

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 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 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 merchandise 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.

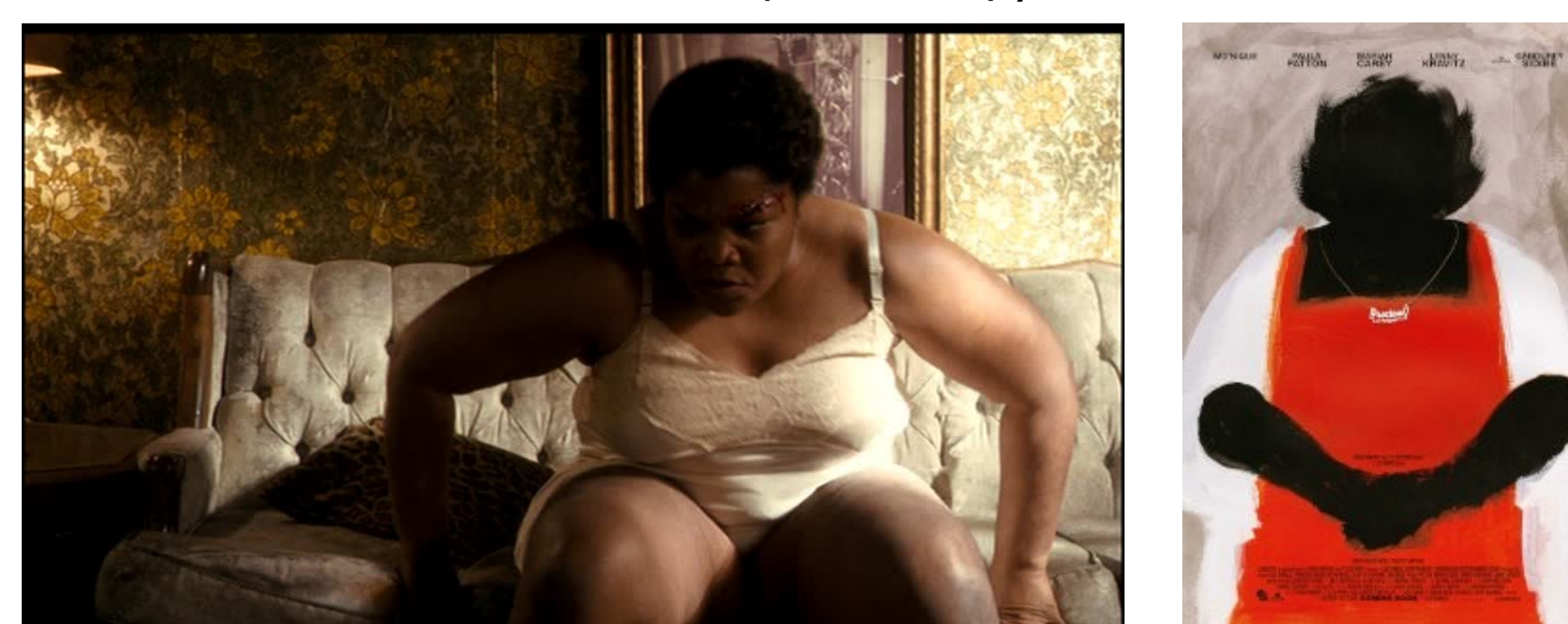
FAT POOR WELFARE MOTHERS

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

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 (imagining 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 (imagining the reasons for and especially the overcoming of poverty as individual matters).

WHITE & RURAL FAT POOR

This chapter analyzes the TV series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012) and the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993).

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 VEILS SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS.

What's Eating Gilbert Grape uses the image of the Fat Poor in order to illustrate the experience of exclusion, to discuss the pattern of intra-familial conflict and escape in narratives of overcoming poverty, and to raise questions of solidarity. Also, the text INCLUDES SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONCERNS.

Further aspects addressed in the chapter are the role of location and mobility, visualization of a white rural (fat) poor aesthetic, and the texts' differing approaches to the idea of generational poorness.

