

## Reconceptualizing temporality in and through multimedia storytelling: Making time with through thick and thin

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# Reconceptualizing temporality in and through multimedia storytelling: Making time with through thick and thin

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## ABSTRACT

What lessons about linearity are illuminated by the stories that engage our experience of queer fat bodies? The authors examine stories generated in the collaborative, community-based research project *Through Thick and Thin*. They analyze a selection of 3- to 7-minute microdocumentaries produced in the project that feature assemblages of queer sexuality, gender expression and identity, and other privileged or minoritized identifications (race, disability, class, indigeneity) in confrontation with weight-based stigma, expectations around eating and exercise, and experiences of pathologization. The authors argue that linearity requires a constant labor of improvement that seeks to restore and recover fat queer bodies to imagined state(s) of normalcy/health. By using concepts of queer and crip time, the authors illustrate how queer subjectivity—queered in terms of not only sexuality, but also body shape and size, and/or eating dis/order practice—finds itself out of sync with time: that is, how the project's storytellers are refused or engage in acts of refusing available futurities and instead construct and live subversive temporalities. In the authors' range of examples, they show and value how *Through Thick and*

*Thin* storytellers, and by extension persons with queer and non-normative embodiments, live and move through and in effect, re-make time.

KEYWORDS: Arts-based research, fat, futurity, queer, temporality

## Introduction

In this research article, we analyze microdocumentaries<sup>1</sup> produced for a collaborative, arts-based research project that challenge available narratives about embodiment. The project, *Through Thick and Thin* (TTT), brought together 10 researchers and eleven research-participant storytellers<sup>2</sup> who storied their experiences of queerness, fatness, and eating through digital media. This article focuses on how TTT microdocumentaries illustrate ways that queer subjectivity—queered not only in terms of sexuality, but also in relation to body shape and size, and/or eating dis/order practice—finds itself out of sync with time: engaging in acts of refusing available futurities, instead constructing and living subversive temporalities. Engaging with recent feminist, queer, and crip reconfigurations of temporality, we ask: What lessons about linearity are illuminated by the stories that engage our experience of queer, fat, and female-coded bodies? We argue that linearity requires a constant labor of improvement that seeks to restore and recover fat queer bodies to

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<sup>1</sup> To view the microdocumentaries analyzed in this article, go to <https://projectrevision.ca/re-conceptualizing-temporality>. Following the prompts, type in the password “makingtime.” Please note: These videos are intended for readers only and are not for public screening.

<sup>2</sup> We wish here to acknowledge that this project would not have been possible without project coordinator Tracy Tidgwell, as well as artists and videographers who supported our workshops: Sharlene Bamboat, Liz Brockest, Michele Clarke, melannie g campbell, Hannah Fowlie, Erin MacIndoe-Sproule, Ingrid Mundel, Michelle Peek, jes sachse, and Kimber Sider.

imagined state(s) of normalcy/health. Further, we argue that linearity relies on respectability to produce ideas of success.

TTT engaged with how persons in queer communities who claim multiple intersecting positionalities confront biopedagogical scripts designed to contain and discipline their abjected bodies. TTT was a collaborative project between Canadian universities and Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO), an organization that develops training, resources, and policy pertaining to LGBTQ+ health. The digital storytelling workshops were a specific collaboration between RHO and Re•Vision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice, a research hub at the University of Guelph that uses arts-informed and community-engaged research methods to foster inclusive communities, well-being, equity, and justice within Canada and beyond. TTT researchers and research participants are a diverse group of queer and trans women and allies of different ethnicities and races, class backgrounds, body sizes, and abilities. We have lived with eating disorders, fought fatphobia, and experienced body distress, who came together in community to research and represent such experiences using creative approaches.

Autoethnographic and artistic filmmaking methods enabled researchers and participants to work together in a queer, crip, and fat positive space to explore how we affect, and are affected by, culturally inscribed body standards in and outside of LGBTQ+ communities. Their lived subversive temporalities exist out of sync with, and in opposition to, linear models of time. TTT storytellers highlight how fatphobia relies on temporal metaphors to promote the myth that adipose is a pathology. Fat bodies are regarded

as consequences of poor choices, poor judgment, and erroneous behavior—synonyms for respectability standards. The temporal construction of respectability intersects with competing logics of race, class, ability, and sexuality in TTT microdocumentaries to frame storytellers' experiences of having their bodies read as aberrant. In our examination of the relationship between fatphobia and temporality, we argue that codes of respectability are pursued in a constant labor of improvement in order to achieve or maintain thin bodies and stave off the threat of weight gain. (Re)entry into normative time and normative identities is promised to fat subjects who have fallen out of time. In this way, through valued relations and against standards of success, linearity relies on respectability to produce socially legitimized subjectivities.

### Queerness, fatness, and time

Our understanding of alternative temporalities is informed by studies of queer, crip, and feminist time found in Edelman (2004), Halberstam (2005), Muñoz (2009), and Kafer (2013), which encompass the relationalities and communities that fall outside normative framings of futurity. These spaces are defined by their refusal of linear or straight time, the trajectories of which are “irredeemably bound to notions of teleological progress” (Browne 2014, 7). To mobilize possibilities outside such a telos, queer theorists might turn to those who “will and do opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production[:] ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers” (Halberstam 2005, 39). Similarly, feminist crip theorists take an interest in non-normatively embodied subjects; take, for instance, St. Pierre (2015), whose stutter “fails” to match the hegemonic temporal rhythms

necessary for reaching a “shared horizon of meaning that makes embodied human communication possible” (53). Because “duration [is] inflected by the capabilities and possibilities of the body” (57), the disabled speaker experiences a lived bodily time that contrasts with a normative ableist masculinist time order that moves along lines of linear development. Body, especially one out of joint with time, then serves as an entry point into retheorizing temporality that needs not be singularly conceived or collectively shared.

We invoke notions of queer, crip, and feminist time bearing in mind the “potential queerness—and queer potential—of fat” (Wykes 2014, 3), where queerness can be found in othered embodiments because the term can only be defined relationally, against naturalized and compulsive norms. Stories produced in TTT feature moments of queering and crippling time or living in queer and crip time, where storytellers call out, reflect on, and resist physician-prescribed diet plans and recovery regimens; body shame in relation to sexual intimacy; imaginings of their bodies as existing in a “before” state en route to restoration and recovery, or as foretelling the “after” effects of physical/mental pathology; and social presumptions that their bodies are marked for death.

TTT storytellers destabilize the tethering of bodily practices to body size. Regardless of the actual fleshy outcome of self-work, the fat person is not to be believed “recovered” or “healthy” until or unless they are able to demonstrate their work through their decreased corporeal form. Should that corporeal form never materialize, the person is not to be believed, and is exhorted to continue following prescriptions for “health” (Ellison 2013).

These prescriptions continually reinforce a temporal logic that presupposes that time spent working on recovering the “thin woman within” will translate directly into a visible result in the future. If weight loss occurs, it is celebrated as a victory. This celebration ensues regardless of the bodily practices that led to the loss, regardless of toll on mental or physical health and irrespective of health status measured by anything other than body mass index; the assumption of health is inscribed on the thin body (Hawks and Gast 2000). We would add that the newly thin body is expected to endure, unlike the fat body, which is only ever conceived of as a temporary stop on the way to thinness.

### Microdocumentary analysis

The microdocumentaries we present in this article offer a polyvocal illustration of bodies ever in process (Murray 2005). Bodies so open-ended in their configurations, so fluid in form, may be read as failures for not aligning with biopedagogies that lead to some collectively shared and valued futurity. By biopedagogies, we mean expert instructions for living imbued with moral overtones that circulate widely under neoliberalism, where knowledge has become decontextualized and commodified and individuals responsabilized to act according to the given directives and advice (Rice 2014, 2015). “Failures” of bodies to demonstrably embrace/embody these demands open up the possibility, however, of reconceptualizing time as a “mutual contamination of ‘nows”” (Hutchings 2008, 166–7) or an enmeshment of the befores with the afters rather than a linear trajectory we are all meant to share. We highlight these possibilities, showing how other “nows” could unfold outside straight (or straightforward) time. Storytellers use perspective to show how they stand

outside of an undesired timeline, play with speed in their reconstructions of their narrative, or commit to repetition visually or verbally in ways that resist forward momentum. In our examples, we show and value how TTT storytellers, and by extension persons with queer and non-normative embodiments, live and move through and in effect, *make* time.

To create digital stories, the TTT research team adopted our methodology from the Re•Vision research centre, and its Re•Visioning Differences Media Arts Laboratory (REDLAB), a state-of-the-art stationary and mobile media lab. Re•Vision uses critical arts-based methods, particularly story, to foster richer understandings of difference that disrupt dominant narratives and open possibilities for living. Situating its work within the tradition of critical arts-based research (Conquergood 2002), Re•Vision endorses postmodern and process-oriented approaches and generates original texts and artefacts through art-making practices (especially film). Other researchers have used terms such as digital storytelling, ethnocinema, and participatory filmmaking to refer to videos that feature first-person and community-based narratives of experience (Brushwood Rose and Granger 2013; LaMarre and Rice 2016; Lambert 2013).

We adapted the general formula used in Re•Vision's workshops specifically for LGBTQ+ communities exploring histories of embodiment, designing a curriculum oriented around an exploration of scholarly, popular, and other literature and representations of queerness in relation to bodies that participants could speak back to. Our project added to Re•Vision's growing archive of 1- to 10-minute-long microdocumentaries that combine audio recordings of personal and communal narrative with photographs, video

clips, music, dance, artwork, and more (Rice et al. 2015). Sixteen videos were produced over the course of two storytelling workshops: the first was five days spanning June-July 2015, the second four days through November-December 2015. Workshops featured presentations by project researchers on dominant and subversive representations of embodiment; tutorials by Re•Vision staff teaching photographic literacy and video editing; open studio time where research participants and researchers-as-participants, with the support of queer-identified artists, each produced their own film; and a collective final screening.

We conducted analyses of the videos collaboratively in viewing sessions with the research team, as well as in screenings with insider (queer) and outsider (health provider and academic) audiences (White 2007). We employed narrative thematic analysis (Riessman 2007) to identify themes in individual stories and cutting across the archive, and articulated those themes in writing that approached each video as an illustrative example and a wholly intact artifact. For this article, our analysis centers filmmakers' interpretations of their own work, which we supplement and strengthen with audience reflections and with other researcher and researcher-participant interpretations.

Analyses of microdocumentaries presented subsequently consider which lessons about linearity are illuminated by stories that engage our experience of queer, fat, and female-coded bodies. We argue that linearity and its outsider alternatives are relationally produced. Further, linearity requires a constant labor of improvement that seeks to restore and recover fat queer bodies to imagined state(s) of normalcy/health, and relies on

respectability to produce ideas of success; inasmuch as this is the case, bodies that fail these standards point to new possibilities for lived time.

### Our experience of time in relation

The following set of multimedia stories explores embodiment within, against, and alongside romantic and family relations. Illustrated across these videos, filmmakers are making calculated decisions around their particular disavowals and straddlings according to who regards them and how they are regarded. The storytellers construct subversive temporalities by reimagining the temporal construction of their bodies. These reimaginings disrupt codes of respectability and the linear progressions, upon which respectability depends.

In *Wednesday's Ghost*, Jen Rinaldi explores how the origins of her eating dis/order have been tangled up in the secret and emergent queered romantic feelings of her youth, such that she learned to skip meals and restrict food intake to impress and spend time with the girl she found mesmerizing. Operating in and through this intimate relation are clues to how a young Rinaldi regarded and shaped herself. So along the way to recovery, and her re-committed turn to life, she renounced not only the strategies that marked her as unhealthy, but also her love of Wednesday. Rinaldi's pressured but fraught return to a hetero/normative script is reflected in the film's visual work. Viewers are invited into the privacy of her home—curtains drawn closed for the night—and carried through her routines: food preparation in the kitchen, and nightly rituals before bed. The activities to which viewers are privy—as though voyeurs—seem mundane, innocuous, altogether familiar life rhythms. Yet they incorporate the

routinized temporality of daily anorectic practice: the subtle portion control, the rigorous cleanup work, keeping track of when one last ate, how much longer one can go, the pauses between bites. These anorectic patterns also align bodies with straight time by encoding them as productive and disciplined, successful and healthy. And yet, the body produced via eating dis/order habitus can also find itself branded as stuck in time, with loss of menses for example; and as oriented toward death (Warin 2010), even when behaviors are taken up as strategies for survival in the face of violence or shaming (Thompson 1994). The stigma of diagnosis throws the subject out of time, such that the return to normativity requires a radical break from the past, a persistent tendency toward disavowal (Rinaldi, LaMarre, and Rice 2016).

In *Measuring my Waste*, Robin Akimbo reflects on the intersections between fatphobia and racism in her family's immigration story. She notes how her father, "a Jamaican immigrant...[relied] on constant [athletic] training [as] his meal ticket." Just as her father's physicality was used to achieve measures of respectability in order to succeed in a racist, capitalist society, Akimbo struggles to know her body outside racist structures. She notes, "For me, size is heavily entwined with whiteness...I learned that little was good. Slight, small equaled grace, equaled value." Akimbo's reflection attests to the ways that White bodies are legitimized as normative. These are lessons she carried through her own body history, from the instruction to tuck in at ballet lessons to her identification with Black glam pop icons whose bodies have been fetishized. Her corporeality shifts in response to different contexts and communities, moving from her punk androgyny, to

her “in” ass, to her labor scars; and rather than being committed to straight forward momentum, these shifts are instead grounded deeply in lineage.

Shona Fraser’s microdocumentary *Satin White Wedding Gown* describes how her exploration of queer sexuality and feminist thinking ended abruptly upon falling in love with her future husband. Fraser describes how her wedding dress, an icon of respectability, enabled her to pass as normative. She says, “[The wedding] dress covered all of my sins: my feminist thinking, my queer ways, and of course my love of cheese.” Wedding photographs flash across the screen as Fraser describes her wedding day: “I felt normal. I felt I had finally made my parents happy. I met their expectations of becoming a properly married woman.” By participating in a heteronormative marriage rite, Fraser was able to strategically mask the ways her subjectivity failed at both physical and gendered expectations. Her wedding dress hid her sexual, intellectual, and physical hungers in the interests of becoming “proper.” Once her marriage ended, Fraser distanced herself from the rigid and univocal markers of proper femininity, instead insisting that “I [have] found that more than one word [sums] me up: Mother. Bisexual. Queer. Feminist. My body is still big and will never be smaller. I accept it for what it is and will always be.” Fraser reclaims her identity in the context of the temporal present—rejecting both hegemonic pasts and futures.

In *Butch Coyolxauhqui*, Karleen Pendleton Jimenez illustrates how “at twelve, I learned I was fat, and a girl, both of which were gross...I didn’t want to be fat! I wanted to be strong. I didn’t want to be a girl: I wanted to play with the boys.” Pendleton Jimenez’s gender nonconformity was

constructed as simultaneously aberrant alongside her body size. In queer relationships, she found counternarratives with which to make sense of her body. “My lover, she told me that she liked butches, especially those with a bit of flesh. I liked that my body was not looked at, but felt. I was a heavy shield holding her safely underneath me.” Looking at an image of the 15th century Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, Pendleton Jimenez cannot help but find comparisons: “She’s got the exact same chichis as me, big heavy breasts, nipples swelled, facing straight down, right one bigger than left. A tummy creased and stretched, hanging freely.” She continues, affirmatively: “And, she’s a goddess...etched in giant stone for hundreds of years. Someone had to believe she was important for that to happen. Someone must’ve thought her beautiful.” Pendleton Jimenez’s microdocumentary resists contemporary discourses of fatphobia and heteronormative gender roles by casting her body as beautiful and in time with precolonial ideas of beauty. In this way, she invites further examination into how colonial discourses construct fat bodies as out of time.

### Our experience of bodies failing up & away from straight time

The videos in this section share in common meaningful grapplings with bodies that have been coded as failures. Their supposed failings, and their refusals and explorations of alternatives, point the way to new, exciting, and heretofore unimagined futures, calibrated to the nuances and contours of their subjects’ unique positions.

In *No Room for Doubt*, Crystal Kotow narrates her story of surviving pulmonary embolism over the sounds of subway trains screeching into

stations, roaring across bridges, and navigating twisted tracks. The certainty of the train's fast course is juxtaposed against a medical narrative in which her personal experience of weight loss is ignored as a possible contributing factor for developing pulmonary embolism. Kotow's narrative illustrates the dangers of disavowing a body's history, and reinforces the expertise at stake in lived experience. "I know myself" the filmmaker insists, as she documents the aggressive 100-pound weight loss she pursued, ostensibly in the interests of "health." After learning about increased risks of blood clots in fat women who take hormonal birth control, she begins a strict exercise plan that eventually inspires her to begin closely monitoring calorie consumption and expenditure. Here, participating in heteronormative birth control led directly to a reliance on weight-loss biopedagogies to secure a respectable future (devoid of unplanned pregnancies or weight). She is regarded as a success story, as "doing the right thing" for her body, according to normalized narratives of thinness and/or shrinking bodies and health. This celebration ignores the violence she is inflicting on her body. Kotow becomes yet another failed dieter once she begins to restore her weight. She is also cast as a failed woman, one whose body refused to follow gendered linear scripts of body normalcy—scripts that insist feminine bodies must consistently labor to take up less space. Implicit in this microdocumentary is the suggestion that her attempt to alter her body to fit scripts of normalcy and health ultimately contributed to her suffering pulmonary embolism, a life-threatening diagnosis.

Tenniel Rock's documentary, *My Diabetic Body*, showcases how White supremacy rationalizes illness in Black bodies as inevitable. Rock describes her diagnosis at 28 years old with diabetes, saying, "I

vehemently resisted the finality of this statement the same way I did with most statements of ‘you can’t’ from White people.” Rock’s is a story of the struggle to refuse available futurity as a Black woman diagnosed with diabetes. Her story is a testament to how the futurity of her diagnosis locked her body into a whitewashed health recovery plan she had to subvert to reconnect with her body and rename her health. For instance, she details her inability to feel connected to the food she was supposed to be eating as a diabetic: “salads, chickpeas, brown rice, stuff that had no taste. That was White people food.” She also explains the disconnect between the types of exercise she was recommended and how her body wanted to move: “Black girls like me don’t do fit.” Rock found that the remedies for changing her body’s future were couched in almost exclusively White narratives for recovering the diabetic body. Her experience of navigating the relevant literature and medical advice that required her to revise narratives to better fit her Black body illustrates a nonlinear approach to reclaiming and recoding her health.

Margaret Robinson declares her body to be a “proud survivor’s body” in *My Mi’kamaw Body*. She embraces the way her Indigenous body stores fat as a testament to the resilience of her ancestors, and translates this self-love into a widespread acceptance of food. “My ancestors migrated across the Bering Strait over 15,000 years ago,” she narrates, “The people who survived this long walk did so, because they were good at getting fat.” Robinson’s illustration of her inherited fat constructs fat as life-giving, life-sustaining, and a marker of health. In so doing, her microdocumentary offers an anti-colonial temporality with which to understand her body and its size. She continues, “As colonists forced the Mi’kamaw from our territories,

my people suffered from malnutrition, disease, and starvation... Those who survived, did so partly because of their body's ability to store fat well." Fat bodies are cast within Robinson's narrative as bodies capable of surviving colonial violence. Robinson turns to the past to legitimize the function of fat, dismissing the fatphobic threat of a failed future.

Emma Lind reflects on the relationship between her fatness and her whiteness in *Seeing My Body Differently*. Lind notes, "It would take me years to understand how [fatphobic] logic reflects a belief in the myth of whiteness. That invisibility is a cultural belief families like mine cling to, to legitimize our wealth." As the camera cuts to a photo of Lind celebrating Pride in a busy street covered in rainbow iconography, she continues, "But to reject invisibility as a cultural belief, is to reject a foundational part of the cultural system." Lind therefore links her rejection of White respectability standards with her capacity to come out and live publicly as queer. Emboldened to consider her body more than simply a "before photograph, waiting for some miracle diet transformation," Lind troubles the biopedagogical imperative that suggests fat bodies lie waiting to become thin. This has epistemological implications as she seeks a subversive present for her body by reconceptualizing its current meaning. She offers new ways of regarding her body: "Maybe my body loves the fat it has created, and relies on it for the stamina to write my PhD dissertation. Maybe what makes me metabolize calories slowly is exactly what helps me metabolize *ideas* slowly." By rejecting fatphobic futurities, Lind's body is conceptualized in dynamic and subversive ways that see purpose, function, and magic in her body, rather than signifiers of inactivity and stagnation.

## Conclusion

Working within the limits of dominant notions of temporality defined by linearity, control, respectability, and standards of success requires a constant labor of improvement. Bodies that defy temporal boundaries, in effect falling out of time, challenge these dominant narratives, creating spaces for alternative conceptualizations of temporality. In this article, we presented an analysis of TTT microdocumentaries, revealing the extent to which fatphobia, racism, class, sexism, transphobia, and ableism rely on logics of linearity. TTT storytellers' rejection of ideas of "progress" as applied to bodies reveals the violent undercurrents of normative, linear temporality. The filmmakers grappled with various themes: "resolving" queer desire through an eating disorder as a means of feeling in control; navigating a medical establishment that hinges on definitions of health coded as White and nonfat; finding meaning in heteronormative markers of "success" that offer filmmakers access to respectability; and finally, the subversive nature of reconceptualizing fatness as survival, as beautiful, and as magical.

While we argue that queer, fat bodies defy linear temporal scripts, in imagining the various ways to theorize queer, fat temporality, it is evident that both fat and queer allow equally for an *interruption* and *reinscription* of linearity. The narrative of coming out of the closet may provide a narrow, singular, and very time-bound view of achieving queer utopia, while the lived experiences of many queer folk may instead involve endless micromoments of coming out, continued struggles with internalized homophobia, and/or the ongoing need or desire not to come out at all.

Similarly, an enduring narrative suggests that when fat bodies become thin, they are restored to their normative state; however, we must consider that, especially with the proliferation of body positive and fat liberation movements, fat people may reach “enlightenment” and learn to embrace their fat, constructing a different version of linearity and achievement. This work has already begun in fat studies scholarship. Charlotte Cooper (2016) cautioned that body positivity can reinscribe the “monolithic idea of trite self-love that mirrors diet culture with its fantasies of transformation and happy endings” (15).

Relying on linear imperatives of health, normalcy, respectability, and success to predetermine who deserves a future endangers the inclusion of what is complex, meaningful, and relevant in the lived experiences of queer fat people. TTT empowered research subjects to tell their own stories, and in so doing, the storytellers identified how hegemonic expectations were experienced as temporal expectations. In talking back, storytellers were able to claim their own experience of remaking time to survive the violences of body shame and stigma. TTT storytellers remind us as researchers of the importance of understanding temporalities as heterogeneous sites of meaning-making. Each story claimed its own sense of temporal meaning, and in so doing, invited an understanding of how the experience of time is both individuated and mitigated through systems. TTT storytellers demonstrated ways that living in a body that is both fat and queer is a refusal, willing or not, of the moral project of reproducing norms that are exclusionary.

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