Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Athia N. Choudhury

JVN // The lighting today is, like, really—in my phone—it's really giving it to me, Athia. And you are just giving me, like—are we going to get, like, modeling contracts from a podcast?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // I think so! I think so!

JVN // Are we gonna be, are we the first people in history? Sometimes my friend will be, like, "Oh my God, are they going to kick us out for being too hot?" I'm—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // For being too hot and too brilliant. It's gonna be very hard. It's almost not fair.

JVN // Ohmigod! It's literally not fair. Athia, well, I mean, literally it is not fair. Like, we're literally just, like—ah! Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. We recently spoke with Dr. Eviane Leidig about women on the far right. And one thing that struck me about these women is that they have very specific ideas about dieting and wellness. Nutrition is part of their commitment to white supremacy. Now, they wouldn't say it like that. And I know that it, like, if this is your first episode of Getting Curious, that might sound hyperbolic, but if you go back and listen to it, like, it's, it's real. So this week we're taking this connection between race, gender, and quote "health" one step further. Bum bum bum. We are taking on the calorie! And honey, we've got a lot to learn. So let's welcome to the show, Dr. Athia N. Choudhury, who is a writer and cultural historian. She's currently the Postdoctoral Associate in Asian American and Diaspora Studies at Duke University. She researches the intersections of race food, militarism, eugenics—fuck you, Francis!—and body surveillance in the 20th century. Athia, welcome to Getting Curious.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Thank you so much for having me here. I'm very excited to chat with you today.

JVN // I hate to sound like a naive sill sill, but I didn't really know what eugenics was until Getting Curious. Like, I learned it within this podcast. I just never learned about it in school or college. And then I went to hair school and then I got—whatever, I got busy is what some would call it, you know, addicted to drugs, whatever it's fine. I wrote a book about it, but then I recovered and now I'm just, like, on my learning journey. So I didn't know about what eugenics was. I didn't know about that Francis Galton. Who is the inventor of it, right? This fucker. We, we hear about him on the—-yeah, so, like, that, I'm glad that you can confirm as a—that, that is true. We weren't just, like, making, it was absolutely true. First question—wait, how are you?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // I'm very excited. I feel like I'm absorbing some of your energy. And I just want to say, like, there's no shame in not knowing about eugenics or simply learning about eugenics later in life, particularly because it's so innocuous, right? It functions precisely in this way to be invisible to us. And oftentimes it's dismissed as a historical quack science, but the threads of it are so alive and present in our everyday, and it becomes a lifelong project to unpack it, to unlearn it, to see how our experiences in the world are shaped by it.

JVN // Now, let's get into it. So, what we're asking about today is, like, what is the cultural history of the calorie? That whole thing is all up in our face, from sunup to sundown, it's on all these boxes, it's on the tip of everybody's lips. I got a nutritionist last year, couldn't stop

talking about a fucking calorie. So if we were to ask a chemist or a nutritionist to define a calorie, how would they answer?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So, historically speaking, the calorie was used in chemistry as a heat to energy conversion ratio, right? It was a way to understand how much of a substance needed to essentially, like, burn or be expelled to raise 1 gram of water another degree Celsius. Wilbur Atwater, who would later be known as the father of nutritional science. What Atwater did was he applied these theories around burning energy or measuring energy into the human body and into food. So what Atwater did during his experiments, he gathered three of his graduate students, one at a time, he locked them in this enclosed room and there was a calorimetry machine that was attached to it that would measure the amount of heat and moisture that was being released into the atmosphere as they did various activities. So feeding them a steady stream of food, like Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes and milk. And having them do, like, their everyday activities like sleeping and studying and, like, jumping jacks, he would measure the amount of energy required or energy burned from the consumption of food. There's a ton of, you know, critique about his scientific method and his process and the control group. And I think what's really an important takeaway is this is a moment of discovering a way to quantify food outside of taste, outside of texture, outside of culture. And then it sort of bleeds into the reasons why we eat, right? "Why do we eat" becomes a very different thing because of our knowledge or our being educated about the calorie.

JVN // What's the water, raising the water degree have to do with it?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So when you raise the temperature of the water, it's supposed to be the measurement system, right? So that's how you begin to create a universal standard. And there was a lot of excitement that was generated from his data, and his data sets would become really important to the US government in terms of, like, the US Department of Agriculture was very invested in Atwater's data because they wanted to know precisely, "How much food does the average person or the everyday person need to consume—like, what was the minimum requirement—in order for them to be, like, effective and efficient workers?" And so that was sort of the crux of it.

JVN // Whoa dark, right? Like, the calorie started, like, what's the bare minimum someone needs to be, like, an effective worker, in like…

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, so before the calorie was really popular in, like, people's homes, their, like, regular everyday sort of thinking around food and eating. It was primarily used in outposts as an experimental science: in prisons, in asylums, and even in Native boarding schools. So one of the really interesting things that I discovered: I was looking through the Carlisle Indian School archives, which is one of the largest repositories of documents and photographs of Native boarding school materials. And it's really fabulous. They've digitized a lot of it. So just everyday folks can go and access this online. They have these little profiles that were filled out for each child that was brought in to these schools—and in these profiles, they would list their age, their height, and their weight. And so when families would write into the schools and demand the release of their children, oftentimes the administration would send a letter that was accompanied with a chart or with data from these charts detailing how much the child weighed prior to entering the school versus how much they are now. And this weight management was used as a, as a reason for not returning a child to their home and their family. Right? "You're better off here, you're better off under state control. You're getting better nutrition. Your health status is, you know, a lot better." And so, like, before the calorie was what we know it is today, as, like, this sort of educational technology that's very familiar to all of us. It was primarily used through these state surveillance and imperial projects.

JVN // Fuck me hard. OK. That was, like, a lot. So for the first pair, there's a lot to unpack. I have, like, 18 follow up questions.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, sure!

JVN // So, so who was funding that? So it was, like, the Department of Agriculture and, like, the United State government, like, was trying to, like—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes, also they were, he was getting funding from private institutions. So when we think about the eugenics movement, we have to remember that it was institutionalized in, like, university systems and, like, they had departments and programs and conferences and pockets of money that were flowing into funding research. And it's very similar to how research operates today.

JVN // There was, like, a magazine called, like, Eugenics Weekly, wasn't there?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Exactly.

JVN // So in the 1800s and 1900s, there was college departments that were, like, titled Eugenics? About, like, Human Eugenics?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // They weren't necessarily titled, like, Human Eugenics, but they would offer eugenics courses. But they would be things like Human Development or Population Management. It, it would be in the ways that people created—

JVN // Not the Population Management!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, and population management was approached in a more "delicate" way, right? Not as though it was, like, "Ok, we're going to exterminate all these populations." But, like, "Ok, so what are the greatest crop yields that we would need to achieve in order to manage XYZ birth rates in this year," you know, those kinds of things. So really thinking about human experience and human life as quantifiable data sets that you can then craft economic solutions for.

JVN // Wow. So eugenics, I think we know some things about that but not all the things. But you introduced me to a new word in your work, which is euthenics. What's the deal with, like, euthenics? Euthenics—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Euthenics, yes.

JVN // Euthenics!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, euthenics! It's really interesting because it's not really spoken of as much as eugenics is, but I would describe it as the sister movement to the eugenics movement. And so Ellen Swallows Richards, who was the sort of forebearer, one of the forebearers of the home economics movement, wrote this book called *Euthenics, The Controllable Science of the Home and Environment*. And so in this text, she describes euthenics and eugenics. So she says, "Eugenics is hygiene for future populations. Euphenics is hygiene for present populations." And so there are these two really compatible projects that are aimed at purifying, cleansing, correcting degeneracy, illness, or brokenness, dysfunction in human populations, right? And the way that eugenics approaches it is through hereditary, larger systems. Whereas euthenics is all about, "How do we manage change and control our environmental settings so that the present population can become reformed, right?" And so it becomes really interesting because, like, we don't talk about euthenics but euthenics is what we practice all the time. An example of euthenics would be, like—essentially, like, visiting a nutritionist, right? You're visiting a nutritionist to correct your, essentially your hygiene behaviors around food and

eating. And this expert will train you in, “What are the appropriate ways for you to relate to food and eating?”

JVN // Mm. Mm! So what does euthenics have to do with the nutritional calorie?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // I use the nutritional calorie as a way to explore the larger questions of euthenics and vice versa. And what I found in my research was that as white women in America were sort of trying to figure out what their place in the nation was during this moment of extreme upheaval from the joint forces of both industrialization and mechanization as well as, like, post-Emancipation, failed Reconstruction, so all this racial upheaval. White women in America are trying to figure out, like, “What is our role within the nation?” They leaned on homemaking as one of their primary arenas, like, their domain. And essentially by thinking of homemaking not simply as work that *anyone* can do, but homemaking as a science that required precision that required an understanding of chemical processes, thermodynamics, and a higher sense of education around the natural world, they were able to figure out their place as keeper of the home, keeper of the nation.

And essentially, like, this sort of rise of the science of wellness, right, as something that could be practiced, rehearsed, shared and trained as a universal standard across the country and then also across the globe. And so the calorie is one of those technologies that they really relied on as a way to educate people in terms of how to enter into the modern era. During this time, you see that there's a, a lot of circulation of these, like, women's magazines and brochures and pamphlets and radio shows. And in a lot of these columns, women are writing in and they're talking about, like, you know, “What would be a great lunch plan or meal plan to have for, like, a ladies' lunch or something.” And the advice columns would come back with all of these details about not only the etiquette for how to host a ladies' lunch, but how to host an *optimized* ladies' lunch, where everyone will feel not only full but like their bodies will be *nourished*, right? And so we see this language of optimization and vitality really beginning to emerge in this time as well.

JVN // And it makes it sound so fun! It’s—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Right, the thing that makes this particularly challenging, right, the thing that makes health so particularly challenging is that you hear it and you're, like, “Oh, this is good, like, why wouldn't we want to be optimized?” Right. “Why wouldn't we want to be healthy, why wouldn’t—”

JVN // And have lunch with our girlfriends.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // And have lunch with our girlfriends! Like, why would we not want these things? And so for so many of these reformers, they, like, they genuinely believed in improving the quality of life of people and specifically migrant and working poor folks. But they did so, not with the intention of pushing back against the status quo that created systems and structures of inequality that, you know, made people poor in the first place or you know, made them live in polluted and extracted lands in the first place. But it was about, “OK, how does the individual fix themselves?” Right. So it becomes a personal choice to choose health or to become healthy as opposed to thinking about these larger conditions in which people have to survive.

JVN // So, in your work, how do you define the calorie?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So my approach to the calorie, I really think about it as a historical and cultural object that can help us map directions of power and ideology. And so I really came to this work about the calorie because I, you know, I was thinking about my own relationship to it, and it was always a relationship of punishment, right? Like “I, you know, ate something, I ate a cheeseburger today. And so I can't have anything else but,

like, a cucumber slice, you know, for the rest of tomorrow." Or, you know, the various fad diets that I had in engaged in for, you know, 20 plus years of my life, you know, oftentimes under the supervision of family or medical professionals, health practitioners, you know, started dieting when I was 12. But I realized that this was a mundane kind of violence when other people, especially women and femmes would come up to me and talk to me about their own experiences with eating, particularly, you know, some would say, like, "I can't eat in public. I feel really afraid, you know, I try, I try to eat and I can't swallow the food because I, I just, I physically can't do it," or this, like, logic of, you know, trying to balance eating a cookie with having to exercise for 30 or 40 minutes. And that relationship to food and eating and the body has always felt really troubling and fraught for me. And so that's why I have to approach it in this way, right? As a political, ideological, and social project to really unpack because the stakes are for a lot of people about life and death.

JVN // Is that, like, just one of the many dangers of, like, the scientification of, like, food and calories or, like, is it, like, it's all fine and well until you start, like, telling other people to do it? Or, like, what are the dangers of, like, the scientification of, like, this calorie and, like, how we think about, like, nutrition and calorie and wellness and health.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah. So, like, the scientification of the calorie, right, is about the production of knowledge and expertise around food and eating, right? In terms of, you know, "We're gonna create a universal standard and a universal metric to measure, like, how much energy in this food or how much energy this food provides the body and every single body is gonna react to it in the same way," which is just categorically false, right? It's, it's not a stable measurement, and it creates a punitive relationship to the idea of food and eating. And that is, honestly, I think a really deadly consequence, right? Because we've seen the sort of limits that people will go to in order to be thin. And so it creates these really unrealistic expectations over what bodies truly need. And I think that we also have to kind of sit with healthism kind of going to its most extreme. We're in this moment where there is this rise of orthorexia nervosa, which is the fixation on healthy and "clean" eating to the point of it being a detriment to our bodies, right? Or to your health.

JVN // What's that?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So it's a, it's a kind of emerging eating disorder condition that a lot of younger folks are experiencing, and it really is this fixation on having to know—you know, for some people it manifests as having to know the exact origins of the foods that they're eating. It's a hyper fixation on "clean" eating. The number of calories in, calories out. And you see that there is really not a way to talk about this because on the outside, what they're doing is seen as, "Oh, this is healthy."

JVN // If there was someone who was, like, "Oh, like, I can't eat from there because, like, there's," it's not that they're, like, vegetarian or, like, so like, like, but there's, like, everything from that place is, like, "too unhealthy," or, like—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Mhhm. It could manifest as, like, being hypervigilant about where you can eat and, like, looking very closely at the menu and, like, stressing about it for days at a time before you're supposed to go out and meet with someone. Like, the anxiety is a signal that there might be something deeper there.

JVN // That orthorexia is giving me in my nutritionist phases. So, fuck! I think—what other shit am I gonna get? I mean, I actually don't, I'm, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it! Mother Nature, whoever up there, vengeful god, whoever you are. I love you so much. I didn't mean to say it. I was just kidding. Kidding. So then how did thinness become the body, like, ideal? Was that, like, a World War Two thing? Like, ladies are in the house thing? Or what, what was that about?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So when I talk about how fitness or engage with how, like, fitness becomes a body ideal in the 20th century, it really is, like, a story about labor and anxieties about labor and essentially, like, labor and race, right? And how that sort of fits in. There are a bunch of, like, fat studies historians who really talk about this twofold moment where, you know, we're entering into this new phase of America with Emancipation, right? And Reconstruction and then failed Reconstruction. And it be—people begin to pose these kinds of questions or philosophical questions around, "How do we distinguish whiteness and Blackness, if it's not simply about freedom, right?" And personhood is, you know, "If Black people are not enslaved, right, then how do we know ourselves as you know, white Americans?" And then the other piece was about the encroaching eastern European migrants coming into port cities and their physiques being stouter, shorter, rounder, right? And this idea of "consolidating the boundaries of whiteness" created a different kind of anxiety. And so while the 19th century was this project around, "How do we know who is human versus who is not human," we see in the 20th century, the American century, it becomes this question of, "How do we train the body and reform the body." And the people who have the capacity to "manage" their bodies are signaling to us the sort of, like, capacity for rationality, for superior thought. And this idea of capacity, right, becomes a really important one in, like, marking an American identity at this time.

JVN // A lot of this, we got to go through in the history with Dr. Sabrina Strings about, like, the, the racist origins of fatphobia with these, like, European explorers in the 1600s and 1700s. And, like, when they first went to Africa, they were, like, "These women are gorge," and, like, "We're all like obsessed with them," but after Galton decided that, like, you know, evolution, like, also applied to, like, civilization and, like, you know, enforcing, like, Christian, like, Western European ideas onto everyone as a matter of, like, evolution. That's when all of a sudden, like, everybody's curves were, like, a threat and how you could, like, differentiate between, like, it becomes, like, way more racialized. And we learned, like, some of that in that episode, which was really interesting. But what I hear you saying is that, like, a lot of these ideas, like, really continue to persist in terms of, like, deciding how white one is or how, like—and, and you could even replace white with, like, able, like able to learn, able to change, able to assimilate, able to whatever. But that was really seen as, like, the Northern Star and we're still dealing with that.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you for making that connection. I think Sabrina Strings' work is, like, so fabulous and like, so important. And you know, I think the thing that I really took away from, you know, her book was thinking about how these colonists, these, you know, settlers, they went to Africa and saw these beautiful women and it was, like, "Oh, like, we have to enslave them to create them into objects of labor," right? And so that creates this need to dehumanize an entire race of people, an entire group of people in order to justify their degradation.

JVN // Mmm. Let that sink in. So, when and, like, what did a moderate relationship to the calorie come to look like?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Rationing during World War One or during the Great Depression is actually how the calorie entered into, like, the American lexicon. So we're no longer, like, talking about the calorie in just prisons and penitentiaries and Native boarding schools but now, in the home. In an attempt to quell a bread riot or a flour riot from bakers and farmers Herbert Hoover had called on his quote, "police force," the American woman, to arbitrate the calorie in their homes, right? And so the Food and Drug Administration and USDA began sending out all these posters and flyers about, like, how to ration. "This is how many calories a person needs," all of these different kinds of things. And so this was an entry point for women in America and housewives in America to find their place in the nation

through a punitive relationship to the calorie, right? So it's a carceral relationship to the calorie that we really see, like, form and begin to solidify during this time.

JVN // And the way that, that comes together of, like, if you're, you know, like, doing your part for the country.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Exactly, it's a national project.

JVN // Yes, honey, it's giving propaganda, darling. But maybe, well, whatever—I love how I'm so propagandizing myself. I'm, like, "Maybe they needed to, they needed to beat the Nazis or whatever." I'm, like, I'm, like, fuck! Shit! Every time I turn around it's—god damn it. All right. Calming down now, coming back into myself. In recent years. I'm just kidding. I'm kidding. But wait, so, what was that moderate relationship with the calories? And when does that happen?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes! So, I write a little bit about this in my article and I found that it was really interesting when I was going through some of the USDA's archival materials around the Aunt Sammy radio show. And it was sort of counterpoint to the Uncle Sam figure, right? So it was Aunt Sammy, she was either his sister or his wife. Nobody is quite sure who Aunt Sammy is, but her target audience was, like, rural America. So a lot of the radio show programming was centered around nutrition, helping people make recipes. Like, a lot of them would say certain things, like, "Unlike these willowy figures and these sort of, like, dainty shallow debutantes, you know, we take the science of the calorie very seriously, and it's about nutrient dense, rich foods for your family," right? And so they were appealing to a very specific, like, rural America, Heartland population.

And we see this sort of separation or these two competing visions of modern femininity, between the sort of shallow, vapid willowy woman who counted calories just for her vanity versus the healthy, strong, smart woman, who counted calories, you know, for the sake of her family, for the sake of her nation, and for the sake of her health. Right? And so, that's what makes this such a complicated story when we try to think about our modern relationship to the calorie and to health because we can sort of distinguish between these two forms of feminine relationships to the calorie. Right? And we could say that, "Oh, this one's obviously better than the other one." But at the same time, it's still a carceral relationship, a punishing relationship. And a relationship that's based off of a logic of nation building that is inherently an imperial one.

JVN // Mmmm! Okay, so the calorie is part of a bigger, like, wellness project, though in America. I mean, those radio shows that you were speaking about, it reminds me of, like, I mean, so much of our content is about food. Like, on social and, and even before social was a thing, like, infomercials and just, like, recipes on, like, whatever—the, the Today Show morning shows, cooking shows, like, the Food Network, like, a lot of these things, like, it's just food and how we eat it, how we prepare it and, like, what it, whether or not it's, like, "good," "bad," "whatever." That's, like, a huge conversation in so many different platforms that you wouldn't even necessarily clock until you start looking for it.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Right. We don't have an official Bureau for Home Economics these days. And yet, like, I would argue that influencer culture is an extension of these domestic scientists or home economists, right? Because what are they trying to do? They are trying to sell a fantasy of how to live a good life, right? And they train you in these various cooking videos, these hygiene videos, like, there are videos about how to take a shower, what kinds of soaps and shampoos to use. And, like, you know, there, there's a lot to be said about being able to learn anything you need to learn from the Internet, which is a wonderful thing, right? But at the same time, these videos have consolidated particular aesthetic forms that create its own genre, right? So one of the most popular food videos

are, like, "What I Eat in a Day," videos, right? And if you do, like, a quick, like, search for what I eat in the day videos, the faces that pop up, the bodies that pop up look eerily similar, right? And the practices that they do are eerily similar. It is, you know, this very particular set of practices from a thin, young, able-bodied person oftentimes white, middle class and you know, they show us, you know, overnight oats or avocado toast or, you know, just these very familiar things that flag to us, like, "Oh, this is healthy, this is good for you. These are the things that we aspire to." And these kinds of practices of performance and mimicry and, like, taking these food objects as signals around, like, how to shape our desires and our appetites. It has this longer legacy.

JVN // I just want to say big up for my algorithm, like, big up for my algorithm because mine's more of, like, I have all these people in my algorithms that are, like, "This is what I eat in this day as a fat person who's not trying to lose weight," and just, like, really yum yum food, like, like, really, like, just, like, positive, like, affirming, like, fabulous videos, like, yeah, it's, like, really, like, like, my algorithm is fun, like, mine is, like, pretty, it's, like, that like just like figure and, like, really expressive like dances and stuff and gymnastics—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Amazing, my algorithm's fucked, because of my research.

JVN // Oh, I bet! It's all over the place. We have to dive back into history because you were really teaching us some, like, cool stuff. So, okay, so does that mean that we did at one time have a Bureau of Home Economics?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes, it's part of the US Department of Agriculture. They basically worked in tandem to create all these different kinds of programming, educational pamphlets and materials and also collected and created syllabi for, you know, schools across the country. Also bringing it abroad, right? So one of the things, like, if you go to the Philippines, you can find euthenics classes being taught in universities titled Euthenics. But it's labeled as college preparedness, like, or they're described as college preparedness courses. These were programs that were originally brought over to the Philippines in the early 1900s by white women, home economists.

JVN // Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. But, like, how is wellness a project of US imperialism, if you think we haven't answered it already?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, I want us to think about wellness as a project of imperial, American Empire. Because oftentimes when we think about, like, the US's legacy on global food systems, it's about, like, "Oh, it's the introduction of junk food, it's the introduction of fast food. It's the introduction of monocultural farming practices and industrial farming and fishing and all of these different kinds of practices that create fat populations." And I, I want to push back against this kind of framework to instead think about the various forms of wellness technologies that were created by the United States in the 20th century that signaled to the rest of the world that it was a modern nation state, right? And so when you have something like the calorie as this, this technology that is now used across the world, this, this sort of other side of the coin of us empire and food systems theory about the disruption to native bodies and native foods by making them fatter doesn't quite capture what happens to America's food waste in the 20th century, right?

Because more often than not this food waste is being transformed into food *aid* for foreign countries. For example, I do a lot of research on powdered skim milk or fat free milk, which is originally a waste product from the process of creaming for butter and yogurt and cheese. And it used to pollute midwestern cities or midwestern rural ponds and lakes and streams until it was repurposed and shipped off to other parts of the world and sold as a health food, right? That was a miracle technology of the United States that would make you big and strong and simultaneously it was marketed in the US as a miracle weight loss elixir that

will help middle class women stay thin, right? And so, like, if we think about this idea of wellness, like, this is literally a transitive empire here, right? And what did this create? It created a desire for dairy in parts of the world where people didn't consume dairy. This is what I mean when I say that diet culture and wellness is a legacy of American empire.

JVN // That is so fascinating. That's, like, a whole episode of just, like, the milk powder byproduct. And, like, how that all happened. You said earlier, when I was apologizing for stretching, you said, you know, "Be a body," and I love that. And this question I also love which is like, what do the structures of wellness *feel* like on our bodies?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So when I started this project, I was really trying to understand, like, "When did we learn to experience our body as a problem?" You know, what was that moment in our lives? Like, where we learned to not view our bodies as a thing that allowed us to move through the world joyfully, freely, and have all of these new experiences and sensations. But as something that was a problem that needed to be fixed. And so that is what the sort of, like, afterlives of wellness feels like on our body. It feels like a sense of failure, right? It feels like a failure to attain an impossible aspiration for so many of us. That's really how I'm trying to sit with it.

JVN // Wow. Wow. I am obsessed with you. Are you taking applicants to your, like, program should, like, do you teach undergraduate, graduate? Like, like, do you want me to be your postdoc assistant?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah. Be my postdoc assistant, and then I'll just travel the world with you later.

JVN // Okay, we're going to research stuff. Okay, yeah. So I, I'm into this. So in recent years, how have we seen state agencies perpetuate these ideas? It's giving me, like, food pyramid. Is that one?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Oh my gosh. The food pyramid! Ugh, god, when I first started my sort of, like, dissertation research, I was just like doing so much research on the food pyramid. And what was so interesting about this moment in, like, the urgency for the state to develop these nutritional programs in the sixties and seventies was that it switched from combating childhood hunger and poverty to combating childhood ob*sity, really coincided with the civil rights movement and gaining traction, right? And so it becomes this form—if you, if you sort of, like, follow these US senate hearings around, like, introducing a nutritional education into classrooms, there's a lot of talk about, you know, "We're no longer concentrating on urban or rural hunger for children, we're actually going to, like, target children who are ob*se or too fat because it's a sign of parental neglect." So it becomes this sort of, like, way to target and surveil poor communities of color. And that transition was really stark to come across. So, like, when we talk about things like the food pyramid, its introduction into the state is not a neutral one, but also when we think about the foods that are included in the food pyramid, so much of that was dependent and reliant on essentially agriculture and surplus.

JVN // Yeah, because we were supposed to get, like, 15 pieces of bread a day or something, I feel like!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Apparently! And, like, 12 gallons of milk doesn't matter if you're lactose intolerant.

JVN // Drink that fucking milk!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Like, "Do it, do it, do it for the country, okay?!" You know, like, so, so when we, when we think about the sort of, like, state iconography around nutritional health, so much of its early development was in tandem.

JVN // Can you tell us more about, like, body surveillance? Like what is that from, like, a governmental perspective or, like, a societal perspective? Like, what, like, what, what's body surveillance?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // So body surveillance is, it's, it's essentially part of this, like, body management project, right? And it's this mode in which we begin to collect data on ourselves. It's a very fancy way of talking about, like, "How often are we weighing ourselves? How often are we measuring our bodies? How often are we counting our calories, tracking our macros, looking at our heart rates, right?" Like, all of these different technologies, like, they seem like they're so easily integrated into our lives and it's, like, such a natural thing to want to keep track of these things. But I want to know why we started keeping track of these things and, like, what desire is that fulfilling for us?

JVN // And that is really ringing clear now. Like, that is, like, I mean, like, these, like, bro-ed out fucking dudes at the gym who are, like, "Make men strong again." Like, but yeah, that is, I mean, people still think that, like, if you are more fit, then you must be more strong or whatever, like, a lot of these ideas, like, still hold true, constantly.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Absolutely. Like, that's part of that legacy is that we see how this idea of optimization and strength and ableism, like, the abled body is the body who has overcome their nature, a nature that is, you know, that could fall into gluttony or dysfunction and they've proven themselves as "good people." And I think that's why people get so mad when they see fat people thriving and happy because you're not supposed to be happy when you're fat, right? "How dare you try to be happy or show that you're happy when you haven't followed the rules?" Like, you, this isn't supposed to be what's happening, right? It's, it's also where a lot of rage comes from, for, you know, thin folks who are looking at a fat body and being, like, "Oh, you're promoting death or ob*sity," you know, all these different kinds of things.

JVN // Which is something that we see way too much on social media. Like, I see it all the time. So, food pyramid, that was a detour, going back to the question. So state agencies perpetuating a lot of these ideas. The food pyramid is one example. But what about, like, Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign? Like, I love Michelle Obama. I'm obsessed. The only thing I ever really vehemently disagreed with her on, like, I will just say it. I've said it before and I'll say it because I think it's hilarious. I think that when they go low, you kick 'em in the nuts, you don't go try to, you know, like when they go low, you literally, like, wind your leg back as hard as you can and you, like, verbally and academically like kick them, you Rochambeau them as hard as you fucking can in the nuts. Or you do, like, what that NYC, like, doorman did in that viral video from, like, Fashion Week last week where he said that, like, she said, "I'm not talking to you, like, you're not a man." And he was, like, "Man? Man? What you don't know about a man could fill a book," and then, and then, and then she was, like, "Fuck you." And he was, like, "Honey, the last person that you fucked you was genetics." It was the meanest thing.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Not the genetics!

JVN // I know, it was bad. It was really bad. It's all over TikTok right now. And everyone was saying, like, they're, like, "Honey, like you don't ever man at the club." TikTok algorithm was really doing it for me. And it never stops. So anyway, so, but yeah, Let's Move. Is that, was that because it was about, like, moving, or no?

JVN // Yeah, you know, so, like, I'm just a regular, degular human being and I love Michelle Obama. I'm charmed by her. Like, I think she's fabulous and chic and, like, part of me wants to be like her when I grow up. But that doesn't mean we cannot be critical of her, like, performance as First Lady. And her Let's Move campaign, there have been, like, a lot of critiques about it from fat studies scholars and thinking about, like, it in terms of neoliberalism and you know, a part of these, like, larger state projects. Oftentimes, it's read as a sort of, like, Black Mothering project where if you're from a—again, a euthenics and almost, like, feminist science studies perspective, someone would read it as, like, "Of course, Michelle Obama would focus on this, like, childhood ob*sity because Black and brown populations are the ones that are most affected, affected by this." But, like, okay, like, let's examine that logic a little bit about like, why do we always problematize the Black and brown body as a site of excess um and terror and as a site of reform. And so, like, that Black Mothering Project becomes complicated when you think of it in a longer history of American Empire's project. She did say at one point that, like, fat kids were not just, like, a threat to, you know, their own health and safety, they were a threat to global security, right? So these, these are, you know, these are the logics that undergird what's seen as a Black Mothering project.

JVN // Dang! That must have been more, like, term one Michelle, right? Like, was that, more, like, 2009? That was more, like—shit, fuck.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Right! You know, it, it was, she said it in a much nicer. It was nicer. It's more polite, it's more eloquent than that, but that's what it boiled down to, right? That, like, it wasn't just a form of parental neglect or—

JVN // It's, like, how do we keep our military strong if our kids are…

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Exactly. It's not a new statement. You know, Richard Carmona, surgeon general, post-9/11 said that the greatest threat to national security isn't terrorism. It's ob*sity, right. And it's the terror within. It's, like, this national thing. It's the same national propaganda around how fat people are gonna end militarism. But, like, honestly, you're welcome.

JVN // I have a paragraph that I want to say. But then could I ask for your, like, doctoral thesis on—-not a literal thesis but, like, your paragraph about what I'm about to say to that? Okay, isn't it more true that, like, if you want to be a soldier in the military, no matter what country you're from, then you would do that. But then there's going to be other people who are, like, "No, I don't want to do that," and everybody's like, all sorts of different shapes and sizes in every country from every place. So, like, I'm sure, like, whatever Carmona's biggest threats were as far as like, like, I'm sure they got, like, gorgeous, like, full figured people who are, like, "I'm not trying to go to the fucking military." Like, doesn't everyone just have, like, full figured gorgeous people and like, did I just say something accidentally colonial or, like, am I brainwashed or what?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Like, no. So, like, so the impetus behind them saying this, that it's a threat to national security. It's the fear that we will not have fit enough subjects to pass military qualifications. And so that's how it's a threat to national security. The longer version of Richard Carmona's speech, he was saying, like, essentially who will have to come in and replace the Americans. Right? So, like, underpinning that is a fear of the immigrant body that would have to come in and replace the carceral force, the military force in the United States.

JVN // It's so weird that the Bush administration would have had people that were—yeah.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, it was wedded to that, right? So, like you see race and fat phobia being wedded together in these ways to galvanize the public. You know, you guys

had that, the conversation earlier about white supremacist women and their investment in thinness and fitness. And, like, this is part of how it plays out, right? It's this fear that in losing thinness or, like, the promise of thinness, then a new subject or a new body has to come in and replace that.

JVN // Wow, they're afraid of that.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, they're afraid of that.

JVN // Wow. I did have more thoughts after that, but I think my filter worked. So that's exciting. So anyway, but so then why the fuck does the FDA still focus so much on calorie labeling over other metrics? Like should we switch to jewel, like, Jupiter, like, Venus de Milo? Like—[SINGING]

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Honestly! Like, you will never hear me say that we don't need an FDA, right, like, or regulatory forces because people will literally sell you snake oil. Like, they used to put plaster of Paris or cement and milk to make it creamier or whiter. And there was no regulation for that and babies would just die from drinking this substance. And so I would say that truly, if we were going to fight for changes in regulation, they should be about food grade, right? They should be about transparency in the manufacturing processes, all of these different various forms. But the piecemeal offering that we get instead from these, like, sort of FDA rule changes, especially around the capital that I think was solidified in, like, 2014, something like that. Is that, like, "Oh, by labeling or like forcing restaurants and companies to label foods with calories? We've done our jobs, right? We've informed the consumer. And the consumer can place a value on that food based on the calorie alone." And that is insufficient, right? Because it's reinforcing a relationship to the calorie that is again about good or bad foods, you know, based on a numerical measurement. Whereas, like, why are we not thinking about the quality of the food that we're eating and how that quality diminishes? Because we have these really colonial practices in terms of processing our food and sort of in terms of growing our food, in terms of, like, collecting and distributing our food.

JVN // Well, like a great example of that just, like, well, or tell me if you think this is a good example, but it's, like, I saw this McDonald's documentary which leads us into our next question in a minute. But, like, they were saying how, like, McDonald's French fries in the United States, they don't want any of the brown blotches on the potatoes. So they treat it with this thing that takes those brown blotches off, but then you can't handle them for, like, 30 days afterwards because they're, like, so toxic. And then, but then in the United Kingdom, the fries are, like, just, like, potatoes and salt. Not that the United Kingdom is, like, the end all be all. But they do have like a little bit less or like more transparency, like a little bit less shit. And as does the EU and, like, Canada, at least it seems like just like starting from those memes of like the American fruit loops and, like, the Canadian fruit loops and then you like, look at the ingredients and it's, like, "What is PEG 7410 or whatever the fuck," you know, it's, like—so McDonald's, so what's the deal with that case of Katherine Fettke versus McDonald's?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes. So this was a really interesting case because this is a period of time in which, like, what are known as ob*sity litigation cases were really coming for fast food franchises. And it was, like, in the wake of the tobacco industry being successfully sued for the detrimental health effects that they've caused for people. And so what happened with Katherine Fettke was, she was one of the only, her case was the one of the few cases that actually won against McDonald's. And there's something particular about the framing of that case, her involvement with it, and essentially, like, her particular embodiments that allowed her to be perceived by the public in a different way because everyone else who brought up a case against McDonald's, they—I don't know who McDonald's PR team was,

but they ruthlessly destroy these people, right? They came for their sense of intelligence. They made fun of their bodies, all kinds of things. That was just, like, made into a public spectacle. But when it came to Fettke, she sort of presented herself as this life coach who was a concerned citizen and wanted to eliminate trans fats from people's diets. And they made it very clear that she was not a McDonald's consumer herself, but simply, you know, a good Samaritan who was concerned for other people. And so there was something particular about the way that she was framed as, like, expert—you know, because she has certain certifications and qualifications, she was supported by the American Health Association—that allowed her to be read in a very different way from any of the other ob*sity litigation cases that were primarily brought forward by people of color. And so we're seeing here again, this figure of the white managerial expert woman who has a thin body being able to, you know, propose reforms, right? And it's really under the guise of benevolence.

JVN // Hm. So how does Ozempic—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Oh, yeah.

JVN // Rybelsus, like, all of the things? How does that fit into your understanding of the US diet culture?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // It makes me really sad when I think about Ozempic. I actually, you know, I haven't done a huge, like, deep research rabbit hole about Ozempic yet, and I actually just heard it from the grapevine. Like, a bunch of aunties and uncles were, like, "Hey, have you heard about this thing? Like, you know, you can get a prescription for it and it'll fix all your problems." And I was, like, "My problems? Uh… you know, like, ok." But they're, like, you know, "It'll fix all your problems." And so it's really interesting how I heard about Ozempic was, like, through gossip channels of, you know, the, like, the basic community and whatnot, but it is just the same diet pill that we have seen time and time again. It's the same, like, fantasy that they've sold to us time and time again. They didn't even bother to like, change the story or repackage it a little. They had the audacity to give us the same thing. It reminds me of the 1940s, 1950s, amphetamine craze, right? So basically, amphetamines were used in World War II as pills to help keep soldiers alert during battle. And one of the side effects they realized was it was an appetite suppressant. And so they began prescribing it, like, doctors began prescribing this to housewives. And so housewives would have these, like, they would literally be on speed all the time, you know? And then in the 1970s, you know, it was the fen fen craze. Right. And then I talk a little bit about it in my own article going to a weight loss clinic in my twenties where I would inject myself with a pregnancy hormone called HCG in order to, like, lose weight. And, you know, we had registered nurses and a doctor in this clinical setting, but I was really just on a 500 calorie starvation diet.

JVN // Oh, I heard about that thing! My clients used to do that in the early odds.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, exactly. So, like it, it follows a very specific triangulation of, like, you hear from word of mouth. It's an industry secret, like, a-not so-secret industry secret. There are Ozempic parties and, like, celebrity figures are using it, all of these different kinds of things, and it's also being prescribed clinically. But it's, like, it's the same story that happens time and time again, and it's really heartbreaking. And I, I just find myself feeling sad about it because I understand, I understand that the power of that pul,l like, that feeling of desperation, of hope of desire that this taking this thing, this medication that you know, might have the potential for organ failure or to cause death in some, you know, unforeseen way will fix the problem of your body, right? And so I understand why people are so drawn to it and why they feel the need to take it but at the same time, it's, like, we've been here before.

JVN // Mmmm! Slay. So today, calories are still seen as quote "fuel for our bodies." And you mentioned earlier that when the science of the calorie was kind of transposed from that Atwater guy onto, like, you know, thinking of that analogy of our body as like machines that need to be fueled. What do we lose by looking at our bodies as machines?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, I think that what we lose is, like, a sense of comfort with our appetite, right? And we talk, when I talk about appetite, I don't just mean, like, these hunger cues but, like, just the very basic desire to eat, right? Or to feel a sense of, okayness or neutrality around eating. And then when we see the body as simply a machine to be fueled by food, we sort of forget all the other reasons why we can eat, right? We can eat in ceremony, in ritual, we can eat um for cultural memory, we can eat, to be in community with each other, we can eat for pleasure. So all of these different orientations or relationships to food, eating in the body really sort of disappear, the possibilities of that disappear for us. And that feels like a huge loss.

JVN // So what do we gain if we start to change this mindset? Like, what you were saying, it's, like, community and, like joy and pleasure and, like, a guilt-free relationship with food?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes. Wouldn't that be amazing? Right? Like, wouldn't it be amazing to, you know, have a relationship to your body and food and eating and movement that isn't a carceral one, right? That isn't built on punishment or on shame or guilt. But one where you could find expansiveness and to really dream about that world, I think, is worthwhile.

JVN // What's possible in a world where the body isn't seen as a problem.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Honestly, let's dream about it, right? Like, let's dream about what would be possible? Like, if body sovereignty was a thing, if we achieved this moment of, like, thinking about getting free together, how much more time and energy would you have in your day, if you were not fixated on either losing weight, gaining weight, staying a particular shape or looking, you know, aesthetically pleasing, right? Like, how much psychic weight would that take off your shoulders? And I think for a lot of people it would be a huge relief.

JVN // Ow! But, yes. Yes. You know? Yes *and* processing.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah. It's, I mean, I think it's really challenging. It's really hard for me. Like, I've just recently gotten back into, like, movement and so I've been trying to find a way to do movement without thinking of it as exercise, because when I think about it as exercise, I immediately think back to my childhood and my youth and my young adulthood where it was, like, exercising is just to lose weight and you're doing this because you hate your, how you look and you hate how you feel. And now that I'm sort of, like, in my thirties and, like, coming to my body and approaching in a different way, I'm, like, I'm trying to find some joyful movement, right? I'm trying to find a different path to relating to my body, right? You know, I'm trying to figure out, like, what it means to cook for myself with a sense of, like, knowledge, compassion, and, you know, love.

JVN // Absolutely. Do you feel like you're pissed, ever? Just, like, want to punch someone in the face?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // All the time! All the time!

JVN // Well, if you or anyone you love feels like you want to punch someone in the face and you want to get into some joyful movement. Pickleball is giving me a lot of—

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Pickleball is it?

JVN // You would really think that I was Serena or Venus herself. Like, I got so embarrassed, like, playing this, like, beginner ass match with, like, and, and I'll be, like, when I win a point I'm, like, "Come on!" like, I love it so much. But, but it's also because I just, I do really like to be competitive but then when it's over, I don't feel bad about it because I don't, like, like, I have so much fun. Like, it's like, I think it is, like, joyful for me. Like I just, I sort of smack that fucking ball as hard as I fucking can.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Hm. I'm trying to do like, I'm trying to be, like, in my rich lady era. And I'm, like, "I'm taking Pilates, I'm on the reformer, I'm taking Pilates. I'm going at noon in the middle of the day." Like, just, just, like, really leaning into it, in all ways.

JVN // I love, I do think Pilates is, like, fun. I used to go to this one lady who did, like, a really like hip hoppy pilates. Like the music was really good to me, pop my pussy while I watch my inner core. You know what I'm saying?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // That's the one complaint I have about my Pilates studio. There is not any good music at mine.

JVN // No, it was, like, good ass pussy. Like, I was, like, it was confusing to not start turning over and, like, humping my yoga mat and like throwing ass in the air you know what I mean? Like, I was, like, I'm confused. Like, I just, shout out Julie Poplawski. She was amazing. So we want to learn more about you, Athia. It's our wrap up segment. So you were just, like, minding your own business at being, like, this fucking stun, gorge, like, young woman. And then you just like, how did you land on this area of research?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // You know, I landed on this area. It took me a while to get here. I think that for me, I'm trying to process these two really powerful forces in my life that, like, shaped my sense of politics and self and you know, just how I move through the world and these forces. This is where the war on terror and the war on ob*sity, right? These two sort of, like, state securitization, global securitization projects. They, you know, made me feel a sense of otherness. And they're not really talked about, you know, at the same time within, like, critical race circles or feminist theory circles in a way that felt reflective of my experiences of moving through the world, you know, as a fat femme of color. And so really coming to this research, I was trying to understand those two forces and then again, back to the questions of, like, how did we learn to sense what health looks like and sense what it feels like. And those questions really nagged at me for a very long time. And so my entry point in, you know, all of my research objects are all things that populate my own life, like, the calorie or powdered and skimmed milk or, like, you know, I, I write about specifically, like, the Asian American and diaspora relationship to food, eating, and the body. Like, how you could go over to your auntie's house and she makes you this beautiful feast and she's like, "Sit down, I love you, eat all this food and also you're getting so fat. Why are you getting so fat?" You know, and so like, how do you hold space, make sense of all of these different things. And as I started to think and research and, and you know, you know, sit in archives and you know, read other people's work. It, it led me into these really interesting stories.

JVN // Which leads me perfectly to my next question. So you mentioned earlier some of the documents that you consulted. But what, like, what are the documents and, like, archives that you consulted in your work? Because it's really expansive.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // I found myself reading a lot of, like, agricultural journals from the 1900s. I read, like, a lot of, like, agricultural bulletin boards for committee meetings and community meetings and the dairy industry. I find myself, like, reading a lot about, like, Operation White Revolution in India, which was their, like, dairy revolution. Like, I, I find myself in archives of, like, the US Department of agriculture and the FDA and just, like, the,

the, the archive is really expensive. And I also find myself, like, gravitating towards literary performance media, art. Like I look at mukbang content on youtube, which are the Korean eating videos right to really think about these figures of thin dainty East Asian women who are consuming these huge quantities of food. And like, what about that is so fascinating for us as well as, like, some really fantastic, like, literature and poetry and things like that.

Speaker 2: Oh my God, you are just, like, pulling from—she's giving historical, she's giving contemporary, she's giving you diverse, like, logs.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // She's a, she's a messy Gemini. What can I say? This is how a Gemini goes.

JVN // I love your researching Gemini ways. I love! How is researching US diet culture changed your relationship with, like, US diet culture?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // I think I'm a lot more patient with myself and it makes me even more committed to, like, trying to make the world a softer place um or like a soft place for others to land. And so I think the most changes that I've seen in myself is that, like, I can recognize that I study all of these, like, horrible things or like the history of these practices that I still engage in sometimes, right? Like, if there are days where I am hard on myself and, you know, I do something or I slip up, I, I allow myself to be gentle and be, like, "You're up against a lot." You know, we're moving through the world that is hostile towards our bodies. And so, like, obviously we're gonna internalize that, but we have to find ways to, you know, push back against it, and, and breathe and just be. So, I think that's one of the, the big lessons or it could just be because I'm in my thirties now.

JVN // Ugh, It's hard to tell,

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // It's hard to tell!

JVN // Wow, thirties, introspective. We're also gonna get kicked out for being genius and hot and, like, introspective or something. I mean, what you just said is like, what I hope people take from your work. But my next question, which is my first to ask is like, what do you hope people take from your work? A softer place to land? Because that's what I already found. I feel like, wow!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yes, a softer place to land, a softer place to land, a softer way to engage with your body. And to just be in your body,

JVN // Athia, what's next for you and your work? Where can we follow? Where can we stay obsessed with you at?

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // She's working on her book now, that's what's next for me. Next is the book project and I am not on social media as much anymore. Like, I will post, like, some academy type things on that website that shall not be named.

JVN // Yes, the artist formerly named as Twitter.

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Yeah, the artist formally named as Twitter. So like you could definitely reach out there but like send me an email. I'd love to hear from you all.

JVN // Oh my God, Athia! And also we can't wait for the book and we can't wait to support and to have you back on Curious Now. when it comes out, we love you so much. Thank you so much for coming on and sharing your time and your work and your beautiful spirit and your genius mind with us. I'm obsessed with you, Athia!

ATHIA N. CHOUDHURY // Thank you for giving me the space and the time and chatting with me. It was so lovely.