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Losing it in Hawai‘i: Weight Watchers and the paradoxical nature of weight gain and loss
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In Hawai‘i, bodies may be big, successful, widely accepted, and revered by their public, yet some subjects may simultaneously be seeking a thinner body even with what appears to be ‘fat acceptance’ by many state residents. This article analyses weight and weight loss narratives of two prominent public and nonwhite men, Israel Kamakawiwo’ole and Sam Choy. We connect these narratives to Weight Watchers International discourses of slimming as these apply to ‘nonwhite’ subjects in Hawai‘i. We suggest that Weight Watchers normalizes thinness through discourses of whiteness inherent in particular foods. Hawai‘i’s regional cuisine known as ‘Local Food’ is framed as ‘exotic,’ which is distinct from what the organization proposes is ‘good’ food that produces ‘healthy’ bodies. Weight Watchers narrates slim bodies and health while normalizing ‘white’ cuisine and the bodies who consume it thereby excluding Local brown bodies in Hawai‘i.

Keywords: Weight Watchers; whiteness; Hawai‘i; cuisine; obesity

Introduction
In 1997, Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, the beloved and arguably most successful Native Hawaiian recording artist in the State’s history, died at 38 years of age, weighing over 700 pounds. He died of respiratory failure and what his biographer calls, ‘morbid obesity, adult-onset diabetes, cellulitis and renal insufficiency with oliguria’ (Carroll 2006, 134). For many Native Hawaiians (i.e., indigenous Hawaiians) and Hawaiian sovereignty activists, Kamakawiwo’ole’s death was the loss of an eloquent and honey-toned voice for Hawaiian self-determination, as heard in his song Hawai‘i ‘78. For international listeners, ‘Iz,’ as he was known, was the voice who reintroduced them to Somewhere Over the Rainbow. For many citizens of Hawai‘i, Kamakawiwo’ole’s early death and his high-profile state funeral brought forth discussions of ethnicity and its links to the purported diseases of modernity, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Public discussion regarding body size, ethnicity, and health came to the foreground. One of those who claimed that he was eventually moved to action by Iz’s death was Hawaiian-born celebrity chef, Sam Choy, who at that time was carrying over 400 pounds on his 5’7” frame. Choy said that the death of Kamakawiwo’ole affected him deeply. He states, ‘you look at Iz. He was so loved by everyone, so respected and his music is still played around the world. His spirit is strong and still with us, but he’s not’ (McGarry 2009). As Choy dealt with his own worsening diabetes and increased medication needs, he said he thought of Iz, and then sought to lose weight. Trying a range of diets that included Weight

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Watchers, he eventually relied upon his physician and a personal trainer for his weight loss regime. Choy, another respected Hawaiian native son and ‘Local,’ is not only one of the founding members of Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine and successful restaurateur and author, but also has become a poster boy for weight loss, having lost 165 pounds between 2008 and 2013.

What binds these men’s stories is more than their shared cultural identity as Local Hawaiian (a regional identity of mixed ancestry that we explain in more detail below) and their embodiment as big/obese/fat heterosexual masculine subjects. Their lives illustrate the contradictory and paradoxical nature of weight and weight loss in Hawai‘i and in other places (McPhail 2009; Isono, Watkins, and Lian 2009). That is, bodies can be big, successful, publicly accepted, and adored, yet some of these big bodies may simultaneously be seeking a thinner body despite their own and others’ ‘fat acceptance.’ Kamakawiwo‘ole was, and Choy is, a successful, highly functional public figure in Hawai‘i. Rick Carroll’s hagiography of Kamakawiwo‘ole’s life states that the singer’s health affected his career, and in his case fatness is problematically used as a proxy for his poor health (Bacon and Aphramor 2011; Fee 2006). Both Kamakawiwo‘ole and Choy suffered from diseases associated with obesity, but conveniently coincided with stereotypes of fat, brown, and unhealthy. However, it is never that simple.

We begin this article with the stories of these two men to highlight the lived paradoxes of weight. Our article examines Weight Watchers International narratives of slimming as these apply to Hawai‘i residents but particularly Local subjects such as Kamakawiwo‘ole and Choy, focusing on the organization’s omissions of Local Food, a cuisine of Hawai‘i associated with ‘Localness’ (see also Laudan 1996; Kelly 1999). Methodologically, we do discursive analyses of media reports, life histories, 40 years of Weight Watcher’s cookbooks selected by availability and historical contribution, prescribed foods and menus, websites, and other social media. Our analysis of weight loss discourse examines the contemporaneous axes of ethnicity, weight, and masculinity in Hawai‘i and intersections with discourses of ‘healthy cuisine.’ Weight Watchers’ (hereafter WW) menu prescriptions are one but example of how foods are framed by and for particular bodies, and how foods may discursively be ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ The organization frames Hawai‘i’s regional cuisine known as ‘Local Food’ as an exotic indulgence and not an everyday cuisine. In contrast, WW’s prescribed foods are ‘good’ foods for ‘healthy’ bodies, i.e., low-fat foods that effectively normalize a particular type of cuisine (nonethnic), making the bodies who consume Hawai‘i’s Local Foods as different from those who consume WW’s foods or thinning ones. WW’s prescriptions for weight loss and proscriptions against the consumption of Local Food intersect with the regional identity construction practices for ‘Local’ Hawaiians.

Local is a diverse yet salient identity in Hawai‘i of mixed ethnicity, and in the words of Ledward (2007), it is a mixedness of ethnic and class origins that is a legacy of the state’s masculinized plantation labor economy of the nineteenth century. By excluding Local Food from daily eating by Hawai‘i subjects, WW may also reproduce Local bodies as nonnormatively sized, classed, raced, and sexed bodies, according to taken-for-granted discourses of urban health and beauty that are predominantly middle class, ‘white,’ and heterosexual. WW is not the only example of a weight loss discourse that we could examine, nor do we wish to suggest that all Locals consume only Local Food thus essentializing the connection between food and subjectivities. We focus upon WW for two reasons. First, because of its presence in Hawai‘i as an international weight loss organization that prescriptively sanctions particular foods and by extension displaces Local Foods and its attendant social protocols and norms. Second, WW is an example of...
how such organizations reiterate discourses that normalize health, weight, and beauty, often through implicit notions of ‘good’ foods, whiteness, hetero-normativity, and the feminization of weight loss.

WW’s origins as an organization by and for middle-class, ‘white,’ heterosexual women still influences the company’s mission today, although WW is well aware that one way to increase its market share and relevance is to appeal to nonwhite and masculine subjects, revealing the organization’s valorization of thinness and construction of the body as commodity (Guthman 2009b). The organization’s current television advertising campaign targets weight loss for males, featuring former professional basketball player and African-American, Charles Barkley, who tells viewers to ‘lose weight like a man.’ Whether or not WW appeals to men and nonwhite subjects from diverse populations in ‘marginal’ rural places (i.e., ‘new’ markets) remains to be seen.

Hawai‘i’s public acceptance of the embodiment of large men like Kamakawiwo‘ole and Choy suggests that discourses of hegemonic thinness may be unstable at the margins in places like Hawai‘i, although in the contemporary climate of antiobesity campaigns as necessarily pro-health, our article raises important concerns about how the normalization of diet is never benign. For example, according to some studies, Hawai‘i ranks fiftieth in obesity across the USA (MacVean 2012), and taken-for-granted linkages between ethnicity and obesity should be carefully scrutinized. We do not deny the seriousness of illnesses such as hypertension or that obesity is a health issue for some people. Instead, we suggest that this article offers insights on the discursive framing of ‘good food’ (i.e., ‘healthy’ food) in a specific context that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions.

Throughout our article, we employ the terms ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’ without relying upon a singular definition of what those terms mean. We refer to the literature found in the interdisciplinary field of fat studies in order to shed light on the lack of precise understanding regarding the two terms. In the literature of fat acceptance (Bacon and Aphramor 2011; Isono, Watkins, and Lian 2009), some authors suggest that ‘obesity talk’ has to do ‘more with preconceived moral and ideological beliefs about fatness than a sober assessment of existing evidence’ (Gard and Wright 2005, 3). Other authors assert that ‘the obesity paradox’ indicates that fat is not always fitter (Bacon and Aphramor 2011).

In the following section, we provide sociohistorical contextual details about the social construction of Local identity and about Hawai‘i demographic history. An important facet of identity practice is food consumption, and we discuss the connections between Local identity construction and the regional cuisine known as Local Food. In the next section of the article, we examine the WW organization and salient points from the critical obesity literature that frame our discussion of the organization’s presence in Hawai‘i, especially how WW’s discursive normalization of weight and whiteness excludes ‘indulgent and exotic’ Local Foods. Finally, we conclude by returning to the paradoxical nature of large and slimmed bodies in Hawai‘i.

Local identities in Hawai‘i

Kamakawiwo‘ole’s and Choy’s lives reflect many of the contradictions of size-based discourses in Hawai‘i. For example, Kamakawiwo‘ole’s image on the cover of his best-selling album, Facing Future – he is wearing nothing but a lava lava – is a representation of Hawaiian pride, virility, and strength to many, even as in the last years of his life he had difficulty performing because of respiratory problems. Similarly, Choy’s motto used to be, ‘never trust a skinny chef,’ even as he sought to lose weight. For a time, both of these men’s public representations of their own bodies sanctioned fat acceptance. Yet as if to
script, and as Choy’s narrative of his weight loss illustrates, Kamakawiwo‘ole’s early death has come to represent to many Hawai‘i residents the taken-for-granted links between obesity and disease, rather than a body-type to accept or aspire toward. While in these two specific cases, their weight may have contributed to physical ailments, it was their success as large men for which they were known and revered. Iz was and Choy is talented in their respective crafts, and success like health comes at every size and in a range of ethnicities, sexualities, and genders (Bacon and Aphramor 2011; Lloyd 2013).

Body size was an important part of Kamakawiwo‘ole’s and Choy’s public personae as successful ‘Local’ males, and their masculinity may have made their bodies more acceptable to the public and to themselves. Body image affects male and female subjectivities differently, with masculine bodies often finding more tolerance for bigger builds, although not necessarily tolerance for fatness. Longhurst’s work on ‘man breasts’ addresses the negative feminization of fat male bodies (2005), and research on masculinities suggests that masculine subjects are subjected to norms of taut, lean bodies as the ideal (Hopkins 2012; Monaghan 2007). Thinness has long been associated with desirability for feminized subjects and women have been most affected by negative and marginalizing discourses of fatness (Bell and Valentine 1997; Longhurst 2005). Feminized bodies are targeted aggressively for slimming by Western fashion and weight loss industries, as well as medicine (see Longhurst 2012; Evans, Colls, and Hoerschelmann 2011; Lloyd 2013; Monaghan 2007). The ways that fatness is sexed and gendered have garnered extensive scholarship (Gard and Wright 2005; McPhail 2009). Less commonly analyzed, though, is the nexus between body size, ethnicity, ‘race,’ gender, and sexuality (although see Boisvert 2012; Isono, Watkins, and Lian 2009; McPhail 2013; Fee 2006). For example, Pacific Island populations may have greater fat acceptance than ‘white’ populations (Knight, Latner, and Illingworth 2010; Latner, Knight, and Illingworth 2011), although these claims rarely address differences in acceptance across genders and sexualities.

In recent years, obesity has become a prominent and contentious issue for many governments, nongovernmental organizations, and researchers (Evans 2006). Like elsewhere across the USA, the State of Hawai‘i has public relations campaigns to ‘battle’ obesity and its ancillary ‘diseases’ and is on a ‘mission’ to introduce ‘healthy’ foods into schools to ‘save our children.’ Much is made in Hawai‘i’s campaigns about the disproportionate share of the burden of obesity’s diseases born by nonwhite residents, such as Kamakawiwo‘ole or Choy (for example, see Mascarinec, Novotny, and Tasaki 2000), while some Hawai‘i residents suggest that the nonindigenous, ‘Western’ diet of fatty and sugary foods has created ‘dis-ease,’ which may be particularly acute amongst Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians who, perhaps, because of lower income levels attributable to racism and systematic disenfranchisement from land and resources, may consume more of the inexpensive but calorically dense processed foods that are presumed to be a cause of obesity (see Pollan [2007] and Schlosser [2005] for a discussion of these issues in the continental USA). Some researchers suggest that the ‘thrifty gene’ in Pacific Islanders contributes to obesity, along with the so-called lifestyle changes, a shorthand term for eating calorie dense, fatty foods common to ‘modern’ diets. Fee suggests that the thrifty gene theory’s use of ‘racial’ or ethnic group is often a “‘rough proxy” for susceptibility to disease, thereby obscuring incidence of disease such as type 2 diabetes amongst European descended peoples’ (2006, 2989) and overly attributing such diseases to particular ethnic groups, such as indigenous peoples of the USA and the Pacific (see also Poudrier 2007).

Feminist geographers, such as Guthman (2009a, 2011), Longhurst (2005, 2012), Evans (2006), Evans and Colls (2009), Colls and Evans (2009), and Lloyd (2013) along with political scientists, sociologists, and fat activists such as Heyes (2006), Cruikshank (1999),
Kirkland (2008), LeBesco (2004, 2011), and Murray (2005) challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding the links between obesity, ill-health, large bodies within the context of gender and sexuality. Some of these scholars draw upon Foucault’s work and his insights from *History of Sexuality* (1978), particularly his concepts of governmentality and biopower, in a body of work now known as critical obesity literature. Longhurst (2012, 2) notes that, ‘examining slimmed/slimming bodies or weight loss helps make it possible to understand more about the shifting and temporal nature of embodiment,’ which varies between and within places, as well as between bodies and over the life course of embodied subjects. Evans, Colls, and Hoerschelmann’s (2011) work on embodied subjection considers the cultural understandings of identity in relations to place (see also Lloyd 2013). Our analysis of weight loss in Hawai‘i resonates with Longhurst’s concerns, and also with Evans, Colls, and Hoerschelmann’s focus on geographically embodied connections and the cultural hegemony that take place through antiobesity frameworks such as those perpetuated by WW in Hawai‘i. Our analysis of embodied Localness in Hawai‘i resonates with Lloyd’s call for feminist geographers to ‘recognise new agendas for research which accounts for the experiences, representations and constructions of fatness when bodies and ideas move over national borders’ (2013, 1). The place specific context of bodies that live in Hawai‘i today is embedded in the State’s history of settlement and migrations and the resulting ethnically mixed population that contributes to the Local regional identity.

Ledward (2007, 1) states that the ‘hybrid mixed-ness’ of the State of Hawai‘i’s population is the norm, not the exception, although this was not always the case. The decimation of Hawai‘i’s indigenous population due to foreign illnesses and the eventual displacement of Native Hawaiians from their land and resources are widely known (Inglis 2012). In 2014, only the privately held island of Ni‘ihau has a population of what the US Census calls ‘one-race’ Native Hawaiians, with the majority of Native Hawaiians being of mixed ethnic ancestry, although many of them self-identify as Native Hawaiian. During Hawai‘i’s plantation era (roughly c.1835–1920, although on some islands sugar maintained a presence into the 1970s) (Takaki 1983), immigrants from the USA, China, Japan, Philippine Islands, Korea, Portugal, and Puerto Rico came independently or were brought to Hawai‘i to work in the sugar, and later agricultural (e.g., pineapple) plantations. Post-WWII, Native Hawaiians and the Asian, European and the American plantation era immigrants were joined by those from other Pacific nations such as Guam, Samoa, Tonga, and Federated States of Micronesia, who came to Hawai‘i as part of Statehood and under US compacts with Pacific Island nations.

As a result of these waves of immigration, the cultural identity of Local emerged, which is a hybrid, predominantly nonwhite identity of Native Hawaiian and Asian/Pacific descendants of Hawai‘i’s plantation workers and affiliated industries. The term, Local, came into common usage following the divisive Massie Case of 1931–1932 in which a Native Hawaiian man and his working-class friends were accused of and tried in court of raping Thalia Massie, who was ‘white.’ The accused men reflected Hawai‘i’s ethnic diversity. It was not until the 1970s that University of Hawai‘i sociologist Andrew Lind suggested that the Massie Case was the founding narrative of the term. Lind was also an early proponent of the view that Hawai‘i’s ethnic mixing led to ‘tradition of equality and tolerance’ (Lind quoted in Okamura 2000, 118), a perspective that overlooks the legacies of divisive plantation hierarchies, differences between ethnic groups, and land claims/theft of Native Hawaiian property.

It is simplistic to suggest that Hawai‘i’s ethnic diversity has led to a society that has eliminated racism or that social equality has resulted: it has not. Locals and particularly
Native Hawaiians have higher rates of incarceration and, germane to this article, higher rates of illnesses such as those associated with obesity like hypertension and type 2 diabetes, which can be argued to be the legacies of racism and may manifest most starkly in brown bodies although not only in brown bodies (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, Justice Policy Institute, University of Hawaii and Georgetown University 2010). While Local is useful in distinguishing nonwhites from haole, it has also had the effect of erasing distinctions between Native Hawaiians and the settler populations of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino, according to scholars such as Trask (2000). As Rosa states, ‘Local identity . . . is far from unproblematic’ (2000, 94).

Despite differences in social standing between and within Hawai‘i’s social/ethnic/cultural groups, and problematic applications of the term, Local remains a prominent and popular vernacular identity in Hawai‘i, to both rural and urban state residents. Some scholars suggest that Local is someone who is ‘island born’ (Ledward 2007), while others suggest that Local is a class-based identity, that is, descendant from the plantation working classes (Rosa 2000) and in contrast to haole elite, formerly the merchant plantation class. Implicit in the embodiment of Localness is that he or she is racialized as brown and not haole, although paradoxically, people speak of Local haole. For masculine and feminine subjects, large body sizes are often considered to be a marker Localness because of Native Hawaiians’ Pacific heritage, although this may elide Localness amongst those of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino ancestry who may be smaller bodied (Knight, Latner, and Illingworth 2010; Latner, Knight, and Illingworth 2011). In addition to physical identity markers, there are significant cultural practices that denote Localness, for example, speaking Pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole English) and participation in activities that are perceived of as distinctly of Hawai‘i’s, such as, but not limited to, canoeing, surfing, hunting, and fishing, etc. Localness is also conveyed in knowledge of social protocols surrounding celebrations and special events, such as weddings and first birthday celebrations (baby lū‘au).

Local, like other social identities, is gendered, classed, sexualized, multifaceted, malleable, and dynamic. For example, Localness may be more masculine and rural than feminine and urban because of its working-class roots in masculinized agricultural labor, which was located away from the urban center of Honolulu and is from rural Hawai‘i. Cultural identities change over time and space, and suggesting that Localness is more rural than urban or more masculine than feminine is not to suggest there are not urban Local Hawaiians, or that women are masculinized by the term, or that there are not small-bodied Locals. Locals are everywhere in Hawai‘i, occupying nearly every strata of Hawai‘i’s society and embody a wide range of body sizes, genders, and sexualities, although there are socially agreed upon characteristics of Localness that are meaningful to Hawai‘i residents, deployed by them to denote their identity.

Cooking, eating, and having knowledge of certain foods literally and figuratively constitute one’s Localness. Locals have developed a distinctive cuisine, drawn from the wide range of ethnic influences of their plantation and Hawaiian ancestors that now constitutes a regional cuisine known as Local Food. Local Food reflects ‘mixedness’ of Hawai‘i’s diverse ethnicities, and the ‘mixed plate’ lunch often metaphorically stands in for Hawai‘i’s population (Laudan 1996) – the Hawaiian ‘plate lunch’ or ‘mixed plate’ of Kalbi (grilled Korean beef) or Korean chicken, macaroni salad, Lomilomi salmon, Long Rice or white rice, and kimchee, foods that hail from a range of cuisines, growing environments and locations. For many Hawai‘i residents, Local Food is a defining cuisine of the State. The upscale version of it, Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine, owes much of it inspiration to chefs like Choy, who brought his knowledge of this ‘people’s food’ to the global movement for fresh market cuisine (Costa and Besio 2011; Heckathorn 2011).
To underscore the importance of Local Food in the lives of Locals, in Kamakawiwo'ole's journals he writes that one reason he resisted moving from his urban Honolulu neighborhood of Kaimuki to more rural or 'country' Makaha (west O'ahu) was leaving his favorite foods in his Honolulu eateries (Adams 2006; Carroll 2006). He states in Pidgin,

I figgah I move Country I going miss out on everything like 9th Avenue Bakery da best French and Dutch loaf bread, Tropic Baker was good too up on 12th Ave and the okazu place right across the street all us kids from Kaimuki Inter [Intermediate School] used to meet in the morning for breakfast. 3 Musubi 2 chicken with gravy all over. (Kamakawiwo'ole in Carroll 2006, 169)

Kamakawiwo'ole’s love of Local Food was well documented and widely commented upon as his size grew, and what this excerpt suggests is that Local Food, place, and identity are deeply intertwined (Costa and Besio 2011). For a 'Local boy' like Kamakawiwo'ole, food was an important part of social life, much as it is to people everywhere, and organizations like WW are always already contending with social factors that influence what people eat. In the following section, we look more closely at what happens when a multinational weight loss organization seeks to change the eating habits of Locals in Hawai'i through its dietary prescriptions. While WW might be an international firm, suggesting an inclusiveness and worldliness, its values, norms, and prescriptions reflect the organization’s history, social context, and a specific type of body: one that is slim, ‘fit,’ and we would add urban, predominantly ‘white,’ middle-class, and feminized.

WW in Hawai'i: disciplined vanity or self-empowered health?

Obesity discourses have recently become much more about health and physical attractiveness, becoming increasingly medicalized in their shaming of fat subjects (Guthman 2011; Julier 2008), and WW’s evolving program follows this trend in narrating fatness. In its early years, WW’s discourse regarding weight was about ‘looking good’ not health, while today the organization’s emphasis is on appearance coupled with health. In her 1970 biography, WW founder Jean Nidetch (1970, 150) states that her reason for starting the organization was that she was ‘blessed to be fat and angry and desperate enough to do something about it and then to help other people do something about themselves.’

In the program’s inception, it was a weight loss organization started for women like Nidetch, presumably ‘white,’ middle-class, and heterosexual suburban American women. We say presumably based on the organization’s early emphasis toward stereotypical housewives with whom Nidetch claimed to identify. In her various writings, she describes herself as a Long Island housewife who was desperate to lose weight (Nidetch 1970). Upon attending a weight loss clinic, she tried the ‘Prudent Diet’ of Dr Norman Joliffe, Director of New York City’s Bureau of Nutrition (Schwartz 1986, 220). The Prudent Diet was low in fat, sugar, and starch, and focused on reducing consumption nutritiously while losing weight slowly. Nidetch started losing weight and then sharing her strategy for success with interested friends. Soon, the group of friends grew, and Nidetch called the new program ‘Weight Watchers.’ Invited to speak at a New York City seminar on obesity, she gave herself a title: Nidetch, FFH (i.e., instead of MD or PhD) that stood for ‘Formerly Fat Housewife’ (Nidetch 1970, 3). Deciding that, ‘only the formerly fat had the emotional knowledge to commune with the currently fat,’ Nidetch (1970, 355) recognized the power of being thinner within the context of group interaction/surveillance of like-minded and presumably like-sexuality and – raced subjects. According to the journalist Kate Russell,
WW discourages GLBTI members (2003), suggesting a continuing exclusion of the so-called nonnormative subjects. The organization’s policy is that members do not discuss ‘religion, race, politics or sexual orientation at meetings’ (Russell 2003), a ‘blindness to difference’ strategy that often results in normalizing ‘whiteness’ or heterosexuality. In Nidetch’s (2009) autobiography, she states: ‘Weight Watchers is, and always has been, like me: color-blind, race-blind, country-blind. We are simply the people who are dedicated to improving our lives . . . ’ (2009, 11).

Discourses of differentiation have changed since the 1960s when Nidetch started WW, and our intention is not to single out the organization as racist or heterosexist, but, instead to point out how its underlying philosophies scaffold particular discursive frameworks of ‘normal’ bodies. WW’s early intentions were focused on authenticating its group surveillance method for losing weight. As Nidetch stresses, ‘the fact is that our organization is based on the principles of good menu planning and on having ex-fatties, who have won the war against obesity, point out the problems, pitfalls, and pleasures, which pave the road to a trim figure’ (Nidetch 1966, 7). Her emphasis on an authentic and shared experience buttresses the program and is echoed in the following sentiment almost four decades later: ‘Nothing tastes as good as it feels to be thin’4 and one might add middle-class, ‘white,’ and heterosexual. The ‘authentic’ experience of WW participants was to produce an idealized thin body, which came about through shared surveillance amongst like-minded and embodied subjects.

In 2006, the WW philosophy, as stated on their website, became more based in the ‘obvious’ health benefits of a slimmer body, stating:

A healthy body results from a healthy lifestyle – which means mental, emotional and physical health. Weight Watchers does not tell you what you can or can’t eat. We provide information, knowledge, tools and motivation to help you make the decisions that are right for you about nutrition and exercise. We help you to make healthy eating decisions, and we encourage you to enjoy yourself by becoming more active.

In more recent versions of the program (Momentum Program, PointsPlus Program), WW emphasizes what they describe as ‘healthy’ eating, ‘smart’ choices, and ‘simplistic’ approaches to eating. In our analysis of 40 years of WW cookbooks, websites, and in Nidetch’s statements, we find these texts to be an evolving model of the program. The cycle of self-governance learned in WW is taught through the management (disciplining) of eating with the attainable rewards of being a thinner, more in control, and a healthier subject. In Foucaultian terms, bodies discipline their eating habits by following the organization’s prescriptions and recipes, and then through the surveillance of group meetings that keep members on ‘track’ to lose weight. The individual members follow the guidelines of the program, although those guidelines are meant to be adjusted for various lifestyles and eating habits. These adjustments have limitations because if the member deviates too much from WW guidelines, then he/she – overwhelmingly ‘she’ as WW’s membership is 99% female – publicly ‘fails’ to benefit from the program and the subject is off-program and the scale either does not budge or goes up. The success of the member depends on accepting the structure of the program and fitting her or his lifestyle into the organization’s normative prescription for success, which, in turn, panoptically disciplines subjects.

A key aspect of WW’s discourse is the emphasis on self-empowerment through group interaction (see Martin 2000, 2002) again fitting within the Foucaultian paradigm of surveillance and discipline (Foucault 1995; Heyes 2006; Guthman 2009b). According to WW, a ‘new you’ is a thinner and more empowered you. To critical feminists who promote fat acceptance (Bordo 1993; Murray 2005), personal empowerment achieved
through weight loss is either the result of a false consciousness or a compromised critical position on obesity. Despite this contradiction, many feminists describe their own experiences of this latter perspective from their personal struggles and successes in losing weight (Murray 2005; Longhurst 2012; Heyes 2006). Heyes (2006) and Longhurst (2012) reflect thoughtfully upon the contradictions that weight loss pose for post-structural feminists, with Longhurst keenly aware of the irony that she is perhaps a more disciplined subject in her eating than she was when she ate what she liked. However, as a marginalized fat subject, she, like other fat subjects, is subjected to the myriad negative discourses of laziness, moral failing, and diminished opportunity, which also discipline individual’s subjectivities (Julier 2008). Choy and academics such as Longhurst (2012) and Murray (2005) note that they ‘feel better,’ that is, their experience of a smaller body is worth the effort in losing weight, even if their new embodied subjectivity is read as normatively thin and attractive, or in the case of Choy as more like ‘white’ bodies than Local ones. These narratives of slimming evidence the entanglements of materiality (body) and affect (feeling) in discourses of slimming. That is, a subject may ‘feel better’ because she or he is less stigmatized by the biopedagogies that construct thin as healthy or attractive.

In some narratives of slimming, losing weight has less to do with prescriptive norms about what she or he looks like and more to do with how the slimmed subject feels in his or her own body. In The Will To Empower, Cruikshank (1999, 70) describes ‘operations of power which promote subjectivity are neither benign nor neutral ... [where] relations of empowerment are in fact relations of power in and of themselves.’ In her work on aspects of governmentality, specifically on the politics of self-esteem, Cruikshank (1999, 85) describes the self-help organization as a voluntary association that operates as a nongovernmental means of government. That is, WW disciplines bodies to a range of norms and ideological functions. Cruikshank (1999, 23) argues that the freedom to redefine is also the freedom that subjugates, as ‘the will to empower [is] a strategy of government, one that seeks solutions to political problems in the governmentalization of the everyday lives of citizen-subjects.’ When Nidetch (1988) started WW, health and obesity were not the inseparable companions they are today, nor were they foci of state institutions that now routinely make obesity a public health concern (Evans 2006; Guthman 2011). Obesity reflects the intricate intertwining of bodies with the body politic. Food choices are paradoxically a personal choice that has a collective outcome, reflecting the dominant paradigm that being thin is a proxy for ‘good’ health.

In the early years of WW cookbooks, food’s taste was prioritized. In contrast, the 1988 WW cookbook (Nidetch, 1988) explicitly links health and taste: ‘Our Programs work, and the Quick Success program is our best one yet. Why? Because it’s faster, simpler, and healthier than ever before.’ In this cookbook, the so-called ethnic cuisines and special occasion foods were added, and WW stresses that ‘anyone can fit it [the program] into their individual life-style.’ In this version of WW discourse, the organization’s dietary suggestions become more inclusive by adding ‘ethnic food,’ although in doing so implicitly admit the organization’s ‘white,’ middle-class roots through the backdoor. As noted earlier, WW promotes its programs with ‘brown’ faces, to men with Barkley and to women with African-American singer, Jennifer Hudson. Yet while the face of the organization may be changing, its dietary prescriptions remain exclusionary.

**WW normalizes ‘indulgence’**

WW distinguishes between ethnic and nonethnic food, calling attention to the normativity of a nonethnic self and diet. This raises the complicating circumstances for how WW
engages eaters whose cuisines differ from these norms. Local Food is considered to be an ethnic or ‘other’ food by the program rather than ‘everyday’ food, a treat to be enjoyed every now and then, and part of quotidian eating practices. Thus for Local subjects seeking to lose weight through the program, they not only discipline themselves to ‘eat better’ in order to become empowered slim/healthy subjects, but must become disciplined to eating haole.

WW has 14 locations on Hawai‘i’s neighbor islands and 16 locations on the island of O‘ahu, where the majority of the State’s population resides. In addition to its ‘brick and mortar’ presence, the organization now reaches out to members through its website, online communities, blogs, WW App, Twitter feeds, and Facebook page. WW has also aligned with health insurers and HMOs (US health management organizations, such as Kaiser Permanente and insurers like HMSA/Blue Cross/Blue Shield), and offers meetings at and through health service providers. The organization’s representational presence appears to be more inclusive of diversity, reflecting the now wider purchase that issues of weight loss and health have in societies more widely.

As noted earlier, Local Food is a hybrid cuisine, coming from a variety of Hawai‘i’s ethnicities. Favorites include potato-macaroni salad, spam musubi, spare ribs, tempura, saimin, long rice, laulau, chicken katsu, and mochi, to name just a handful of the foods that appear on a special handout, the Local Foods Points List provided by WW. The organization hands out the Local Foods Points List to interested members upon request, yet none of the above dishes or their recipes appears in WW program guidelines or cookbooks. Perhaps Hawai‘i members share recipes for low-calorie versions for these foods in their online communities. Yet the absence of Local Food in published, sanctioned literature sets up a dichotomy of what should be eaten by participants, that is, ‘healthy’ vs. Local, i.e., unhealthy. Local Foods, by their very absence from WW materials, are condemned as ‘bad’ foods. The benefits of eating ‘well’ will elude Local members who cannot discipline their eating to exclude Other foods. In order to fulfill their obligation to themselves and adhere to WW prescriptions, eating means not eating Local Foods that may be an important part of social identities and practices.

If the ‘best’ path to health and beauty (and success, self-empowerment and happiness, to name a few implied but not explicitly stated ends) is in disciplining the self to eat WW prescribed foods, then ethnic food, in this case, Local Food, becomes an indulgence and Other to the Local eater. These Other foods are considered too high in points and not as healthy as other choices, such as nonethnic fare, that is, foods such as grapes, chicken breasts, lettuce-based salads, etc., all of which are currently not part of Local cuisine (and some not grown locally in Hawai‘i). Nidetch’s Weight Watchers Simply Delicious: Winning Points Cookbook (2002) articulates the program’s change for health with the statement ‘being healthy has a trickle-down effect on your life. If you’re in good shape, you can do more and feel it less . . . improves your overall quality of life.’ The normative benefit of weighing less is framed as a ubiquitous desire: ‘We suggest you start thinking seriously about taking on the number-one resolution of the majority of people in this country: losing weight.’

The reasons for losing weight in 2013 differ from those in earlier versions of WW cookbooks. Personal vanity has merged with personal health. The same touted ubiquitous struggle to lose weight is framed as a normal desire and expected practice, measured according to the WW Weight Range, which is based upon the averaged BMI. In WW, weight loss and body size are not culturally determinant and through their standardized framework, appropriate body size based on BMI has become a truth by which to live, in part because body size has now become a concern for the State (Evans 2006). Body sizes
differ according to place, gender, age, etc., and adhere problematically to BMI, in as much as BMI adheres problematically to bodies (Guthman 2011). Promoted as late as 2000 by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, the BMI, with its origins in 1960s epidemiological study that was later termed BMI in 1972 (Hacking 2006), is the ratio of height and weight objectified as the state’s calculation for a healthy weight.

The self-governance of WW, taught through discourses of discipline and empowerment, is made measurable through BMI/WW Weight Range. This range of weight is a normative assessment. ‘Normal’ weight is ‘healthy,’ and weights above or below are neither normal nor healthy. This range of weight is a governing tool of WW as members can gauge personal health according to the acceptable range of normalcy. Furthermore, the BMI/WW Weight Range can be interpreted as a guide for doing the program correctly. If WW members are disciplined to eat so that they weigh at a ‘normal’ range and are empowered to do so by being considered a ‘healthy’ and ‘attractive’ weight, then this ‘normal’ weight range can be considered personal protection from being fat. We would argue that in Hawai‘i, WW normalization of foods as either healthy or indulgent is a type of political technology reminiscent of the racialized and sexualized colonizing by haole in Hawai‘i.

Conclusion: paradoxical nature of large and slimmed bodies in Hawai‘i

According to WW, Hawai‘i eaters must reject Local Food, thus rejecting a rich accompanying culture of eating, sociality, and identity. The exclusion of Local Food in WW discourse normalizes not only certain foods and bodies, but may also stigmatize cultural foundations for Local identity through eating as well. It could certainly be argued that giving up ‘unhealthy’ foods, whether they be Local, ethnic, or haole, is just part of the dynamic nature of diet and cuisine, and as with most cultural changes there will be an ensuing cry of ‘cultural loss’ that will eventually fade into the background as cuisines change over time.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1995, 202) leaves readers with the underlying premise that ‘real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation.’ In the case of WW, the fictitious relation is liberation, where the real subjection is a lifetime of discipline of the will performed through prescribed weight loss practices. But it is fictitious only to a point, as the person losing weight submits to the program in order to lose the weight and is empowered by the results. In Hawai‘i, slimness, as emphasized by WW and other diet organizations, is the key measure of health and attractiveness. This returns us to discussions of normative perceptions of smaller bodies as healthier and more attractive. In Hawai‘i as elsewhere in the Pacific, bigger bodies may be more culturally accepted, valorized, and healthy, keeping in mind that there are no necessary links between size and good health (Bacon and Aphramor 2011). In the case of Kamakawiwo‘ole, his health suffered. Yet his poor health may be read paradoxically as gluttony and lack of self-control by some, or, alternatively, as a victim of Western disease by others. Moreover, his body size may have been emasculating, yet stories of Kamakawiwo‘ole’s ‘womanizing’ appear in his bibliography (Carroll 2006), and his masculinity, as defined by a hyper-heterosexualization, is evidence of his attractiveness, and thus his ‘manhood’ unquestioned.

In examining perceptions of cross-cultural body image in Hawai‘i and Australia, Janet Latner found that Pacific Islanders, Asians, and Whites each differed in their relationship between body image and self-esteem. In the case of Pacific Islanders, she asserts that ‘it is possible that both higher BMI and higher body satisfaction result from a greater acceptance of larger bodies and low levels of cultural stigma and fear of overweight’
(Latner, Knight, and Illingworth 2011). Other studies throughout the Pacific concur with Latner’s findings regarding greater body-size acceptance amongst Pacific Islanders, although those who have studied migrants to urban Pacific locations note that fat acceptance by Pacific Islanders diminishes with increasing exposure to dominant media messages for slimmer bodies (McCabe et al. 2011). In addition, other scholars attest to the resistance to ‘biopedagogies of obesity’ that counter the ‘fat-is-bad’ paradigm of mainstream research and practice in Newfoundland and Native American populations (McPhail 2013; Boisvert 2012). Some researchers suggest Hawai’i to be a place where a variety of bodies are accepted due to ‘an underlying “generosity of spirit” adhering to the principle of accepting people for what they are’ (Knight, Latner, and Illingworth 2010, 431) rather than because of Hawai’i’s Pacific populations’ genetic makeup and social acceptance of larger bodies. The former framing of bodily acceptance echoes discourses of social equality due to ethnic intermixing, problematically overlooking the impacts of discourses of slim, taunted, and toned bodies ever-present in the media that affect both feminine and masculine subjects, albeit differently.

Complicating WW and other health and weight loss narratives that exclude consumption of exotic ethnic foods, in this case, Local Foods, are prominent once-big Local/Hawaiian male subjects, such as Choy who, through his restaurants and cookbooks, espouses Local Food because it tastes good and it is ‘ours,’ meaning from Hawai’i. Choy’s body – both large and slimmed – may be read paradoxically as resistance to Local Food and Localness. That is, people could ‘see’ the effects of ‘bad’ foods on his large body, hence he, like Kamakawiwo’ole, is a negative example of a ‘Local boy’ who ate too much Local Food and whose health suffered because of his eating habits. In this reading, eaters seeking slimness should avoid becoming like Choy and eliminate or curtail their consumption of ‘bad’ foods rejecting the ‘big Local’ stereotype. In contrast, Choy, now as a slimmed Local chef who enthusiastically prepares and sells Local Food, albeit dressed up as Hawai’i Regional Cuisine, conveys through his slimmed body that eating Local Food is desirable and can be healthy, although his own personal statements about his diet suggest that he, like WW, treats Local Food as an indulgence (Shimabukuro 2009).

This article has not been able to adequately address the ‘success’ of WW amongst Local Hawaiians or the response by those who may resist the hegemony of ‘thinning’ and biopedagogies that construct them as ignorant of or unwilling to change their diets (see McPhail 2013). We hope, though, that it has raised questions about how WW and weight loss programs emplace themselves in ethnically diverse populations through discursive constructions of ‘good’ foods, while simultaneously using brown bodies as the public face of former ‘fatties.’ In making the public face of weight loss brown or black and not white, weight loss organizations may contribute to perceptions that obesity is a problem of nonwhite populations, paralleling medical discourses on the so-called diseases of modernity such as type 2 diabetes that focus narrowly on Hispanics, Native Americans, First Nations, and African-Americans (Fee 2006; see also Poudrier 2007), thus eliding food system inadequacies. However, Local Food, because of its inclusiveness of a range of foods, its already hybrid composition, and the dynamic nature of cuisine changes, incorporates low-fat haole foods in the form of heart-healthy menu options next to Loco Moco at Local eateries. This is, perhaps, just another paradox of ‘losing it’ in ‘paradise.’

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Notes

1. We use this term ‘purported’ with some sense of skepticism, as the link between obesity and disease is not proven, as some scholars describe (see Bacon and Aphramor 2011).

2. The positionality of one of us – Sarah – is revealed in her own experience as a white female and member of WW in Hawai‘i and in Massachusetts as the juxtaposition of the two locations generates particular place-based insights.

3. Nearly 75% of the State’s population lives in the city and county of Honolulu, with the remaining 25% living on the neighbor islands of Kauai, Maui, Hawai‘i, Lanai, and Ni‘ihau. According to US Census Bureau figures, nearly 24% of the States’ population reports as two or more races, with 10% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, 39% Asian, and 25% White, with the remaining 3% Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and ‘Some other race’ (US Census Bureau 2011a, 2011b).

4. As a WW member from January 2002 to the present day (as a lifetime member), Sarah has heard this phrase numerous times at various meetings led by a variety of people. It is just one such phrase, but is a discursive representation linking thinness to power.

Notes on contributors

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References


En Hawai‘i, los cuerpos pueden ser grandes, exitosos, ampliamente aceptados y reverenciados por su público, aunque algunos sujetos pueden estar buscando simultáneamente un cuerpo más delgado, incluso con lo que parece ser “aceptación de la gordura” por muchos residentes del estado. Este artículo analiza las narrativas del peso y la pérdida de peso de dos destacados hombres públicos y no blancos, Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole y Sam Choy. Conectamos estas narrativas con los discursos de adelgazamiento de Weight Watchers International ya que estos se aplican a los sujetos no “blancos” en Hawai‘i. Sugerimos que Weight Watchers normaliza la delgadez a través de discursos de blancura inherentes a alimentos específicos. La cocina regional de Hawai‘i, conocida como “Comida Local” es presentada como “exótica”, lo cual es distinto de lo que la organización propone como “buena” comida que produce cuerpos “saludables”. Weight Watchers narra a los cuerpos delgados y a la salud mientras normaliza a la cocina “blanca” y los cuerpos que la consumen, por lo tanto excluyendo a los cuerpos locales oscuros en Hawai‘i.

Palabras claves: Weight Watchers; Blancura; Hawai‘i; Cocina; Obesidad

在夏威夷减重：体重监控协会与增重、减重的矛盾本质

在夏威夷，人的身材可以是丰腴、成功、广为接受并受到公众尊敬的，但即便该州居民似乎多半具有“肥胖接受度”，有些人仍自愿性地追求更为纤瘦的身材。本文分析两位知名的非白人男性公众人物Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole与Sam Choy的体重及减重叙事。我们将这些叙事连结至国际体重监控协会用于夏威夷非“白人”主体身上的减重论述。我们主张，体重监控协会透过内在于特定食物的白人性论述，正常化苗条的体态。被称作夏威夷“在地食物”的区域菜餚，则被视为“异国情调”，并且不同于与该协会所提出的可形塑“健康”身体的“优良”食物。体重监控协会叙述苗条的体态与健康，并同时正常化“白人”的菜餚，以及消费这种菜餚的身体，从而排除了夏威夷在地有色人种的身体。

关键词：体重监控协会; 白人性; 夏威夷; 菜餚; 肥胖