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### A reply

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# A reply

By Emily Yates-Doerr

When I began fieldwork over a decade ago, I thought I would be studying Guatemalan understandings of obesity—a term that had begun to circulate between global health meetings in the capital and markets, classrooms, and clinics in the country’s western highlands. But carrying out fieldwork made me suspicious of the understandings that I had once been after. As obesity was not a naturally bounded thing, neither were Guatemalans. The realities of contingency and heterogeneity began to call into question my ambition to ever *understand*.

The respondents of this book forum have generously engaged with my deferral of understanding. They have gone along with my insistence that knowledge, especially, cannot be *known* once and for all but is reshaped by engagement, and they have unpacked what this implies for a field – and a text – that contributes to the production and circulation of knowledge. It has been a gift to read my research through their reflections. I am grateful.

An ethnographic adage says that fieldwork is over when you stop learning anything new from the questions you ask. This has never happened with me. The slower I ran the audio speed when transcribing dialogue and interviews, the more I could hear within words and ideas I had previously taken for granted. Having the same comments repeated when people spoke about obesity – *the problem is education! the problem is exercise! the problem is diet!* – helped me see the endeavor to make obesity a problem in consistently different ways.

Fieldwork ended because it was time to write. I had stories to tell about the horrifying and seductive calculus of metabolic reasoning, with its promises that exchange could be even and quantified. Fieldwork ended because women were teaching me about the power of changing the dominant narrative (of the value of obesity— and of value more broadly) and I wanted to participate in this myself. Fieldwork did not end because the story was complete.

If fieldwork did not have a natural start and stop, neither did my book. Do others share this experience too?

“It’s over,” I thought when sending the book to the publisher. My second son had just been born and I saw in its pages a project documenting the impossible challenges that mothers and fathers must balance to feed families well.

“It’s over,” I thought a year later when I held the book in my hands for the first time. Having produced such an unabashedly economic object that I was nonetheless proud to have produced, what stood out for me was the lesson about the liveliness of markets that Simon’s commentary addresses. Capitalist systems may work hard to give the appearance that labor and weight can be fixed in metrics, but units – whatever they may be working to stabilize – team with gaps and excess.

“It’s over,” I reminded myself the first time I was asked to describe what the book had been about in a forum for medical anthropologists and I wrote about the ontological violence of forcing fluid objects into fixed positions. For this



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audience I wanted to draw out the message of the book that it is far too easy to think of fatness as a problem of structural violence: how does this fail to address, I asked then, the violence in assuming that fatness is a problem?

Now, one year since it was published, reading it through the commentaries of others makes it different yet again.

*So what is the book about?* Jeannette asks this specifically but all of the contributors to this forum take up this question in some way. Shouldn't I give them an answer? Yet because they understand my deferral of understanding they are not asking for just one stable answer. I have, in fact, learned from them that knowledge is active and they are quite okay with the book being many things at once: a book about bodies, race, and power; a book about writing practices instead of writing cultures; a book that is slippery, because living is slippery; and a book about how even when living is slippery, sometimes it is not. Women whose tremendous power in the kitchen makes the power of politicians seem small and meek still lost their children to emigration and limbs to amputation. What privilege it must be to call this contradiction when for so many this is not at all contradiction but a truth of life.

Shortly after my book was published I read Ta-Nehisi Coates' memoir written for his son, my own small son swaddled in my arms. The illustration of how white Americans have built their lives upon the destruction of black bodies is clear, as is the desire to reclaim these bodies from the institutions that destroy them. His text has made me pause upon the politics of my book, for I tell a somewhat different story. Focusing upon time spent in the largely Indigenous highland city of Xela, I show how turning persons into bodies fits a colonial project there at work. Before fieldwork, I might have asked a rather naïve question of these seemingly divergent messages: *But what is the right response to colonial violence? Reclaim the body? Refuse it?* Having now done the fieldwork and writing that I've done—having lived for years among the anthropology of science—I'm wary of questions that are asked in such general terms. As colonialism does not happen in a general way, neither can efforts to unsettle it be built upon these kind of generalities—a statement that I hope is open enough to acknowledge that sometimes, when the situation calls for it, generalities may be warranted too.

Marianne pushes me: what doors does the deferral of understanding help to open up, she asks? I want to turn this question back to the professionals and patients in a nutrition clinic where I spent my time. I may be trained in ethnographic methods, but they were well-versed in ethnographic practice. *Don't close things down; don't be too certain; don't think you can learn while assuming to know; make space to listen; give relations air to breathe and time to flourish.* This was not an analytic exercise; this was not theoretical (or, in thinking with Rebeca and Jeannette, it is deeply theoretical insofar as it demands we rethink how theory is done). This was the path people followed because strength and suffering happen in all sorts of unexpected ways, and being ethnographic was the care-filled way to be.

It is from these clinical spaces as well as from the kitchens where women went back to their work of living and feeding that I have learned how “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) need not itself be troublesome. The doors I've tried, in the best of company, to ever so slightly nudge, open upon worlds where we can better see that building upon shifting instead of solid ground may be a vital way forward—when it comes to caring for the social lives of health and theory alike.

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