

Haunted by Fatness: Medicalization, Diet Culture, and the Failure of Chrononormativity

By Catherine Jeffery

ABSTRACT. In the summer of 2016, BBC Three filmed an autopsy of an obese woman in a documentary called *Obesity: The Post Mortem*. In addition, BBC has released a “behind the scenes” video of the procedure, detailing the real-life process of shipping a body overseas for “medical research.” This essay begins by pointing out the expressions of fears of fatness and of fat people present in Netflix’s full-length version of the autopsy as well as in the behind-the-scenes clip, by focusing on narration in the films as well as stylization such as sound and cinematography choices. I will use the framework of chrononormativity, as developed by queer theorists, to show how fatness disobeys normative notions of time. What’s more, the strategies that have been created by society to manage fatness, such as the medicalization of obesity and dieting culture, have in fact created new spaces where fatness persists in refusing normative temporality through haunting.

Fear of Fat

Fatness is deeply feared, and this fact is on display in *Obesity: The Post Mortem*. This video, through its overt statements by the narrator and by interviewees, as well as through its stylization and its dehumanizing imagery, illustrates an intense fear of fat. Near the beginning of the episode, the narrator notes that, normally, autopsies aren’t allowed to be filmed. However, because obesity is such a crisis, the filmmakers were approved for this one in the hopes that it would shock people into thinking more seriously about their weight, their lifestyle, and their eating habits. Live people are interviewed in the documentary,

and they are often caught echoing one another's statements: they all agree that being fat makes one sad and alone and forces one to work twice as hard to overcome negative impressions that people may have of them, such as that they're lazy or stupid.

In case these overt statements wouldn't be enough to scare someone out of being fat, the stylistic choices made in this film are similar to those of a horror movie. The show has low lighting, with shadows splayed across the laboratory where the doctors dissect the body. The lighting gets brighter only when the live doctors speak directly to the camera outside of the autopsy room or when the interviewees are brought into frame. Sinister music accompanies the entire video except for the few minutes where the interviewees explain how they're trying to lose weight; at these moments, the music shifts to being happy and hopeful. The narrator uses a serious tone throughout and employs phrases like "catastrophic" and "startling discoveries" which suggest an atmosphere of crisis. The shots top this all off with the camera frequently cutting to display close-ups of naked flesh being sliced open as well as shiny, heavy-duty surgical tools.

Despite this cinematographic detail, the viewer is never really introduced to the corpse. The narrator claims this is for privacy reasons; but, judging by the language employed by the doctors, it is also due to a need to distance human life from fatness. Pieces of the corpse's body are compared to various kinds of food throughout the episode: the heart should be like a piece of steak but is too soft and soggy because of her fatness; the liver is damaged because of the fat and now has the consistency of pâté; the kidneys, in their sacks of fat, are like edamame beans that must be popped out of their shells. This dehumanization makes it impossible to compare the dead woman to the doctors in the room; not only is she dead and they alive, but she is dead precisely because of her fatness, and this means she

cannot be fully human. Instead, she is relegated to the status of food.

All these instances point to an underlying fear of fatness that is important enough to document. Indeed, fat bodies both inside and outside the morgue act as repositories for social anxieties and fears, as outlined by several scholars (see, for example, Shugart or Guthman). In response to fear, social mechanisms are often created to manage the “problem” of fatness: for example, medicalization (on display in this video) and diet culture are just two of these. But these mechanisms, as will be illustrated later, allow for a fat haunting in turn.

Queer Time, Fat Time

Chrononormativity has been greatly developed by queer theorists, but it is also applicable to studying fatness. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) defines chrononormativity as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (p. 3). She also notes that time binds whole populations together through chronobiopolitics (Freeman, 2010, p. 3). Within chronobiopolitical society, social institutions such as the State work to connect bodies to narratives of movement and change, often doing so through life landmarks like marriage, reproduction, raising children, and death (Freeman, 2010, p. 4). Life becomes legible and respectable only through this specific timeline, with an overarching theme of progress and maturation (Freeman, 2010, p. 5). As Jack Halberstam (2005) notes, within this construction, people are expected to be in search of longevity, and any lives that do not prioritize this are pathologized (p. 152).

These ideas have important ramifications for queer people. Halberstam (2005) charts subcultural involvement, arguing that while subcultures are often envisioned as part of one’s youth, queer people engage within subcultural movements well into adulthood (p. 161), thus creating a sort of “stretched-out adolescence” (p. 153). Queerness

disobeys the command to mature, to grow up, and to progress on the normative life narrative through this participation. It also does so through practices of sexuality: in Freudian theory, orality and anality are stepping stones to healthy, mature adulthood, but queer people continue to engage in these sorts of sexual activities well beyond youth (Freeman, 2010, p. 8).

Although chrononormativity has been theorized mainly by queer scholars, it applies just as well to fatness. As Kevin Warth highlights, queer people do not fit within the state's formation of idealized citizenship, and thus they are left in "political and temporal exile"; this applies to fat people as well, who often do not follow normative life rhythms such as the landmarks outlined by Freeman. It is hard to date and marry if one is fat (according to the interviewees from the autopsy film and as illustrated by McFarland et al.), and myths abound that suggest fat people are incapable of biological reproduction anyway (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 140). If they do dare to have children, they are a threat to that child's wellbeing through encouraging unhealthy behaviours (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 142). Further, in the best-case scenario where they have children and survive to see them grow up, there will be no wealth to pass down after death because fat bodies overconsume, leaving no leftovers (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 142-143). Additionally, fat people fall out of line with chrononormativity because their lives are not seen as in line with a quest for longevity, as Halberstam (2010) notes. Obesity, the medical industry claims, creates serious risks by increasing the likelihood of a myriad of life-threatening diseases (Condie & Manoharajah, 2016).

Fatness generally disobeys chrononormative commands through the failure to meet normative landmarks and the lack of futurity and longevity. Furthermore, as is of particular concern for this essay, fatness is often a haunting force. Carla Freccero (2008) develops ideas about haunting in relation to the study of

history, but this concept can be just as relevant for various sorts of analyses. Haunting reminds us that “the past and the present are neither discrete nor sequential. The borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles, and does not hold still” (Freccero, 2008, p. 196). As I will demonstrate, a specifically fat haunting does just this.

Fat Haunting

Both medicalization and diet culture create opportunities for fat haunting. Medicalization creates the opportunity for fat futurity, despite claims about obesity; in turn, this futurity allows for fatness to live on and therefore become a haunting force. Diet culture also creates the opportunity for a fat haunting because, while it is often used to conform to major life landmarks as dictated by chronobiopolitical society, it ends up centering life around fatness.

Fat people can live on through medicine. Through the medical industry, dead bodies can be shipped across seas and be driven around, therefore taking on experiences as they would in life, minus the consciousness. The fat body can also live on through others since an action one does now (i.e. become a donor) can have an impact on the future because the body will provide a resource for science (BBC Three, 2016). This research could even save a child’s life, as in the case of this documentary, which can teach young people about how they ought to live their lives. If nothing else, the doctors in the video explain that *they* are able to learn something new from every body (Condie & Manoharajah, 2016). In this way, medicine allows fatness to have futurity, even if it’s on medicine’s own terms.

Since medicine offers the possibility of futurity for fatness, it also provides the opportunity for a fat haunting. The autopsy videos, while explicitly centered around this woman’s death, also illustrate the fact that pieces of her are still with us. Because the body can serve as a resource for science, teach youth, save children’s lives, or provide learning opportunities for doctors and students, it

maintains a presence in the world. This presence allows pieces of it to infiltrate the living world, haunting those still here. Indeed, one of the doctors in the documentary already seems to be confused about whether the cadaver is alive or dead, here or there, as he consistently mixes up tenses throughout the episode, saying “this lady has heart failure” or “this lady is obese” before going on to state that “this lady *died* from obesity” (Condie & Manoharajah, 2016). As the fatness lives on, it lives on *within* the current world and therefore haunts it.

The haunting of fatness is not only present in this autopsy film (through medicalization) but also furthered through diet culture. As outlined by McFarland et al. (2018), dieting is an essential part of life for fat bodies, which must slim down to fit into normative life milestones (p. 135) and thus participate in the type of chronobiopolitical society mentioned by Freeman earlier. For example, dieting is seen as an important action in preparation for weddings because popular culture excludes fat people from the social institution of marriage (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 137). Social stigmas can then be internalized by potential partners who may not be willing to date a fat person (McFarland et al., 2018, p. 138), and these stigmas can also be expressed by fat people themselves. In the case of *Obesity: The Post Mortem*, multiple interviewees express the fact that they do not feel able to date or enter romantic relationships because of their weight. One interviewee discusses her wedding specifically, explaining how the “happiest day of her life” was, in fact, not happy at all but was instead deeply uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing because of her fatness (Condie & Manoharajah, 2016).

While dieting is meant to enable a fat person to be folded into chronobiopolitical society, in fact, it opens up the possibility for fat haunting. A popular image within diet campaigns is the before-after image, as discussed by Rachel Fox (2018). These images “bend time, glorifying the future

and denigrating the past and present” (Fox, 2018, p. 216). Through these images, dieting is always oriented toward the future where the fat body can no longer exist (Fox, 2018, p. 217). However, even when (if) these thin bodies take shape, fatness remains a haunting force. The thin body that comes into being must always fear the return of fat cells, constantly fighting against putting the weight back on. This weight-loss struggle, which at one point was about progress and “becoming the new you” (Fox, 2018, p. 216), must now be defined by the fat past and the threat that what has passed will return once again. Even as thin bodies can survive in the utopian (skinny) future, they never escape fatness because fatness will always be what has happened before, what could happen again, and therefore what is to be avoided. Thus, fatness continues to haunt skinny lives. Although dieting can result in weight loss and therefore the ability to participate in normative life landmarks, it also creates a future that is consistently haunted by the past. In this way, while diet culture can produce normativity in terms of body shape, size, and weight, it will simultaneously reinforce non-normativity when it comes to issues of time.

Conclusion

Through the autopsy done in the summer of 2016 and its subsequent documentation, issues of fat time can be explored in depth. The behind-the-scenes video and the full-length Netflix episode entitled *Obesity: The Post Mortem*, both illustrate the intense fear surrounding fatness. Meanwhile, mechanisms used to manage fatness allow for a fat haunting. While fat people are often seen as lacking a future, medicalization makes a future possible; but, in turn, this allows fat bodies to continue existing within living society as a haunting force. Diet culture, as it works to slim fat people down in order to encourage meeting chronobiopolitical life milestones, constructs skinny lives that remain structured around and haunted by

the specter of fatness. In both of these cases, fat people and their fatness persist against the grain of normative temporality.

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