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Against progress: Understanding and resisting the temporality of transformational weight loss narratives

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ABSTRACT

Narratives of personal transformation through weight loss, often presented in the form of before-and-after photos, have the power to bend time into a nonlinear structure that glorifies the future at the expense of the past and present. In this article, the author proposes that the temporality created by presenting weight loss as a way to perfect one's life is actually a manifestation of a larger, progress-driven temporality embedded in Western history and culture. An analysis of this larger temporality through its appearance in the colonial paradigm of progress and the queer studies concept of reproductive futurism provides a critical lens through which to examine its materialization in dieting discourse and internalization by fat dieters. This lens reveals that disillusioned dieters may have trouble giving up on their weight loss attempts because doing so involves rejecting a much larger temporal pattern. People who have given up on dieting may develop an ambivalent relationship to the present as they resist the temporality of transformational weight loss while continuing to live in a society built on a larger version of it.

KEYWORDS

Fat; fatness; dieting; weight loss; temporality; futurity; fat acceptance

Introduction

Weight loss transformation photos—the infamous “before and after” shot—are impossible to avoid in Western society. Combined with their taglines, phrases such as “become the new you!” or “reveal your true self!” they have the power to bend time, glorifying the future and denigrating the past and present. This time bending creates distinct chronotopes,¹ or forms of time, specific to the idea of identity-changing weight loss. For the past few decades, fat activists and fat studies scholars have worked to dismantle the damaging narrative these advertisements create, but the fight to diminish their influence, especially on dieters, has been a steep uphill battle. In this article, I propose that the reason this struggle has been so difficult is because the chronotopes created by narratives of personal transformation through weight loss are manifestations of larger temporal patterns embedded in our history and cultural ethos.

To make this case, I begin with a discussion of these larger temporal patterns and their origins in the modern ideal of progress. Next, I examine how scholars from the fields of postcolonial studies and queer studies have encountered specific manifestations of these chronotopes in their areas of interest, focusing on the paradigm of progress in postcolonial studies and reproductive futurism in queer studies. Using insight from these examples, I then turn a critical temporal lens on the way the temporality of progress appears in dieting discourse and *is internalized by dieters*, as described in fat studies literature. The internalization of these chronotopes distorts time for dieters, especially fat dieters, and has the ability to hold us hostage to a future that will never materialize while simultaneously making other ways of experiencing time unthinkable. Recognizing the socio-historical embeddedness of these chronotopes provides a clearer picture of how they function and why they are so powerful. This embeddedness also helps to explain the ambivalence many fat activists feel after accepting (or even embracing) our fatness, as we are caught between resisting one manifestation of the temporality of progress while continuing to live with/in many others.

Why revisit before and after?

In her dissertation, *Habits of Resistance: Feminism, Phenomenology, and Temporality*, Kristen Rodier (2014) argues that work on “fat temporality” has focused too heavily on dieting and the narrative created by before and after pictures (157). She’s right—this narrative does not speak for all fat people, so calling it “fat temporality,” something I have done in the past, homogenizes a diverse population. On the other hand, she also says “The futural meaning of obesity is solidified through *temporal narratives of progress—directly connecting to a better future*” (172, emphasis mine). This reference to “temporal narratives of progress” can also be found in Elena Levy-Navarro’s (2009) chapter “Fattening Queer History: Where Does Fat History Go from Here?” in the *Fat Studies Reader*, where she says, “The fat are history itself—that is, they are the past that must be dispensed with *as we move toward our seemingly inevitable future progress*” (18, emphasis mine). Countless other articles address before and after photos, which are inherently future oriented. But none of these texts explicitly engage where this temporality comes from.

Thus, although we should not call it “fat temporality,” I disagree with Rodier’s claim that before and after narratives have played too large a role in fat studies literature. Instead, I would argue that the temporality they create, a temporality that glorifies the future at the expense of the past and present, has not been paid enough attention, especially regarding its connection to a larger sociohistorical pattern of time.

The temporality of progress

The idea of progress in the West is commonsensical and built into every realm of our lives. As Emilie Townes (2006) argues in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, we learn from a young age to believe in the Enlightenment ideals of Western exceptionalism,² expansionism,³ triumphalism,⁴ and that progress is both an inevitable direction of history and a moral duty. These ideas make time appear linear and forward moving, enabling us to believe that the work we do in the present can bring about change and a better future. From Aristotle's great chain of being to Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism to any political stump speech, this sense of the world advancing through developments in science, technology, and social organization is ubiquitous. As Anna Tsing (2015) phrases it in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*: "Most of us were raised on dreams of modernization and progress. These frames sort out those parts of the present that might lead to the future...our theories of history are embroiled in these categories. So, too, are our personal dreams" (20–21).

Organizing life and time in a linear way is not inherently bad, but an extreme investment in progress can be dangerous. When the idea of progress becomes hegemonic, other ways of living and conceptualizing time are crowded out, leaving future-driven linearity as the only option. In Tsing's (2015) words, "progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms" (21). This hegemony is often enforced from both above and below, meaning it can be unilaterally imposed by those in power, but it can also be woven into the common sense of a society, which subtly regulates behaviors and value systems (see Gramsci 2000). Organizing time according to the idea of progress is a problem when one cannot choose to leave it, either because one is limited structurally or because any alternatives to it have become unthinkable. Additionally, an extreme investment in progress becomes a problem when the projected future is unattainable because it is based in a utopian fantasy of perfection without compromise. These two problems often occur together, so that the drive for a perfect future is hegemonic, deforming the linear trajectory of progress into a nonlinear, nonoptional emphasis on the future at the expense of the present and past.

Unfortunately, this unquestioning sprint towards an impossible goal is pervasive enough to be familiar, if not taken for granted. Its manifestations affect neither all realms of life nor all people equally, and the boundary between a general, productive sense of progress and its extreme forms is neither clear nor static. Despite that, some scholars in postcolonial studies and queer studies have analyzed the way temporal patterns created by an extreme investment in progress appear in their areas of interest.⁵

Colonial temporality

Postcolonial scholars have analyzed the way Euro-American colonizers used a distorted temporality, derived from Enlightenment ideas of progress, to justify their colonial efforts and shape their sense of history.⁶ In her book *Reports from a Wild Country*, historian Deborah Bird Rose (2004) argues that colonizers felt time was directed toward the end goal of a utopian civilization; they believed that their actions, no matter how violent, would lead to redemption in the form of a perfect society. Their vision of a future that would transcend the past altered the colonizers' sense of time so much that it enabled them to "understand [themselves] in an imaginary state of future achievement" (Rose 2004, 17). As a result, they turned their backs on their surroundings and their actions because they could only see them as things that were about to be transcended. In this temporality, the future consumed the colonizers' understanding of the world, leaving them to see themselves and the world around them *in retrospect*, as something that *happened* on the way to their utopia. Said differently, their consuming investment in progress turned the future into the only thing that was real. They contorted time so that things not included in their future *could no longer exist*, and must therefore have been part of the past.

Here we see the paradigm of progress take the form of three chronotopes: an imagined future that dominates the present, a past that is equal parts things that have happened and things which do not fit into the vision of the future, and a present which is effectively nonexistent, since it can only be seen in retrospect. And although I am discussing them in the past, these chronotopes can still be found in Eurocentric accounts of history, as well as in neocolonial ideas of "development" today (see Nkrumah 1965). Therefore, when we look at phenomena that are driven by an ideology of progress, we can expect to see similar chronotopes to the ones outlined here.

Queer temporality

While postcolonial scholars provided a model for how an extreme investment in progress turned into chronotopes that colonizers used to justify their colonization efforts, queer studies scholars have uncovered hegemonic forms of time through efforts to resist them. The most notable example of this is Lee Edelman's (2004) book *No Future*, in which he argues that our sense of politics is driven by "reproductive futurism," the obligation to live our lives in a way that benefits the hypothetical "Child" who will reside in the future we must build for them (2–3, 11). For Edelman, working for this future is presented as "unquestionable" because the entire field of politics is actually *thought through* "the image of the Child" (2). This way of thinking imposes an ideological limit on political discourse and thereby on our way of conceiving time as anything but a fight for the future. In Edelman's view, the only way to live outside of this

propagation of a conservative and heteronormative social order is to *not* fight for the child, to disavow any “realization of futurity” (4) and instead not imagine a future at all, lest we fall back into the trap of hoping to forge a more perfect social order.

J. Jack Halberstam (2005), in the book *In a Queer Time and Place*, also outlines the hegemony of reproductive futurism through a call to resist it. Queer subcultures, Halberstam writes, “produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience” (2) such as linear maturation, biological reproduction, child rearing, and the time of inheritance. As such, Halberstam’s queer time stands in contrast to the same drive for progress that demands the past and present exist only in the service of a future that will never arrive. This is especially clear when Halberstam describes queer time as a “moment”—literally the stopping of the rush for progress, which is incomprehensible to those “for whom the past represents the logic for the present, and the future represents the fruition of this logic” (11). This text, along with *No Future*, lets us see that the chronotopes created by reproductive futurism resemble those created by the paradigm of progress, providing evidence that the ideology of progress bends time in similar ways across disparate situations.

Postcolonial scholars revealed how colonizers experienced and perpetuated nonlinear temporalities in the service of colonization, and therefore from a place of power. Queer studies scholars, on the other hand, showed how these chronotopes can be made visible through efforts to resist them. Fat studies literature, in contrast to these analyses, can show us the form of these chronotopes as they appear in dieting discourse and *are internalized by dieters* who then experience their lives according to these forms of time.

The temporality of transformational weight loss

Recognizing the larger pattern to which the progress-driven temporality of dieting is connected is crucially important when we consider that dieters, wooed by all the things that come promised with thinness (see Heyes 2006), often wholeheartedly invest in and internalize this temporality. Moreover, many fat studies scholars—myself included—feel the reverberations of this temporality long after giving up on dieting, likely because the larger temporal pattern is inescapably woven into our cultural ethos. Looking at accounts of experiencing this temporality can provide us with a rich description of the chronotopes created by the ideology of progress manifesting in dieting discourse. I am saying neither that all dieters experience time this way, nor that this is the only temporality created by weight loss rhetoric. I am also not claiming that those who do live by this temporality do so equally—after all, fatness and weight loss are raced, classed, and gendered, and each identity brings with it a different

history of relation to the idea of progress (see Farrell 2011, chapter 3). Instead, I am interested in how the temporality of progress manifests in the idea of weight loss, bending time into a set of chronotopes that do not necessarily reflect reality but *present themselves* as the right way to think about weight loss, which dieters can then take up.

Future

Accounts of the future by dieters and former dieters suggest that it functions as an inescapable fantasy in which thinness is posited as the solution to any and all conflicts of the past and present. Fat activist and blogger Kate Harding (2007) refers to this as “The Fantasy of Being Thin.” In the fantasy, losing weight “is not just about becoming small enough to be perceived as more acceptable” but “about becoming an *entirely different person* — one with far more courage, confidence, and luck than the fat you has.” This idea of thinness is echoed by Yofi Tirosh (2012) in “The Right to Be Fat,” where she says, “Most people perceiving themselves as fat experience the center of gravity of their identity in their imagined, post-transformation future...Weight loss is conceived as an act of restoring or finally finding the true self, whose emergence will bring with it confidence and happiness that are deficient for many fat people” (301). There is some sense to this vision of the future—losing weight could very well ease the burden of existing in a fatphobic society. But the temporality undergirding these accounts is not one in which persistent action in the present may moderately change a more-or-less predictable future. The future being imagined here is one completely devoid of connection to the reality of the dieter. What “after” photos ask us to imagine is not a slightly better version of our current lives, but a *completely different* life, a utopia in which losing weight fixes *all* our problems. As Harding puts it, “When I was invested in The Fantasy of Being Thin, I really believed that changing this one ‘simple’ (ha!) thing would unlock a whole new identity.”

Imagining a completely different life is not necessarily a problem. Many people do so, for any number of reasons. The problem occurs when this impossible imagination comes to inescapably dominate the present, when seeing oneself in a perfect future is no longer a choice. For example, as Rodier (2014) points out, “the displacement of hope for the future seems especially salient for fat people who experience amorphous future health threats that evoke their premature death” (160). Levy-Navarro (2012), in the essay “I’m the New Me: Compelled Confession in Diet Discourse,” makes a similar point. When dieters “confess” that they want to lose weight so they don’t “die young,” the “confessions insist that they cannot possibly live into the future” (Levy-Navarro 2012, 349). Dieters can be forced to invest in a utopian future via threats of *not having a future any other way*.

Dieters who internalize the idea of the future created through narratives of transformation via weight loss can—or must—come to experience themselves in

an imaginary state of future achievement. This not only affects the temporality of the past and the present, but also serves to naturalize the fantasy that losing weight can solve every problem in one's life, when, in fact, the road to extreme weight loss often destroys this future before it can even exist.

Past

Convincing dieters to understand themselves in an imaginary state of future achievement allows the weight loss industry to thrive while its consumers suffer. Dieting ads implicitly claim that suffering is retroactively justified by the future it is imagined to create. When dieters internalize this logic, they can use it to actively engage in weight loss activities while viewing those activities as things they *did* to get thin. When they constantly imagine themselves in the future, as their “after” selves, dieters can only access the present with a backwards glance. The present becomes the past.

Majida Kargbo (2013) elaborates on this temporal phenomenon in her article “Toward a New Relationality: Digital Photography, Shame, and the Fat Subject.” She describes how the before-and-after image both represents and produces a temporality in which the dieter can only engage with the present retroactively:

The viewer's full identification with the image...is predicated on making the fat body the abject Other to the new thin self. Thus, one's orientation to the body (both the “before” image and the fat subject in the present) is in the future tense. If we “learn to see ourselves photographically,” some fat subjects learn that one's relationship to the present (fat) body can only be integrated and narrativized as a possible identification from the vantage point of the future (thin) body *looking back* on abject fat embodiment (168).

This temporality can be understood, and has been written about, as a liminal present. But if we connect this retrospective glance to the way the past functions in the ideology of progress, we can see that this chronotope can also be the past *encroaching on* the present. If the past serves as a container for the things we no longer wish to be associated with, then the fat, abject body—even as it is inhabited—is relegated to the past, thus letting the dieter *look back* on their fatness even as they continue to live it. Only by connecting this temporality to the larger temporality of progress can we see it for what it really is—the past made partly of things that have happened but equally of *things which do not fit into a vision of the thin future*.

Le'a Kent (2001) also tackles the condemnation of the “before,” fat body in her chapter “Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women” from *Bodies Out of Bounds*. After examining several advertisements in pop culture publications from the mid-1990s, she concludes, “The before-and-after scenario both consigns the fat body to an eternal past and makes it bear the full horror of embodiment,

situating it as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being” (135). As we picture dieters who have internalized this temporality, we can see that in order to continue living with this “horror of embodiment,” they must abandon the present for other times. They must escape this horror by understanding themselves as having left it for a thin future, while their current flesh is consigned to the chronotope of the past. This has the effect, as Kargbo (2013) says, of positioning fat subjects “in temporalities that have either passed or have yet to come” but never unambivalently in the present (168).

Present

What, then, becomes of the present? If the temporal trajectory of progress has its way, then the present is constantly *evacuated* as things that are allowable are projected forward and things not allowed are already left behind, condemned to the by-gone era that is *everything but* the utopian future. It is this temporality Edelman and Halberstam reject, this abandonment of the present in the service of things that will not—and indeed, cannot—come to be. But for the dieter who does not resist this temporality, the present becomes a site of profound estrangement.

As Rodier (2014), Kent (2001), and Kargbo (2013) all remark upon in their pieces, dieters who have internalized this temporality often experience the present as a liminal space. Kargbo specifically notes how living with the constant instability of the present can incentivize dieters to ignore it entirely: “The narrative of fat-as-transition that constructs our ability to ‘see’ the fat body has the expected effect of...invisibility (the erasure engendered by the belief in the desirability of the eventual transformation into the nonfat body), but additionally renders some fat subjects illegible to themselves” (167). When everything that does not belong in the utopian future is consigned to the past, looking in the mirror yields only confusion.

Connecting this empty present to the larger temporal pattern of progress is also monumentally important for understanding what happens when one decides to give up dieting. Breaking out from the temporality of progress requires *literally (re)building* the present in a previously vacuous space. For example, Samantha Murray (2005), in her essay “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics” finds herself feeling ambivalent about her body as she tries to find her place in the size acceptance movement of the mid-2000s. She grapples with feeling like the “change your mind about fatness” advice in fat liberation guides is not enough support; she calls instead for more attention to the way fat people “embody the very discourses and bodily knowledges that are the cause for our anger” and the way common-sense knowledge about fatness “ha[s] become...embedded in our sense of self” (160, 161). Murray’s appeals for more attention to corporeality and the systemic stigmatization of fat are an insightful response to her initial encounters with fat activism. But I think that part of her ambivalence also came from suddenly being

faced with a twofold challenge: one, the need to find and build a moment of “now” for herself, and two, the struggle of trying to leave the temporality of transformational weight loss while continuing to live in a society built on a larger version of that same temporality. When fat activists encourage people to stop dieting, we must be aware of the magnitude of what we are asking. Giving up on the temporality of dieting while continuing to encounter that temporality every day is bound to create, at the very least, ambivalence.

When we consider that giving up dieting means rejecting the very temporal pattern our culture was built upon, it is no wonder that the task is so difficult and many resist the message of fat liberation. Giving up dieting means rejecting every chronotope of the transformational weight loss temporality: giving up on a utopian future, no longer using the past as a container for the things we do not like, and accepting the hard work of building a present against the pull of progress. In light of this perspective, as Harding (2007) writes:

It's a lot easier to understand why some people freak out when you say no, really, your chances of losing weight permanently are virtually nil, so you'd be better off focusing on feeling good and enjoying your life as a fat person. To someone fully wrapped up in The Fantasy of Being Thin, that doesn't just mean, "All the best evidence suggests you will be fat for the rest of your life, but that's really not a terrible thing." It means, "You will NEVER be the person you want to be!"

Not only does fat liberation ask a dieter to give up on fixing all their problems through weight loss, but also it asks them to do so against the temporal current of our entire society. It asks them to accept all the horrors, threats, and oppressions that come with stepping outside the idealized narrative of progress, to build their life in the emptiness left by evacuating the present *while resisting* the insistence that their bodies are only temporary. Giving up dieting and its corresponding temporality is a herculean task, and it is one that must be repeated every day as the ideology of progress weighs down on us, permeating many other realms of life.

Conclusion

In “Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers,” Cressida Heyes (2006) advises that “Weight-loss dieting needs to be understood from within the minutiae of its practices, its everyday tropes and demands, its compulsions and liberations; and in turn, these cannot be resisted solely through refusal” (127). As fat activists, we must remind ourselves that our calls for self-acceptance in the here and now are asking dieters to subject themselves to all the things they use their imaginary future to dissociate from, including both their individual troubles and the enormous amount of fat stigma in Western society. Giving up dieting means accepting that you might be seen as someone “who disrupt[s] the temporal logic of History...refusing to place the past as secondary to the present, and the

present as secondary to the future” (Levy-Navarro 2009, 18). Given this, we should not be surprised that many dieters resist our message, or that many of us are left with mixed feelings even long after discovering fat activism.

Different manifestations of the temporality of progress have been resisted with varying degrees of success. The current size of the fat activist movement is good news for resisting its appearance in narratives of transformational weight loss, but we are still facing an uphill battle. As we fight, we must remember that what we are resisting is bigger than just the pressure to diet, and it is crucial to hold space for the ambivalence many of us feel from being caught up in a myriad of temporalities. For the dieters with whom we wish to connect, we must always keep in mind the unintended consequences of our messages. It is difficult to remain compassionate when people invested in the temporality of transformational weight loss scorn what we see as appeals to optimism and liberation; I know I am certainly guilty of letting my frustration with dieters get the better of me. But if we remember that what we are asking is nearly as painful as continuing to diet, and that breaking out of this temporality of dieting involves additionally resisting something much larger and stronger, then I am certain we can find innovative ways to recruit and resist. In fact, I am certain we already have.

Notes

1. The concept of the chronotope was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where he defined it as the connection between space and time expressed in literature. Using chronotopes as an analytic tool lets us see how “time... thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” (84).
2. Exceptionalism: The belief that the West is unique in technological, social, and moral achievement.
3. Expansionism: The belief that Western superiority justifies the expansion of its culture and power, however destructive.
4. Triumphalism: The belief that Western culture is the pinnacle of civilization.
5. The examples in the following sections are not an exhaustive representation of all the places and times in which these chronotopes have appeared as distorted time, nor are they meant to be. Nevertheless, the similarities between them demonstrate the fruitfulness of examining temporality in this way and point to a larger framework that can be applied to more deeply understand other appearances of these temporal patterns, such as in narratives of transformational weight loss.
6. Colonialism reciprocally shaped and reinforced this ideology of progress, but what I am interested in describing here is the general model of time that colonizers collectively imagined and let dictate their actions.

Notes on contributor

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