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The Biggest Loser: The Discursive Constitution of Fatness

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The Biggest Loser: The Discursive Constitution of Fatness

Located within a superficially depoliticized ‘more government’ predicated on the technocratic embedding of routines and institutions of neoliberal governance, reality television operates as a ‘cultural technology’ concerned with the conduct of conduct, or more specifically, with the calculated *direction of conduct* to shape behaviour to certain ends. Focused on physical fitness and weight loss, we focus on the globally successful reality tv format, *The Biggest Loser (TBL)*, as a highly politicised space that *educates* subjects and disciplines the non-compliant; part of a moral economy that differentiates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens. We read TBL as a powerful public pedagogy that circulates techniques and provides the platforms for a government of the self; a component in the neoliberal reinvention of ‘welfare’ that promotes choice, personal accountability and self-empowerment as ethics of citizenship while, at the same time, masking social forces that position people into the dejected borderlands of consumer capitalism. Contributing to the ‘biopedagogies’ of weight, *TBL* classifies the obese, overweight and physically unfit as personal moral failures, immoral and irresponsible citizens, socially, morally, and economically pathologised outsiders.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Reality television, Governance, Obesity, Abject

The Biggest Loser: The Discursive Constitution of Fatness

Know that by deciding to take charge of your health and lose weight, you're doing the right thing. Try and focus on what you're gaining- years of you life, more energy, and a sleeker look- instead of what you're missing out on. Losing is not about beating yourself down, but *lifting yourself up* (NBC, *The Biggest Loser* Website 2008, emphasis added).

Within this paper we explicate the powerful role played by reality television in the making and remaking of citizens (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b). Specifically, we focus on how the everyday practices of physical fitness and weight loss have become implicit within the technologies of self-governance. We do so through critical consideration of the globally successful, reality television, broadcast, *The Biggest Loser (TBL)*. *TBL* is, at the time of writing, entering into its twelfth series on NBC in the United States. With subtle local adaptations pointing to its glocal resonance (see Ritzer 2004), the format can be viewed in 22 media territories, including in 14 countries in the 'Arab World' version (*Ar Rabe'h ELAkabar*), India (*Biggest Loser Jeetega*), the Phillipines (*The Biggest Loser: Pinoy Edition*), Brazil (*Quem Perde Ganha*), the Netherlands (*De Afvallers*), Australia, the UK and Asia. While there are a number of differential formats, including *TBL* 'Military Wives' or *TBL* 'Couples', the basic menu is the same: 'unhealthy' contestants (which in the 'logic' of *TBL* means 'fat') are educated, trained and encouraged by 'expert' trainers and put through physical work-outs to lose weight and thereby transform their bodies and thus (again as the 'logic' of *TBL* goes) their health and their lives. In this paper then, following Ouellette and Hay (2008a/b), we explore *TBL* as a genre of reality television that operates as a 'cultural technology' concerned with the conduct of conduct, or more specifically, with the calculated *direction of conduct* to shape behaviour to certain desirable ends (Palmer 2003). We interrogate *TBL* as a highly politicised and contested space that educates subjects, disciplines the non-compliant, and becomes part of a moral economy that differentiates between 'good' and 'bad' citizens. We read *TBL* then as a source of powerful public pedagogies of "self and lifestyle transformation" (Ouellette & Hay 2008b: 471), that circulate techniques for

a government of the self—a component in the neoliberal reinvention of ‘welfare’ that promotes choice, personal accountability, consumerism, and, self-empowerment as ethics of citizenship while, at the same time, masking social forces (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b) that position people into the dejected borderlands of consumer capitalism. To locate *TBL*, we begin by addressing the conjunctural conditions that have determined the personalisation of health-care and the loss of the social. Building on this grounding, and somewhat reworking Peck and Tickell (2002), we locate reality television as one, arguably central, technology of governance through which new social subjectivities are being fashioned and fostered. From this juncture, we mobilise *TBL* as emblematic of reality media products—and indeed in relation to the variety of other media forms that that converge to form the *TBL* enterprise—that conduct the corpus towards particular ends. Our discussion then is concerned with the mediated discursive constitution of fatness; the biopedagogies of obesity that do little but pathologise anything other than the white, heterosexual, militarised, gendered, and, slender normalised, middle-class, consumer-citizen.

Neoliberalism, Poverty & Health

Albeit with differing degrees and localised intensities, neoliberalism has emerged as a ‘new planetary vulgate’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001) which has led to citizens in many ‘advanced’ Western nations having to contend with a massive retrenchment of social welfare sensibilities and programs (Giroux 2004a/b; 2005; McMurria 2008). Part of the ‘epochal shift’ away from the supposed ‘social mentality’ ideologies underpinning the role of the state (Rose 2000), a shift that saw the state relieved of its powers of obligation to answer for all society’s needs concerning order, health, security, and productivity, there ensued an aggressive diminution of state influence over major industries, public services, and, social welfare, in favour of an approach centred on enhancing capital accumulation by bolstering the scope and “logics” of the free market (Brenner & Theodore 2002b; Peck 2003; Peck & Tickell 2002; Sheller & Urry 2003).

With regard to institutionalized patterns of health inequality, a diversity of traditionally public health issues and concerns have become incorporated into the reach of the private sector, such as: disease prevention, health promotion, personal and public health, juvenile curfews,

medical services, day care, nutrition, substance abuse prevention, mental health and family counselling, teen pregnancy, services for the homeless, family abuse, improvement of infrastructures, and, economic revitalization (Andrews, Silk & Pitter 2008). Social and racial patterns of polarisation and postwar neglect (Hillier 2008; Squires & Kubrin 2005) contribute to these long established disparities in health and wellness (Dreier, Mollenkopf & Swanstrom 2001; Kington and Nickens 2001). With specific regard to obesity, social, economic and physical influences—the availability of grocery stores and fast food restaurants, transportation, racial and low-income community profile, perceptions of crime, advertisements for tobacco and alcohol in certain areas of cities—have all been purported to be of import in the creation and sustenance of more or less ‘obesogenic’ environments (Baker et. al. 2006; Hillier 2008). These social and racial patterns of neglect and polarization point to the silenced, yet far from absent, condition of ‘racial neoliberalism’ (Goldberg 2008). That is, social and health disparities are racialised disparities; while they may be displaced from formal mechanisms and regulation of government rule, there are explicit expressions of race and racism within the maintenance and indeed (public/private) responses to ill-health, urban poverty, and lack of access to say, healthy food. Perhaps this was most graphically demonstrated in the racially skewed death toll and images of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 (see Gibson 2006; also Denzin 2006; Molotch 2006). Indeed, one of the biggest ironies here is that most Americans learnt of such social health disparities from various media sources—the electronic news media’s frenetic coverage, Spike Lee’s excellent *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, or through the special ‘Katrina’ editions of reality TV show: *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* (see McMurria 2008). To adequately think through the relationships between such social and health disparities, neoliberalism and *The Biggest Loser* requires thinking through, in a theoretical sense, how cultural technologies offer the resources for the conduct of the self. To do so, we turn to the relationships between reality television and governmentality.

Real Governmentality

We are not alone in theoretically grounding the genre of reality television within this neoliberal conjunctural moment. Finding solace and instruction, we owe a debt, in particular to

the work of Laurie Ouellete and James Hay (2008a/b), Toby Miller (2007; 2008a/b), as well as to Gareth Palmer (2003). We draw inspiration from Foucault's conception of governmentality—the processes through which individuals shape and guide their own conduct (and that of others) and are instilled with a willing acquiescence to surveillance and self monitoring, and, in which capillary like institutions (such as the media) do the work of government agencies, including the courts, in encouraging a focus on issues of personal responsibility and self-discipline (Andrejevic 2004; Foucault 1991; Palmer 2003). As such, our theoretical grounding involves looking beyond the formal institutions of official government; we are emphasising the proliferation and diffusion of the everyday techniques through which individuals and populations are expected to reflect upon, work on, and organise their lives and themselves as an implicit condition of their citizenship (Ouellette & Hay 2008b). Techniques of governmentality circulate in a highly dispersed fashion by social and cultural intermediaries and the institutions (schools, social work, and the medical establishment) that authorise their expertise. This involves techniques, technologies and discourses that are constructed to render problems thinkable and hence governable, that conceptualize various populations to be subject to governance, that characterize the different spaces and technologies of government in, through, and around, which political agendas are operationalized and institutionalized (MacLeod, Raco & Ward 2003; Rose 1999; 2002). These initiatives stress the problems deemed appropriate to be governed, the sites within which these problems come to be defined, the diversity of authorities that have been involved in the attempts to address them, and the technical devices that aspire to produce certain outcomes in the conduct of the governed—devices that are, in many respect, far removed from the political apparatus as traditionally conceived (Rose 2000). As Peck & Tickell (2002, 390, emphasis added) eloquently surmise, these are “new technologies of government that fashion new institutions and modes of delivery within which new social subjectivities are being fostered; extensions of the logic of the marketplace that *socialise individualised subjects* and *discipline the noncompliant*.” Following Rose (1999; see also Miller 2007), we are talking here about an array of other practices for shaping identities and forms of life: advertising, marketing, the proliferation of goods, the

multiple stylizations of the act of purchasing, cinemas, videos, pop music, lifestyle magazines, television soap operas, advice programs, talk shows, and, reality television.

Television, along with other popular media, are an important—if much less examined—part of this mix in that they too have operated as technologies called upon to assist and shape citizens (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b). In this sense, and as part of an array of private sector interests capable of socialising subjects and disciplining the non-compliant, television operates as a ‘powerful public pedagogy’ (see Giroux 2003), an educator of sorts, or what Ouellette and Hay (2008a) term a ‘cultural technology’, in the production of good citizens. As Rose (1996, 58) put it, television is able to translate the “goals of authorities” into guidelines for enterprising living (Ouellette & Hay 2008).

Of specific significance, Toby Miller (2008a) highlights that the genre of reality TV is suffused with the deregulatory *nostra* of individual responsibility, avarice, possessive individualism, hyper-competitiveness, and, commodification, which are all played out in the domestic sphere rather than the public-world. Embroiled as a component of the ‘outsourcing’ and outreach through which the current stage of liberal government rationalises public welfare and security, reality television offers a cultivation of sorts, a space for putting things in order to ensure maximum productivity and the achievement of goals (Ouellette & Hay 2008a). That is, it provides *instruction* in the little, banal tasks of daily life link knowledge and skill to the administration of one’s household, family and self; reality entertainment facilitates the articulation of lifestyle governance and everyday regimes of self-care (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b). Acting as a kind of ‘meme’ (Redden 2008), the proliferation of the genre points to the changing relationship between television and social welfare, in which television viewers are moulded into active and healthy citizens—part of neoliberal ‘reinvention’ of government in capitalist democracies such as the US (Ouellette & Hay 2008b, 471).

Providing *education* in the better use of symbolic resources, citizens are ‘given’ the chance to achieve social recognition; whether that is in showing off a beach body, a home, or an obedient toddler or pet (Redden 2008). As such, and in a neoliberal conjuncture where civic *well-being* is commodified and tied to market imperatives, reality television aids in the production of a

privatised system of welfare, one that is significantly more aligned with a market logic than was the case in the previous ‘states of welfare’ (Ouellette & Hay 2008b: 476)ⁱ. The political rationality then of contemporary reality programming acts as a resource for achieving the changing demands of citizenship in our ‘national ordinary’ (Bonner 2005, in Lewis 2008): in our present moment “the impetus to facilitate, improve and makeover people’ health, happiness and success through television programming is tied to distinctly neoliberal reasoning about governance and social welfare” (Ouellette & Hay 2008b, 471).

By repeatedly distinguishing, defining and attributing moral value—middle class values at that (see Palmer 2003; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008)—to specific practices, reality television makes the schema of moral value apparent as it identifies people in need of transformation: predominantly working-class populations (Skeggs & Wood 2008). Within this context, cultural technologies such as television, which have always played an important role in the formation of idealised citizen subjects, becomes instrumental as resources of self-achievement in different and politically significant ways (Ouellette & Hay 2008a). In sum then, reality television, has emerged in a context of deregulation, welfare reform and other attempts to reinvent government as the quintessential technology of citizenship of our age—enacting experiments in governance and providing ‘civic laboratories’ for testing, refining and sharpening people’s abilities to conduct themselves (Ouellette & Hay 2008a).

As the proliferation of the genre itself may suggest, responsibility for self and family development and control on television is separated into its constituent parts (cleaning, caring, education, eating, exercising, manners) and subjected to surveillance and judged accordingly (Skeggs & Wood 2008). Indeed, the genre of reality television is itself derived of any number of oft-overlapping sub-genres. There are, for example, makeover / lifestyle formats (such as *Changing Rooms*), reality game formats (*Survivor*), celebrity formats (*I’m a celebrity get me out of here*), talent formats (*X-Factor*), clipshow formats (*When Animals Attack*), dating formats (*The Bachelor*), self-help formats (*Intervention* or *Supernanny*), docu-soaps (*Sorority Life*), reality sitcoms (*The Osbournes*), or court/crime formats (*Judge Judy* or *Cops*) (cf. Couldry 2004; Hill 2005; Nabi 2007; Ouellette & Murray 2004). Of course, the boundaries between these sub-genres are fluid and

programmes overlap such typologies, such that categorisation of programmes is difficult (Nabi 2007). Indeed, as Nabi (2007) has proposed, it might be more salient to look at the ‘qualities’ or themes inherent within reality programmes than the categories in which they might be placed; an insight we take on as we unpack *The Biggest Loser*.

The Social Currency of Slenderness: The Civic Conduction of Corporeal Corpulence

Reality television does not often venture into the territory of serious illness, yet, it isolates the travails of drinkers, smokers, junk food addicts, the overweight, the sedentary: those who can be seen as victims of their own lifestyle choices (Redden 2008)ⁱⁱ. Following those in disciplines such as medical geography and public health, it is important to take a critical and interdisciplinary approach to thinking about obesity lest we reify and legitimise the stigmatisation, medicalisation and labelling as deviant of some bodies, spaces and places (Evans 2006; Jutel 2005). Following Evans (2006), this does not mean a questioning of medical knowledge per se, but thinking through how the ideas about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and the association of guilt with some practices, are formed through, and rooted in, the discourse surrounding medical interpretations of obesity. In the following section then, as we address the mediated constitution of corpulence, we are referring to specific (re)presentations (the most pervasive and widely read representations) of fat bodies that reproduce ideas about (im)morality (Evans 2006; Longhurst 2005).

Previously, scholars such as Mosher (2001) and Sender and Sullivan (2008) have suggested that when larger people are portrayed on television, fat women are frequently figures of fun, occasionally villainesses, often ‘bad examples’ of people with no self control or low self esteem (take, for example, Maggie’s mother in the film *Million Dollar Baby*). Conversely, fat men tend to appear in situation comedies (*Drew Carey, The King of Queens*) in which the impotence of patriarchal power invests male fat with an effeminacy or ‘sensitivity’ against the dominant heterosexual masculine ideal (see also Greenberg et al. 2003; Himes & Thompson 2007). Despite the perversity of focussing on television—so castigated for both its ‘fatty’ commercial content and its role as a sedentary social technology (see e.g. Jenvey 2007)—our interests lie with

addressing how a programme that lauds physical activity discursively constitutes ill/health? Somewhat rearticulating Palmer (2003), how does reality television centred on weight loss, organise discourse that forms the subject-citizen?

NBC's *The Biggest Loser* 'allows' its contestants, as well as the viewing public, to 'take charge' of their health and lose weight. Via an established reality television series and comprehensive media convergence (see e.g. Dwyer 2010; Wessels 2011), individuals can attend boot camps, post diet blogs, attach pictures to *The Biggest Loser* gallery, learn recipes from the new *Biggest Loser* cookbook, listen to *The Biggest Loser* workout mixes, join the *Biggest Loser* club, 'like' the *Biggest Loser* on facebook, 'follow' the *Biggest Loser* on Twitter access the *Biggest Loser* meal plan, purchase from the *Biggest Loser* store, sign-up for the *Biggest Loser* weight loss League, stay at the *Biggest Loser* ranch and resort spa at Fitness Ridge, Utah, play the *Biggest Loser* on Wii or Nintendo DS consoles, subscribe to receive weight loss text alerts direct to a mobile phone, or download the *Biggest Loser* 'app' featuring a fitness tracker and healthy recipes. The show debuted on NBC in the United States,ⁱⁱⁱ recruiting male and female applicants—often from the lower middle classes (Sender & Sullivan 2008)—who 'desire' to lose weight. Personal trainers (Jillian Michaels [up to 2011], Bob Harper, and Kim Lyons) provide 'expertise' to resculpt and reshape the bodies of participants. In terms of viewing figures (it regularly attracts over 10 million viewers in the US, boosts ratings of follow-on shows, and has consistently delivered the desired 18-49 age group to NBC [see e.g. Gorman, 2009; Toff 2009]),^{iv} one can see the programme as a success; what else might one expect from a production team whose credits include *Ugly Betty*, *The Office*, *Masterchef*, *Beauty and the Geek*, *30 Days*, *Nashville Star* and *Shedding for the Wedding*. Indeed, its inveterate popularity is underscored by the near 1.3 million 'likes' on the official TBL facebook page and its 50,000 followers on Twitter. However, critics point to the dangers of rapid weight loss through calorie restriction, exercise and dehydration, the potential for injury (see e.g. <http://anti-thebiggestloser.org/>), not to mention the ways in which the programmes 'logic' that thin bodies are healthy bodies simplistically and reductively defines fat as the primary determinant of health and well-being (Evans, Rich, Davies & Allwood 2008; Rich 2011).

In the US version of the show, which forms the essence of our commentary^v, the contestants spend up to three months at a Southern California ranch where they eat, live and workout, before returning home to ‘finish’ losing weight (Sender & Sullivan 2008). The programme is highly structured, offering a narrative flow that fragments each episode into a series of distinct scenes (a structure repeated in every episode). The first scene of each episode starts by introducing the viewers to the contestants and giving them a heartfelt, emotive, recap on their background. The second segment centres on exercise sessions, meal times, and, weekly weight loss and physical challenges. The climactic conclusion—the money shot (Grindstaff 2002)—is the dramatic ‘weigh in’ where the weight loss of each contestant is revealed and the problems of the self are solved through a quick and simplistic solution (Sender & Sullivan 2008). Of course, all these narratives are left ‘hanging’ through the insertion of commercial breaks, another element that enhances the drama (and indeed marketisation) of each broadcast. This climax provides the conclusion to each week, offering a story telling element designed to engage the audience to feel a part of the experience (Gruneau et. al. 1988). The ‘internal composition’ of the show offers a definitive rhythm and facilitates the governance of ‘underlying messages’ (Gruneau et. al. 1988)—in this sense the cultural transmission of obesity discourse. *TBL* then presents individuals’ experiences and understandings of their embodied selves as fat, thin, underweight, overweight, obese or normal. It centres on ‘correcting’ the obesity ‘disease’ through structured, competitive weight loss achieved through dieting and exercise.

Biopedagogies of Fatness: “What have you done today to make yourself feel proud?”

Obesity is a complex pot pourri of science, morality and ideological assumptions; an embodied and situated experience as much as it is a biomedical condition (Herrick 2007). It is writ large on our bodies, a part of the intimate private sphere that has now been marshalled into public spaces “for the operation of power, using it to reinforce arguments of normalcy against the ruptures of social and cultural tensions” (Skeggs & Wood 2008, 559). *TBL* is emblematic of the individualisation of obesity discourse within the US, framing obesity as an issue that resides in

personal behaviour (Kim & Wills 2007). It suggests that individual choices, *wrong* choices more accurately, must be solved through *responsibility* and *learning* for the subject to become self-sufficient. Emphasis is placed on the contestant careers, lifestyles, aims, targets and previous experiences. Framed within a soundtrack announcing “*what have you done today to make yourself feel proud,*” the focal point of the narrative is based on how the individual will ‘get with the programme’ and lose the weight they have gained. Eschewing any mention of support (or indeed lack thereof) from health care services, or indeed any views the ‘contestants’ may have on the ‘obesity epidemic’, *TBL* individualises fatness. This approach is most visibly evident in the ‘work outs’ and training sessions that the contestants attended on a daily basis. The personal trainers situate all the blame on the individuals for being ‘obese’; the way out, the escape from this condition is a renewed focus on self and the need to take ‘100% responsibility.’ Insults, if not outright victimisation and humiliation (McRobbie 2004; also Bonner 2008), revolve around the exercise, presumably to motivate the contestant: ‘being fat is your fault’; ‘you are letting down your family.’ These *lipoliteracies*—the dominant cultural meanings attached to “fat” bodies in western societies (Graham 2005)—circulate within *TBL* around themes of inactivity, laziness, defiance, lack of control, moral failings, ill-health, unhappiness, food addiction, lack of willpower, inability to manage desire and lower than *normal* levels of intelligence (Crandall 1994; McMurria 2008; Murray 2008). Following Murray (2008), *TBL* conceives the fat body as a site of numerous discursive intersections, the effect of normative beauty standards, health, gendered (hetero)sexual appeal, self-authorship, moral fortitude, fear of excess, and addiction; roughly translated as a white, male, heterosexual and able-bodied: a cared for, thin body recognised as reflecting control, virtue and goodness (Bordo 1993; Evans 2006; Evans, Rich & Davies 2004; Rich & Evans, 2005). To be fat in *TBL* however is to conceive the individual as unfit and unhealthy, a moral failure (Hearn 2008)—being fat is of course the predetermined ‘condition’ that enables one to apply for the show in the first place. In *TBL*, unquestioned medical narratives bring these normative discourses and assumptions together under the ontological umbrella of the obesity epidemic (see Gard & Wright 2005). Thus, “anxieties about bodily difference are manifested as a moral panic: the threat this epidemic poses is constituted by medical narratives not simply as

endangering health but as fraying the very (moral) fabric of society” (Murray 2008, 9). In essence, and drawing on the Cartesian separation of mind and body, fat and obese bodies are conceptualised as unruly, bad, uncivilised, dangerous and in need of control: the result of inaction or complacency. *TBL* of course provides the fictive solution, abject (see Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008) bodies are, quite literally, put on trial to ascertain if they can be induced to become fully participant consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy (see e.g. McMurria 2008): empowered, employable, consuming citizens with ‘proper’ conduct, instrumental value, and, self worth (Redden 2008; Sender & Sullivan 2008). In this sense, *TBL* operates as part of what Rail (2009) terms the biopedagogies of obesity discourse that act to regulate life and bodily practices through a focus on controlling bodies to reduce obesity and protecting everyone from the ‘risks’ of obesity; a discourse that places individuals under constant surveillance and presses them towards monitoring themselves. As a discursive biopedagogy, *TBL* does little but pathologise and ascribe obesity as deviant (Rail 2009), yet perversely, offers the lucky contestant—and the viewer—the way out.

Public Pedagogies of Normalcy: “Do you have the willpower?”

TBL provides a ‘life intervention’ that circulates the techniques for a government of the obese self, a technology that operates as part of the very ethics of neoliberal citizenship: personal accountability and self empowerment (Ouellette & Hay 2008a). As viewers, and as the insecure other is massaged into the narrative, we get helpful hints about how to become productive, stable, culturally legible individuals (Hearn 2008; Sender & Sullivan 2008). *TBL* then is part of an overtly pedagogical process that positions some bodies as more equal than others (Evans 2006; Hearn 2008; Jutel 2005); it “diffuse[s] and amplify[ies] the government of everyday life, utilising the power of television (and its convergence with new media) to evaluate and guide the behaviours of ordinary people, and, more importantly, to teach us how to perform these techniques on ourselves” (Ouellette & Hay 2008b, 472). In saying ‘something’ about the reshaping of citizens bodies—a something concerned with the transformation of faltering, uneasy, anti-neoliberal citizens—there is, as Jameson (1981) reminds us, something left out. This

is the ‘unconscious of the text’, the silences, the ‘that which is not said’ (Johnson et. al. 2004). *TBL* neglects to offer any narrative on the health implications relating to intense work-outs, extreme dieting, mental or physical challenges. *TBL* does not deem itself ‘responsible’ or ‘accountable’ for informing the public on healthy living or how to reduce the occurrence of obesity; there is a lack of information on the ‘right’ foods to consume (although many of those most readily available in poorer neighbourhoods—the ‘wrong’ foods—are demonised in the programme), and, there is no narrative concerned with the health implications of obesity, or any of the classed and social dimensions associated with the epidemic. As Sender and Sullivan’s (2008) audience research on *TBL* has suggested, it is far more gratifying to see contestants’ sweat and tears than it is to see a lesson in how to gauge the number of calories in a burger. Building on Sender and Sullivan’s work on audience responses to *TBL*, we suggest that the programme enacts the reasoning that people who are floundering can and must be taught to develop and maximise their capacities for *normalcy*, happiness, mental stability and success rather than rely on a public safety net: the achievement of an “ethic of self-sufficient citizenship promoted by neoliberal regimes” (Ouellette & Hay 2008b, 472). Welfare is, quite simply, privatised (Redden 2008). Following Jones (2008), *TBL* then is panoptic—self-regulating, disciplining, normalising—part of the new formations of welfare that mask the very social forces that position these people (Ouellette & Hay 2008).

Responsibility then for obesity is firmly placed at the level of the individual; contestants are held accountable (too lazy, lacking willpower) for being obese and constantly reminded of this throughout the programme. Herein lies the winning neoliberal formula for the biggest losers. Obese bodies represent the failure of will in a culture in which self direction and choice are paramount; fatness is proof of and produces laziness, a lack of willpower and a failure of self-esteem (Sender & Sullivan 2008). The opening montage’s text challenges, “*Do You have the willpower?*” and each episode tests contestants’ will through the shows challenges (competitions of physical endurance) and its temptations (trials of psychological commitment). *TBL* provides a discursive space for *learning* balanced and ‘disciplined’ eating habits and for carrying out intense physical exercise regimes, at the same time, it tempts contestants with vast displays of decadent

food to test determination and willpower (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b). For example, the *TBL* formula *allows* contestants back into their domestic sphere where their choices and will are tested by the temptations of their own larders and lifestyles. As with other reality shows whose narratives are predicated on the pathologisation of inadequate abilities to make choices (Redden 2008), *TBL* offers a seductive, if not peccable, repast in the form of a vacation.

In the season which formed the focal point for this analysis, the contestants are taken to Jamaica for a week, the narrative centring on contestants 'will' to avoid the tempting food and drink on offer. Following Sender and Sullivan (2008, 580) this narrative strategy positions the ideal neoliberal citizen, governed by free will and consumer choice, in relation to the figure of the contestant/addict (as long as we are able to put aside the contradictions and problems with exercise addiction) unable to cope with the endless freedom on offer: "[t]he neoliberal moment that demands self-disciplined, self-directed, *willing* citizens both produces and requires their nemesis: the undisciplined, food-addicted, lazy fatty." In this sense, the discursive constitution of the healthy body politic and those who do not *properly belong* (Butler 1993; Zylinska 2004) operates as a form of ocular authoritarianism that renders even more visible—and thus subject to control and regulation—those bodies that are deemed or perceived to threaten normalized, consumerised, healthy bodies and social practices (see Silk & Andrews 2006; 2008).

The idealised, normalised citizen-subject in *TBL* is an 'entrepreneur of the self' given the exaggerated capacity afforded the 'correct' use of commodities in the improvement of individuals lives (Bonner 2008, Redden 2008). In this sense, in the process of making ones body anew, *TBL* offers a whole array of consumables and auto-critique in place of adequate social security (Miller 2008a). Consumption is transformed into a form of citizenship, options for living become bound with regimes of status values; the codes of propriety that are depicted as leading to personal betterment are largely applied to consumption (Miller 2008a/b; Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b; Redden 2008). In such a formulation, any notion of self-expertise is obscured; productive citizenship is instead formed through a belief in the 'norm' (Palmer 2003). This norm—the ways in which people come to think of themselves—is of course nourished by the desire for self-development and private self-empowerment, a desire that can be ensured through a combination

of the market, a regulated autonomy, and, expertise (Bonner 2008; Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b; Redden 2008; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Rose 1996; 1999). A certain amount of expertise can be gathered from *The Biggest Loser* club, through which members can gain diets and exercise routines. The Will Power Bash on the official NBC *Biggest Loser* website also provides the opportunity to smash hamburgers and pies and broccoli! A bad score in this online game is rewarded with a message telling the surfer to keep dieting and try again when in better shape. As Palmer (2003; 2004) proposed, this form of technological governmentality is dependent on experts (see also Rich 2011) in exercise, diet and nutrition. These are the new authorities that preach from the same neoliberal text about the keys to happiness and self-fulfilment—duties to the self. As Miller and Rose (1993, 75 in Palmer 2003) implied, programmes such as *TBL* rely “in crucial respects upon the intellectual technologies, practical activities and social authority associated with expertise . . . the self-regulating capacities of subjects, shaped and normalised through expertise, are key resources for governing in a liberal democratic way.” *TBL*’s ‘experts’ (Jillian Michaels, Bob Harper, and Kim Lyons) not only provide on screen ‘training’ in everyday life, they constitute winners as “beneficiaries of consumer advice about ‘improving practices’” (Bonner 2003, 106). Of course, as both Rose (1998) and Redden (2008) have suggested, such expert advice is exploited and enhanced in the new markets of health and welfare; professional lifestyle coaches germane to the task of resculpting bodies have an array of services for sale. Kim Lyons, for example, offers a twelve-week exercise programme for enhancing your life in her book, “*Your Body, Your Life*.” You could, if desired, also purchase her upcoming DVD exercise series or the all-natural line of health supplements and sweeteners. With a more ‘nutritional’ focus, Jillian Michaels offers a *30-day shred* instead of the 12-week approach. You could also take the “*Jillian Michaels Fitness Ultimatum 2009*” test available on the Nintendo Wii console. There is also an array of ‘official’ pedagogical devices, such as *TBL*’s *Cardio Max* DVD or the *Power Sculpt* DVD, as well as the range of *Biggest Winner* DVDs and console games. As a telling exemplar then in both the new formations of welfare and in old/new media convergence, these *TBL* products, fronted by ‘heroic’ professionals who deliver ignorant and ugly people from the dross of

everyday life, provide technologies of the self that can transcend what off-screen primary care professionals have been able to do for them (Miller 2008a).

Living Properly: Breaking Bodies

Depictions of the normalised (read consumerised) citizen are bound in *TBL* with the power relations inherent in the constitution of body size; particularly with regard to the assumptions about the relationship between class, race, gender, and, obesity (Evans 2006; Jutel 2005). Through the processes of normalising the body, *TBL* offers the pathway towards “living properly” (Bonner 2008, 549) in a neoliberal world. However, living properly involves consumption (of personal trainers, exercise regimes, ‘correct’ foods), and the positioning of middle class tastes (literally) lifestyles and values as normative. In this regard *TBL* acts to police and regulate the working classes while modifying class tastes and the humiliation of those evincing working or lower-middle class preferences and behaviours by those possessing middle or even upper middle-class social capital (Bonner 2008; McRobbie 2004; Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b; Lewis 2008a; Palmer 2003; 2004; Rich 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008). Indeed, the tips provided by experts and their range of commercial accoutrements offer strongly class inflected modes of guidance around questions of style, taste and social distinction (Palmer 2003). That such tastes, values and preferences may not be available—given the long established disparities in health and wellness of populations disadvantaged by class, race and social location—is of course, conveniently ignored.

Living ‘properly’ on *TBL* also means living like a man. The cast is equally split between men and women, yet, masculine values of hard work prevail; trainers emphasise the need for contestants to push beyond their perceived limits and to ‘workout like a man’ (Sender & Sullivan 2008). Working out like a man however is depicted, somewhat ironically, as ‘required’ to achieve what we could term a feminised *corporoeconomicus*—the correct or proper female body, invested from head to toe, from the surface of its skin to the gastrointestinal tract, with a middle class consumption ethic. In this sense, *TBL* further reconstitutes the ways in which women’s bodies are presented as being in constant need of monitoring, surveillance, disciplining and remodelling

(and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness (Gill 2007; Jones 2008; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008). Yet, and while we agree with Jones (2008) and McRobbie (2004) that gender binaries on reality television do appear as stricter and more regressive than other television genres, *TBL* offers a further dimension. Men are told to ‘work out like a man’, however, and often through humiliation of their obese bodies (especially with regard to heterosexual carnal performance), are ‘*broken*’ through recourse to the affective/feminine. Within the episodes ‘real’ men were often seen crying, offering emotive responses to trainers judgements, they were feminised and domesticated in certain respects (such as through cooking ‘correct’ foods or completing ‘feminine’ forms of physical activity) to ‘solve’ their aberrant body. While being inducted into middle-class, feminised dispositions (Redden 2008), these passages were often framed, however, in terms of the male being able to return to the domestic order, taking up responsibility as head of the traditional nuclear family, and, through reaffirmation of heterosexual sexual activity; a counter to the impotence and lack of sexual desire assigned to the obese body (cf. Miller 2008b).

Normalcy in *TBL* also can be seen as part of what Goldberg (2008) termed the architecture of neoliberal racism. Following Sender & Sullivan’s (2008) account of audience reaction to *TBL*, our observations suggested that although *TBL* was somewhat more racially diverse than much network television, the link between obesity and social, racial, and geographical patterns of polarisation and neglect were, quite literally, whitewashed. In this regard, and contributing to the privatisation and individualisation of racial politics, power is further disconnected from social obligation, making it progressively more difficult for disadvantaged groups to gain equality and justice (Giroux 2004b). Following McMurria (2008), *TBL* never identifies race as a factor for why families are struggling, obfuscating the very structures of racial discrimination that position them there in the first place and offering neoliberal solutions as being equally beneficial to all. Indeed, the show cites tolerance of obesity in black communities, suggesting such a cultural heritage must be overcome in order to save oneself: a reinstatement of implicitly white norms of size and appearance (Sender & Sullivan 2008). Somewhat reworking Giroux (2004a) then, *TBL*’s discursive power serves to reconstitute whiteness, blames those

subject others deemed less responsible for their bodies, offers a corporatised solution to their 'condition', and, eludes any form of social responsibility for improving their lifestyles. Othernesses, in this sense racial and ethnic difference, are treated as unremarkable contingencies of social life, an incidental occurrence in a televisual reality culture that has seemingly moved *beyond race* (Gilroy 2005; Sender & Sullivan 2008). *TBL* then offers an explicit expression of race, yet one that is silenced and not explicitly named. In this sense, race and racism is displaced from the formal mechanisms and regulation of government rule while all the time being embedded within particular public, private and corporatized structures, in which it is more ambivalent, ambiguous and difficult to identify (Goldberg 2008; 2010). In this regard, following Susan Giroux (2010), *TBL* acts as a cultural pedagogy that carries a powerful, if symbolic, sadism that materialises cruelly at key moments to impose order and control through the production of (demonized) subjects and provide the conditions and indeed rhetoric for the subsequent rationalization of their ill-treatment. These cultural pedagogies then form part of the very essence of neoliberal racism's architecture, logics and social relations, they act as a form of symbolic isolation (cf. Giroux 2010; Goldberg 2010) that separates and partitions based on notional distinction and pre-determined difference (Goldberg 2008).

The TBL Boot Camp: The Biopolitics of Militarisation

Giroux (2008) suggests that while both militarism and neoliberalism have a long history in the United States, the symbiotic relationship into which they have entered, and the way in which this authoritarian ideology has become normalized, constitute a distinct historical moment. The ever-expanding militarized neoliberal state, marked by the interdependence of finance capital and authoritarian order is a vast war machine that stresses military oriented measures over social programmes like health care, and as a 'culture of force', serves as a powerful pedagogical force that shapes our everyday lives and memories (Giroux 2004a; 2008; Newfield 2006). The synergies between neoliberalism and militarization are evident in a range of diverse institutions and organisations: increasing surveillance and control mechanisms in most institutions in society; schools with 'zero tolerance policies;' media broadcasts (*Jag, Army Wives*) and our leisure

activities—paintballing, computer games, attendance at a *NASCAR* event (see Silk, 2011). Moreover, and importantly for the current paper, the neoliberal militarization of everyday life is enmeshed within the genre of reality television; from *American Fighter Pilot* on CBS, *Boot Camp* and *Celebrity Boot Camp* on Fox, *The Last 10 Pounds Boot Camp* on the Slice Network, the BBC's *Bad Lads Army*, DVDs such as *Special Ops Fitness*, *Semper Fit: The Marine Corps Workout*, *NikkiFitness: Military Life Workout*, *Sergeant Ken Wiechert's Boot Camp Fitness Trilogy*, the various boot camp weeks on various versions of the *X Factor* or *American Idol* competitions, or, indeed, the boot camps for troubled or overweight teens on 'advice' programmes such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* or the *Jerry Springer Show*.

Unsurprisingly, *TBL* deploys the same narrative structure, even naming one of its patented workouts, *The Biggest Loser Boot Camp*. Subsequently, and doing little to dispel the gendered nature of neoliberal militarised citizenship, a special edition of the show was centred on the battle between military wives. The narrative is dispersed throughout episodes: contestants' behaviour is governed by what the trainers 'dictate'; fostering a sense of fear, they are marched in formation across the desert towards the waiting officers (trainers), informed not to speak out of turn or question anything the trainers commanded them to do; as in 'real boot camp', the contestants are led through physical torture by the experts, subject to stress and emotional bullying, which often induced emotive reaction. Broadcasts were structured around the 'battle' between teams, trainers emphasised the notions of 'sacrifice' and team 'spirit', discussion focused on gaining 'territory' and being 'warriors' during challenges and, trainers often used phrases such as 'who wants a beating' to scare contestants during work outs. Furthermore, and building on discussions of the place of mediated sport within the war on terror (see e.g. Hogan 2003; Falcous & Silk 2005; 2011), *TBL* utilises the 'evocative iconography' (Biltekoff 2007) of patriotism—the theme song by Heather Small 'Proud' provides the perfect slippage between individual self-responsibility and freedom. In this sense, *TBL* can be read as a powerful, militarised, and neoliberal form of public (bio)pedagogy, a normalising cultural technology (Ouellette & Hay 2008a/b) in the formation, shaping, and production of good consumer-citizens.

Coda: Media Convergence & Corporeal Constitution

The Biggest Loser—a site that provides us with a nexus of transformed bodies that are at once fleshy and digital, hybrid mediated bodies that exist on the screen and in the living world (Jones 2008)—promotes a neoliberal ethic that individualises and privatises obesity. It offers a vast number of new and old media resources, as well as cross-promotional materials and products, for viewers to ‘transform their bodies, health and lives.’ It thus serves as an emblematic and telling exemplar of media convergence with respect to the synergy and conglomeration in industrial practice, multi-platform promotion and storytelling and interactive opportunities for fan activity, participation and involvement (Wessels 2011). That is, TBL provides a synergized platform for old media (television) to embrace new media forms and thus extend the scope and reach of their products (Dwyer 2010). Importantly, as Dwyer (2010) points out, media convergence is also a new media ideology that facilitates the operation of the neoliberal market. This does not just impact upon ideas about say the inevitability of industry conglomeration and concentration, but acts as a form of governance; as actors utilize cultural technologies—such as *TBL’s* patented work-outs on the Wii or Nintendo DS consoles—they “*physically* train themselves in the practices required of a particular form of governance” (Wessels 2009 72, emphasis added). Following Rose (1999), these are the bodily techniques required to use new devices and the practices of the self around new technologies that are imbued with the shaping of conduct and the production of desired affects. As such, the ubiquity of TBL as a form of media convergence, provides interactions with certain cultural technologies—playing TBL on the Wii console, visiting Fitness Ridge, Utah, performing physical activity in the living room directed by a *TBL* expert’s DVD—that literally provide for *embodied physical practices* associated with specific forms of neoliberal subjectivity and citizenship (consumption) to be cultivated (Wessels 2011). Put differently, reality televisions rhetoric of neoliberal responsibility and self-fashioning intersects with interactive opportunities to put such *lessons into practice* (Ouellette & Hay 2008; Wessels, 2011). Further, these ‘lessons’ converge with advertising, for they require particular products that are deemed integral to the performance of good neoliberal citizenship (Wessels 2011). In this regard, following Emma Rich (2011), TBL operates as a powerful form of public pedagogy

through which ‘health’ concerns are known. Further, through the convergence of technologies and products, *TBL* becomes ubiquitous, operating as a surveillant assemblage (Haggerty & Ericson 2000, in Rich 2011) that promotes a new somatic body ontology predicated on the monitoring of bodily information (Monahan & Wall 2007; Rich 2011). That is, with Rich’s (2011) reading of reality media and obesity, we suggest we learn our bodies through the convergence of media technologies and thus monitor, manage, control, act, and reshape them through the cultivation of physical/technical practices in the production of complicit and productive neoliberal citizens. In this regard, media convergence and interactivity naturalizes the somatic monitoring and surveillance of the body and thus ultimately undermines democratic citizenship. That is, following Andrejevic (2007), neoliberal notions of responsibility mandate that we ‘work’ on our bodies, through engagement with participatory media, to produce conforming, militarized and individualized corporeal neoliberal subjects. Thus, *TBL* operates as a public pedagogy par excellence in authoritarian statecraft; a new configuration based on social and racial containment, the privatization of social reproduction, the normalization of economic insecurity, pre-emptive crime control and the death of the social (Giroux 2005; Peck 2003). The programme *blames* individuals for being ‘obese’, emphasising the individual responsibility and will power required to avoid or reduce this ‘epidemic’ (Gard & Wright 2005). As part of the replacement of an ethic of reciprocity and mutual social responsibility for areas such as healthcare, a market-driven ethic and an ethic of individualism act—through cultural technologies such as *TBL*—as a powerful pedagogical force that exercises a form of control over how people interpret themselves and their relationship to others in society (Giroux 2001b; 2004b). *TBL* acts as a powerful cultural technology that “promote[s] individual and institutional conduct that is consistent with government objectives” (Raco & Imrie 2000: 2191). Quite literally, in *TBL* and other forms of reality programming, the dysfunctional subject is reoriented; transformation acting to shape a person with a lifestyle ‘fit’ for social purpose (Redden 2008).

TBL then, as an appetizing appurtenant to the market-oriented dictate of the ascendant neoliberal order, forms part of a discursive armoury that produces, assembles, interpellates or aligns moral, sober, responsible and obedient subjects with civility, social solidarity, and social

responsibility (Rose 1999). Furthermore, it marks off, it marginalizes and excludes, the abject other, from this ‘healthy body politic.’ *TBL* then acts to sustain the boundary between the *bodies proper* that fulfil the ‘obligations’ of participatory democratic citizenship (in this sense through appropriate rates and acts of fitness consumption) and those constitutive socially, morally, and economically pathologized ‘outsiders’: the public pollutants. Thus, and fully complicit with civic regimes centred less on the public good and more on bolstering and extending the logics of the market, pernicious consumer capitalist discourse (such as *TBL*) names, shames and makes discernable those without the moral fortitude to live a ‘normal’ neoliberal life. The obese are thus discursively constituted as a ‘problem’ to be managed, an immoral non-productive citizen discursively and visually constituted as ‘other’—subject to control, and, exclusion. *TBL* then divisions blame and responsibility for an ‘unhealthy’ body politic, classifies the obese, overweight and physically unfit as personal moral failures (McMurria 2008), whilst simultaneously denoting the expansion and intensification of the ‘normal’, idealised, aspired to, consumerised body—the *corproeconomicus*—within the cultural realm. Acting as a justification for the systematic evisceration of welfare, and indeed, those bodies that do not count, *TBL* provides the obese quite literally, with the digital currency and practices with which they should conduct their everyday lives. Failure to conform, to conduct oneself in line with this menu, positions one as abject, personally responsible for a body that does not *belong* to a consumerised neoliberal and militarised society.

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Notes

ⁱ See Corner (2004) for complementary reasons for televisions' turn towards the 'everyday terms of living' (deregulated market and fragmented audience, the relatively inexpensive production of the genre, the 'free; non-unionised labour (in the form of contestants).

ⁱⁱ Of course, obesity is a serious and increasingly prevalent condition, a costly and deadly 'epidemic', and regarded as one of the major public health problems in the world (e.g. Gard & Wright, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ There are differences in the discursive meanings within the localised formatting of TBL. Lewis (2008a) for example points to the Australian contexts where the hosts are 'resolutely average', and the focus is on losing weight for family and community. While we contend that there is a global currency of certain types of consumerist and neoliberal models of selfhood and citizenship (Lewis, 2008a), our comments within this paper only extend to the US version. A comparison between localised inflections of TBL is a project that we are seeking to develop.

^{iv} There does appear to be a slight drop off in numbers in 2011, with the TBL Couples format delivering slightly smaller audiences than the regular format.

^v Our analysis focussed on series 4 of the US version of the show. Our 'reading' of this specific series of TBL was based on Johnson et. als (2004) approach to reading texts for dominance. Our observations are formed from this analysis and supplemented by our wider reading of the show in both the US and the UK.