**THE IMAGE OF THE FAT POOR**

**IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

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

**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, inimicable, and unproductive.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- What are the functions of the image of the Fat Poor in contemporary U.S. society and popular culture (esp. in literature, film, & television)?
- What is the cultural work of the image in general & in specific (con)texts?
- Does the image conceptualize poverty as social matter, cultural tradition, individual concern, or biological heritage?
- How can poverty be narrated in literature and film, concerning the influence of existing stereotypes and genres?

**DISCIPLINES**

This project is located in American Studies & the recently emerged field of Literary-Critical Poverty Studies.

**METHODOLOGIES**

- Literary Case Studies (close reading and interpretation)
- Discourse Analysis
- Contemporary New Historicism
- 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 nor necessary 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 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.

**WEIGHT LOSS SHOWS**

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

**FAT POOR WELFARE MOTHERS**

Both Push and Precious combine the images of the Fat Poor, the Welfare Mother, and the Welfare Queen in their portrayal of the protagonist Precious and her mother Mary. Two poor, African-American women living in New York City's Harlem in the 1980s.

The chapter analyzes the use of the stereotypes and their contribution to the CULTURALIZATION OF POVERTY (imagine poverty as a matter of behavior, attitude, and character primarily) in these two texts.

It also examines the use of the motif of the success narrative and its role in the INDIVIDUALIZATION OF POVERTY (imagine the reasons for and especially the overcoming of poverty as individual matters).

**WHITE & RURAL FAT POOR**

Both texts employ the image of the Fat Poor in the portrayal of white, poor, obese characters living in non-urban areas. Via these characters, the texts discuss the CULTURALIZATION OF POVERTY.

In the reality TV series Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, a family is portrayed as obese, poor, abnormal, and deficient. The series ridicules the family, presents their poverty as a chosen lifestyle, and relies on Velli socio-economic aspects.

**AN EXAMPLE OF FAT POOR**

In 2008, a couple from California tried for one month to spend 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 200,000 comments, one of them mirroring the image of the Fat Poor.

**SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE DISCOURSES ON THE POOR & THE OBSE**

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 OBSE**

- Construction of the poor / the obese as the Other
- Discrimination and devatuation of the poor / the obese
- Diverse explanations ranging from blaming the individual (own fault) to the person's cultural or biological heritage
- 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)

**DISCLAIMER**

This dissertation project is not about real connections between pov- erty 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.

**POVERTY TERMS**

Expected definitions, one more than 200 comments, one of them mirroring the image of the Fat Poor.