

GENEALOGIES OF EXCESS

Towards a decolonial Fat Studies

Athia N. Choudhury

On finding the fat body

I am leading a discussion section for a course titled *Peoples and Cultures of the Americas*. The professor has assigned Junot Díaz's (2008) novel *The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao*. My students are unusually hesitant, stumbling over their words. The protagonist, Oscar, is fat – nerdy, ugly, unable to get with the ladies – his fatness is a central metaphor for the destructive, recursive, and generational legacies of colonial and sexual violence explored throughout the novel.¹ Not one person has mentioned the word *fat*. Big. Fluffy. Rotund. Obese. They skirt around *fat* at whatever cost; their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths, glued tight by civility and decorum. I can sense how my fat body in the classroom, as instructor, unsettles them. How can we talk about this obvious metaphor of dysfunctional and racialized fat in the novel when such a body – in flesh and bone – interrupts the classroom space? Despite thinking through flesh and race throughout the course, we are now struggling to articulate how empire is viscerally embodied in the characters.

The complex, submerged renderings of fatness and race that press into the novel and our everyday lives tightly bind us, shut. Oscar and my body are swallowed whole by the visual and visceral logics of fatness and neither I nor our discussion can move forward until I break off a piece of myself as offering. My body stiffens – I ask, *can we talk about fat and racial formation and landedness? What do we think about fatness being made to represent the trauma of 400 years of conquest, rape culture, and state violence?*

I am unsure of the thickness that hangs between us – if I have exposed too much of my own body and what is at stake in who and what gets leftover by internalizing fat as colonial loss and dysfunction against the backdrop of modernity. I feel vulnerable to the scrutiny.

Finally, someone pipes up: *It's fucked up.*

I cannot help but erupt into laughter: *Isn't it, though?*

Prelude

I think of this encounter now as I consider: is there room in the decolonial horizon for fat matters?² As a decolonial feminist scholar invested in questions of excess, aesthetics, and viscosity as felt structures of coloniality/modernity (Quijano, 2000), my work often begins by asking,

quite simply, how did we arrive at a narrative of fatness *as* colonial dysfunction? What are the fat origin stories we share, whose experiences do they annunciate, and what are their racial logics? Díaz, like other artists working to illuminate a decolonial epistemic turn, makes sense of fat as a story of colonial loss, difference, and effeminization (Fresno-Calleja, 2017; Perez, 2010; Griff, 2016; Inness, 2005; Saldaña-Tejeda & Wade, 2018). Oscar's life is ultimately an inescapable tragedy wrought on by the twin valences of hypermasculine and fat-antagonistic publics condensed through centuries of colonial violence made bare across the body.³ The image of the poor, fat Latino child makes sense of our modern racial discourse on obesity – one that uncritically recasts and flattens the fat body as a problem of imperial foodways, diaspora/displacement, and settler colonialism. Fatness, then, *is* the destructive, recursive, and ongoing force of colonial damage and trauma manifested onto the body. Yet, how did this image of the fat, poor, racialized child come to proliferate with meaning?

We know this story of fat racialization. It appears along the golden arches of McDonalds in Chile, India, Sri Lanka, Los Angeles – the impact of Western-industrial foods felt on added poundage, deteriorating health, and disappearing local foodways. In a world populated with the specter of a global obesity epidemic (Boero, 2012), the visual drama (and multinational-corporate manufacturing) of the malnourished versus the overfed, and the realities of North/South currents of extractivism (Gómez-Barris, 2017) – what could possibly be decolonial about fat? I stretch my unruly body into this question, finding myself in spaces of deep fracture, blame, and shame. Where does the fat body fit within the decolonial? As problem? As victim? As something else entirely?

To move us towards decolonizing Fat Studies and a decolonial fat methodology, I first piece together the story of fat and race as we understand it in our contemporary epoch and reach for ways to complicate such theorization. First, I map how an onto-epistemology of race and fatness has been conceptualized through Fat Studies and obesogenic research by discreet (but overlapping) methodological and critical approaches to the study of fat that continue to center on white womanhood.⁴ In the following sections, I untangle how Fat Studies historical materialist projects and obesogenic sociological frameworks – operating as distinct tendencies at enmeshed rhetorical frequencies – codify, consolidate, and narrate a unidimensional paradigm of fat liberation or health re-education that continues to foreground white colonial subjecthood.⁵

I argue that Fat Studies projects deploying historical materialist and cultural critiques of the socialities, textualities, and visual economies of fat perpetuate the center of fatness as being white, Western, and female. I meditate on what is discarded through such a rendering and offer a racial capitalist framework for teasing out the racial logics of body-making as they are grounded in ontologies of colonialism and capital. Obesogenic research, in turn, renders fatness as a form of risk/race coding where systemic poverty and ecological crisis are the environmental conditions that innately produce (poor) fat populations (of color). This section explores how public health rhetoric around racialized “obesity-fat” – and the *war on obesity* – consolidates state powers contingent on framing poor communities of color as at-risk populations in need of proper management and governance. Moreover, I examine how our study of “obesity-fat” would shift when we consider how body-sovereignty and land-sovereignty are deeply intertwined.

This chapter is capacious in that it makes room for different approaches to dreaming and doing decolonial Fat Studies and argues that the current tendencies in the field sediment a shorthand for the study of fat and race that must be both provincialized and proliferated from global and social peripheries. Often, decolonizing fatness (or, decolonizing body-love) comes to stand in for *undoing Euro-centric beauty standards*. These soul-body-healing projects of examining and dismantling beauty standards, desirability politics, internalized fatphobia, food and eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and colonial body traumas are absolutely crucial for us to get free.

However, we must press for a decolonial fat methodology that expands our theorization of flesh and the body beyond questions of representation and recognition within the white supremacist settler state when such a regime sustains itself through the disappearance, exploitation, and death of Indigenous, black, migrant, disabled, and chronically ill peoples.

Moving through the world as a diasporic fat femme, I am acutely aware of the ways in which body-size, ability, and perceived dis-ability aggregate conceptions of race, nation, gender, and sexuality not adequately reflected or explored in critical race, postcolonial, and transnational feminist discourses. Fat Studies, as a critical intra-discipline that has grappled with how bodies become naturalized through state and self-governance is uniquely positioned to interrogate how the body acts as archive and index for race and empire across disciplinary fields, geopolitical locations, and political solidarities. Rather than simply map “correctives” to the current literature or offer a monolithic genealogy that can seamlessly stitch together *the* unified theory of fat, I urge scholars to move horizontally across multiply layered temporalities and histories. Let us linger in the fissures of possibilities, pause in the gaps, and grasp at the questions that might get us closer to finding the body in Empire.

Decolonial fat methodology or stiffening as method

This decolonial fat methodology begins with the body, registering the aftermath of colonial encounter and the sticky impressions left-behind and carried over which become sediment as everyday thought. Impressions – *marks produced by pressure* – weigh psycho-affectively and materially on the body *as* and *in* formation, to be made bare through moments of bodily tension and resonance. The anecdotes I share throughout are attendant to moments of fat bodily stiffening, an anxious pause, a widening gap, that oscillates between an anticipatory reaction to mechanisms of punitive discipline and breaking oneself open as vulnerable to those technologies of control. As in my opening anecdote, my fat presence as instructor in the classroom complicates theorizing fatness as a metaphor for colonial dysfunction for my students. My own stiffening measures the anticipatory pause before I break open an invisible seal that calls attention to my body and subsequently all the bodies in the room that drastically shapes and informs the kinds of conversations we can have.

It is in these moments of tension and tensing, of contact between flesh and episteme, touch and ontology, that the fat body of color grazes uncomfortably against what Frantz Fanon calls a *colonial vocabulary*, and it is here that I trace a genealogy of excess. In *Wretched of the earth*, Fanon (1963) writes about the native’s encounters with European values (the zoological, colonial vocabulary that marks the native as beastly, savage, less than) as producing a kind of bodily *stiffening* or *muscular lockjaw*. As he grounds the phenomenology of encounter within his own black, colonial, Martinique flesh, he details a bodily and visceral reaction that demonstrates the distance between what he feels and knows about himself versus what he is told about his body and appetites (Fanon, 1963). Building off of this work, I consider moments of fat bodily stiffening as breaking open the seal around a colonial vocabulary of fleshy propriety – oscillating between what we feel and know about ourselves versus what we are told about our bodies. How we break open and offer up parts of our flesh is indicative of the distance we must travel to decolonize Fat Studies and fatten decolonial theory.⁶

A decolonial fat methodology is a tender look at the bodies – waiting – stiffened through fat origin stories and fleshy myths and asks us to interrogate “clichéd and shorthand forms in some everyday habits of thought” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 4) that sediment fat and race over time. The following sections interrogate the shorthand histories of fat and race that press into our skin – the stories we intuitively share, inherit, and perpetuate.

De-mythologizing fat

Fat Studies has asked crucial and important questions about embodiment, governance, medicalization, gender, and sexuality (Boero, 2009; Harjunen, 2016; LeBesco, 2011; Mollow, 2017; Usiekiewicz, 2016). Through a myriad of approaches to the cultural study of fat, scholars have examined the force of fatness in Western societies to organize and re-arrange intimate domains of life and zones of contact both mediated and unmediated by the state and globalization (Boero, 2012; Cooper, 2010; Farrell, 2011; Greenhalgh, 2012; Murray, 2008, 2009). In this section, I examine a recurring shorthand in our everyday thought: the evolutionary trajectory of fat – or, in other words, the story of how fatness was once a desirable corporeal form (a sign of good health, access to food/wealth, and strong reproductive capacities) and has now shifted into a symbol for excess, poor choices, lack of self-governance, and moral/health decay. When deployed by cultural critiques, this shorthand for our shifting orientations towards fat is meant to demonstrate its malleability and social constructiveness. Feminist theorists and cultural critiques often deploy such logics in order to complicate the morality of thinness and call for an end to fat-based discriminatory practices. I consider this motif an evolutionary trajectory, however, because of the ways in which this very same narrative is utilized by social scientists to map the social, political, and material terrain in which fat bodies are no longer *needed* in our modern society and should therefore be eradicated. I interrogate the logics of this shorthand not as a means of disproving fatness's malleability or social construction, but instead to ask: how is this evolutionary timeline enmeshed in racial taxonomies and capitalist time? What does it tell us of the story of perversity/inclusion, white colonial health aesthetics, and systems of governance?

Fat history, whiteness, and the modern savage

A dominant Western history of fatness often begins with the figure of the *portly European* settler who sought factory work in industrialized cities, signaling to the American public a crisis of class and migrant contagion (Bordo, 2004; Schwartz, 1986). Fat Studies historians detail the malleability of fatness from desirable to derisive by tracking the historical influx of new settlers which caused the American public to fixate on food, appetite, and stature/body size at the height of hygiene reform. Such a fixation was meant to ideologically consolidate an ethno-national identity that could still fit within the cultural vernacular of the savage versus the civilized – a vocabulary inherited through colonial⁷ and American Nativist ideologies (Higham, 2002). As the category of whiteness became bound and unbound through class lines, the *cult of slenderness* emerged as a fleshy marker of bodily propriety. For example, Peter Stearns traces American diets and eating cultures in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, following the winding history of a fear of fat grounded in class discourses where early Americans transposed French and British sensibilities around slenderness as a form of class distinction from the new flood of *hefty* working-class settlers (Stearns, 2002). The story that is told, then, foregrounds and yet disappears race and landedness from fat history, a sleight of hand necessitated by the ongoing process of consolidating the boundaries of whiteness in the US. However, this is also a moment of productive tension, that can help us read, horizontally, the intimacies between fat, racialism, and capital.

Cedric Robinson's theorizing on racial capitalism allows us to sit within this tension. Robinson defines racial capitalism as a system of dispossession, primitive accumulation, and the manufacturing of uneven life chances that sutures around racialism/racialization to produce the conditions of capitalism and economies of attraction (Robinson, 2000). He argues that racial taxonomies have always been foundational to capitalist origins and pushes back against Marxist frameworks that mark capitalism as a distinct break from European feudalism. Such a break from

the social and economic world order would suggest that capitalism was “racial” only insofar as the ruling class needed to separate laborers to discourage uprisings or provide justification for slavery and dispossession. Rather, Robinson argues that capitalism is not a breaking point, but an extension of a Western ontoepistemology of differentiation, or, racialism embedded in the common-sensing, economy, and political fashioning of everyday life. Part of the fabric of early European society was the process of marking the racial other *within* Europe, where the first proletariats were already racial subjects and victims of captivity, criminalization, dispossession, and death. A Cultural Studies reading of fat and class must therefore attend to racial formation as the bedrock of body-hierarchies.

In thinking about how the fear of the ethnic other creeping into the cities manifested itself through fatphobic images and rhetoric, Amy Farrell (2011) details how it was during the 1900s that the fat (female) body acted as the staging ground for public speculation over the repercussions of industrialization and modernization by marking fat as a racial stain that was no longer racial. The xenophobic body-anxiety of the twentieth century was grounded in ideas of criminality and underdevelopment that was linked not only as a mental disability, but as a genetically predisposed condition of newly arrived not-yet-white European settlers that could be tracked onto the body. Farrell gestures to Cesare Lombroso’s *The Female Offender* – a critical text that has informed modern penal reform – to understand how these public sentiments came to be. As I think alongside Farrell and Lombroso through penal and eugenicist transnational knowledge formations that permeated public discourse (Mitchell & Snyder, 2003), the connectivity between fatphobia, shifting conditions of whiteness, and race science which pinpoint the collisions between American Nativism (the project of consolidating settler identity to the land) and the colonial body (the process of curating the nation through the body) becomes apparent. Lombroso and Ferrero (2004) defined white criminals as exhibiting behaviors similar to those amongst the *lower levels of civilization* writing that:

Female criminals are shorter than normal women and in proportion to their stature, prostitutes and female murderers weigh more than honest women Prostitutes’ greater weight is confirmed by the notorious obesity of those who grow old in their unfortunate trade and gradually become positive monsters of fatty tissue.

(p. 74)

The fatty, monstrous, excessive sexual and consumptive appetites of the criminal woman set the stage for the distrustful lens in which we view the fat (female) body (of color), and connects contemporary biopedagogies of state and self-surveillance to the much older desire to contain and manage the criminal ethnic other. The impetus to define and delineate fat origin stories is a confrontation in class, whiteness, criminality, labor, and modernity – where the culturally saturated fat body takes on fluctuating meanings through shifting ideas of health and punitive disciplinary technologies of the body (a claim I interrogate more closely in the next section).⁸

Where fat historical materialists and cultural studies projects interrogate fat through a locus of annunciation within Western genealogies of white desirability, sexual desire, and performing proper gender/citizenship roles as a more recent phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth century, I turn to the site of racialized fat to consider how the perimeters of who is considered human have always included questions of body size, appetites, and excess. *Fat, desire, and disgust in the colonial imagination* (Forth, 2012) traces the colonial anxiety felt by British and French imperialists in the eighteenth century over Indigenous fattening practices, documenting them as body disorders and marking the difference between civilized (and therefore populations who could regulate and manage themselves) versus savage behavior. Forth notes how much of this

colonial anxiety around body size was predicated on the ways in which women's bodies and sexualities were a speculative terrain read through fat, diet-regulation, economy, and reproductive viability. I gesture to these works to excavate how coloniality ideologically limits the scope and scale of bodily possibility while framing health within very narrow perimeters of whiteness, able-bodiedness, and thin functionality. By orienting ourselves in partial histories and incomplete archives, Fat Studies scholars can ask different kinds of questions about the specters that haunt our modern medical system, carceral state, ecologies, and public spaces and architecture.

On being "at-risk"/on being fat, poor, and brown

I'm sitting in the audience at the *Edible feminisms: On discard, waste, and metabolism* conference at UCLA. I am engrossed by and impressed with the panel of speakers – a mix of academics, cultural workers, and activists who have generously shared their stories about sustainability and food justice work. Progressivism, decolonization, and radical ways of caring for one another have been evoked several times throughout. It feels life-giving. I am particularly taken by a food justice activist from the Bronx. She is an exuberant public speaker – a fat, black femme mother who has planted herself in her neighborhood and found ways to connect and grow power in her community.

She tells us a story about food education and literacy. I am listening intently – happy to hear her talk about her relationship to food, her stories of cooking with kin, and the stakes of eating together. The mere act of a fat person talking openly about food in such a public way feels powerful and vulnerable. But I catch a change in her demeanor. The ease in which she occupied the stage makes way for a stiffness that is all too familiar. I ready myself. While she shares about a program she created to utilize the produce from the community garden by starting cooking classes in her predominantly black, low-income community, she pauses. Her eyes dart across the room, body stiffened, as she quickly offers: *I mean, I'm working on my weight. I want to be healthy for my kid.*

My stomach drops. *Did I imagine that she looked at me?* I feel the wind knocked out of me as I survey the room of over a hundred (mostly thin, mostly white) academics. It was only a moment and I'm sure not many noticed how her body changed, how even her voice strained – as though to shrink her thickness in anticipation of breaking open, offering herself, purifying her fat at the pyre of *health*. What does it mean for a fat, black femme food justice activist to proffer her own weight-loss intentions to this room of thin, (white) feminist scholars? How many times have I offered up my own body in a similar way? What are the ways health becomes a rhetorical dead-end that binds the body to racialized-thinness?

Where Fat Studies cultural critiques might have neglected to tell a thicker story of race and fat outside of the West and whiteness, obesogenic research has taken to undertheorizing and over-representing the vulnerabilities of women, children, and communities of color as highly susceptible to "obesity-fat." Public health crisis, medicalization, and environmental catastrophe narratives become saturated with overlapping fat-racial-contamination. Obesogenic researchers speculate risk, harm, and economy through genealogies of becoming fat (and subsequently losing fat) to consider the forces both inside and outside of the body that produce fleshy responses to food, environment, and economy. I contend that this literature often results in risk-coding as race-coding – where fat embodiment comes to symbolize symptoms of minoritized and marginalized social conditions produced by industrial harm, an account that often relies on old colonial, classist, and white supremacist tropes of the savage brown other.

While discursive feminist critiques of fat/ness and the body attempt to situate the shifting meanings of fat across whiteness, womanhood, the civilized and (un)governable body through

Euro-American Enlightenment and beyond, obesogenic research has been more interested in determining the environmental factors that produce *at-risk* populations susceptible to the “obesity epidemic” or advocating for a study of fat outside of its social symbolism. Obesogenic projects offer what they assume is a corrective to what Megan Warin (2015) notes as an over-investment in representations of fat life. Warin contends that the “celebrations of ‘fat flesh’ do not engage with material or biological bodies, but squarely sit within a social constructivist frame ... [as they present] important debates about identity, not about the materiality of flesh” (p. 48). Warin is speaking to the ways in which Fat Feminist theory and activism has been scaffolded around and against the “globesity crisis” and is, therefore, weary of how biology, human nature, and nutritional science has been leveraged as disciplinary mechanisms from inclusion into full citizenship, human rights, and dignity.

Scholars such as Lauren Berlant (2011), Rebecca Yoshizawa (2012), and Elspeth Probyn (2009), Samantha Murray (2008, 2009), Edward Norman and Fiona Moola (2019), have all argued that the discursive turns in feminist theories of the body make it difficult to engage with biological matter and the very real negative consequences of capitalism run amok on public health, while highlighting how a refusal to look at the *facts* of “obesity-fat” reproduce Cartesian logics as well as theories on the body that are overly invested in recuperating and re-centering the human.⁹ Oftentimes employing an ecological Marxist analysis of over-industrial foodways, an alienation of labor to land to mouth, and modern populations’ shift to sedentary lifestyles as the (chrono)logical trajectory of the obesity epidemic, much of the work centers around framing target populations as vulnerable to state and corporate violence, particularly amongst poor, working class women and children (of color). However, in doing so, these feminist scholars recast race, gender, and fatness through ideas of risk-coding – what Anna Ward (2013) describes as a process by which “subjects are fixed in a setting, installed in a field that nurtures a particular appetitive response, a response that produces not just fat, but also a particular racialized and classed embodiment of fat” (p. 5). As Ward suggests, risk-coding and race-coding are conflated within obesogenic research, often deployed by white feminists advocating for particular forms of environmental and health conservation and redress that results in the hyper-surveillance of communities of color through state nutritional and health programs.

Obesogenic researchers argue that a focus on representations of fat life and liberation politics deflects from the very real harm done onto vulnerable populations by multinational agribusinesses and other forms of environmental degradation, noting that the fat body represents the scale of environmental collapse – the yellow canary in the poisoned mines.¹⁰ Such claims only serve to justify further punitive measures for fat people, whether manifested in psycho-affective or material consequences. Ultimately, as Ward and Anna Kirkland (2011) argue, obesogenic studies fail to recognize the inherently classist (white supremacist) logics that are invisible to many of these researchers, as the fat-poor body is perceived as more susceptible to its environments than the elite bodies who manage to stay thin and healthy despite environmental conditions. Though many of these feminist scholars claim to be sympathetic to, aware of, and even in agreement with Fat Studies critiques of the stigmatized fat body, the work often reflects an inability to grapple with the murkiness of fat as both material stuff and symbolic order due to an uncritical optimistic investment in health.

Where scholars of foodscapes and food deserts utilize a neoliberal framework of global capitalism to analyze why at-risk populations are more susceptible to food-related chronic illness (obesity always listed amongst them), the reigning logic says that issues of obesity and illness are created by lack of access, fast food franchising, and lack of nutritional education. Though there is an extreme urgency for food justice and sovereignty, movements which challenge state-corporate interests and environmental degradation of our water and foodways, I must call for a

closer examination of the rhetoric around obesity-fat as it targets *at-risk* populations, a strategy that often serves to deepen divides between the Global North/South and to further stigmatize fat racialized bodies. What does it mean, then, to be an at-risk body working towards shrinking yourself? Where Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois have asked what it feels like to be a problem – of being black in a world built on anti-blackness – or what does it feel like to live with the double-consciousness as colonial subject that must move through colonial spaces, I turn these questions to racialized fat. How does it feel to be a bodily problem and product of modernity as fat bodies of color move through a world that has already marked them for dead?

One possible entry into this question is through critical race scholarship that has engaged the question of health and contamination as one rhetorically bound within notions of race science and medicalization (Ahuja, 2016; Shah, 2001; Shaw, 2006). Sabrina Strings (2015) traces a history of racialized “obesity-fat” through black female sensualism, mediating between health/contamination narratives of the black female body. She writes:

Ideologies of black female sensualism have historically revolved around black women’s presumed sexual abandon during an era in which sexually transmitted diseases were major killers. However, the most recent iteration of chronic diseases employs the (equally old) stereotype of black women as gluttonous. I argue that this has resulted in a novel reconfiguration of the trope in which sensualized African American women are converted from “deadly” into “social dead weight.”

(p. 2)

Strings asks us to consider how the rhetoric around the dangers of black women’s bodies shifts from infectious diseases (syphilis and tuberculosis) to chronic illness (obesity). This is one example of how following the racial history of science contextualizes the rising fascination and fabulation of the obesity epidemic in black communities without relying on classist and white supremacist tropes to define those populations.

Neglecting the ways in which risk/race coding operate within obesity-fat discourses allows for the manifestation of public health programs and initiatives that not only vilify fat people, but render fat communities of color as inept, infantile, and irresponsible. Expanding outside of the US and returning to my earlier contention that body sovereignty and land sovereignty are intrinsically bound, I consider the universalization of risk/race-coding applied to Indigenous communities in the Pacific. In “The burden of brown bodies,” Jaleh V. McCormack and Lisette Burrows (2015) take up obesity research in New Zealand that frame Pasifika as homogenous, problem populations. Their analysis of sociological and public health studies demonstrates how healthcare practitioners and researchers not only ask leading questions (weighted down by Western perceptions of the Pasifika body), but also flatten Pasifika histories, cultures, and futures into an imaginary monolithic *Indigenous* figure. Further, McCormack and Burrows argue that this homogenized Pasifika (crafted by researchers, foundations, and politicians) is typecast as ignorant of true and valuable health standards, citing that the backwards culture of the Pasifika people allows for the valorization of obesity, and therefore the death of their people. They note:

Glover, another public health researcher based in New Zealand, is quoted in a national daily newspaper in Feb 2013 stating “quit-smoking and other health promotion campaigns need to be long-term, backed by support and take account of cultural differences. For instance, Pacific people’s beliefs around beauty and body image are a challenge for obesity campaigns.

(p. 375)

Here, a monolithic Pasifika belief system needs to be re-educated because they do not perform an accurate enough depiction of fat shame and hatred. In such an order of things, these “backwards” views of fatness (that have yet to catch up with the evolutionary timeline of fat I mentioned several sections ago) is then leveraged by the settler state as a benevolent reason for continued occupation and surveillance. Further, such a narrative fails to grapple with alternate body-cosmologies, body-diversity, and the enmeshed histories of establishing a colonial politic in opposition to fleshy corporeal figures.

I use these two articles as examples in how moving towards a decolonial Fat Studies requires us to interrogate how obesogenic research – that can find itself in progressive, radical, and anti-capitalist movements and ideologies – actually recast old prejudices of racial contamination into more palatable discourses through health and wellness.¹¹ We must consider how these discourses are weaponized against black, Indigenous, and communities of color as people advocate for better living/work conditions, anti-capitalist organizing, sovereignty and self-governance, and structural representation that can unwittingly paint said communities as incompetent and complicit in their own self-destruction.

Both, neither, all and none; towards a genealogy of excess

A rumor was immediately circulated that Sojourner was an impostor; that she was, indeed, a man disguised in women’s clothing ... Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man’s estate; that, although they had sucked her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck! In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame. Two young men (A. Badgely and J. Horner) stepped forward while Sojourner exposed her naked breast to the audience. I heard a democrat say, as we were returning home from meeting, that Dr. Strain had, previous to the examination, offered to bet forty dollars that Sojourner was a man! So much for the physiological acumen of a western physician.

(Truth, 2018)

The above is an excerpt from a letter written in October of 1858 detailing the events that transpired at an anti-slavery meeting in Northern Indiana. Sojourner Truth, abolitionist and prototypical black feminist, was accused by the crowd she was speaking to (regarding abolition and women’s rights) of being a man disguised as a woman. Personal letters described her physical appearance, often calling her elderly, dark, *ugly* – not at all up to the sensibilities of white female beauty and fragility. The crowd began demanding that she *bare her bosom* to medical doctors for inspection.

I begin with this scene to demonstrate how histories of enslavement complicate understandings of gender, and further how Truth’s fat flesh marks what her objectors sensed as an alarming ambiguity in relation to her sex. Though feminist scholars have taken up this scene as a means of tracing the impossibility of black female enfleshment, what would a decolonial Fat Studies reading have to offer such an analysis? How does fat interrupt clear delineations of sex and gender? This is where the work gets messy, where the citations require a coaxing, and the theorizing is more flirtation than fact. In connecting a Fat Studies analysis to Women of Color Feminist

theorizing on the body, we are better able to engage with how race, gender, and fatness are codified under the same system of racial capitalism – a system of black, migrant, and Indigenous denigration of life, land, and labor under the rubric of progress and extractivism. Black feminist scholars and activists have deeply shaped the ideological and political terms within which Women Of Color Feminisms theorize the body. Anti-blackness and coloniality have sutured the imperial body as two sides of the same coin, and much of our vocabulary for understanding racialized fat is indebted to black feminist/femme theorizing (Lorde, 1984; Shaw, 2006). The racialized (fat) femme body has been a historic site of speculation, surveillance, social/state policing; she is at once visually captured and fugitively outside of the boundaries of the human (Crenshaw, 1990; Da Silva, 2007; Wynter, 2003).

Truth's performance layers across intersecting gazes – of nineteenth century medical science, of white supremacy, and modes of gender performance and regulation. Nineteenth century medical science and Enlightenment philosophy were co-constitutive: formalizing objects as knowable, truth as empirical, and rationality and reason as the highest capacity of Man (Wynter, 2003). The codification of European epistemologies as truth, as the singular way of being human, foreclosed *infinite and extraordinary possibilities* (Césaire, 1972) through colonial technologies that solidified racial taxonomies and gendered/sexual difference. Truth forces us to reckon with how the enslaved female flesh escapes the category of woman – her blackness, her age, her undesired-but-hypersexualized body. Black flesh, fat fleshy commodity, at once is excluded from categories of nation and gender and at the same time, remain the very bedrock of politics. In *Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: An American grammar book*, Hortense Spillers (1987) offers critical interventions into gender and racial formation in the US by thinking through flesh, black kinship, histories of containment, and dispossession. She argues that the Middle Passage and enslavement represent “zero degree of social conceptualization” in which flesh accrues a more fundamental level of meaning that is, over time, subject to different discursive feats. Spillers posits that the *symbolic integrity* of “male” and “female” as two subject positions lose validity and differentiation within a regime of captivity and dispossession, only to be rearticulated as dichotomous positionalities through white supremacist patriarchy.

There has been much theorizing on Spiller's groundbreaking work, and I wade further into murky waters to connect how fatness produces a problem of gender that is reified through racial logics, collected impressions of power and unfreedoms, bending us towards the white settler body. I turn to Performance Studies scholar Caleb Luna (2018) to connect how racialized fatness continues to produce gender in specific ways, writing:

I have a big, soft belly and what might be called breasts on a different body. This is a feminized fatness that is different from the hard, muscular guts found on athletes and those in masculinized spaces like the bear community. I have very little body hair that follows the patterns of my father and other Indigenous men I see who look like him. This is another marker of masculinity that my body fails, that, along with my fatness, locates me in a kind of gender purgatory—both, neither, all and none.

(para. 9)

Both, neither, all and none. Fat, race, and gender are inseparable to the categories of the human – of who is authentic, real, and worthy. Decolonial fat widens – it pushes through, appears where things don't fit, and reminds us of the radically different ways in which bodies can/must occupy space, ways that are not neatly contained and inevitably contaminated. I offer this reading not to exceptionalize the fat body as the ultimate site of liberation or resistance or denigration, but rather to mark how punishing bodily difference marks the affect of capital: where moving to

the site of racialized fat layers multiple histories of (un)freedom, desire, and possibility – from enslaved black women, portly European settlers, Pasifika bodies, and diasporic subjects.

In the tradition of a Woman of Color Feminism that calls for an unwillingness to seek easy resolutions – refusing the production of knowledge that demands positivist answers – this piece instead sits in the muck of tension/tensing. This chapter reckons with a deep fracture in the world as our fat, brown, femme bodies experience it versus the world as it has been historicized and contextualized through a colonial vocabulary. This fracture is the distance between what we inherit and learn about our bodies through our great grandmother's traumas and the indexing of risk/race-coding as a new racial formation in the 21st century. Decolonizing Fat Studies means wanting more than anyone is willing to give you, being stuck between worlds that can't contain all of you and moving about those spaces without asking permission or forgiveness. It is a patchwork of incomplete archives, cross-disciplinary methodologies, and partial histories that are felt onto our bodies and into our spaces. It is uncovering a looking at and after ourselves despite all the ways scholars, doctors, and kin have already defined us. Decolonizing Fat Studies is the healing work we do for ourselves and each other – even when we aren't ready, even when there are no citations.

Notes

- 1 Diaz has stated in interviews that Oscar's fatness symbolizes the trauma of colonial domination and a legacy of rape – that the fukú, the intergenerational curse, becomes embedded into Oscar's flesh through fatness as a response to the trauma of rape culture. For example, in an interview with the Boston Review (Moya, 2012), Diaz says: "Oscar isn't fat just to be fat – at least not in my head. His fatness was partially a product of what's going on in the family in regards to their bodies, in regards to the rape trauma." In Diaz's conceptualizing of race, fat, gender, and coloniality, Oscar's body symbolizes the dysfunction of 400 years of conquest, of a rape culture that begins with la Malinche, and reappears in the violence of Trujillo's regime.
- 2 My use of the decolonial horizon considers how becoming cannot be decoupled from colonialism, global capitalism, and white supremacy; there are no clear divides between post/colonial, premodern/(post)modern, human/nonhuman. As Sylvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1991) and Laura Lomas (2008) argue: there are alternative, decolonial histories that are always already *here*. Where there is power and surveillance and regulation by the settler colonial state, there is always resistance and this resistance does not rupture time and place (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1991). This re-imagined temporality, instead, constitutes an animated decolonial horizon where struggle and resistance are not thought of as events or fleeting moments, but the conditions of possibility and becoming.
- 3 There are other interpretations of Oscar's life – that he was the only character to defeat the fukú by experiencing true love and intimacy. However, if we are to look at the structural and systemic ways in which his life was discarded and laid bare, I believe my analysis of the dead-end of fat continues to ring true (see Kunze, 2013; Mitchell, 2013).
- 4 I delineate between Fat Studies projects and obesogenic projects partly through their disciplinary methods and whether they study fat/ness or obesity-fat. Obesogenic research is often framed through Science and Technology Studies, New Materialisms, Feminist Science Studies to interrogate multiple forms of governance, and is interested in understanding: *what in our society produces fat? How might we then manage the various disorders that, amongst other things, produce fat populations?* The Fat Studies projects I name here are cultural studies, historical materialist, or media studies projects engaged with questions of representation (less so about aesthetics), but deeply grounded in fat activism.
- 5 Following the tradition of postcolonial and decolonial scholars who put pressure on the figure of the human in western discourses, this chapter asks us to consider how ideas of individualism, enlightenment, personhood, and cohesive-subjecthood are contingent upon labor, racialization, and the body. For an interdisciplinary reading of western liberalism as it has informed/been informed by Empire in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, see Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of four continents* (2015).
- 6 Much of my reading of muscular tension and Fanon is indebted to and deepened by Neetu Khanna's life-affirming graduate seminar "Colonial Affect" at USC and her forthcoming book *The visceral logics of decolonization*.

- 7 I name this as colonial because as Rebecca Earle (2012) notes, Spaniards in the Americas fixated on diet and food as a means by which early settlers maintained racial and class difference in contact zones where flesh and fluid were in constant interchange and flux, dissolving the boundaries between self and other.
- 8 Farrell's (2011) discussion on the matter of race/gender/fatness is more centered on white suffragist's desire for legibility within white male-publics but does meditate on the slippages between racialization and racialism.
- 9 Though I agree that Fat Studies has certain limitations in theorizing alongside the human, I route my critiques through Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Denise Da Silva's (2007) work on race, science, and embodiment in order to think through an urgency in decolonizing conceptualizations of health and fatness. That discussion remains outside the scope of this chapter, but also complicates how the Feminist Science Studies scholars I have listed above have taken up the question of fatness, materiality, and humanness.
- 10 Despite the move to depoliticize fat and to materialize fat outside of cultural critique, the fat body remains an ideological and representational force that furthers public policy recommendations around agriculture, city ordinances around fast food and soda, child services, welfare and healthcare, and environmental policies – many of which are central points of focus for obesogenic research. For further discussion on how fat and environmental apocalypse are collapsed categories, see Russell & Semenکو (2016); White (2013).
- 11 In a similar vein, Lucas Crawford's (2017) *Slender trouble: From Berlant's cruel figuring of figure to Sedgwick's fat presence* offers a strong analysis of how even queer theory overdetermines the stagnation and dead ends of fatness.

References

- Ahuja, N. (2016). *Bioinsecurities: Disease interventions, empire, and the government of species*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Boero, N. (2009). Fat kids, working moms, and the "epidemic of obesity": Race, class, and mother blame. In E. Rothblum, & S. Solovay (Eds.), *The fat studies reader* (pp. 113–119). New York: New York University Press.
- Boero, N. (2012). *Killer fat: Media, medicine, and morals in the American "obesity epidemic."* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bordo, S. (2004). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture, and the body*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Césaire, A. (1972). *Discourse on colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press. (Original work published 1955).
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cooper, C. (2010). Fat studies: Mapping the field. *Sociology Compass*, 4(12), 1020–1034.
- Crawford, L. (2017). Slender trouble: From Berlant's cruel figuring of figure to Sedgwick's fat presence. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 23(4), 447–472.
- Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Da Silva, D. F. (2007). *Toward a global idea of race* (Vol. 27). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Díaz, J. (2008). *The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Penguin.
- Earle, R. (2012). *The body of the conquistador: Food, race and the colonial experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1963) *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Farrell, A. E. (2011). *Fat shame: Stigma and the fat body in American culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Forth, C. E. (2012). Fat, desire and disgust in the colonial imagination. *History Workshop Journal*, 73(1), 211–239.
- Fresno-Calleja, P. (2017). Fighting gastrocolonialism in Indigenous Pacific writing. *Interventions*, 19(7), 1041–1055.
- Gómez-Barris, M. (2017). *The extractive zone: Social ecologies and decolonial perspectives*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Greenhalgh, S. (2012). Weighty subjects: The biopolitics of the US war on fat. *American Ethnologist*, 39(3), 471–487.

- Griff, E. C. (2016). *Too much to belong: Latina/o racialization, obesity epidemic discourse, and unassimilable corporeal excess* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). College Park, MD: University of Maryland.
- Harjunen, H. (2016). *Neoliberal bodies and the gendered fat body: The fat body in focus*. London: Routledge.
- Higham, J. (2002). *Strangers in the land: Patterns of American nativism, 1860–1925*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Inness, S. (2005). *Secret ingredients: Race, gender, and class at the dinner table*. New York: Springer.
- Kirkland, A. (2011). The environmental account of obesity: A case for feminist skepticism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 36(2), 463–485.
- Kunze, P. C. (2013). Send in the clowns: Extraordinary male protagonists in contemporary American fiction. *Fat Studies*, 2(1), 17–29.
- LeBesco, K. (2011). Neoliberalism, public health, and the moral perils of fatness. *Critical Public Health*, 21(2), 153–164.
- Lomas, L. (2008). *Translating empire: José Martí, migrant Latino subjects, and American modernities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lombroso, C., & Ferrero, G. (2004). *Criminal woman, the prostitute, and the normal woman*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- Lowe, L. (2015). *The intimacies of four continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Luna, C. (2018). In the gender non-conformity of my fat body. *The Body is Not an Apology*. <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/the-gender-nonconformity-of-my-fatness/>
- McCormack, J. V., & Burrows, L. (2015). The burden of brown bodies: Teachings about Pasifika within public health obesity research in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 15(5), 371–378.
- Mitchell, D., & Snyder, S. (2003). The eugenic Atlantic: Race, disability, and the making of an international eugenic science, 1800–1945. *Disability & Society*, 18(7), 843–864.
- Mitchell, K. I. (2013). *Narrating resistance through failure: Queer temporality and reevaluations of success in Junot Díaz's The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao* (unpublished doctoral dissertation). Boulder, CO: University of Colorado.
- Mollow, A. (2017). Unvictimizeable: Toward a fat black Disability Studies. *African American Review*, 50(2), 105–121.
- Moya, P. M. (2012). The search for decolonial love: An interview with Junot Díaz. *Boston Review*, 26.
- Murray, S. (2008). Pathologizing “fatness”: Medical authority and popular culture. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25(1), 7–21.
- Murray, S. (2009). Marked as “pathological”: “Fat” bodies as virtual confessors. In J. Wright, & V. Harwood (Eds.), *Biopolitics and the “obesity epidemic”* (pp. 78–90). New York: Routledge.
- Norman, M. E., & Moola, F. J. (2019). The weight of (the) matter: A new material feminist account of thin and fat oppressions. *Health*, 23(5), 497–515.
- Perez, C. S. (2010). *From unincorporated territory [Saina]*. Oakland, CA: Omnidawn.
- Probyn, E. (2009). Fat, feelings, bodies: A critical approach to obesity. In M. Burns, & H. Malson (Eds.), *Critical feminist approaches to eating dis/orders* (pp. 113–123). Hove: Routledge.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power and eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology*, 15(2), 215–232.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (1991). The historical horizons of internal colonialism. *Report on the Americas*, 25(3), 18–45.
- Robinson, C. J. (2000). *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Russell, C., & Semenko, K. (2016). We take “Cow” as a compliment: Fattening humane, environmental, and social justice education. In E. Cameron, & C. Russell (Eds.), *The fat pedagogy reader: Challenging weight-based oppression through critical education* (pp. 211–220). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Saldaña-Tejeda, A., & Wade, P. (2018). Obesity, race and the Indigenous origins of health risks among Mexican Mestizos. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(15), 2731–2749.
- Schwartz, H. (1986). *Never satisfied: A cultural history of diets, fantasies, and fat*. New York: Free Press.
- Shah, N. (2001). *Contagious divides: Epidemics and race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Vol. 7). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Shaw, A. E. (2006). *The embodiment of disobedience: Fat black women's unruly political bodies*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Spillers, H. J. (1987). Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics*, 17(2), 65–81.

- Stearns, P. N. (2002). *Fat history: Bodies and beauty in the modern west*. New York: New York University Press.
- Strings, S. (2015). Obese black women as “Social dead weight”: Reinventing the “Diseased black woman”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(1), 107–130.
- Truth, S. (2018). *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A northern slave*. Boston, MA: Squid Ink Classics.
- Usiekiewicz, M. (2016). Dangerous bodies: Blackness, fatness, and the masculinity dividend. *A Journal of Queer Studies*, 11a, 19–45.
- Ward, A. (2013). Fat bodies/Thin critique: Animating and absorbing fat embodiments. *The Scholar and Feminist Online*. Issue 11.3. <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/life-un-ltd-feminism-bioscience-race/fat-bodiesthin-critique-animating-and-absorbing-fat-embodiments/>
- Warin, M. (2015). Material feminism, obesity science and the limits of discursive critique. *Body & Society*, 21(4), 48–76.
- White, F. R. (2013). “We’re kind of devolving”: Visual tropes of evolution in obesity discourse. *Critical Public Health*, 23(3), 320–330.
- Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the Human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(3), 257–337.
- Yoshizawa, R. S. (2012). The Barker hypothesis and obesity: Connections for transdisciplinarity and social justice. *Social Theory & Health*, 10(4), 348–367.