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"The Terror Within:" Neoliberalism and the Rhetoric of the Obesity Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on specific discourses within the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” that position the fat body as a threat to U.S. military power and national identity. Since 9/11, there has been a growing rhetoric that frames obesity as a threat to national security that is weakening U.S. military forces and straining the U.S. economy through increased health care costs and lower worker productivity. Drawing on research from rhetorical studies, transnational feminism, and disability studies that highlight the way that discourses surrounding the body are used to limit access to citizenship and rhetorical agency, this research analyzes the material and discursive effects of nationalist rhetorics of obesity.

The project begins with an analysis of John F. Kennedy’s 1960 article “The Soft American,” which worried that declining rates of fitness in the U.S. would lead to defeat in the Cold War and ultimately led to the development of the Presidential Fitness Program. This analysis of Kennedy works to contextualize the analysis of a variety of specific contemporary sites where a nationalist rhetoric of obesity emerges, including the work of the lobbying organization “Mission: Readiness,” the Centers for Disease Control-funded documentary series *Weight of the Nation*, and the First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign. The analysis of these sites shows that a nationalist rhetoric of obesity has developed as a response to the contradictions of neoliberalism, deflecting attention from the failures of the neoliberal state and encouraging citizen-consumers to buy their way to a thinner body. A nationalist rhetoric of obesity further normalizes the body and creates thinness as a condition of citizenship, ultimately reinforcing and deepening existing marginalizations based on race, gender, class, and ability.

Through its methodology, this dissertation project builds on rhetorical work in transnational feminism like that being done by Rebecca Dingo, Jennifer Wingard, and Eileen

Schell. The project also draws on the work of rhetorical disability scholars like Jay Dolmage, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, and Margaret Price as it highlights the way discourses surrounding the body are used to limit access to citizenship and to rhetorical agency. In addition to blending transnational feminist and disability theory as critical frameworks, this project works to bring rhetorical studies into conversation with the relatively new field of fat studies—a field that challenges the medicalization of fat and deconstructs the stigma surrounding fatness in order to promote more just body politics.

“THE TERROR WITHIN:” NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RHETORIC OF THE OBESITY
CRISIS

by

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Dissertation

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INTRODUCTION

THE RHETORIC OF THE WAR AGAINST OBESITY

“[S]tudying any culture’s attitudes and arguments about the body always connects us intimately with attitudes and arguments about rhetorical possibility. That is, to care about the body is to care about how we make meaning.” -Jay Dolmage (“Octalog III: The Politics of Historiography in 2010,” 114)

“American culture is engaged in a pervasive witch hunt targeting fatness and fat people (a project that is being rapidly exported worldwide). Although this urge to eradicate fat people continues, it is not only challenging to be fat, but also especially challenging to question any aspect of the witch hunt on fat people [...]. Whenever members of a society have recourse to only one opinion on a basic human experience, that is precisely the discourse and the experience that should attract intellectual curiosity.” -Marilyn Wann (Forward to *The Fat Studies Reader*, x)

During a 2003 National Public Radio interview, then Surgeon General Richard Carmona identified obesity as the greatest threat facing the US. At the time of the interview, less than two years had elapsed since the September 11th terrorist attacks and the US had since invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq under the justification of fighting continuing terrorist threats. Despite these ongoing military campaigns, and despite persistent fear of further attacks on the US, Carmona told NPR, “I’ve come to refer to [obesity] as the terror within because it’s every bit as devastating as terrorism.” Like so much post-9/11 rhetoric, Carmona’s framing of fat as the “terror within” clearly plays on and deepens public fears and anxieties over the specter of terrorist threats. But it also implies that the bodies of citizens either are or have the potential to become a grave threat to the strength and security of the nation.

In the years following Carmona’s NPR interview, the idea that obesity rates present a serious danger to the US as a nation has gained speed. In 2010, for example, a group of retired military personnel called “Mission: Readiness” began advocating for reforms to school lunch programs—reforms they argued were necessary in order to curb childhood obesity rates so that

more of America's youth would meet the physical requirement for military service. Earlier in the same year, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the "Let's Move" campaign, a campaign dedicated to increasing education about exercise and nutrition while also advocating reforms to national nutritional standards and public school lunch programs. While Obama's campaign does not voice "Mission: Readiness's" explicit concern for the future of national defense, the "Let's Move" campaign has been referred to again and again in the news media as "Michelle Obama's War on Childhood Obesity." News sources across the US now make reference to the "war on obesity" on a daily basis, working to pull readers in by drawing on the militarized, panic-stricken language of headlines like "Cash as Weapon in the War Against Obesity,"¹ "New Tactic in War on Obesity: Attack Portion Size,"² and "No Twinkies Please, We're Dying."³

The "battle of the bulge" has been a common phrase thrown around dieting discourses for a long time. But the current rhetoric of the "war on obesity" marks a shift from a focus on the individual struggle to slim down to a desired weight to a national struggle to normalize and discipline the citizen body as a way of strengthening the collective whole. In the rhetoric of the "war on obesity," nationalist and militarized language is not being employed as a purely convenient metaphor—it's being used to posit the size and health of the individual citizen body as a threat to the national identity and global standing of the US. In this dissertation, I offer a rhetorical analysis of a variety of sites where a militarized and nationalist rhetoric of the "obesity crisis" emerges in order to better understand the diverse purposes it serves, the variety of cultural and political values with which it is embedded, and the lived consequences of its circulation.

In her book *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, Julie Guthman argues that while "[i]t is incontrovertible that Americans on average have gotten bigger

¹ David Maris. *Forbes* 7 May 2012. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

² Brian Vastag. *The Washington Post* 2 June 2012. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

³ Mark Morford. *SFGate* 20 Nov. 2012. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

over the past thirty years,” there is actually very little that is truly understood about what the increase in average weight means (24).⁴ We do not, Guthman believes, have a firm sense of whether people are now more prone to illness or whether they will actually experience lower mortality rates. We do not know the precise environmental factors at play in the increased average weight of Americans and thus cannot really determine what might be the best intervention or even whether wide-scale intervention is necessary. Guthman goes on to argue that the “obesity epidemic” is “an artifact of particular measures, statistical conventions, epidemiological associations, and rhetorical moves” that ultimately limit the way the issue of weight is conceptualized and represented (25). In other words, Guthman argues that the “obesity epidemic” as we have come to commonly understand it in American culture is shaped by research and writing that all too often assumes more than it proves and is powerfully shaped by existing biases against fat bodies.

Despite all that is unknown about the meaning and potential effects of an increase in average weights, the “obesity epidemic” produces a discourse about fatness that speaks with great certainty while reinforcing existing cultural ideas about the undesirability of the fat body. The certainty of this rhetoric around the obesity crisis has been used increasingly over the past decade and a half to put forward a very specific narrative about the threat obesity poses to the U.S. More specifically, the narrative of the “war on obesity” tells us:

- Obesity is dangerous in military terms. We are, or are certain to become, too sick and too unfit to defend ourselves against foreign enemies who would like to usurp our position as world leaders and undermine our freedoms.
- Obesity threatens our position within a globalized economy. Obesity is making us inefficient and is negatively affecting our ability to produce. Obesity is costing us billions

⁴ The general estimate is that the average weight of Americans has increased by about twenty pounds since 1970.

of dollars in lost productivity and health care costs, putting undue strain on an already tenuous economy.

- Obesity threatens the morality of U.S. culture. The U.S. is supposed to function “as a city upon a hill,” but we have become gluttonous and lazy. We must discipline our bodies in order to right our moral standing.
- We can defeat the enemy obesity through sheer individual will. If the enemy is everywhere, so too is the frontline. Everyone can, and must, participate in the fight—we must monitor individual behaviors and use our buying power as consumers to seek out healthier foods for ourselves and our families. By participating in this war, we show that we are not only moral and loyal citizens, but that we are worthy of participating in the cultural and political life of the nation.

In this dissertation, I unpack many of these claims in detail and highlight the rhetorical and material implications entailed in this narrative of obesity as a national crisis. It is important that we pay attention to the consequences of this narrative because the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis is working to organize citizen bodies in ways that facilitate particular power dynamics.

One way in which the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis works to organize and discipline citizen bodies is through the production of fear. In her article, “The Terror Within: Obesity in Post-9/11 U.S. Life,” Charlotte Biltekoff argues that the war against obesity and the war against terror converged in the years following 9/11 to produce a heightened sense of threat in the U.S., collapsing fear of a dangerous Other that exists beyond national borders with a deepening fear of unseen threats at home. The production of fear and anxiety through a crisis-laden rhetoric works in a post-9/11 era to normalize the militarization of daily life while also

encouraging citizens to discipline their bodies through diet and exercise as a show of patriotism and civic pride. By positioning obesity as a grave threat to the nation, the crisis rhetoric surrounding obesity also works to create a “by whatever means necessary” attitude towards nullifying the threat posed by fatness. The result is a willingness on the part of individual citizens to allow greater surveillance and restriction of individual bodies, such as school programs that monitor student BMIs or corporate programs that track employee weight and health indicators.

But even more than drawing on and reinforcing the circulation of anxiety as a vehicle for disciplining bodies, the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis tells us a story about who we are as a nation and defines national borders. In other words, as we “war on obesity,” we construct a particular image of ourselves as U.S. citizens and, in the process, we define who belongs as part of our citizen body, we decide what makes us strong as a collective, and we determine who among us is good and who among us poses a threat. The image we construct through the narrative lessons of the “war on obesity” does not develop in isolation, but amid the specificities of our current economic and political context. As we construct ourselves in this moment, we work to make sense of ever-growing anxieties about ongoing military campaigns in the Middle East, about the troubled U.S. economy, about the changing class and racial makeup of the country, and about the position the U.S. occupies in the global market.

At the same time the rhetoric of the “war on obesity” attempts to make sense of ongoing political, economic, and social anxieties, it constructs its lessons about what it means to be an American citizen within the scope of the neoliberal logic currently dominating economic and political thought. As Wendy Brown explains in “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” while we frequently think of neoliberalism as a matter of economic policy, neoliberalism entails its own social ideology—an ideology marked by a focus on individual

choice rather than systemic or institutional responsibility. That is, in a context dominated by neoliberal values, the means for altering social or cultural circumstances are largely imagined as a matter of getting individuals to voluntarily change individual behaviors. The neoliberal emphasis on choice and personal responsibility works to obscure larger systemic issues that might be at the root of social issues.

In the context of current discussions of the “obesity crisis,” neoliberal values might emphasize education-based initiatives founded on the assumption that teaching individual family units to make better choices regarding food, exercise, and preventative health care would make the biggest difference towards intervening in rising rates of obesity and chronic disease. While these educational initiatives certainly have a place, they often overlook the fact that the circumstances of poverty, the corporatization and consolidation of the agriculture/food industry, and the effects of systemic racism and classism make some “choices” completely out of reach for many communities. Encouraging preventative health care or visits with nutritionists is all well and good, but these sorts of suggestions have severely limited reach when these services are not universally accessible. And, of course, access to services like these is made all the more tenuous by an ever-deepening wealth gap.

The social ideology of neoliberalism heightens a focus on individual choices by moralizing the results of those “choices.” We encounter this moralizing discourse, for instance, when the argument is made that those who lack access to affordable, quality healthcare in the U.S. are simply not working hard enough to properly provide for themselves and their families. Again, these kinds of arguments ignore systemic factors that limit access to health care, but they also position lack of access as a personal, moral failure. In the context of the “obesity crisis,” exceeding the accepted “normal” weight range is frequently constructed as a personal moral

failing, as fat people are assumed to be gluttonous, lazy, unclean, uncaring, and lacking in self-control. This moralization is compounded by historic stigmas associated with race, gender, class, and ability, such that the rhetoric of obesity works to justify existing marginalizations, reducing the material effects of structural inequities to a failure of personal morals and will.

In this dissertation I ultimately argue that the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis effectively circumscribes citizenship, positing an ideal of fit citizenship wherein thinness is seen as a condition of citizenship. By constructing fat bodies as contrary to the ideals of citizenship and as betraying or undermining the values of the nation, fit citizenship encourages citizens to discipline their bodies according to normative ideals of thinness and fitness in order to maintain the privileges of full citizenship. Meanwhile, fit citizenship deepens and justifies the marginalization of non-normative bodies. A neoliberal emphasis on moralized personal choice is used to distinguish “good” citizen bodies from “bad” while deflecting attention away from the economic and political systems of power that manifest in the body. In the chapters that follow, I analyze specific sites where the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis emerges in order to better trace the ways in which this rhetoric circumscribes citizenship to the detriment of already marginalized bodies. Chapter One, which explores arguments made by John F. Kennedy about the fitness of U.S. citizens in 1960, expands on the concept of fit citizenship while the later chapters explore some of the specific ways in which contemporary rhetorics of obesity build on and develop problematic ideals of fit citizenship.

Transnational Feminist Rhetorics and the Rhetorics of the Body

In this project, I approach sites that engage rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis through the frame of a transnational feminist rhetorical analytic. In the introduction to a special issue of *College English* focused on transnational feminism, Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell argue, "A

transnational rhetorical perspective calls into question the ways in which intercultural communication practices are always already conditioned by complex legacies and histories of capital, power, nationalist discourses, and global interconnectivities. Moreover, a transnational perspective allows us to examine networks and relations across cultural groups" (465). A transnational feminist focus on networks and circulations of power allows feminists to account for power in a way that is not one-dimensional (that is, in a way that is able to account for more than just gender) and offers more latitude for considering shifting landscapes of privilege and constraint within the contexts of neoliberalism and globalized economies.

In *Networking Arguments*, Rebecca Dingo draws on the transnational feminist emphasis on networks, as well as on previous work in rhetoric on the importance of circulation (Trimbur and Edbauer), to encourage feminist rhetoricians to expand their work beyond analyses of a static moment. Dingo instead advocates for a network model for thinking through transnational power relationships that traces how rhetorics travel across various borders and how meanings shift as they circulate. This network model works to capture a series of important linkages (economic, political, historical, etc.) through which rhetorics might travel and reminds us that power is not equally distributed through these linkages, but is instead concentrated in certain areas. This network model, which understands localized arguments as connected with larger global contexts, encourages us to rethink concepts like rhetorical agency and audience and allows us to perform a kind of analysis that shows links between seemingly disparate local and global contexts.

While Dingo argues for the network model as a transnational feminist rhetorical *analytic*, she also argues that this analytic can form a transnational feminist research methodology. As Dingo explains:

To write networked arguments ultimately means connecting the micro and macro by situating writing practices within far-reaching economic and political systems and by drawing connections between vectors of power: state and supranational power, rhetorical representations, history, class relations, and sexual, gendered, raced, and ethnic identity.

Networking arguments is thus not just an analytic but also a material practice.

Networking arguments can result in writing projects that influence how, for example, policy makers understand that what appears to be the local situations of particular women are actually due to global economic changes. (148)

Dingo argues that researchers need to focus on writing networked arguments—that is, arguments that actively work to connect the “micro” of a specific text with the “macro” by showing how a given text relates to larger economic, cultural, historical, and political contexts. As a methodology, networking arguments brings the insights of transnational feminism to rhetoric, pushing researchers to think of rhetoric in terms of gendered relationships and circulations rather than in terms of the objects of research.

The rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” is one built on long-standing bodily stigmas and an ideology of deep individualism. At its worst, the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” moralizes fat as a personal failure rooted in sloth and gluttony; at its best, it maintains that fatness is the result of poor choices on the parts of individuals who can (and should) be educated to make better choices that will keep them thin. Deep-seated fat stigma and a culture of hyper-individualism lead to overly simplistic formulations of obesity as a crisis, confusing larger understandings of health and food and enabling short-sighted and potentially harmful interventions. As a methodology that emphasizes understanding the “micro” of localized situations as an integral part of the “macro” of larger political and economic contexts, networking arguments allows us to step

outside the individualized and moralized terms of debate established for talking about issues of body size and begin to understand the situation systemically. Networking arguments allows us to understand the body as a significant node in the global circulation of economic and political power. In other words, networking arguments helps us understand that the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” does not merely coincide with neoliberalism, but is very much a part of the US’s neoliberal project. An analysis that allows for understanding the normalization of body size as part of a larger neoliberal project is important so that, rather than accepting the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” on its own terms, we can begin to uncover how certain political and economic interests are served by this rhetoric and begin to develop better ways of talking about health, the food system, and bodies.

This project depends in large part on the foundation of scholarly work done on the rhetoric of the body—work done largely by scholars of feminist and disability rhetorics. While their specific sites of research are diverse, rhetoric scholars interested in the body share the belief that all rhetoric is embodied, both in the sense that all rhetoric issues forth from a particular body and in the sense that rhetoric has lived consequences. In his statement for the third Octalog, Jay Dolmage argues that “we should see rhetoric as the circulation of discourse through the body” (115), an argument that effectively defines the body as a central concern for rhetoric. This project takes Dolmage’s definition as a starting point and engages the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” with the assumption that the way a culture talks about the body reveals something significant about that culture’s guiding values and beliefs. As I draw on scholarship on the rhetoric of the body as a critical foundation for this project, there are three larger arguments about the rhetorical significance of the body that are particularly salient.

The Body as a Rhetorical Construction

First, the classic Cartesian split of modern philosophy has not only argued that mind and body are absolutely separate, but in so doing has also posited the body as a fixed object in contrast to the assumed transcendence of the mind. This vision of the body as a static thing has been compounded by theories that treat the biological as both determined and universal. Scholars in rhetoric have taken issue with these overly simplistic formulations of the body to argue that the body is neither static nor determined, but is instead a rhetorical construction. In his article “Disabled Upon Arrival,” Jay Dolmage explains that the body as a rhetorical construction is similar to the idea of a socially constructed body in the way it departs from a view of biological determination. However, rather than focusing on the product of this construction, the body as a rhetorical construction pushes us to identify discrete material and discursive processes through which we come to understand (and subsequently categorize, treat, etc.) bodies. To think of the body as a rhetorical construction, then, encourages us to go beyond acknowledging that fatness is stigmatized and to instead focus on discrete moments where and why the fat body is made a problem.

The model of rhetorical construction that Dolmage describes is important because it reminds us that the body is constantly in a state of becoming, being made and remade continually. Thus, we cannot take the way that we understand the body for granted as simply the way things are or as a product of past thinking. Instead, we need to understand the position of the body as a reflection of contemporary social, political, and economic values. The model of rhetorical construction is likewise important because identifying specific discursive and material processes through which the body is constructed in particular ways, we are also identifying specific practices in which we can potentially intervene. Building on the model of the body as a rhetorical construction, the various chapters in this dissertation will focus on specific moments

where the fat body is being constructed as a national problem in order to uncover the neoliberal values and policies guiding these constructions and to begin to imagine more productive interventions into these debates.

Normalization and Rhetorical Fitness

Second, feminist and disability scholars have worked to show that the body functions as a site through which power is continually negotiated. We can see this negotiation of power happening through the construction of norms. As the term is understood in disability studies, norms are used to construct an idealized body assumed to be a universal good or universal standard from which anything different deviates. This idealized body is used as a measure for categorizing bodies as “normal” or “abnormal.” As Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue in “Refiguring Rhetorica,” “These categories [of normal and abnormal] are useful fictions that mark unwanted elements while reinforcing the hegemony of the dominant group” (24). In other words, although we may take the normative body for granted as the standard, the criteria by which we categorize bodies as “normal” or “deviant” are culturally constructed and continually in flux. To be labeled as “abnormal” or “deviant” is to have one’s body simultaneously highlighted as deficient and to be reminded of the assumed “rightness” of the normative body.

These norms are used to narrow the way that we think about the rhetorical landscape. As Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson argue, the idealized, normative body is often taken for granted as the ideal rhetor such that those who deviate from the normative body are seen as rhetorically deficient or as altogether lacking in rhetorical ability. Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson use the term “rhetorical fitness” to refer to the traditionally normative standards by which a speaker or writer is assumed an authoritative, rhetorical agent. Access to rhetorical agency is crucial to citizenship since defining who is a “fit rhetor” functionally defines who is seen as being fit to

engage in the responsibilities of civic life. As it engages with the nationalist and militaristic rhetoric of the “war on obesity,” this project argues that body size has come to play an increasingly important role in the definition of the “fit” rhetor/citizen.

Medicalization and Pathologizing Bodies

Third, and of course related to the second, the way that we talk about the body has significant material effects. Mary Lay illustrates this in her work when she talks about how scientific discourses about female reproduction influence the treatment of women’s bodies and how they also work to exclude models that involve alternative kinds of treatments. This overlaps with discussions of the effects of medicalization in disability studies. Medicalization refers to discourses where bodily phenomenon are authoritatively cast in the language of medical discourse—a casting that has the dual effect of pathologizing bodies and of presenting a particular view of a body in a language granted the status of the objective and universal. As Dolmage argues, the language of medicine “spills out” into everyday life and disseminates knowledge about the body that is taken for granted as authoritative or that is unquestioningly granted the status of truth.

Medicalized discourses have historically worked to cast any bodily difference from the white, male, thin, able ideal as pathological so that rather than being seen as natural, difference becomes a defect to be cured, fixed, or otherwise eliminated. Treating difference as a sickness or a pathological deviation is then used as an argument for why particular individuals are not entirely in control of their faculties or used to relegate people to the power imbalance of a patient-caretaker relationship. In short, medicalization functions as a powerful means of making difference grounds for being seen as rhetorically “unfit,” thus reinforcing norms and limiting political citizenship. At the same time, the privileged status granted to medical and scientific

discourse—the same discourses through which medicalization occurs—makes challenging the effects of medicalization all the more difficult. We can see medicalization being employed as a tool in the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis,” as medical claims about the negative health effects of fat and rising rates of obesity are used to justify measures that increase surveillance and control over individual bodies.

While this project draws on much of the existing work in disability rhetorics and rhetorics of the body that highlights the ways in which the rhetorical conceptualization of bodies works to limit the material realities of non-normative bodies, it also contributes to these areas of scholarship by highlighting a contemporary discourse of the body that hails all citizen bodies in some way. That is, while much of the scholarship on the rhetoric of the body focuses on discrete kinds of bodies (disabled bodies, women’s bodies, student bodies, etc.), the rhetoric of obesity constructs, organizes, and disciplines all bodies in some way. In her foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann argues that “in a fat-hating society everyone is fat. Fat functions as a floating signifier, attaching to individuals based on a power relationship, not a physical measurement” (xv). In other words, while the rhetoric of obesity appears to target a particular set of bodies identified as fat or obese, the fear of fat or the threat of becoming fat works to hail and discipline even those bodies not considered fat or obese. By studying a rhetoric that touches and organizes all bodies in some way, this project analyzes the ways in which different bodies are rhetorically co-constituted and the way that these simultaneous, intertwined rhetorical constructions work to facilitate the flow of power through bodies and discourse.

Bringing a Fat Studies Perspective to Rhetoric

In addition to these rhetorical frameworks, this project also draws on a fat studies framework. With roots in feminist fat-positive activist efforts that began in the 1970s, fat studies

has been growing as a critical, interdisciplinary field of study alongside fat acceptance activist groups for the past decade. Not coincidentally, fat studies scholarship has gained momentum as the frenzy surrounding the “obesity crisis” has grown. While its methods and sites of analysis are varied, fat studies work is generally guided by four key critical practices. First, despite frequent claims about health concerns, fat studies highlights the fact that discourses surrounding fat and body size are predominantly concerned with narrowing ideals of embodiment that work to replicate historic oppressions, that construct thinness as a category of privilege, and that conscript individuals into practices that discipline individual bodies. Second, fat studies involves the practice of critically evaluating the production and circulation of health- and weight-related information, including but not limited to analyses of the funding and methods of weight-related research studies as well as the way the results of such studies are reported in popular media outlets. Third, fat studies actively challenges the medicalization of weight. This challenge is based on two intersecting arguments: first, that the seeming objectivity and cultural authority granted medical information is used to justify and normalize fat shaming and discrimination; and second, that the medicalization of weight consistently conflates weight with health, privileging the cosmetics of body size in making assumptions about health rather than key health indicators like blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Finally, fat studies is driven by the desire to analyze and critically respond to the shaming and surveillance of bodies authorized and normalized by the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis.”

While fat studies has been taken up in disciplines like Sociology and Women’s Studies, it is just beginning to gain some traction in Rhetoric and Composition. Fat studies is an area open to serious engagement from cultural rhetorics scholars because it extends ongoing questions from disability rhetorics and feminist rhetorics about bodies, health, citizenship, norms, power, and

policy by focusing on discourses of fatness and body size as a current locus of cultural concern. As fat studies continues to grow as an interdisciplinary area of scholarship, the work of cultural rhetorics has much to contribute. Work in feminist rhetorics of the body and disability rhetorics offers important analytical frames for understanding ideals of thinness and the moralization of body size as discursive productions aimed at maintaining certain power dynamics. Rhetoric encourages us to think critically about the values tied up in normative discourses of body size and shape. Work from disability rhetorics that critically investigates the effects of medicalization is further useful because it provides an existing terminology and a guiding analytical model for examining the ways social and cultural biases inflect medical discourse, as well as the material implications of such bias. This is particularly important since much of the hype around the “obesity crisis” pivots upon claims from medicine that are taken for granted rather than taken as sites for critical investigation.

Chapter Overviews

Each chapter in this dissertation focuses on the rhetorical dimensions of a particular text or site of debate dealing with the “obesity crisis.” While the texts and sites dealt with across chapters might seem disparate at first glance, they all address, in some capacity, the question of what fatness and body size mean in terms of rhetorics of national identity. Concerns about the state of the American body might be expressed in terms of military strength, in terms of economic strain, or in terms of possible interventions at the level of federal policy. Regardless of their specific expression, these concerns and the arguments they inspire are fundamentally based on the idea that what it means to be an American at an ideological level is somehow threatened by the widening waistlines of citizens. What I am most interested in across these different texts and sites of debate is the ideological work happening as these various rhetorics construct a

particular vision of American as a nation, drawing specifically on concerns about weight and health as a way to narrow and normalize the ideal citizen of said nation.

Chapter One, “John F. Kennedy’s ‘The Soft American’ and the Construction of Fit Citizenship,” historically contextualizes the current “war on obesity,” the rhetoric of which depends on the claim that we are facing an unprecedented crisis of the citizen body. I offer this context through an analysis of John F. Kennedy’s work in “The Soft American,” a piece in which Kennedy expresses doubts that American citizens are physically fit enough to win the Cold War and maintain the U.S.’s position as a global power and argues for the need for national intervention into the physical fitness of the nation’s children, namely through the establishment of the Presidential Fitness Program. “The Soft American” marks a moment where, much like the contemporary rhetoric of the obesity crisis, militaristic and economic anxieties are projected onto the citizen body and citizens are asked to discipline their bodies in particular ways in order to better embody the values of the nation. I argue that Kennedy’s rhetoric of the nation and of the importance of physical fitness to the functioning of the nation ultimately constructs an ideal of fit citizenship, or an ideal of citizenship that can only be enacted through a fit and able, normate citizen body and circumscribes the boundaries of the nation along very traditional heteropatriarchal lines.

Chapter Two, “Fighting Fat with ‘Mission: Readiness.’ Branding the Fat Body as a Threat to National Security,” focuses on the work of “Mission: Readiness,” a group of retired military personnel who lobbied to reform school lunch programs as a way to improve military eligibility in young adults. While there has been ongoing concern about the nutritional standards of school lunch programs, “Mission: Readiness” became a particularly high-profile group, largely because their claims were bolstered by the belief that rising obesity rates could negatively

impact the country's ability to defend itself. Drawing on Jennifer Wingard's concept of the neoliberal branding of bodies, I argue that the way "Mission: Readiness" in the process of rhetorically constructing fatness as a threat to national security, the group implicitly races and classes this imagined threat so that the positioning of fat as a threat works to justify and deepen existing marginalizations.

Chapter Three, "Neoliberal Literacies of the Body in *The Weight of the Nation*," takes up an extended analysis of the 2011 HBO documentary *Weight of the Nation*. Divided into four hour-long parts, the documentary reflects the quality of discourse surrounding obesity seen across news and other media outlets. Framing rising obesity and chronic disease rates as a national crisis that threatens contemporary life in the US, *Weight of the Nation* offers a portrait of fit citizenship that makes thinness, health, and ability central to the maintenance of the US as a global economic and political leader. While the work of Kennedy and "Mission: Readiness" I analyze in earlier chapters depends on a militarized rhetoric of the citizen body, *The Weight of the Nation* depends on a thoroughly medicalized rhetoric of obesity as a national epidemic—a rhetoric that stigmatizes and objectifies the fat body. Through my analysis, I argue that the film speaks to a narrow, imagined audience of white, middle-class, normate viewers and circulates rhetorics about food, health, and weight that encourage this imagined audience to see fat bodies as opposed to proper enactments of citizenship and to see poor communities of color as furthering the spread of obesity and chronic disease through their negligence and ignorance. In contrast to this deeply problematic representation of bodies and poor communities of color, I argue that the film encourages its imagined audience to discipline their bodies in the interests of the state in order to hold onto their privileged position as citizen-subjects.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Race, Motherhood, and Rhetorical Constraint in Michelle Obama’s ‘Let’s Move’ Campaign,” focuses on the first lady’s ongoing national campaign to reverse rising rates of childhood obesity in the course of a generation. In this chapter, I focus on the layers of rhetorical constraint the Michelle Obama experiences as first lady and as an African American woman in the public eye as she attempts to foster child health and nutrition. These rhetorical constraints push her to embrace a rhetoric of motherhood which, I argue, coalesces with a rhetoric of obesity overdetermined by an emphasis on individual choice rather than systemic change to situate women as primarily responsible for maintaining the health and well-being of their children. This rhetoric of motherhood introduces a gendered script to rhetorics of obesity that circumscribe citizenship by defining women’s value as citizens through their role as mothers and reproducers of the nation.

The rhetoric of the obesity crisis is so deeply entrenched that its claims—that obesity represents a national crisis, that all fat bodies are necessarily diseased or disabled, that obesity is the result of poor personal choices that could be corrected through greater moral character and willpower—are often taken for granted without question. As I analyze a variety of sites where the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis emerges, my goal is to unpack the different ways in which the boundaries of the nation and ideals of citizenship are produced through this rhetoric. The way the nation and citizenship are defined through the rhetorics of obesity serve militarized, neoliberal interests, disciplining the citizen body and justifying the disenfranchisement of raced, classed, and gendered bodies. Recognizing the circulation of power through these discourses and through the citizen body is a key starting point for developing and promoting more just rhetorics about the body.

CHAPTER ONE

JOHN F. KENNEDY'S "THE SOFT AMERICAN" AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FIT CITIZENSHIP

Obesity will crush the United States, and we will fade into the rearview mirror in oblivion. We could have done something different. We should have done something different. And we lacked the moral fiber and love for our children to do the right thing.
 -Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller (*Weight of the Nation*)

Read on its own, Susan Combs's apocalyptic warning about the specter of obesity "crushing" the United States seems extreme to the point of being ridiculous. Combs's comment displays no sense of measure or nuance, it lodges inflammatory charges of immorality and parental neglect at its audience, and it provides no evidence or meaning that would justify such an extreme interpretation of consequences. But placed alongside much of the rest of the rhetoric of the "obesity crisis," especially those discourses that frame obesity specifically as a national problem, Combs's comment looks less and less like an outlier. Whether it's the Surgeon General calling obesity "the terror within," frequent references to obesity as an "epidemic," or grim predictions of a generation of children dying before their parents, the rhetoric of obesity in the U.S. is a rhetoric of crisis.

In *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, Arundhati Roy succinctly details the dangers of crisis-driven rhetorics as she analyzes the profit-driven tactics of neoliberal news media. Roy argues that in our neoliberal moment, news media has become a spectacle of crisis, treating story after story as a complete calamity and actively digging up material that can be presented as the root of future disaster in order to keep viewers and readers hooked in an environment of non-stop news. As Roy argues, "In this era of crisis reportage, if you don't have a crisis to call your own,

you're not in the news" (9). Getting coverage for an issue, then, depends on being able to present that issue as a crisis. Besides functioning as a profit-making machine for neoliberal news media, Roy argues that crisis rhetorics work as a powerful form of discursive control. The constant focus on a new source of fear and a new global upset works to distract people from mundane, everyday forms of violence and injustice. Trafficking in fear and creating a constant sense of threat, crisis rhetoric forecloses the possibility of nuanced analyses and effectively limits the range of public responses. As Roy explains, crisis rhetoric "forces us to view a complex evolving historical process through the distorting prism of a single current event. Crises polarize people. They hustle us into making uninformed choices" (18). Through gross oversimplification, complete decontextualization, and an amping up of fear, crisis rhetoric places people in a corner and gives them the option of extreme choices with no middle ground. To bring Roy's analysis of crisis rhetorics back to Combs, we can choose to fight righteously against obesity to protect our nation and our children or we can stand idly by while the United States falls once and for all.

The crisis-driven rhetoric surrounding the "obesity crisis" makes it seem as though the only logical response to increased average weights in the U.S. is to assume that the consequences of that increase will be dangerous and to respond to that potential danger as we would any other national threat. The sense of crisis thus structures not just how we talk about obesity in the U.S. but also structures public policy, scientific research, and the functioning of a myriad of institutions. Bolstered by the seeming objectivity of the medicalized language used to talk about body size, the crisis-driven rhetoric of obesity uses a fear of the unknown and a constant speculation on a myriad of dangerous consequences to push citizens to see obesity as a national problem in which they are personally and continually implicated. The sense of crisis allows for no time or space to weigh medical evidence or to consider other environmental or economic

factors that might be impacting the health and well-being of American citizens. And in the sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications of crisis rhetoric, there is little consideration for who might be effected and in what ways by the growing number of public policies and institutional practices designed to combat the “obesity crisis.”

The fear-driven rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” depends on the idea that a changing American body represents unprecedented territory with any number of unknown consequences. Much of the power of the rhetoric of the “obesity crisis” comes from making it difficult for people to objectively evaluate the frightening potential dangers of obesity thrown around on a daily basis, thus making it easier for people to be disciplined by the values and institutions that claim to stave off these potential dangers. But intense national panic over the changing body politic is not new. The contemporary “obesity crisis” marks just one moment in an ongoing history of anxiety-laden public discourse, polemic scientific research, and public policies aimed at disciplining the citizen body in response to a rise of non-normative bodies.

This chapter works to contextualize the contemporary “obesity crisis” by looking at the way the health, fitness, and strength of the citizen body came under fire during the Cold War. More specifically, I will analyze an article published in a 1960 issue of *Sports Illustrated* called “The Soft American,” written by then President-Elect John F. Kennedy. In the piece, Kennedy argues for the national importance of sport and physical fitness and promises, as President, to instantiate a national program to address declining rates of physical fitness among American citizens. The title of the article—“The Soft American”—goes a long way in highlighting the values driving Kennedy’s concern with physical fitness. While the piece bears a striking resemblance to the anxiety-laden conversations about changes to the average citizen body that have become commonplace in contemporary media, Kennedy’s work isn’t a medicalized, 21st

century analysis of health care costs and rates of disease, but rather gets more directly at moralizing particular forms of embodiment as ideal for assuming the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. As Kennedy explains the links he sees between the fitness of citizens and the functioning of the democratic state, Kennedy's arguments are consistently based on the assumption of a metonymic relationship between the citizen and the state. In other words, Kennedy's arguments are based on the belief that the strength and power of the individual citizen body does and should reflect the strength and power of the nation. A citizenry that has "gone soft," then, represents a nation incapable of maintaining its position as a world power.

Kennedy's work in "The Soft American" is especially useful for establishing a historical context for the contemporary rhetoric of the "obesity crisis" partly because it shares a focus on the national consequences of the fitness of the citizen body. But Kennedy's article is also relevant because, like the "obesity crisis," it is a discourse born out of a socio-political moment marked by deep militarization, wars waged in the name of democracy, anxieties about the global economic and political status of the US, and concerns about the effects of globalization. Through my analysis of "The Soft American," I argue that Kennedy's effort to visualize a strong, physically fit, idealized citizen body that will have the strength to protect and maintain the power of the U.S. functions as a means of nation building meant to rally citizens and quiet dissent in the face of a myriad of social, political, and economic uncertainties.

In what follows, I first ground my analysis of Kennedy's work in feminist and disability rhetorics, specifically by drawing on the concepts of rhetorical fitness and rhetorical space to theorize something I call fit citizenship—or the discursive construction of citizenship as a right attached to a narrowly circumscribed, nomate body. Drawing on this rhetorical framing, I rhetorically analyze "The Soft American," paying particular attention to the way the text

functions as an act of nation building that establishes a shared history and a common future organized around a normalized citizen body, while also delineating the insider/outsider boundaries of the nation. In my analysis, I also place Kennedy's anxiety over the state of the citizen body within the larger context of the historical moment, interrogating the ways in which Kennedy's arguments about the body are structured by the particularities of Cold War politics. I then highlight the consequences of this act of nation building, ultimately arguing that Kennedy's construction of fit citizenship works to bolster and naturalize a vision of the U.S. as a war-faring, heteropatriarchal state.

Analyzing "The Soft American" as a discursive predecessor to the contemporary "obesity crisis" dismantles the idea that we are facing entirely unprecedented territory, reminding us that national discourses around the body historically functioned as a means of nation building that define new citizen responsibilities and circumscribe the boundaries of the nation in ways that shift or draw new lines between insiders and outsiders. These discussions not only normalize and discipline the citizen body, but work to justify the exclusion of certain bodies from the privileges and rights of citizenship. Contextualizing the "obesity crisis" as part of an ongoing, historical discourse about the link between the citizen body and the state that congeals in new formations in the face of shifting political anxieties also allows us to challenge the oversimplified terms of debate set by a crisis-driven rhetoric. Challenging the current terms of the debate opens up the space to begin asking what values, groups, and institutions benefit from the normalizing of the citizen body and the construction of fit citizenship. The crisis-driven rhetoric around obesity asks citizens to take for granted that obesity is a major problem for the nation-state and to discipline their individual bodies accordingly. But historically contextualizing the "obesity crisis" as part of an ongoing strand of biopower allows us to ask how the very terms of the debate are framed by

the neoliberal interests of the nation-state.

Rhetoric, Citizenship, and the Body

Rhetorical scholars have demonstrated that embodiment, rhetorical activity, and citizenship are deeply intertwined. Debra Hawhee argues in her book *Bodily Arts*, for example, that in Ancient Greece, training in speech and rhetorical activity—key to the functioning of a democratic state—were taught and developed in concert with athletic training. According to Hawhee, physical fitness and democratic activity were not simply key values that existed alongside one another, but rather the very ideals of how to make civic arguments were internalized through movement and embodied in their delivery. The Greek system was one that explicitly tied privileged forms of intellectual activity with privileged forms of bodily movement and both of these were seen as central to the training in and performance of democratic citizenship.

While Hawhee’s analysis of rhetorical and athletic training in Ancient Greece offers an example in which the training of the body becomes a route to rhetorical activity associated with citizenship, Jay Dolmage’s work in “Disabled Upon Arrival: The Rhetorical Construction of Disability and Race at Ellis Island” points to ways in which the fitness of the body can become a disqualifier for citizenship. In this piece, Dolmage looks at the immigrant experience of Ellis Island, focusing specifically on the way that the physical space and processing procedures at Ellis Island rhetorically constructed disability.⁵ As people moved through Ellis Island, Dolmage argues, immigrant bodies were literally marked with chalk during initial inspection for further medical testing, the results of which would potentially disqualify them for entry into the United States. Dolmage argues that this marking of bodies was not only a process of identifying bodies

⁵ Throughout the article, Dolmage specifically uses the phrase “rhetorical construction” rather than “social construction” because he argues that understanding the body as a rhetorical construction emphasizes the process of construction over the product.

that were not fit enough for potential U.S. citizenship, but that it also involved the rhetorical construction of a space specifically designed to produce and survey physical differences regarded as suspicious. Dolmage explains,

The social processing that Ellis Island engendered was all about identifying and sometimes manufacturing abnormal bodies: these elements are out of place; these bodies are disordered. [...] The space of Ellis Island circumscribed certain patterns of movement and practices of visualizing the body. The product was, often, the spectacle of Otherness. And all who passed through Ellis Island also became subject to—and then possessor and executor of—a certain gaze and bodily attitude. (26)

The decision to make these marks was based on visual cues that the physical space of the entrance to Ellis Island was designed to elicit, and the language of determining who to mark was laden early on with the rhetoric of eugenics. Dolmage argues that this literal marking of the potentially diseased or disabled body taught unmarked immigrants to be wary of their own difference and to make the visual difference of others.

Responding to “whitewashed” visions of Ellis Island that view it romantically as a rite of passage into American citizenship, Dolmage argues that Ellis Island functioned as a significant origin point of eugenic action in the United States. He further argues that the “human test” used at Ellis Island to identify disabled bodies—a test that assumes that one can visually determine “defects” of body and mind—spilled out of the immediate rhetorical space of Ellis Island and has become “one of the most pervasive social attitudes about disability” (45). Beyond producing a visual specter of disability, however, the space of Ellis Island also constructs the boundaries of the nation as it works to circumscribe citizenship as the right of a white, able-bodied subject and institutes a practice of ongoing policing so that citizens themselves become invested in marking

out and marginalizing deviant bodies as an act of nationalism.

Hawhee's work on the connection between rhetoric and athletics in Ancient Greece highlights a system in which access to rhetorical and civic influence was made accessible through the education and training and both body and mind. In other words, this pedagogical system makes it seem as though the privileged forms of rhetorical activity associated with the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizens are available to those who become trained in and learn to embody the values of the political system. However, Dolmage's work serves as a reminder of the ways in which certain bodies have and continue to be excluded from citizenship or marked as suspicious by virtue of their embodiment. Rhetoric, citizenship, and embodiment are linked precisely because the systematic valuing of particular bodies in a given time and space determines both who is regarded as a rhetorical agent capable of participating in public life and which bodies are imagined as properly belonging with rhetorical spheres of influence.

Drawing boundaries around who is seen as a rhetorical agent depends on the normalization of the body. In their article, "Refiguring Rhetorica: Linking Feminist Rhetoric and Disability Studies," Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson work to open up new analytical pathways for feminist rhetorics by introducing five concepts from disability studies they believe can be the basis of a critical alliance between feminism and disability studies. Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson explain that "[r]olling through each of these concepts is a key rhetorical strategy in disability studies—the move to investigate the history of bodily norms in order to unmask the power and processes of 'norming' and the construction of 'normality'" (24). The concept of normalcy or 'the normal,' in this instance, refers not to a statistical average but rather to a privileged and idealized subject position taken for granted within a particular cultural

context as the standard from which all other subject positions are seen as non-normative deviations. Disability studies takes up the concept of the normal as a category for critical investigation, paying careful attention to the way the construction of the normate works as a way to marginalize, objectify, other, and otherwise control disabled bodies.⁶ Much like contemporary discourses around weight and body size, Kennedy's claims about the national importance of physical fitness is anchored in the implicit construction of a normalized citizen body imagined to be best able to represent and defend the interests of the nation. Rather than allowing this unspoken normate category to remain unmarked, a feminist disability studies perspective encourages an analysis that takes seriously the way that texts like "The Soft American" simultaneously centralize the normate and marginalize the bodies that deviate from it.

Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson argue in "Refiguring Rhetorica" that one key way that the privileging of the normate influences rhetoric is through a concept that they refer to as "rhetorical fitness." They argue, "Just as feminist researchers have challenged the idea that women were not fit rhetors, a study of the rhetorical tradition, though a disability lens, reveals the way that rhetoric became disembodied and rhetorical fitness came to be ascribed to just a narrow range of (white, male, able) bodies" (27). In other words, Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson argue that the rhetorical tradition has continually envisioned an idealized rhetor defined not just by a facility with language or a talent for persuasion, but by having a very particular kind of body and mind that is seen as properly "fit" for rhetorical work. Underlying the assumption of the properly "fit" rhetor is the Enlightenment image of the *cogito*—the rational man who is

⁶ "Normate" is a term developed by and used throughout the field of disability studies to refer to a privileged subject position that is constructed in such a way that makes it appear natural, inevitable, unquestionable, and unmarked. As Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson explain, "Normate designates the unexamined and privileged subject position of the supposedly (or temporarily) able-bodied individual" (24), and the construction of that subject position works to make it seem as though being able-bodied is simply the natural, universal standard from which all other forms of embodiment are a deviation. While the term "normate" is most often used in reference to the social construction of disability, it can also be used to talk more broadly about the multiple, intersecting axes of identity that come together to construct the privileged subject position of the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle/upper-class, physically fit male.

idealized because his sound mind and the power of his logical reasoning allows him to exist in a manner believed to be as unfettered by the body (and thus by the limits and whims of nature) as possible. The reliance on the *cogito* as the model of subjecthood and rhetoricity means that particular bodies do not need to be explicitly excluded from rhetorical activity for the category of the fit rhetor to be functionally exclusive. Any body that can be framed as failing to meet the conditions of rational autonomy ascribed to the *cogito* can be marked as suspicious and as less rhetorically fit. Fat bodies, for example, are not formally excluded from spheres of rhetorical influence, nor are they universally denied the status of rhetorical agents. However, as I will discuss at greater length in Chapter Three, the rhetorical construction of the fat body as diseased, disabled, and pathological works to undermine fat people's ability to speak for themselves about their own experiences, such that they are frequently objectified and spoken "about" by normative experts as a problem to be solved.

As Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson acknowledge, much of the recovery work done by feminist rhetoricians shows precisely the historical struggle of women to prove that they, too, could be fit rhetors. Carol Mattingly's book *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women's Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-Century America* provides an especially rich look at the various ways in which the women of the 19th century drew on existing discourses of dress and fashion to confront the assumption that they were not fit to engage in public address. While Mattingly interprets 19th century women's rhetorical use of dress and fashion primarily through the lens of ethos construction, the assumptions women had to fight against to gain any recognition as an authoritative speaker were largely rooted in the belief that women were physically, mentally, emotionally, and morally unfit to engage in public speaking. Mattingly argues, for instance, that many women adopted a plain or religiously-influenced modest style of dress as a way to show

that they were serious (rather than emotional), to downplay those physical features that marked them as feminine, and to rid themselves of some of the restrictions of more stylized dress that could reinforce the seeming weakness and frailty of women. At the same time, other women embraced forms of dress that emphasized their femininity in order to remove themselves from suspicion of becoming masculinized through their rhetorical activity. Ultimately, Mattingly shows that while 19th century women's use of dress was an attempt to make rhetorical use of the fact that their bodies were being examined first and foremost by audiences, the very assumptions they were having to fight against were assumptions that pathologized women's minds and bodies and marked them as unfit for rhetorical action.

The concept of rhetorical fitness highlights two important points about the privileging of particular bodies within the rhetorical tradition. First, it provides a lens for analyzing the specific means through which certain bodies are discursively constructed as being "unfit." We can see this at work historically in the claims that women were not fit for public speaking because, detractors argued, women were too frail and emotionally unstable to engage in rhetorical activity. When we apply the concept of rhetorical fitness, we understand that this is a discursive tactic that simultaneously constructs rhetoric in a rigid, narrow way (as a masculinized, demanding activity that subsists on logic first and foremost) and deploys a disabling rhetoric against particular bodies in order to cast them as naturally, universally unsuited to rhetorical engagement. Second, rhetorical fitness highlights the fact that the privileging of a very narrow range of bodies as best suited for rhetoric is not just informed by, but also part of a system that reinforces and recreates, a social hierarchy that privileges a narrowly normalized citizen body.

As we see in the work of Hawhee and Dolmage, the link between rhetoric, citizenship, and the body is not just about defining who is or is not rhetorically fit, but it also depends on the

interaction of the body of the rhetor and the space in which rhetorical activity takes place. In her rhetorical history of female preachers, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Roxanne Mountford defines rhetorical space as the specific geography of a communicative event and explains that this geography is often constructed in ways that assume the body occupying that space and responsible for the communicative event will be a normate, masculine body. Mountford argues that the pulpit represents a rhetorical space built specifically for occupation by a masculine body in ways that made it difficult for women preachers to seamlessly occupy that space in the same manner as their male contemporaries. In other words, while particular bodies may already be marked as less rhetorically fit, the construction of rhetorical space in ways that assume an idealized, normate speaker can work to amplify any bodily deviation and thus further mark the non-normative body as not properly belonging in a space of rhetorical influence and discursive power.

In *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*, Nan Johnson likewise discusses women's rhetorics through the lens of rhetorical space, but employs a definition of the term that focuses less on highly specific geographies and instead thinks about the construction of space in a broader sense. Throughout her book, Johnson uses the term "rhetorical space" to "chart which rhetorical situations carry political power and which do not" (175). For Johnson, then, rhetorical space is necessarily connected to questions of power, political representation, and public influence. By analyzing the way in which the postbellum tradition of parlor rhetoric offered women training in literacy and elocution that still limited their rhetorical activity to the domestic sphere, Johnson highlights the ways in which rhetorical space can be strategically manipulated to exclude particular bodies from spheres of influence and to reinforce normative values that marginalize those same bodies.

Indeed, Johnson argues that “[b]y rereading the history of rhetoric as a drama about how convention is inscribed and redefined within rhetorical space, we better prepare ourselves to identify where and how circles of rhetorical power are constructed in our own times and to better understand who is drawing those circles, who stands within them, and who remains outside” (2). Johnson’s framework of using rhetorical space as a concept to trace the circulation of power through discourse encourages us to understand that rhetorical space isn’t just constructed on the assumption that a particular body will occupy that space, but that rhetorical space is designed, altered, manipulated, and actively policed in order to protect the centrality and power of the normate elite. Johnson’s analysis also highlights the ways in which the construction of specific geographies like the parlor or Ellis Island become linked to the way that we imagine more expansive and abstract spaces like the public and private spheres or the nation.

The concepts of rhetorical fitness and rhetorical space share a symbiotic relationship. Rhetorical space is constructed to allow for the privileged ideal of the rhetor and to exclude deviant bodies. The relationship between rhetorical fitness and rhetorical space lays out an important foundation for understanding what’s happening in Kennedy’s piece because, as I will show, he is continually invoking concrete spaces—the school yard, the family home, the Olympic arena, the battlefield and even outer space—as a way to envision and define the space of the nation-state, all while normalizing and privileged citizen body he believes to be best capable of representing and defending the nation’s interests. In his discussion of the “soft Americans,” Kennedy doesn’t just define a body that is literally and rhetorically unfit to represent the nation, but also works to define the nation as a space that does not properly include the unfit, non-normate body.

This normalizing of a privileged civic body ultimately works to exclude certain interests,

groups, and identities by making them seem as though they are not properly part of the purview of the nation. This ongoing normalization of the citizen body, or the continual construction of the ideal citizen as occupying a normate subject position, is an extension of rhetorical fitness that I refer to as “fit citizenship.” When I use the term “fit citizenship,” I am referring to the way that a normalized, privileged citizen body is imagined through the pathologization of other bodies—for example, in the way that white, middle-class men were historically taken for granted as rightfully in control of American government through the systemic pathologization of femininity, blackness, and poverty. In both Kennedy’s piece and contemporary rhetorics of the “obesity crisis,” the construction of fit citizenship defines particular bodies as contrary to the values of the nation in order to offer an invitational rhetoric of citizenship. This invitational rhetoric encourages and urges people to train and discipline their bodies towards fitness as a demonstration of their ability to carry out the rights and responsibilities of citizens and to embody the values of the nation. While this performance and embodiment of citizenship is ostensibly open to anyone willing to make their body “fit,” the dependence on the pathologization of particular bodies in order to define the nation means that particular bodies will always be marked as suspicious and as potentially excluded from the category of citizen. Contemporary rhetorics of the “obesity crisis” may use the construction of fit citizenship to invite the white, able-bodied, middle-class to use their leisure time and expendable income to discipline their bodies, but the invitation to fit citizenship does not extend in the same way to poor communities and communities of color that experience disproportionate rates of obesity.

Fit citizenship offers a lens for investigating the ways in which the state actively participates in, maintains, and even narrows a normalized image of the ideal citizenship along lines of race, class, gender, ability and, increasingly, thinness in order to advance shifting

political and economic interests. Discourses like those circulating around the current “war on obesity” are driven by a crisis rhetoric that posits certain forms of embodiment—in this case, fatness—as a threat to the national economy and to national security. The category of fit citizenship allows us to move away from the reactionary place established through fear-provoking crisis rhetorics by shifting the field of analysis so that we can focus on the way that the normalization of the citizen body functions as an act of nation building organized around the symbolic and discursive exclusion of marginalized bodies.

Dolmage’s discussion of the proto-eugenic action occurring at Ellis Island highlights a particular process through which fit citizenship was constructed in the early 20th century in ways that normalized the ideal citizen (or potential citizen) along intersecting lines of race and ability. In our current political moment, there is no shortage of examples of the ways in which the ideals of American citizenship are being visualized as best embodied through thinness. When, for example, a public debate sprang up around the question of whether or not New Jersey governor Chris Christie was too fat to be elected President, we see the Oval Office being constructed as a space that cannot or should not be occupied by a fat body.⁷ It might be tempting to write the question of whether a fat man can serve as President of the United States as a media stunt to hook viewers or Christie’s political opponents using fat shame as just one of many weapons in their campaign arsenal. However, when we read these arguments against the backdrop of discourses from state representatives (like the Surgeon General or the Center for Disease Control) that continually argue that obesity is a threat to national security and economic stability, we are reminded that the question of whether Chris Christie is too fat to be President exceeds concerns about his likelihood of having a heart attack in office. Fit citizenship allows us to

⁷ Never mind that the Oval Office already has been occupied by a fat body, most notably that of 27th President William Howard Taft. Once again, the crisis rhetoric of obesity eschews historical context.

recognize these debates as arguments about whether or not a fat man can properly embody the values and represent the interests of the U.S. on the global stage. Fit citizenship allows us to ask why and to what effect is the state invested in making fatness seem incompatible with—and even threatening to—American values.

Going forward in this chapter, I will show through my analysis of Kennedy’s “The Soft American” that the crisis-driven rhetoric around the state of the citizen body is not new and, in fact, has some relatively recent historical predecessors. Additionally, I will illustrate how the concept of fit citizenship highlights the ways in which a variety of values and anxieties work together in a given historical moment to normalize the citizen body in particular ways. While there are plenty of historical examples of fit citizenship being constructed in the United States, the example of Kennedy’s “The Soft American” is especially interesting because it is concentrated on questions of strength, fitness, and athleticism—topics that are closely aligned to the specific anxieties over health, fitness, and thinness circulating in contemporary discussions of obesity as a national crisis. Analyzing the construction of fit citizenship in Kennedy’s article will ultimately help us to draw out the political and economic anxieties underlying the current normalization of the thin citizen body.

The Physicality of World Power and the Threat of the “Soft” Citizen Body

At the time Kennedy published “The Soft American,” domestic life in the U.S. was undergoing significant shifts as new and rapidly developing technologies were changing the conditions of American work and reorganizing the space of daily life. The decades following the end of World War II saw not only a growing middle-class with the buying power to make cars, televisions, electric home appliances, and processed convenience foods staples in many homes, but also saw a rise in white collar office jobs and increasing numbers of white, middle-class

Americans leaving cities and moving to the suburbs. In the political context of the ongoing Cold War, these domestic changes to daily American life took place amidst a generalized sense of anxiety and a sense of ever-present nuclear threat most immediately visualized through the image of the hardened, implacable Soviet enemy. By publishing in *Sports Illustrated*, Kennedy was able to directly address a male, middle-class readership affected both by the continuing shifts in daily American life and by the militaristic and ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union.

Kennedy's appeal to his assumed male, middle-class audience begins with the reader's very first interaction with the December 1960 issue of *Sports Illustrated*: the magazine cover. Kennedy is pictured in the center of the cover image, sun-kissed, wearing a polo shirt, and standing on a boat with his wife in front of him and the open sea behind him. The image of Kennedy boating, a symbol of wealth and culture, at once appeals to a higher class of sporting, but also symbolizes the expansive freedom of American democracy—a limitless frontier of power and possibility. The significance of Kennedy being shown in casual dress while engaged in a leisure activity is greater than simply showing him engaged in sport for the sake of a sporting magazine cover. Choosing not to show a more traditionally Presidential image of Kennedy presents him as the Every Man capable of appealing to *Sports Illustrated* readers not as a future head of state but rather as a husband, father, and proud American. What's more, the magazine cover presents readers with a specific visualization of American masculinity that defines masculinity simultaneously through the youth and apparent physical vigor of Kennedy himself, through the wealth and status imparted through the symbol of the boat, through Kennedy's access to open spaces, and through his relationship to his wife.

This image of Kennedy is powerfully contrasted to the title of his article, "The Soft

American.” The term “soft,” of course, calls up all of the associations of what it means for someone to have “gone soft:” to have lost their willingness to fight, lost their aggressive focus on their own goals, lost the ability to make “tough” decisions, become too empathetic and too emotional. The “soft American” is, essentially, a feminized American who has lost the edge and strength to be able to embody and maintain America’s imperial power. Part of what has led to the “softening” of American citizens, Kennedy worries, are the very modern conveniences that serve as a symbol of the political, cultural, and economic superiority of life in the U.S. As Kennedy explains,

It is ironic that at a time when the magnitude of our dangers makes the physical fitness of our citizens a matter of increasing importance, it takes greater effort and determination than ever before to build the strength of our bodies. The age of leisure and abundance can destroy vigor and muscle tone as effortlessly as it can gain time. Today human activity, the labor of the human body, is rapidly being engineered out of working life. By the 1970s, according to many economists, the man who works with his hands will be almost extinct. (2)

What we see here is anxiety over the fear of losing the working man in the midst of rapidly changing economic and technologic landscapes: what’s lost isn’t just a form of work, but the values and attitude associated with a particular kind of work. What’s lost is the “bread and butter” masculinity believed to have built America. Indeed, Kennedy references Theodore Roosevelt’s warnings in the early 20th century against the myriad dangers of falling into a “slothful ease”—in other words, of getting caught up in an easier life that results in a kind of physical and moral atrophy in which the heart of American masculinity is lost. This anxiety about threat to American masculinity is contrasted with the specter of the Soviet enemy, imagined to have been hardened

to the point of ruthlessness through the moral and material deprivation of the Communist state.

Implicitly responding both to the threat of Communism and the shifting position of the individual body in an increasingly technical society, Kennedy goes on to argue that “in a very real and immediate sense, our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to society” (2). Here Kennedy drives home the threat of a nation of physically “soft” citizens who, by virtue of a widespread loss of physical strength, likewise lack the moral fortitude and military strength to protect American democracy and maintain the U.S.’s status as a global power. Kennedy’s use of the language of softness in the title and throughout the body of the article effectively works as something akin to a school yard taunt designed to prompt his reader towards public displays of a particular kind of masculinity believed to best represent the national interests of the U.S.—a display of masculinity that Kennedy himself seems to embody as he’s presented on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. In other words, the combination of the loaded language of “softness” and the presentation of Kennedy as the antithesis of the “soft American” works to normalize the citizen body before the reader even engages the arguments made in the article by constructing the ideal citizen as masculine, middle-class, and physically fit.

As he encourages his reader to stand against the threatening potential of a citizenry gone “soft,” Kennedy’s arguments begin with the most accessible of anxieties—namely, that young soldiers need to be prepared for and capable of meeting the many physical demands of war. Kennedy argues that physical fitness first presented itself as a potential problem for the U.S. early in the Korean War and became an even more apparent issue when “figures were released showing that almost one out of every two young Americans was being rejected by Selective Service as mentally, morally or physically unfit” (1). Later in the piece, Kennedy clarifies that although all soldiers go through basic training to help them meet these physical demands, it’s

unreasonable to expect that this brief training period will make up for years of poor physical fitness. Kennedy writes: “[T]he stamina and strength which the defense of liberty requires are not the produce of a few weeks’ basic training or a month’s conditioning. These only come from bodies which have been conditioned by a lifetime of participation in sports and interest in physical activity” (2). In other words, Kennedy argues that U.S. citizens need to see fitness as a national concern because the state cannot expect military training alone to turn unfit soldiers into the fit and ready troops war demands. Rather, Kennedy insists, the seeds for a fit military are sown much earlier in the life of soldiers—something U.S. citizens need to keep in mind when thinking about the national significance of physical fitness.⁸

Emphasizing the political importance of childhood fitness, Kennedy insists that “[o]ur struggles against aggressors through our history have been won on the playgrounds and corner lots and fields of America” (2). Here, he is not advocating that the U.S. embrace the spirit of the Spartans, imagining American children as potential soldiers and thus training them to become warriors from the earliest stages of life. Rather, Kennedy’s concern with the ramifications of childhood fitness is a question of the reproduction of the nation. In other words, Kennedy’s concerns fit within longstanding discourses and concerns about how to raise children in ways that protect the values, interests, and history of the nation. For Kennedy, cultivating physical fitness is a vital part of reproducing the nation precisely because, he believes, without it the U.S. risks losing hold of its position as a world power. At the same time, fitness as a means of reproducing the nation exceeds the question of the physical well being of the citizen body. By talking about fitness, he isn’t just addressing one part of the problem of too many young men

⁸ Here, of course, Kennedy is essentially arguing that the health and well-being of American children is a national concern because of its potential impact to U.S. military readiness. This same argument about military readiness surfaced again after 9/11, and the following chapter on the work of “Mission: Readiness” will explore the connection between military readiness and the health and fitness of the citizen body in greater detail.

being “mentally, morally or physically unfit.” Rather, he’s insisting that raising American children in a way that values physical fitness, vigor, and competition will create citizens both physically capable of defending the nation and morally and intellectually capable of upholding the values believed to be integral to the nation’s global power.

Kennedy highlights the ideologies underlying the connection between the fit citizen body and the strength of the nation when he locates his warning about the dangers of becoming a nation of “soft Americans” squarely within the Western Classical tradition. Kennedy begins his piece with the image of the Greek Olympian games, reminding his reader that during the Olympian games, the Greek state would declare a “sacred truce,” putting aside political conflict to celebrate the performance of the human body. The winners of the games were received in their home cities as heroes because, as Kennedy writes, “The Greeks prized physical excellence and athletic skills among man’s great goals and among the prime foundations of a vigorous state” (1). The idea that physical fitness and athletic performance are “among man’s great goals” has the ring of sacred reverence as it implies that athletic ability, alongside the foundations of democracy also inherited from the Greeks, is one of the finest possible achievements of Western civilization. Mirroring the logic of the same Greek training system discussed by Hawhee that tied privileged forms of intellectual activity to privileged forms of bodily movement, Kennedy argues in his article that “physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body; it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity” (2). If a strong body equals a strong citizen mind, then in the metonymic relationship Kennedy envisions between citizen and nation, strong citizen bodies represent the militaristic and technological superiority of the U.S.

Given his belief that the strength of the citizen body represents the strength of the nation-state, Kennedy’s most pressing concern is not so much the immediate recruiting difficulties of

the military but rather a study that, in his mind, suggests the possibility of a weakened America in the future. More specifically, Kennedy cites a study comparing the fitness levels of American children with European children as “the most startling demonstration of the general physical decline of American youth” (1). The study, conducted by Hans Kraus and Sonja Weber out of Columbia-Presbyterian hospital, administered six different tests of strength and flexibility to children from the U.S., Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. The study found that nearly 60% of American children failed one or more of these tests, compared to less than 10% of European children. As he recounts the results of the study, Kennedy seems especially distraught at the fact that American children performed so poorly on the tests “despite our unparalleled standard of living, despite our good food and many playgrounds, despite our emphasis on school athletics” (1). It’s at this moment that one of the key ideologies underlying Kennedy’s concern about physical fitness reveals itself—that is, his arguments for why the physical fitness of citizens matters so deeply is guided by a belief in American Exceptionalism. In other words, Kennedy seems to be arguing that not only is America the greatest nation, but that this greatness should be evident in the body of every citizen. That this does not seem to be the case—and in fact, that other children in the Western world appear significantly stronger and more fit than American children—works for Kennedy as a kind of rallying cry to prove, through the exercise and discipline of the citizen body, that the U.S. really is the best, the elite. Kennedy continues to emphasize this point throughout “The Soft American” through the language of “decline.” He titles the section following his discussion of Kraus and Weber’s study “A Constant Decline” and frequently refers to the “decline” in physical fitness among Americans.

In the context of Kennedy’s article, particularly given his romantic references to Ancient Greece, the language of decline calls to mind references to the “decline of Empire,” references

that put into relief anxieties about the U.S. losing its position as a world power. In the course of Kennedy's writing, these anxieties about the political standing and global power of the U.S. are cast onto the individual citizen body as physical fitness is imagined not just as a personal state of health, well-being, or ability but as a national asset. Indeed, Kennedy writes, "[T]he physical vigor of our citizens is one of America's most precious resources. If we waste and neglect this resource, if we allow it to dwindle and grow soft then we will destroy much of our ability to meet the great and vital challenges which confront our people. We will be unable to realize our full potential as a nation" (2). Maintaining the power of the nation-state is linked to the physical strength of the citizen body, both as a mark of the power of nation-state and as a symbol of the intellectual and moral superiority of the U.S. Thus, physical fitness is not (and never has been) simply a matter of having enough potential troops prepared for the physical demands of war. Rather, physical fitness as a national concern is much more about reproducing the nation in such a way that embodies a vision of the U.S. as good, superior, right, and fit. Unlike the threatening image of the "soft American" who Kennedy believes lacks the physical strength, intellectual capacity, and moral will to seize and maintain it's position as a world leader, Kennedy believes that the physical fitness of the citizenry will prove that the U.S. is deserving of elite status and justified in the exercise of global power.

However, fully appreciating the connection that Kennedy makes between physical fitness and global competition requires placing this argument within the social, political, and economic context in which Kennedy was writing in 1960. More specifically, Kennedy's arguments about the physical fitness of the individual citizen body takes on new dimensions when we consider the ways in which sport and technology became politically charged sites of global competition during the Cold War. In the context of a new and uncertain form of global conflict punctuated by

the myriad anxieties associated with the existence of nuclear warheads, technological advancement and competitive sports were more than arenas for bolstering various nationalisms. During the Cold War, both of these areas of global competition took on a militaristic importance, becoming transformed into symbolic battlegrounds for proving not just the superiority of the nation, but of an entire political and economic system. And at the moment that Kennedy wrote “The Soft American,” the US seemed to be lagging behind the USSR on both fronts.

Most people are familiar with the extra-military manifestations of global competition between the US and the USSR during the Cold War in terms of the Space Race. An extension of the arms race between the two countries in the decade following World War II, the Space Race began in earnest when, following the announcement of the US’s plans to launch an orbiting satellite into space, the USSR responded by successfully launching Sputnik nearly a year earlier than the US’s intended launch date. The US rushed to move their satellite launch date up in reaction to Sputnik, but their first attempt was a complete failure. While the the US managed a successful satellite launch just a few months later, they still appeared to be trailing behind the USSR in the race to get a man to the moon. About six months after Kennedy published his piece in *Sports Illustrated* in December, 1960, both the USSR and the US would successfully launch astronauts into orbit—the USSR managing their launch just three weeks before the US. At the time Kennedy was writing, many people both in the US and abroad believed that the USSR would certainly outpace the US in the race to the moon. The Space Race, then, was a battle to flex technological muscle that had clear military implications. The launch of Sputnik raised anxieties about the security of US communications and the possible fallout of the USSR developing satellite and missile control technologies faster than the US.

Probably less well known is the way that the Cold War transformed the meaning of

competitive sports, both in the U.S. and internationally. Indeed, the very fact that Kennedy is writing an article for *Sports Illustrated* in 1960 to outline key parts of his political agenda points to some of the key aspects of this transformation. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the importance of sport in the U.S. was undergoing a rapid shift. Whereas competitive sports had previously been associated with the working class and seen as an uncultured interest, the increased leisure time and improved technologies that made televised national sports broadcasts widely available led to a wider, cross-class embrace of competitive sports. *Sports Illustrated* was likewise going through a transition at the time Kennedy wrote, as a new managing editor, Andre Laguerre, was brought on board in 1960 was working to shift the magazine's focus from the sporting activities of the elite (namely golf, hunting, and sailing) to making competitive sports appealing to a broader audience through more in-depth and analytical sports journalism. Indeed, Laguerre was hired to revise the magazine after writing a series of pieces about the 1956 Olympic games that described them as a symbolic struggle between Cold War powers. Kennedy's argument that competitive athletics are among Western civilization's greatest triumphs can then be understood not only as an argument for national concern with fitness, but also as an argument for recognizing the growing cultural significance of sport.

But it wasn't just changing technologies and the leisure time of a growing middle class that changed the significance of sport at home in the US. The meaning of sports and their connection to nationalism was also significantly influenced by the way that the Soviet Union seized on international sporting events like the Olympics as a site for demonstrating the physical and technological power of their state. In the first half of the 20th century, US Olympians were largely amateur athletes who trained in their free time outside of their working lives. However, in preparation for the 1956 Olympics, the USSR began training full-time athletes in state-of-the-art

facilities where they worked under the supervision of full-time, state-financed coaches. As a result of the USSR training programs (as well as the widespread use of performance enhancing drugs), the USSR managed to come out on top in the final medal count at the 1956 Winter Olympics in Italy, while the US lagged behind in 6th place, winning less than half that number of medals earned by Soviet athletes. The US wouldn't overtake the USSR in the Olympic medal count until the Summer Olympics of 1964, held in Tokyo, and then only by a narrow margin of six medals.

Ultimately, the Soviet Union's success in launching Sputnik and their performance at the 1956 Olympic games became great sources of anxiety for the U.S. precisely because they challenged the superiority of the U.S. To look at a report that signals the poor physical fitness of American children against these indicators of the U.S.'s struggle to compete internationally with the U.S.S.R, we can see the way in which military power, technological advancement, and the strength and fitness of the individual citizen body get wrapped up in one another. Kennedy's anxiety about the US's seemingly tenuous position in relation to the USSR is palpable when he writes: "We face in the Soviet Union a powerful and implacable adversary determined to show the world that only the Communist system possesses the vigor and determination necessary to satisfy awakening aspirations for progress and the elimination of poverty and want. To meet the challenge of this enemy will require determination and will and effort on the part of all Americans. Only if our citizens are physically fit will they be capable of such an effort" (2). Physical fitness as a national issue isn't just about who brings home more medals from the Olympics, but rather comes from a place of anxiety over the fact that Soviet citizens are, or at least appear to be, stronger, more hardened, more masculine, and more motivated in their cause. And in encouraging US citizens to seriously take up physical fitness as part of the

ideals/responsibilities of citizenship, Kennedy isn't just hoping that more children will be able to pass an arbitrary fitness exam. Rather, Kennedy believes that in working to become stronger and fitter, US citizens will naturally begin to embody a competitive spirit that will drive technological innovation, strengthen nationalism, and bolster military operations. As Kennedy himself writes, "We do not live in a regimented society where men are forced to live their lives in the interest of the state. We are, all of us, as free to direct the activities of our bodies as we are to pursue the objects of our thought. But if we are to retain this freedom, for ourselves and for generations yet to come, then we must also be willing to work for the physical toughness on which the courage and intelligence and skill of man so largely depend" (3).

In a context where the means of winning a war of political ideology is increasingly unclear and unstable, we find new ways of demonstrating power and superiority. In this context of international competition, anxieties about maintaining global power in the US were cast onto the individual citizen body wherein it is believed that the nation is maintained through the actions of the individual, and the individual citizen thus has a responsibility to act in the interests of the state. But in making this argument, Kennedy effectively narrows the definition of citizenship along deeply ableist lines. As he writes about the Ancient Greek's belief in the connection between body and mind, Kennedy explains, "The relationship between the soundness of the body and the activities of the mind is subtle and complex. Much is not yet understood. But we do know what the Greeks knew: that intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity when the body is healthy and strong; that hardy spirits and tough minds usually inhabit sound bodies" (2). Kennedy's decision to reference the Greeks once again isn't just a reference to ancient wisdom, but again an attempt to contextualize the current moment as a historical antecedent of Ancient Greek democracy. In other words, Kennedy's reference to the

Greek ideal of a sound mind inhabiting a sound body is a reminder that this ideal body is likewise seen as the ideal citizen. This idealized, normalized body—masculine, able, etc.—is seen as capable of embodying and maintaining the power of the nation, and thus most deserving of the rights of citizenship. Kennedy effectively pins citizenship (defining it in terms of its rights and responsibilities) on a normalized body capable of doing particular kinds of things. And on the reverse, bodies that fail this test are implicitly constructed as threats, weakening both the morality and the global power of the nation.

Kennedy firmly ties the normate body of the idealized citizen with an emphasis on the heteropatriarchal state. We see this when Kennedy closes the piece by insisting, “[N]o matter how vigorous the leadership of government, we can fully restore the physical soundness of our nation only if every American is willing to assume responsibility for his own fitness and the fitness of his children” (3). Working from the heteropatriarchal assumption that the nuclear family unit, headed by the father, is the building block of the nation, Kennedy identifies himself once again with his reader as a paternal figure personally responsible for the fitness of future generations of citizens. Here, and at several other points in the article, Kennedy explicitly addresses his imagined reader as both male and as a father. Kennedy’s appeal exclusively to men is more than the result of a historical tradition of referring to men as the universal, and it is more than the result of being published in a magazine primarily directed at men. It is a statement about the power and potential of the United States that is visualized through an idealized image of the male body and that is framed as being with the grasp of American men to direct, in no small part through the disciplining of their own bodies and the disciplining of the bodies of their children. This is not to say that Kennedy is not concerned about the fitness of American women. Surely, he also believes that women should be fit, even if this definition of fitness and strength differs

from that of the standards set for men. But what we can say about Kennedy's framing of the "soft American" as a national threat is that he does not seem capable of imagining a world in which women play any significant role in international politics. In Kennedy's world, women work to support the empire-building efforts of men. They cook and nurse and keep home fires burning, but they don't actually do the fighting or the innovating. It's the strength and physical power of men, Kennedy believes, that are the best embodiment of American values and national power, and that will ultimately help the US maintain its position as a world power.

But the emphasis on traditional, able-bodied masculinity that runs through Kennedy's writing isn't just about ongoing gender relations in the US—it's an ideology that also writes global power dynamics in terms of gendered understandings of power. Ultimately, Kennedy imagines the display of world power through the lens of traditional masculinity and patriarchy—strong, active, decisive, authoritative, in charge. To see another nation show signs of superior strength (perhaps in the form of the scores of child fitness tests or extraordinary Olympic performances) or show signs of superior intelligence (perhaps in the form of a satellite sent up into space), is to see signs that you are about to have your power usurped. And while Kennedy would eventually respond to these threats by developing programs to develop science and technology faster, by trying to out-manuever the enemy through military action, and by playing chicken with nuclear warheads, the bulk of what Kennedy is trying to do in this piece is to urge his (male, heterosexual) audience to embody and enact a particular ideological stance in everyday life. According to Kennedy, we need to imagine ourselves as a nation as stronger and more powerful (that is, more masculine) than our enemies and we need, as individual citizens, to embody this strength and power in our individual bodies. It's important that we have more economic and political power than our enemies—but, for Kennedy, it is also important that we

be able to prove ourselves more masculine than our enemy.

In the conclusion of “The Soft American,” Kennedy, again associating himself directly with his male reader, insists: “We do not want our children to become a generation of spectators. Rather we want each of them to be a participant in the vigorous life.” Of course, in the context of Kennedy’s arguments throughout the article that the strength of the individual citizen is necessary for the strength of the nation, the vision of raising a generation of children ready to participate in the “vigorous life” refers to much more than encouraging children to be active, creative, and engaged. “The vigorous life,” we can assume, includes continuing to carry out global political and economic policies that maintain and even expand the reach of American power. At the same time that Kennedy appeals to his assumed audience as head of families and citizens of the heteropatriarchal state, he relies on a classic gendered binary to construct both the future and the scene of global relations. A generation of spectators is a passive, feminized generation that will lead to a powerless state. Kennedy offers his reader instead the promise of a nation driven by the active direction of a powerful, masculinized citizenry that can only be realized through the normative ideal that he himself appears to embody.

Conclusion

Looking at Kennedy’s “The Soft American” fifty years later means that, as readers, we are removed from the anxiety of the moment in which it was written. We know, from where we sit now, that American’s comparatively low levels of fitness did not bring down U.S. imperialism. We even know that despite Kennedy’s appearance of health, fitness, and physical vigor that he suffered for most of his life from Addison’s disease, a condition that necessitated multiple surgeries throughout his life, affected his mobility, and resulted in Kennedy taking chronic pain medications and testosterone throughout his presidency (Suarez). While the efforts

to hide Kennedy's disability from the public (much like the efforts made to hide Franklin Delano Roosevelt's disability) and the persistence of the image of Kennedy as a youthful, vital President highlight once again the normative ideal of citizenship, Kennedy's story is also proof positive that physical fitness was not a requirement even at the highest levels of American leadership during the Cold War. Still, every kid who has spent time in gym class working through the Presidential Fitness Test—the result of Kennedy's call for a national program to address childhood fitness levels—knows that the anxieties that produce texts like “The Soft American” have lasting material effects.

Thinking about contemporary constructions of fit citizenship in relation to Kennedy's own constructions allows us to step back from emotionally-loaded crisis rhetorics of obesity and begin to investigate how debates around obesity are structured and whose interests those debates serve. Looking to “The Soft American” as historical context for current discourses on obesity helps us recognize the ways in which concern over the state of the citizen body are wrapped up in political and militarized ideologies about global power. In other words, Kennedy's concern about the state of American fitness makes clear that it is not a concern about simply increasing the strength and health of individual citizens, but rather concern about what the health and fitness of citizens means for nation's ability to maintain a position of global economic and political dominance. Kennedy's piece also works to highlight a historical trend wherein national attention on the body works to distinguish those bodies seen as properly American from those seen as suspect. While Kennedy's piece offers the specter of the “soft American” as a feminized, weak, passive citizen incapable of embodying the values of the U.S., our current moment offers the image of a fat body incapable of fighting in the military, contributing to the economy, or leading on the global stage. Ideologies of global power and fit citizenship can be obscured by the

contemporary reliance on a medicalized discourse of weight and fitness, but thinking about the rhetorics of obesity in relation to Kennedy's arguments about fitness help us to become more aware of the political and cultural ideologies circulating through current medicalized discourses.

Since Kennedy wrote "The Soft American" in 1960, we've seen a deepening of neoliberal ideologies that simultaneously support market-based policies that effect the health and well-being of individual bodies while also discursively constructing health and thinness as the result of deeply moralized personal choices. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss contemporary rhetorics of obesity in relation to the increasing militarization of the individual body, the medicalization of weight, and the moralization of motherhood as the primary frontline for protecting the thinness of future generations. Running through all of these different manifestations of a nationalized discourse of obesity is the insistence that the fat American, much like the "soft American" of 1960, is a threat to the current and future stability of the nation. This construction of the fat American as opposed to or failing to properly embody the values and global power of the U.S. works to discipline the individual citizen body, encouraging citizens to conform themselves, as much as they are able, to a rigidly normate ideal. Moving forward, I will work to deconstruct contemporary crisis rhetorics of obesity and trace the construction of fit citizenship along lines of thinness in order to highlight the neoliberal ideologies and anxieties over the U.S. economic and political position circulating through these discourses.

CHAPTER TWO

FIGHTING FAT WITH “MISSION: READINESS:” BRANDING THE FAT BODY AS A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Fat studies scholars have argued that the discursive link drawn between the “war on terror” and the “war on obesity”—a link enacted, for example, in Richard Carmona’s claim that obesity is “the terror within”—is not incidental, but rather a targeted attempt to discipline citizen bodies and shore up support for U.S. military campaigns. In “The Terror Within: Obesity in Post 9/11 U.S. Life,” Charlotte Biltekoff argues, “Anxiety about obesity escalated not in spite of, but in conjunction with, the reaction to 9/11. As a response to 9/11 coalesced into the war on terror, the response to rising weights among Americans coalesced into a ‘war on obesity.’ Both wars contributed to a heightened sense of fear among Americans by promoting a perpetual sense of danger” (32). Biltekoff goes on to argue that in a context where one of the most powerful strategies for shoring up support for war in the Middle East was the creation of a pervasive culture of fear, the merging of anxieties over terrorism and obesity worked to make even the most mundane parts of daily life seem threatening. In response to these merged anxieties, citizens were not only encouraged to support war efforts without question, but also to discipline their individual bodies. Just months after the 9/11 attacks, then-Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson argued that “all Americans should lose 10 pounds as a patriotic gesture,” reasoning that “[a]s much as we love to eat, too often we fail to consider the consequences of that love” (Rosenblatt). As a perfect example of the way that a militarized rhetoric of obesity moralizes the fat body, Thompson’s comments situate fatness as purely the

result of gluttony and warn of the consequences of such gluttony—consequences which, in the larger geopolitical scene, include the weakened defenses of the nation-state.

A militarized rhetoric of obesity that merges concerns about fatness and terrorism in order to amplify both extends many of the anxieties present in John F. Kennedy's "The Soft American." Biltekoff argues that at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the coalescing anxieties over fat and terror materialized in the specter of the fat soldier—a hypothetical body that, like Kennedy's citizen gone "soft," is mentally and physically unfit to properly defend the nation against its enemies. But, just like "soft American," the fat soldier represents something greater than insufficient preparation for war—he betrays the tough, masculinized image and rigidly moral self-discipline believed to represent and justify Western imperialism. But while Kennedy's vision of the fit American is framed in the idealism of the moral fortitude of democracy overpowering the hard deprivation of Communism, the tenor and material consequences of the current "war on obesity" have been shaped by a now-entrenched neoliberal economic and political system that, according to Jennifer Wingard, "brands" already-marginalized bodies as a threat to the nation-state.

The implicit targeting of raced and classed bodies as problematic or even threatening is premised on a neoliberal social ideology that thinks of people in terms of the cost/benefit analyses of a market logic. In "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," Wendy Brown argues, "Neo-liberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player" (39-40, emphasis in the original). A sense of the humanizing qualities of the individual or a belief in the natural rights of citizens are vacated in favor of data sets used to determine "good" bodies

from “bad.” In *Branded Bodies, Rhetoric, and the Neoliberal Nation-State*, Jennifer Wingard argues that this increasing reliance on market-driven data to determine social policy “is great for capitalism because it is no longer regulated by the legalities of the liberal nation-state. Instead, it is regulated through numbers, quotas, and other abstract measures of quantification, thus leaving the actual bodies and identities and the nation state’s responsibility to them out the discussion entirely” (13).

The story of the war on obesity is thus told increasingly through the use of seemingly damning (but also questionable) statistics about overall rates of obesity, rates of chronic disease associated with obesity, and the costs associated with health care, disability claims, and other benefits payouts. This focus on abstract data allows for the implicit positioning of those communities that experience disproportionately high rates of obesity and chronic disease—that is, primarily poor communities and communities of color—as wrenches in the nation’s machinery. Biltekoff argues that the implicit targeting of the poor and of people of color in the war on obesity ultimately works to support the war on terror. She writes,

While the war against obesity calls on all Americans to participate in the national health campaign, its broad address masks the fact that anti-obesity reformers consider minorities and the poor their primary target. The campaign’s particular focus on Blacks, Latinos, and the poor also serves an important role in maintaining the nation’s commitment to the war on terror. It displaces the threat to domestic life, and particularly to the health and welfare of minority populations, from irresponsible government policy to irresponsible behaviors in minority communities, thus obscuring the real toll that the war on terror is taking on the lives of the American underclass. (31-32)

The effect of these discursive efforts to deflect attention away from government policy extends beyond the justification of war. The implicit targeting of the poor and people of color in the war on obesity encourages the American public to think of problems attributed to higher rates of obesity as the result of certain communities' negligence, ignorance, and poor choices rather than calling into question the state's responsibility to address social issues like health care, hunger, pollution, and poverty.⁹

Thus, the current militarized rhetoric of the "war on obesity" doesn't just encourage the American public to think of fat bodies as a threat to the integrity of the nation; it also implicitly marks already marginalized bodies as particularly threatening, even if discussions of the "war on obesity" don't specifically invoke issues of race or class. We can see the implicit targeting of poor communities and communities of color in the militarized rhetoric of obesity in the work of the lobbying group "Mission: Readiness." "Mission: Readiness" describes itself on its website as a non-partisan, non-profit organization composed of a group of retired military leaders "calling for smart investments in America's children" ("About Us"). Based in Washington, D.C., the group formed in 2009 in response to data from the Pentagon indicating that 75% of American youth between the ages of 17 and 24 are ineligible for military service according to existing recruitment standards. While there are a multitude of reasons that would exclude someone from military service, the group explains that there are three primary reasons that account for the high rate of ineligibility: a history of criminal activity, an inadequate educational background, and a failure to meet fitness standards either because of obesity or because of an inability to pass

⁹ The tendency to blame poor communities in particular for leading their children to become obese due to a lack of nutritional knowledge, for example, deflects attention from the ways in which state agricultural policies actively lead to the production of excess calories. In "Agricultural Policy and Childhood Obesity: A Food Systems and Public Health Commentary," David Wallinga argues that state agricultural policies that are geared towards the overproduction of cheap food are responsible not just for an excess of cheap calories, but for the more limited availability and higher expense of whole and more nutritional foods. Focusing primarily on personal responsibility and choice in food consumption ignores the state's role in producing an overall food environment that benefits business while limiting farmers and harming citizen bodies.

required physical fitness tests. While the group does not explicitly discuss factors of race or class, the three primary reasons for military ineligibility are raced and classed in various ways, and the interventions into school programs the group has lobbied for would primarily effect poor students and students of color. If the war on obesity implicitly targets poor communities and communities of color as problematic, then what might be the material impact of policy interventions fueled by this same rhetoric?

Combining a crisis-laden rhetoric of war and significant political influence, “Mission: Readiness” has played an instrumental role in getting legislation introduced into Congress like the School Food Modernization Act, which would provide funding to public schools for the purpose of updating kitchen and food storage facilities. While the School Food Modernization Act is still in committee in the House of Representatives, the group also lobbied aggressively (and successfully) along with Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign for the passage of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Indeed, this lobbying success is precisely why “Mission: Readiness” is interesting. Through the group’s reports, we can both trace the development of a militarized rhetoric of obesity that has evolved over the course of a few years and know that this militarized rhetoric is actively influencing federal policy. The crisis-laden rhetoric the group relies on opposes the fat, threatening body to the “good” citizen body, effectively making thinness a condition of cultural citizenship. Working from the rhetorical assumption that the way that we frame a problem shapes the solutions we imagine, this chapter analyzes the way that “Mission: Readiness” constructs the fat body as a threat to national security in order to highlight the material implications of policies that are influenced by a rhetoric that frames implicitly raced and classed fat bodies as a threat to citizenship.

“Mission: Readiness” and the Branded Body

At the heart of the work “Mission: Readiness” does is the argument that, in an age of decreased funding for education and social welfare programs, it is worth paying to improve school lunch programs because childhood nutrition and education are the roots of military readiness. According to the group, “Investing early in upcoming generations is critical to securing our nation’s future. Retired admirals and generals understand that whether young people join the military or not, we must increase investments so that all young people can get the right start and succeed in life-whatever career path they choose” (“About Us”). In order to reduce the number of American youth currently eligible for military service, “Mission: Readiness” proposes a three-pronged plan to 1) increase access to early-childhood education, 2) ensure children have more nutritional food options at school, and 3) increase both the quality and quantity of physical education children receive. Increasing access to early childhood education is a core part of the group’s agenda because they believe that a strong educational start will make the most difference in addressing two of three leading reasons for military ineligibility: inadequate education and criminal background. However, most of the national media attention the group has received has focused entirely on the group’s efforts to intervene in rising rates of childhood obesity.

The group functions under an umbrella non-profit known as Council for a Strong America, which is composed of five different groups “working together to prepare young Americans for success” (*Council for a Strong America*), with each group organizing their work according to the respective interests of the military, law enforcement, business, athletics, and evangelical ministry.¹⁰ “Mission: Readiness” is run by an Executive Advisory Council that includes over 200 retired Admirals and Generals who guide the group’s work. In addition to

¹⁰ In addition to “Mission: Readiness,” the other groups operating as part of the Council for a Strong America include “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids,” “ReadyNation,” “Championing for America’s Future,” and “Shepherding the Next Generation.”

these commissioned officers, the Executive Advisory Council includes nine former enlisted (non-commissioned) officers and three civilian military leaders, all former appointees to the Office of the Secretary for different military branches. The bulk of the Executive Advisory Council is thus composed of retired, career military personnel who have held significant leadership positions within their respective branches of the military and, in several cases, have also held significant leadership positions at the level of state and national government. There are, for example, several Generals affiliated with “Mission: Readiness” who have been former Adjutant Generals of various State National Guards. Among the twenty-five four-star Generals currently listed as members of the Advisory Council, five have served as Supreme Allied Commanders to NATO. Since “Mission: Readiness” formed in 2009, at least three former Chairmen to the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been affiliated with the group. So while the current Advisory Council members are retired from their military and government posts, “Mission: Readiness” clearly has a wealth of connection not only to current military leaders but to policy-makers at both the state and national levels.

The military has long concerned itself with schools and educational programs as a means of developing an improved recruitment base. In “Drafting U.S. Literacy,” Deborah Brandt analyzes some of the discursive and material impacts of policy interventions in the name of increasing military readiness and demonstrates that these militarized interventions can actually shift public understandings of students and education in ways that impact the development of public policy. In the article, Brandt traces the history of literacy programs established by the military during World War II to ensure that soldiers were able to keep up with increasingly technological and intelligence-dependent combat. Brandt explains that the programs established during the war were incredibly effective, vastly improving literacy rates among enlisted soldiers.

But the demand for increased literacy created by changing military technologies and tactics, as well as the programs subsequently developed to address those new demands, also had the effect of changing what literacy meant.

Brandt argues that instead of literacy being idealized as a moral good and seen as a “value-added”—that is, something that transforms the individual into a better, more valued person—literacy became a kind of commodity. While the idea of literacy as a moral good persists, literacy has been transformed into a tool deemed necessary to productive labor. As Brandt explains, “Today illiteracy marks you as a moral outcast not because you have resisted conformity to social mores, but because you are a drag on economic productivity—unable to pull your weight as a learner and earner” (487-88). Brandt argues that, as a commodity, literacy takes on the power to create and maintain groups of second-class citizens: illiteracy marks a person as a second-class citizen and social hierarchies are reinforced by limited access to literacy among marginalized groups. Furthermore, transforming literacy into a commodity means that institutions begin to think about investment in literacy less as a moral imperative and more in terms of cost/benefit analyses. One of the many implications of these cost-benefit analyses is that investing in literacy for marginalized groups becomes a last resort—that is, investing in literacy for marginalized groups is an action taken only when it serves the interests of the state or the institution.

Brandt’s analysis of military-sponsored literacy programs suggests that the rhetoric of military readiness doesn’t just provide an exigency for justifying the expense of reforming school lunch programs—it provides a terministic screen that shapes our understanding of food, schools, and student bodies. Kenneth Burke argues in *Language As Symbolic Action* that language never emerges as a one-to-one reflection of the thing being spoken about, but rather

emerges in the form of a particular terminology that shapes meaning. In other words, there is no language that exists outside of some sort of frame or, to use Burke's phrase, terministic screen. A terministic screen functions as a filter that brings certain information to the fore and that makes sense of phenomena by highlighting certain points of likeness or dissimilarity to other phenomena. For Burke, understanding the importance of terministic screens is vital for two reasons. First, because "[e]ven if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (45, emphasis in the original). In other words, any screen is not an expansive representation of reality, but a selective one that may be covering over other truths. Because of this, it's worth asking why a particular screen—like the terministic screen of war and military readiness—carries so much weight.

Second, as selections of reality, these screens encourage or support certain lines of action. That is, a screen isn't just a convenient metaphorical comparison, but an entire meaning-making system that makes possible and justifies particular responses while making other kinds of responses seem impossible or illogical. For example, interventions into school lunch programs ranging from federal overhauls to nutrition standards to the increased interest in maintaining school gardens as a source of fresh vegetables have attracted a lot of public interest and attention as a way of addressing increasing rates of childhood obesity, while proposed solutions like regulating food advertising aimed at children or regulating the use of chemicals shown to increase the body's propensity towards obesity have failed to gain significant momentum. We can explain the difference in the popularity of these different proposed solutions at least partially by recognizing that while interventions into school lunch programs fit within the screen of war (especially given the role of schools as recruitment sites and the established history of using

school lunch programs to increase the viable recruitment pool) while increased regulations of advertising and industry would challenge the basis of the neoliberal economic system contemporary wars are fighting to maintain.

The specific screen of war that “Mission: Readiness” depends on is important precisely because it is so much greater than just the work of this one lobbying group. Rather, the group’s use of war as a screen isn’t just about getting people’s attention but about referencing and working within an established way of thinking about the world. The most powerful screens, like the screen of war, come to function as meta-rhetorics that shape what is granted the status of authoritative knowledge, ultimately working to reinforce a robust set of ideological assumptions. Responding to a national post-9/11 discourse framing terrorism in the language of war (rather than, for example, framing terrorism in the language of crime), George Lakoff and Evan Frisch argue in “Five Years After 9/11: Drop the War Metaphor,” that the use of war metaphors worked to redefine patriotism as being in favor of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and justified a variety of conservative actions such as diverting resources away from social programs and towards the military. Lakoff and Frisch write:

Once adopted, the war metaphor allowed the president to assume war powers, which made him politically immune from serious criticism and gave him extraordinary *domestic* power to carry the agenda of the radical right: Power to shift money and resources away from social needs and to military related industries. [...] Power to set up a domestic surveillance system to spy on our citizens and to intimidate political enemies. Power over political discussion, since war trumps all other topics. In short, power to reshape America to the vision of the radical right. (Emphasis in the original, np)

In other words, framing terrorism within a metaphor of war did more than justify military attacks on countries represented as harboring terrorists—the war metaphor functions as a screen that enables a particular set of domestic policies that undermine privacy rights, social support, and the ability to critique the actions of the state. More than a convenient way of speaking, the screen of war entails a whole set of conservative, fear-based ideologies that encourage citizen action in ways that support the economic and political interests of the militarized neoliberal state.

When applied to the question of school lunch programs, the screen of war and military readiness works to justify an investment in childhood nutrition, which gets shaped as a necessary cost of national security rather than a form of social support. Indeed, a recent *Al Jazeera America* article reported that funding for school meal programs that will provide children in food-insecure areas with three meals a day as part of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) has been secured through billions of dollars in cuts to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP), also commonly known as food stamp programs (Resnikoff). The irony of making severe cuts to a food assistance program that helped to feed nearly one in five children in 2014 in the name of fighting childhood hunger starts to make more sense when we recognize it as a shift of funds away from the social welfare programs demonized by neoliberal interests and towards school lunch programs endorsed by the military as key to future recruitment efforts (“Census”).

The entrenchment of a neoliberal economic and social philosophy means that the language of profit has become thoroughly tied to the language of war. Indeed, in the mission statement made available on the “Mission: Readiness” website, the group insists, “Investing early in the upcoming generation is critical to securing our nation’s future” (“About Us”). The economic lingo of neoliberalism functions as an added layer to the terministic screen of war, so that we operate not just within a militarized screen, but within a screen that sees war as a means

of protecting economic interests and securing Western control of the global market. Jennifer Wingard addresses this linking of neoliberal economic interests and the logic of war in her book *Branded Bodies, Rhetoric, and the Neoliberal Nation-State*. In the book, Wingard argues that in our neoliberal moment, we are seeing a shift away from a concern about rights and a movement towards an emphasis on the use of bodies as commodities—a shift not unlike a screen of war that justifies the erosion of privacy rights while envisioning the value of school lunch programs in terms of the potential use-value of the bodies being fed through those programs. Wingard’s work is especially useful in highlighting the racialized logic at work in the commodification of bodies—a logic that builds on the racialization of war in order to bolster a domestic system of labor that relies on a raced underclass denied the benefits of legal and cultural citizenship.

Wingard argues that the construction of a raced underclass used to serve the interests of capitalism without the promise of citizenship is achieved through the branding of bodies. Branding, in this sense, works just like the branding of companies and products as part of an advertising strategy. Brands are an effective marketing tool because they assign a core set of values or the vision of a particular kind of life to the images or products associated with a company, not only attracting consumers, but securing their loyalty through the promise of “buying in” to a shared identity. As a discursive technology that Wingard argues serves the interests of neoliberal governmentality,

Branding of bodies and the assembling of those brands work to turn ‘others’ into rhetorical products, much like consumable products in advertising. Those products, then, are circulated and used to establish a core national identity in a time of economic and political flux. Part of the reason branding works is because it creates an object upon which the American public can focus their emotions. Branding redirects the anxieties that

the material conditions of neoliberal capital produce through unemployment, economic disenfranchisement, and changing demographics. (ix)

That is, the branding of bodies works to safeguard the interests of neoliberal governmentality by shifting public attention away from the material conditions brought about by the conditions of neoliberalism and instead assigning meaning—in the form of a set of values, assumptions, promises, or threats—to particular bodies. These branded bodies then come to signify either the root of the social problems that lead citizens to feel anxious or the promise of a particular kind of life and identity that provides a sense of stability and meaning in a historical moment otherwise marked by economic instability and changing political meanings. We see this dynamic at work in Biltkoff's analysis of the rhetoric of obesity after 9/11. In this rhetoric, the fat body is represented as ominous and threatening in a way that detracts from the aggressive warring of the state while working to achieve thinness and fitness become a way of firmly identifying oneself with the values of the nation.

The branding of bodies works through affective identification, a concept Wingard borrows from Wendy Hesford's work in "*Kairos* and the Geopolitical Rhetorics of Global Sex Work and Video Advocacy." According to Wingard, "Affective identification uses language and images to create responses which are often extralinguistic—visceral or somatic. Affective identification works as a backdrop of feeling that resonates with histories, rhetorics, and images that are not evoked directly, but that circulate to connect our memories and bodies" (9). As a rhetorical strategy, branding concentrates on emotion rather than logic, speaking to the anxieties and desires of citizens rather than an analysis of the material conditions of their lives. A citizen might identify with affective brands like the upstanding, mainstream homosexual; the corporate career woman "leaning in;" the young, casually dressed tech entrepreneur; or the lithe,

environmental yogi. But these implicitly raced (white) and classed (upwardly mobile) brands that work to build a unified sense of the nation are shaped in no small part through the branding of marginalized bodies, such that media is replete with images of the dangerous and uncivilized Arab man, the criminal Black man, the illegal Latino laborer, the brown single mother, and the angry and riotous urban poor. The technology of branding that works to support neoliberal governmentality thus cannot be divorced from the continued marginalization of raced and classed bodies, both within and outside of the U.S. Indeed, as Wingard writes, “Ultimately, branding leads to the utter dehumanization of marginalized people” (xiv).

Branding bodies depends on the dehumanization of poor people of color as a tool to maintain social stratification by encouraging the white middle class to identify themselves with the economic elite rather than with the disenfranchised with whom they increasingly share the conditions of job insecurity, unaffordable education, eroding rights, and increased commodification as workers. In other words, branding bodies supports neoliberal governmentality in part by discouraging resistance to the material conditions of neoliberal life. In the process, branding bodies aids in establishing and maintaining structures that support market interests over citizen rights by replacing an ethical concern for individuals with an economic concern about costs. As Wingard argues, “[B]randed bodies become void of any individualizing markers. [...] Individuals become data sets to be given over to authorities, corporations, medical services, and so on. It is through the monitoring of those statistics that the state and other powerful entities (private security companies, insurance carriers, corporations) monitor and allow individuals to act” (12-13). It is significant, then, that with branding the body—which can be easily objectified, commodified, and rotely categorized—becomes more central than the whole person, who would be harder to reduce to simplified data sets. In the contemporary

rhetoric of the obesity crisis, a dogged focus on health care costs, rates of disease, the Body Mass Index (BMI), and rates of ineligibility from military service work to cast fatness as a drain on political and economic systems in ways that allow for the dehumanization and objectification of fat bodies. The representation of human experience through the lens of a cost/benefit analyses means that the role of the good citizen becomes more thoroughly defined as a body that costs the least amount of money.

But branding bodies is not purely a technology of distraction. Wingard argues that much of the working of branding occurs through the assemblage of brands in order to produce a greater sense of threat. As she applies the concept of assemblage to branding, Wingard draws on Jasbir Puar's work in *Terrorist Assemblages* in which Puar argues that the culture of fear built around terror after 9/11 is produced not through the identification of a singular, tangible threat, but rather through a networking of features, histories, events, and bodies of various "Others" in a way that treats them as contiguous parts of a much larger, always-shifting network of threats. This assemblage produces a sense of fear so pervasive and so great that it justifies the militarized and invasive actions of neoliberal governmentality. Wingard argues that branded bodies situated as threatening others, for example the Mexican immigrant portrayed as a "bandit" that has come to "steal" American jobs and culture, is an assemblage of contemporary anxieties around immigration and a depressed economy and past cultural histories like the representation of "the Frito Bandito" (22). Through the assemblage of multiple brands, the branded body of the Mexican immigrant becomes linked in the U.S. cultural imaginary with other "Others," like the brand of the Muslim Terrorist, reproducing a culture of fear and justifying militarized action in the Middle East and along the U.S.-Mexico border. In our contemporary moment, viewing the world through the screen of war actively depends on the branding of bodies as a means of

quickly categorizing bodies, both domestically and abroad and in ways that depend on markers of race and class, as either allies or enemies. Positioning fat as another part of the nebulous threat facing the nation means that fatness becomes another way of marking poor bodies of color as suspicious and threatening. In other words, branding the fat body as threatening allows for fatness to be assembled with other racialized brands in order to reinforce and justify the labeling of particular bodies as problematic for the nation.

It is precisely this question of which bodies get labeled as threatening to national security and national identity that makes the intertwined terministic screen of war and the concept of branding bodies pertinent to analyzing the work of “Mission: Readiness.” The exigency for the group’s work—specifically, their concern that rates of obesity, criminality, and inability to meet educational standards—is already implicitly raced and classed given that these are all problems that manifest disproportionately in poor communities, both urban and rural, as well as in African American, Latino, and Native American populations. The group is attempting to mobilize the cultural weight given to discourses of military readiness and national security in order to improve school programs—or, as Brandt might argue, they are using military interests to justify investing in marginalized groups. But this positions these groups as “problem” bodies that have the potential to pose a significant threat to the nation. In the section that follows, I will take up a rhetorical analysis of the national “Mission: Readiness” reports in order to show what difference the screen of military readiness makes and to show the “branding” of the bad citizen body at work. More specifically, I’ll argue that weight does not function as a separate, contained threat, but rather functions as another floating, threatening characteristic that, through the process of assemblage, works to deepen the perception of brown bodies, both within and outside of the U.S., as suspicious and thus not deserving of full citizenship.

Analyzing “Mission: Readiness”

Recruiting in the Lunchroom: Establishing an Exigency for “Mission: Readiness”

In order to bring about the kinds of reforms the group would like to see, “Mission: Readiness” lobbies at both the state and national levels, pushing lawmakers to introduce or support legislation the group believes will effectively increase the number of youth eligible for military service. To support their lobbying efforts, the group has released five national reports: *Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve* (2009), *Too Fat to Fight* (2010), *Unfit to Fight* (2011), *Still Too Fat to Fight* (2012), and *Our Troubled Education System: A Threat to National Security* (2013).¹¹ Throughout their reports and their lobbying efforts, “Mission: Readiness” relies heavily on the rhetoric of war and terror, labels specific bodies as either threats or heroes, frequently invokes the language of national security, and argues that “[t]he best aircraft, ships, and satellite-guided weaponry alone will not be enough to keep our country strong” (*Ready, Willing and Unable*). The sense of fear and threat invoked through the rhetoric of terror is amplified by sensational, panic-inducing claims about obesity, often featured in bold-faced type, such as the claim that “today’s children may be the first generation of Americans to live shorter lives than their parents” (*Unfit to Fight*, 2-3). Much like John F. Kennedy’s arguments in “The Soft American,” “Mission: Readiness” depends on the rhetoric of crisis as it ties anxieties over threats to national security originating outside U.S. borders to a perceived threat to the citizen body originating from within. Like Kennedy, the group is guided by the belief that if American children are weak or sick, the country’s future is likewise compromised. As “Mission: Readiness” argues at the end of their report *Too Fat to Fight*, “The United States military stands

¹¹ In addition to these five national reports, “Mission: Readiness” has also released a number of reports aimed at lawmakers in states like Oklahoma, California, Michigan, and Mississippi where there are a significant number of youth ineligible for military service for one reason or another. These reports primarily focus on childhood obesity and are simply more targeted versions of the national reports that highlight state-specific data on obesity rates and recruiting statistics.

ready to protect the American people, but if our nation does not help ensure that future generations grow up to be healthy and fit, that will become increasingly difficult. The health of our children and our national security are at risk. America must act decisively” (7). Like “The Soft American,” “Mission: Readiness” urges its audience to understand interventions in childhood health and fitness as key to preserving the strength of the nation, while also allowing the audience to see the maintenance of their own health and fitness as an act of patriotism.

As a way to legitimize the group’s concern with school lunch and fitness programs, “Mission: Readiness” aligns itself in its reports with the passage of the 1946 National School Lunch Act. Signed into law by Harry S. Truman after the end of World War II, the National School Lunch Act gives subsidies to public schools in order to provide free or reduced-cost lunches to qualified students. While most of the support offered to schools through the law comes in the form of cash subsidies, the law also contains a provision that entitles public school to receive surplus food from the USDA. The law was prompted, in part, by urging on the part of the military to improve childhood nutrition as a means of ensuring a strong base of future recruits. According to “Mission: Readiness,” the military discovered during World War II that 40% of rejected recruits were turned away because they were malnourished and underweight (*Unfit to Fight*, 2). While ensuring military readiness was a significant motivator behind the passage of the National School Lunch Act, the law was also passed as a way to subsidize agriculture. The law was intended to stabilize food prices by allowing the USDA to give agricultural surpluses directly to public schools rather than allowing surpluses to flood the market and drive down food prices. As quoted in *Too Fat to Fight*, the language in the National School Lunch Act describes the law “*as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health*

and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutrition agricultural commodities and other food" (6, emphasis in the original).

In addition to establishing a historical precedent for their concern, the group's efforts to establish a longstanding link between the military and school lunches also helps to shore up the support of the growing number of people who blame rising rates of childhood obesity on the lacking nutritional quality of school food programs. Critics of the nutritional quality of school lunches believe that the matter is nationally pressing given the rapidly increasing number of children that depend on school lunch programs for regular meals. Particularly in communities where there are a significant number of low-income students, many schools have started supplementing their meal programs by offering students breakfast before school begins and running school meal programs throughout the summer to ensure that students who depend on schools for regular meals do not go hungry when class is not in session. The number of students benefitting from free and reduced-cost lunches has been growing steadily since the recession began in 2008. From 2008-2009, there was a 6.3% increase nationally in students benefitting from the program, with the number of students enrolled growing from 16.5 million to nearly 20 million (Eisler and Weise). By the end of the 2011 fiscal year, 31 million children in the U.S. were receiving free or reduced-cost lunches (*National School Lunch Program*). In some cities and counties, the vast majority of students are enrolled in the program. For example, in Jackson, Mississippi, 86% of students receive subsidized meals (Eisler and Weise).

Critics of school lunch programs argue that because the National School Lunch Act provides schools with agricultural surpluses, school meals tend to incorporate a lot of processed foods made from subsidized crops like corn and soy—processed foods that are higher in calories and lower in nutritional value. The issue of the kinds of foods made available through

agricultural subsidies are amplified by an ongoing need among schools to cut costs, resulting in depleted cafeteria staffs who, rather than preparing foods onsite, primarily reheat self-stable frozen and canned goods for students to eat. The National School Lunch Program has also been marked by controversies over efforts among lawmakers to stretch the categorization of particular foods to meet existing nutritional standards. As a response to laws that cut funding for school lunch programs, the Reagan administration infamously issued suggestions for food substitutions to meet nutritional standards like the idea that condiments like pickle relish or ketchup might be counted as vegetables. More recently, in 2011, Congress passed an agricultural appropriations bill that declared that the scant 1/8 cup of tomato sauce on a slice of pizza could be considered a serving of vegetables. While concerns about the nutritional quality of school lunches has been longstanding, more and more critics are arguing that many school meals are a collection of glorified junk foods that are contributing in no small way to increased rates of childhood obesity. The group's efforts to locate "Mission: Readiness" as part of the continuing history of military investment in school lunches as a way of ensuring a healthy recruitment base is thus all the more powerful in terms of appealing to audiences given widespread concerns about the effect school lunch programs are having on child nutrition.

Combining a fear-laden rhetoric with assurances that the military has and will continue to use school lunch programs as a way to intervene in concerns about readiness, "Mission: Readiness" presents itself as a balm to the very anxieties about health and security that their reports raise. In their reports, the group continually emphasizes the number of American youth ineligible to enlist on the basis of weight. "Mission: Readiness" reminds readers in *Unfit to Fight*, for example, that "childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past 30 years and approximately one in four 17- to 24-year-olds in the United States is too overweight to serve in

the military” (1). These constant reminders are positioned as though they are warnings of a massive potential security breach—as though there is a chance that the U.S. would only be able to deploy a fraction of its military might. However, in the following year’s report, the group argues, “As retired admirals and general, we know that America is not powerless in the face of this insidious epidemic. We do not have to keep surrendering ever more of our young people to obesity. We do not need to keep jeopardizing our national security because three quarters of our young people cannot serve in the military, a quarter of them because they are overweight” (*Still Too Fat to Fight*, 6). In *Unfit to Fight*, the group closes the report by calling for “decisive action” from Congress to intervene in the lack of physical education many children receive in school—a call made with the urgency of someone calling for war. In other words, “Mission: Readiness” does a significant amount of affective work throughout their reports to create a fear of an imminent threat presented by obesity, even though that threat does not actually seem to exist.

Despite the group’s insistence that the U.S. has the makings of a military readiness crisis on its hands, the U.S. military has not struggled to meet their recruiting goals in recent years. Indeed, the recruiting data from the 2012 fiscal year indicates that all active branches of the military met their recruitment goals and, with the exception of the Army National Guard who met 95% of their goal, all reserve military branches met or significantly exceeded their goals (“DOD Announces”). The 2010 Military Recruitment report from the National Priorities Project (NPP) shows that in addition to meeting or exceeding recruiting goals, the quality of recruits has actually increased, making recruitment an increasingly competitive process. According to the NPP, because of the number and quality of potential recruits, the Army has even been able to raise its educational standard for recruits, prompting the discontinuance of a program that allows enlistees to earn their GED as part of their training. Recent changes in military and foreign

policy like the end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the U.S.’s withdrawal from Iraq, the beginning of plans to withdraw from Afghanistan, and the end of the official ban on women in combat all seem poised to further ease some of the obstacles in the recruiting process.

“Mission: Readiness” acknowledges in several of its reports that military recruiters are currently having little trouble meeting their goals; however, the group repeatedly credits the economic recession and weak economic recovery with providing an eager and well-qualified recruiting base despite the high rate of youth ineligible for service. In the introduction to *Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve*, the group argues that despite promising recruitment data, “We cannot rely on a continuation of what may be the worst recession since the Great Depression to ensure that America has enough qualified men and women to defend our country” (1). Here the group seems to offer readers a pessimistic vision of the future in which a strong, stable economy poses a threat to the strength of U.S. defenses. But more than that, the argument that “Mission: Readiness” makes that ensuring a strong military recruitment base for the future needs to be a primary concern of today works to normalize the idea that the U.S. will inevitably find itself in another military conflict large enough to demand a significant increase in troops. We can hope for an improvement in the economy, “Mission: Readiness” tells us, but we will always be plagued by war, making it both appropriate and necessary to imagine school children as the potential soldiers who will do the work of war.

As “Mission: Readiness” argues that we need to attend to the possibility of having an inadequate recruitment base in the future, they reference the years just preceding the 2007 housing market crash and subsequent recession as a moment in recent history when recruiters struggled to meet projected demands for 50,000 additional soldiers to staff the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In *Too Fat to Fight*, the group specifically references an article from the Associated

Press on the recruiting data from 2005, a year when the military experienced its first recruiting shortage since 1999 and its worst shortage since 1979 (Warren). While an Army spokesperson quoted in the article attributes the shortage to a strong national economy, the article cites evidence that intensified anti-war sentiment played a significant role in the recruiting slump. As ambivalence about U.S. involvement in Iraq grew, fewer soldiers reenlisted at the end of their contracts, parents expressed more resistance to their children enlisting, and anti-war activists began targeting school recruiters, impeding their access to student data and highlighting problematic recruiting practices. The military responded to the recruiting challenges by compromising some of their educational standards, accepting a higher rate of recruits who had not finished high school or who had earned low scores on aptitude tests. “Mission: Readiness” reports that the Army tried to address their recruiting shortage by accepting recruits who could pass physical fitness tests but had a greater percentage of body fat than typically allowed. In *Still Too Fat to Fight*, the group explains, “The Army found that those overweight recruits were 47 percent more likely to experience a musculoskeletal injury (such as a sprain or stress fracture) and that more overweight recruits had to recycle back through boot camp,” thus leading to an end of attempts to accept overweight recruits (4).

By referencing the recruiting shortages experienced at the height of the simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, “Mission: Readiness” reminds readers that recruiting shortages have been a part of recent U.S. history and draws on memory of intense U.S. anxiety about terrorism to argue for the need for state intervention into the high rate of youth ineligible for military service. While “Mission: Readiness” wants to frame recruiting challenges purely in terms of youth eligibility and the economy, the erasure of the role anti-war sentiment played in the 2005 recruiting shortage normalizes the actions of the military and treats past, present, and

future U.S. military action as though it is or would be universally supported. So at the same time that “Mission: Readiness” normalizes the idea that the future will be marked by war, the group proactively diverts the concern about these future wars away from questions about the conditions of and justifications for these wars and instead focuses purely on the question of who will be prepared to go into battle.

This normalization of war is disturbing given both the tendency of U.S. foreign policy towards what Jorge Mariscal refers to as “pre-emptive wars and wars of choice” and the populations being targeted as a potential recruitment base to fight these wars (3). In an article for *Sojourners* called “The Poverty Draft,” Mariscal argues that “[i]f recent history is any indication, our politicians will use our military less for national defense than for adventures premised on the control of resources, strategic advantage, and ideological fantasies. [...] Exactly who will have to fight and die in those wars will be determined by economic class” (4). In his article, Mariscal takes on the question of whether or not a “poverty draft” exists and argues that while the military may not explicitly recruit “poor” youth, it does actively recruit those youth who have limited economic and education opportunities. And, as Mariscal notes, these recruitment strategies often involve campaigns targeting specific racial groups, such as the Army’s “Hispanic H2 Tour” to recruit Latino youth and the “Takin’ it to the Streets Tour” to increase recruitment rates among African American youth. Recruiters not only promise educational benefits, job training, and a steady pay check for potential recruits, but they also offer non-economic benefits like a pathway to citizenship for immigrants or merely the opportunity for members of certain minority groups to prove that they are “American.”

When “Mission: Readiness” admits that the recession makes recruitment easier, they support the idea that military recruitment targets those with fewer economic and education

opportunities—a recession just means that more people have fewer options. But “Mission: Readiness” is suggesting that we need to invest in those who will still have limited options when the economy recovers. As it forecasts a future marked by war and a return to recruitment strategies that have to more actively target raced, classed youth with few options, “Mission: Readiness” advances a militarized worldview that not only normalizes war and commodifies the bodies of potential recruits, but that also works to uphold patriarchal values. “Mission: Readiness” is positioning itself as a benevolent force working to improve the health and education of American youth at the same time that it is targeting poor kids and kids of color as a “resource base” for future “adventuring”—that is, for future wars that, given ongoing trends, are likely to be wars of choice that reinforce and deepen racialized stigma against foreign Others. In his *Sojourners* article, Mariscal cites a 2007 Associate Press analysis that indicated that more than 50% of soldiers killed in Iraq came from towns with poverty rates that exceed the national average (2). While “Mission: Readiness” may not be consciously or explicitly working to ensure that future wars are fought disproportionately by poor youth of color, their efforts nonetheless seem oriented towards realizing such a possibility.

The Statistical Work of Branding: Turning People into Numbers

Still Too Fat to Fight features a prominent text box early in the report containing a quote from Retired U.S. Air Force General Richard E. Hawley arguing, “In the civilian world, unfit or overweight employees can impact the bottom line. But in our line of work, lives are on the line and our national security is at stake” (2). Hawley’s quote takes for granted that all fat bodies act as an economic drain, and while the American public might be willing to tolerate the assumed economic drain of the fat body in the private sector, Hawley urges readers to see the fat body as a fatal wrench in the defense machine. It’s one thing to have a body seen as unreasonably

expensive; it's another thing to have a body that cannot physically protect its fellow citizens. But for all of the emphasis that "Mission: Readiness" places on the potential defensive disaster of not having enough bodies to fight the country's wars, their actual assessment of the risks of out-of-shape soldiers is focused intensely on the actual costs associated with caring for both current and veteran soldiers. In *Too Fat to Fight*, "Mission: Readiness" explains that the costs of obesity do not end with the number of youth turned away during the recruiting process. They write:

Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-time enlistees before their contracts are up because of weight problems; the military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$50,000 for each man or woman, thus spending more than \$60 million a year. That figure pales in comparison, however, to the cost of treating the obesity-related problems of military personnel and their families under the military's health care system, TRICARE, or the cost of treating obesity-related problems under the veterans' health care system. (4)

The group goes on to discuss the costs associated with the treatment of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer as obesity-related health care costs, and cite a estimate from The American Public Health Association suggesting that obesity will add \$344 billion dollars to national health care costs by the year 2018 (4).

In the following year's report, *Still Too Fat to Fight*, when "Mission: Readiness" discusses the Army's unsuccessful attempt to try accepting physically fit but overweight recruits in the face of recruiting shortage, the group also talks more broadly about the costs associated with recruiting efforts. They note that Congress responded to the 2005 recruiting shortages by significantly increasing the number of military recruiters and offering larger sign-on bonuses for new recruits. In addition to arguing that overweight recruits are at a higher risk for sprains and

stress fractures and more likely to have to repeat boot camp, “Mission: Readiness” notes that recruits who meet the weight requirements but are not in the habit of exercising regularly “are more prone to leg and ankle injuries” (4). The group goes on to summarize the consequences of overweight, unfit, and undernourished recruits, explaining, “Injured soldiers often cannot be deployed with their units and a soldier’s failure to pass the military’s physical fitness tests can result in discharge. *Worse*, more soldiers were evacuated from Iraq or Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than for combat injuries” (4, emphasis mine). While “Mission: Readiness” does not throw out any concrete numbers or draw attention to the associated costs of recruiting shortages or injured soldiers, the common thread between concerns about recruiting shortages, musculoskeletal injuries, and soldiers either sent back through boot camp or discharged is precisely the issue of cost. All of these issues amount to increased recruiting, health care, and training costs for the military.

So despite the group’s continual warnings that the U.S. might someday find itself in a position in which it does not have an adequate number of fit soldiers to defend itself, this discussion of the economic costs of obesity for the military suggests that the primary threat “Mission: Readiness” sees being posed by overweight and unfit youth is an economic one. A large number of youth ineligible for military service, including overweight or unfit youth, have the potential to make recruiting a more costly venture. But the most troubling aspect of the group’s discussion of the costs associated with overweight and unfit recruits is the way this cost/benefit analysis spills out into discussions of the conditions of war and care for veterans. According to “Mission: Readiness,” a good recruit (and, by extension, a good citizen) is one who does not cost an unreasonable amount of money, and it’s clear from their anxieties over sprains and fractures that a large part of what determines the appropriate cost of training and caring for

soldiers is determined by rigid ideas of what warfare looks like. In other words, “Mission: Readiness” suggests that injuries sustained from enemy attacks are a legitimate military cost, but that injuries sustained from the non-combative, daily work of occupation and increasingly technological warfare are not. And, in fact, these non-combative injuries are “worse” than the prospect of discharging unfit soldiers.

At the same time that “Mission: Readiness” argues that national security depends on the current and future service of American soldiers, with the potential sacrifice of life and limb that this service entails, the group attempts to relieve the military of some of the responsibility of caring for those soldiers and their dependents. When the group argues that greatest military cost associated with obesity are the health care costs to treat what are described as “obesity-related problems,” it implies that the cost of ongoing health care for soldiers and veterans is an unreasonable burden for the military. These health care costs—the cost of treating a variety of conditions including diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and a variety of physical disabilities—can be treated as unreasonable because of the intertwined logics of a rhetoric of obesity that says that fatness is the result of poor personal choices and a neoliberal social logic that believes that individual situations are the result of individual choices and thus not the responsibility of government or its institutions. In short, “Mission: Readiness” is arguing that the military should not have to assume responsibility for a potentially massive number of health care costs because it is assumed that a good soldier-citizen should have been able to avoid those health problems in the first place.

In “Composing Queerness and Disability,” Robert McRuer argues that “the bourgeois culture of the past few centuries has only become more obsessed with the composed, self-possessed, ‘normal’ subject, properly located in a hierarchical social order” (153). In other

words, what has come to signify good citizenship is someone who stays in line, does not cost the state money, does not make demands, and does not disrupt the established order of things. Injury and disease are costly disruptions. “Mission: Readiness” believes that the military can make an exception for injuries sustained from enemy attacks, assuming the costs and responsibilities of dealing with these disruptions, but not for the ongoing reality of bodies. This way of talking about the military costs of obesity is part of a larger trend of refusing governmental or institutional responsibility for the material effects of neoliberalism, globalization, and militarism. We see this trend also at work in ongoing controversies over the treatment (or lack thereof) of mental health issues in veterans, as well as in the general tendency to associate rising instances of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer as the result of individual lifestyle choices rather than as linked to a complex set of possible causes including the conditions of systemic poverty and systemic racism, the health and nutrition implications of corporate-oriented agri-business, the shifting daily conditions of labor in the U.S., and the widespread use and deregulation of dangerous chemicals and toxins.

The way in which “Mission: Readiness” discusses the costs associated with obesity ultimately positions recruits, soldiers, and veterans who are variously overweight, unfit, injured, diseased, or disabled as potentially threatening to the stability of U.S. defenses. Part of the means through which the group is able to categorize the same bodies that have or will actually do the work of defense as problematic is by turning those people into numbers. To return to Wingard’s discussion of the way in which neoliberal governmentality vacates individual, human characteristics in favor of data sets, “Mission: Readiness” can blame current and former U.S. soldiers for what they argue are undue costs to the military without losing their readers’ sympathies because they substitute the image of individual soldiers with a series of shocking

injury statistics and health care cost estimates. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the “Mission: Readiness” reports is how absent the actual body is. That is, even though the body is at the crux of the reports dealing with obesity, the body—fat or otherwise—is very rarely represented, visually or through description. Instead, the body is represented through the various kinds of costs and statistics described above, as well as through a variety of charts and graphs. A substitute for the (often headless) images of overweight bodies frequently used in mainstream media to illustrate the obesity crisis, these charts and graphs work to provide a visual representation of the need for state intervention in rates of childhood obesity.

The ideological work happening in the representation of data through these charts and graphs is perhaps most striking at the opening of *Still Too Fat to Fight*. In the report, “Mission: Readiness” compares the numbers of calories from junk food consumed by children at school to the weight of an aircraft carrier. In the report’s summary, the only image featured is a larger, centered image of the ship in question. The use of this image not only quantifies caloric consumption in terms of something truly massive, but associates weight with the machines of war, encouraging readers to think of weight gain as something that directly affects access to defense technology. The same report includes a chart in the appendix that indicates the percent of obese adults in each state, as well as the number of pounds adults in each state would need to collectively lose in order to have no obese or overweight people in the state. This table and the data it represents is questionable for a number of reasons, but the most shocking thing about the chart is that it includes a column that calculates the number of pounds each state would need to lose into the equivalent weight of Abrams tanks. So, for example, the chart indicates that the state of Mississippi would need to collectively lose 3,800,000 pounds to reduce its 49% obesity rate among 18- to 24-year-olds to zero, a weight “Mission: Readiness” calculates as equal to 32

Abrams tanks. In case readers struggle to envision the sheer mass of 32 Abrams tanks, the table includes an image of a tank to drive the point home.

In both of these examples, the individual body is vacated and translated into a data set, which is then rematerialized in the form of heavy war machinery. These images conjure up a whole set of histories and associations that then determine how readers think about these objectified bodies. These images encourage readers to see the collective weight of U.S. citizens as frightening and as much a threat to national defenses as a destroyer or a fleet of tanks. In *Too Fat to Fight*, the body is rematerialized in the form of stock photos of vending machines; in *Unfit to Fight*, readers are presented with an image of fast food in deep fryer baskets. The ideas readers associate with these stock images—for example, the belief that fatness is a matter of poor nutritional choices or a lack of will power to remain healthy—are assembled with the images of tanks and aircraft carriers. The argument presented through the use of these images is that fat bodies are threatening to the U.S. military and American life and that eliminating the threat is just a matter of properly disciplining citizen bodies. The fact that individual, idiosyncratic bodies are largely absent from the reports makes it easier for readers to accept this argument because they do not have to consider the complications of individual circumstances or more nuanced social histories that might challenge the grand narrative “Mission: Readiness” presents.

Visualizing the Threat, Visualizing the Hero

Although the group does not offer a specific image of the kinds of bodies they believe are threatening national security, rendering those bodies instead as data sets and cost estimates, images presented by “Mission: Readiness” members outside of the group’s national reports give a clearer picture of the way the group is branding the fat body. In 2012, Lieutenant General Mark Hertling, an Army commanding General for nearly forty years, gave a TEDx talk called “Obesity

as a National Security Issue” meant to publicize the work of “Mission: Readiness.” To help his audience visualize the problem of youth made ineligible for military service because of weight, Hertling began his talk by showing a single image that he argued encapsulated a serious threat to national security—a stock image of an overweight, white pre-teen boy sitting on the couch and watching television. The television is pulled so close to the couch that the boy is no more than a foot or two from the screen. As he sits in front of the screen, the boy is eating from a bag of potato chips with an open bottle of soda sitting on a nearby table. The image is taken from over the boy’s shoulder so that his face is mostly obscured. The image is designed, of course, to reiterate to the viewer the common wisdom of “obesity crisis” discourses: weight gain happens through a combination of inactivity and poor nutritional choices and losing weight is really just a matter of having the will power to drop the junk food and step away from the screen.

As Hertling invokes this image of an overweight boy as a visualization of a significant threat to U.S. security, Hertling asks his audience to imagine the citizen body—and more specifically, the body of a child—as a potential enemy. As the images works to identify a particular threat, the fact that it is so generic becomes especially powerful. Since the child is pictured in a way that obscures any kind of identifying features, the viewer is simultaneously compelled to objectify individual bodies that could be labeled as similarly threatening and to imagine themselves or their children as potentially being labeled a threat. Like terrorism, the threat posed by the citizen body is ubiquitous and difficult to identify, requiring constant vigilance. Hertling asks his audience to turn this vigilance inward, urging them to “be fearless” about making personal changes to their diet and exercise routines, arguing that citizens cannot rely on the government or other organizations to deal with the problem of obesity.

Hertling's talk has the ring of a battle cry, quite similar to John F. Kennedy's call to action in "The Soft American," urging his audience to embrace the continual policing and disciplining of individual bodies—the bodies of children, in particular—in the name of patriotism and national security. Given the shared ideological foundation with Kennedy, the fact that the child represented in the image is white is significant because, as his body is labeled a threat, the viewer does not question his literal or cultural citizenship. Because he is white and male, the child represents a privileged category for whom citizenship and its attendant rights is assumed. The image Hertling shows is of the "quintessential" American child—the future of the nation—gone wrong. In other words, the fair-skinned boy that should represent the future of American power and American values is instead shown in crisis, threatened and made threatening by behavioral and environmental factors on the homefront.

The image of the body in crisis is not the only body that takes form in Hertling's talk. Explaining how he came to see obesity as a concern for the military in his career, Hertling goes on to talk about his experience as a graduate student training to teach physical education at West Point. He describes being "issued" the body of a man who died at the age of 46 from heart disease to use for study in his physiology class. At the urging of his professor, Hertling named his corpse to humanize him and to help him remember, as he dissected the corpse, that this body had once been a real, living person. Hertling says he decided to name him "Charlie." In addition to suffering from heart disease, "Charlie" was also fat, and Hertling describes his frustration at having to work harder, he believed, than his classmates as he cut through the adipose tissue in "Charlie's" body to get to his chest cavity. As the class worked to identify major arteries surrounding the heart, Hertling says that instead of being rubbery as described by the professor, "Charlie's" arteries broke off in his hand. While Hertling positions himself as a benevolent party

in this story—humanizing the corpse by giving it a name and continuing to use that name as he tells the story decades later—his story is rife with shaming lessons about the body.

Like the child watching television who is shown faceless, “Charlie” is denied a real name. We instead know him by a generic name given to him by someone about to dissect his body—a name that has even been used as military code to refer to the enemy. Hertling tells us that he’s “humanizing” the corpse by giving him a name to make him seem like a nicer person while he is discursively laying this man’s body bare to a public being told that bodies like that of “Charlie” are not just bad, but dangerous. In 2007, psychologist Charlotte Cooper coined the term “headless fatties” to refer to the all-too-common tendency in journalism to accompany stories about health and obesity with images of fat bodies shown from the shoulders down. In cropping out the heads of fat people, Cooper argues, “we [fat people] are presented as objects, as symbols of a collective problem, as something to be talked about.” Like the “headless fatties” Cooper discusses, the two portraits of individual fat bodies Hertling provides in his talk come to symbolize, in their objectified state, a threat to national identity, military power, and productive labor. Employing versions of the headless fatty trope helps Hertling, and “Mission: Readiness” by extension, brand the fat body as a threat—that is, to present the fat body as a set of identifiable features associated with a host of cultural assumptions and historical representations that treat the fat body as immoral, undisciplined, weak, pathological, and undesirable. Shown through the lens of military readiness and national security, this branded body is then assembled with a whole host of other bodies (often the bodies of brown men) labeled as threatening the security and integrity of the nation.

The branding of the fat body in Hertling’s talk is even more striking when viewed in comparison to the rare moments in the “Mission: Readiness” reports when the individual body

comes into view. While the “Mission: Readiness” reports do not offer any images of the kinds of bodies it sees as problematic, it does provide a handful of images and stories of the kinds of bodies the group believes ideal to the task of protecting the U.S. All three reports focused specifically on obesity—*Unfit to Fight*, *Too Fat to Fight*, and *Still Too Fat to Fight*—all include a single image of soldiers somewhere in the course of the report. These images all show soldiers in combat gear in the middle of a desert, and they are shown with their backs to the camera as they are running towards a helicopter. This repeated image associates military enlistment with traditional images of combat. The soldiers are shown as active, mobile, and bolstered by the heavy machinery and advanced technology of modern warfare. But at the same time that this photo encourages viewers to think about soldiers in combat, it mystifies the actual scene of combat. These soldiers appear safe. They are not firing upon an enemy nor are they under fire.

These images of the soldiers running towards the helicopters are amplified by two moments in the reports where, once again, very specific bodies come into view. The reports *Too Fat to Fight* and *Still Too Fat to Fight* each highlight a soldier whose extraordinary performance in combat highlights the necessity of having fit soldiers. As “Mission: Readiness” argues, “[F]or military personnel the physical abilities of their colleagues can be the difference between life and death” (*Too Fat to Fight*, 3). *Too Fat to Fight* highlights the story of Corporal Todd Corbin who was awarded a Navy Cross for carrying his patrol leader and several troops out of the line of fire while firing back at the enemy (3). *Still Too Fat to Fight* highlights Marine Corps Sergeant Andy Lee who rushed back and forth across a 200 meter distance, carrying heavy loads of weapons and ammunition in 110 degree Afghanistan heat to assist another squadron being fired upon. When a gunner on his team was injured, Lee then made sure the injured Marine was evacuated while taking the gunner’s place. For his efforts, Lee was awarded a Bronze Star (5).

Unlike “Charlie” and the boy watching television, these soldiers have names and ranks. More than that, they have faces—both of the sections describing the soldiers’ actions include an image of the soldier. Corbin is shown in an official portrait in his dress uniform while Lee is shown in full combat gear, crouched and on the move. These portraits give a counter-image to the potential threat posed by the fat body. Instead, the reader sees an image of someone with dignity and purpose. Even if the reader is not physically capable of performing the same actions of the two men, they are likely compelled to identify the spirit, bravery, and endurance of both men as representative of U.S. patriotism. There is an obvious dyad set up by “Mission: Readiness” between the images of the soldiers in the reports and the figures of the fat bodies represented in Hertling’s TEDx talk. The audience is presented with two different sets of bodies framed, respectively, as good versus bad, productive versus unproductive, hero versus threat. This dyad works to brand the body of the soldier as thoroughly masculine, hyper-capable, strong, mobile, and active. Readers are encouraged to affectively identify with this brand of the patriotic hero by opposing themselves to the objectified, dehumanized fat body.

Of course, both the screen of war and the branding of the body are defined as much by what they represent as what they obscure or exclude. The dyad opposing the soldier-hero to the threatening fat body militarizes all citizen bodies and presents a masculine ideal of the soldier that perpetuates a romantic vision of warfare and reaffirms the patriarchal nation-state. The ideal soldier-citizen body presented in the “Mission: Readiness” reports does not represent the diversity of people who actually serve in the military, thus continuing to allow for certain bodies to perform the labor of war while still being denied the full rights of citizenship, or even the assurance of promised benefits from the military. But the brand of the soldier-hero presented in the reports also does not acknowledge the mundane, daily labor of occupying forces, the ongoing

impact of injuries both visible and invisible sustained during deployment, or the lived costs of “wars of choice.” The branded body rallies readers behind military efforts while skirting the questions and critiques that surround those efforts while disciplining the citizen body by branding fat as a betrayal of the nation.

Conclusion

As an example of a militarized rhetoric of obesity, the work of “Mission: Readiness” labels the fat body a threat to national security, treating fatness as a potential failure to properly defend the nation-state. But when we consider the larger context of the group’s work, it is clear that while all fat bodies are treated as bad, not all bodies are equally implicated in the group’s work. Because of systemic racism and systemic classism, the problems “Mission: Readiness” addresses as preventing youth from being eligible for military service—criminal background, low literacy levels, obesity, and poor nutrition—all occur disproportionately in poor white rural communities and poor communities of color. Furthermore, U.S. military recruitment practices and the limited economic opportunities available to youths from these communities means that efforts to improve future recruiting pools will significantly target these populations. So while “Mission: Readiness” talks about obesity, and childhood obesity in particular, as though it were detached from other identity categories, the bodies the group is concerned with are implicitly raced and classed. The way in which the group brands the fat body through the use of images and data-sets draws on a network of cultural assumptions and historical representations that ultimately work to reaffirm an understanding of fat as a manifestation of laziness, lack of willpower and discipline, ignorance about nutrition and exercise, weak morals, and lack of productivity. All of these features that circulate as part of the fat branded body have also been employed to justify a host of

class- and race-based oppressions, and are, indeed, frequently used to reinforce these existing marginalizations.

Viewed through the screen of war and terror, branding the fat body as a threat to national security works to assemble this threat with other (also implicitly raced) bodies positioned as threatening the U.S. safety and security. This assemblage shapes the way the state and its institutions respond to these bodies, positioning them as suspicious bodies that need to be monitored and disciplined as necessary. For any body that might be treated as suspicious, at least in part because of weight or fitness, a militarized rhetoric of obesity encourages those bodies to prove their patriotism or their ability to fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship through thinness, physical strength, and military service. In other words, a militarized rhetoric of obesity suggests that American youth might not be fit enough, mentally and physically, to defend their country. It also encourages marginalized youths to discipline their bodies in the interests of the nation-state and prove their value as citizens through military service and the adoption of masculinized military values.

While “Mission: Readiness” lobbies for changes to school nutrition, fitness, and literacy programs that many might see as positive reforms for underfunded public schools, it is important to remember that the interventions the group proposes are rooted in the argument that poor youth from marginalized communities are worth “investing” in because of their potential use-value to the military. As these interventions further militarize schools and students, they do not allow for a more robust, nuanced understanding of the ways in which neoliberal economic policies or systemic racism might be implicated in the phenomenon of childhood obesity, poor levels of childhood nutrition and fitness, or highly-processed school meals. At the same time, a militarized rhetoric of obesity reinforces the idea that communities in which rates of obesity and chronic

disease appear disproportionately high are an economic and political problem for the nation-state, justifying the disenfranchisement of these groups. As the work of “Mission: Readiness” demonstrates, a militarized rhetoric of obesity is powerful because the way that it brands the fat body serves the interest of neoliberal governmentality, marginalizing raced and class bodies while offering a white middle-class the opportunity to prove their allegiance to the nation-state through the disciplining of their bodies.

CHAPTER THREE

NEOLIBERAL LITERACIES OF THE BODY IN *THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION*

During the 2013 Annual Meeting for the American Medical Association (AMA), delegates voted to declare obesity a disease. The decision had the effect of labeling nearly one in three American as sick simply by virtue of their BMI. In voting to recognize obesity as a disease, the AMA rejected the recommendations of its own Council on Science and Public Health, which had researched the question of whether obesity qualified as a disease a year earlier. The Council on Science and Public Health ultimately declared that “obesity should not be classified as a disease because the measure that is used to categorize obesity (body mass index, BMI) is flawed” (Fitzgerald). The Council on Science and Public Health contended that BMI could not be used as a reliable diagnostic tool for determining the health of patients, pointing out that people with higher BMIs can be healthy while those with lower BMIs can still have the kinds of metabolic issues and high body fat levels associated with obesity. In their findings, the council wrote, “Given the existing limitations of B.M.I. to diagnose obesity in clinical practice, it is unclear that recognizing obesity as a disease [...] will result in improved health outcomes” (qtd. in Fitzgerald).

Despite the findings of the Council on Science and Public Health, the AMA board members who voted to recognize obesity as a disease insisted that doing so would improve health care for obese patients by decreasing the stigma surrounding obesity. The resolution drafted following the vote explains, “The suggestion that obesity is not a disease but rather a consequence of a chosen lifestyle exemplified by overeating and/or inactivity is equivalent to suggesting that lung cancer is not a disease because it was brought about by individual choice to

smoke cigarettes” (qtd. in Fitzgerald). The board’s contention, then, is that the label of “disease” challenges the notion that weight is something entirely in the control of the individual and thus strips away the moral judgment attached to fatness. The AMA’s argument that more deeply medicalizing weight will alleviate the problems of fat stigma, of course, ignores that fact that many diseases and disorders, from mental illness to AIDS, are deeply stigmatized both within and outside of medical environments. One also has to wonder about the kind of treatment people can expect to receive from health care providers and insurance companies when they are seen as diseased purely on the basis of a number generated by a single, seriously limited metric. The argument that recognizing obesity as a disease will curb fat stigma and improve health care thus seems deeply suspicious.

Indeed, in the Foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann argues, “Far from generating sympathy for fat people, medicalization of weight fuels anti-fat prejudice and discrimination in all areas of society. People think: If fat people need to be cured, there must be something wrong with them. Cures should work; if they do not, it is the fat person’s fault and a license not to employ, date, educate, rent to, sell clothes to, give a medical exam to, see on television, respect, or welcome such fat people into society” (xiii). According to Wann, the medicalization of weight actually reifies the idea that fatness is inherently bad, thus adding to the stigmatization of the fat body. Wann goes on to explain that the medicalization of weight can, and often does, actually serve as a justification for the harassment and discrimination of fat people, as those acting on the basis of fat stigma explain away their behavior as being out of concern for fat peoples’ health. Wann’s discussion of the medicalization of weight is part of a larger project in fat studies and fat acceptance activism to challenge a medical model of fat—a model that has become so deeply normalized that many people conflate fatness with diseases like

diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease and take for granted that the fat body is necessarily a sick body. The 2013 AMA decision to recognize obesity as a disease in and of itself shows that the insistence on a medical model of weight is growing ever stronger. This chapter investigates the role that the medicalization of weight plays in the construction of obesity as a concern for the nation, particularly in the framing of obesity as an “epidemic.”

The rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” treats fatness (and the gluttony, lack of willpower, and lack of discipline assumed to be the root of fatness) as a contagion rapidly spreading through and threatening the life of the population. In this way, the language of the “obesity epidemic” contributes to the panic-laden rhetoric also perpetuated by the “war on obesity.” But just like the militarized language of the “war on obesity,” the language of epidemic can also be used to construct national borders and demonize marginalized bodies. The discourses surrounding the recent ebola outbreak in West Africa exemplify the ways in which the language of epidemic can be used to imagine and enforce national borders. In an article for *The Guardian*, Hannah Giorgis critiques the racism and xenophobia in Western media coverage of ebola cases discovered in the United States and Western Europe. As Giorgis argues, “Ebola now functions in popular discourse as a not-so-subtle, almost completely rhetorical stand-in for any combination of ‘African-ness,’ ‘blackness,’ ‘foreign-ness’ and ‘infestation’—a nebulous but powerful threat, poised to ruin the perceived purity of Western borders and bodies.” In other words, the ebola outbreak was used to construct the borders of Western states as closed to and protected from the contagious, dirty, and threatening racialized “Other.”

In order to highlight the specific ways in which the medicalization of weight is used to construct the borders of the nation and the conditions of citizenship, this chapter analyzes the film series *The Weight of the Nation*. This film series engages at length with the language of the

“obesity epidemic” and argues that current rates of obesity are indicative of a nation in crisis. *The Weight of the Nation* originally aired on HBO in May, 2012 and was collaboratively funded by the Institute of Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and Kaiser Permanente, a major managed care consortium based in California (*Weight of the Nation* Homepage). The series is divided into four parts, which have all been made available for free on the series website. Part One, “Consequences,” makes arguments about the health consequences of obesity and the negative impact obesity could have on the U.S. as a nation. Part Two, “Choices,” outlines medical and scientific research on weight gain, exercise, nutrition, and weight loss. Part Three, “Children in Crisis,” focuses on rising rates of obesity in children, especially in relation to school lunch programs and physical fitness programs. And finally, Part Four, “Challenges,” attempts to explain the connection between obesity and environmental factors like the service economy workplace and industrialized food systems. Each part of the film series combines commentary from a host of experts, including public officials, doctors, researchers, nutritionists, politicians, and corporate representatives, with confessional-style interviews from fat individuals and case studies that exemplify the issues of health, nutrition, weight loss, and weight gain discussed in the film.

The Weight of the Nation discusses obesity firmly through the lens of medicine, arguing that obesity has not only reached the status of an epidemic, but that the United States must prioritize obesity as a public health crisis threatening the lives and well-being of citizens. The guiding message of *The Weight of the Nation*, then, is not far off from the arguments “Mission: Readiness” has made about the threatening potential of national obesity rates. Indeed, the opening sequence that plays at the beginning of each part of the series shows one expert insisting

that the issue with obesity rates “is not only about health; it’s about survival and the well-being of the United States as a nation.” This comment is immediately followed by another expert arguing, “If we don’t take [obesity] as a really serious, urgent national priority, we are all of us, individually and as a nation, going to pay a very serious price.” The tagline for the film series, “In order to win, we must lose,” even adopts a militarized rhetoric of obesity, treating individual weight loss as part of a battle to protect the nation.

The fact that the tone and tenor of this documentary series focused on the “obesity epidemic” bears such a close resemblance to discussions of obesity framed through the language of war and security is not coincidental, nor is it purely an attempt on the part of the filmmakers’ to align themselves with already-existing arguments about the threatening potential of obesity. Rather, as I will show through my analysis of the series, the medicalized rhetoric that the language of the “obesity epidemic” depends on plays a vital role in ongoing efforts to construct the borders of the nation and the conditions of citizenship through the body. In other words, while the language of the “war on obesity” might circulate more readily in media as a means of representing fatness as a national problem, the medical model of weight that underlies the comparison of obesity to an epidemic is a powerful pedagogical tool teaching citizens how to understand their own bodies and the bodies of others.

As various disability scholars have argued, medicalization works as a way of “knowing” the body that denies agency and self-knowledge to any body that can be constructed as diseased or disabled. Ultimately, I argue that *The Weight of the Nation* contributes to the medicalization of weight and creates what Rebecca Dingo refers to in “Networking the Micro and the Macro” as a “neoliberal literacy and pedagogy” of the body—that is, a way of teaching viewers to see the body that advances the interests and values of neoliberal governmentality. Many of the issues

associated with obesity, from the industrialized food system to the conditions of labor in a service economy, are directly related to the conditions of neoliberalism, and growing rates of chronic disease and changing body morphology are arguably the material consequences of neoliberalism played out on the level of the individual body. As I will show, the neoliberal literacy of the body circulating through *The Weight of the Nation* contributes to the narrowing of citizenship by denying agency to those who are fat while also recreating and deepening social stratifications that encourage viewers to discipline their individual bodies rather than to contextualize, critique, and resist the complex systems of power impacting health in communities across the country.

The Medicalization of Weight: Producing Neoliberal Literacies of the Body

While *The Weight of the Nation* declares obesity an epidemic and a public health crisis, the concern in the film is not just focused on the correlation between a high BMI and chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Indeed, in the film, the argument that obesity threatens the nation hinges largely on the claim that obesity is disabling, both to the individual worker and to the economy. Obesity, the film claims, makes workers less efficient, requires that workers take more time off, increases health care costs for employers, and presents the risk that workers might even need to go on disability, removing them from the economy as laborers altogether. The first part of the series, “Consequences,” ends precisely on this note, warning of the dangers of an economy disabled by obesity. Philip Marineau, the former President of The Quaker Oats Company and Pepsi-Cola North America warns, “If you look at the skyrocketing rates of obesity in the United States, which we don’t have solutions for, whatever competitive position that we have in the world today will even be weakened by this overweight problem that we have.” Texas Comptroller Susan Combs follows Marineau’s forecast of a

weakened, non-competitive national economy by raising the image of the burdened business owner, saying, “We’re going to have a productivity crisis. We’re going to have an employer-employee crisis. We’re going to have people say, ‘I’m not sure that I’m going to be able to manage my bottom line business system if I don’t have fit employees.’” Discussing the practice of employers increasing health care premiums for obese employees, Duke University economist Eric Finkelstein then suggests, “[B]ut some companies are saying, ‘You know what, its just too expensive.’ And they’re moving their sites to India or China for cheaper labor and basically off-loading the cost of hiring.”

Here, the driving message is that obese Americans threaten the national economy, and perhaps more importantly, the U.S.’s status as a controlling power in the global market, because they are not maximally efficient, minimally expensive laborers. Moreover, obese Americans are portrayed as hurting business owners and are blamed for the ongoing practice of outsourcing labor to cheaper, exploited international labor markets. There is little to nothing done in the course of the film to challenge the conditions of the contemporary workplace, the conditions of the current labor market, or the labor politics of a global market economy. Instead, the film treats corporate business owners as sympathetic parties unduly burdened with the cost of paying for employee benefits like health care and sick leave. Meanwhile, viewers are told they need to be efficient, flexible, and cheap laborers ready to meet whatever demands the market and the workplace make. Being ready to meet these demands, in no small part by having the kind of fit and able body that can labor under these conditions, is not only what defines a good worker, but also what defines a good citizen.

The ideologies circulating through these arguments about obesity disabling the national economy reflect what Robert McRuer refers to as “compulsory able-bodiedness” in his book

Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability. McRuer develops the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness by extending Adrienne Rich's work on compulsory heterosexuality. The compulsory aspect of both heterosexuality and able-bodiedness is rooted in both being seen not as identities, but simply as the basic state of things. In other words, able-bodiedness is not understood culturally as an aspect of identity in the way that disability might be claimed as part of a social or political identity. Rather, able-bodiedness is assumed as a foundational part of subjecthood from which everything else is an aberration. As McRuer explains, "The culture [...] assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, 'Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?'" (9). Even if subjects are not actually able-bodied, or not actually heterosexual, the compulsory nature of both means that subjects are still expected to normalize themselves as much as possible—in other words, to recuperate themselves from their deviance by living out the appearance of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as much as is possible.

McRuer argues that both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness are central to the way subjects are valued in the context of neoliberalism. More specifically, McRuer contends that meeting the expectations of these compulsory norms of subjectivity gives the appearance of a unified subjectivity, a subjectivity that does not experience the split subjectivities or the inflexibilities associated with queer and/or disabled life. This unified heteronormative, able-bodied subjectivity simply fits within the expected mold and thus is not, or at least does not appear to be, out of step with the political and economic systems of power. McRuer argues that neoliberalism demands this unified subjectivity, specifically through a

cultural and economic emphasis on flexibility. Highlighting the rapid pace of change and continual reorganization of labor within a neoliberal economy, McRuer explains that flexibility becomes a highly valued trait. Flexibility, he argues, is not about being able to be many kinds of people or play many kinds of roles as the situation demands, but rather the ability to manage to continual crises presented by neoliberalism. McRuer writes, “Under neoliberalism, in other words, individuals who are indeed ‘flexible and innovative’ make it through moments of subjective crisis. They *manage* the crisis, or at least show that they have management potential; ultimately, they adapt and perform as if the crisis had never happened” (17, emphasis in the original).

Flexibility is thus a highly valued and idealized trait because the flexible subject effectively takes on the responsibility of obscuring the material implications and the economic and political upheavals that result from neoliberal governmentality, making these crises seem like they are simply part of life. Radically queer and severely disabled bodies that cannot meet the demand for a whole, unified subjectivity in this manner disrupt the functioning the neoliberalism. Obesity similarly disrupts the functioning of neoliberalism. Beyond arguments like those made by experts interviewed in *The Weight of the Nation* about the inefficiency and economic drain of obese workers, obesity arguably highlights the contradictions and material implications of an industrialized food system that produces excess, highly-processed calories or a service economy that keeps workers immobile for long hours while stripping away the basic assurances of employer benefits and public assistance. We might then extend McRuer’s theorizing of compulsory able-bodiedness to add compulsory thinness to the conditions of being values as a citizen-worker in a neoliberal context. To meet the neoliberal demands of flexibility

requires a normate body that is not only heteronormative and able, but also as thin, fit, and healthy as possible.

In *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing*, Rebecca Dingo shows how the idealization of the hyper-fit and hyper-able subject works to construct national borders and facilitate the process of globalization. In her analysis of the circulation of the term “fitness” in various United Nation’s documents on development, Dingo argues that these documents and their concern with the questions of fitness essentially imagine the third world as backward and “disabled” in contrast to the progressive, hyper-able first world. The goal for addressing disability in developing nations, according to these documents, is to “enable” the disabled in the third world by normalizing them into the global economy, thus aiding in the project of “developing” third world nations. Dingo writes, “[I]ndividual citizens of these developing nations must support their nation’s globalized economy by entering into the capitalist market and producing commodities that will demarcate their acquiescence of ‘normal’ economic activity. This sort of discourse of normalcy is reified when the state—or another governing body such as a supranational organization—attempts to make ‘normal’ those who are deemed as unfit, nonstandard, or incomprehensible” (68). Once again, the question of ability and economy merge as fitness is taken for granted as a necessary condition for participation in the global economy, which is effectively the route for being recognized as a citizen-subject. The documents Dingo analyzes privilege the normate Western body in contrast to the non-Western bodies in need of normalization, a framework that explains global economic disparity as a failure of normative embodiment rather than as the result of colonial legacies and neo-imperial economic policies. The pressure on the Western body is not only to meet the compulsory able-

bodied demands of the workplace, but also to continue to prove the superiority of the West through a hyper-able performance that justifies Western control over the global economy.

As a framework of knowledge and power, medicalization helps to normalize the body. While scholars in disability studies have worked to unpack the discursive and material implications of the medicalization of disability, as Marilyn Wann's work indicates, we can extend the work of these scholars to talk about the medicalization of weight. In "Refiguring Rhetorica," Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson explain that a medical model of disability does not simply refer to the diagnosis of and medical treatment of disabling conditions. Rather, they argue that a medical model of disability is a particular way of defining disability and creating knowledge about the body that is connected to power. Locating this medical model as rooted in a particular scientific paradigm, they argue that a modern scientific and medical interest in determining human norms "schematized and multiplied categories of bodily deviance and deformity. [...] Science, medicine, and later therapeutic discourses and practices cast disability as a personal deficit or deviance to be cured" (29). Here we can see how a medical model of disability functions as the backbone of compulsory able-bodiedness. In the medical model, disability is constructed when anything that deviates from the norm is pathologized. In other words, disability is not seen as part of the inevitable variance of human diversity but rather as an aberration to be corrected. The guiding goal of the medical model is to normalize all bodies, which means that medical care for the disabled is generally focused on finding a "cure" or some form of treatment that will bring the disabled body as close to the idealized norm as possible.

While the medical model is not the only means through which the body is normalized, it functions as a particularly powerful node of normalization because of what Susan Wendell refers to as the cognitive authority of medicine. In *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical*

Reflections on Disability, Wendell defines cognitive authority as “the authority to have one’s descriptions of the world taken seriously, believed, or accepted generally as the truth” (117). Wendell explains that because of the cultural and social status given to medical knowledge—status derived largely from the belief that medico-scientific knowledge is both objective and universal—the knowledge of the body derived from the screening and diagnostic mechanisms of medicine always carry more weight than the individual person’s subjective experience of their own body. Wendell explains, “The cognitive and social authority of medicine includes the power to confirm or deny the reality of everyone’s bodily experience. Thus, medicine can undermine our belief in ourselves as knowers, since it can cast authoritative doubt on some of our most powerful, immediate experiences, unless they are confirmed by authorized medical descriptions, usually based on scientific laboratory results” (122). Wendell argues that by undermining individual knowledge of the body, the cognitive authority of medicine alienates people from their bodies and justifies the medical management of the body.

Claims like those made in *The Weight of the Nation* that obesity will weaken the national economy are persuasive precisely because the cognitive authority of a medicalized view of weight makes it seem already apparent to viewers that fat bodies, in their deviation from the norm, cannot possibly be as efficient or as fit as they need to be. It does not matter if those considered obese do not feel ill or diseased, nor does it matter if they do not see themselves as impaired, deviant, or as inefficient laborers—their experience is written over by the culturally accepted authority of medicine, which conflates fatness with disease, moralizing and pathologizing the fat body. Indeed, we can see how a metric like the BMI works powerfully to medicalize weight since it organizes the variety of human body weights into a set of categories that measure all bodies in comparison to the idealized category—a category that gets variously

labeled “average,” “normal,” and “healthy.” Categories like “underweight,” “overweight,” and “obese” are not just descriptors, but indicators of the work a person needs to do to normalize their body. Moreover, the BMI is a powerful metric because it does not just categorize and medicalize the weight of fat people, but rather submits all bodies to the gaze of medicine. The social and cultural power of this particular metric of weight is made clear by how naturalized it has become to frame all discussions of weight in the medicalized terms of “obesity.”

The loss of agency that comes with the power of the cognitive authority of the medical model to define, describe, and normalize the body is just one of the political ramifications of medicalization. Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson argue that the medical model of disability has “become an operative and essential element driving subject/object dualism—any body subjected to the medical gaze becomes disabled to some extent, through its positioning as passive object, and through the over-signification of bodily deviance” (29). When defined as a patient, a person becomes the object of power—an object defined by the sum of its problems—and the only way to be recuperated as a subject is to willingly submit oneself to the medical model. While Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson point out that this process of objectification applies to any body being submitted to the medical model, as all bodies are from time to time, we can see how this objectification contributes to the disenfranchisement and marginalization of those who are continually pathologized.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the pathologizing effect of the medical model has been employed as a tool of various systemic oppressions. In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers argues, “When minority identities are pathologized by association with disability, the effect is never, I claim, merely metaphorical [...] The pathologization of other identities by disability is referential: it summons the historical and representational structures by which disability,

sickness, and injury come to signify inferior human status” (6). In other words, the deep stigmatization of disability as objectifying aberrance works to ground and justify marginalizations and discriminations. Fat studies scholars like Wann have highlighted the ways in which the medicalization of weight—a process that works to construct fatness as a disabling condition—works to justify stigma against fat people. But given the disproportionate rate of obesity and chronic disease among the poor and among communities of color, Siebers’ comments also call us to recognize the ways in which the medicalized construction of obesity as disease can work to justify discrimination against these already-marginalized communities.

In addition to justifying the marginalization of pathologized identities, a medical model of disability is dangerous because it de-politicizes the question of disability by treating it as a highly individualized phenomenon. Simi Linton explains how medicalization works to remove disability from the realm of the political in her book *Claiming Disability*. Linton writes:

[T]he medicalization of disability casts human variance as deviance from the norm, a pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to *disability*, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and ‘treat’ the condition and the person with the condition rather than ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives. (11, emphasis in the original)

Medicalization thus confines disability to the personal sphere, not only making it difficult to organize around disability as a political identity but obscuring the social and cultural factors that produce many of the experiences of disability. We can see the depoliticizing effect of the medicalization of weight at work in the practice of sending home BMI report cards for children. In schools that make use of BMI report cards, children are sent home with reports indicating

their BMI and whether or not it is seen as problematic. The justification for this practice is that children with a “healthy” BMI tend to do better in school, and more specifically, that children in this category are better able to focus and remain attentive throughout the school day (Wiley). BMI report cards mark deviant student bodies as a problem for the school and encourage the normalization of the student body in order to facilitate the school day. But the solution to this problem is located within the individual home—it is treated as a problem to be solved by the family, ostensibly through improved “choices” around food and exercise. By positioning the problem of BMI as a private, medical issue for families to address on their own, schools are not expected to reflect on the conditions under which children are being asked to learn, nor are they asked to build in increased time for movement and recreation during the school day. Thus the privatization of student BMI works to mark deviant bodies in ways that ultimately reinforce the interests of neoliberal educational institutions with their increased emphasis on testing and continual cuts to education spending.

Medicalization, like militarization, is part of an ongoing project that spills out from its point of origin to organize life. In this way, medicalization is significant because it is not just about the power of medicine acting upon the body, but about teaching people to see their bodies and other people’s bodies in specific ways. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson analyzes the ways in which the traveling “freak shows” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries involved audiences in a spectacle mimicking the medical gaze. The bodies on display as the spectacle—raced, disabled, non-Western bodies—were presented as absolute Others, and viewers were meant to take the otherness of the non-normative body as confirmation that the body and identity of the spectator were normal. This practice thus directly involves, and even educates, the public in a way of viewing the body that idealizes the normate and objectifies

bodily difference. Likewise, Jay Dolmage argues in “Disabled Upon Arrival” that the space of Ellis Island was set up to allow officials to visually survey immigrant bodies in various states of movement so they could mark those bodies thought to be too ill or disabled for entrance into the United States. He argues that this organization of space, in addition to facilitating this ongoing visual exam of bodies, was also pedagogical—it taught immigrants to visually assess the bodies around them for deviations and impairments, and taught them that these deviations were a mark of inferior status and not truly American. Charlotte Cooper’s analysis of the “headless fatty,” which refers to the practice of playing stock footage during obesity-related news stories that scans fat bodies filmed from the neck down, is similarly pedagogical, inviting viewers to participate in a medical gaze that marks the fat body as deviant, as pathological, and as objectified.

I argue that much of the work being done in *The Weight of the Nation* is likewise pedagogical, teaching viewers to assess their own bodies and the bodies of those around them through a medicalized lens that objectifies the fat body and treats thinness as a condition of subjectivity. More specifically, as the documentary argues that obesity represents a potential crisis for the U.S., especially with regard to the U.S. economy and the U.S.’s position in the global market, the film series proliferates what Rebecca Dingo refers to in “Networking the Macro and the Micro” as a “neoliberal literacy”—that is, a way of seeing and coming to know the body that normalizes it in accordance with the values and interests of neoliberal governmentality. As an example of the way in which these neoliberal literacies circulate, Dingo analyzes *Half the Sky*—a book and film of the same name about sex trafficking in South East Asia—focusing on the way these texts teach a Western audience to think about and orient themselves toward women in the third world. Dingo argues that the film does not offer a single,

contained representation of third world women, but rather circulates an entire literacy of global gender relations that continues to position the West as a place of progress and freedom for women and that encourages its audience to “empower” other women through the funding of things like micro loans rather than critically investigating the systems of power that result in the kinds of gendered exploitation represented in the film. She writes,

I believe that *Half the Sky*'s stories offer readers a dangerously neoliberal literacy and pedagogy—an incomplete pedagogy that does not teach its readers how tangible global systems of power impact individual women's lives; a pedagogy that precariously situates its readers [...] as empathetic neoliberal agents for change without educating them in the *contexts* that connect women's oppression with wider transglobal powers and histories. Recognizing these contexts ought to be part of a transnational feminist pedagogy and literacy. (534)

In contrast to neoliberal literacies that focus on individual phenomenon without attention to the larger cultural, political, and economic context, transnational feminist literacies develop ways of seeing and analyzing media that help readers critically engage with the historical and contextual gaps in representations that obscure the functioning of power.

Like *Half the Sky*, *The Weight of the Nation* offers viewers an “incomplete pedagogy” that oversimplifies questions of food, weight, and health and instead draws on the cognitive authority of medicine to stigmatize fat bodies and position thinness and health as patriotic endeavors. In so doing, the film reinforces for its viewers the belief that health is basically within the control of the individual—a neoliberal perspective that moralizes individual choices and depoliticizes questions of food, health, and fitness. In the next section, I offer a rhetorical analysis of *The Weight of the Nation* that enacts Dingo's call for a transnational feminist

pedagogy and literacy that draws attention to the conceptual and contextual gaps in the film, highlights the lessons the film is working to teach its viewers, and works to identify the role that the film's primary lens of medicalization plays in the continued disenfranchisement of raced, classed bodies as it positions obesity as a national crisis.

Defining the Nation: Citizens vs. Problem Bodies

Imagining an Audience, Issuing a Warning

The neoliberal pedagogy and literacy circulating through *The Weight of the Nation* hinges on the film defining a clear audience for itself—an audience who can be interpellated into a set of social relations and ideologies around the body that support both the state and corporate interests collaborating in the production of the series. In other words, while the film purports to speak to the all-encompassing “we” of the nation, the group of subjects actually being addressed as citizens is very narrow and reflects a highly normalized ideal of the subject body. Indeed, although the film emphasizes from the very beginning of the series that two-thirds of Americans are considered overweight or obese according to the BMI, the series seems to only address itself to an audience that does not include obese people. Obese people are positioned as the objects of the film series—a problem to be solved—and not as the citizen-subjects being addressed and expected to act. For example, Jack Shonkoff, who is the Director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, follows the lead of many of the experts interviewed in the film series and speaks on behalf of obese people, asserting,

Life is really hard for people who are obese. And by hard, I mean both the social consequences of that and the health consequences of that, right down to the fact that those who are very obese are not going to live as long as others. What makes me frustrated

bordering on angry is that this is preventable. This is not one of those unfortunate acts of nature that we just have to accept as reality. This is not the product of a tsunami.

Like Shonkoff in his comments here, much of the film series rhetorically constructs a limited “us” that aligns the assumed, normative viewer with the filmmakers and the experts interviewed throughout the film, positioning them as an elite group of citizen-actors empathetic to the plight of the obese and encouraged to act out of concern for the nation rather than passively accept current rates of obesity. In contrast, those considered obese, who are not directly addressed by the film but who, statistically, are likely to encounter the film in some way nonetheless, are positioned as pitiful, shameful, and thoroughly objectified by the medical gaze of the film. The rhetorical implications of this division between the assumed audience and those considered obese are two-fold: it reinforces the idea that thinness is a condition of being seen as an active and engaged citizen, and it also normalizes the idea that fat bodies must be objectified as problems to be solved.

While the first part of the film series, “Consequences,” is ostensibly focused on outlining the potential ramifications of high rates of obesity, the most significant pedagogical task “Consequences” accomplishes is drawing the line between the active, empowered “us” and the objectified, obese “other.” One of the challenges the film faces is the difficulty of defining obesity as a national public health crisis that warrants state intervention in a neoliberal era focused on deregulation and privatization. This task is made even more difficult by the commonly accepted belief that obesity and the chronic diseases associated with it are the result of poor individual choices that can thus be prevented through greater will-power and self-discipline. Much like “Mission: Readiness,” the film ultimately explains the exigency of the issue through the use of cost/benefit analyses meant to highlight the economic damage that might

potentially be wrought by increasing rates of obesity. While several of the experts interviewed in “Consequences,” the first part of the series, focus on obesity’s potential impact on the ability of the U.S. to compete in the global economy, others tried to speak more directly to the imagined viewer, emphasizing the annual cost of obesity to taxpayers.

Just before the close of “Consequences,” the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Thomas Freidan, estimates, “Someone who is obese costs, on average, more than \$1400 to care for more per year than someone who’s not obese. Someone with diabetes costs on average \$6600 more to care for per year than someone without diabetes. Collectively, obesity costs about \$150 billion a year.” William Dietz, director of a special division of the CDC focused on obesity, follows Freidan’s comment, saying, “Out of that \$150 billion a year, more than half of that is paid for by public funds—medicaid and medicare.” There is no context or explanation given for how the CDC has arrived at this estimate that obesity costs \$150 billion a year—this shocking figure is just meant to insist to the film’s imagined audience that they need to get on board with addressing obesity as a public health issue because obese, diseased, problem bodies are directly costing them money as taxpayers. Dietz’s comment further constructs the bodies identified as costing an unreasonable amount of money to care for as a drain on the system, raising the cost of health care without paying these costs themselves.

The distinction between the imagined audience and the objectified obese population is also figured through the rhetoric of epidemic continually employed in the film series. As a metaphor, the language of epidemic works to construct obesity as a disease spreading rapidly and without discrimination—a point used to simultaneously create a sense of panic among viewers and encourage viewers to discipline their own bodies so as not to fall victim to the spread of the epidemic. In “Consequences,” Marlene Schwartz, who is the Deputy Director of the Rudd Center

for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, explains that people who are poorer tend to have higher rates of obesity, but that rates of obesity have been increasing across all income levels since the 1980s. Schwartz warns that having money is no longer as “protective” against obesity as it once was. Shortly after, the film moves into a discussion of the correlation between poverty, obesity, and chronic disease, explaining that African American and Latino children experience especially high rates of obesity and diabetes. While scanning a poor, urban neighborhood and the bodies of fat people of color, the filmmaker’s indicate that “[o]f the 10 states with the highest obesity rates, 9 rank among our nation’s poorest.” Public Health expert Anthony Iton then argues, “If we don’t take on strategies that affect how the low-income community is dealing with the obesity epidemic, we’re going to see this phenomena across our society in a relatively short period of time.” Earlier in the same discussion, another expert admits that the silver lining of increased rates of childhood obesity is that it means there can be a national conversation about health—conversations made much more difficult when those health problems are only associated with people considered less desirable. In case the subtext of the comment is unclear, the filmmakers’ immediately show an image of an urban neighborhood populated by people of color, defining these “less desirable” bodies for the viewer.

These comments assume an audience not already immersed in the health problems it addresses (such as problems with diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease), but also constructs that audience as needing to be very concerned about the spread of obesity out of poor communities and communities of color and into the white middle class. The overall message is that the subject-citizen assumed to be the film’s primary audience can neither afford to foot the bill for obesity, nor become obese themselves and thus be written out of their privileged subject position. The division between the imagined audience and the objectified obese body not only

naturalizes and justifies the continued stigmatization and marginalization of fat bodies for viewers, but it also encourages viewers to discipline their own bodies in the interests of the neoliberal state. In other words, the films' warnings about the risk of obesity continuing to spread out into a white, middle-class population pushes viewers to submit themselves to medical view of weight and turn their attention inward to the level of individual and family choices around food and exercise. This lesson to discipline the individual body as a performance of citizenship is offered most pointedly in two case studies that use representations of obese and diseased individuals as warnings to the films' imagined audience about the risk of not diligently normalizing their own bodies.

The first of these case studies appears in "Consequences" when the filmmakers' enter the home of Mary and Dan Hanley, a couple in their seventies from Westford, Massachusetts. The scene begins with Mary telling the cameras that she had always assumed that when doctors and news stories warned of the consequences of obesity that they were only talking about people who were "huge." She explains that she and her husband were a bit overweight, but that they were not obese so they did not worry until Dan was diagnosed with Type II Diabetes. Mary says that they learned too late that it "only takes a little bit of overweight" to fall victim to chronic illness. As Mary talks continues to talk about her husband's daily life following the amputation of one of his feet, the filmmakers show Mary taking her husband to the bathroom, pushing him around their home in a wheelchair, and showing off his prosthesis to the cameras. Later, the cameras follow Dan into his doctor's office and show the doctor examining his stump, examining the neuropathy-related lesions on his remaining foot, and then telling Dan that he is developing cataracts. For the majority of the scene, Dan is present but silent as his wife and then later his doctor talk about him and his health. Dan himself only addresses the camera briefly as he shows

pictures of himself from the past and evaluates his weight at the time the pictures were taken. He follows this up by saying, “We could have probably eaten better and we could have done a lot of things better if we knew what it was leading to—to diabetes.”

The film’s profile of the Hanleys is part of a segment focused specifically on diabetes, which begins with the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Thomas Farley, warning viewers, “People or individuals with obesity are much more likely to have diabetes. They may have foot infections that fester and don’t heal and so it requires amputations. They may develop blindness. They may develop kidney failure, which leaves them tethered to a dialysis machine for the rest of our lives.” Farley thus defines diabetes for the viewer as a series of severely disabling complications that make life with diabetes seem a dire prospect. Dan Hanley’s life as a diabetic amputee works to illustrate this portrait of diabetes as creating a pitiable, unenviable life and serves as a warning to viewers of the consequences of failing to take obesity seriously. In the film’s representation of Hanley, the greatest cost of his diabetes does not seem to be the foot he lost to amputation so much as it is the fact that he would have to be pushed around his own home in a wheel chair and have to be assisted to the bathroom by his wife. In other words, the film portrays Hanley’s greatest loss in being disabled as the loss of his masculine agency. The film even reinforces and recreates this loss of agency by denying Hanley the opportunity to speak at length about his own experience, choosing to instead letting his “caregivers” assume the responsibility of representing his life.

Hanley’s brief comments to the camera reinforce the idea that health is something that is within the individual’s control. The guiding message of this segment is that, had Hanley taken the risks of obesity seriously, he could have prevented himself becoming diabetic and, by extension, from becoming disabled. The film treats diabetes as though it is not only entirely

preventable but as though it is only linked to weight, which is an over-simplification of a complex chronic disease that effectively works to stigmatize all Type II Diabetics as having brought about their own illness. This belief that diabetes is somehow the direct result of Hanley's personal choices works to justify the stripping of his agency as a speaker and an autonomous subject. The pointed take-away for viewers is that any deviation from the ideal in terms of weight is a dangerous path to disease and disability, both of which are shown in Hanley's case as resulting in the objectification of being perpetually seen as a patient. What the imagined audience learns from this scene is that it is their responsibility to discipline and normalize their bodies or risk similarly losing their status as subjects.

A second case study that appears in "Choices" works to illustrate for viewers the rewards of taking the warnings about obesity seriously and properly disciplining their bodies. This scene follows fifty-year-old Tim Daly and his identical brother Paul. After Paul was diagnosed with Type II Diabetes, Tim (who was already considered pre-diabetic) learned that his chances of becoming diabetic as someone with a diabetic twin were nearly 95%. In an attempt to stave off his own likely diabetes diagnosis, Tim enrolled in the Diabetes Prevention Study run by Dr. David Nathan. As part of the study, Tim was asked to make small lifestyle changes in order to lose 7% of his body weight (a total of fourteen pounds for Tim) and to increase his activity by 150 minutes a week. Thanks to these efforts, Tim's pre-diabetes numbers went back to normal and after twelve years of following the same diet and exercise program, he is still not diabetic. Tim sums up the moral of his story, telling viewers, "I mean, how much more proof can you have of someone that has the same genes as you that has diabetes? And really the only difference is the weight." Of course, Tim's good fortune to not be the twin first diagnosed with diabetes and the luck of stumbling upon the Diabetes Prevention Study at an opportune time are significant

differences between the brothers that go unremarked. Tim and Paul's story is instead simplified, with one brother being presented as someone who cared properly about his health and another brother who "let" himself become diabetic.

Like Dan Hanley, Paul appears throughout the scene as a kind of disabled specter highlighting the importance of his brother's success in avoiding diabetes. Although Paul appears in nearly every shot with Tim, he only speaks to comment on his own weight or to point out his own lack of fitness. While Tim talks about his involvement in the Diabetes Prevention Study, the filmmakers show the two brothers bowling together. They continually scan Paul's body, moving closer to show that he is sweating and capturing the fact that he sits down promptly between turns while, in contrast, they show Tim jumping up and down, celebrating his win over his brother. Shortly after, the twins are filmed while visiting with Dr. Nathan, who quickly points out that Paul weighs more than Tim and that this extra weight is unhealthy. Dr. Nathan then turns to Tim, praising him for his efforts and pointing out the rewards of making small changes to prevent diabetes. At the end of the scene featuring the two brothers, Tim tells Paul, "I really want you to commit to yourself, and to me too."

Paul is thus continually positioned as a failure, lacking the effort and willpower to make the kinds of lifestyle changes his brother has made, and this justifies the patronizing treatment he receives for his weight and his status as a diabetic. Despite other people continually urging Paul to "commit" to his health, there is no discussion at any point in the film about what it means to lead a healthy life as someone with a chronic illness, nor any attempt to complicate what health looks like in the context of chronic disease. The concern shown for Paul's health ultimately serves as a reminder for the viewer of all the good choices he failed to make—choices the viewer is led to believe would have most certainly prevented the onset of diabetes. Meanwhile, Tim is

elevated in the film as an example of what it looks like to properly discipline the individual body. Unlike his brother, who is positioned as an object of shame and failure, Tim is able to hold onto his status as a speaking subject in the film by virtue of his efforts to avoid diabetes. This critique of the way the film represents Tim is not meant to completely disregard his efforts and his concern for his own health, but rather to highlight the fact that the manner in which his story is told by *The Weight of the Nation* is strategically designed to push viewers into a particular way of understanding and relating to their own bodies that naturalizes the medicalization of weight and reinforces the stigmatization of fatness and chronic disease.

More specifically, *The Weight of the Nation* imagines an audience of normalized citizen-subjects not inclusive of those obese and/or diseased individuals who have already been objectified by the medical gaze and marginalized by a complex network of intersecting oppressions. However, the film makes clear in addressing this relatively narrow audience that their subjectivity is at risk—they, too, could become the silent, pitiable, costly bodies said to be threatening the integrity of the nation. The film raises the specter of diabetes as a warning to its imagined audience of the potentially disabling impact of diabetes, and it positions those with diabetes like Dan Hanley and Paul Daly as both failures to properly submit themselves to a medicalized view of weight and, in offering no discussion of what their efforts to maintain their health look like in the face of disease, as too far gone. This deeply individualized model of health that posits health as the result of personal choices aligns with a neoliberal social ideology that imagines good citizenship as embodied in moralized individual choices. In the context of weight and chronic disease like diabetes, this works to create an ideal of citizenship that position the good citizen as someone who knows how to make the right decisions about their health and who has to fortitude to do so even when it's difficult. The film's audience, then, is encouraged not just

to submit their bodies to a medicalized view of weight and normalize themselves accordingly, but they are encouraged to prove their moral strength, their worth as workers, and the commitment to the values of the nation by disciplining their bodies so that they remain as productive, efficient, and flexible as possible.

Medicalizing the Fat Body

As a series, *The Weight of the Nation* is framed by a medicalized view of weight that objectifies bodies and conflates fatness with disease. The opening sequence played at the beginning of each of part of the series includes a group of fat individuals listing off the weight-related conditions, complications, and diseases they suffer from. Fat bodies, including the bodies of children, are shown being examined, scanned, and even operated on throughout the series. Often during these exams, the doctors do not speak directly to their patients, but rather address the cameras, detailing the problems they are seeing while talking about the individual being examined in the third person. During a case study following fourteen-year-old Sophia as she is treated for obesity, her doctor has her sit silently on an exam table while he discusses her BMI with her parents and then begins to point out parts of her body that he deems to be problematic to her parents, without addressing himself to her at all. Only when he identifies a mark on the skin of her neck associated with pre-diabetes does he then turn to her and say, “Do you know what diabetes is? [...] It can kill you.” In another scene following someone undergoing bariatric surgery, the filmmakers show the individual’s naked body on the table and then films the laproscopic tools moving through his abdomen while his surgeon laments the struggle of having to cut through thick layers of fat. The act of showing people in the film being examined, cut open, and reduced to their symptoms encourages viewers to see fat bodies as needing to be submitted to and known through the cognitive authority of medicine. But it also implies that

these bodies are not deserving of a certain degree of dignity, or of the respect of being addressed as agents. They are instead objectified as patients in need of a cure—separate, once again, from the citizen-subjects addressed as the primary audience of the film.

Beyond simply viewing the fat body through the lens of medicine, one of the key strategies the film employs in order to circulate a neoliberal literacy of the body is to turn the fat body into a medical spectacle that trains viewers to see the fat body as already diseased, as aberrant, and as abject. One of the most pointed examples of the creation of the fat body as spectacle occurs during a segment on heart disease in “Consequences” when two pathologists are filmed for several minutes as they display and dissect a series of organs on camera in order to show viewers the internal effects of obesity. This segment starts, for example, with a pathologist showing the healthy heart of a 26-year-old woman of “normal” height and weight who died from non-cardiac causes. He then compares this to the heart of a fifty-year-old man who was 5’9” and five hundred pounds and who died of cardiac disease. The pathologist lays the two hearts next to each other on a table and points out the amount of fat surrounding the man’s heart, as well the enlarged state of the heart and its clogged arteries. He points to the man’s enlarged heart and tells viewers, “You can see that it is dramatically different from the normal heart.”

The pathologist’s comparison of the two hearts carries the seemingly objective authority of medicine, but it is a comparison so extreme that its only goal can be pure shock value. The two hearts are, of course, dramatically different, and the visual of one massive heart wrapped in a layer of fat laying next to a smaller, unimpeded heart makes the “normal” heart seem obviously superior to the heart meant to represent the cardiac state of obese patients. Of course, the important piece of context that goes unremarked in this scene is the fact that the two hearts represent wildly different ends of a spectrum of cardiac health. On the one end, the young

woman's heart is a heart young enough to have had little chance of being effected by cardiac disease. The pathologist does not bother to compare the man's heart with that of another middle-aged person of "normal" height and weight. The man's heart, however, is the heart of someone with a BMI of almost 74—well above even the 39-40 range that marks the cut off of the "obese" category and the beginning of the "morbidly obese" category. In other words, while the man's heart is shown as though it is representative of the cardiac problems of obesity, he himself was not representative of what obesity typically looks like. When Rosemarie Garland-Thomson analyzes the pedagogical nature of traveling "freak shows," she argues that these spectacles relied on the radical difference of the bodies on display to construct and reinforce the normalcy of the spectator. This scene works similarly, drawing on the radical difference between these two organs in order to naturalize the normative category. The result is that the heart of the young person obviously looks "the way a heart should look," even to the untrained eye, collapsing the concept of health into one static, idealized model and positioning all fat bodies as equally diseased.

Indeed, this turning of the fat body into a spectacle gets extended to bodies that more closely align with those of the imagined audience. In "Consequences," the filmmakers follow Jennifer Ericson, a white middle-aged woman who is overweight but not obese, as she participates in National Institute of Health study on the metabolic impact of weight gain. As one of the study's participants, Ericson was asked to add 1,000 calories a day to her diet over the course of 6-8 weeks until she had gained 5% of her starting body weight. The study further stipulated that the 1,000 additional calories the participants consumed needed to come specifically from a group of five fast food restaurants (McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and KFC). While she is enrolled in the study, the filmmakers continually show

Ericson sitting in her car, ordering food at the drive-thru and then reciting the high calorie values for each of the foods that she has ordered. The cameras closely scan the pizza, chicken, tacos, and burgers that she orders daily.

Once Ericson gains 5% of her body weight in accordance with the parameters of the study, the cameras film her sitting down with one of the lead researchers, who informs Ericson and viewers about the metabolic changes she experienced as a result of the weight she gained. The researcher tells Ericson that “after gaining this 5% of body weight over such a short period of time” she increased her “bad” cholesterol by 14%, her triglycerides by 33%, and significantly increased the amount of fat in her liver. He then hands her a bizarre bumpy, yellow mass of plastic that is about eighteen inches long, telling her that it represents five pounds of fat and asks her to imagine that her recent weight gain has added at least two of these masses to her body. As Ericson turns the plastic mass over in her hands, she describes this mental image of her own body as “pretty disgusting.” Throughout this scene, the researcher’s tone as he details the metabolic changes her body has gone through is condescending and incredulous, and he is careful to position her as the instigator of the changes. The reveal of her metabolic test results and the model of the five pounds of fat turns Ericson into a spectacle meant to illustrate the swift and dangerous impact of even the smallest amount of weight gain. At the end of the segment following her participation in the study, Ericson summarizes the moral of her story for viewers, saying, “So even though I always considered myself to be a normal person and never that much overweight and never that unhealthy, going through all of this taught me that its almost like you’re at the line waiting to go over the edge.”

The researcher ends his session with Ericson by telling her that a weight loss of 5-10% of her body weight can have a positive health benefit. As part of the second stage of the study,

Ericson stops consuming the extra calories from fast food and is put on a diet of lean meats, whole grains, and vegetables. She loses the weight she gained for the study and her metabolic levels return to normal. Ericson is thus saved from being a spectacle and, as her above comments indicate, is sobered by the experience of having her weight thoroughly medicalized. In the process, the doctors and researchers involved in the treatment are positioned as saviors bringing her back from “the edge.” By representing medicine as a powerful hero, the film obscures the limits and realities of the study. Ericson is positioned as representing what happens to every person who gains weight, rather than as representative of what happens when a person gains weight in a short period of time by increasing their daily caloric value by 50% purely through the consumption of highly-processed foods laden with trans fats. And Ericson is moralized and objectified because of her weight gain despite the fact that it was in service of national study of metabolism—a study that is professionally beneficial to the same researcher who later patronizes and blames her for the changes her body has undergone. The cognitive and social authority of medicine not only naturalizes the way in which Ericson is submitted to the review of medical knowledge but also works to universalize her experience, making it seem as though the metabolic effects of her specific weight gain are the metabolic effects every obese person suffers from.

While the continual creation of the fat body as a medical spectacle in *The Weight of the Nation* works to normalize the body and reify the authority of medicine, the radical difference of the fat body produced through this spectacle is further amplified by the stories fat people are allowed to tell about themselves in the film. In “Choices,” the filmmakers include a series of interviews with number of people considered obese, asking them to talk specifically about their relationship to food. The film emphasizes the interviewees’ deep emotional attachment to food,

even showing one man saying that he loves food so much that he had a cheeseburger tattooed on his knee. After several of the film's experts talk about the futility of most diet plans, the interviewees are then shown detailing the most extreme diets they've been on, describing daily food plans that consist, for instance, of nothing but cabbage and cookies or that involve a regimen of extreme calorie restriction. These interviews reinforce the medicalized view of weight presented by the film's experts as they represent fat individuals both as having a pathological attachment to food and a general ignorance about good nutrition principles.

The experiences represented in these interviews become more extreme as the film progresses, fixating on the most humiliating and debilitating aspects of obesity. Just before a segment of "Choices" focused on bariatric surgery, the filmmakers show a series of individuals who all weigh between 450 and 600 pounds talking about the ways their weight has limited their lives. One man says he is unable to put on his own socks. Another woman describes the shame of breaking a toilet seat. The failure to achieve heteronormativity because of weight becomes a theme as one woman says that she does not have a family photo because she is too ashamed of her body while another woman says that her weight means that marriage and children are out of the question for her. These comments, which are presented in a manner that completely decontextualizes them from the rest of the interview, ultimately work to produce obesity as a series of humiliating failures and limits—humiliations that are repeated in the act of confessing these failures in front of the cameras.

There is only one woman interviewed by the filmmakers who is shown speaking about her experience and her feelings about her weight at length without having her comments heavily edited and strung together with similar comments from other interviewees. Vivia, who is an African American woman in her late twenties, is shown talking for several minutes about the

way she believes her weight has negatively impacted her life, making several deeply personal confessions in the process. She tells the camera, “I do not have a sexually active life. I’ve been told numerous times, there’s guys who like big girls. I don’t want a guy that likes big girls. I just want a guy that likes me. I don’t want a chubby chaser.” Having apparently internalized a deep amount of shame over her body, Vivia assumes that the possibility of another person being sexually attracted to her as a fat woman could only involve the objectification of a sexual fetish—to love her, she believes, would be pathological. She goes on to describe herself as using food to fill the emotional void in her life, beginning to weep as she says, “Food can be my best friend. Food can be my boyfriend at the moment. Food can be a vacation to the beach when I can’t afford to go.” Vivia then describes the kind of person she believes she would be were she not fat, saying

If I were not obese, I would have no hesitation in doing the things I want to do, going the places the I want to go, trying for things I want to accomplish. I could go on a roller coaster. I would skydive if I wasn’t obese. I would be able to roller skate. I would probably pursue dating if I were not obese. And I would have a little Vivia. I want her to be Vivia II. I shouldn’t deprive the world of that. They need another me.

Vivia is shown talking about her life as if it can only attain value and meaning through thinness. She describes her life as a fat woman instead as a failure of heterosexuality defined by an emotional relationship with food and her arrested potential as a subject.

Vivia’s representation of her life as thwarted, limited, and pitiful is ultimately what makes her of interest for an extended interview in the film. The filmmakers’ decision to show her talking about herself at length, crying as she confesses the limits of her life, turns her into a spectacle that reinforces a neoliberal literacy of the body, which insists that the normalized body

is the only proper body and the only means to a liveable life. While Jennifer Ericson is represented earlier in the film as a body temporarily made a spectacle before being saved by submitting herself to the gaze of medicine, the majority of the fat bodies featured in the film are shown as dead, objectified through medical examinations and screenings, or as “not really living” because they are disabled or feel shameful about their size. The viewer is thus taught to feel sympathy for the thwarted lives of obese people, who are positioned as diseased and disabled by virtue of their weight, in a way that constructs thinness as a compulsory identity. Much like McRuer defines compulsory able-bodiedness as captured in the moment when someone believes that, all told, everyone would rather be able-bodied, the spectacle of the fat body positions thinness as a foundational condition of subjectivity—that is, as the only way to achieve the autonomous, rational ideal of subjectivity is to not be impeded by the shame, pity, and objectification that accompany a medicalized understanding of fatness.

Saving Children and Repenting for Fatness

The spectacle of the fat body produced through the film is largely developed in the first two parts of the series, “Consequences” and “Choices.” In this sequencing of the film series, the medicalization of the fat body in the first two parts not only serves as a warning to the imagined audience (as in, don’t become one of these bodies we dissect and make vulnerable), but also works to set up the call to medicalize children that emerges in Part III, “Children in Crisis.” All the case studies presented in “Children in Crisis” follow parents of overweight children as they enroll their children in different childhood obesity studies, childhood fitness programs, and pediatric health clinics. In each of these stories, the children are shown being examined by doctors, being educated about food, and being guided through exercise by their doctors and their parents. Much like the adults submitted to the medical gaze in the film, these children are not

asked to talk at length about their experiences of their own bodies or their feelings about the medical treatment they receive. The children are not really subjects in the film, but are rather shown as in the process of normalization—they are being medicalized so that they might have the chance to become proper citizen-subjects in the future rather than continue down a path the film constructs as leading to abjection, disease, and death. There is no complication in the film of the availability and accessibility of the kinds of health services the children receive, nor is there any complication of the way the children are treated in medical environments (recall, for instance, fourteen-year-old Sophia who was only addressed by her doctor to be told that diabetes could kill her) or the damage wrought by having one's body made a constant issue in childhood. Instead, medicine is once again given the power of being the route to subjectivity, saving these children from “the edge” of becoming aberrant bodies.

For fat adults, the possibility of being recuperated into the status of a subject-citizen is represented as requiring an all-encompassing effort to shed fat, prove ones' willpower, and go to any necessary length to normalize the body. While one of the film's experts critiques shows like *The Biggest Loser* for portraying unrealistic versions of weight loss and changes towards health, the profiles of long-term weight loss shown in *The Weight of the Nation* don't seem all that far off from *The Biggest Loser*'s extreme weight loss programs. There seem to be two different messages about weight loss circulating in the film. For the imagined audience, which does not include people who are seen as obese, the experts urge viewers to take small steps to improve their health in the form of moderate increases in exercise, sensible changes to diet, and for those who may be slightly overweight, small amounts of weight loss like those recommended for Tim Daly and Jennifer Ericson. The film's message about weight loss for those who are considered obese, however, is that the road to health depends on major weight loss and a great deal of

ongoing work and concentrated effort, particularly because of the concept of the weight set point, which refers to the body's tendency to maintain its weight.

The consequence of the body's set point is that long term weight loss requires that people need to indefinitely maintain the caloric restrictions and increased exercise that lead to weight loss. One expert explains, "As far as we know, this phenomenon [of the body's set point] never goes away. So being successful for a year does not mean you would be able to go back to eating at a rate that would be appropriate for a person who never lost weight." A bariatric surgeon interviewed for the film tells viewers that when you look at the individuals who have maintained a significant weight loss for several years, "you get a sense of the *extreme vigilance* that's necessary in order to accomplish and maintain that goal" (emphasis mine). This vigilance is dramatized in the story of Rhonda and Elana, two friends from New York City who viewers are told have each lost over one hundred pounds and maintained their weight loss for more than a year. The filmmakers follow Rhonda and Elana as they spend the day together, documenting the ongoing effort that maintaining their weight loss requires. On the day the two women are filmed, they begin the morning with a nine-mile walk in Central park in order to meet their caloric goals for the day. Later, the two friends are shown navigating a tedious, drawn out process of estimating calories in different dishes and discussing the details of food preparation over the phone before placing an order for lunch. When their food arrives, the two women sit together at a table, carefully weighing portions of fish, chicken, and prepared vegetables and dividing them accordingly between themselves before finally beginning to eat.

While the caloric intake for the average woman is roughly 2000 calories a day, Elana and Rhonda's intake is significantly less—1400 and 1100 a day, respectively—in order to maintain their weight loss. The two women talk at length about the daily struggle of eating as they try to

“maximize” their individual calorie budgets. Maximizing, in this sense, means trying to find a way to get as much volume as possible from their foods so that they can stay within their calorie budget without continually feeling hungry. In addition to a significant daily exercise regimen and meticulous calorie counting and food journaling, the two women talk about coming up with more and more strategies for burning as many calories as possible. Elana, for instance, says that she has begun walking in place while she watches television at night. At the end of the segment, Elana tells viewers, “I’m just an ordinary person who just does a bunch of very, very tiny, ordinary things that together are extraordinary.” Elana’s comment is ironic because her intensive, seemingly non-stop effort to avoid being fat is anything but ordinary. In fact, it is exhausting just to watch and seems like it would be an untenable commitment of time and effort for most people (neither Elana nor Rhonda seem to work).

The filmmakers, however, do not talk about the material realities required to be able to follow the same path as Elana and Rhonda, focusing instead on the warm friendship and camaraderie between the two women. As they spend their day together dedicating hours of their time to carefully managing their daily calorie budget, the women laugh and joke together, cheer each other one, and toast to one another as they sit down to eat. The film thus treats their Sisyphean efforts as though they are easily managed by deemphasizing the sheer amount of labor that goes into maintaining their weight loss.¹² But at the same time, the focus on the women’s friendship (shared long before they actually began losing weight) tells viewers that their reward for losing weight is not just thinness, but connections, happiness, and belonging—things denied to others featured in the film like Vivia. The women’s shared optimism over their weight loss

¹² It’s worth noting that while Rhonda and Elana briefly discuss their health indicators, the daily work they are shown doing to manage their diet and exercise is completely focused on the maintenance of weight loss and not on the improvement or maintenance of specific aspects of their health. Once again, the film emphasizes that while the assumed, normative viewer can make small lifestyle changes to improve their overall health, those considered obese must go to whatever lengths necessary to achieve thinness.

and their eagerness to urge others to make similar lifestyle changes further minimizes the commitment of time and effort maintaining their weight loss requires, implying that whatever effort is required is worth achieving thinness.

The film's insistence on compulsory thinness and the importance of normalizing one's weight no matter the cost is perhaps most shocking in its profile of Darrel Phillipson, a sitting county judge in Seattle, who elects to have gastric bypass surgery. The filmmakers show Phillipson a few hours after surgery, walking around the hospital and joking around with his family. But when they follow-up with Phillipson five and a half months after the surgery, he admits that his ongoing recovery has not been so rosy. Phillipson says, "I think I was prepared for the possibility of complications. Now, I didn't know that all of the bad things that could happen would happen." Pulling up his shirt to show the camera a large incision site on his abdomen that was not the result of his laproscopic bypass surgery, he lists off the complications he's experience, saying,

Something ruptured in the intestine or the stomach or something and there was leakage into the body cavity. And then I had some really adverse reactions to the morphine. I developed something they call a fistula. It was a leakage from the old stomach—the bypassed stomach—into the wound. Two kidney stones. A blockage. A serious kidney infection that turned into a blood infection. A surgery to remove the kidney stones. Six or seven surgical procedures of varying seriousness. Spent a lot of time in the hospital—a total of probably close to thirty days.

Earlier in the segment profiling Phillipson, his bariatric surgeon explains that bariatric surgery is, by no means, an easy solution to weight loss. Rather than using Phillipson's story to highlight the very real limits and difficulties associated with bariatric surgery, however, the film presents

Phillipson's surgery as a largely successful leap towards improved health. The filmmakers show him playing with his infant grandson, golfing, and riding a bike. They celebrate the fact that he managed to lose over one hundred pounds in a span of six months, and they point out that he's significantly reduced his use of insulin and stopped taking his blood pressure medications. The segment closes with Phillipson telling viewers, "Six months of discomfort is a small price to pay to have years of life and enjoyment."

The film's spectacular representation of fatness so thoroughly constructs the fat body as abject and unliveable, that whatever one must endure to lose a significant amount of weight is not only seen as "worth it" but also as "healthy," no matter how punishing to the body. Unlike the imagined audience who is encouraged to make small life changes to improve concrete measures of health, fat people are expected to go to great lengths to normalize their body as much as possible. For fat people, health is so roundly envisioned as thinness that even six months of continual, potentially life-threatening health complications are minimized as "discomfort" and seen as a reasonable part of achieving the "health" of weight loss.

In terms of promoting a neoliberal literacy of the body, these stories of the struggle to achieve thinness as a fat person not only emphasize the necessity of normalizing the body, but also highlight the way that a medicalized view of the body coalesces with the moral. The filmmakers ask one of the women being interviewed for the film if she thinks her struggle to lose weight and maintain weight loss is unfair. The woman responds, saying, "Sure. It does seem unfair. It's unfair that, you know, I can't just lose the weight and go back to the way a normal thin person lives their life. But that's part of the price you pay for allowing yourself to get overweight in the first place." The language of repentance—language that echoes Phillipson's own comments about the price he had to pay for "health"—implies that losing weight is not just

about improving health but about correcting and atoning for an aberrant body. The medical spectacle of the fat body constructed in the film not only produces fatness as contrary to the normalized subject and in need of the objectifying gaze of medicine, but thoroughly moralizes obesity as the result of poor personal choices that require radical change and repentance in order to be recuperated as a citizen-subject.

Neutralizing a Systemic Critique of Public Health

The moralization of the fat body and treatment of obesity as an individual problem is central to the neoliberal literacy circulating through *The Weight of the Nation*, and it ultimately acts most powerfully the film's discussions of the systems and institutions implicated in increased rates of obesity and chronic disease. Particularly in the third and fourth parts of the series, "Children in Crisis" and "Challenges," the film approaches at different moments what seems like a systemic critique, especially as it discusses failed attempts to regulate food advertising, the lacking nutritional quality of school lunch programs, the functioning of the industrialized food system, and the correlation between poverty and obesity. This movement towards what appears to be a systemic critique makes sense given the film's overall goal of arguing for the necessity of federal intervention into increased rates of obesity. However, the film's discussion of the systemic factors that impact public health and nutrition is ultimately muddled and, at times, contradictory. Here, we can see the rhetorical limits of the cooperative corporate and state interests that funded *The Weight of the Nation*, resulting in an analysis that argues for increased federal regulation of industry while also championing business-led interventions into obesity and suggesting the inefficacy of focusing too much on top-down, policy-driven change.

In “Children in Crisis,” the film’s experts critique junk food advertising aimed at children, claiming that this kind of advertising creates brand loyalty in children for foods that “will kill them.” They further argue that the tendency of food companies to advertise their products to parents through the use of questionable health claims—for example, marketing sugar-rich breakfast cereals as healthy because they contain some whole grains—makes it difficult for parents to determine what is actually okay to feed their children. During the lengthy discussion of food advertising in “Children in Crisis,” the filmmakers largely follow the work of the Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG). The IWG is a collective of representatives from several government institutions including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and the Federal Trade Commission. The group was created by Congress and charged with the task of defining a consistent set of nutritional standards that would be defined by government in order to eliminate the problem of advertisers being able to use any kind of loose nutritional claim to market junk foods to children. The film shows the members of the IWG meeting with a representative from General Mills who tries to convince the IWG that corporations should be allowed the opportunity to self-regulate their advertising and the nutritional content of their products. The IWG responds by harshly critiquing the limits of self-regulation, pointing out that companies like General Mills will always prioritize profit over the health of children.

The IWG is represented, then, as a group of experts and thinkers pushing for strong advertising regulations that would make it infinitely more difficult for food companies to appeal to children as a captive market for highly-processed foods lacking in nutritional value. The film ultimately shows the IWG taking a strong set of nutritional principles “that would lower the levels of sugar, salt, and fat in the majority of foods marketed to children” before a congressional

committee. When they meet with the committee, the IWG is completely shut down, and the filmmakers capture members of Congress rebuking the group for creating an unreasonable set of principles that will create undue burdens for businesses. The IWG was ultimately told to withdraw its proposal and merely conduct a study of nutritional facts to report back to Congress. The segment ends with the filmmakers remarking, “As of March 2012, no further progress has been made on the IWG good marketing report.” The strong argument for increased regulation issued by the IWG is thus presented as a failure, especially since the filmmakers conclude the segment by highlighting the lack of progress on the original proposal rather than highlighting ongoing efforts to intervene in food advertising. The scene ultimately leaves viewers feeling pessimistic about the possibility of top-down change, particularly given the film’s representation of business interests as having an unbreakable hold on the functioning of government.

The futility of appealing to government as a means addressing wide scale problems with food, nutrition, and health is reinforced later on in “Children in Crisis” when the film takes up the question of school lunch programs. Again, the film highlights the structural aspects of the way contemporary school lunch programs work that contribute to low nutritional quality of the meals served. The filmmakers highlight, for example, the fact that funding structures for school lunch programs have changed, requiring programs in many schools to be self-supporting and resulting in lunch rooms that look more like shopping mall food courts as programs try to break even by selling junk foods that appeal to students. They also discuss the organizational challenges of trying to feed as many students as possible, as efficiently as possible, with a small staff of cafeteria workers. A school administrator interviewed in the film explains the problem with improving school lunch programs as being opposed to a neoliberal focus on austerity. He

explains that administrators are forced to make hard choices about how to appropriate limited funds and argues, “

Food service in general for K-12 education is lowly underfunded for what expectations need to be for what we’re feeding our kids. We’re painted into a corner of pouring more money into food service and competing with educational programs. And the answer, unfortunately, is too easy at the end of the day. We’re not going to take resources out of the hands of kids in learning to provide them a different food product.

The question, then, of the reforming lunch programs at the level of the school is explained away by limited school budgets—budgets made all the tighter by ongoing cuts to educational spending and increasing demands for test-based educational outcomes. Rather than use this moment in the film to argue for the necessity of putting more money into schools to support healthier meals for students, the film ultimately naturalizes the limited state support for education, implying that while reforms to school lunch programs would be nice, they are simply not economically feasible.

The film then turns to the development of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act as a state intervention into school lunch programs meant to ensure healthier meals for the children who depend on schools for a significant portion of their daily food. The film explains that, as written, the act creates more rigid nutritional guidelines that would limit the consumption of foods like French fries and increase the offering of fruits and vegetables while gradually switching lunch menus to only include whole grains. The filmmakers then detail the successful efforts of Congress to essentially rewrite the bill such that the most progressive aspects of the bill that would fundamentally shift the structure of school lunch menus were nullified. The film explains these changes as being the result of “special interests,” and more specifically as the result of

pressure from the potato lobbyists and companies making frozen pizza to get rid of restrictions in the bill against their foods. In the book *Democracies to Come*, Rachel Reidner and Kevin Mahoney argue that the generation of apathy functions as one of the most powerful affective strategies for supporting neoliberalism because it effectively diffuses resistance and systemic critique. Rather than use the problematic systems the film identifies as hurting efforts to improve public health as a rallying point for systemic change, the film ultimately creates a sense of apathy for viewers as it continually represents corporate interests as too powerful to challenge and government as too ineffectual to matter. Any optimism and hope for change viewers are left with is created through an appeal to individual efforts to shift norms around the consumption of food.

The discussion of the industrialized food system that appears in “Challenges” reinforces this emphasis on individual responsibility. In its discussion of U.S. farm policy and food production, the film focuses primarily on agricultural subsidies for crops like corn and soy—subsidies that discourage American farmers from growing fruits and vegetables while creating an excess of these subsidized crops that get turned into inexpensive processed foods. David Wallinga explains to viewers, “The way to think about the link between farm policy and obesity is that our policies are driving our farmers to overproduce exactly the kinds of foods and the calories in those foods that we’re already overeating.” The film’s experts also point out the one of the effects of these agricultural subsidies is that they make food artificially cheap, making unsubsidized fruits and vegetables seem unreasonably expensive and creating a consumer demand for lower and lower food prices. The film’s experts call for a push to recognize and educate consumers about the actual price of food. Paul Roberts, author of *The End of Food*, anticipates resistance to changing market prices to reflect the unsubsidized cost of food, telling viewers, “People will hear you say that and they’ll say, ‘Great, you’re going to make my food

more expensive.’ And I’d say, ‘No, what I’m going to do is I’m going to show you when you go to the supermarket what this actually costs. Instead of making you wait twenty years when you have that heart attack, you know, and you can’t work and you lose your house. You know, I’m just going to show you up front what the cost is.’”

The film introduces, then, a public gap in food literacies and argues for the need of more roundly contextualizing the price of food and the structure of the food system. However, rather than use the identification of this gap in food literacies to imagine what a reformed food system might look like at a structural level, the filmmakers once again reduce the question of change to the individual level with Roberts’ comments. Roberts constructs the problem of the artificial price of food as basically a barrier created by unreasonable consumer frugality, pushing viewers to accept higher food prices on the threat of future disability and its attendant economic impact. Viewers are told that they just need to accept the upfront cost of food, and there is nothing done to account for what this would mean in conditions of poverty in an era of rapidly decreasing state assistance. As the segment on the industrialized food system closes, the filmmakers give the final word to Philip Marineau, the former President of The Quaker Oats Company and Pepsi-Cola North American, who urges viewers to be sympathetic to the perspective of food corporations. He argues, “Whether you’re talking about oil companies or food companies, they did not create this problem and they cannot be made the villains here. They have to be part of the solution and they have to have incentives that allow them time to change their business model and if we don’t do that in this process, either in climate change or in fighting obesity, then that’s a force that will not be in the game with us.” The same call for allowing business the opportunity to self-regulate and change at a more comfortable pace for their business model that was roundly critiqued by the

IWG in the earlier segment on the regulation of food advertising thus becomes the films' summative comment about addressing the American food system.

The film's extremely soft critique of the systems implicated in increased rates of obesity and chronic disease thoroughly reveals its rhetorical allegiance with neoliberal corporate and state interests. Although the goal of *The Weight of the Nation* is ostensibly to advocate for wide ranging changes to intervene in what it constructs as a public health crisis, the changes the film ultimately calls for do more to support the current system of power than to challenge it. In addition to encouraging the medicalization of the individual body, the film positions business as one of the most promising sites for change in encouraging better health for citizens. At the opening of "Challenges," the filmmakers highlight employee health oversight programs that regularly screen the weight, blood pressure, and blood sugar of employees as a preventative "cost saving" measure designed to keep employees efficient and health care costs low. The question of intervening in public health is further privatized in the film through the push for efforts based at the level of the individual. In one of the final comments presented in the film series, Kelly Brownell, Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, tells viewers, "A fundamentally important question that we'll have to ask as a nation as we address obesity is whether change will come from the top down, that is, from the federal government let's say, or will it begin at the grassroots level and the percolate up and become contagious?" From both the framing of Brownell's comments and the film's portrayal of government intervention as futile, it's clear that the viewers are being called to roll up their sleeves and "be the change," so to speak.

The filmmakers suggest that viewers can prompt changes to the food system by simply creating greater demand for organic fruits and vegetables. The film further highlights volunteer

initiatives to encourage group exercise and non-profit programs focused on bringing fresh produce to low-income urban neighborhoods as positive models of change that viewers can support financially and through volunteer hours. So while Brownell describes the kind of change encouraged by the film as “grassroots” change, it resembles less the kind of community organizing and resistance associated with “grassroots activism” and more a kind of “trickle up” model of change that enacts a market logic, implying that systemic change will come as a result of consumer-based demands. The film thus encourages its imagined audience to see their civic participation as rooted in their consumer identities and pushes middle-class viewers to relate to poor communities without reliable access to fresh food or safe outdoor spaces through a charity model designed to bring knowledge and resources to what are constructed as less fortunate, less educated communities so that they might begin to make the “right” choices about nutrition and exercise for themselves and their families.

This privatization and depoliticization of food system and public health reforms is most dangerous and most ideologically powerful when the film discusses the relationship between poverty and obesity. At multiple points in *The Weight of the Nation*, the film’s experts observe that there is a correlation between poverty and obesity, as well as a correlation between poor communities of color and high rates of chronic disease like diabetes and heart disease. However, the film does almost nothing to unpack the impact structural factors like city zoning, de facto urban segregation, food deserts, or the stresses of poverty and systemic racism have on the individual body. If the film’s audience is imagined as a primarily white, middle-class, normatively-bodied audience, then there is no attempt made at all to help the viewer understand the environmental and material challenges of those living at or below the poverty line. As rare as it is for the film to allow fat people to talk about their own experiences of their bodies, there is no

opportunity given for poor people and people of color to talk earnestly about the struggle of feeding their families and attending to their health. Instead, poor people of color in particular are constructed as ignorant or even neglectful with regard to the questions of food and health. The neoliberal literacy circulating through the film thus entails gendered and raced scripts that teach the assumed audience to see increased rates of obesity as largely the result of poor decisions and a lack of education on the part of poor communities of color and on mothers in particular.

In one scene, a small group of the film's public health experts visit a Philadelphia bodega to investigate the foods readily available for purchase by the people in the neighborhood. After highlighting the abundance of cheap, highly processed junk foods and the sparse, comparatively expensive selection of fresh whole foods, the experts talk with the store manager about the food purchasing habits of the people in the neighborhood. The store manager tells the cameras that the people who frequent the neighborhood (who are marked visually by the cameras as predominantly African American) "raise their kids on this stuff" while pointing to a selection of chips and candy. He then argues that most of the kids who come into the bodega cannot identify common vegetables like broccoli. The store manager's representation of the neighborhood's food purchasing habits work to dramatize comments made throughout the series by the film's experts suggesting that "certain communities" (communities implicitly raced and classed by the filmmakers) are not interested in the health and nutrition of their children. In "Children in Crisis," Director of the National Institutes of Health Francis Collins blames community negligence for the spread of Type II Diabetes among children. He argues, "We never thought that Type II Diabetes would occur in ten- or twelve-year-olds, but not it's not uncommon at all to see that. So these are serious consequences and the tendency to dismiss this, or to perhaps see it in some cultures as a norm, is getting in the way of recognizing this as a real public health

emergency.” The filmmakers immediately switch from Collins addressing the camera to shots scanning a low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhood in Boston, thus coding the negligent “cultures” Collins refers to as poor urban communities of color.

Collins’ suggestion the childhood diabetes and childhood obesity are the result of a failure of poor parents of color to properly attend to their children’s health is followed by a segment following the parents of Tiarra, an African American elementary school student, as they seek medical and professional help to address their daughter’s weight. While white parents with overweight children featured later in the film are represented as having made significant, ongoing efforts to address their children’s nutrition and exercise, the film’s representation of Tiarra’s parents lays bare parenting decisions constructed as causing Tiarra’s weight gain. They are treated as ignorant in their parenting as a doctor explains the danger of their decision to allow Tiarra to have a television in her bedroom and as misguided in their attempts at intervention as a doctor critiques them for prohibiting soda in their household while continuing to allow Tiarra to drink fruit juice. While Tiarra’s parents are represented in the film as indicative of the ignorance and poor parenting decisions being made in poor communities of color, they are also praised in the film as working to overcome their negligence. Tiarra’s doctor tells viewers, “Tiarra’s mother is *exceptional*. She noticed a big increase in Tiarra’s weight and was motivated enough to seek out the support of our program” (emphasis mine). Positioning Tiarra’s parents as exceptional in their decision to address their daughter’s weight only works to reinforce the idea that other parents like Tiarra’s—Black, urban, low-income—are dangerously cavalier about their children’s health, failing to properly submit their children to the power of medicine and, subsequently, allowing the problem of childhood obesity to spread.

The film series concludes with the profile of another group constructed as an exception to the assumed negligence of communities of color. The filmmakers follow a group of Latina women from Santa Ana, California in their ongoing effort to build a park in their neighborhood—a neighborhood that has not had a public outdoor space for children to play in over twenty years. The filmmakers document the women’s efforts to secure a piece of unused land through the donation of a local business owner, explaining that it has taken the women seven years raise enough money and to secure all of the necessary permits to begin construction on the playground. Throughout the segment, the filming of these women works to highlight the differences between them and the imagined audience. The women are almost exclusively Spanish speaker, and they often have the film’s experts speaking on their behalf or have their children translating for them to the cameras. Meanwhile, the cameras continually scan the bodies of their children as they play in a nearby parking lot, emphasizing their children’s weight and lack of fitness. The barriers the women face as they struggle to build a neighborhood playground are presented as proof of their exceptionality and not as an opportunity to analyze and critique the city zoning laws, the inaccessibility of bureaucratic processes, or the racialized language and poverty barriers that made building a park such a massively drawn-out process. Like Tiarra’s parents, these women are instead positioned as a sort of “model minority”—exceptions celebrated for “taking charge” in a way that ultimately reinforces the idea that poor communities of color just need to work harder to make changes for themselves. This final profile teaches the imagined audience that the real reason problems of obesity and chronic disease persist is because those communities most affected by these issues don’t care or know enough to properly care for themselves and their families, thus relieving state institutions and corporate interests from assuming any real responsibility for public health and access to food.

Conclusion

As it argues that obesity represents a public health crisis demanding widespread intervention, *The Weight of the Nation* positions itself as explicitly pedagogical, circulating a rhetorical construction of fatness that situates fatness as opposed to citizenship and as threatening to the economic interests of the state. HBO has made the film series available for free to the public on its website and through a number of other video streaming platforms on the premise that the films need to be viewed and shared as widely as possible to generate change. On the film website, there are also a number of additional text resources available, including a companion book for sale, which are designed to facilitate the discussion of the film in classrooms, businesses, and community organizations. The filmmakers have also continued to expand the project, adding shorter films focused on special topics like “Healthy Mom, Healthy Baby” and “The Biology of Weight Loss.” They have also begun a secondary project creating a series of films targeting children called *The Weight of the Nation Kids*. Through this explicitly pedagogical project, *The Weight of the Nation* circulates a neoliberal literacy of health and the body that individualizes and privatizes health and encourages viewers to act on their health in ways that align with the interests of the globalized market.

There are two related pedagogical aspects to the neoliberal literacy circulated through the film series, the first of which is the production of the fat body as a spectacle that works to construct and reinforce thinness as a normative ideal. The spectacle of the fat body constructs thinness as a compulsory condition of subjectivity by representing fat bodies as failing to fulfill the role of the rational, autonomous subject. The medicalization of weight deepens this literacy of the body by treating weight and the chronic diseases associated with it as being firmly within the control of the individual. This belief that weight and health are the result of individual choice

works to simultaneously discipline the normative body of the imagined viewer and stigmatize the fat, diseased body—positioning fatness as the sum of poor choices, poor morals, and poor character. This medicalized literacy of the body serves as a foundation for the second pedagogical aspect of the film, which involves the depoliticization of concerns about the state of public health. Even as the filmmakers raise concerns about systemic and environmental factors in increased rates of obesity and chronic disease, they ultimately reduce the problem to a market-based logic focused on charity and individual change. *The Weight of the Nation* does not fundamentally challenge a neoliberal social and economic system that wears on the citizen body, but instead idealizes citizen action in the terms of consumer choice.

The production of the fat body as a spectacle and the depoliticization of public health work together to create and reinforce a social stratification separating the white, middle-class, normatively-bodied viewer from the raced and classed obese body. As poor communities of color are positioned as enabling the spread of obesity and chronic disease through their ignorance and negligence, the middle class viewer is made to feel, at best, sympathetic and charitable towards these communities and, at worst, threatened and justified in their discriminatory attitudes. If, as the film's experts insist, wealth is no longer as protective as it once was from the threat of obesity and chronic disease, then perhaps that is an indication of the fact that the economic instability, political disenfranchisement, and the lack of a public safety net are increasingly shared effects of neoliberalism, particularly as the middle-class becomes more precarious and the wealth gap increases. The bodily and economic effects of contemporary economic and political systems could be cause for solidarity against a neoliberal machine that privileges profit over the health and well-being of people. Instead, the neoliberal literacies circulating through *The Weight of the Nation* invite a narrow audience of viewers to secure their

privileged position as citizen-subjects by disciplining their bodies and perpetuating the pathologization and marginalization of (frequently raced, classed) fat bodies.

Missing from the analysis in *The Weight of the Nation* is substantive attention to real systemic barriers to accessing good food and fostering health. While the film makes a nod towards systemic issues such as the effects of an industrialized food system, the literacy it forwards does little to nothing to help viewers understand in a rich way the intertwined corporate and state interests that perpetuate this system. The film likewise makes little room for exploring the efforts of actual grassroots organizations addressing access to good food, safe public spaces, non-stigmatizing health care, and fair working conditions as social justice issues. While *The Weight of the Nation* gets caught up in trying to simultaneously critique and support corporate and state interests, the rhetorics developing in these grassroots movements begins from a different point, trading a concern for the efficiency of laboring bodies for a focus on food and safe spaces as basic rights. The rhetorics around urban farming, for instance, don't just offer a different kind of solution to the problem of food deserts, but open up substantive conversations about the material barriers to growing and accessing food—teaching people not just how to grow their own food, but also educating them on the systems of power that determine differential class and regional access to foods. At the same time, rhetorics like those around urban farming challenge the raced and classed scripts of a neoliberal rhetoric of food and health that positions poor people of color as neglectful or uneducated about health and nutrition, instead highlighting community-based efforts to overcome the systemic barriers that effect health and nutrition. The panic-driven rhetorics of *The Weight of the Nation* appeal to audiences because they reinforce powerful and long-established assumptions about particular bodies. Seeking out, promoting, and circulating the rhetorics coming out of progressive organizing efforts to intervene in

contemporary rhetorics of obesity is key to advancing an alternative literacy of food, health, and bodies.

CHAPTER FOUR

RACE, MOTHERHOOD, AND RHETORICAL CONSTRAINT IN MICHELLE OBAMA'S "LET'S MOVE" CAMPAIGN

In 2011, *Child Development* published a study that found a correlation between working mothers and childhood obesity. The study, which analyzed data gathered on elementary school children for a separate research project begun in 1991, found children in the sixth grade were six times more likely to be overweight than children with stay-at-home mothers, and that the likelihood of a child being overweight or obese increases the longer the child's mother has been employed. The study estimates that "[f]or each additional five-month period his or her mother is employed, a child of average height can be expected to gain 1 extra pound over and above normal growth" (McMillen). While researchers looked at multiple factors like time spent watching television and exercise habits, they were unable to explain the correlation between working mothers and childhood obesity, but they hypothesized that busier family schedules led to increased consumption of fast and prepared foods. The study's lead researcher, Taryn Morrissey, insisted that this correlation did not mean that mothers were not to blame for childhood obesity, arguing, "It is not the mother's employment [that is the problem], but the environment. [...] There needs to be improved access to healthy foods" (qtd. in McMillen). Other childhood obesity researchers reiterated Morrissey's insistence that the association between childhood obesity and working mothers not be positioned as the cause of childhood obesity. Michele Mietus-Synder, the co-director of the Obesity Institute at Children's National Medical Center, responded to the study by emphasizing the ongoing difficulties many people face when it comes to feeding their children. Mietus-Synder told reporters, "Foods that are the

healthiest are often the most expensive and least accessible, and the healthiest foods are often the most time-consuming to prepare” (qtd. in McMillen).

Even as national media coverage of the study acknowledged the researchers’ more nuanced understanding of the data and their emphasis on the importance of considering the relative accessibility of healthy foods for many working families, reporters did little to encourage their audiences to think about the study’s findings in more complex ways. An article with the headline “Working Moms May Mean Overweight Kids,” opened its discussion of the study by implying a more direct link between childhood obesity and working mothers than even the study’s researchers seem prepared to admit. The article’s author begins by writing, “Over the past 35 years, the percentage of U.S. mothers who hold down a job while raising kids has soared, from less than 50% to more than 70%. The childhood obesity rate—which is now close to 17%—has more than tripled during the same time frame. These overlapping trends may not be a coincidence” (McMillen). This first paragraph appears on Health.com directly next to an image of a woman in the driver’s seat of a car, passing what appears to be fast food to her young children in the back seat.

While readers who click through to the second page of the article might see Morrissey’s explanation in the closing paragraph that there are too many factors at play in increased rates of childhood obesity to single out working mothers as a cause, most readers are more likely to gloss only the first few paragraphs and accompanying image. The way the article frames the study’s findings ultimately draws on and reinforces an ongoing rhetoric about obesity that explains the increase in average body weight since the 1970s as the result of a feminist movement that pushed women out of the kitchen and into the workforce. The image of a mother feeding her children from the front seat of her car reiterates a common story told about working women who are too

strapped for time to care properly for their families while romanticizing a past era marked by limited options for women. Like the other rhetorics of obesity analyzed in earlier chapters, this origin story of the obesity crisis that blames working women and feminism for the end of the nutritious family meal is powerful precisely because it obscures a host of systemic factors at work. This origin story naturalizes the assumption that women's work continues to be a "choice" rather than an economic necessity for many families and does nothing to interrogate the ways in which a neoliberal economy with its eroding social support systems, burdensome childcare costs, and industrialized food system impacts the way families access or consume food. This origin story does not challenge an industrialized food system that makes fast and prepared foods cheaper and more accessible than many healthier, whole foods, nor does it challenge a heteronormative gender order that keeps the majority of working women strapped with a "second shift," assuming the bulk of responsibility for childcare and housework on top of their regular jobs. Locating the root of the "obesity crisis" in women's increased movement into the workforce instead supports a neoliberal social ideology that locates individual and familial choice as the key to solving social issues. If the busy working mother is making her kids fat by feeding them too many frozen dinners and using the television as a baby-sitter, then the solution lies in a new ideal of the "good" mother who does whatever necessary to feed her kids healthy foods and keep them physically active.

Given the steadfast cultural assumption that the care of children and preparation of food remain primarily the responsibilities of women, it is not surprising that motherhood is positioned both as a cause of and first line of defense against childhood obesity. While motherhood has been made central to many conversations about food and weight, perhaps the most powerful example of the rhetoric of motherhood in national discourses around obesity is first lady

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign. Launched in 2010, "Let's Move" is an ongoing national initiative "dedicated to solving the problem of obesity in a generation" ("About Let's Move"). The campaign is organized around five key pillars, which include 1) establishing a healthy start for kids in the earliest years of life, 2) educating parents to help them make healthier choices for their families, 3) getting healthy foods into schools, 4) ensuring access to healthy, affordable foods for all families, and 5) increasing physical activity for kids. In addressing the campaign's fourth pillar focused on the accessibility of healthy, affordable foods, "Let's Move" makes clear that access to healthy food is made especially difficult for poor communities of color, pointing towards systemic factors that make access to particular foods a mark of privilege.

However, Obama uses "Let's Move" less as a bully pulpit to address food and nutrition as a social justice issue and more so as an educational, awareness-building campaign in which she positions herself as "mom-in-chief," working to instill healthier habits in the nation's children. When she speaks to the public as part of her work with "Let's Move," Obama consistently situates her concern for children's health and her strategies for encouraging healthier choices in her experiences as a mother, working to relate to other parents as someone who knows firsthand the struggle to keep kids healthy while juggling the myriad demands of daily life. This way of representing herself primarily as a mother is a deliberately crafted public image shaped through the interplay of the historical legacy of the role of the first lady and Obama's subject position as the first African American woman to occupy that role. In my analysis of the "Let's Move" campaign, I pay particular attention to the rhetorical constraints placed on Obama as she develops and advances "Let's Move." While the rhetoric of motherhood allows Obama to overcome some of these constraints to win over her national audience, I argue that this rhetoric becomes networked with existing arguments around fitness, gender, citizenship, and

neoliberalism in ways that deepen social stratifications and perpetuate the disenfranchisement of poor women of color. Ultimately, I argue that the conditions of rhetorical constraint and emphasis on motherhood that shape the “Let’s Move” campaign demonstrate the importance of crafting a national conversation about public health that actively challenges normalized, raced, classed, and gendered definitions of citizenship.

The First Lady, Republican Motherhood, and Gendered Citizenship

Feminist rhetorical scholars have argued that the rhetoric of motherhood is a particularly potent rhetorical trope, drawing on deeply ingrained cultural values to help women rhetors build their ethos at the same time that it reinforces traditional notions of femininity. These scholars note that motherhood has historically functioned as a key frame through which the expansion of women’s civic activity is imagined and justified. The frame of motherhood has become so central to the way women’s political engagement is imagined that, as Lindal Buchanan argues in *Rhetorics of Motherhood*, “the Mother is easily invoked but difficult to resist in rhetorical situations” (xvii). Buchanan goes on to explain that the rhetorical power of motherhood is tied to a heteronormative gender code that structures private and political life in the West. According to Buchanan,

Motherhood’s persuasive force stems from its place in the cultural matrix. Embedded within an overarching system of gender, motherhood reflects prevailing beliefs about sex and sexuality, femininity and masculinity, reproduction and children. These beliefs permeate the code of motherhood, a *mélange* of the precepts, values, expectations, and conventions about maternity that support the gendered status quo. The code, in turn, is part of the comprehensive body of scripts, norms, and roles learned by subjects during the process of acculturation, so it is instantly recognizable to cultural insiders. (116)

The rhetoric of motherhood is powerful, then, because it communicates and reiterates an entire set of cultural familiar values and ideologies that organize social life and define the roles of citizens. This means that what makes motherhood an effective rhetorical appeal—the fact that it is so recognizable—is tied to a heteropatriarchal script that supports not just an established gender order, but that has historically worked (and continues to work) to support global systems of power, creating and recreating racial hierarchies, furthering the interests of capitalism, and facilitating systems of colonialism and Western imperialism.

Feminist rhetorical work on the trope of motherhood frequently locate the ideological roots of this trope in nineteenth century ideals of republican motherhood, which defined citizenship for women through the role of mother. Within the framework of republican motherhood, women's value as citizens comes not from simply having children, but from enacting a traditional form of femininity by defining themselves primarily as mothers and by reproducing the values of the nation by instilling those values in their children. While the ideology of republican motherhood held up white middle- and upper-class women as emblems of the purity of traditional femininity and of the moral superiority of the West, this ideology was consistently used to deny the right to and recognition of the maternity of women of color. Idealizing a performance of motherhood only available to white, able-bodied, heterosexual, affluent, Christian women ultimately worked as a justification for both the disparaging of mothers who did not fit this normative mold and the denial of what Dorothy Roberts refers to as “procreative freedom” to women of color (4).

In *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts details an ongoing series of historical moments in which a whitewashed ideal of motherhood has resulted in systematic attempts to undermine black women's reproductive control. Roberts argues that “regulating Black women's

reproductive decisions has been a central aspect of racial oppression in America” (6)—something made evident in the sexual abuse of slave women by white slave owners, the practicing of selling slave children from their mothers, and the forced or coerced sterilization of African American women. Likewise, the systematic removal of Native American children from their families and the forced sterilization and coerced use of dangerous birth control methods for Native American and Latina women are all examples of the ways in which the denial of procreative freedom and reproductive control have been used to further racial oppression in the U.S. Common media representations continue to demonize poor mothers of color by casting them as hyper-fertile, irresponsible, manipulative of state support systems, and addicted to drugs and alcohol. The gendered ideology of republican motherhood that idealizes motherhood as key to the reproduction of the nation thus entails a racialized ideology that uses the denial of motherhood as a form of social control and as a justification for ongoing marginalization.

The role of the first lady is both rooted in and carries on the legacy of republican motherhood. In her article, “Collective Memory and the Candidates’ Wives in the 2004 Presidential Campaign,” Lisa M. Burns notes that the role of first lady is not static and has evolved significantly over the last century. Burns argues that first ladies have “undergone a progression, moving from ceremonial hostesses, to emerging spokeswomen, and finally to independent activists and political surrogates” (86). In “The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady,” Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Diane Blair echo Burns when they argue that the expanded role of the first lady is rhetorically significant because it extends the possibilities for women’s political participation on a larger scale, effectively “transforming the twentieth century version of the republican mother into an activist voice of national consequence” (567). However, Parry-Giles and Blair show that the activist voice of the modern first lady was not a dramatic departure from

nineteenth century ideals of gendered citizenship, but rather built on and shifted the ideology of woman as mother and reproducer of the nation, making the role of first lady a more public, outward performance of a nationalist ideology of motherhood. According to Parry-Giles and Blair, “The nineteenth-century mother assumption that ‘being a good citizen meant being a good mother’ was now translated into ‘being a good first lady meant hailing, modeling, and promoting publicly the civic values that *good* mothers historically instilled” (576-7). In other words, while the public and more activist role of modern first ladies expands women’s political sphere, it also keeps public perceptions of women’s acceptable civic participation anchored to traditional femininity and motherhood. Indeed, as Parry-Giles and Blair note, the projects first ladies take up during the course of their husbands’ administrations almost always take up issues seen as traditionally domestic, private, and outside the concern of “real” politics—issues typically involving the welfare of women and children.

In “Family Metaphors and the Nation: Promoting a Politics of Care Through the Million Moms March,” Sara Hayden suggests that the centrality of the rhetoric of motherhood to the activist efforts of first ladies may actually be a strength in shifting the face of politics. Situating her argument in an analysis of the ways in which the rhetoric of motherhood can be used to advance a social justice framework rooted in care for others, Hayden writes, “I maintain that a significant part of maternal appeals’ allure is their ability to highlight values and attributes typically considered irrelevant to public issues and debates” (198). The role of mother-activist enacted by the first lady, then, has the potential to bring to the forefront of national concern issues central to the daily, material realities of many women (issues, for example, like the struggle to access and prepare healthy foods for children). However, as Buchanan points out, “the quandary of employing maternal rhetorics [...] is that both their force and their peril derive

from entrenchment in dominant systems of gender, knowledge, and power” (5). First ladies might use their expanded public role to bring national attention to issues that concern the lives of women and children that might otherwise be excluded from the view of formal politics, but the fact that legacy of the first lady is anchored in republican motherhood and tied to traditional notions of femininity and gendered citizenship means that their activist and philanthropic campaigns will always bear a complex relationship to raced and gendered power structures.

Indeed, Tasha Dubriwny argues that the primary challenge first ladies face is balancing an expanded public role with traditional, normative expectations about their responsibilities as wives and mothers. In “First Ladies and Feminism: Laura Bush As Advocate for Women’s and Children’s Rights,” Dubriwny explains,

What is permissible for one first lady may not be permissible for the next. Perhaps the most important factor in any first lady’s success in achieving the approval of the press and the general public is her ability to negotiate her different roles in the public and private spheres. [...] As such, the political role of the first lady is always tenuous; first ladies are figureheads of symbolic importance as the ‘ideal wife’ and mother, but the role of the first lady does not include institutionalized political power. (87)

This means that while first ladies have a significant public presence and a bully pulpit from which to speak, they face enormous pressure to shape their civic and political participation for fear of backlash. The pressure to enact an idealized performance of wife and mother as well as the lack of institutional power that comes from not being an elected figure both work to discourage first ladies from expanding their activist and philanthropic efforts towards anything that can be interpreted as policy making. Their campaigns and public activities are further shaped by the specific values of their husbands’ administrations and the pressure to appear always

supportive of their husbands' political goals. The more public position of the modern first lady may expand women's political participation, but it does so within a narrow frame that upholds the gendered division of the private from the political. As a model of the ideal wife and mother, the first lady also functions symbolically as the ideal female citizen, defining her value and her concern for the nation through the frame of heteronormative motherhood and actively modeling this ideal of citizenship for the rest of the nation.

Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign fits within the myriad demands placed on first ladies as they develop their public roles. In its goal of eliminating obesity within a generation, "Let's Move" takes up an issue that can be positioned as nationally significant but that is not generally seen as stepping into the territory of that which is properly political. In addressing the health of the nation's children, "Let's Move" aligns itself with some of the key goals of Barack Obama's administration, such as expanding affordable access to health care, without delving directly into the kinds of policy work his administration is involved in. It is a campaign that can, and does, address itself primarily to other women as mothers and that focuses its efforts on caring for the children of the nation. Moreover, the issues of childhood health and nutrition offer Obama the opportunity to adopt an activist stance that addresses, on some level, the links between race, poverty, and lack of access to healthy foods while still employing the rhetorics of motherhood to appear relatively non-threatening. But Obama's embrace of the rhetorics of motherhood, both as she positions herself within the campaign specifically as a mother and as she addresses other women as mothers, is not just a result of the legacy of the role of the first lady—it is also undoubtedly shaped by the additional pressures and constraints Obama faces as the first African American woman to assume the role of first lady.

In “Collective Memory and the Candidates’ Wives in the 2004 Presidential Campaign,” Lisa Burns argues that the primary means through which the public comes to understand first ladies and potential first ladies is through media representations that appeal to collective memory. This practice of calling on collective memory effectively reduces former first ladies to singular issues or traits (for example, recalling Jacqueline Kennedy as significant primarily because of her fashion sense) that can be used as a point of comparison. Burns writes, “[T]he complexities of performing the first lady position are undermined by journalists’ shorthand use of collective memory helps to reify the fairly limited boundaries that define ‘proper’ first lady performance in the press” (686). This collective memory of first ladies not only oversimplifies their respective legacies, but further circumscribes the position by emphasizing the similarities between the women, suggesting a limited number of ways in which one might enact the role of first lady.

However, media coverage of Michelle Obama throughout Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and the earlier parts of his first term emphasized her difference. The authors of “Michelle Obama ‘Got Back’” argue that intense focus on Obama’s body—particularly as the media scrutinized her weight, her facial expressions, and the perceived modesty of her clothing—served as a particularly potent means of marking her as different and not properly fit for the role of first lady (Quinlan et al). This fixation on Obama’s body functioned as an attempt to normalize and discipline her public presentation and embodied performance, exerting public pressure for her to dress in particular ways or carefully monitor her public commentary and emotional expressions. But in continually highlighting the ways in which her body differs from the accepted norm for the role of the first lady, the media’s fixation on her body also worked to

challenge her rhetorical fitness, using an implicitly moralized critique of her bodily presentation as a way to undermine her as an authoritative, rational speaker.

Both Obama's body and her public statements were continually interpreted during the campaign through a host of stereotypes that have long structured the politics of representation of African American women. Public suspicion of Obama's suitability for the role of first lady was dramatized in the aftermath of her infamous 2008 campaign speech given in Wisconsin when she said told her audience that response of her husband's supporters had made her proud of the U.S. for the first time in her life. A letter published in the *Clarion-Ledger* following this campaign speech demonstrates a common understanding of the first lady as a symbol of the ideal of gendered American citizenship and the racist interpretation of Michelle Obama as both suspicious in her citizenship and unfit for the role of first lady. The letter writer opines,

We have been spoiled by having the first lady representing us in the White House and representing our nation to the world, to be a soft-spoken, compassionate, humble, tolerant, graceful, forgiving, good-natured and patriotic person. Jackie Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush, and Laura Bush were all of the above. Mrs. Obama is none of the above. She is an angry, caustic, abusive, racist, sharp-tongued, anti-white and anti-American person. Mrs. Obama would be the perfect poster person for the Hate America Program. (qtd. in Cooper, 48-49)

The writer's representation of Obama is steeped in stereotypes of black women as aggressive, angry, threatening, and emasculating—stereotypes used to mark Obama as the antithesis of the ideal of pure, white womanhood and thus the antithesis to proper citizenship for women. The writer's effort to mark Obama as different and as threatening is so totalizing that even the

strident public critiques Hillary Clinton faced as first lady are ignored and she is idealized as every bit the vision of the proper first lady as Jacqueline Kennedy and Barbara Bush.

As a result of the public backlash she received, Obama had to temporarily step back from her public role in the campaign and retool her public approach in order to show the public that she could strike the balance of public voice and traditional femininity that remains central to the role of the first lady. In “A’n’t I A Lady,” Brittney Cooper details the transformation in the way Obama rhetorically situated herself, explaining,

After her initial missteps, she took a radically different tack in her public appearances, embracing and celebrating her roles as mother and wife and refashioning herself into the role of ‘Mom-in-Chief.’ She gave speeches in which she focused on her dreams and hopes for her daughters, her experiences as a mother, and her strategies for helping her daughters adjust to life in the White House. Although she steered her campaign rhetoric into the supposedly ‘safe’ ground of motherhood, it is important to note that positive ideas about black women’s capacity for mothering have in no way constituted a foregone conclusion in American life. (50)

Invoking a powerful rhetoric of motherhood, then, allowed Obama to carve out a role for herself that the public was receptive to in spite of racist interpretations of her body as not belonging in the White House and as suspicious in its citizenship. At the same time, as Cooper argues, the rhetoric of motherhood helps Obama expand the political sphere for women of color by making black motherhood visible in ways that potentially challenge the ongoing denigration of women of color as mothers. Precisely because Obama was able to successfully invoke the rhetoric of motherhood despite a long-standing history of refusing to recognize black women as mothers, Cooper argues, “Michelle Obama’s ability to appeal to a cross section of the American populace

on the basis of these shared experiences of womanhood, does then, signal at least a modicum of historical progress” (52).

Obama has carried this rhetoric of motherhood into the “Let’s Move” campaign, drawing on her own experiences as a mother, addressing other mothers as they work to keep their kids healthy, and modeling an active, nutrition-focused form of mothering for the rest of the nation. Both through her modeling of motherhood and her deliberate focus on low-income communities and communities of color, Obama’s work with “Let’s Move” helps to build public recognition of women of color as agents of change. Motherhood is thus a powerful rhetorical trope for Obama, helping her navigate the raced and gendered demands placed on her in the role of first lady and making space for people of color in the White House. However, Obama’s success in carving out a public role for herself does not—and cannot possibly be expected to—undo the intersecting race- and gender-based oppressions that have pushed her to situate her public work as first lady through the ideologically normative framework of motherhood.

Within the context of the “Let’s Move” campaign, the raced and gendered ideologies of citizenship that circulate through the rhetoric of motherhood coalesce powerfully with neoliberal ideologies of fit citizenship. An ideology of fit citizenship constructs thinness and fitness as the result of personal choices that reflect the values of the nation while stigmatizing fatness and disease as moral failures. These perceived moral failures serve as justification for ongoing and deepened marginalization of poor communities and communities of color in which obesity and associated diseases disproportionately occur. A normalizing rhetoric of motherhood that imagines women’s primary contribution to the nation as situated in their roles as mothers aligns with and contributes to the construction of fit citizenship, defining the responsibilities of citizenship for women as making the right kinds of choices to keep their families healthy—

whether that means being properly educated about nutrition, embracing a second shift dedicated to managing the nutrition of her children in a food system hostile to those efforts, or even foregoing or limiting work in the formal sector in order to dedicate herself to her family's health and nutrition. This ideal of gendered fit citizenship allows for the demonization of mothers for whom these "choices" are not accessible, particularly given the way in which a rhetoric of traditional motherhood is tied to a historical legacy of demonizing mothers of color. We have already seen this ideal of motherhood and the reproduction of the fit nation being deployed against women of color in texts like *Weight of the Nation* that consistently represent mothers of color as ignorant about nutrition and neglectful with regard to their children's health. Going forward in my analysis of "Let's Move," I am looking at both how Michelle Obama uses the rhetoric of motherhood to try to shift national conversations about obesity in more progressive directions while also being limited in her attempts by the very same rhetoric. But I am also being mindful of the way that her rhetoric of motherhood circulates through her rhetorical role as first lady, spilling out from the campaign itself and affecting other women in various ways.

The Rhetoric of Motherhood in "Let's Move"

Michelle Obama as a Model of Modern Motherhood

During her speech announcing the official launch of "Let's Move" on February 9, 2010, Michelle Obama argued that crafting a national intervention into increased rates of obesity was necessary because "[t]he physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake" (qtd. in "Learn the Facts"). Here, Obama frames the exigency of her campaign through the same neoliberal rhetoric of national security and worker productivity that appears in the work of "Mission: Readiness" and in *The Weight of the Nation*. Indeed, many of the materials available on the campaign website outlining the campaign goals

and initiatives invoke many of the problematic rhetorics of weight and health that read these issues through the individualizing frame of a neoliberal social ideology. The “Let’s Move” website, for example, specifically uses the language of the “obesity epidemic” when talking about the issue of childhood obesity and offers rather dire predictions of the effects of increased rates of obesity, warning readers, “If we don’t solve this problem, one third of all children born in 2000 or later will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lives. Many others will face chronic obesity-related health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and asthma” (“Learn the Facts”). The campaign materials thus invoke the specter of diseased and dying children, reinforcing the tenor of panic and threat around conversations about obesity while also interpreting children’s weight through a medicalized framework.

This medicalized framework is deepened in another piece on the “Let’s Move” website aimed specifically at parents that explains the campaign’s reliance on the BMI as a guiding metric for understanding whether a child’s weight is “normal” and “healthy.” At the end of this page, parents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with their children’s BMI score by following a link that redirects to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s online BMI calculator for children and teens. For those parents who find that their child’s BMI exceeds the “normal” category, the campaign encourages them to seek out medical help as soon as possible. The “Let’s Move” campaign materials assure parents that there is plenty of assistance to be given to help them normalize the weight of their children and explains, “The American Academy of Pediatrics [...] is educating doctors and nurses across the country about obesity, to ensure that medical professionals regularly monitor children’s BMI, provide counseling for healthier eating; and, for the first-time ever, can write a prescription for parents laying out the simple things they can do to increase healthy eating and active play” (“Getting Started”). Much like *The Weight of*

the Nation, parents are encouraged by “Let’s Move” to medicalize their children and, in the process, medicalize their own parenting decisions with the promise of literal prescriptions for family behavioral changes.

While “Let’s Move” echoes some of the panic-laden rhetorics of other national discussions of obesity and embraces a medicalized view of weight, the campaign does resist much of the more dire claims and sensationalist tactics employed by groups like “Mission: Readiness.” The medicalizing framework and language of epidemic that appear on the campaign’s website are rarely emphasized in Obama’s public appearances as part of her work with the campaign, as she chooses instead to focus on the positive potential of helping children develop richer literacies around food, nutrition, and exercise. Despite the emphasis on medicalizing the weight of children in the campaign’s introductory materials, the practical advice Obama and the rest of the “Let’s Move” campaign offers directly to parents to keep their kids healthy almost never advises the monitoring of weight and often actively discourages conversations about weight with children. “Take Action Parents,” a short informational document designed to provide parents with five simple, everyday steps to foster healthy families, makes no mention of weight at all and trades the rhetoric of weight as a problem families must find a way to solve with a rhetoric that positions active play and the exploration of healthier food choices as ways to build stronger familial bonds.

Obama’s emphasis on the possibilities that come with developing new food and health literacies rather than a continual focus on the threat potentially posed by fat bodies is particularly important in terms of the way the campaign works to reach out to communities of color. In its explanation of the increase in national obesity rates over the past three decades, “Let’s Move” acknowledges, “The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities,

where nearly 40% of children are overweight or obese” (“Learn the Facts”). Nearly all of the photos included throughout the “Let’s Move” website feature children of color, indicating the campaign’s commitment to specifically addressing the disproportionate rates of childhood obesity in these communities. *The Weight of the Nation* and the work of “Mission: Readiness” likewise raise the correlation between poverty, race, and obesity, but both of these texts represent the issue in a way that produces a suspicious, threatening, raced body. “Let’s Move” challenges this threatening branded body and instead regularly shows pictures of children of color exercising, gardening, and cooking. In this way, the campaign presents an image of children of color invested in and contributing to the creation of a healthier future for the nation.

The campaign’s movement away from some of the more problematic aspects of other national discourses around obesity is enacted primarily through the way Obama builds her public persona as a mother in her work with “Let’s Move.” While the rhetoric of “Mission: Readiness” and *The Weight of the Nation* revolves around objectifying expert takes on the problems with fat bodies, Obama locates her concern with childhood obesity through the maternal lens of caring for innocent children—a position that allows her to soften and shift the way the campaign talks about children’s bodies. The images of Obama that appear throughout the “Let’s Move” website play a major role in reiterating Obama’s motherly position within the campaign. The official “Let’s Move” Flickr stream, which is embedded on the campaign website, features a string of images showing Obama actively engaged with children as they learn about growing food, cooking healthy dishes, and exercising. Some pictures show Obama in the White House garden, kneeling alongside children as they plant seeds and weed the garden beds together. Many pictures show Obama donning yoga pants and t-shirts as she does yoga with groups of children and leads kids through choreographed dance sequences. Other images show her feeding

professional athletes healthy snacks and coaching the President through exercises. Throughout the campaign Flickr stream, these images that are more explicitly related to “Let’s Move” initiatives are interspersed with images of Obama hugging and embracing children.

These images situate Obama as the ultimate mother figure in the “Let’s Move” campaign, positioning her as a model for the kinds of gendered actions that will keep the nation’s children healthy. As she is shown engaging in various campaign initiatives, it is clear that Obama’s motive is not to use traditional (masculinized) forms of authority to enforce top-down changes, but is rather working to persuade children in particular to adopt certain habits. Her call to develop new literacies around food and exercise is thus more closely aligned with what Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin refer to as an “invitational rhetoric.” In “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” Foss and Griffin define invitational rhetoric as challenging patriarchal rhetorical values of change, competition, and domination in favor of a rhetoric that supports feminist principles of building equal relationships, valuing all living beings, and fostering self-determination. According to Foss and Griffin, an invitational rhetoric enacts these feminist principles by inviting audiences to understand a particular perspective in a way that is not about changing and controlling audiences but that is rather rooted in an openness towards the audience and their varying daily realities. In an invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin explain, “Rhetors view the choices selected by audience members as right for them at that particular time, based on their own abilities to make those decisions” (6). In other words, an invitational rhetoric does not have as an end goal widespread, certain change but is instead focused on bringing a particular perspective to audiences in the hope that audience and speaker can work together to productively incorporate this perspective in ways that will further feminist values.

Obama uses her invitational rhetoric to pull kids into the aims of the “Let’s Move” campaign, making the lifestyle changes she promotes seem fun and using a more personalized, one-on-one approach to teach children about health and nutrition. But this invitational rhetoric also works to situate her campaign actions through a more traditional notion of a care-based feminine rhetoric. While a more traditional rhetorical approach that calls for widespread change at the level of family behavior or policy would (and has) draw public criticism of Obama for overstepping the feminized boundaries of her role as first lady, the use of an invitational rhetoric aimed at teaching and helping children understand the importance of fostering their own health and nutrition helps to soften Obama’s contested public image while crafting a perception of “Let’s Move” as a politically non-threatening project motivated by a maternal care for children.

At the same time that Obama works to align herself with traditional ideals around motherhood, she also updates these traditional ideals as she creates a public persona in the campaign as a fun and active modern mom. The campaign website features a separate page with several videos of Obama promoting different “Let’s Move” initiatives in which she is shown playing table tennis with Nickelodeon stars Big Time Rush, doing a goofy “Platypus Walk” dance with a group of children, and participating in a flash dance workout in the National Mall set to a series of Beyoncé songs. Other videos show Obama working with celebrity chefs like Rachael Ray and Marcus Samuelsson to teach kids about healthy foods and prepare healthy meals to share. Through her frequent interaction with celebrities and liberal use of social media as part of the campaign, Obama models a form of motherhood that seems more accessible and less obviously classed and raced than romanticized images of mid-century housewives. Obama is not envisioning her role as a mother, nor envisioning the role of other mothers, as standing in a kitchen wearing an apron and preparing wholesome meals. Instead, she performs an ideal of

modern motherhood the focuses on playing, cooking, and digging in the dirt with kids—reproducing the nation through the hands-on development of literacies around food and exercise, all while listening to Beyoncé and using Twitter.

The modern image of motherhood that Michelle Obama projects—an image that is still rooted in traditional ideals of motherhood but shifts these ideals to better match the demands made on women in the twenty-first century—is key to the way that Obama relates and appeals to other women. We can see this particularly in a “Let’s Move” Fireside Hangout event held in March 2013. Moderated by Kelly Ripa, the Hangout was a live, streaming video conversation with Obama about “Let’s Move” that featured two women, two men, and a grade school class from Maine who asked the first lady questions about encouraging healthy eating and increased exercise across the United States. In their press release announcing the event, the “Let’s Move” campaign situated the Hangout as a “virtual conversation [...] with families around the country” (Schulman). The announcement also included a short promotional video for the event that included a voice-over of Obama outlining current rates of childhood obesity and insisting, “Something better is possible for *our* children” (emphasis mine). The hour-long event, then, was meant to speak to parents and offer strategies and solutions for developing improved child fitness and nutrition at the level of the family. But while the event is framed with the gender-neutral language of families, and while Obama herself speaks throughout the event about the things that “adults” and “parents” need to do to help children develop healthy habits, the imagined audience for this virtual conversation is clearly gendered. The conversation not only relied on the participation and promotion of a celebrity mother known for her work on a morning talk show with a predominantly female audience, but the conversation among the participants also reaffirms the cultural assumption that women are primarily responsible for the care of children.

Indeed, the phrase “as a mother” functions as a kind of refrain throughout the Fireside Hangout. When Michelle Obama answers questions about how to encourage kids to eat vegetables or enjoy exercise, she answers “as a mother” and talks very specifically about her strategies for fostering healthy habits and positive body image in her own daughters. She explains, for example, that she discourages using language with kids that stigmatizes fat or fixates too much on weight because she knows “as a mother” that this kind of language would be damaging to her daughters’ body image and self-esteem. When she suggests instead using language focused on overall health and “feeling good,” she does not situate this alternative language as part of a general critique of an overly narrow bodily ideal, but again situates her suggestion in her own parenting experience, explaining that “as a mother” she tries to teach her daughters that bodies come in all shapes and sizes. The women participating in the Fireside Hangout reinforce the implicit gendering of the conversation by likewise situating themselves as caretakers of children. The grade school teacher prefaces her question by explaining that she spends her days caring for her students and expressing a maternal desire to see them stay healthy and active. The other women participating in the conversation, including Kelly Ripa, follow Obama’s lead and contextualize each of their respective questions “as a mother.” Meanwhile, the two men participating in the conversation represent themselves through their professional credentials (one man is a doctor and the other is a trainer), and if they have children they do not say so, nor do they ask questions that emerge from their own parenting experience.

Obama’s modern mom persona is at work here as she positions herself as speaking *with* the mothers who make up her imagined audience. While she is giving advice, she is careful not to appear to be speaking down to other women about their parenting decisions, but rather situates herself as in the struggle of being a working mom raising children in a digital age full of screen

time, harmful messages about body image, and constant junk food advertising. This makes her appeals persuasive and less threatening, but it also works to reinforce the assumption that the care and health of children primarily lies with women and that intervening in the problem of childhood obesity needs to happen at the level of the family. The “as a mother” refrain also lends itself in the Fireside Hangout to a heavy emphasis on choice as key to achieving health and ending obesity. The overall message of Obama’s advice is that parents, and more specifically mothers, have to teach kids to make the “right” choices around food and exercise and that they have to organize their own parenting choices around making the “right” choices more attractive to their children. Obama talks, for instance, about how she keeps bowls of fresh fruit around the White House and suggests that this is a great option for families to encourage healthy eating since it makes the right choice readily available for kids. However, there is very little done, in either the Hangout or the larger “Let’s Move” campaign, to complicate who has access to these kinds of choices.

Suggestions such as the recommendation to keep bowls of fresh fruit around the house or a later recommendation that children try new outdoor activities during winter like skiing and sledding become moments of tension in the Fireside Hangout as they begin to point to some of the class privilege inherent in Obama’s advice. However, there is another moment in the conversation that truly lays bare the limitations of an ideal of motherhood that is imagined through an emphasis on choice. One of the Hangout participants asks Obama what mothers are supposed to do if they live in neighborhoods where it is not safe to send their children outside to play. She specifically reminds Obama that shortly before the Fireside Hangout, a child was shot in Obama’s former neighborhood for “doing what kids should just be able to do.” While Obama acknowledges in her response that not everyone has safe outdoor places to play or access to

school playgrounds for recess, her recommendation is ultimately that parents need to find things like church groups for their kids to be involved in. In other words, she suggests that parents simply look for groups that can provide larger facility spaces and structured activities that will give children the opportunity to be active even when they cannot safely be outside in their neighborhoods. Obama also suggests that kids without access to safe outdoor spaces can still get moving by dancing or doing things like jumping jacks in their homes. She argues that in the face of constraints, adults just have to “get creative” because “movement isn’t optional.”

In this moment, Obama is presented with material, structural realities that seriously impact the physical, mental, and emotional health of children and families. The raising of the question of unsafe spaces opens up the potential for a discussion about the connections between issues of food accessibility and safe environments in Obama’s goal of improving child health. But rather than seize the opportunity to address the importance of this connection—that is, rather than taking the opportunity to talk about gun control as a public health issue linked to things like the inaccessibility of food in particular neighborhoods or the stressors of poverty—Obama falls back into a rhetoric of health over-determined by an emphasis on personal choice. In the face of material realities that interfere with things like safe outdoor places to play, Obama essentially argues that parents, and more specifically mothers, can choose to accept the limitations they face or they can “get creative” and simply find a work-around. Here, the invitational rhetoric Obama attempts to establish as she positions herself as a mother talking on the level of other mothers fails. Her openness towards her audience does not entail a real address of the material and structural barriers that make these things difficult or impossible. Instead, the women she addresses are encouraged to simply adapt to the broken structures around them rather than to work together to identify ways in which these structures could be changed.

Obama's rhetoric in this moment is also creates an idealized image of motherhood as she addresses her imagined audience of fellow mothers—according to her response, either mothers are doing enough to ensure the health of their children or they are not. Obama's positioning of herself "as a mother" allows her to sympathetically understand that these choices can be difficult to make, but she ultimately implies that with enough determination, any parent can find a way to ensure good food and plenty of exercise for their children no matter the circumstances. This rhetoric, of course, obscures the class privileges and systemic factors that determine when and to what extent certain "choices" around food, health, and exercise are made accessible to different communities.

Obama's emphasis on motherhood and choice in the Fireside Hangout detracts from more systemic critiques of the industrialized food system or of the health effects of systemic racism and classism, but there were openings in the campaign at its beginning for introducing a more progressive rhetoric around food and health. Indeed, when "Let's Move" was initially crafted, the campaign had a more prominent focus on the regulation of the food industry and on nutritional and educational policy changes at the federal level. When the campaign launched, for instance, Obama used her public appearances related to the campaign to push for the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The original "Let's Move" action plan outlined at the campaign's launch also included several other policy and funding goals such as the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which was included in the 2011 budget. The Initiative, which is part of a partnership with the U.S. Treasury, The Department of Agriculture, and Health and Human Services, provides economic incentives to companies to build markets in food deserts and also entails an ongoing investment in improving access to farmer's markets. The campaign also set a goal to work with the Department of Education to create a "Safe and Healthy Schools Fund"

designed to “support schools with comprehensive strategies to improve their school environment, including efforts to get children physically active in and outside of school, and improve the quality and availability of physical education” (“First Lady Michelle Obama Launches Let’s Move”). The official campaign launch even began with Barack Obama signing a Presidential Memorandum to create the Task Force on Childhood Obesity comprised of the Office of the First Lady and several other governmental agencies in order to “conduct a review of every single program and policy relating to child nutrition and physical activity and develop a national action plan that maximizes federal resources and sets concrete benchmarks toward the First Lady’s national goal” (ibid.).

In its creation, “Let’s Move” was focused on encouraging collaboration between government agencies and research institutions to institute concrete policy changes that could help to make healthy food more accessible across the country. The campaign also positioned itself as specifically sympathetic to those who face the greatest barriers around food and health. As the campaign press release explains, “Let’s Move” was designed to “take into account how life is really lived in communities across the country—encouraging, supporting, and pursuing solutions that are tailored to children and families facing a wide range of challenges and life circumstances.” Many were eager about the progressive potential of “Let’s Move.” According to an article from the *Washington Post*, following the official launch of the campaign, “The Center for Science in the Public Interest issued a statement arguing that Obama should use her bully pulpit to remove *all* junk food from schools and to get all advertisements for junk food out of children’s programming. Others want her to tackle government farm subsidies that can make chips and soda cheaper than healthier alternatives” (Givhan).

While the campaign in its earliest days was focused on educational policy and the food industry, Obama still situated her concern in childhood obesity as rooted in her role as a mother. Other speakers at the campaign launch were more explicit in their critique of current food systems; Will Allen who founded Growing Power, a major urban farming initiative based in Milwaukee, argued for instance, “It’s a social justice issue. Every child in this country, every person in this country, should have access to good food” (qtd. in Givhan). However, Obama was more careful in her explanation of the exigency of the project, situating her concern as both personal and maternal. She argued, “This isn’t about politics. [...] I don’t want our kids to live diminished lives because we failed to step up today. I don’t want them looking back decades from now and asking us, ‘Why didn’t you help us when you had a chance? Why didn’t you put us first when it mattered most?’” (qtd. in Givhan). While Allen makes an argument about the ethics of the current food system, Obama’s argument, which draws on the rhetorics of motherhood, situates her concern as firmly rooted in the care of children and in the maternal fear of failing or letting down the children of the nation. When she insists that the issue of childhood obesity is not political, she is working to distance herself from seeming too interested in the creation of policy or as promoting a particular political ideology through her position as first lady. Distancing herself from seeming too political, even while pushing for policy changes, was all the more important because her subject position meant that she was all the more at risk of being publicly interpreted as aggressive or as overstepping the bounds of her role. Situating her political concern as rooted in her care as a mother effectively says: “I don’t have an agenda. As a mother, I have a duty to ensure the health and safety of my children, and that’s why I care about this issue.”

Obama's embrace of the rhetorics of motherhood are born, from the very beginning of "Let's Move," out of the necessity of having to balance very specific rhetorical demands as first lady and as an African American woman in the public eye. However, she still worked to use this rhetoric of motherhood to argue for systemic changes. Shortly after the launch of "Let's Move," Obama gave a speech at the Grocery Manufacturer's Association, where she called on food corporations to assume responsibility for the kinds of foods they were pushing on kids. In her speech, she criticized food industry efforts to sell processed foods as healthy by adding in small amounts of healthy ingredients and marketing strategies that rely on dubious nutritional claims. Obama told the food industry representatives present, "As a mom, I know it is my responsibility—and no one else's—to raise my kids. But what does it mean when so many parents are finding their best efforts are undermined by an avalanche of advertisements aimed at their kids? And what are these ads teaching kids about food and nutrition?" While Obama invokes the rhetoric of motherhood in this speech, it has a much different tenor than the rhetorics of motherhood that emerge years later in the Fireside Hangout. In "Family Metaphors and the Nation," Sara Hayden argues that despite being tied to traditional gender norms, rhetorics of motherhood still contain a radical potential when they are used to "promote a political and moral order in which the values of caring, empathy, and nurturance are privileged" (198). In other words, Hayden argues that the rhetorics of motherhood can shift the political landscape by privileging an ethics of responsibility to others over established political values like a concern for protecting business interests. We see this progressive potential of the rhetorics of motherhood at work in Obama's speech. While Obama's appeal to motherhood in the Fireside Hangout is focused on the claim that "As a mother, I know how hard it can be to make the right choices for

your kids,” in this speech, her rhetoric supports a stringent critique of the food industry by saying, “You are interfering with what I need to do as a mother, and that is unacceptable.”

In the five years that have passed since the launch of “Let’s Move,” the campaign has all but left behind a public emphasis on the structural critiques and policy aims that were central to the campaign’s formation. Instead, the individualized rhetoric of motherhood exemplified in the Fireside Hangout has become more central to the public construction of both the campaign and Obama’s public persona. The campaign’s fifth anniversary celebration exemplifies this shift in the focus of “Let’s Move.” Rather than use the fifth anniversary to return to and update the campaign’s initial policy-based initiatives, Obama organized the 2015 Easter Egg Roll to double as a celebration of “Let’s Move.” Working within the scope of a very traditional, family-based event, Obama planned for health cooking demonstrations, exercise stations, and choreographed dances on the White House lawn as a way for families to explore new ways of adopting healthy eating and exercise habits together. The Fifth Anniversary Celebration also entailed a social media campaign referred to as the #GimmeFive Challenge in which Obama encouraged celebrities, schools, families, and children to use the #GimmeFive hashtag on various Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook to share five ways they were working to lead a healthier life.

The Fifth Anniversary Celebration was thus entirely removed from any of the earlier policy concerns of the campaign and distanced from any discussion of the systemic barriers many encounter while trying to feed their families, trading these instead for attempts to encourage individual children and families to “get creative” about improving their health and nutrition. But the fifth anniversary celebration also demonstrates the way in which Michelle Obama’s positioning of herself as a mother within “Let’s Move” has become increasingly normative and conservative. In a promotional video released by “Let’s Move” to announce the

fifth anniversary of the campaign and The #GimmeFive Challenge, Obama's explanation of both initiatives is interrupted by the President bursting into the room asking her to help him find his neck tie. In contrast to the launch of "Let's Move," which included policy-based support from the President, specifically in the formation of the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, the fifth anniversary celebration video shows Michelle Obama as the wife of a President who, in the video script, has to be reminded about the important anniversary his wife is celebrating while asking her to manage the mundane details of his daily life. The centrality of this more conservative rhetoric of motherhood comes not just from the constraints posed by the office of the first lady and Obama's subject position, but also from the way that both of these constraints coalesce with the way rhetorics of food and fat are structured by a neoliberal social ideology.

Indeed, the backlash Obama consistently faced at the beginning of her campaign was from those who insisted that no one is forcing parents to purchase unhealthy foods for their children, nor is anyone forcing kids to eat junk foods at school. The more conservative rhetoric of motherhood that has come to shape "Let's Move" in its later years makes the work of the campaign more palatable precisely because it foregoes more stringent systemic critiques and deemphasizes the policy implications of the campaign in favor of educating parents and children about nutrition and empowering them to make better choices. At the same time that the key pillars of the campaign raise access to healthy food as a real, material barrier in many communities, the rhetoric of the campaign ultimately reduces the question about the choices people make around food to one of education and priorities—the campaign does not question who has the privilege of making certain choices about exercise and nutrition, but rather focuses

on making sure people are “educated” about which are the right decisions to make and why it is important to make them.

We see this more conservative rhetoric of motherhood and its relationship to a neoliberal social ideology at work not only in the public outreach Obama does (for example, with the Fireside Hangout) but also in the contrast of what is made readily available on the campaign website and what is missing. The “Let’s Move” website makes most readily available information targeted at mothers designed to educate them about child nutrition and exercise and to offer strategies to help their families begin to make healthy lifestyle changes. While these suggestions are focused on practical solutions that try to account for busy lives and material limitations of many families, the overall focus on mothers as the key to intervening in childhood fitness and nutrition still naturalizes an oversimplified, normative ideal of motherhood that assumes idealized choices are equally accessible to those who are properly motivated. This normative ideal of motherhood is deeply connected to neoliberal systems of power because it rallies white, middle-class mothers for whom those idealized choices around food and health are more readily accessible into believing that those individual, familial decisions are key to improving the health of the nation. In other words, it encourages them to see their value as citizens and to define their responsibilities to the nation in terms of teaching their children to make healthy decisions about food and exercise.

Meanwhile, absent from the website is any information that would help parents understand and better navigate material and systemic barriers to feeding children. The website does not address what it means to prepare meals while negotiating shift work or work and school schedules hostile to the time it takes to secure and cook whole foods. The website is quick to offer advice about how many vegetables children should be eating in a day, but does not offer

any information about how to meet these requirements while depending on food stamps or food bank donations or while living in a food desert where access to produce is virtually non-existent. The website offers parents suggestions for getting more physically active with their children, but does not provide any suggestions for organizations or initiatives that parents could become involved with to work towards improved access to food and safe public places in their local communities.

At the same time, while Michelle Obama is shown repeatedly throughout the website as acting in the position of an idealized mother, working alongside and educating children of color about food, health, and nutrition, other mothers of color are completely absent. Obama is represented as working alongside celebrities, experts, and educators to teach children about food and exercise while the actual families of the children who are shown being taught by Obama are nowhere to be seen. In this way, “Let’s Move” does not need to explicitly invoke a rhetoric of poor communities of color as being neglectful or ignorant in their regard for the health and well-being of their children as *The Weight of the Nation* does. Instead, the absence of parents of color, and mothers in particular, as visible partners in the campaign implicitly supports this already existing, racialized rhetoric of mothering. Likewise, the absence of information made available through the campaign about how to negotiate and shift the structural factors impacting the health and nutrition of children means that the campaign ultimately does little to actually support access to food and exercise in communities where the availability of whole foods and safe spaces are not guaranteed. These gaps in the campaign materials allow a neoliberal rhetoric focused on individual and familial choice to remain secure and to continue to shape the emphasis of the campaign.

Developing Feminist Literacies of Childhood Health and Motherhood

The rhetoric of motherhood present in “Let’s Move” is not a rhetoric that begins or ends with Michelle Obama. Rather, these rhetorics are deeply embedded in gendered ideologies of citizenship that structure the efforts of someone like Obama and make the idea of mothers as responsible for the weight and health of their children seem completely natural. There are activist tendencies and attempts to positively shift conversations around obesity in the “Let’s Move” campaign but these are essentially shut down or neutralized. Instead, Obama’s positioning of herself “as a mother” first and foremost coalesces with a neoliberal literacy around the body, reducing the issues of childhood health and nutrition to the level of the individual and moralizing choice as the key to intervening in social problems. Even Obama’s attempts to shift conversations away from fat stigma and fixation on weight will be rendered null when her individualizing rhetoric of motherhood allows for the bodies of overweight and obese children to be taken as a sign of failed parenting.

As Lindal Buchanan reminds us, both the “force and peril” of the rhetorics of motherhood comes from their entrenchment in dominant systems of power that circumscribe citizenship to suit particular political and economic interests (5). A rhetoric of motherhood that locates maternal care as the key to improving child health on a national scale cannot be divorced from gendered definitions of citizenship that define women’s value through their reproduction of the nation—a gendered ideology that marginalizes poor women and women of color. Defining women’s value as citizens through the reproduction of the nation (and in the rhetoric of the obesity crisis, specifically through women’s ability to maintain the health, fitness, and thinness of their children) works as a counterpoint of the masculinized ideal of fit citizenship present in the rhetoric of Kennedy’s “The Soft American” and in the work of “Mission: Readiness”—an ideal that privileges a body fit enough to protect the militarized interests of the state. Together,

these gendered ideals of fit citizenship work to not only construct thinness and fitness as conditions for citizenship, but also work to support a deeply normalized gendered order that works as a vehicle for circulating the economic and political interests of the neoliberal state.

The rhetorical constraints placed on Obama as she works with “Let’s Move” advance a normative, conservative ideology of motherhood, resulting in a campaign that cannot adequately address the material realities of many women and that cannot effectively address policies that keep systemic barriers to food and health in place. These constraints point not just to the normalizing power of ideologies of republican motherhood, but also highlight the limits of looking to state-sponsored rhetorics like “let’s Move” as a primary source of recourse to the problems with public health and access to food. Obama’s position as a speaker is so deeply constrained and so thoroughly constructed by raced, classed, and gendered ideologies of citizenship that any intervention she could make into public health would always be limited by the nature of her specific public role and over-determined by a mainstream rhetoric of health as the result of personal choice. Even as her campaign makes nods towards wanting to change the tenor of the national conversation around food and health and make some effort to address food policies that hurt people, Obama’s public role as the only African American first lady means that she is not in a position to use her office as a bully pulpit to push for the kinds of policy changes that would fundamentally shift the regulation of food industry, eliminate food deserts, secure safe public spaces, or enhance public assistance programs that would make good foods more accessible in a context of growing poverty.

However, we can use the critical gaps in the rhetoric of her campaign—specifically, the lack of a substantive systemic critique and the absence of other women of color as partners in change—as a road outwards from the limited rhetoric of “Let’s Move” to highlight alternatives.

We can look, for instance, to the work of someone like Will Allen who appeared at the launch of “Let’s Move” as an advocate and partner in the policy-based changes the campaign initially fostered. Through his organization “Growing Power,” Allen runs an urban farm just a few blocks from the largest housing project in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—a farm that distributes fresh produce and locally raised meat throughout the city, feeding about 10,000 people (Capretto). A big part of the work that Allen does through “Growing Power” involves getting area youth involved in the farm, teaching them about growing food and, in the process, teaching them ways to organize and become active in initiating progressive community-based change. According to Allen, getting kids involved in the farm is about “way more than just putting a plant in the ground. [...] It’s about learning some life skills in terms of how to take care of yourself, how to take care of your body, how to be able to work in this environment. It’s about learning how to eat healthy, to be able to build things by doing something hands-on” (qtd. in Capretto). In this way, Allen’s work with local youth advances many of the same pedagogical goals and invitational rhetorics that Obama’s campaign attempts to establish. However, Allen does so in a way that situates critical food and agricultural literacies as community-based endeavors rather than individual concerns and ultimately gets kids involved in grassroots organizing and community involvement through the growing of food.

In “Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit,” Monica White likewise highlights the urban farming initiatives of African American women in Detroit, arguing that the growth of food and grassroots organizing around the inaccessibility of food in areas of Detroit functions as a starting point for complex and multi-layered social justice organizing. Through her analysis of the efforts of African American women to transform vacant space in Detroit into thriving, productive gardens that feed the larger community, White argues that they

effectively transform the spaces of their local communities in ways that allow for greater community determination and resistance to systems of oppression. White argues that the urban farming efforts of women in Detroit create a “safe space” from which to resist “the social structures that have perpetuated inequality in terms of healthy food access, and one where they are able to create outdoor, living, learning, and healing spaces for themselves and for members of the community. Farming, for them, is an opportunity to work toward food security and to obtain more control of the food system that affects their daily lives. Food security is one goal in the direction of self-determination and self-reliance” (18). The growth of food and the transformation of public space in order to foster the health and security of African American communities in Detroit again exemplifies localized organizing efforts to challenge the systems that make food inaccessible and critically shift conversations about health and food towards a social justice framework.

Focusing on examples of alternative rhetorics of food, health, and nutrition, such as those being generated through urban farming, works to challenge the individualizing and moralizing rhetorics of obesity. These rhetorics also allow for the kind of substantive analysis of the way systems of power function through the differential availability of good food, safe spaces, and accessible health care that many contemporary rhetorics of obesity, including those advanced by “Let’s Move,” foreclose or obscure. By using food as a starting point for engaging more complex social justice organizing, these rhetorics also challenge and undo the most problematic assumptions about poor communities and communities of color as neglectful or ignorant about food and health, resulting in a rhetoric of food and the body that actively resists the narrow embodied ideals and normalization of fit citizenship.

CONCLUSION

TRADING WAR FOR JUSTICE: TOWARD A NEW RHETORIC OF FOOD, FAT, AND HEALTH

In her book *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, Julie Guthman critiques the argument that simply shifting individual food consumption practices towards greater reliance on whole and organic foods will be enough to undo the environmental and health effects of an industrialized food system. Guthman argues that we have to pay close attention to the ways problems are articulated because, she writes, “Simplified problems lead to simple solutions” (6). Simple solutions, in this case, are not good and efficient solutions, but rather an imagined solution that enables “a self-serving, self-congratulatory discourse that exalts certain ways of being and disparages others, and places blame in many of the wrong places” (ibid.). In other words, the overly simplistic articulation of problems leads to imaginary fixes that are not only inadequate to the task of productively addressing the issue at hand but that also do not tell the whole story about the players involved.

The rhetoric surrounding obesity is similarly oversimplified, taking as a foregone conclusion that the increase in rates of obesity over the last three decades is a political, economic, and public health “crisis” despite how little is known about what the twenty pound increase to the average person’s body weight might really mean in the long run. The rhetoric of obesity also leaves little room for nuance or for more complex understandings of what kinds of factors might be at work in the increase of the average body weight. Instead, the narrative most

often presented explains obesity as the result of individual behaviors that amount to the increased consumption of calories and decreased activity. The simple solution thus imagined to reversing the increased rate of obesity is to just get people eating less and moving more, making changes to individual behavior and the moralization of particular choices around food and exercise the focal point of many attempts to address public health and nutrition. In the process, systemic and environmental factors that impact the health and well-being of citizen bodies—especially the bodies of those who are poorest—are eschewed or overlooked.

This dissertation has focused on complicating the rhetorics that frame obesity as a national crisis in order to investigate the political and economic values underlying these rhetorics, as well as their rhetorical and material implications. Through my analysis, I have argued that the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis works to circumscribe citizenship, creating an ideal of fit citizenship that posits thinness and physical fitness as conditions for autonomous subjecthood and thus as conditions for full participation in the public rhetorical space. The ideal of fit citizenship encourages certain people—namely those who are white, able-bodied, and middle-class or affluent—into disciplining their bodies according to this vision of citizenship, and encourages them to see their consumer food choices and exercise habits as part of their performance of citizenship. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of obesity works to reinforce and deepen the marginalization of those who are disabled or diseased, non-white, and poor, namely by representing them as ignorant or even neglectful about making the “right” choices in order to achieve thinness and fitness. This rhetoric of obesity thus further reinforces a social ideology that supports the global functioning of a neoliberalism, deflecting attention away from the way the material effects of globalization, the industrialization of food, the growing wealth gap, and weakening social support networks impact the bodily health and well-being of citizens and

obscuring the various systemic barriers put in place that make realizing the ideal of fit citizenship inaccessible to many. Fit citizenship and the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis, then, not only defines the borders of the nation along racist, classist, and ableist lines, but also works to reinforce a heteropatriarchal view of the nation, defining the ideal male citizen as fit, strong, and masculine enough for battle while defining women's value as citizens in their role as reproducers of the nation.

Contemporary rhetorics of obesity, with their focus on generating a panic-laden discourse of both the body and the nation, are so powerful that many attempts to respond to these discourses become reactive—shaped and defined by the terms of the rhetoric of obesity even as they try to resist it. Much like Michelle Obama's work in "Let's Move," these rhetorics are often deeply limited as they attempt to reframe aspects of the rhetoric of the obesity crisis because they are shaped in their reaction through the terms of the debate established by the various ideologies circulating around obesity. Developing an alternative rhetoric of weight, health, and food requires stepping as far away as possible from the terms of debate established by the rhetoric of the obesity crisis. Julie Guthman's work in *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* exemplifies this approach as she starts a conversation about food and health that begins precisely by resisting the founding assumption of most mainstream conversations about health, food, and weight—that is, the assumption that the average increase in weight over the past thirty years necessarily represents a public health crisis. Guthman's analysis begins instead with the argument that while we know that the average adult in the U.S. has gained about twenty pounds since 1980, we actually know very little about what that weight gain means. By resisting the panic-laden push of the rhetoric of the obesity crisis, Guthman is able to carry out a complex analysis through the course of her book that unpacks the ideologies driving obesity-related

medical research, that addresses the impact of a variety of unregulated environmental toxins on the body, that offers a rich critique of food and agricultural policies that affect health and access to food, and that challenge mainstream approaches in food politics that effectively reinforce class- and race-based oppressions.

Rhetorical studies provides many in-roads to likewise challenge some of the problematic foundations of the rhetoric of obesity in order to open up and circulate alternative analyses of food, weight, and health. In “Octalog III: Politics of Historiography in 2010,” Jay Dolmage defines rhetoric as “the circulation of discourse through the body” (115), and he argues that rhetoricians must pay attention to the way the body is talked about in any given historical moment because “to care about the body is to care about how we make meaning” (114). Despite the fact that the rhetoric of the obesity crisis exists as a powerful site of contemporary constructions of meaning around the body, little work has been done thus far in the field of rhetorical studies to unpack how this rhetoric circulates and the kinds of meanings and rhetorical possibilities produced through it. By investigating how the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis circumscribes citizenship and defines the borders of the nation, this dissertation works to expand interest in the field in the rhetoric of obesity, particularly by demonstrating the value of existing rhetorical work on disability, the body, transnational feminism, food politics, and medicine for analyzing these rhetorics.

Rebecca Dingo’s work on the analysis of public policy in *Networking Arguments*, for example, can be a useful starting point for analyzing the various policies that structure the production and distribution of food, both in the U.S. and globally. Dingo’s analysis specifically helps to draw attention to the way in which power circulates through the rhetoric of policy in order to uphold existing structures and promote particular political interests. Similarly, work on

the circulation of rhetoric and public writing, such as that from John Trimbur and Jenny Edbauer, can be expanded to trace the circulation of a medicalized rhetoric of obesity through obesity-related research (much of which is funded by the diet industry), news stories on health and weight, and public health policies. Both of these frameworks—an transnational feminist rhetorical analysis of policy and attention to rhetorical circulation—will be particularly important as the U.S.-based rhetoric of the obesity crisis becomes increasingly globalized and panic about the meaning of the fat body is projected onto other countries and economies.

Because the current rhetoric of the obesity crisis is imbricated in neoliberal social and economic ideologies, work from scholars like Robert McRuer and Jennifer Wingard on the way neoliberal ideologies circulate through the body help to unpack the systems of power at work in constructing the meaning of the body. This work focused on the rhetorical implications of neoliberalism for conversations about the body also provides a foundation for connecting the rhetoric of obesity, which stands as a major node of public discourse about the body at this moment, with ideologies of race, gender, and ability, thus enabling a richer, intersectional analysis of the material and rhetorical implications of current discussions of obesity. The analysis Rachel Reidner and Kevin Mahoney provide in *Democracies to Come* of the struggle and rhetorical possibilities of organizing in the context of neoliberalism can further contribute to an intervention into contemporary rhetorics of obesity. Reidner and Mahoney's attention specifically to the role of affect and the production of apathy in supporting neoliberal rhetorics provides a useful framework for thinking about the way that the rhetoric of the obesity crisis likewise produces particular affective responses like to production of fear in order to discipline the citizen body.

Moreover, much of the work on the rhetorics of the body coming from feminist and disability scholars in the field is useful for extending fat studies perspectives on meanings associated with weight and body image. Work on medicalization from scholars like Jay Dolmage and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson allows us to analyze the ways in which the ongoing pathologization of the fat body constrains the rhetoric of the obesity crisis. Feminist rhetorical work like that which appears in Mary Lay et al's *Body Talk* also provides an important framework for analyzing the rhetorical construction of the body in the institutionalized spaces of medicine. *Body Talk* offers a way to look at the rhetoric of the body that is attentive to the way that cultural ideals around race, gender, class, sexuality, and embodiment become built into institutional spaces and then reinforced through the actions carried out in those spaces—a framework useful not just for understanding the construction of fatness in medicine but also in other institutional spaces like schools and government. Fat studies work that challenges the medicalization of weight and develops alternative literacies for navigating medical institutions is likewise a rich starting point for expanding alternative rhetorics of health and the body.

This project only looks at a select few sites where the rhetoric of obesity as a national crisis emerges, and is further limited by the fact that the rhetoric of obesity is multi-layered and tied to complex rhetorics of health and medicine, the diet industry, media representation, the food industry and agriculture, and public policies (both domestic and global). While this dissertation has not been able to address these rhetorics in depth, it nonetheless demonstrates the interdisciplinary potential of bringing a fat studies perspective to rhetorical study. More specifically, it shows some of the ways that power circulates through rhetorics of fatness and obesity and demonstrates how looking at the rhetoric of obesity through the lens of disability and feminist rhetorics extends insights about the ways in which rhetorics around the body reinforce

normative power structures by denying or limiting the rhetorical participation of certain bodies based on race, class, gender, ability, and thinness.

There are people in academic and activist circles, particularly people working in fat studies and food politics, attempting to intervene in and shift some of the most problematic rhetorics around weight, food, and health. I believe that my analysis suggests three key aspects that an alternative literacy of the body will need to promote and develop to fully challenge the neoliberal literacies currently circulating through discussions of weight, food, and health. First, alternative literacies of the body should contain a critique of capitalism and the social ideologies that support it. This means moving discourses about weight, health, and food away from an individualized focus on consumer power and individual choices and instead towards an analysis of the various systems that make things like healthy foods, safe public spaces, preventable health care, and the full recognition of citizenship less accessible to certain communities. It also means being mindful of the way that the values of capitalism circulate through rhetorics around the body, particularly in the construction of the ideal citizen as an efficient and flexible laborer who places a minimum of economic demands on employers.

Second, an alternative literacy of the body must actively challenge the pathologization and stigmatization of fat bodies. This involves challenging multiple commonly circulated ideas such as the belief that the health of a body can be visually assessed, that all fat bodies are necessarily diseased, that disease and disability constitute a loss of autonomous subjectivity, that health is readily within the control of the individual, and that health is a moral responsibility. Challenging the medicalization and discrimination of fat bodies will require not only shifting the way that we talk about fatness by continually resisting the assumption that fat is bad, but will also require efforts to help people develop critical literacies around science and medicine, as well

as advocacy rhetorics to change unjust policies. Given that so much medical and scientific research is made readily available for public consumption, particularly through profit-driven media sources that can regularly pull in audiences with fantastic claims about health, weight, and nutrition, developing critical literacies that investigate how this research is funded, conducted, and then circulated through various media outlets is key to challenging crisis rhetorics around health and allowing for greater nuance in these discussions.

Finally, alternative literacies of health, weight, and the body must maintain explicit attention to the way that racism, classism, sexism, and ableism intersect to support and circulate problematic ideologies of capitalist nationalism in the U.S. As Marilyn Wann argues in her Foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, the fear of fatness is powerful precisely because fat is a “floating signifier” that can attach itself to any body, regardless of actual weight. However, the experience and meaning of fatness is not universal and any alternative literacy of the body must work to develop an awareness of the various ways in which fat stigma works to reinforce or deepen existing marginalizations in the interests of the current political and economic order.

Rhetorics that critique the effect of capitalism on the body and on public health, that challenge the pathologization and stigmatization of fat bodies, and that are attentive to the impact of intersecting oppressions in construction of fatness are not new. What is most important is that developing alternative literacies of health, weight, and the body requires rhetorics that bring all of these aspects together. For example, a rhetoric that challenges the pathologization of fat without critiquing the way in which fat phobia gets used to reinforce the marginalization of bodies of color will be limited in its ability to shift public conversations about fat. Attempts to challenge the stigmatized representation of fat bodies primarily through an appeal to consumer choices in media and fashion are likewise limited. And as Julie Guthman illustrates in her work

in *Weighing In*, critiques of the industrialized food system that participate in the stigmatization of fatness and treat consumer choice as the key to change will ultimately do little in the way of substantially changing either the articulation of the problems around food and health or the current food system itself. To productively challenge the rhetorical and material implications of the positioning of obesity as a national crisis, alternative literacies of weight, health, and the body must help to develop a complex awareness not only of the way that the values of capitalism circulate through this discourse, but also of the way that fat stigma and intersecting oppressions work as vehicles to support the interests of neoliberal capitalism.

One of the greatest difficulties in addressing and intervening in the rhetoric of the obesity crisis is confronting the ways in which we are all deeply implicated in this rhetoric. To step back, analyze, and challenge the rhetoric of the obesity crisis requires challenging deep-seated and long-standing biases against fatness that are not only naturalized in U.S. culture but that we are all hailed by as we negotiate our own relationships with our bodies. Particularly given the tendency of the rhetoric of the obesity crisis to objectify fat bodies, treating them as problems rather than as agents, it is important that we begin to investigate the ways in which, regardless of our individual body morphology, we are constructed and disciplined by these rhetorics. As the material and rhetorical implications of the rhetoric of the obesity crisis escalate, resulting in greater institutional surveillance of bodies and the construction of thinness as a condition of citizenship, it is all the more pressing that we continue to develop rhetorical frameworks that allow us to understand the way power circulates through the discourse of obesity.

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