodies were used as a way to reinforce control over public space. Farrell studies picture postcards from this period, illustrated with images mocking fat women. The beach was a popular scene for these postcards as an icon of middle-class leisure culture. While Farrell's sample of postcards is an example of the ways in which fat jokes were made, 'Climber's' letter to 'Virgilia' is something rarer—a record of how these jokes were experienced. Farrell identified numerous jokes about porpoises and tidal waves in her study of these postcards. 'Climber's' letter shows us that these jokes were experienced as an attack on women's capacity for feeling dignity and joy in public spaces. We also see Farrell's contention that the broader tacit goal of these jokes was to revoke women's newly gained freedom in public space, as 'Climber' sees removal from, or segregation of, shared public spaces as the only possible way forward.<sup>71</sup>

This article has highlighted some examples of the significant number of women who used 'The Corner' as a space where they could resist dominant discourses of fat stigmatisation. However, a question must be raised about the complicity of women in this rhetoric. In contrast to the radically affirming letters of 'Nota Bene' and 'Nil-Desperandum', 'Climber's' letter is also a reminder of the ability of prescriptive literature such as women's pages to reinforce conformity to conservative understandings of femininity and acceptable womanhood.<sup>72</sup> 'Climber' does not challenge the assumption that 'O.S.' women simply need more exercise, and while she highlights some structural problems that attack women's ability to use public spaces, she ultimately concludes that leaving these spaces is the most appropriate form of action. 'Climber's' letter highlights the ambivalence of 'The Corner' as a space of empowerment. She, like other 'O.S.' letter writers, claimed a community and described her experiences with a radical honesty, but the veneer of respectability of the women's pages also gave space for women to reinforce, rather than challenge, the structural barriers that attacked their use of public space. The Virgilians do not necessarily fit comfortably into histories of fat activism, nor do they distinguish themselves as a community of radical or progressive feminists.

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70 Ibid., 261.

71 Ibid., 258.

72 Joanne Scott, 'Dear Editor: Women and Their Magazines in Interwar Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 22, no. 58 (1998): 79, doi.org/10.1080/14443059809387404.

However, the conservative coding of their letters, which obscures the many areas of solidarity Virgilians share with such fat activists and feminists, suggests a way forward in complicating both these histories.

As, at least superficially, a conservative-coded space, it is significant to note that Virgilians were also complicit in replicating many of the repressive and narrow conditions associated with their particular cultural context. Kay Whitehead has written on the profound class stratification and racial segregation of rural Western Australia in this period.<sup>73</sup> While the Virgilians seem remarkably comfortable conversing across class lines—indeed, many of the most prominent contributors were often writing from profound poverty—the letters overwhelmingly reinforced white middle-class social ideals.<sup>74</sup> Women worst affected by Depression conditions were praised for their ability to re-create these ideals, often in situations of near-homelessness, while women of colour were, with a small number of notable exceptions, not represented at all. ‘Chrysanthemum’ from the northern coastal town of Broome was one of these exceptions. When, in 1939, she wrote into ‘The Corner’ for the first time, she was excited as she had been a reader of the *Western Mail* since childhood and an admirer of ‘The Corner’ from afar for some time. However, she expressed a nervousness: ‘I hope there is no colour bar. I am Japanese.’<sup>75</sup> ‘Chrysanthemum’ was largely welcomed into ‘The Corner’, through a slightly awkward interaction with ‘Virgilia’ herself, who professed a love for ‘the land of the Cherry Blossoms’ and reinforced the cultural homogeneity of the space by assuring her ‘there is no colour bar among Christians’.<sup>76</sup> ‘Chrysanthemum’s’ uncertainty that she would even be allowed to contribute her perspective is indicative of the presumptive whiteness of the space.

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73 Kay Whitehead, ‘Marjorie Caw’s Transitions from City Teacher to Leading Citizen in Interwar Rural Western Australia’, *History Australia*, 15, no. 2 (2018): 7–10, doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2018.1452158.

74 Fair Fat and Firty, ‘Women Are Pioneers Today’, *Western Mail*, 25 April 1935 is an excellent example of this wider trend; ‘The Corner’ appealed to readers across class divides, in a way more leftist women’s publications often struggled to achieve. See Kirkby, “Those Knights of the Pen and Pencil”, 89.

75 Chrysanthemum, ‘A Japanese Member’, *Western Mail*, 31 August 1939.

76 Ibid.

Questions of race and ethnicity were a central question in rural Western Australia in this period—between 1916 and 1934 both Kalgoorlie and Broome had seen significant racially motivated riots.<sup>77</sup> However, race and ethnicity were almost never discussed in 'The Corner', and while readers and contributors were not all white, there was little space for contributors of colour to talk about how their experience at the intersection of race, ethnicity and fatness may have been different. Further, like many white rural Western Australian women in the interwar period, Virgilians often asserted their place in an Australian national mythology by engaging with an identity of a 'pioneer'.<sup>78</sup> However, few considered the implication of their role as coloniser on Indigenous women, and I found no evidence that Indigenous women ever contributed to 'The Corner'. This can be interpreted as an expression of Bolton's theory of interwar Western Australian consensus culture, whereby difference would be welcomed, as long as it was not perceived as disruptive. It is an example of the importance of considering the cultural contingency of fat and of prescriptive women's literature. The class and racial conditions of interwar Western Australia determined whose experiences were prioritised and whose were completely ignored in this archive of fat women. Women like 'Climber' offered solidarity with other fat women, conditional on their conformity to other social ideals. Her letters have left a powerful trace of how it felt to be fat in Western Australian in the interwar period and how fat women spoke to one another. While 'The Corner' provides little explicit evidence of how race and ethnicity influenced experiences of fatness, the letters do provide insights regarding who was excluded from these rare sites of solidarity.

By the time 'Virgilians' Friendly Corner' had been established, there was a tradition of women's pages in newspapers and women's public letters to these pages. The first example of a regular women's section in Australia

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77 Christine Choo, 'Inter-Ethnic Conflict in Broome, Western Australia: The Riots of 1907, 1914 and 1920 between Japanese and Other Asians', *Continuum*, 25, no. 4 (2011): 465–77, doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2011.575213; John Yiannakis, 'Kalgoorlie Alchemy: Xenophobia, Patriotism and the 1916 Anti-Greek Riots', *Early Days: Journal of the Western Australian Historical Society*, 11, no. 2 (1996): 199–211; Sarah Gregson, "'It All Started on the Mines?': The 1934 Kalgoorlie Race Riots Revisited", *Labour History*, 80 (May 2001): 21–40, doi.org/10.2307/127516768.

78 Janina Trotman and Tom O'Donoghue, 'Becoming a Woman Teacher: Memories of Learning to Be a Monitor in Western Australia in the 1920s and 1930s', *Oxford Review of Education*, 36, no. 2 (2010): 182, doi.org/10.1080/03054981003696671; Brown Woodpecker, 'Pioneering in the South', *Western Mail*, 3 June 1937.

was in the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, which began in 1870.<sup>79</sup> Alice Fahs has reflected on the irony that sat at the heart of these pages, which were often at once creating a new and, by definition, radical public space for women, yet chose to, or were required to, couch these spaces in the rhetoric of domesticity.<sup>80</sup> It is without doubt a further irony that women reported on and, as this article has shown, in many ways resisted the surveillance and control of their fat bodies in women's pages, which were perpetuating these messages of conformity. This poses a question for how women's pages should be characterised. It was a question often posed by the writers and editors of these pages themselves, who often at once required and resented their confinement to the women's pages throughout their careers.<sup>81</sup> I would suggest that the resolution to this tension between radical journalists and domestic-coded spaces can be found in a re-focalisation away from the journalists who (sometimes begrudgingly) wrote these pages onto the readers and the ways in which the content reflected their needs and wants. Letters sections such as 'The Corner' render this possible and offer insights into the expansive implications of a domestic-coded public space.

By focusing on the experience of readers, we confront the ways in which women's pages created a discursive community and a public world, yet only by extending private space. Rather than proclaiming their rights to public space, as many more radical newspaper women aimed to do, the women readers and writers who populated pages such as 'The Corner' often hedged the self-conscious creation of a highly public community in the language of the private domestic sphere. Yet, the simple act of sharing their stories and opinions in many ways implicitly questioned hegemonic discourses that devalued women's participation. Katie Holmes in her study of Australian women's diaries reconciles this conservative/radical tension by suggesting: 'While writing a diary did not appear to challenge women's traditional roles as wife, mother, daughter or household manager, in doing so women accorded to these activities a status otherwise denied

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79 Justine Lloyd, 'Women's Pages in Australian Print Media from the 1850s', *Media International Australia*, 150 (February 2014): 62, doi.org/10.1177/1329878x1415000114.

80 Alice Fahs, *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 56, doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2012.10677816.

81 Mary Durack may have been one of these writers with an amiguous relationship with her readers. Durack's biographer describes her as 'besieged by garrulous readers [of "The Corner"]' and left with little time for 'serious' writing. Niall, *True North*, 59, 63.

them.<sup>82</sup> By focusing on readers and their experiences of this space, it is made clear that the dichotomies of radical and conservative can serve to obscure these women who operated in and were complicit in creating much more ambiguous spaces.

Correspondence from readers was a fairly typical feature of women's pages and the new commercially focused women's magazines, which were being developed in the interwar period.<sup>83</sup> This trend is often associated with urban newspapers and magazines, but they were also a vibrant space in rural press.<sup>84</sup> The *Weekly Times*, Australia's largest rural newspaper launched their women's section, 'The Women's Bureau', in 1931, which included correspondence with 'Miranda', a persona that still exists today.<sup>85</sup> The Victorian Farmers' Union newspaper, the *Farmers' Advocate*, had featured letters from its female readers from as early as 1919.<sup>86</sup> Other women-specific magazines also published the letters of rural women, such as *Woman's Budget*, which aimed to 'establish a pen-and-ink bond between the bush and city dwellers'.<sup>87</sup> Raelene Frances suggests that Australian women's magazines of the interwar period reflected and enforced the socially mandated behaviours of a cultural majority, perpetuating a conservative 'gender script' that dictated women's behaviour, portrayal and self-image.<sup>88</sup> By focusing on the letters from readers (while also acknowledging that we have little way of knowing to what degree they were mediated by an invisible editorial hand), we develop a picture of how life was experienced by this supposedly homogenous, authoritative group. We may begin to break down this group: in the case of 'The Corner', we see the ways in which these readers' experiences were determined by their rurality, the particularities of Western Australian interwar culture

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82 Katie Holmes, *Spaces in Her Day: Australian Women's Diaries 1920s–1930s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), xviii.

83 Kirkby, "Those Knights of the Pen and Pencil", 91.

84 Hunter, 'The Drover's Wife and the Drover's Daughter'; Ruth Ford, "I Shut My Eyes and Picture Our Place": Gardens, Farm Landscapes and Working-Class Dreams in 1930s–1940s South-Eastern Australia', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 31, no. 2 (2011): 109–20, doi.org/10.1080/14601176.2011.556374. Both of these works have used rural women's letters published in Eastern rural newspapers to draw conclusions about the experience of women on the land.

85 Ford, "I Shut My Eyes and Picture Our Place", 110.

86 It is possible that the early addition of women's letters to *Farmers' Advocate* is an outcome of the more political aims of the paper, which would explicitly seek the support of women voters. For example, see 'For Our Women', *Farmers' Advocate*, 23 October 1919.

87 *Woman's Budget*, 9 April 1921, 5, quoted in Scott, 'Dear Editor', 77.

88 Raelene Frances in Scott, 'Dear Editor', 79; Jennifer L Graves and Samantha Kwan, 'Is There Really "More to Love"?: Gender, Body, and Relationship Scripts in Romance-Based Reality Television', *Fat Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2012): 48, doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2012.627791.

and their experiences as women. We see a tension between narratives of respectable womanhood and how these narratives were contended with by their consumers. We see how their community was constructed and how they negotiated a space that accounted for the inevitably diverse views and opinions of this supposedly homogenised group.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

When I began my research on the Virgilians, I had no sense that this was an archive of fat politics. My eyes scanned over references to ‘O.S. types’, subconsciously filed away as unimportant miscellany, a term from the era that I did not know—not desirable, but not wholly unusual. It was by chance that I deciphered the code and this world was opened up to me. This raises questions of how studies of private fat worlds would change fat histories. Fat historians must find ways to push beyond traditional languages of fat empowerment and oppression and ask: how did fat people talk to each other? How did they talk to themselves? How did local and global conditions alter their experience? Perhaps, most importantly, we must acknowledge that few, if any, bodies walk throughout the world in a state of constant resistance, and that the negotiation of social and cultural conditions is central to the historicisation of fat. This article has explored the ways in which the letters of rural women to the *Western Mail’s* women’s pages undermine assumptions about conforming femininity, resistance, and activism. It has suggested that ‘O.S.’-identified women made for themselves a community where they could express and share their bodily experiences. Though coded conservative, this became a space where women shared solidarity and supported one another. It was a unique space in their lives where they could air and undermine the fictions spread about their own bodies. Nevertheless, it was also a space where women could reinforce oppressive gender scripts and perpetuate assumptions about what kinds of space ‘O.S.’ women could take up. This study sits within the still developing field of fat histories, demonstrating that the experience of fat bodies is an essential reflection of contemporary cultural conditions. Finally, it suggests that traditional metrics for considering resistance and conformity do not reflect the varied conditions women have negotiated to share their stories and to create communities.

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89 Scott, ‘Dear Editor’, 80, 82.

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