

THE IMAGE OF THE FAT POOR

IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

A STEREOTYPE AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE DISCOURSES ON POORNESS* AND ON FATNESS*

DEFINING FAT POOR The image of the Fat Poor is the idea of a person being both poor and obese with the two conditions being connected in an almost natural way, as if they are closely related and depend on each other. The image attributes negatively connoted character traits, attitudes, and habits and it contains associations of being lazy, passive, immobile, and unproductive.

“This couple somehow managed to avoid any sort of junk food in their experiment, and food preparation was not difficult enough to deter them. This proves that poor people are poor because they are **less intelligent**; they **don't know** how to **manage** their diet in the best possible way, and they probably wouldn't need to survive on a dollar a day if they were **smart** enough to get better-paying jobs. [...] It would be in everyone's best interest if **natural selection** took its course; let the **obese people** be weeded out, let them die.”

AN EXAMPLE OF FAT POOR

In 2008, a couple from California tried for one month to spend not more than one dollar per person and day on food. The *New York Times* featured an online article on their experiment, followed by more than 200 comments, one of them mirroring the image of the Fat Poor.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS What are the functions of the image of the Fat Poor in contemporary U.S. society and especially in literature, film, and television?

Does the image of the Fat Poor conceptualize poverty as an individual concern or as a social problem?

How can poverty be narrated in literary and audio-visual texts without a focus on the individual and instead incorporating the societal dimension, if literary and film genres prefer individual stories and individual struggle?

DISCIPLINE AND METHODOLOGY

I locate my project within the recently emerged field of

LITERARY-CRITICAL POVERTY STUDIES

Methodologies for this project:

- discourse analysis
- literary case studies (close reading, interpretation)
- intersectionality and multiple jeopardy
- fat studies

* **POORNESS** is a concept referring to characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes which are frequently attached to poverty but which are not necessarily or exclusively connected to poverty as an economic condition and its closely related socioeconomic aspects.

* **FATNESS** functions as a cultural category including judgments and attached characteristics concerning people who are considered as overweight, obese, or fat. I am interested in poorness and fatness as the social perceptions and stigmatized dimensions of poverty and obesity, and in how the poor and obese are represented within discourse and especially in cultural text, in literature, film, and television.

DISCLAIMER

This dissertation project is not about real connections between poverty and obesity. It is about culturally constructed connections between being poor and being obese and it is about prejudices, representations, stereotypes, and cultural perceptions of the poor.

- Attachment of **negatively** connoted characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes.
- A highly **emotional tone** in both discourses, often involving indignation and scorn concerning the poor and obese.
- Use of seemingly neutral **definitions** and **measurements** (poverty lines, income, weight categories, body mass index) which seem stable, though they might change and depend on the sciences dominating the discourses.
- A **terminology** of **war** and **panic** has been and is used to define poverty and obesity as major, nearly **epidemic threats** to U.S. society.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE DISCOURSES ON THE POOR & THE OBESE

At the intersection of the discourses on the poor and on the obese several similarities come together. These similarities strengthen the connection between poorness and fatness and thus facilitate the construction of a merged logic of the stereotypical image of the Fat Poor.

- Construction of the poor / the obese as the **Other**, **discrimination** and **devaluation** of the poor / the obese.
- Diverse **explanations** ranging from blaming the individual (own fault) to the person's cultural or biological heritage (family, genes, neighborhood).
- Expected **internalization** of a **work(out) ethic** inspiring change via discipline and hard work, and not merely because of outer financial or social necessity or pressure.
- Focus on preventing and fighting **child poverty** / **child obesity** (particularly interesting in coming-of-age stories when the adolescent is blamed).

CASE STUDIES ON FAT POOR

WEIGHT LOSS SHOWS

This chapter discusses contemporary weight loss shows like *The Biggest Loser* (since 2004) and their merchandising products.

The Biggest Loser is a valuable source for this research project, as the series and its products employ a capitalist market ideology as the basis for changing individual bodies according to a workout ethic. Central elements of *The Biggest Loser* are the participants' competition, persistent self-improvement, and internalization of dominant body and health ideals. In this respect, the series' cultural work is similar to the image of the Fat Poor and its functions. This chapter



is interested in discussing how ideals of capitalist markets are integrated into a discourse on obese and overweight bodies, how these ideals are internalized as a workout ethic by the show's participants, and what this means for the discourse on fatness in general.

FAT POOR WELFARE MOTHERS

This chapter looks at the novel *Push* (1996) and its movie adaptation *Precious* (2009) and the texts' use of Fat Poor.

Both *Push* and *Precious* employ the image of the Fat Poor in their portrayal of the protagonist Precious and her mother Mary, two poor, African-American women living in Harlem in the late 1980s.



The texts combine Fat Poor with older stereotypes about poor, non-white women, such as the Welfare Mother and the Welfare Queen. The analysis focuses on the use of these stereotypes and the texts'



discussion of the success narrative. The chapter furthermore addresses questions of ethnicity, gender, and motherhood, and it explores the texts' complex – stereotypical and yet critical – portrayal of the poor.

FAT POOR WHITE TRASH

This chapter is an analysis of texts which employ characters who qualify as both Fat Poor and White Trash.

In several audio-visual texts Fat Poor White Trash characters are featured as minor figures, as in the movie *Winter's Bone* (2010).



The novel and the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1991 & 1993), portray a poor and obese mother as a Fat Poor White Trash outsider.

In the reality television series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (since 2012), the protagonist and her family are shown as weird, obese White Trash characters, the series indulges in ridiculing the family & presenting them as deficient.



Aspects addressed in this chapter: rural settings, construction of outsiders, spectacle, freaks, monsters, the grotesque, crime, stupidity, incest, and lack of morality.