



# PaleoliTHICC: Understanding the Woman of Willendorf using contemporary fat studies

Shelby Jones | Department of Anthropology | Advisor: Dr. Siavash Samei  
The College of Wooster | Wooster, Ohio 44691

## Abstract

My research focused on the Woman ("Venus") of Willendorf figurine, one of the most famous Paleolithic figurines. Rather than arguing that she is a depiction of a fertility icon or a Mother Goddess, **I argue that she should be understood as nothing more than a depiction of a fat woman.** I also ask what modern perceptions of the Woman are. The initial research conducted for the literature review of this project indicated that there were four distinct anthropological "camps" that explain her creation: the Woman as a fertility icon, the Woman as a toy of some form, the Woman as a Mother Goddess, and the Woman as a fat person. Additionally, rather than keeping the Woman planted firmly in the Paleolithic era, I tie in the contemporary theoretical framework of "fat studies" to understand her place in the world as a fat woman. Fat studies is a discipline that aims to place fat bodies at the forefront of conversations and bring awareness to the oppression that fat people face. Jeannine Gailey's theory of "**hyper(in)visibility**" further narrows the perspective on the Woman and experiences of those fat feminine bodies that resemble her. In order to answer the question about the modern perceptions of the Woman, a survey was sent to the College of Wooster student body, and the responses to this survey were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

## Survey

- Sent to Wooster student body---117 valid responses
- Asked general questions about the Woman, and some questions about fat people in participants' real lives.
- Most students hypothesized that she may have been made as a fertility icon/depiction of a pregnant woman
  - Shows that theories that anthropologists assign to figurine have lasting effects on her legacy
  - Also rendered her hyperinvisible
- Hyperinvisible answers were given about real people, too.
  - One participant did not want to call their friend "pudgy" but still highlighted that their friend looked like the Woman
    - Acknowledged fatness of friend, but did not want to admit it.
- Overwhelming majority would describe her as "fat"
  - Importance of identifying her as a depiction of a fat woman
- Along the same lines, received some very fatphobic responses specifically about the Woman.



Figure 1. The Woman of Willendorf figurine.  
(WikiMedia Commons, n.d.)

## Thesis

I argue that the Woman of Willendorf figurine should be understood as a fat woman rather than as a fertility icon, a Mother Goddess, or a depiction of a pregnant woman like scholars have suggested before.

## Theoretical Framework

- **Fat studies**- Discipline aimed at putting fat people at the center of conversations and openly discussing fatness and the oppression that comes with being fat.
  - Much of the academic work for this discipline came out after the World Health Organization made fatness a diagnosable disease with the onslaught of the obesity epidemic.
- **Hyperinvisibility**- "When a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked" (Gailey 2014, 7).
  - Fat people are looked at because we take up more physical space than thin people, but the oppression we face is ignored.
  - **Woman is hyperinvisible because she is analyzed in academy but never as just a fat person.**
- **"Headless fatties"**--Term coined by Charlotte Cooper about photos taken of fat people from the shoulders down to give "anonymity" but also takes away personhood.
  - Woman is a headless fatty because of her lack of facial features and the way that everyone just looks at her fat, and not the legacy behind the figurine.

## Conclusions

- Real people are impacted by the way that anthropologists describe the Woman
  - One participant felt invisible because she felt her friends only saw her weight and not her face, headless fatty and ties back into the Woman
- Inspires a new way to analyze the Woman and the Paleolithic peoples that made her and other Venus figurines like her
- Gives voices back to the fat people that have been largely left out of the conversation
- Hyper(in)visibility runs a lot deeper than people ignoring the struggles and experiences of contemporary fat people
  - Happens to ancient fat people, too.
- We will never know the exact reason the Woman of Willendorf was created, but this research opens a new door to explore and analyze further