

Book Review

– *The Weight of Obesity: Hunger and Global Health in Postwar Guatemala*, by Emily Yates-Doerr. University of California Press, 2015.

In *The Weight of Obesity: Hunger and Global Health in Postwar Guatemala*, Emily Yates-Doerr explores the global public health concept of obesity within the local reality of Quetzaltenango, a predominantly indigenous Maya city in the Guatemalan highlands. Guatemala represents a provocative site for an ethnographic case study of the obesity epidemic, given that the country faces rampant food insecurity and has one of the highest rates of chronic childhood malnutrition in the world. These problems co-exist with obesity, and disproportionately so among indigenous Maya, the population featured in Yates-Doerr's work. Her ethnography traverses kitchens, colorful markets, and nutrition clinics of Quetzaltenango, focusing on poor urban women's understandings of food, fatness, and health, as well as how obesity, as a global biomedical concept, is imagined and experienced by patients and health care providers alike. Yates-Doerr relates these themes to changing understandings of race, personhood, and biomedical practice.

Yates-Doerr's work highlights several dynamics that are broadly relevant to Latin American and Caribbean societies. The ethnography analyzes the Guatemalan body under nutritional scrutiny as individual, social, and political. Yates-Doerr's interlocutors experience food, hunger, and their bodies in ways that nod to the fluidity of traditional dichotomies of indigenous and mestizo, urban and rural, and poor and rich. At the same time, "fatness" emerges as a part of a new vocabulary of racialization and abuts longstanding social metrics of blood and skin color; excess weight becomes a proxy for poor personal discipline, lack of education, and cultural inferiority. The book additionally describes dieting and food preparation as highly gendered and intimate activities that transform local and national models of personhood. Yates-Doerr departs from scholarship that conceptualizes personhood in Latin America in terms of neoliberal self-entrepreneurship or formerly interdependent indigenous social units transitioning towards "individualization." Instead, she proposes "possession" as a metaphor for how public health discourses of nutrition and self-care encourage subjects to assume ownership of and surveil their bodies, while sim-

ultaneously positioning themselves as caregivers and citizens responsible to others – family members, communities, and the nation-state.

The Weight of Obesity also advances scholarly understandings about how public health concepts are digested and processed in the Global South. Yates-Doerr explores the social lives of two important public health concepts. The first of these is the “nutritional transition”, the theory that economically developing populations progress linearly through nutritional maladies beginning with undernutrition, followed by a co-existence of under- and overnutrition, and ending with a predominance of overnutrition and obesity. The second public health concept is that of “nutrition” itself, which Yates-Doerr defines as “a nutrient-based approach to health centered on vitamins and minerals” (p. 56) that aims to simplify people’s food choices through categorizations of particular foods as healthy or unhealthy. Yates-Doerr provides indigenous oral histories of feast and famine, local interpretations of vitamins and pesticides, and Mesoamerican models of food that complicate both concepts. She extends her critique of global health to nutritionists’ attempts to “make health quantifiable” (p. 164) through an explicit focus on balancing numbers – calories, weight, body mass index – and transforming meals into measurable formulas. Even when scales are poorly calibrated and dietary balance is elusive, such “metrification” functions to make nutritional practice seem objective and legitimate. Overall, Yates-Doerr illuminates the prescriptive reductionism that often underlies global health discourse about disease and lifestyle modification.

There are some gaps in *The Weight of Obesity*. First, as Yates-Doerr explicitly states, she does not offer a comparative perspective to other countries grappling with obesity. Second, considering the numerous structural and bureaucratic barriers poor Guatemalans face to clinical nutrition services, the book could have benefitted from further discussion of the politics of health care access as it relates to the author’s arguments about the fluidity of socioeconomic class and models of personhood. Readers may be left with questions about what motivates poor women – who represent the majority of Yates-Doerr’s ethnographic subjects – to overcome barriers to access clinical nutrition services that clash with local foodways and cultural models that valorize fat. Finally, clinicians and readers with a biomedical perspective, like myself, may find the concept of “obesity” problematized to the point that the very real morbidity and mortality that obesity causes seem trivialized. Yates-Doerr powerfully illustrates how clinical practice can exact ontological violence, but another sort of violence – that of neglect – occurs if providers do not use the tools of their training, however limited, to attempt to prevent strokes, heart attacks, and kidney failure, to name a few debilitating long-term complications of obesity. It is clear that clinical practice must change. The form it should take, to achieve both respect and efficacy for patients, remains uncertain.

The Weight of Obesity will be of interest to scholars of Latin American studies, global health, medical anthropology, and science and technology studies. As the ethnographic subject of the book is concepts and how they travel,

rather than people, for teaching purposes, the book may be better suited for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. Yates-Doerr's work is sure to please scholars interested in transnational flows and permutations of scientific and biomedical discourse in the Global South.

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