Real Fit:
Identity, Society, and Viewer Investment in Fitness Reality TV

By

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Dedicated to my parents for their encouragement and support.

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CHAPTER I

THE SHIFT FROM VIEWER AS SUBJECT TO VIEWING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

In *Real Fit*: *Identity, Society, and Viewer Investment in Reality TV* I propose a conception of viewership as a social practice that is intimately connected to normativity and political context. Watching TV, like any other form of lived experience, can't be reduced to an individual act of perception; it necessarily refers to the affect of embodied subjects existing within and in virtue of a concrete social and political context. In our present, the consumption of TV media stands out from other forms of lived experience in that it is a social site where the traditional distinction between public and private collapses. Viewing is always a "viewing with others."

The concept of social viewership provides structure to existing debates on media and society by delving into the normative and psychoanalytic dimensions of the world we feel, touch, and see in order to uncover patterns of violence, neglect, or isolation residing out of view. Screens, streaming, and emerging media technologies are all crucial drivers of social change, though we need more than technical expertise to understand their impact on human society and experience. A philosophical framework is necessary for talking about what behavioral trends mean for political culture, attitudes toward sovereignty, the status of embodiment, and, importantly, in order to address exclusion. The concept of social viewership is a strategy for understanding macro trends, though in this dissertation I develop it at a local level, by studying the affective, psychic, and normative dimensions of viewer engagement with the popular reality TV show *The Biggest Loser* (*TBL*).

With *Real Fit* I am interested in uncovering the historical human truths embedded in mainstream passion for *TBL*'s stories, characters, and values. Studying attachments to a specific TV program provides a situated glimpse into the pathways by which visual media enters into contact with dimensions of the viewer's present, providing a lens for exploring aspects of selfhood, community, society, and political context. These pathways are at once material and theoretical: they express technological forces mediating the experience of the viewer, and also provide a lived illustration of a theoretical understanding of the self in terms of a social/historical/political positionality.

In the chapters that follow I explore relationships between social and political discourses, and narratives of selfhood, family, community and society, employing empirical and theoretical methodologies to expose the diversity of identities and range of normative meanings at work in the experience of social viewing. Each exploration incorporates a discussion of the experience of fans, engaged viewers, and passive viewers who interact with *TBL*.[1]

[1] **"Fan"** is a category that designates *TBL* viewers who tend to actively engage with the show, seeking out other individuals who share their interest in the program. Online behaviors characteristic of *TBL* fans include: talking about the show on social media with fellow enthusiasts, commenting on articles about a show, and sharing video or image content relating to the show with fellow enthusiasts. Offline behaviors characteristic of *TBL* fans include: recreating "Biggest Loser" contests in communities or offices, participating in *TBL*-sponsored events, and participating in *TBL*-sponsored programs (including visits to the *TBL* Ranch, a center located on the set of the show that runs fitness programs that replicate the physical training and nutritional guidance featured on the show). **"Engaged viewership"** refers to viewers who are similar to fans in their tendency to share content relating to the show on social media, though they do not actively seek out communities of shared interest. "**Passive viewership"** encompasses occasional and regular viewers, and is defined by a tendency to exhibit passive online engagement with *TBL*. **"Passive engagement"** refers to the most basic forms of interacting with content on social media

Social viewership: A Concept that Invites Collaboration

Social viewership is a dynamic concept for grounding future collaboration between the fields of Feminist Philosophy of Film, Affect Theory, and Media Studies. The philosophical discipline, at its best, is capable of constructing frameworks that tap into wells of social meaning, allowing historical truths to emanate from within technological and behavioral trends being studied in other fields. Though admittedly optimistic, my primary reason for choosing an interdisciplinary approach was to solve a problem in the interdisciplinary subject area of TV viewership. In the last five years, publications in media studies, communications, and cultural studies about TV viewership have fallen into two categories: (1) studies that interpret the social, cultural, and political symbolism of TV, though do not engage at the level of viewer affect; and (2) studies that map the relationship between technology, behavior, and affective dimensions of TV consumption, though do not engage in a meaningful way at the level of the social, cultural, and political. In *Real Fit* I work to fill in the gaps between these two categories by placing the viewer's affect within a web of multi-directional influences: contextual factors shape the viewing experience of visual media, and in turn visual media's influence on the viewer is constrained or enabled by contextual factors.

An example of a recent publication that falls into the category of academics who engage with political meaning, though don't ask questions pertaining to viewer investment and audience affect, is *Postracial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century* (Squires 2014). This title

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(liking a post or tweet, or tagging a friend on a post) and simply watching, reading, or looking at content relating to the show.

provides an in-depth analysis of the use of the term "post-racial" in media coverage of U.S. politics. This title draws on a range of interdisciplinary methods and concepts (exemplifying a strong approach to intersectional research) though it remains focused on the connection between politics and screen. *Real Fit*'s approach to studying the political meaning of audience affect could provide a jumping-off point for future research on race discourses on cable news, using qualitative research to examine the moods and networks of relationality binding audiences to problematic utopian narratives.

Research that falls into the second category (that looks at the experience of TV audiences without painting a robust picture of the surrounding social context) commonly appears in psychological research on media consumption. An example is the paper "A Snooki effect? An exploration of the surveillance subgenre of reality TV and viewers' beliefs about the 'real' real world" (Riddle and De Simone 2013); the authors combine press, content, and pattern analysis to define the "surveillance subgenre," and then evaluate the influence of this content on young adults using survey data. The findings raise some interesting questions, particularly in regard to young adults and gender stereotyping. However, little attention is paid to the institutional structure in which stereotypes come to take shape, or to the history of oppression relating to race, gender, class, and other defining features of an individual's social position.

The problem with the Snooki study is emblematic of the types of omissions that occur in research on audiences in the sciences and humanities. Riddle and De Simone's lack of attention to contextual forces is the source of major blind spots, methodological missteps, omissions, and instances of bias in their survey questions. For instance, the study does not inquire into sexuality as an identity category, which is particularly egregious given the focus on studying perceptions

of gender within romantic relationships (2013). Additionally, the survey method limits its investigation to active and visible forms of gender stereotypes,[2] suggesting their research process did not seek to evaluate the meaning of "stereotyping" in a critical manner. *Real Fit*'s method could be adapted for future psychological research on media consumption. For instance, social psychologists could make use of *Real Fit*'s concept of "social viewership" to refine their understanding of the social, cultural, and experiential factors that come to bear on populations of interest.

I was able to identify a gap in interdisciplinary debates on TV viewership thanks to the successful intersectional research on gaming culture and technology, which continues to find creative pathways for merging ethnography, anthropology, media scholarship, psychology, engineering, and philosophy. This merging process tends to encourage dynamic analyses of engagement that touch on affect, social context, and the tangible behaviors generated by technological developments. Some recent examples of dynamic studies are: *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014), which proposes a theoretical and practical model for thinking about systems of value in games; and *Play Matters* (Sicart 2014), which explores the concept of play, from game design to play spaces, and cultural moments experienced through sporting events. Henry Jenkins (I return to his work later in this chapter) remains an important influence on academic inquiry into gaming culture.

The political value of studying viewer investment also takes on a literal meaning when it comes to a show like *TBL*. The series promotes weight loss as an important item on the national

[2] "On the topic of gender, participants were asked about the prevalence of four different types of behaviors: verbal aggression, spreading rumors and gossip, being argumentative and difficult to get along with, and being overly emotional" (Riddle and De Simone 2013, 6).

agenda, and uses its alliance to anti-obesity campaigns to drive consumer-based brand equity (meaning the overall strength of consumer attitudes, perceptions, and associations). Loyalty to the *TBL* brand is supported by the perception that the most entertaining aspects of the show have a meaningful purpose. For instance, the show's website claims *TBL* supports "the fight against obesity," and, in the past three seasons, *TBL* has asked contestants to compete in "nutritional education"-themed challenges, such as a trivia game focused on the caloric value and fat content of a range of popular meals. These strategies have been so successful in sustaining the perception that *TBL* is a positive influence on viewers that anti-obesity advocates have turned to the show to promote organizations and causes. Michelle Obama is among these health-focused social advocates, making one appearance in April 2012 to promote the Let's Move anti-obesity initiative, and a second appearance in 2013 on behalf of Partnership for a Healthier America's campaign to persuade the nation to drink more water.

My dissertation is motivated by the belief that it is the responsibility of scholars in the humanities and social sciences to maintain a critical dialogue with this evolving logic of mediated engagement, especially as it relates to transformations in new types of "selfhood" that emerge in the experience of viewers. What follows is intended as a modest attempt make headway in a broad field of inquiry by providing philosophical perspectives for cutting through the "noise": the flow of real-time updates from The Event/ The Show/ The Game/ The Revolution; "food porn" and "earth porn"; vloggers on YouTube; and invitations to binge watch Netflix – Amazon – Hulu – HBO-Go.

Background Engagement with Media Studies: Conceptualizing the Shift from Individual to Community Modes of Media Consumption and Circulation

Modes of engaging with visual media have changed significantly over the last decade with ongoing developments in technology and media consumption, and remain in a period of transition. Beyond the stories that get frequent press coverage—such as the rise in popularity of video streaming platforms, increases in mobile video usage, and the mainstream presence of photo and video based social networks (Instagram) and micro-blogs (Vine)—there are deep structural, social, and behavioral changes taking place that have profound implications for theoretical treatments of identity. This project was developed out of a philosophical interest in work by scholars in the field of media studies researching emerging forms of online behavior in social media spaces.

Participatory media and affective economics

Media studies pioneer Henry Jenkins, known for his seminal book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, has been particularly influential in my articulation of viewership as a collective and deeply social phenomenon. *Convergence Culture*, first published in 2006, argues that the model of media circulation today is dependent on the active participation of consumers. More than a multi-platform technological reality, Jenkins suggests that "convergence" is a culture and an economic system where audiences today do "work" (Jenkins 2008, 3). I was drawn to *Convergence Culture* because of its basis in social behavior, and because it balances critique with optimism for the subversive potential of "meaning making" (4);

this attitude of openness toward the implications of emerging relationships to media was a major inspiration throughout my research for *Real Fit.*

The need for a collective, rather than individual, perspective arises on account of developments in convergent media technologies, which have led to large-scale transformations in media culture and modes of media consumption. For Jenkins, "convergence" refers to a cultural and economic phenomenon wherein audiences do "work," aiding (or at times impeding) the circulation of media (3). Until the late 20th Century, media consumption was a relatively isolated experience, even if socializing certainly did occur in connection with visual media (notwithstanding niche genre fandoms, whose history can be traced all the way back to literary fan fiction). Changes in 21st Century media consumption have largely been spurred by evolving media technologies: TV, film, advertising, and gaming converge in a social space conducive to active participation with video content.

One influential technological change has been the increase in availability of online communications tools that support the informal, spur of the moment sharing of content (a general term that includes media "artifacts," such as photos, videos, interactive dialogues, and even games). Instantaneous online sharing caught on quickly, mimicking the pre-existing (previously offline) social phenomenon of word of mouth (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 2-3).

Jenkins's research has covered niche fan communities, online political activism, social behavior on social networks, and transformations in consumption of news and media. Of direct interest to *Real Fit* is Jenkins's examination of the emergence of reality TV. Focusing specifically on the creation of *American Idol* in 2002, Jenkins offers a balanced perspective on its popularity: he sets up a conversation between tactics used by marketers to launch the show, and

the sociological context that allowed their tactics to work. In particular, he emphasizes a shift in the media industry's interest in consumer emotions, describing the "affective economics" (63) that shape viewing and buying decisions. In the case of *American Idol*'s first season, this took the form of a "fantasy of empowerment" in that it told viewers they would be the ones to choose the winner with the aim of driving long-term passion and investment in the American Idol Brand (63).

Since the publication of *Convergence*, "affective economics" has become a dominant force across industries and markets, with a great deal of research being carried out for the purpose of deepening marketers' emotional understanding of consumers. To cite a recent example, a January 2015 article in *Harvard Business Review* analyzes strategies for understanding how social identity influences the behavior of consumers. Recommending that brands pay close attention to their customers' sense of self, the authors write, "The implications for marketers are obvious. If social identity shapes decisions, then a company's marketing strategy should encourage customers to tune in to an identity that inspires behaviors like visiting a website, going into a store, buying the product or service, getting more value from it, telling others about it, and helping design a better product" (Champniss, Wilson, and Macdonald 2014).

In recent years, work on participatory media and consumption has grown considerably across multiple disciplines. For instance, Axel Bruns' work on user participation provides a complementary perspective to Jenkins, in that he approaches audiences and user engagement through the history of web technology, rather than the changing landscape of media and entertainment. The shift among online users toward social networking, with blogs and personal home pages receding speedily into the background (Bruns 2013, 417) has lead to increasingly

collaborative environments. Both in the arena of media viewership and media production, the consumer is increasingly active in the economy of digital content creation. Bruns is known for coining the concept of "produsage" to describe the shift from the more traditional "producer/consumer" dichotomy to this new form of collaborative mode of viewership (Brun 2008, 11).

Background Engagement with Feminist Film Theory:
Conceptualizing Normative and Psychological Relationships to Representation

My position on media viewership seeks to remain in conversation with the history of feminist film theory, which has, from its very inception, demonstrated an awareness and active concern with the political dimension of representation. I am particularly indebted to Laura Mulvey, Tania Modleski, and Barbara Creed, who work from the shared assumption that visual representations in film express features of the social and political unconscious of the context in which it was made, and are able to have an effect on the spectator in virtue of this connection. Tina Chanter's work has also been valuable as a critical contemporary perspective on feminist film theory. Her book *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (2008) provides a constructive challenge to the use of psychoanalysis by film theorists, and advocates for a psychoanalytic engagement with spectatorship beyond sex and gender to include race and class.

Feminist film theory as an institutionally recognized discipline begins in the mid-1970s with Laura Mulvey's foundational essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," which

identifies the male gaze as a structural feature of Hollywood cinema, and takes issue with the passive representation of women onscreen. Concerned about the status of women as “receptacles of meaning” rather than as creators of meaning, she employs political/psychoanalytic methodology to understand subconscious factors at work in cinematic representations of femininity. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” using Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* as a lynchpin, argues that Hollywood film’s privileging of the male point of view reinforces patriarchy. Visual images both reflect and reinforce the social unconscious—an idea that Mulvey articulates using a Freudian/ Lacanian conception of “phallocentrism,” or the centrality of the penis/phallus as a symbol of male dominance. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” appropriates psychoanalytic theory “as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (1989, 14). In this sense, Mulvey’s description of phallocentrism is meant to apply to a specific historical and political context, rather than a universal feature of human experience. Phallocentrism describes the dominant mentality that feminists must combat by introducing alternative accounts of female sexuality (15).

Mulvey’s work is a combination of film theory and social criticism; it is committed to exposing the complicity of classic film narratives with societal prejudice. She thinks critically about film’s representation of gender, and considers alternative cinematic narratives that challenge the phallocentric order. Mulvey herself has made feminist films that attempt to take up the challenge to create alternative cinematic narratives. For instance, her 1979 experimental film *The Riddle of the Sphinx* offers a feminist retelling of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic interpretations of the Oedipus myth. Mulvey’s turn to psychoanalysis, both as a filmmaker and film theorist, extends the scope of her feminist activism to an inquiry into the

mechanisms by which visual images reinforce the phallocentric structure of the spectator's unconscious.

Tania Modleski challenges Mulvey's position in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by proposing an alternative Freudian interpretation of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. She argues that this film challenges the viewer's assumptions on male dominance by presenting persuasive images of gender relations that are characterized by ambiguous representations of sexuality, rather than a passive femininity. Further, she criticizes Mulvey's appropriation of psychoanalysis for its oversimplification of gender difference and sexuality (Modleski 2005, 2-3). She offers an alternative reading, focusing on tensions between the fragmented self and the unified "I" to think about the relationship between masculinity and self-identification.

Barbara Creed's ideas emerge in response to thinkers like Mulvey and Modleski. Of the three theorists listed, I have found Creed's work to provide to richest basis for thinking simultaneously about normativity, selfhood, and media. Her 1993 book, *The Monstrous Feminine* (Chapters 4 and 5), is Creed's critical response to debates in film theory in the early nineties. Some of the tendencies she is aiming to trouble include: the widespread belief that women always play "passive" roles in Hollywood films; the overuse of the passivity/activity binary in attempts to explain how male and female spectators experience film differently; and the lack of attention to male fears about female sexuality (1993, 7-8). *The Monstrous Feminine* also represents a shift away from feminist film theory's focus on Lacan in favor of sustaining a serious dialogue with Kristeva and Freud, especially in the context of thinking through experiential features of movie going. Creed doesn't limit herself to mere application, but rather

moves between the application of psychoanalysis and the critique of psychoanalytic interpretations within the field of film theory.

Discussion of Research Method and Limitations

Real Fit: Identity, Society, and Viewer Investment in Reality TV is first and foremost a philosophical experiment in how to articulate the space between viewer and screen. It's driven by a methodological investment in bringing theories of normativity into an experiential terrain typically dominated by media studies. What does it mean to study an audience? And how does this knowledge speak to, or challenge our existing models? It's an investigation into the political dimension of seemingly innocuous entertainment, and a deep consideration of how this comes to bear on invested viewers. Staying within the confines of the virtual, my dissertation studies the ways that TV exploits affect to reinforce current personalized narratives of obesity as a problem that can be managed by self-discipline.

While writing *Real Fit* I worked as a Fanthropologist for an entertainment marketing company in Los Angeles, carrying out and analyzing qualitative research on audience and fan conversations so as to provide the creative strategists with "actionable" insights to use in creating print, A/V, and digital marketing. For instance, for a consulting report for Disney's *Maleficent*, I studied cosplay communities on Tumblr and deviantART to provide the studio with an understanding of the deep investment in the character as a strong female role model.

Fan research is useful for marketers, who have been increasingly "out of touch" with the audiences they are trying to sell films to–though I quickly realized that the method was a clear

resource for *TBL*'s position on viewership. I reworked the ethnography-based techniques and tools I acquired on the job in order to (attempt) to bridge the gap between my theoretical account of viewer investment and the lived experience of actual viewers. I intend to explore other ways to bridge this gap in my future work on viewer investment, for instance by using Affect Theory to analyze data from sociological surveys.

The research process I developed involved three distinct phases: (1) digital fieldwork; (2) qualitative data analysis; and (3) quantitative data analysis. In the first I documented the online discussions of audiences, observed fan behavior on social media, and tracked interactions within key online communities talking about the "scandalous" finale of *The Biggest Loser* Season 15. In the second I used social media monitoring tools to quantify conversation volume and content, and to track which types of opinions were being expressed most frequently within conversations about the finale. In the third, I recorded headlines and relevant quotes from major news publications and popular blogs covering this event. I used this data to pinpoint sources of social influence and to classify the dominant opinions being voiced by viewers. A more detailed description of each step follows:

- ***Digital Fieldwork*** [3] is the process of documenting online discussions, behavior, and interactions within and between particular interest/fan groups. To support chapters that explore *TBL* fan experience I used the following methods: (1) manual collection of relevant organic comments (meaning authored by non-sponsored users, and

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3 As developed by marketing professionals and academics from foundational texts in sociology and ethnography. See for instance Durkheim's *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1966). For industry-related publications, see Mariampolski 2001 and 2006. For academic research, see the *Digital Ethnography* collection (Horst and Miller 2012).

unrelated to official campaigns or advertising); (2) recording headlines and relevant quotes from major news publications and popular blogs; and (3) collecting observations on fan interactions on major forums dedicated to discussing the site.

- ***Qualitative Data Analysis*** involved a process of manually sorting phase 1 data by similar sentiment, opinion, and behavior. The result was a breakdown of the dominant opinions, sentiment, and reactions to the topic being discussed. I cross-referenced this breakdown with conclusions from my quantitative data analysis to verify that the results agreed with one another.
- ***Quantitative Data Analysis*** was carried out independently from the previous two phases, using Netbase Insight Composer, a social media monitoring tool that uses natural language processing technology to analyze conversations from millions of (public) online sources and social networks, including Twitter and Facebook. I used this resource to generate of list of top terms appearing in conversation, a general breakdown of online sentiment (positive and negative), demographic insights, and a record of conversation volume over time.

Ultimately, I decided that the conclusions reached using ethnographic research would have to play a secondary role in the overall thesis of *Real Fit* due to epistemological limitations. While the relative anonymity of online engagement encourages freedom of expression, it also conceals aspects of an individual's social context and experience that are so crucial to analyzing the driving forces. Demographic information on Twitter, the most popular (public) platform with TV audiences, is self-reported by users, and is limited to age, gender, and location. Hence, for the

purposes of this project, it was not possible to determine to what extent the users participating in the conversation were representative of the full population of viewers of *TBL*. I would have needed to supplement my research with offline surveys to account for individuals who either didn't engage in conversation about the show on social media due to viewing habits or lack of Internet access.

While the social monitoring tool was instrumental in gaining a "bird's-eye view" of the online landscape, it presented limitations in terms of gauging complex viewer emotions and reactions. Manual data collection and manual processing were my primary resources for arriving at nuanced audience insights. For this reason, the quantification of "sentiment" obtained through Netbase Insight Composer was used for describing general characteristics of the overall conversation. Additionally, the platform does not offer access to Google products or sites such as Google+ and YouTube. Because a very large portion of online conversation occurred on YouTube, I supplemented my quantitative analysis with conclusions obtained through qualitative research.

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 2 I argue that *TBL*'s popular resonance is tied to the normative structure of its visual storytelling. Through the so-called emotional journeys of transformation of "real" individuals, whose commitment to physical exertion and self-discipline is shown to achieve concrete results, the show affirms the ideal of individual choice. With reference to Lauren Berlant's discussion of obesity in *Cruel Optimism*, I show that *TBL*'s optimistic representation of

individual potential to enact self-transformation appeals to the conservative fantasy of individual agency.

In Chapter 3 I argue that viewer investment in *TBL* constitutes an ideological investment on the part of its most passionate viewers, who model themselves after the show's celebrity trainers by taking on ideologically charged values, ideas, and perspectives. One major learned behavior is the adoption of a pathologizing pop psychology discourse, which contributes to the widespread blindness to institutional responsibility for social oppression in the United States. Following Kelly Oliver's account of psychic oppression in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, I take a strong stance against the predominance of individual pathology as an explanatory model for affects such as depression and anger, and consider the extent to which this hugely popular reality TV show should be held accountable as a force of cultural power.

In Chapter 4 I delve deeper into the visual triggers supporting viewer investment in *TBL,* with reference to Kristeva's theory of abjection. I articulate the process by which eating, imbibing, and devouring becomes abject on *TBL*, and reflect on how this process supports ongoing desire on the part of viewers. Turning to Barbara Creed's reading of Kristeva on abjection as a point of reference, I suggest an analogy between investment in *TBL* and horror films that hinges on their representation of bodily excess and physical pain.

In Chapter 5 I look at the relationship between abject images and viewer divestment in *TBL* by using a combination of digital ethnography and social media analytics to study audience reactions to Rachel Frederickson's drastic weight loss that lead to her Season 15 win. I reconsider Chapter 4's discussion of abjection with these new conclusions, and propose a

framework for future efforts to combine Kristeva's work on abjection with digital ethnographic research on fan communities.

In the Conclusion I discuss the epistemic and social significance of silence in the context of viewer engagement, and recommend that future work on viewership analyze silence in addition to online conversation. Investigating "what is not being said?" and "who is not talking?" is one strategy for assessing the alienating effects of a TV program.

CHAPTER II

STORYTELLING, POLITICAL SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE BIGGEST LOSER

The Biggest Loser's (*TBL*) popular resonance is tied to the normative structure of its visual storytelling. Through the so-called emotional journeys of transformation of "real" individuals, whose commitment to physical exertion and self-discipline is shown to achieve concrete results, the show affirms the ideal of individual choice. *TBL*'s optimistic representation of individual potential to achieve the "American Dream" has provided an appealing conservative fantasy throughout the last tumultuous decade, characterized by unemployment, war, terrorism, and changes to traditional family structures.

Visible signs of a crumbling national identity[4] have persisted throughout the show's 16 seasons—the uncertain aftermath set in motion by the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, the stock market crash in 2008, the ongoing dismal state of the job market—which have necessarily entailed a disruption of affective relationships with identity, meaning, and work. Because contemporary discourses of citizenship are built on the liberal fantasy of individual subjectivity, which severs the personal from the political actor, we lack a vocabulary for talking and making sense of the affective experience of signs that we are no longer standing safe American soil. This absence of explicit conversation means that we must look elsewhere to understand the implications of a crisis of nationhood on embodiment. At the same time, we must also ask: to

[4] There have been several meaningful engagements with post-9/11 political discourses. For instance, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* examines the resurgence of uncritical nationalist tendencies following the bombing of the Twin Towers and the preemptive wars in the Middle East, which included the rise of anti-intellectualism and media censorship. See "Explanation and Exoneration" in Butler 2004, 1-19.

what extent are cable news programs and popular TV media sustaining an illusion of wholeness? Are there ways in which popular media's storytelling is continuously engaged in a reconstitution of nation identity?[5]

In this chapter I argue that there is political value to studying the mainstream popularity of *TBL*, a weight-loss focused reality series, currently in its 16th Season, in which contestants undergo intense physical training on a lush California ranch, competing against one another for cash prizes. Using Lauren Berlant's analysis of the obesity epidemic in "Slow Death: Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency" as a point of reference, I argue that the crux of the show's appeal lies in its specific strategy for framing individual stories as hopeful narratives of self-motivated transformation, which provide a compelling "real" affirmation of the liberal fantasy of individual choice. The draw of *TBL* lies in its ability to step in to recover the role of national storytelling that once belonged to the voices of political and economic institutions.

In Chapter 2's first section, "Obesity and Agency," I address Berlant's theoretical perspective on contemporary discourses surrounding obesity, as elaborated in her much discussed essay/chapter "Slow Death: Obesity Sovereignty, Lateral Agency." I focus on her characterization of the embodied experience of obesity as an interruption to notions of individual sovereignty, and discuss the influences of materialist feminism, queer theory, and Foucault on her methodology. The content of this first section builds a conceptual foundation for my

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[5] There has been some debate surrounding the extent to which the media engages in a construction of national identity. For instance, Jacques Rancière has argued that the consistent patriotism in the media's portrayal of 9/11 worked to counter any actual "symbolic rupture." He suggests that the terror attack was quickly used to strengthen the symbolism of American togetherness in the fight of good versus evil. See "September 11 and Afterwards: A Rupture in the Symbolic Order?" in Rancière 2010, 97-104.

discussion of the political context that has been a driving force in popular interest in *The Biggest Loser.*

In the second section, "Storytelling and Nationhood," I situate the popularity of *TBL* in the broader context of the symbolic crumbling of American national identity that has defined the last decade. My focus is on the trainer/contestant dialogues, whose structure I argue works to affirm the fantasy of individual choice and control that have been made fragile by the surrounding political climate. I conclude with a reflection on the show's distorted representation of affect, taking up Berlant's attunement to a phenomenon's potential for disruption.

Obesity and Agency

Finding clarity within health crisis culture

From public rage about Obama-care, to the ongoing fight against the obesity epidemic, we are perpetually bombarded by images of what to feel shameful about, or fear, and what images to celebrate and strive for. Revere the athletic hero and the soldier; flee from the virus-infected foreigner; pity the obese children. "Fear-Bola" is dominating the news as I write this chapter, fueling a growing panic about domestic contagion (Dennis and Craighill 2014). Despite the low level of risk, schools and public spaces in Ohio and Texas have been shut down for disinfection; in places with no shutdowns, school attendance is dropping, as families have begun to keep their children at home (Murray 2014).

1—Protester outside the White House protesting Ebola Response (Messing 2014)

Media coverage of the rise in obese Americans is far less anxiety-driven in tone as compared to Ebola coverage, though the use of fighting words, the paranoid mood, and the assignment of personal blame characterize both. Segments on the "fight against the obesity" have become a fixture in cable news programming, and a simple search for "Obesity" yields hyperbolic headlines such as "Obesity may be even deadlier than thought" (Fox 2014) and countless Op-Eds arguing the obesity epidemic is the responsibility of corporations, families, government, or lack of individual discipline. The tendency to assign responsibility to major institutions or to blame individual choices also appears in media coverage of the Ebola virus, with headlines blaming the Texas doctors for lack of preparedness, or discussing to what extent a sick individual has spread the infection to others.

It is here, faced with structurally similar messages about dissimilar health crises, and desiring to understand the climate of extreme health-related passion/fear, that I engage with Lauren Berlant. Her work on the ordinary affect[6] of obesity has been of immense value in understanding the history and context surrounding the contemporary popularity of fitness reality television—a crucial step in understanding the conditions of possibility for viewer investment in shows like *TBL*.

Berlant's much-discussed analysis of the obesity epidemic, "Slow Death: Obesity, Sovereignty, Lateral Agency," approaches "the very out-of-scaleness of the sensationalist rhetoric around crisis within the ordinary" (2011, 94) motivated by a concern with the inadequacy of how we (theorists and citizens) talk about political agency. Berlant chooses to focus on obesity as the most recent example of "slow death," a concept coined to describe "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (95).

Despite Berlant's popularity with a range of communities and interest groups[7] that are associated with political activism, her choice to focus on obesity isn't motivated by concrete policy aims, or an affinity for a "disruptive" lifestyle. This is worth noting due to the prevalence of feminist activist/scholars throughout the history of feminism, gender studies, and queer

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[6] See works by Kathleen Stewart and Eve Kosofsky Sedwick for other compelling (albeit quite different) perspectives on ordinary affect (Stewart 2007, Sedgwick 2003).

[7] Berlant's work is popular with non-academic publications, including *Bitch Magazine/ Media* (http://bitchmagazine.org) and queer/ feminist online communities, such as *Feministing* (http://feministing.com). Her online presence in the form of a hybrid personal/professional blog has supported her popularity among younger users, who share quotes from her work on social networks like Tumblr.

theory, who have tended to tie calls to action/activism together with academic analysis. Feminist research on obesity began in the early 2000s, also taking the form of a call to action.[8] "Slow Death," is not explicitly activist, even if it is a deeply political text. Berlant investigates a tragic site where embodied experience suffers at the intersection of capitalism, culture, history, institutionalized poverty and racism, and cold war politics. Thinking through the phenomenon of obesity is crucial because of its location in history, and because there are no clear answers or parties to blame. The condition is one that occurs over time, as a result of history, modes of production, institutional oversight, and normative confusion. Obesity, though inextricably linked to this contemporary moment, is not new; it is a new chapter in an older and more complex history of "the damage to bodies made in spaces of production and in the rest of life" (2011, 104). Her interest in the molding of bodies within capitalist[9] economic structures is made explicit throughout the analysis.

Theorizing ordinariness

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8 For instance, see Yancey et al. 2006. Feminist scholar/advocates in the field of Public Health co-authored this article as a strategy for expanding academic involvement in the issue, expressing urgent concern about the "obesogenic environment" that was harming black women in poor areas.

9 Though her attention to economies of production is articulated as an engagement with Marxist scholars (such as David Harvey), Berlant approaches critiques of capitalism from the perspective of affect, emphasizing the elements of physical experience and modes of relationality. In reference to the passage paraphrased above, she writes "'Capitalism' here stands in for the relations between capitalists and workers and capitalists and consumers amid the shifting character of capitalist strategies […] [and] points to a variety of phenomena related to the physical experience of production and consumption throughout a life cycle" (2011).

The sphere of the mundane is key to understanding the conceptual landscape of Berlant's perspective on obesity. Lateral agency, like slow death, is an articulation of a feature of the relational patterns of working/eating/loving that occur in the "zone of ordinariness," that is, the realm of lived experience occupied by predictable daily rhythms of working, loving, consuming, eating, and resting (96). In addition to providing a complex picture of obesity, it functions as a reaffirmation of Berlant's commitment to talking from within embodiment.

The concepts of slow death and lateral agency exist in a discursive and mutually elucidatory relationship, which includes an ongoing conversation with temporal, geographical, economic, and political contexts. It is within patterns of slow death that we discover the urgency for new ways of thinking about personhood. And in turn, lateral agency allows us to revisit the phenomenon of slow death with new ways of talking and thinking about damaged embodiment.

Obesity is the contemporary scene of ordinariness in which this conceptual exchange takes place. It is the concrete phenomenon within which Berlant articulates the concepts of "slow death" and "lateral agency," and uses these concepts to return to think critically about the phenomenon. Lateral agency provides a structure and vocabulary for understanding the lived experience of obesity as a tangible scene of slow death, or "the condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life [in which] agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience without full intentionality" (100). Through lateral agency, Berlant shifts the conversation toward an inquiry into obese embodiment as a pattern of relationality.

Rather than focusing on the so-called "private lives" or "personal preferences" that lead to obesity, we are now looking at the political meaning of the ways people relate to mealtime,

snacks, and drive-throughs. The political emerges as a mode of relationality within phenomenal life, bringing into focus traces of subtle violence. We can now tell a story about capitalist production and institutional management of life without stumbling into the traps of universalizing or de-contextualized abstractions. With the concept of lateral agency, we are doing away with the false dichotomy of public/private or political/personal, for instance by thinking about the political meaning of the habit of eating fast food in front of the TV after a stressful day.

Lateral agency and politics

In pushing us to think beyond things like rationality, choice, action, and rights, lateral agency teaches us to pick up on the political patterns that emerge within and between the nuances of everyday life; this is especially crucial for identifying scenes of slow death, since this phenomenon evades bureaucratic modes of judging suffering and quality of life. Slow death does not appear as an urgent call to state intervention–it is something other than an emergency (no "rights" are being infringed on by external threats or dangers), so it is often overlooked.

That lateral agency is structured in a way that invites dialogue is a reflection of Berlant's broader commitment to the politics of relationality–it's not enough to understand what an idea means, we also have to enter into a theoretical and experiential engagement with it. Lateral agency confiscates habitual ways of talking about sovereignty, veering us away from using the special circumstances and "inflated terms" that tend to appear in contemporary discussions of what it means to be a political subject. We must take up the activity of finding alternative models of thought in order to fully enter into the framework Berlant is proposing, which understands

agency as “an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics and lifelong accumulation and self-fashioning” (99). By breaking open “private” spaces, lateral agency challenges us to move beyond the category of the personal by thinking critically about our ordinary connections to our worlds of people, words, and things.

To accept the challenge to remain within embodiment is to engage in an activity that is simultaneously a doing and undoing. The work of restoring the organic unity of the private self with the political subject also entails an uprooting of the foundations of Western thought, in that it requires taking a meta-critical stance with regard to the history of philosophy. We must now substitute the question “what is the good life?” with an inquiry into the status of affective relationships with daily life. It is only through an understanding of how bodies converse with their world that we are truly working toward new perspectives on flourishing.

Moving momentarily beyond Berlant’s essay, the value in thinking about national bodies caught in patterns of “slow death” provides a framework for addressing other contemporary patterns of slow violence. By refining our theoretical attunement toward semi-visible institutionalized forms of violence—those patterns of suffering that are at once everywhere and nowhere, hidden in plain sight—we are now more likely to “see” problems with things like the day-to-day suffering structured into the daily life of prison inmates. In fact, there has been a rich body of recent work on solitary confinement that proposes concepts for describing slow forms of violence. For instance, in *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, Lisa Guenther examines the “death-in-life” experience of prisoners detained in supermax prisons, investigating the undoing of personhood that occurs through the deprivation of embodied relations with others

(Guenther 2013). Methodological differences aside, Berlant and Guenther invite us to view the embodied consciousness as the starting point for political critique, where "consciousness" always refers to life moving within the interconnection of people, things, and ideas. "Slow death" and "death-in-life" can only emerge into plain sight once we replace individual subjectivity with subjectivity as embodied relationality.

Questioning contemporary fantasies of selfhood

In an interview with *Variant* magazine on austerity measures in the UK, Berlant provides an especially clear articulation of how dominant fantasies of personal flourishing are tied to the persistence of outdated models of government (Berlant 2010). She advocates for the need to "reorganize all of the kinds of value now challenged by the new normal that has not yet become the new ordinary" (2010) as a strategy for breaking the cycle of the state's complicity in the socialization of poverty.

Popular attitudes toward "the good life" expose the formative role that capitalist ideology is currently playing in the construction of identity. For many, happiness refers to future prosperity—a glossy image of accumulated possessions and achievements—that justifies subjecting oneself to "sacrificial" forms of labor. By examining affective ties to workdays, relationships, and even food we are also questioning the extent to which we identify with the state's political and economic structure. Openness to examining our everyday patterns is the first step in working toward a reciprocal model of flourishing that stretches beyond "amounting to something."

The challenge to practice criticism from within the sphere of ordinary embodiment should also be understood in the context of Berlant's ongoing engagement with political liberalism. Remaining embedded in affect also entails foregoing the liberal fantasy of truth in politics; we are now asked to see that the act of striving toward universality, entailed in things like the human rights discourse or democratic ideology, is an emptying of meaning. Significant analysis must strive to comprehend and discover new modes of relationality – a structure of thinking that moves through experience rather than attempting to define the foundations of knowledge.

Berlant develops lateral agency as an alternative to political liberalism's conception of sovereignty as a condition or impediment to justice, for instance in the works of Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe (2011, 96). More than a rival concept, lateral agency functions as an active disruption to liberalism's account of sovereignty. Berlant motivates the theoretical need for an alternative conception of agency, suggesting that there is a link between liberalism's conceptual foundation and discourses that either hide or justify the phenomenon of slow death.

Liberalism's "mimetic," or performative, understanding of sovereignty (my status as a political subject is defined by the special situations in which I perform acts of decision making, voting, and signing), is problematic because it casts political engagement as distinct from embodied experience in everyday life. By using a discourse focused on individual choices, it masks "the wide variety of processes and procedures involved historically in the administration of law and of bodies" (96). Further, following Foucault, Berlant suggests that this narrative fails to address how power in our present takes the form of biopolitical regimes, rather than regimes

of sovereignty. She phrases this difference "as a distinction between individual life and collective living on, where living increasingly becomes a scene of the administration, discipline and recalibration of what constitutes health" (97). Dominant discourses in our present continue to emphasize individual life, and create a false distinction between living and dying, allowing the phenomenon of slow death to persist in the murky gray area that lives in the shadow of liberalism's conception of sovereignty.

Returning to my introductory comments, the urgent language used by mainstream news outlets in covering the "obesity epidemic" illustrates the extent to which dominant discourses fail to capture the temporality of widespread "letting die." At the very heart of this failure lies individual sovereignty—a fantasy of personhood that construes governmental control of health as an intrusion, except in cases of emergency. Casting obesity as an emergency justifies institutional involvement in the personal choices of individuals. This masks the actual state of affairs, which involves a biopolitical structure where life processes are already being managed by the state. Berlant's concept of slow death allows us to cut through the noise of frenzied media coverage of health "crises" with new clarity on why we need to overcome the fantasy of individual sovereignty and work toward a new way of thinking and talking about sovereignty.

TBL should be analyzed in the broader context of the symbolic crumbling of American national identity that has defined the last decade. The trainer/contestant conversations about "feelings," included in every episode ever aired, expose the extent to which *TBL* narrative structure affirms the fantasy of individual choice and control that have been made fragile by the surrounding political climate. Following Berlant, my orientation toward politics and media is one that recognizes that both produce "scenes" that appeal to affect. In an interview with Cabinet

Magazine Berlant explains the diversity of objects that belong to a study of everyday affect. Regardless of whether the thing in question is another person, an idea, or a movie, taking an interest in "sentimental culture" means looking at all aspects of experience in terms of emotional transmissions (Berlant 2008). Extending this idea to visual media, "reality TV is an extension of sentimental culture rather than it's opposite . . . narratives about [sentimentality] can take place in many idioms" (2008).

My attention to narrative structure is also motivated by my experience working in the entertainment industry, where I have developed a concrete familiarity with the market-driven forces that shape mainstream film and television. Creating "marketable" content is not merely a task for marketers—it is also an expectation that influences casting, setting, and even plot. Conversations with reality TV editors and producers provided me with an inside look at how the demand for marketable content specifically influences the making of reality television. The increasingly commonplace practices of scripting (by producers on set) and manipulating footage (by editors in post-production) are driven by the industry expectation that each episode provide an emotional climax and over-the-top behavior that could be used in advertising. There has been some coverage of this topic by news and media outlets, which tend to express fascination with the constructed realness of reality TV. While the people featured in reality TV shows are real, and the footage is real (meaning it involves non-actors), this "reality" is shaped through the use of on-set provocation of emotional reactions, and then using the hundreds of hours of footage to construct a compelling storyline.[10]

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[10] For instance, a 2012 blog post on *Cracked.com* describes the popularity of using "fake reaction shots" to craft dramatic tension, explaining, "The fake reaction shot isn't necessarily a lie—sometimes it's used to make a line seem more outrageous. Add a double take to a bad joke and suddenly it kind of works.

Storytelling and Nationhood

Since its 2004 premiere, *TBL* has framed weight-loss as a deeply personal journey of self-discovery and change. The editing of the show structures this narrative of transformation in a way that affirms two key aspects that we also find in dominant political discourses on health and choice. First, it affirms the ideal of individual sovereignty through the suggestion that self-actualized change is accessible through hard work and perseverance. Second, it affirms the notion that the health of body and mind belong to the sphere of an individual's "private life" by identifying emotional trauma as the cause of weight gain.

TBL, one of the most successful reality TV shows of the last decade, uses a narrative structure that affirms the liberal idea that individual choices and emotional stability are the cause of good health. Scenes in which trainers interact with contestants is one in which the liberal ideal of individual sovereignty emerges through dialogue. I explore these scenes in this section through a theoretical engagement with Berlant, examining how choices made by editors in post-production work to distort the representation of ordinary affect. My aim, however, is not to point a finger at specific editors or producers of *TBL*, for the creative direction of television programming is typically determined by economic necessity, which in turn is determined by the broader contemporary context. Rather, I am looking to raise critical awareness on the role that political fantasy plays in viewer interest in *TBL*.

However, a fake reaction shot can also be used to completely manufacture drama. For example, women, especially the kind who sign up to do reality shows, sometimes playfully call each other bitches . . . However, if an editor cuts off the music track right after one girl says 'bitch' and splices in footage of the other girl looking surprised, oh shit. Things just got real." (Seanbaby 2012)

The trainer as a dual authority over body and mind

Each season of *TBL* features three trainers who are put in charge of a team of contestants. At the beginning of the season, teams compete against one another in physical challenges and at weekly weigh-ins; the show transitions to individual contestants competing against one another as teammates are voted off. Conversations between contestants and trainers are a fixture on all episodes, often leading to displays of tear-filled confessions on the part of the contestants. An increase in heart-to-hearts over the last decade is tied to the evolution of the role of the *TBL* trainer from an authority on health and fitness, to a fitness guru who doubles as a life coach—a dual authority on psychology and physical training. In one sense, the trajectory of the role could be described as a gradual acknowledgement of embodied experience. But it is precisely this surface veneer of holism that masks the show's reinforcement of dominant norms governing health and identity.

TBL's representation of trainers as authorities over mind and body should also be understood as belonging to the larger pop-cultural phenomenon of the celebrity trainer. Thriving at the crossroads of media celebrity and the health and fitness industry, this figure holds tremendous power—she is viewed as a source of inspiration, wisdom, and physical improvement, and literally leads by example. The celebrity trainer is the glossy embodiment of norms governing bodily health (glowing skin, muscular tone, youth) and class (wealth, leisure time, eloquent modes of speaking that point to an upper middle-class education), whose onscreen persona exudes an aura of health that has been stripped of features typically associated with race, sex, and gender difference. In this sense, the performative aspects of the figure of the celebrity

trainer also express a living testament to the myth of the American dream, in which hard work is said to pay off, regardless of skin color, class, gender, or sexual orientation, and success is always a measure of inner strength and perseverance.

Authority on *TBL* is confined to the realm of the personal; trainers establish authority over the management of mind and body by providing evidence that they have achieved self-mastery in the realms of fitness and "overcoming the odds." Demonstrations of physical strength (through activities with contestants, and simply by being muscular) combined with signs of wellness (white teeth, glowing skin, confident composure) convey a self-mastery over body; and explicit retellings of the difficult life experiences encountered on the way to self-mastery establish their psychological self-mastery. These personal stories are shared with one or more trainees at the beginning of each season, and are typically presented as a genuine desire on the part of the trainer to share something with her team. The trainer "opens up," performing a controlled vulnerability intended to convey relatable flaws. Preaching a belief that fitness requires working on one's inner self as well as one's overall physical fitness, the trainer talks about an obstacle with the expectation of reciprocity from the trainee(s).

In Episode 2 of Season 16, the trainer Dolvett decides to gather his team into a private room because "In order for any of my guys to be vulnerable, I gotta do the same thing. If I'm not open, how can I expect them to be?" (DeGroot 2014b, 14:30) With the full team seated before him, Dolvett repeats a similar message, explaining that he is going to tell his story because he expects them to do the same. He begins by talking about physical abuse, "my father was abusive, and would hit me instead of talk to me . . . they told me I wasn't good enough." Dolvett tells his team that sharing his story has made him a stronger trainer, and he wants to teach them to "share

that vulnerable strength. Because it's the only way you can take the weight off and keep it off" (16:10).

2—Dolvett talks to his team (DeGroot 2014b, 16:10)

In this scene, Dolvett's story of self-mastery affirms the fantasy of individual choice by stressing the importance of willpower. The deeply personal style of narration, combined with the emphasis on self-transformation, confines health to the domain of the personal. Berlant's Foucauldian insight, that the fantasy of individual sovereignty masks the impact of politics and law on bodies (Berlant 2011, 25), again becomes relevant. Similar to liberalism's discourse on political agency, this narrative element of *TBL* follows the pattern of misrepresenting health as an individual choice, rather than acknowledging the role of institutions or government. What's missing in Dolvett's pep talk is a framework that acknowledges the ways in which "lifestyle choices" are at least in part determined by things like social services, healthcare, and demanding jobs.

Crying and talking

Vulnerability and power go hand in hand when it comes to the figure of the trainer. This interplay becomes visible in scenes involving crying contestants. Displays of emotion typically happen during workouts in connection with physical stress, leading some contestants to fall into sobbing and breakdowns. The trainer intervenes, re-establishing order by taking the trainee aside to engage in reciprocal story sharing. In one sense, we can explain this in terms of the production pressure to seek out scenes with an emotional climax. But in a deeper sense, from the perspective of a viewer, we are seeing the restoration of order. The trainer's symbolic function in the narrative is to drive the restoration of normative forms of individual agency—often addressing the contestant's literal failure to carry out the role of mother, father, or spouse. Obesity gets in the way of carrying out functions within the family, and therefore is an obstacle to social roles within the home.

For instance, in Episode 1 of Season 16, the trainer Jesse pays a visit to Laurie, since she had been crying during their first workout. He sits down in her bedroom to have a heart to heart, and asks her to open up about the difficulties in her life, telling her that "a lot of emotions were coming out during the workout so I just want to hear about it" (DeGroot 2014a, 27:30). Laurie talks about the seven miscarriages she had due to her weight, and the stress that this put on her marriage. The camera cuts to a testimonial with Jessie, who recounts the experience, "being a father it's hard to hear Laurie's story . . . there's a lot more that goes on here than just weight loss. It's an emotional, emotional journey" (28:00). The camera then cuts back to the bedroom, where Jessie tells Laurie, "I got a four-and-a-half-year-old, and I'll tell you right now, your job

as a mother is the most important role out there. And you're doing this because you love him . . .but most of all what he needs is for you to be healthy" (28:40).

The exchange between Jesse and Laurie illustrates the normative undercurrents running throughout the show's narratives. Jesse steps into Laurie's "private" space to establish an interpersonal pattern of "sharing" that will ultimately be used to prevent Laurie from disrupting training sessions at the gym. The process used to guide Laurie's "re-building" hinges on the ideal of individual sovereignty and reinforces the allocation of health to the sphere of private experience. Additionally, the personal nature of the training process encourages Laurie to view the needs of her son and husband as motivating goals. As Jesse put it, "there's a lot more that goes on here than just weight loss" (28:40).

3—Jessie and Laurie's Conversation (DeGroot 2014a, 28:40)

The trainer's strategy of "opening up" disguises a relationship of dominance as an interpersonal dialogue or team effort. When faced with disrespect or disinterest from their trainees, the trainers tend to return to the strategy of launching a dialogue about personal feelings in order to reestablish their authority.

In Episode 2 of Season 16, trainer Jennifer Widerstrom faces resistance from a contestant, Matt, who refuses to listen to her instructions. Jennifer confronts Matt, urging him to finish his set of burpees, and Matt in turn questions whether she has consulted with the medical staff to clear him for that day's workout. Jennifer's initial reaction to Matt's challenge to her authority is to explicitly demand respect, offering a firm "I don't want you talking back to me. I'm trying to put you through a workout because this matters" (DeGroot 2014b, 10:14). Matt continues to communicate a refusal to follow her orders, and Jennifer (or Jennifer as portrayed through editing choices in post-production) quickly shifts her strategy by launching an emotional dialogue. "I know this hasn't been easy for you but it hasn't been easy for anybody. You're dragging through every exercise and I don't know why . . . so my question is: what are you fighting for?" (10:34). The camera then cuts to Matt's testimonial,[11] where he tells the camera that he wants to lose weight to save his relationship with his girlfriend. Pictures of a younger, thin Matt lovingly holding his girlfriend flash onscreen, and Matt becomes visibly emotional. The camera cuts back again to the gym, where we see Jennifer smiling at Matt; she echoes his concerns in a gentle tone, "What I'm hearing is that you want to be in your life, you want to be free with the woman you love." Jennifer then uses Matt's desires to establish her authority, though she continues to use a gentle tone: "What's going to make that possible is you being

[11] Testimonials are a common feature of reality TV, in which the camera is solely focused on one contestant.

present here with me. You don’t have to be someone you’re not, I just want to see more of Matt.”

The scene ends with the trainer and trainee hugging (11:30).

4—Jennifer and Matt 1 (DeGroot 2014b, 11:30)

5—Jennifer and Matt 2 (11:40)

The chain of events—beginning with the tense challenge to authority, continuing with Matt's testimonial, and concluding with Matt's acknowledgement of Jennifer's authority—offers a clear illustration of how the visual and spoken language of "self-knowledge" is used to establish authority. The exchange, framed as a personal and empathetic response to a contestant's difficulties, ultimately works to portray poor health as stemming from the contestant's weak willpower.

For a second time in the same episode of *TBL*, we can see how the narrative structure of trainer/contestant dialogue affirms the fantasy of individual sovereignty through the suggestion that self-discipline results in positive life changes, and the suggestion that physical and emotional health are the outcome of individual choices.

Conclusions on TBL*'s representation of affect*

TBL distorts embodied experience by representing affect as a matter of "personal feelings"; that is, as a deeply private matter. Sentimentality is stripped of ordinary context (with almost no reference to things like work, social interactions, or geographical location) and is then imbued with dramatics (outbursts of crying, sadness, anxiety). Additionally, contestant testimonials and intimate conversations between trainer and trainee place an exaggerated focus on the home and family life, which works to homogenize differences in the affective lives of contestants. This focus takes the form of focusing on family values as the primary motivation for improving health, and by including visual references to the home and family life. For instance, pictures of a contestant's family are shown during testimonials, or trainers/contestants share family photos with one another as a form of bonding. *TBL*'s representation of affect literally keeps us indoors, stuck with family, engaged in perpetual heart-to-hearts.

CHAPTER III

TV FANDOMS & PSYCHIC OPPRESSION

Viewer investment in *The Biggest Loser* (*TBL*) is an ideological investment. Although the topic of the program isn't explicitly political, its most passionate viewers model themselves after the show's celebrity trainers by taking on ideologically charged values, ideas, and perspectives. One major learned behavior is the adoption of a pathologizing pop psychology discourse, which, as I will show, reinforces a cultural blindness to social oppression. Here, oppression refers to the stress placed on groups or communities by political, social, and cultural authorities. Oppression can include things like the conditions of labor that weigh on the "ordinary affect" of working adults (as discussed in the last chapter in connection with Lauren Berlant), inadequate childcare resources for working single mothers, or the living conditions in prison complexes.

Following Kelly Oliver's account of psychic oppression, this chapter takes issue with the predominance of individual pathology as an explanatory model for affects such as depression and anger; by contrast, we need a social theory to hold political, cultural, and economic institutions accountable for harm. This hugely popular reality TV show is one instantiation of cultural power that teaches its viewers to rely on individual pathology to explain struggles with obesity, which, as I explained in the previous chapter, should be understood as a form of institutionally sanctioned "slow death."

I am not arguing that *TBL* is directly responsible for the systematic harm of individuals, nor am I suggesting that viewers of *TBL* are oppressed. Rather, I am identifying a learned tendency to rely on individual pathology as an explanatory concept. We should worry about the

infiltration of this trend into popular culture because it relies on a discourse that marginalizes institutional explanations of violence, and therefore is prone to misdiagnosing affects of oppression in an apolitical manner.

The cultural power of *TBL* works through its celebrity trainers, whose influence I traced by studying online *TBL* fan communities. Drawing parallels between the trainer's advice on the show and the behaviors and conversations of fans, I identified a strong investment in the trainer's as authorities on physical health and psychology. Fans look to the trainers as life coaches, psychologists, and experts on fitness, leading them to understand obesity as an individual pathology. Obesity and other weight-related conditions are considered features of an individual's personal situation—her family issues, her self-esteem, her willpower—rather than as widespread patterns of "slow violence," as articulated in Chapter 2's engagement with Lauren Berlant. To phrase the problem in terms of responsibility, *TBL* commits an injustice by discouraging its millions of viewers from understanding embodiment as a social phenomenon.

A note on fan research

My research in this chapter approaches *TBL* viewership from the perspective of collectivity in order to account for the dominant type of consumption associated with the rise in convergent media. I approach audience engagement as an increasingly social practice, an orientation learned from media studies scholar Henry Jenkins, known for his seminal book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. "Convergence" refers to a cultural and economic phenomenon wherein audiences do "work," aiding (or at times impeding) the circulation of media (Jenkins 2008, 3). Until the late 20th century, media consumption was a

relatively isolated experience, even if socializing did occur in connection with visual media (notwithstanding niche genre fandoms, whose history can be traced back to literary fan fiction).

Changes in 21st century media consumption have largely been spurred by evolving media technologies: TV, film, advertising, and gaming converge in a social space conducive to active participation with video content. One particularly influential technological change has been the increase in availability of online communications tools that support the informal, spur-of-the-moment sharing of *content* (a general term that includes media "artifacts," such as photos, videos, interactive dialogues, and even games). Instantaneous online sharing caught on quickly, mimicking the pre-existing (previously offline) social phenomenon of word of mouth (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 2-3).

Today, an invested viewer is also likely to be an active participant, expressing passion (or strong distaste) for programs by engaging in online discussions, sharing content on social networks, commenting, and reviewing. Viewing behavior also extends to non-verbal forms of participation, particularly among younger audiences, who express interest in a film or show by tagging friends on related posts, or "liking" stills and video content. At its most passionate, viewership takes the form of participation in fandoms, where vibrant online communities form around a shared interest in some aspect of TV or film content, including franchises, TV series, genres, and actors.

TBL views fan communities as a crucial area of study for media and also for politics. Despite some basic limitations—the opinions and behavioral tendencies of these groups aren't representative of all viewers, and not all TV and film titles boast online fan communities—studying fan activity provides an opportunity to analyze real-time reactions and engagement with

programs. Passionate fan communities for mainstream titles like *TBL* may not provide a representative sample, though their opinions and reactions tend to influence opinions of a wider audience via organic word of mouth. Particularly for the present project, the opportunity to observe *TBL*'s passionate fanbase was an incredible resource for arriving at dynamic insights about the culture, mood, and affective world surrounding the show, and a source of inspiration for articulating questions on the political significance of the show's resonance.

A shift in theoretical framework: moving beyond Berlant

Lauren Berlant's account of sovereignty was valuable for drawing broad connections between viewer investment and contemporary political discourse; however, her overall theoretical position is one that explicitly seeks to move beyond normative identity, meaning it doesn't offer resources for thinking critically about how the experience of visual media is itself mediated by normative categories of race, gender, and sexuality. To Berlant's credit, she does explicitly address identity norms as prominent features of a contemporary moment's political, economic, and historical context; her attention to these structures, however, is intentionally confined to the sphere of introductory analysis and general social commentary.

With the concept of lateral agency Berlant moves us into a framework that interrupts the status quo, redirecting our attention from normativity to the overlooked (or better yet – under-theorized) sphere of ordinary affect. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, provides a valuable framework to describe the psychical and historical roots of affect associated with normative identities that appear on reality TV. The differences between these frameworks should also be understood in terms of their respective starting points. While Berlant's study of affect uses

contemporary embodiment as a foundation for imagining a queer futurity, psychoanalysis uses history (in all senses of the term) to uncover the why and the how that undergirds contemporary affect. In order to account for the oppressive representation of identity on *TBL*, we must remain within identity categories that shape experience in our present.

In shifting to a psychoanalytic framework, I am building on the previous chapter's engagement with Affect Studies. After all, the history of Affect Studies begins within psychoanalysis, and at present, extends across multiple disciplines. The subject is best understood as an umbrella term for a range of theoretical interests in aspects of embodiment that all embrace psychoanalysis, among other fields. In a recent interview with *The Critical Leed* Podcast on her book *Sex, Or the Unbearable*, co-authored with Lacanian scholar Lee Edelman, Berlant replies to a question on her theoretical relationship to psychoanalysis. She resists the suggestion that there exists a "Psychoanalysis Versus Affect Theory" tension with her co-author, explaining, "I don't represent affect theory the way he represents psychoanalysis. I'm very informed by all kinds of psychoanalytic thinking and Affect Theory" (Myers and Rowe 2012, 40:47).

Whereas Lee Edelman's research is concentrated on Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Berlant understands herself as crossing multiple disciplines. "It's not just Psychoanalysis and Affect Theory, but it's also Aesthetics, and the ways in which Aesthetics is the place where we discover not only the cultivation of our affects toward normativity, toward predictable intuitions, but also where we are surprised by the valences of the encounter" (42:00). In this sense, the transition to psychoanalysis is a building on Berlant, rather than a departure.

A shift in theoretical framework: from affect studies to psychoanalysis

Shifting from a politically oriented affect studies framework to a critical socio-psychoanalytic framework that draws on Kelly Oliver's theory of psychic oppression, I suggest that this seemingly harmless brand of "pop psychology" supports cultural acceptance of the indiscriminate use of individual pathology as an explanatory concept in politics and society.

Oliver's account of oppression as a socially grounded phenomenon, which understands social oppression as resulting in social pathologies (rather than individual pathology), provides a valuable framework for asking ethical questions about the nature of viewer investment in *TBL*. *TBL* contributes to oppressive tendencies in mainstream culture by perpetuating the conception of obesity as an individual pathology, unrelated to aspects of an individual's social position. The idea that weight loss is the result of personal growth ("journeys of transformation") works to normalize the experiences of the contestants, presenting each individual's story as a variation on a tale of self-improvement. Individual pathology as a pop psychological concept is prominent on the show, and also pervades conversations about weight, appearance, eating, and obesity within *TBL* fan communities.

The transition to psychoanalyis is an elaboration of my account of contemporary TV viewership as a site where attachment to the show reveals networks and connections to normativity, representation, and psychic life. Watching TV, like any other form of lived experience, can't be reduced to an individual act of perception; it necessarily refers to the affect of embodied subjects existing within and in virtue of a concrete social and political context. A full account of viewer investment must begin from an understanding of the subject position of the viewer, whose identity emerges in relation to the world, which includes the world of popular

media. “I” exist at the intersection of my body with normativity, collective cultural memory, patterns of everyday living and working, and my surrounding material conditions.

Habits of TV viewing express who “I” am over time. To use Lauren Berlant’s terminology, the stories, characters, and ideas on television I find compelling belong to the realm of relationality and ordinary affect. Given the fluid nature of identity and TV viewing habits, viewership also refers to a mobile and diverse group. In light of these considerations, *TBL* analyzes TV viewership with an aim to understanding the social, political, and psychic dimensions of this position. Instead of inquiring into the preferences of one viewer, or the tastes of a broadly quantified demographic, I take a contextual approach, investigating the political, social, and even psychic conditions that must be met in order for any viewer to form an affective bond to a program.

Following Oliver, I view the indiscriminate use of individual pathology as an explanatory concept as a detrimental force to overcoming patterns of social oppression. The predominance of individual pathology at the expense of social, historical, and political notions of agency is a theoretical and policy-related hindrance. On the theoretical side, it leads to incomplete accounts of personhood by omitting the complex and always moving network of relations that define “my” sense of self. With regard to policy, public acceptance of individual pathology as an explanation for problems with health, education, and employment leads to a lack of institutional accountability for opportunity gaps. Political parties seeking to undermine social aid tend to implicitly invoke individual pathology in supporting their position.

For instance, the Libertarian Party’s current platform on national poverty lists “ending welfare” as the number one item on its agenda, citing individual inability as the root cause of

difficulties in succeeding in the present day job market.[12] The use of the term "individual inability" as an explanatory concept in the party's platform characterizes poverty as a symptom of an individual's weakness, laziness, or lack of intelligence—an especially egregious misrepresentation stemming from a universal conception of agency. Because so-called potential is viewed in isolation from the opportunities presented or challenges afforded by a social position, the neoliberal platform is able to dismiss institutional accountability. Vocalizing the role that institutions play in patterns of "slow death" or psychic oppression is a vital ingredient for overcoming systematic relations of dominance.[13]

Yet even at the level of institutions, the fundamental concern is the status of the affective life of the individual. At its core this is not a question of abstract justice, equality, or rights–to cast a critical eye on institutional networks of power is to ask whether the necessary conditions for individual flourishing are being met. Flourishing can only occur when an individual's subject position supports the full articulation of her subjectivity, or, to put it differently, when the structures that mediate social and cultural meaning provide space for the vocalization of individual experience. As Oliver notes, the psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious and of sublimation "come to bear in important ways on the fact that all of our relationships are mediated

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[12] "We should eliminate the entire social welfare system. This includes eliminating food stamps, subsidized housing, and all the rest. Individuals who are unable to fully support themselves and their families through the job market must, once again, learn to rely on supportive family, church, community, or private charity to bridge the gap" (Libertarian Party 2013).

[13] There is a rich literature devoted to critical examinations of the oppressive tendencies of neoliberalism in the United States, including work by prominent feminist scholars such as Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Judith Butler. See Fraser 2013. Foucauldian scholars have also remained active in this arena, drawing on Michel Foucault's College de France lectures in the late 1970s long after his passing. See for instance Simons 1995.

by meaning, that we are beings who mean… Our being is brought into the realm of meaning through drive and its affective representation" (Oliver 2004, xviii – xix).

"Individuality" is never an isolated phenomenon, but instead is always an expression of the constraints or systems of support that belong to a subject position. Identity is best understood as an individual voice that only exists in conversation with a collectivity, since "subjectivity does not exist in the abstract apart from real-world situations. Rather, subjectivity and its agency are empowered or disempowered by the context in which they are fostered or impaired" (71-72). A substantial ethical responsibility now falls to the community, which must maintain environments that support the integration of individual voices into the collective networks of relationality.

Fandom and Ideology

Studying fan investment in *TBL* provides a concrete avenue for studying one source of cultural influence. Because *TBL* occupies a position of power we should think critically about the culture it fosters among its fans. Concern about the effects *TBL* has on viewers has been echoed by popular blogs. For instance, *The Daily Beast* recently acknowledged the degree of influence the show exerts on perceptions of obesity, using secondary research to posit, "If it's true that our cultural biases about obesity will determine research dollars and eventual therapies, I can't help but wonder if shows like *TBL* could do a better job about educating the public about the biology of obesity […] we are not battling gluttony and sloth—as the show might have you believe—but physiology" (Drake 2014). While I am not seeking to echo this author's direct ethical charges against *TBL*, since the question of what type of education reality TV owes its viewers is quite

complex, I am critical of the show's discursive tendencies. The habit of invoking individual pathology in conversations about obesity lends itself to the expression of moralistic and misleading perceptions of the body.

Thinking critically about viewer investment is one strategy for identifying the ways in which misleading perceptions of major social issues take place. In the case of *TBL* fans, viewer investment takes the form of an active learning from the show's trainers. Fans replicate the trainers' workouts, follow their health-related guidance, and repeat their explanations for why weight gain/loss occurs. Like the trainers, fans describe obesity and other weight-related conditions as features of an individual's personal situation—her family issues, her self-esteem, her willpower—rather than as a feature of her social position.

Fan conversations about the show take on the style and structure of the onscreen narratives, relying on a simplistic and apolitical conception of obesity as a homogeneous phenomenon unrelated to specific social contexts, for instance by omitting the representation of race and class as concrete factors that come to bear on embodied experience. As I showed in the previous chapter, the contemporary discursive tendency to relegate bodily health to the sphere of private choices has the function of covering over the institutional roots of the so-called epidemic. This same insight also applies to *TBL*'s simplistic representation of obesity, in that it severs historical injustice from obesity, concealing the institutional history that has led to this widespread "slow death." Trainers on *TBL* teach overweight contestants that their family and personal psychological problems are the root cause of weight gain. Even when contestants mention details about struggling with economic difficulties and social stigma, the trainers remain

stubbornly wed to the misleading holism–what I will term "zen dualism"[14]—insisting that external health is a symptom internal harmony. Context, community, economy, gender, race, and age are virtually absent from the authoritative voices of the trainers on the show.

The trainers' attitudes carry over to *TBL*'s most passionate fans, who model their behavior after the show and form social relationships around their interest in the show. The dominant perception among fans is that *TBL* is a source of inspiration for making life changes; it's considered a positive force in the lives of individuals and communities. Fans believe the show sets a positive example for individuals, families, and communities, and they are drawn to the relatable personal and physical challenges of contestants. The behavioral dimension of online *TBL* fan communities is also reflected in the now mainstream popularity of local "Biggest Loser" contests throughout the United States: office, gym, and neighborhood communities participate in weight-loss contests with public weigh-ins and cash prizes. But the highest degree of emotional investment is expressed in connection with virtual fan-run *TBL* contests, organized on social networks, within fan communities, and on fitness support forums. In these locations fans exchange advice, share personal experiences relating to weight struggles, confess to breaking diets, exchange inspiration, and participate in online weight-loss competitions. In place of public weigh-ins, users post their weight. Online communities are also used to organize local weight-loss groups for overweight individuals.

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[14] "Zen Dualism" refers to *The Biggest Loser*'s representation of bodily health as an external manifestation of internal peace. The spiritually-infused language has the misleading appearance of a holistic conception of embodiment, masking the actual dualism that distinguishes between internal "emotional life" and the physical body.

My research process focused on conversation threads that took place for the duration of Season 16 (September – December 2014) occurring on The Biggest Loser Club, the official NBC run site, where subscribing members pay $19.95 per month to have access to fitness and nutrition-tracking resources, support forums, and weight loss challenge groups. Here, users demonstrated a confident acceptance that the trainers are authorities on weight loss, and often made explicit reference to the show in discussing their individual fitness plans. Community members watch the show for the same reason they pay for access to the fan site—to find personal inspiration, advice, and to connect with others to whom they can relate. There is a general belief among this community that the advice given by trainers to individual contestants represents a generally applicable truth on weight loss. Taking the lead from Season 16's celebrity trainers—Jessie Pavelka, Jennifer Widerstrom, Dolvett Quince, and Bob Harper—users demonstrated a concern over the "emotional cause" underlying their weight gain.

Influence is not necessarily a worrisome phenomenon of TV viewing. More precisely, object of my critique is the nature of the behaviors learned through a particular channel of influence. The trainer's descriptions of fitness and lifestyle resonate with the *TBL* fans. This resonance is observable through their online conversations. In forum threads devoted to the latest episode, fans discuss the trainers' advice, only infrequently challenging their authority. In forum threads devoted to exchanging personal experiences or to participating in online weight loss challenges, fans repeat the trainer's advice in response to questions from other fans. Forum-based exchanges between fans repeat the ideas, opinions, and structure of trainer/trainee interactions, revealing the cultural impact of the show on its audience.

Why individual pathology in pop psychology matters

Building on Kelly Oliver's argument in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, I see trends in pop psychology, in addition to flaws in past psychoanalytic and social theories, as major obstacles in working toward institutional accountability for social oppression. *TBL*'s informally expressed views on emotions and health don't constitute a theory, though they do shape the way fans diagnose themselves and their fellow community members.

In *Colonization*, Oliver argues that psychoanalytic theorists misdiagnose the affects of oppression as individual, rather than social pathologies. Any theory seeking to address or remedy social oppression should incorporate the subject position into its account of identity and personhood. She proposes a socially oriented model of subject formation that places sublimation at the heart of the constitution of the social subject, arguing that individual agency develops through communication and self-expression. Following Franz Fanon, Oliver approaches the psychic space of oppression as a social pathology, where the absence of opportunities to express one's individuality lead to depression or violence. Departing from the Freudian tradition, which saw neuroses as individual phenomena, Fanon understood the pathologies of colonized people as rooted in a social setting characterized by relationships of domination and privileged access to meaning. Colonizers reserve the freedom of self-determination for themselves; they do not provide the same space to the colonized people, while defining the being of the colonized man in advance (2004, 25).

Colonization proposes a social theory that responds to the need for a theoretical account of the relationship between subject position and subjectivity, recognizing that this under-theorized connection is associated with blind spots throughout the history of psychoanalysis.

Most notably, the marginalization of critical attention to subject position is linked to the normalization of white, male, heterosexual experience; the othering of non-normative subject positions; and the overemphasis of social struggle as constitutive of subjectivity, in place of constructive models of selfhood.

Although Oliver's theory extends beyond the colonial setting, her perspective remains rooted in Fanon's insights on the social root of colonial pathology. This choice isn't merely theoretical–insisting on a social reading of things like depression and aggression is a way of holding those with political power accountable for perpetuating violence, or for addressing the unspoken harm that occurs within cultural blind spots. On the other hand, solely characterizing the pathologies of the oppressed within the sphere of the individual covers over the institutional roots of psychic violence. In order to have a meaningful conversation about how to overcome oppression, we must first identify the role that social and political institutions play in perpetuating harmful practices, perceptions, and cultural practices.

The *TBL* online fan community provides an opportunity to further extend Oliver's theory to a critique of cultural power. *TBL* works against a social reading of obesity, weight loss, and general attitudes on embodiment by perpetuating a tendency among its viewers to understand identity in isolation from context and community. This tendency is an obstacle to social progress in a similar way to the overly deterministic accounts of personhood, or individually oriented psychoanalytic methods. By making the personal or private life of an individual the sole realm in which the diagnosis of affect can take place, we are leaving out the very possibility of identifying widespread patterns of slow death.

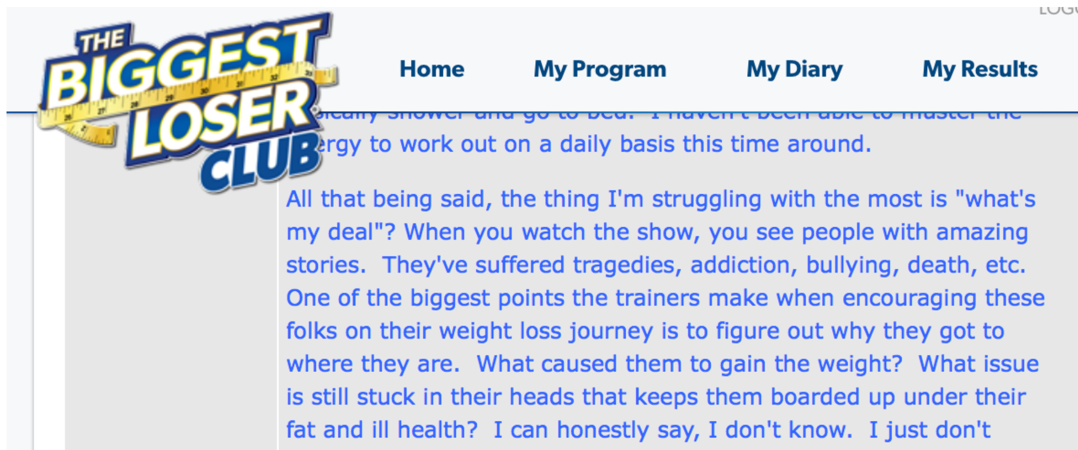
The urgency of studying this pop cultural tendency is made evident when considered in connection with the increasing popularity of sharing informal medical advice online—U.S. adults have been turning to online resources, rather than doctors, to deal with medical problems and to seek out advice on health care. According to a 2013 Pew Research Study, 35% of U.S. adults use online searches to diagnose their own medical condition, or to help someone they know with a medical diagnosis (Fox and Duggan 2014). Additionally, a 2012 survey about the healthcare market found that American adults tend to feel comfortable with exposing private health information if they believe it will benefit their well being (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2012, 15-16). These findings suggest that we can expect to see an increase in our cultural willingness to embrace non-expert opinions of media personalities, and to rely on crowdsourcing when it comes to fitness and nutrition.

A Closer Look at TBL Fan Behavior

The two most frequently occurring behavioral and conversational patterns among *TBL* fans were: (1) searching for the emotional/psychological root cause underlying weight gain; and (2) appropriating elements of medicalizing and pathologizing obesity discourses.

In the sample post provided below, Ruth17 expresses confusion as she tries to apply ideas learned on *TBL* to her own life. Wanting to make sense of her own weight gain, Ruth17 looks to pinpoint the emotional cause underlying her inability to shed pounds. In the excerpt included below, she expresses a trust in the authority of the trainers by repeating their view that weight gain is a symptom of an individual's emotional distress or pain. Implicit in this post is an

endorsement of the causal relationship between inner spirit and outer appearance, characteristic of *TBL*’s “zen dualism.”



6 - Forum Sample 1 (Ruth17 2014)

Of the celebrity trainers, Dolvett is the most vocal about his belief that contestants can only lose weight by resolving personal turmoil associated with personal experiences and relationships with family. For instance, in Chapter 2 I analyzed a scene from Episode 2 of Season 16 in which Dolvett decides to teach his team about the therapeutic importance of “dealing” with problems. He exemplifies a “healthy attitude” by confessing to suffering abuse as a child, explaining to his team that sharing his story has made him a stronger trainer, instructing, “Share that vulnerable strength. Because it’s the only way you can take the weight off and keep it off” (DeGroot 2014b, 16:40). Ruth17 indirectly acknowledges Dolvett’s authority by taking his pop-psychological beliefs as her own, and by using the language of “dealing with personal problems” in the context of a post about her struggles with weight.

Jessie Pavelka, also a celebrity trainer on Season 16, is explicit in his belief that there is a direct connection between psychological wellbeing and weight. On his *TBL* blog, Jessie explains that in order to make physical changes contestants need to first deal with their personal issues; in his own words, "I try to get the people I work with to pay attention to the way they feel. Weight loss is a side effect of living and feeling good—and feeling can't be [quantified] on a scale, only qualified by YOU" (Pavelka 2014). Here, Jessie confines "feeling good" to the realm of purely subjective experience, isolating the pathology underlying obesity to the internal life of an individual. Struggles with weight, following Jessie's logic, are always a symptom of private, internal experience.[15] Again here, the voice of authority on health encourages inspiration-seeking audiences to accept individual pathology as an appropriate perspective for understanding obesity, and for taking practical steps to achieve weight loss.

One need only scroll to the comment section of the blog post cited above to get wind of viewer investment in Jessie as an authoritative voice on health. One reader, Gaynor Brown, expresses admiration for Jessie's perspective, and for *TBL* as a positive influence. Rephrasing Jessie's ideas with religious undertones, Gaynor writes, "What you do is so inspirational because as you say, you work out the demons from the inside to fix what is happening on the outside. It's the inner reasons for eating that people losing weight really need to get through to be truly free of a weight problem. The contestants are in good hands—yours" (Brown 2014). Whether directly supporting a trainer's approach, as with Gaynor, or indirectly affirming a trainer's lessons, as with Ruth17, engaged *TBL* audiences tend to gravitate toward conversations about "inner reasons."

The political worry involved in *TBL*'s focus on "inner change" is echoed by Lauren Berlant's analysis of the obesity epidemic, which I discussed in Chapter 2. In addition to a concern about patterns of violence that are going unnoticed in our present society, Berlant takes issue with the privatization of healthcare, arguing that antidepression and antiobesity initiatives both seek to orchestrate a collective environment for making personal changes that are focused on "individual choices." Divorcing individual health from oppressive elements of the individual's social position results in a medicalization that is also a privatization; this alleviates the responsibility of employers and states in providing financial support for depressed or grossly overweight individuals (Berlant 2011, 68).

The second tendency of *TBL*'s celebrity trainers and among members of the *TBL* fan community is the appropriation of medicalizing and pathologizing obesity discourses, whose members discuss their weight-related struggles in terms of "emotional eating," a family history of disease, and depression. In a recent post on the *TBL* forum, user cfsk55 self-identifies as an emotional eater, and confesses to succumbing to this condition. Both Ruth17 and cfsk55 understand their respective weight struggles in terms of individual pathology, and identify family relationship stress as a major cause of weight gain. While Ruth17 expresses confusion when she is unable to identify "her deal," cfsk55's "deal" is emotional eating and family-provoked stress–a perspective that is affirmed by supportive members of the *TBL* weight loss community.

Topic: Bad w

cfsk55	**Posted:** Saturday, October 18, 2014 1:52:15 PM
	I am a very emotional eater. I did let it get the best of me. Needless to say I am looking at a gain this week. So hard after doing well the last two weeks. I do know I need to just let go and start again. But,easier said than done. I have to travel to see family this coming week..who knows what will happen. I did all my work outs and have my resistance band packed for the trip. Week 4 is a new week and a new me! Thanks, I needed to get this

7 - Forum sample 2 (csfk55 2014)

The celebrity trainers featured on Season 16 encourage medicalizing explanations by insisting that behavior that does not conform to the health regimens and diets they prescribe are symptoms of a turbulent emotional state. The inability to follow a diet, or the lack of willingness to complete a workout at the gym, is always an expression of individual pathology. Contestants then echo the trainers' perspective by describing their struggles with weight and nutrition as connected to emotional stress and family dilemmas.

This pattern is visible in the testimonials with contestants featured on the show, and in contestant interviews with media outlets and popular blogs. For instance, contestant Tanya Winfield published a guest post on jetmag.com in which she gives new college students advice on how to avoid gaining weight in their first year away from home. Tanya warns readers to "be on the lookout for emotional eating. Being away from your family and friends, being in an unfamiliar environment, meeting new people, and college studies has to be pretty tough for anyone to adjust to, so your emotions will be all over the place. Recognize them, embrace them, cherish them, but don't feed them! Ben & Jerry's is not your friend" (Bishop 2014). Tanya suggests a literal connection between loneliness and over-eating, and assumes this connection

applies to her readers, replicating the standard message delivered by *TBL* trainers, who believe emotional health is a requirement for weight loss.

A second example is Andrea Wilamowski's interview with *People* magazine, in which she describes her struggles with weight as a "coping mechanism" for dealing with marital abuse. Andrea attributes her success to figuring out that she was suffering from emotional eating, explaining, "I realized what emotional eating was about . . . I had a huge 'aha' moment when I figured it out. That one moment has changed my whole life" (Gomez 2014). Andrea's words provide a concrete illustration of the extent to which affects associated with distress are informally defined in terms of the personal or private life of an individual. Even with marital abuse, it's assumed that emotional eating is an expression of private suffering, rather than a particular expression of patterns of violence against women. Andrea doesn't reject gender as part of the explanation for stress relating to marital abuse, but leaves it out altogether, suggesting that her social position was not considered a relevant factor to begin with. The act of violence (abuse) and the effects of that violence (in this case, emotional eating) are located in the realm of home, privacy, and personal relationships.

Tanya's and Andrea's words are not, in themselves, blameworthy. Tanya is simply intending to communicate practical advice to her readers in a way that only indirectly suggests a desire to self-promote. Similarly, Andrea is engaging with *People* magazine in a way that is seemingly harmless. What these women's words reveal is a deeper complicity of *TBL*'s narrative in the spread of popular perceptions of health, body, and agency. That the contestants echo the trainers' ideas and attitudes is crucial to bolstering the show's message–they function as "proof" of the show as an authority worth listening to. Before and after photos, combined with a slew of

media appearances by contestants after the season finale, give credence to the belief that *TBL* is enacting change in everyday people's lives.

Fans of the show become "invested viewers" by buying into the narrative that individuals have the power to enact change, and by embracing the trainers as authority figures. The *TBL* brand derives its power from an onscreen appeal to popular dreams of self-betterment (the actual episodes), by the continuation of the contestants' narrative following the conclusion of the show—as if to confirm this reality series is "really real," and, perhaps most importantly, by the incorporation of viewer engagement into the structure of the *TBL* experience via the maintenance of NBC's official fan site.

Viewer investment as an expression of capitalist consumer logic

TBL's cultural authority—or the power to disseminate messages with an ideological and political dimension, obscured by the entertaining content—is cemented through viewer investment, where investment expresses a capitalist logic of property and possession. Fans of the show pay a monthly fee of nearly $40 to engage with other viewers in a community defined by its striving toward an ideal of fitness and emotional stability modeled by the *TBL* trainers. However, the payment to participate in this community, and the desire to watch the show, are not perceived as "purchasing a product." The fact of buying membership, or "buying into" a show's message, fade out of view as a result of the appeal to identity embedded in the *TBL* brand. Watching the show and talking about the show on NBC's fan forum are participatory behaviors through which individuals perceive themselves to be "investing" in self-development.

TBL's ability to thrive as an influential force among consumers is grounded in our current economic context. The ideal of "self-development" as a product of capitalist consumerism is similar to the perpetuation of racial status in colonial capitalist settings–both emerge from social settings in which property-based notions of identity reign supreme. In order for *TBL*'s narrative of self-enacted transformation to resonate, or for whiteness to retain its status, the context must be one in which identity is viewed as a commodity, where "I" refers to a fixed and linear accumulation of achievements, status, and wealth.

Kelly Oliver examines this association in *The Colonization of Psychic Space* in connection with Franz Fanon's views on white power's reliance on the economy of property, and with Patricia Williams's proposals for thinking of investment without ownership. With Fanon and Williams, Oliver suggests that norms of assigning value are at the root of race-based oppression. Capitalist societies are structured around the understanding that value is a measurement of property, possession, and goods. Identity, both social and personal, comes to be located in measurable markers of property ownership. In a colonial setting, white power is exercised through the accumulation of land and wealth, and by the expression of dominance over the colonial people. Finding alternatives to property-based notions of value are a strategy for reshaping how we think about subjects and subjectivity (2004, 65-67).

Economic context is fundamental to understanding social oppression, whether we are looking at the history of European colonial rule or at limiting health-related discourses in our present. As Oliver puts it, "the colonization of psychic space not only turns psychic phenomena and their bodily manifestations into properties/property but also turns outside the economy of property" (2004, 67). *TBL*'s commercial success is one and the same with its ideological

influence, meaning that there are experiential, financial, and political dimensions to viewer investment. The perpetuation of individual pathology as a pop psychological concept is just one example of how political networks of power map onto patterns of consumption. Beyond exposing the interconnected channels that structure our world, this chapter's study of fan investment in *TBL* illuminates the extent to which the experiential world of real individuals conforms to the ideals established by cultural and political institutions. "Consumer identity" is not experienced as such by viewers of the show–my analysis of NBC's official fan community sheds light on the genuine benefit that fans derive from participating in online support groups.

On the one hand, this deep identification with a for-profit online community is simply an expression of the depth of capitalist culture in our present. On the other hand, the experiential dimension of viewer investment leaves open the possibility for communities of resistance from within the heart of consumer culture. While it's true that we need to take *TBL* seriously as a major source of cultural influence, *TBL*'s cultural influence does not preclude the possibility of transformation within its fan community. Optimistic though it may be, we must leave open the possibility that fan engagement on NBC's official site is subverting commodified notions of identity, or that it has the potential to give rise to a major social shift.

In the following chapters I delve further into the normative structure of viewer investment in the show, continuing to explore psychoanalytic theory and the social, political, and economic significance of *TBL*'s popularity. The fourth chapter turns to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, providing new insights on the experiential dimension of viewer investment in the program. The fifth chapter speaks directly to the possibility of subversive potential emerging from within *TBL*'s audience by studying an occurrence that lead to widespread divestment.

CHAPTER IV

ABJECTION & VIEWER INVESTMENT

In this chapter I consider concept-based explanations for viewer investment in *The Biggest Loser* (*TBL*) with reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. The aim of the chapter is to first articulate the process by which eating, imbibing, and devouring become abject on *TBL*, and to then reflect on how this process takes hold of the viewer. I develop my analysis on a theoretical level, examining *TBL* through a conceptual lens, and then evaluate conclusions derived from my own research on audience reactions to the show.

I begin by offering an overview of Kristeva's theory of abjection, illustrating key features of her argument in connection with scenes from Season 14 of *TBL*. I then set up an analogy between *TBL* and horror film. Drawing on feminist film scholar Barbara Creed's theory of "monstrous femininity," I discuss similarities between the investment of viewers in horror film and the investment of viewers in the TV series. I argue that, as with horror film, viewer investment is tied to a particular experience of transgression. Viewer investment in horror film and *TBL* include frequent images of abjection (what Kristeva refers to as primary expressions of abjection) and represent bodily desire as abject. One major strategy I take is to illustrate an analogy between the representation of desire on William Friedkin's film *The Exorcist* (1973) and representations of eating and food on *TBL*.

My choice to incorporate Creed is motivated by a concern with the social meaning of media representations of desire—similarly to Creed (who looks at *The Exorcist's* implications for feminine desire), I show how the "desire for junk food" is bound up with social borders and

meanings at work in our present. Also similarly to Creed, I believe television—especially reality TV—repeats processes of abjection. It is a valuable resource for reflecting on dominant forces that define the social world in which we reside. This chapter will analyze patterns of discourse and visual tropes as expressions of norms governing gender identity, sexuality, and class (and race through class).

Kristeva

In this section I offer an overview of Kristeva's theory of abjection to set up my engagement with Creed in the next section. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva uses the term "abject" to describe social excess—that which sits on the edges of social meaning. "Abjection" describes the movement by which social excess comes to reside at the margins. "Abjection" also describes the profoundly ambiguous reaction that "social beings" have in encounters with the borders of their world (2002, 229-31). The abject, especially in its most elementary forms (blood, corpses, rot, aversion to food), involves a violent relationship of myself to the indefinable that I am (perversely) drawn toward and disgusted by. Yet even in its most elementary forms, the abject is recognizable. For instance, the corpse has the shape of a human, and in certain contexts can be approached from the perspective of human biology. The abject is the decay that resides within recognizable forms.

For Kristeva, social norms and language are never abstractions: our bodies live, feel, and belong to the structures of meaning in our social world. Gut reactions to the abject—the social excess that we are simultaneously repulsed by and perversely drawn toward—express this very

physical participation in normativity. Kristeva explains that the physicality of encounters with the abject feels like a "natural" phenomenon. I do not experience my encounters with the abject as something mediated by society, even though social mediation lies at the heart of abjection.

Kristeva illustrates her ideas on abjection by discussing basic expressions of abjection, which include "loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck" (2). The elementary expressions of the abject involve me in the most violent way by dragging me in two directions. I feel the pull of social excess, and at the same time I am disgusted. To sewage and muck Kristeva also adds the decaying corpse, which works to "show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (3). For Kristeva, my physical reaction to a corpse is related more to life than death. I am defined by my normative world, a world of boundaries that expels the abject from the realm of language and meaning. The necessity of expelling otherness again reveals the fragility of normativity; a meaningless and excessive outside constitutes my linguistic and social realities.

The social dynamism of individual bodies lies at the heart of abjection. Bodies play an active role in the reinforcement of boundaries, rules, and meaning. At the same time, the fact that I am also (perversely) drawn toward the abject points to the fragility of the norms in question, as if to assert their meaninglessness. My experience is fundamentally ambiguous, expressing a process of socialization that is always incomplete: language cannot fully capture my experiences, and my experiences are never fully defined by custom. In my encounter with the abject, I experience the fundamental fluidity of my identity as fragility.

Kristeva holds that “abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (10). Again, the confrontation with danger is an encounter with the possibility of transgression and the fragility of social meaning. Kristeva explains that this confrontation brings us into contact with our archaeology—to the realm of being that we inhabited prior to entering the world of norms. The experience of pre-sociality—of having been one with our mothers, of having been animal—is never fully erased. In our encounter with the abject, the residual (and never buried) elements of the maternal and the animal float up into the foreground.

The maternal is central to abjection. Kristeva designates the maternal body as the first site where the movement of abjection plays out (in the development of the male infant). The developing child has an ambivalent relationship to the maternal body: he both desires to remain connected to his mother, and at the same wants to liberate himself from her. The phenomenon of abjection first occurs as a visceral reaction to an ambivalent desire toward a body that is both familiar/desirable and also disturbing. On the issue of the maternal as origin Kristeva explains that abjection arises within our personal archaeology, “our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent and clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (239). Against Freud, Kristeva explains that the mother is the root of individual development since she stands at the threshold of her child’s entry into the world of social meaning and language. Individuation occurs through the movement of repelling (abjecting) the maternal body. Kristeva writes, “Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting

itself. Ab-jecting. […] this struggle, which fashions the human being […] is a precondition of narcissism" (239). The mother's flesh serves as the passageway through which the (male) child enters the world of signification.

Kristeva discusses the forms of the abject that reside within maternal and female bodies, such as menstrual blood, which come to have a "polluting value" (260). Kristeva explains the excessive status of maternal blood by drawing an analogy to excrement. Excrement (and other primary forms of abjection, such as decay and the corpse) threatens identity (the ego). Excrement and decay make up the "non-ego" in that they conjure images of death, the thing that disintegrates the life and solidity of the individual (260). Menstrual blood also threatens, but in a different way. She writes, "Menstrual blood … stands for the danger issuing within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference" (260-261).

Menstrual blood is a remnant of the time when the individual was not a man, nor a woman, but a plasmatic non-identity within (and with) the mother. Menstrual blood conjures the warm womb in the individual's personal archaeology; it carries with it the threatening message that "myself" is merely social myth built in the aftermath of the fusion of "my" body with the maternal. It disturbs because it exposes the abject at the heart of the familiar.

Creed

In this section I discuss Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*, which explores monstrous representations of women in subgenres of horror film

(1993, 7). I illustrate the primary role of Kristeva's theory in Creed's analysis, and also consider the theoretical and practical applicability of Creed's framework to a more general understanding of viewer investment in visual media.

The Monstrous Feminine emerges out of a specific academic context—it is Creed's critical response to debates in film theory in the early nineties. Some of the tendencies she is aiming to trouble include:

(1) The widespread belief that women always play "passive" roles in Hollywood films.

(2) The overuse of the passivity/activity binary in attempts to explain how male and female spectators experience film differently.

(3) The lack of attention to male fears about female sexuality. (7-8)

The Monstrous Feminine sustains a continuous dialogue with the psychoanalytic theories of Kristeva and Freud, especially in the context of rethinking how spectators experience the horror film genre. It moves between the application of psychoanalysis and the critique of psychoanalytic interpretations within the field of film theory. Throughout her analysis Creed uses conclusions on popular horror themes as a springboard for critiquing dominant interpretations of Freudian analysis within film theory.

Creed's use of Kristeva in *The Monstrous Feminine* offers a framework for understanding how the genre of horror film is able to grab hold of its audience, and draw it into the gritty drama onscreen. Horror films' visual images present the audience with representations that they are simultaneously disgusted by and perversely drawn toward. Cinema sets up a context where

spectators are allowed to indulge their fascination with things they aren't "allowed" to look at. Creed uses Kristeva's concept of the abject to understand the construction of female monstrosity in horror films, especially in regard to the question of borders and transgression. The monstrous woman takes five forms, or, as Creed puts it, "faces."[16]

In *The Monstrous Feminine*, Creed identifies "images of abjection" in horror film and analyzes the process by which a particular character or element comes to be represented as abject. Decaying corpses and wounded flesh are examples of this type of images (10). That a viewer chooses to watch corpses and wounded flesh onscreen "signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/ being filled with terror/ desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity […] to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat)" (10).

Creed's analysis illustrates the extent to which horror films offer the viewer an experience of transgression: more than lovers of "guts and gore," fans of the genre are thrill seekers. She also sets up a conversation between Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory and inquiries into viewer investment. On the one hand, horror film viewership offers a new perspective from which to contemplate Kristeva's theory: the viewer's experience of transgression is a tangible repetition of the violent ambivalence of abjection. On the other hand, Kristeva's theory of abjection offers media scholars a vocabulary for articulating the social/psychological basis of the genre's popularity. Horror films present the viewer with a "safe space" for coming in close

[16] **Face 1:** The Archaic Mother (which includes symbolic representations of a primordial womb, such as the inner space of the mother-ship in the 1975 film *Alien*); **Face 2:** The Monstrous Womb (such as Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, in the 1975 film *Alien*); **Face 3:** The Witch (such as Nola in the 1970 film *The Brood*); **Face 4:** The Vampire (such as the lesbian vampires in the 1970 film *Vampire Lovers*); **Face 5:** The Possessed Woman (such as Regan in the 1973 film *The Exorcist*) (Creed 7).

contact with social excess—an experience that is defined by the duality of perverse desire and visceral revulsion. The thrill of horror hinges on the opportunity to look at that which, in other contexts, we are forbidden to want to see.

Social borders, for Creed, play a central role in horror (10-11). The monstrous figure is monstrous precisely because she violates boundaries and challenges basic meanings that define the viewer's social reality. Monstrous figures (such as werewolves) challenge the clear difference between human and animal. Possessed young women in movies such as *Carrie* and *Rosemary's Baby* challenge representations of purity and youth by infecting girls with demonic seed. Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a vocabulary for articulating the "thrill" associated with viewing monstrous figures onscreen. The monster, possessed woman, or animal-like human is fundamentally ambiguous in that it is at once recognizable and utterly foreign. Monstrous figures offer the experience of transgression, defined by the co-existence of perverse desire and revulsion. The monstrous sparks a reaction in the viewer that repeats the violent ambivalence of abjection, and does so by toying with socially and culturally specific norms governing identity (gender, spirituality/piety, human as distinct from the animal).

Creed's framework is applicable outside the realm of horror film, since the focus of *The Monstrous Feminine* is interested in digging out the processes of abjection that support the portrayal of the "horrific," rather than treating "horror" as an independent concept or category. Creed's film analysis privileges the social element of Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, never allowing the normative context of a media image to disappear from view. The issue of why certain types of images grab hold of the viewer, or why the viewer seeks out a particular kind of viewing experience, is a matter of individual identification with the broader social context.

Furthermore, *The Monstrous Feminine*'s focuses on elements of horror that aren't exclusive to the genre. As mentioned earlier, this chapter will turn to Creed's analysis of representations of female desire in the film *The Exorcist* in order to understand the structure of viewer investment in *TBL*.

Vomiting, Fainting, Gagging

In this section I use key concepts from *The Monstrous Feminine* to reflect on representations of the abject on *TBL* Season 14. Similarly to horror film, which features "the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears, and putrifying flesh" (10), *TBL* also abounds in images of abjection. Though there are no corpses, the program is filled with bodies being pushed to the limit. Sweat, tears, and exhaustion are constant—the contestants are shown struggling through grueling workouts, frequently crying about not being able to go on. Many of the contestants struggle through exercise sessions as though they were being tortured: the men and women grit their teeth to fight through the pain, or plead with the trainers to let them stop. When they are pushed too hard many come close to fainting, or experience exercise-induced sickness.

Images of fatigue and vomiting—losing one's lunch—on *TBL* express the abject by showcasing bodily waste and/or wasted (exhausted, fatigued) bodies. What is unique about the show, however, is that in addition to featuring "primary expressions of the abject," it also establishes direct connections between the contestant and the viewer through a combination of the following elements:

(1) Scenes where contestants are participating in activities or training sessions with teammates, or competing against other teams in “challenges.”
(2) Scenes where one contestant is speaking directly to the camera, recounting her individual experience of participating in training or challenges, or “confessing” to their private fears, past struggles, and difficulties experienced in her private life.
(3) Scenes where trainers (there are three total—Jillian Michaels, Bob Harper, and Dolvett) recount their own perspective to the camera. Their comments typically reference the value of personal responsibility, and the pride of being able to “push through the pain.” They reassure the viewer that the disturbing images of fatigue and vomiting are all part of “the process.”
(4) Interactive features of the show that involve viewers through social media and community events. “Biggest Loser Challenge America” is the off-air extension of the show to Americans seeking to lose weight just like the contestants on the show. The related Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest pages allow for the audience to engage directly with posts by the show, or with individual contestants. Each contestant keeps a Twitter account where he or she responds to comments and questions from fans.

Confessions of “self-disgust” are a key feature of the representation of the abject on the show insofar as they invite the viewer to experience revulsion with them. The viewer is invited into the mind of the individual contestants. Moreover, this introduces “binge eating” (over-

eating, stuffing oneself, eating more than one should) into the show's discourse surrounding body and food. The confessions invite the viewer to partake in the struggle between the overwhelming desire to eat and the disgust experienced at having eaten so very much. The coupling of the confession of "self-disgust" with scenes of strenuous physical activity invites the viewer to become a participant in this cycle of disgust with eating, while also presenting the viewer with the primary expressions of the abject that offer a "horror-like" experience of transgression.

The inclusion of the trainers' perspectives further supports the participation of the viewer in the abjection of "over-eating," junk food, and the overweight bodies that suffer from their indulgence. The trainers' fit bodies, celebrity "street cred," and level of expertise offer rational reasons that work to justify the viewer's entry into the experience of transgression. Their words on "health-consciousness," "becoming the best version of one's self," and "owning up to one's choices and habits" sanction the disgust—they make it OK for the viewer to desire to watch the contestants vomit and cry and undergo pain because they are getting healthy. Moreover, they add a dimension of "expert credibility" with regard to the contestants' confessions of "self-disgust" and "addiction to food."

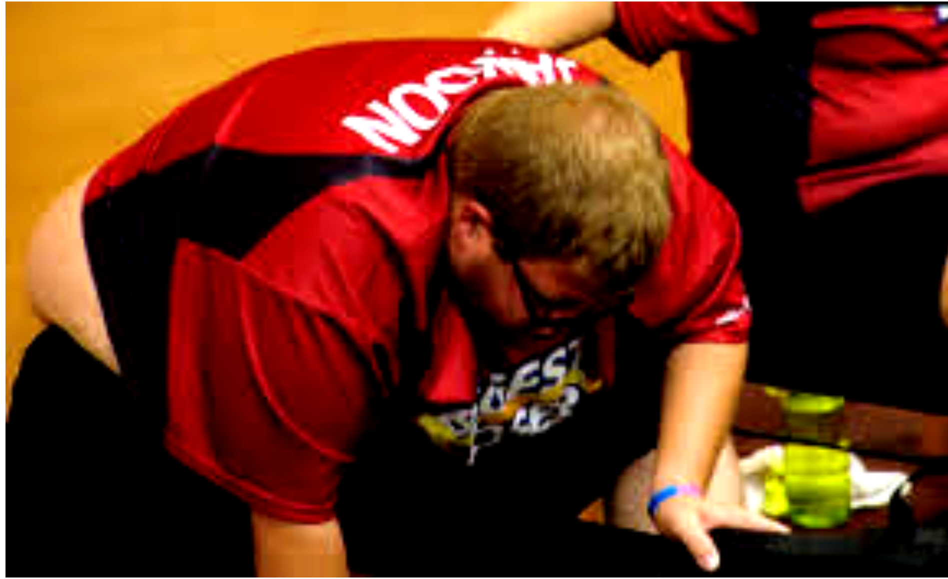
The difference between abject waste on *TBL* and in horror film is in part due to stylistic differences in the genres of horror and reality TV.[17] Yet stylistic difference has important

[17] The one-on-one interview sessions, where the camera is solely focused on one contestant (testimonials), are a feature of reality television that has persisted since the early days of MTV's *The Real World*. Despite its heavy editing, the realness of reality TV depends on features where individuals confess to the camera, revealing their true fears and deep inner secrets. The "lifestyle" or "health" expertise of the trainers on the show is also part of a larger trend in reality TV (intervention programs—where an expert intervenes in some aspect of an individual's personal life).

consequences for how Kristeva's concept of "abjection" comes to bear on the present analysis. Creed's understanding of horror viewership, that "viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images…) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject" (1993, 10), takes on a new literal meaning. Viewing *TBL* signifies a desire for the perverse pleasure of confronting bodily waste and exhausted bodies, and also a literal desire to watch those bodies throw up the perverse foods they have consumed. The viewer is engaged in a cycle of abject consumption of images (the act of viewing) and perverse desire to see "consumed" bodies and bodies stuffed with food. The viewer is able to place her own feedback into this cycle by interacting with contestants or fans on social media. In this schema, excess consumption of food is the perversion in question. The overweight contestants are not shown binge eating, though the topic of "food addiction" and overeating is discussed throughout the season. So the expression of the abject on *TBL* is not confined to isolated images of bodily waste, but rather includes the "back story" of binge eating. The repeatedly expressed connection between "sick" eaters and exercise-induced sickness expresses a version of the pathologizing discourse discussed in Chapter 3.

Exercise-induced sickness (vomiting, fainting, and fatigue) is featured on every episode in the first half of the season. The three trainers on the show tell the contestants that this is a part of adapting their bodies to physical fitness, and encourage "powering through" the phase. One contestant in particular, Jackson (Red Team), vomits, collapses, or gags more frequently than the others. The first image below shows Jackson vomiting (Figure 8). Dolvett, the trainer leading the

Red Team's workouts, encourages Jackson to get back on the treadmill. Then, exhausted, he collapses (Figure 9).


8—Jackson 1 (Bartley 2013a, 15:10)

9—Jackson 2 (15:30)

Jackson vomits again during a rowing machine workout. He is shown turning to his side and releasing chunks of vomit out of his mouth. Talking to the camera he explains, “I was on the ground with a bucket and I think to myself this is the end of the world. But every time I’ve thrown up this week I take a couple seconds, gather myself, and get back to work.” Jackson’s statement refers back to an idea that Dolvett, his trainer, insisted on earlier in the episode, that vomiting is simply a part of the process. “Get back on it, get back on it,” is a phrase Dolvett says to his team throughout the episode (Bartley 2013a).

Jackson is only one of many contestants who throw up in the first episode. Jeff, a young man on the Blue Team, is shown spewing vomit out of his mouth. Pam, a woman on the White Team, also throws up in the training room. Bob Harper, the trainer leading the Blue Team (talking into the camera), explains, “Everyone was dropping like flies. It wasn’t just a couple people, it was the majority” (Bartley 2013a, 15:40). In fact, contestants reflect on the experience of this first grueling workout in testimonials throughout the remainder of the episode. Nathan, a contestant on the White Team, begins tearing up. Talking to the camera he says, “[the workout] was like a metaphor for my whole life. I always get up and I always fall right back down. I just want to be able to stay up for once” (17:00). Nathan’s tears are tears of shame—he always falls. Though he doesn’t mention it directly, the implication is that he is overweight because he can’t force himself to make the right (healthy) choices. The viewer is invited into Nathan’s struggle with food.

10 - Jackson 3 (Bartley 2013b, 19:10)

In the second episode, the White, Red, and Blue teams compete in a "Bubble Gum Swamp" challenge, where team members must drag themselves through a pool of a bubble gum-like substance in order to bring a set number of balls from one side to the other. All contestants struggle, though Jackson has the hardest time of all (Figure 10)—he stops in the middle of the "swamp" and gags. Though he does not end up vomiting, the episode includes a close up of his mouth and throat convulsing. In addition to speaking about his experience in the pit (Element #2), he also engages directly with viewers on this incident through his Twitter account (Element #3).

Jackson Carter @jacksonwhitt Jan 15
I've already puked on one team mate, I can't puke on the rest :)
#bl14 #blquestions @joannadolgoffmd @dolvett
Expand Reply Retweet Favorite More

11 - Jackson's Tweet (Carter 2013)

Jackson's Tweets the phrase, "I've already puked on one team mate" (Figure 11), drawing a connection between his bubble swamp gagging with an earlier incident, in which he accidentally vomited on a teammate's leg. This message is composed so as to reach as wide an audience in possible—as suggested by the inclusion of #bl14 (hashtag is an acronym for "The Biggest Loser Season 14") and #blquestions (hashtag is an acronym for "The Biggest Loser questions").

Viewers accept the direct invitation to interact with the show. For example, Jennie Henderson of "Confessions of a Former Fat Girl," posted the following message, expressing a mixture of endearment and support: Jackson is throwing up left and right. "Everything I throw up, I get right back on. LOVE IT" (Henderson 2013), and Figure 12 are additional examples of comments posted on *TBL*'s Facebook feed.

Scott N Crystal Donaldson Jackson you are awesome! I laughed so hard at the bubble gum episode! You are one of my favorites!! This season so far Has been such a relief from last season! Hang in there buddy!!
February 7 at 9:57pm via mobile · Like · 1

12—Scott's Facebook Post

This sequence of elements provides an excellent example of the movement by which viewers receive, and accept invitations to participate in, the contestants' struggle with "over-eating." The individualized identification sets the viewer up for an involved experience of transgression that goes beyond simply reacting to horrific/abject images. The viewer is set up to want to engage in the perverse self-abjection of the contestants—the "realness" structured into the show, coupled with its interactive features, set the viewer up to experience a strong ambivalence with regard to over-eating, sweating bodies, and vomiting bodies. Finding vomiting funny or endearing is one expression of this ambivalence with regard to the graphic nature of the scenes where contestants vomit.[18]

The bubble gum pit takes on a symbolic meaning in the context of the challenge. The host, Alison Sweeney, explains that the sugar-filled candy pit represents the effects of junk food on the body, implying that eating excessive amounts of sugary food leads to physical difficulties. She announces that the prize for the winner of the challenge is a voucher for "$5,000 worth of fresh, healthy groceries." The introduction of "produce" is not merely a question of vegetables—it assigns the value of abject to the junk food that the contestants ate (and to the repeated act of eating junk food). Throughout the challenge Alison makes statements that explicitly reference the meaning of the pit. For instance, she shouts "Junk food—slowing you guys down!" as the

[18] The relationship of comedy to the abject has been explored in film, theory, and fiction. Enjoyable titles that explore and engage with visual media and Julia Kristeva's writings include John Limon's chapter "Journey to the End of the Night: David Letterman with Kristeva, Céline, Scorses" in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2003, 68-82); and Menachem Feuer's "Almost friends: post-Holocaust comedy, tragedy, and friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything is Illuminated" (2007, 24).

contestants heave and struggle through the pink goop; and later, "Every aspect of the challenge…wearing on them" (Bartley 2013b).

The host's choice of words echoes the perspectives voiced by Dolvett, Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels. The notion that the contestants must "detoxify" their bodies from all the junk they have eaten is frequently discussed on the show. The contestants' own accounts (in "confession" camera mode) support the message that eating junk food is disgusting. For example, Kate (contestant on the Red Team) talks to the viewers directly, "America laugh all you want—you have no idea how hard it is. When you fill your body with garbage, that's how you move through a pile of gum: sluggish." Kate confirms the host's message to the viewers: she confesses that she indulged in the eating of "garbage," and also that eating "garbage" is the reason why she is having a hard time moving through the swamp.

The frequent use of the words "garbage," "junk," and "toxins" on the show is part of the process by which specific kinds of eating and food are abjected on the show. Contestants and trainers use these words to talk about eating habits and food—they are repeated in confessional moments with trainers, in confessional moments with contestants, and during conversations between trainer and contestant during grueling workout scenes. The discourse is a key feature of the cyclical structure of the show that invites viewers to partake in the abject "reality" of the contestants, yet it also works to connect the show's "reality" to dominant discourses that exist in the context surrounding the show. Discourses of health, personal responsibility, food addiction (over-eating, binge-eating, and other medicalized notions of eating), and self-improvement are a defining feature of storytelling on *TBL*. What's common to these threads is the recurring

suggestion that the overweight contestants contain an internal "toxicity" within them—a thing that must be purged: spiritually, morally, and physically.

As *TBL* distorts embodied experience by representing affect as a matter of "personal feelings," that is, a deeply private matter. Sentimentality is stripped of ordinary context (with almost no reference things like work, social interactions, or geographical location) and is then imbued with dramatics (outbursts of crying, sadness, anxiety). Additionally, contestant testimonials and intimate conversations between trainer and trainee place an exaggerated focus on the home and family life, which works to homogenize differences in the affective lives of contestants. This focus takes the form of focusing on family values as the primary motivation for improving health, and by including visual references to the home and family life. For instance, pictures of a contestant's family are shown during testimonials, or trainers/contestants share family photos with one another as a form of bonding. *TBL*'s representation of affect literally keeps us indoors, stuck with family, engaged in perpetual heart-to-hearts.

Exercising Exorcism for America

In this section I build an analogy between Creed's analysis of the representation of desire in *The Exorcist* and representations of hunger on *TBL* as a strategy for articulating its abject status on the show.

Creed discusses *The Exorcist* in her third chapter of *The Monstrous Feminine*, "Woman as Possessed Monster." Her aim is to call attention to the film's ideological message, that spiritual decay must be combated through the recuperation of Christian conservative moral

values. With the help of Kristeva's theory of abjection (especially her discussions of ritual), Creed articulates her interpretive claim, that the possessed woman is the horrific thing that threatens paternal power by "[refusing] to take the proper place in symbolic order" (1993, 38). Creed's extension of Kristeva's theory of abjection to *The Exorcist* takes her into new and important territory by exposing the film's violent portrayal of a young girl's sexuality in order to further its conservative ideological goal. *The Exorcist* takes a device that, in many films, is simply used to entertain, and uses it to persuade the audience of its pro-conservative Christian moral values.

Father Damien defends the symbolic/paternal order against the threat of the other (the evil that has taken hold of Regan) by enacting the religious ritual of exorcism. This ritual has two functions: (1) to define normative boundaries; and (2) to assert the dominance of these norms with reference to that which threatens to break the rules. Father Damien's exorcism defines the social bounds, and asserts the dominance of the conservative Christian moral order. In the context of the film, "conservative Christian moral order" means the affirmation of heterosexuality, the insistence on abstinence prior to marriage and other "traditional" family values, and the denigration of intense sexual pleasure.

The overweight contestants on *TBL* are horrific in a similar way to Regan—their expression of desire for food (both feeling hungry and representing that voracity through their physical appearance) is a threat. It is not just an individual problem, but rather part of an epidemic that is taking hold of the nation. The celebrity trainers on the show also defend the dominant symbolic order by purifying the bodies of the contestants on the show of their uncontrollable disease. Differently from the film, however, the symbolic order in question is that

of "American Strength." While *The Exorcist*'s message involves the restoration of a Christian moral order, *TBL*'s message involves the restoration of the national moral order. This is especially true of Season 14, which has made "fighting childhood obesity" its explicit cause. For the first time, teens are invited to participate on the show (albeit in a very different capacity). On each episode viewers are invited to join the fight against childhood obesity, and challenged to join the contestants in their effort to be a part of a healthier America. Health takes on patriotic overtones, with frequent suggestions that physical fitness is a contribution to nation building. The close connection between national pride and bodily health is expressed in Figure 13, showing an ad for Season 14, featuring the trainers who are "back to change lives and inspire a nation."

13—Ad for Season 14

Similarly to *The Exorcist*, *TBL* is structured around the project of taming the desiring body. Both Regan and the contestants on *TBL* must be disciplined and socialized. As mentioned earlier, this state of possession makes Regan become sexually voracious and very violent. The Father's mission is to liberate the pure and chaste (read: socially proper) girl trapped inside the hypersexual and bloody possessed (read: abject) body. Just as Father Damien is in a literal battle against Regan's possessed body, so, too, are the trainers in a literal battle to transform the bodies and appetites of the contestants. Differently than *The Exorcist*, the reality TV show conceals this battle as a positive life intervention on behalf of each contestant.

The third episode offers a clear illustration of the extent to which *TBL* represents the contestant's hunger as abject, horrific, and something that must be disciplined. The contestants compete in a "Childhood Obesity Trivia Quiz," where the teams answer a series of multiple-choice questions on a variety of statistics relating to the prevalence of obesity in children. The punishment for the losing team is to be locked in a room (called "The Junk Room") filled with various junk foods for four-and-a-half hours a day for one entire week.

14—Junk Room 1

15—Junk Room 2

Figures 14 and 15 show the interior of the junk room: a dark-lit, neon space filled with displays of fast food—the very thing the show has told us the contestants are unable to resist. This is their punishment because they are being forced into a situation where the temptation will be too strong to deny. Since success of the show is determined by a team's percentage of weight loss, the idea is that they will eat and therefore not lose weight. A countdown clock is installed in the junk (Figure 15) and the safe-style door that is used to lock them in. The team panics throughout the episode about having to face this temptation. In a similar manner to *The Exorcist*'s portrayal of Regan, the contestants on *TBL* are represented as having a desire for junk food that they cannot control.

The Junk Room concept establishes a direct connection between the consumption of junk food (binge eating) and the consumption of media (binge watching).[19] It's a room structured to induce laziness and lack of willpower among the contestants, as if to suggest they can't resist lounging front of the television, stuffing their faces with garbage. This connection between TV and junk food implicates the viewer of *TBL* in the picture of abject lifestyles portrayed on the show, and works to reinforce the ambivalent identification of the viewer with the contestant. The viewer of this particular episode is watching the overweight contestants give free rein to their

---

[19] Binge watching is becoming an increasingly mainstream behavior across viewing platforms, as suggested by studies like TiVo's Spring 2014 Binge-Viewing Survey, which reported the preferences of TiVo users: "with 91 percent of the 15,196 survey respondents reporting binge-viewing as common viewing behavior, binging is firmly established as the preferred method of consuming entertainment content. In fact, 40 percent of respondents had binged within a week and 69 percent had binged within a month of the survey" (TiVo Research and Analytics 2014). While the high rates in this survey may in part be a reflection of the "viewing type" that tends to subscribe for TiVo's on-demand services, these findings are nonetheless valuable for thinking about how the viewing landscape is shifting.

“food addiction” while she herself engages in activity that is now explicitly coded as a vice.[20] The structure involved in the viewing of the Junk Room episode brings new meaning to my suggestion, that finding vomiting funny or endearing is one expression of ambivalence toward the abject. Not only does the viewer of the Junk Room episode identify with the self-disgust expressed by the contestants on the show, but she also is put in a position where she must recognize elements of herself in the abject images onscreen.

Whereas *The Exorcist* relies on the spectator’s ambivalence toward visual images of the abjected female body in order to deliver its moral message to the viewer, we might say that *TBL* relies on the spectator’s ambivalence toward visual images of abject desire to consume. The film portrays the overt sexuality of Regan’s possession as both disgusting and appealing (1993, 36-7), whereas the show portrays the act of consuming food and TV watching as both appealing and disgusting. The abject on *TBL*, then, assigns an ambivalent status to the very act of spectatorship.

Creed, again, drawing on Kristeva’s discussion of ritual and the abject, describes the influence of the film’s visual images on its audience: “*The Exorcist* is not unlike a ‘ritual’ of purification in that it permits the spectator to wallow vicariously in normally taboo forms of behavior before restoring order. This, of course, is a central appeal of the horror film; what is different about *The Exorcist* is its graphic association of the monstrous with the feminine body” (37). Differently than the film, “wallowing” operates on multiple levels on *TBL*. The viewer engages vicariously in a taboo form of behavior before restoring order, yet the genre (reality TV)

[20] Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) examines the connection between advertising images, women’s perception of their own bodies, and virture/vice in great depth within a Foucauldian genealogical analysis of advertising images.

and the content of the episode (binge eating and watching) turn the ambivalence back toward the self-perception of the viewer.

In the next chapter I consider the limits of viewer investment with regard to *TBL*. Is there an extreme boundary of imagery that severs emotional connections to the show? Is there an authoritative voice that has the ability to call *TBL*'s positive image into question? What role do audiences themselves play in the rupture of ties to *TBL*?

CHAPTER 5: THE LIMITS OF VIEWER INVESTMENT

In Chapter 4, I examined how abject imagery contributes to viewer investment in horror film and *The Biggest Loser* (*TBL*). I now turn to the relationship between abject images and viewer divestment in *TBL* by using a combination of social listening strategies, digital ethnography, and social media analytics to study audience reactions to the Season 15 finale. When Rachel Frederickson earned the title of "Biggest Loser" in February 2014, dropping to just over 100 pounds from her starting weight of 260, controversy ensued over whether she had lost too much weight. Since February, Rachel has made appearances on talk shows to show off her new healthy weight (most recently, an April 2014 edition of *US Weekly* showed off Rachel's new +25-pound frame) and *TBL* has been subject to serious criticism from the press and its own trainers. Jillian Michaels has been vocal about her opinion of the Season 15 situation, criticizing the producers of the show for permitting drastic weight loss, and cited the controversy as a major reason motivating her decision to not return for Season 16.

I chose to investigate conversation about Rachel's win for four reasons. First, the story's polarizing effect took me by surprise. The tone of conversation reached a much higher level of emotional intensity than I had previously seen over the course of my research on *TBL*'s audience, and I was eager to see what insights research might reveal. What was driving the passion on both sides? And why hadn't the winners of past seasons elicited this kind of response? Second, the kinds of ideas and beliefs being discussed by viewers were relevant to my philosophical interest in the show and to the scope of the present research. These were the interconnected concepts of health, moral responsibility, and normativity. Third, the rich sample of viewer responses was

optimal for analysis: the volume of online engagement that coincided with the finale's viewership (at 7.4 million total viewers, the finale achieved the highest rating since the season premiered in October 2013), which increased my chances of finding "real time" viewer reactions to the broadcast. My experience working in entertainment marketing as an audience analyst has underscored that "real time" comments tend to yield deep insights. Finally, Rachel's win was a case where abjection broke the spell of viewer investment in *TBL*, presenting a fascinating challenge to my analogical use of Barabara Creed's theory presented in Chapter 4.

For these four reasons (again, the intensity of the emotional response, the conceptual and topical relevance to the present study, the richness of the qualitative data sample, and the unexpected challenge it posed) I saw conversation about Rachel's win as an opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with one present-day discourse about media representations of bodies. It is a concrete, contextually specific manifestation of how the "Unhealthy" body challenges ethics, politics, and morality.

I begin by analyzing online conversation about the February 5 finale of *TBL* Season 15 with the aim of gaining insight on viewers' emotional responses to the episode. I lay out major themes, trends, and emotions expressed by audiences in a summary format to provide reference points for my engagement with Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed in the second and third parts of this chapter.

I continue by arguing that the audience's response to Rachel Frederickson's win is a case where the analogy between horror film and *TBL* isn't applicable, posing a challenge to Barbara Creed's theory of viewer investment. I use this failure to reflect on the limitations of applying Creed's reading of Julia Kristeva to the present project, touching on conceptual obstacles and

contextual differences, with a particular emphasis on how TV media is consumed in our present. What behaviors distinguish viewership in our present? What are the social, psychological or political forces driving the desire to watch TV?

I then return to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and a selection of other texts to articulate my own conceptual framework that accounts for the relationship between abject imagery and viewer divestment. I suggest that while abject imagery will always function as a trigger for viewer reactions, the nature of viewership has increasingly shifted from I to We. The conversation that once surrounded viewing experiences will continue to merge with the act of viewing, and this truth should be reflected in theoretical engagements with popular media.

Research Methods and Process

My research process was carried out in three phases: (1) digital fieldwork; (2) qualitative data analysis; and (3) quantitative data analysis.

Digital Fieldwork

Digital fieldwork[21] is the process of documenting online discussions, behavior, and interactions within and between particular interest/fan groups. For this chapter I carried out a manual collection of organic comments (meaning those authored by non-sponsored users, and unrelated to official campaigns or advertising) posted online that mentioned Rachel Frederickson

[21] As developed by marketing professionals and academics from foundational texts in sociology and ethnography, such as Durkheim 1966. See Mariampolski 2001 and 2006. Also consult Horst and Miller (Eds.) 2012.

directly, or that were posted as a response to press coverage of Rachel's win, over a one-month period (February – March 2014). Additionally, I recorded headlines and relevant quotes from major news publications and popular blogs from this same period of time.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis, for this chapter, consisted of manually sorting phase 1 data by similar sentiment, opinion, and behavior. The result was a breakdown of the dominant opinions, sentiment, and reactions to the topic being discussed. I cross-referenced this breakdown with conclusions from my quantitative data analysis to verify that the results agreed with one another. This was especially important for verifying that recurring ideas corresponded to the list of "top terms" (see below). I inserted comments throughout this chapter (see the italicized quotes beneath sub-headings) in order to offer concrete references to the conversation being analyzed. Unless otherwise noted, each of these comments is representative of a reaction, emotion, or opinion shared by a significant portion of those engaging in online discussion. The placement of the comments reflects the content of the paragraph.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was carried out independently from the previous two, used Netbase Insight Composer, a powerful social monitoring tool that employs natural language processing technology to analyze conversations from millions of (public) online sources and social networks, including Twitter and Facebook. I used this resource to generate of list of top

terms appearing in conversation, a general breakdown of online sentiment (positive and negative), demographic insights, and a record of conversation volume over time.

Limitations

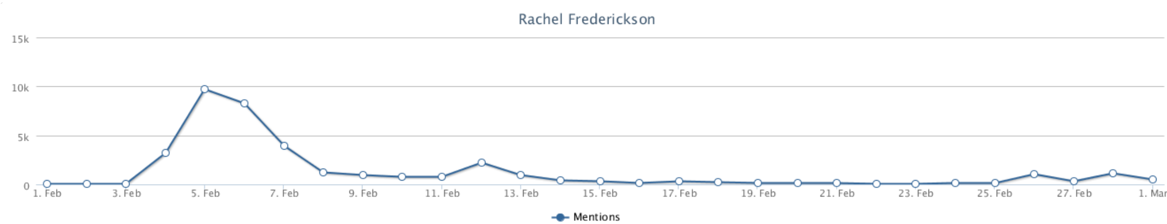
While the social monitoring tool was instrumental in gaining a "bird's-eye view" of the online landscape, it presented limitations in terms of gauging complex viewer emotions and reactions. Manual data collection and manual processing were my primary resources for arriving at nuanced audience insights. For this reason, the quantification of "sentiment" obtained through Netbase Insight Composer was used to describe the more general characteristics of the overall conversation. Additionally, the platform does not offer access to Google products or sites such as Google+ and YouTube. Because a very large portion of online conversation occurred on YouTube, I supplemented my quantitative analysis with conclusions obtained through qualitative research.

Listening to the Audience

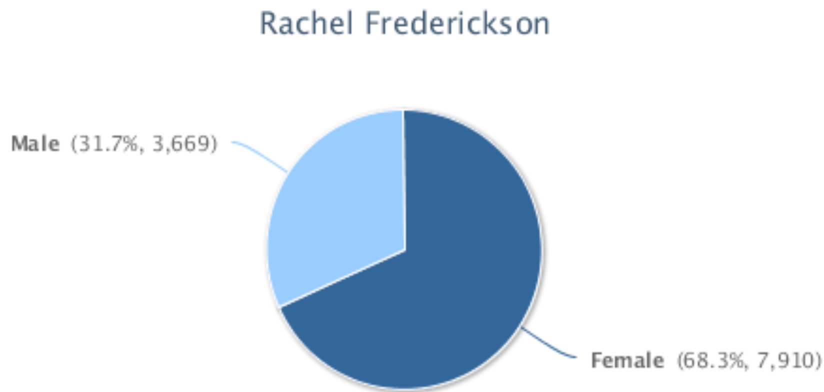
In this section I analyze online conversation about the February 5 finale of *TBL* Season 15, examining reactions to Rachel Frederickson's win with the aim of gaining insight on viewers' emotional responses to the show. I lay out major themes, trends, and emotions expressed by audiences in a summary format to provide reference points for my engagement with Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed in the second and third parts of this chapter.

A bird's eye view: social media analytics

My analysis covers online conversation about Rachel Frederickson in the month following the Season 15 finale. Buzz for Rachel Frederickson peaked on February 5 (the night of the broadcast) with over 10K mentions, and sustained mainstream engagement for nearly two weeks. Press and media coverage of the "controversy" was persistent, leading the finale to become the focus of a widespread public debate on Rachel's "health" and *TBL*'s integrity.



16—Social Buzz Graph (data obtained through primary research)



17—Pie chart showing gender breakdown (data obtained through primary research)

Conversations occurred on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, in the comment sections of YouTube, and in online wellness-focused forums, and saw the highest engagement from women:

(Figure 17) 69.1%—which is to be expected, seeing as *TBL* tends to be most popular with female viewers 18-49. Moreover, this gender breakdown is consistent with social media habits of reality TV viewers. According to a recent Nielsen study, 65% of people tweeting about reality TV series are women, and 75% are under 35 (NielsenSocial 2014).

Overview of conversation sentiment

> ***"I loved cheering Rachel and wanted her to win. I was sad to see how thin she got. I saw the shock on the trainers faces when they saw her." (Facebook Comment, 2/5/14)*** [22]
>
> ***"She looked very sick I actually had a hard time looking at her! there was nothing left of her. All I see is bones sticking out of her." (Facebook Comment, 2/5/14)***

Viewers had strong emotional reactions to Rachel's "body reveal," as suggested by the conversation's sentiment breakdown, which was 42.6% negative and 57.4% positive (Figures 18 and 19). The negative comments included: (1) expressions of shock, disgust, outrage, and sadness; (2) speculations on the underlying medical and psychological conditions leading to the weight loss; (3) accusations of anorexia and bulimia; and (4) criticism of and blame placing on *TBL* for not taking measures to prevent extreme weight loss.

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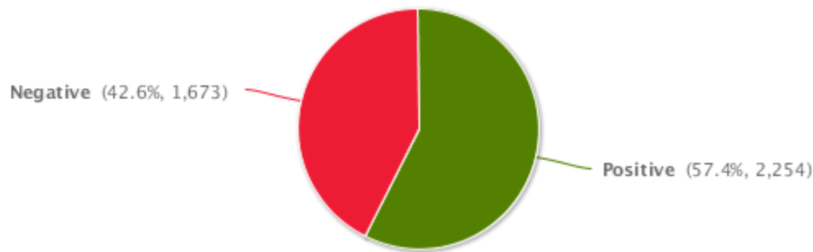
[22] To respect the anonymity and privacy of the social media users who authored the comments included in this chapter (italicized quotes beneath sub-headings), the citation format has been limited to the date and platform on which the comments occurred (included with each comment). If the reader of this dissertation is interested in obtaining more information on the source of these comments, please send a request to the author at juliana.lewis@vanderbilt.edu.

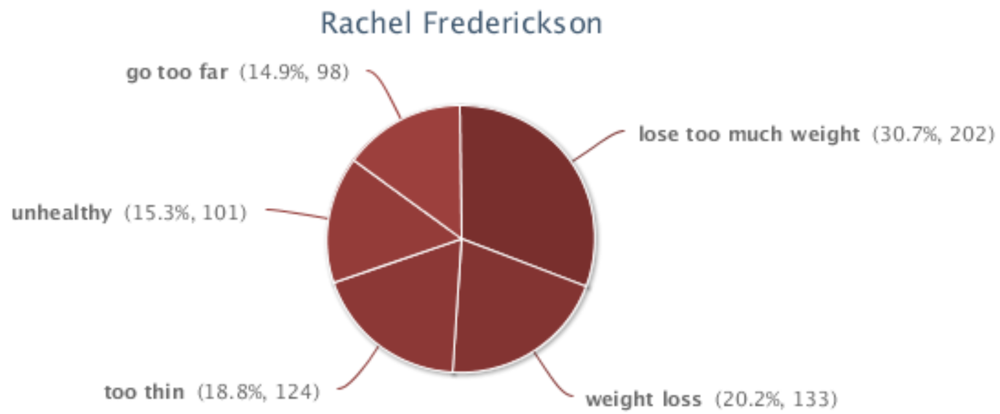


18—Pie chart showing sentiment breakdown (data obtained through primary research)

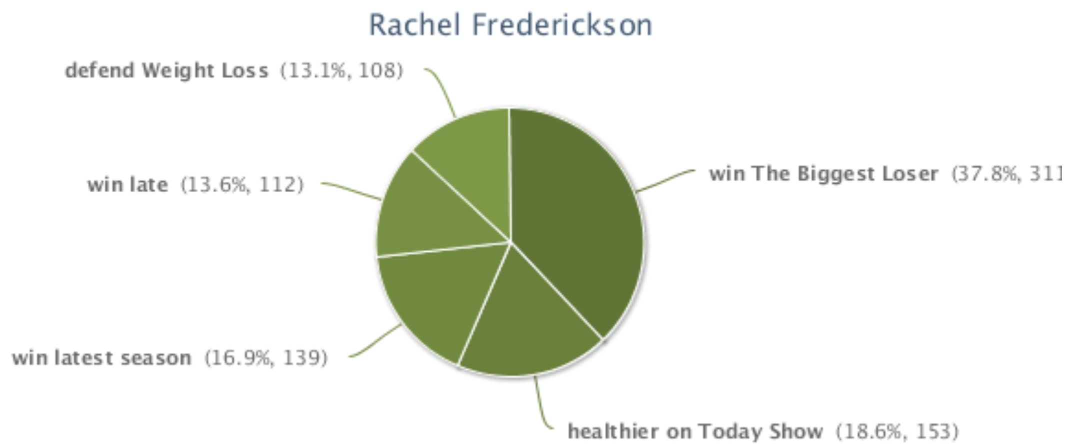
19—Word cloud showing negative and positive terms (data obtained through primary research)

The top phrases occurring in negative comments (Figure 20) were: “going too far,” “too thin,” “losing too much weight,” and “unhealthy.” The positive comments included fans of the show congratulating Rachel on her win; fans defending Rachel’s win; and simple expressions of

excitement about the Season 15 finale. The top phrases occurring in positive comments (Figure 21) included variations on "winner" and "deserving to win." Following Rachel's appearance on the *Today Show*, this list expanded to include "looking healthier."



20—Pie chart showing breakdown of negative conversation (data obtained through primary research)



21—Pie chart showing breakdown of positive conversation (data obtained through primary research)

Sadness and disgust

"What she did to lose that much weight (after they left the farm) was unhealthy and sends a bad message. I have to believe that's why Jillian and Bob were shocked." (Yahoo! TV Comment, 2/8/14)

"Even Jillian looked mortified and Bob when Rachel walked out! She is NOT athletic anymore...she looks underweight." (Low Carb Friends Comment, 2/4/14)

Dedicated female fans of *TBL* (many of whom had been rooting for Rachel to win) were the primary group to voice feelings of sadness and disappointment. This was not what "they expected" to see on their favorite show, which (prior to this win) was viewed as a reliable source of uplifting narratives featuring highly relatable individuals. Expressions of disgust were most prominent among individuals who weren't watching the finale in real time, but were exposed to online clips of Rachel's reveal as a result of the press/social media frenzy. A portion of both groups (female fans and late joiners) reported they had a hard time looking at the screen.

Authorized criticism

"The look on the trainers faces tell the whole story." (YouTube Comment, 2/4/14)

Cameras paid considerable attention to the reactions of the studio audience attending the finale, exposing viewers nationwide to the crowd's shocked expressions, to the reactions of the other contestants, and to the visibly upset faces of celebrity trainers Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels. Stills of the trainers, faces in this moment quickly achieved a viral status thanks to fan sharingon social media, a flood of posts and re-tweets on Twitter, and coverage from popular gossip blogs. Active sharing of clips, links, and images on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr led to an expanded awareness of and engagement with news that the too-skinny contestant shocked the audience, the other contestants, and the trainers Bob and Jillian.

22 – Bob and Jillian (Bartley 2014, 38:02)

The effects of these reports were almost immediately discernable in conversation about the show. Expressions of sadness and disgust were coupled with references to the facial expressions of the live studio audience, the trainers, and the other contestants. This recurring trend suggests audiences felt authorized to criticize and express disgust since Bob and Jillian (widely recognized as spokespeople for the series) disapproved of Rachel's appearance. In the logic of the conversation, Bob and Jillian's shocked faces functioned as evidence that there was something wrong with Rachel's appearance, justifying criticism of Rachel and/or *The Biggest Loser.*

Death and Dying

> ***"When she revealed, I thought of two words: Crypt Keeper." (E! Online Comment, 2/11/14)***
>
> ***"When I saw Rachel's arms, they looked like the arms of a holocaust victim, not a strong athlete." (MyFitnessPal Forum Comment, 2/7/14)***

References to death imagery, sickness, and dying were common within criticism of Rachel for having lost too much weight. The most frequent types of perceptions surrounding the theme of Rachel as "wasting away" described Rachel as skin and bones, a skeleton, aging, or evoked starvation-related imagery such a "holocaust victim." Comparisons to singer and drummer Karen Carpenter (who suffered from anorexia and eventually died of heart failure in 1983) were also frequent among older audiences.

Diagnosing Rachel

> ***" SHE LOOKS OLDER BECAUSE SHE IS ANOREXIC. YOU LOOK OLDER WHEN YOU HAVE ANOREXIA, NOT BECAUSE YOU LOST A LOT OF WEIGHT." (YouTube Comment, 2/5/14)***
>
> ***"She was obsessed with swimming, then with her boyfriend and their breakup, then she was obsessed with eating, and now with losing weight. She needs a shrink, not a diet." (US Magazine Comment, 2/28/14)***
>
> ***"When your head looks bigger than your body, you look anorexic!" (Facebook Comment, 2/5/14)***

A significant portion of audiences fixated on identifying "signs" that Rachel had an eating disorder, required medical attention, or had lost an unhealthy amount of weight. These discussions often turned into heated debates between what I will call "the Diagnosers" and her fans/supporters who did their best to defend Rachel's victory. The Diagnosers were characterized by their tendency to interpret Rachel's body through the lenses of psychology and medicine, and

a high level of confidence in their assessment of the situation. Diagnosers cited specific signs or symptoms as evidence of a medical problem, often following up their statements with the recommendation that Rachel seek out medical and psychological help. These included: (1) the view that Rachel's head was bigger than her body; (2) references to psychological dispositions or problems exhibited by Rachel throughout Season 15; (3) her bony frame; (4) that her face had aged considerably; and (5) her weight (announced at the weigh in).

Not healthy, not ethical

> ***"What she needs to focus on is health. Health is moderation. She should be extremely proud of her accomplishment, but realize the battle for health (mentally and physically) is only half over." (Reddit Comment, 2/5/14)***
>
> ***"Just as there is morbidly obese, there is too skinny. Skinny does not always equal healthy. This is a sick example for young women and girls who think this is beautiful." (Facebook Comment, 2/5/14)***

Audiences felt that Rachel's win sent the "wrong" message because she looked unhealthy. On the surface, this seems like a simple situation of loyal fans feeling let down by a brand they trusted. Over its fifteen seasons, marketing and PR for *TBL* has positioned the show as a get healthy source of inspiration and an active player in the fight to improve eating habits in the United States. However, as we saw in the last chapter, viewer investment in the show is a complex and non-uniform phenomenon. Through research, I uncovered that this perception was rooted in pre-existing notions of what bodies on TV are supposed to "do." In the context of the show, there is a belief that contestants' bodies are examples of striving to ward off illness.

At all stages of the competition, the contestants' bodies represent a praiseworthy moral endeavor because they acknowledge their sickness and are shown actively "healing." However,

until the Season 15 finale, there had been no "skinny" winners. All contestants and winners of all past seasons had bodies perceived as still "in the healing process," which is to say they still appeared to have weight to lose.

Pushing Kristeva Beyond Creed

In this section I argue that the audience's response to Rachel Frederickson's win is a case where the analogy between horror film and *TBL* isn't applicable, posing a challenge to Barbara Creed's theory of viewer investment. I use this failure to reflect on the limitations of applying Creed's reading of Julia Kristeva to the present project, touching on conceptual obstacles and contextual differences, with an emphasis on how and why TV media is consumed in our present. I conclude the section by considering critical responses to Creed in the field of feminist film theory.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Creed focuses on "images of abjection" in horror film, analyzing the process by which a particular character or element comes to be represented as abject. Decaying corpses and wounded flesh are examples of this type of image (1993, 10). That a viewer chooses to watch corpses and wounded flesh onscreen "signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/ being filled with terror/ desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity […] to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat)" (10). For Creed, Kristeva's theory of abjection offers media scholars a vocabulary for articulating the social/psychological

basis of the genre's popularity. Horror films present the viewer with a "safe space" for coming in close contact with social excess, or that which we are "forbidden" to look at.

Identifying the need for a new framework

Chapter 4's conceptual framework used Creed's insights into horror film to achieve a deep understanding of viewer investment in certain aspects of *TBL*, thus demonstrating the broad descriptive potential of specific concepts and interpretive methods developed in *The Monstrous Feminine.* The vocabulary of abjection and ambivalence proved a successful strategy for getting at the psychological/social foundation of viewer interest in watching contestants struggle through grueling workouts, express emotional pain, and even come close to fainting. However, the framework I used in Chapter 4 is insufficient for achieving the same kind of foundational account of audience reactions to Rachel's Season 15 win. It's worth noting that the challenge to Creed is largely due to major changes that have taken place in the way we watch television and movies since *The Monster Feminine* was published.

There are three fundamental reasons why a new framework is required:

(1) <u>Not equipped to account for divestment</u>

A large number of viewers divested from the show: fans became non-fans and previously loyal fans explicitly stated they would not watch Season 16 of *TBL*, citing Rachel's win as their primary reason. Since Creed's analysis in *The Monstrous Feminine* (and, as a result, my analysis in Chapter 4) presupposes viewer interest in a genre, film, or type of story, it is necessarily an incomplete resource for reflecting on a situation

characterized by loss of interest. While the framework might be useful for understanding why audiences shared clips of the “frighteningly” thin contestant, it can’t do the same for understanding the widespread criticism of the show.

(2) Not equipped to account for social forms of viewership

Creed’s analysis presupposes a personal notion of viewership that applies to individuals. Even if social norms come into play, viewer investment is understood in terms of internal psychological and behavioral phenomena. Rachel’s win, however, requires a social conception of viewership that is not confined to individual viewers. The pop cultural event status of the finale lead viewers to engage in online conversation about the show as it was occurring.

(3) Not equipped to account for multi-platform consumption of media

The way viewers watched the Season 15 finale is characteristic of present-day media consumption, which continues to shift away from traditional television viewing toward a multi-screen, multi-platform, and socially connected mode of consumption. When a show, sporting event, or live broadcast receives a high rating, this fact tends to be reflected in online conversation. At its height, mainstream passion for TV media becomes a cultural event that viewers want to be “there” for, and which they are driven to discuss in real time. Fan-making of clips, GIFs and stills are also common behaviors in response to “must see” TV events, exposing a wide

> public to pieces of the full episode or event, and further expanding participants in real time online conversation. Fan engagement with the 2014 World Cup and the Netflix release of House of Cards Season 2 are recent examples of large-scale chain reactions sparked by a TV/online media with cultural event status.

These three points do not imply the need for an "extreme makeover" that does away with all of Creed's insights. Rather, they ask that Creed's Kristevan framework receive an update that accounts for major changes in present-day media consumption, and conceive of "viewer investment" as a fluid and fragile mode of engagement. More specifically, a robust account of viewer reactions to the Season 15 finale requires a theoretical framework that gives equal weight to: (1) the social context in which the viewing takes place; (2) the processes of abjection arising in connection with representations of Rachel's body, always looked at in connection with (1); and (3) the ecosystem of online engagement set in motion by the airing of the finale as a major force shaping viewer perceptions of images onscreen.

Creed and Feminist Film Scholarship

Other feminist film theorists have taken up the project of pushing Kristeva beyond Creed, using *The Monstrous Feminine* as a fruitful starting point for analyzing representations of female or gendered bodies onscreen, updating Creed's theory to reflect new trends in cinema/media, or deepening Creed's insights with new layers of conceptual richness.

One compelling example is Kelly Oliver's *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down: Images of Pregnancy in Popular Culture*, which builds on Creed's analysis of the trope of pregnancy in the horror genre. Through a discussion of more recent films such as *Splice* (2009), Oliver reframes Creed's key insights, and argues that the abject cinematic imagery's appeal lies primarily in depictions of bodies characterized by gender/sex/species ambivalence, particularly where monstrous wombs are concerned (2012, 123). She explains that "[f]or Kristeva, the abject is that which calls borders into question […] The abject is not horrifying because it is gross or slimy, but rather because it is ambiguous, neither one nor the other, neither solid nor liquid […] What is horrifying are the ways in which the monstrous is ambiguous—in-between one body (the mother's) and another (the fetus); in-between human and animal; even in between female and male" (123 -124).

Oliver's "ambivalence as abject" framework is notable for its high degree of flexibility with regard to film genre applications, since it focuses on the viewer's relationship to social boundaries, norms, and customs, rather than on dominant trends in a particular genre. Whereas Creed's starting point is thematic, Oliver grounds her discussion of horror film in the Freudian and linguistic roots of Kristeva's work. In fact, *Knock Me Up, Knock Me Down*'s discussion of abjection is rooted in Oliver's earlier essays on a variety of film genres—including essays on film in *Subjectivity Without Subjects* (1998) and *Noir Anxiety* (2002)—where she examines "what is uncanny and/or horrifying in various films from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair* to various films noir and to Hitchcock" (2002, 123-124).

Of particular interest to the present analysis is the connection between the processes of identification and ambivalent imagery. Although I am not dealing directly with media

representations of the maternal/of pregnancy, the concept of the maternal body is not confined to pregnant women; rather, the mother/maternal/woman/womb is the site through which identity comes to be and boundaries are defined, and which always remains an excessive trigger for ambivalent desire. In particular, the understanding of media representations of the maternal as a trigger for viewer ambivalence underscores its connection to the history of how the female body has been represented in film and on TV.

The Norwegian film theorist Katherine J. Goodnow has also engaged in significant ways with *The Monstrous Feminine*. In her recent book *Kristeva in Focus*, Goodnow criticizes Creed's account of horror film for lacking meaningful depth when it comes to understanding the safe boundaries that establish the very possibility of enjoying abject images in the genre (2010, 50-51). Creed's theory is helpful for gaining a general sense of why people pay to see horror productions, but "to move beyond the general points, one needs to ask: how is it that some films provide more assurance of safety than others? What are the 'safety procedures' that the spectator calls upon? What happens when the usual 'safety procedures' are ripped apart or in some way denied to us?" (51)

In order to move beyond a superficial account of the genre's appeal, Goodnow argues that we need to turn to Kristeva's discussion of coping mechanisms in Christianity and Judaism's rituals of defilement in *Powers of Horror* (52-53). Just as the Judaic and Christian traditions developed specific practices of dealing with defilement, so, too, has the horror film genre: films with mass appeal tend to offer recognizable rituals for ejecting (which is to say processing, making sense of, finding one's bearing) the abject images onscreen (52-53).

Popular horror films tend to provide viewers with tangible references to recognizable social structures and values. For instance, the characters in *Alien* (1979) react to situations with relatable emotions (fear, disgust, hope, and dread), implicitly replicating dominant perceptions on otherness and strangeness. Moreover, they interact with one another in ways that mirror socially acceptable forms of interpersonal relationships (teamwork, worrying about loved ones, bonding). That a viewer is able to relate to the characters in *Alien* provides a safe structure for engaging with images and situations that break boundaries. On the other hand, experimental or envelope-pushing films offer no such structure for digesting abject imagery, offering a "truly horrific" viewing experience that will not appeal to most viewers. For instance, the characters in the 1989 film *Kitchen Sink* lack any form of recognizable emotional response to abnormal/boundary-breaking situations. The lack of reference to social practices and values leaves the viewer stranded, and truly, profoundly horrified (52).

A Social Form of Viewership

In this section I return to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and a selection of other texts to articulate a new conceptual framework with a robust theoretical vocabulary. Additionally, I consider how Goodnow's discussion of "rituals of defilement" come to bear on *TBL*'s viewership.

As discussed in the previous section, in order to make sense of the qualitative findings on viewer reactions to Rachel's win, we need a framework that reflects current trends in how media is consumed; that understands "viewer investment" as a fluid and fragile mode of engagement;

that privileges the social scaffold structuring the viewing; and that takes online word of mouth as a driving force seriously. The Kristevan framework that I am proposing brings these ideas together by providing four conceptual angles from which to analyze part one's qualitative research findings. These angles are intended to function as moving parts that yield meaningful insights on the social and psychological foundation of viewer engagement with media representations of bodies. They are not meant as a formula, but rather as a process for bringing feminist film theory together with qualitative audience research. These are: (1) maintaining the mindset that media is a social laboratory; (2) identifying the visual trigger; (3) uncovering the degree of social influence exerted by "word of mouth"; and (4) identifying the presence or absence of "rituals of defilement."

Media as a social laboratory

Viewership, understood as a form of social behavior, underscores the social and political value of analyzing popular media. Characters or reality TV contestants are never merely elements in entertainment; they are representations of a certain kind of identity. Understanding the impact of a particular media personality, like Rachel, can yield insights into the political potential of media representations. The political dimension of analysis takes on a literal meaning when it comes to *TBL*, since the show has long promoted its health-focused social agenda, branding itself as an ally in the "fight against obesity" in the United States. Images of Rachel's underweight body contributed to the disruption of this politicized identity by sparking serious questions and criticisms from previously loyal fans.

It’s not yet possible (which is to say probably impossible) to determine whether Rachel’s disruption posed a critical challenge or worked to reinforce existing norms governing bodies and individuals, as we are too close to the actual event to see its relationship to broader changes in the social landscape. However, the polarizing nature of online conversation, touched on at the start of this chapter, suggests that Rachel’s body triggered ambivalent desires in audience members.

As Kristeva notes in a 2007 article, “literature and art do not constitute aesthetic décor…But each of these experiences, in its diversity, offers itself as a laboratory for new forms of humanism—or rather, for the new conception of the human that…we have pursued and must continue to pursue” (219-226). Here, Kristeva is reflecting on the task of the intellectual in contributing to the challenge to “normative conscience,” which is to say sparking the desire among the consuming public to think critically about ideology. She suggests that scholars and specialists of literature, and art have a certain kind of ethical imperative to understand the social, political, moral, and sexual import of a work or text. She writes, “in studying literature, for instance, the specialist will experience how language transverses sexual, gender, national, ethnic, religious, and ideological identities. Students of literature, whether open or hostile to psychoanalysis, elaborate a risky, singular, yet shareable understanding of the desire for meaning anchored in the sexual body. The study of literature, of writing, upsets the metaphysical duo reason versus faith” (219-226).

Art and writing as potential avenues for challenging blind adherence to coercive or oppressive values reiterate ideas articulated by Kristeva in earlier writings on revolt. For instance, in *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (US translation released in 2001), she

discusses “intimate revolt,” or the political promise of the creative imagination, as a voice that can awaken “the robotizing and spectacular society” (437) where the “spectacle” is the antithesis of consciousness-raising art, literature, and media. She continues, “Faced with the invasion of the spectacle, we can still contemplate the rebellious potentialities that the imaginary might resuscitate in our inner-most depths” (445).

Kristeva returns to the “so-called society of the spectacle” in *Intimate Revolt* in the chapter “Fantasy and Cinema,” arguing that the saturation of media images in our present has dulled our ability to create our own imaginary, and as a result has discouraged critical thought (2002, 67). She locates the contemporary imaginary in the cinematic image, “the universe of the image that invades us through film and television” (68), which is divided into the “specular” and the “spectacular.” Specular cinema is a category that refers to great art that is able to activate the viewer’s critical engagement with the imaginary, such as films by Godard (69). Spectacular media, however, destroys fantasy by promoting passive viewing; this category includes popular shows and films, “for example, when stereotypical soap opera images reduce the viewer to a passive consumer, or, on the contrary, when so-called auteur cinema pulverizes fantasy” (69).

I do not adhere to Kristeva’s understanding of popular media, which is one moment in her thinking that resonates closely with the negative aesthetics of theorists associated with the Frankfurt School in the mid to late 20th century. Similarly to Adorno’s criticism of jazz,[23] or Kracauer’s “mass ornament” (1995), Kristeva reduces popular culture to its supposedly detrimental effect on the public; the term “spectacular society” implies that mainstream entertainment is the enemy of critical thought, which is to say an ally to totalizing ideologies.

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[23] See for instance Adorno 1973 and 1982.

While it's true that media has been used for things like propaganda, there is no clear basis for rejecting "stereotypical soap operas" as possible sites for stimulating critical thought in the viewer.

Particularly in the present age of interactive viewing, it would be a mistake to make assumptions about a TV show or a film promoting passivity or activity. Visual content and story aren't the only elements shaping the viewing experience. The audience backlash against the *TBL* finale I discuss in this chapter is a striking example of an unprecedented reaction from an audience that, for the previous 14 seasons, had been satisfied and uncritical of its content.

While I agree that popular art, literature, and film often can reinforce existing norms, or can have the effect of numbing the viewer's or reader's desire to engage in critical reflection, this is also a risk for the "higher" forms of representational storytelling. Characterizing popular media as "spectacular" and "robotizing" rejects the possibility of discovering outlets for widespread discussion, questioning, and engagement. In the spirit of great works in feminist media analysis—such as Judith Butler's essay "Gender is Burning" (Butler 1997) and Tania Modleski's work on Hitchcock (2005)—feminist pop culture blogs like The Mary Sue (www.themarysue.com), this framework insists on remaining open to the possibility of finding critical potential in media with mainstream appeal. Beyond the general value of open-minded attitudes toward discovery, openness also leaves room for new insights to emerge from qualitative research on viewer reactions. Beginning from the perspective of a negative aesthetics/politics risks overlooking major trends running throughout the data.

Image as trigger

Rachel’s body was shocking because of her boniness, loose skin, and the perception that she had aged overnight. When Rachel walked onstage (Figures 23 and 24) audiences flinched, looked away, and came to the decision that this was “too much.” As discussed in section one, the top phrases occurring in negative comments were: “going too far,” “too thin,” “losing too much weight,” and “unhealthy.” Research also revealed that references to death imagery, sickness, and dying were common in online conversation. Audiences described Rachel as wasting away, a skeleton, and a holocaust victim, and were horrified by her “aged” face.

23—Rachel's win 1 (Bartley 2014)

24—Rachel's win 2 (Bartley 2014)

At the root of these trends in conversation is a fundamental expression of ambivalence with regard to decay, particularly where that decay involves a woman's body. For Kristeva, physical reactions to things like corpses and injured bodies are related more to life than death. The necessity of rejecting death reveals the fragility of normativity. Rachel's boniness is by no means a full explanation of reactions to the finale, though it did function as the primary trigger for the flood of disgust expressed by audiences.

Boniness and decay don't always function as triggers, for much depends on how the image is presented in a visual frame. In her analysis of Georgia O'Keefe's artwork, Kristeva discusses how the painter's portrayal of bones and skulls are softened through the inclusion of neutralizing images. On the paintings "Cow's Skull with Calico Roses" and "Horse's Skull with

White Rose" (O'Keefe is posing alongside the latter in Figure 25) she writes, "adorned with artificial flowers, these surrealist visions are nothing more or less than a mockery of death wedded to celebration: they neutralize the horror of the former and the splendor of the latter and imply the (serene or sinister?) permanence of artifice" (2011, 242). Kristeva goes on to describe the painting "Red and Pink Rocks and Teeth" as an expression of the artist's ability to infuse life into the inanimate or dead, which "assume the aspect of a living fabric" (242).

The white flower O'Keefe paints onto the canvas works with the skull to convey a new meaning. Beyond the flower's lively symbolism, its placement is somewhat comedic, in that its position resembles a feminine hat or accessory. The impact of the skull would have been entirely different if O'Keefe hadn't included the flower, or if she had painted a live horse head next to its skull—both choices would have emphasized the deadness of the skull, rather than its coexistence with living things, or with artifice.

25—Photo portrait of Georgia O'Keefe posing with "Horse's Skull with White Rose" (Everett 1931)

Throughout Season 15, images of the contestants at their starting weight were used to give viewers a sense of the weight loss that had taken place, presenting each body within a "before and after photo" frame. This thin/fat contrast, which has become a fixture of the visual language of weight loss-related media and advertisements, generally serves as a strategy for heightening excitement and surprise by emphasizing the dramatic transformations that took place at the Biggest Loser Ranch. The "before and after" frames were used during weigh-ins throughout the season, and especially prominent during the finale. Images of obese Rachel were present the entire time she was onstage in the form of a blown-up photograph, and a holographic projection. In this sense, it wasn't simply boniness, but boniness emphasized within a "before

and after" frame. The emphasis on the difference in starting and ending weight (which has always played a major role in the show's narrative structure) further contributed to the drama.

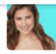
Social buzz as trigger

Weighing the influence of visual triggers and framing effects against the power of word of mouth, social buzz, and press coverage is of paramount importance to understanding what forces are driving audience reactions. As I showed at the beginning of this chapter, conversation volume spiked in response to press attention to the finale, including increased tweets and Facebook posts. Exerting the greatest influence on audience reactions were stills of the trainers Bob and Jillian's facial expressions. In one sense, this image forms part of the visual frame that contributes to perceptions of Rachel's body. However, my analysis of conversation revealed that the power of this image only emerged when it was taken out of context via fan-made screen grabs, and subsequently shared as "proof" that Rachel's appearance was disturbing. For instance, in Figure 16, a blogger shared the image with her followers with the message, "Jillian Michaels & Bob Harper's reaction to the #BiggestLoser winner's disturbing weight loss says it all" (Benson 2014).

This is one of countless examples of social media communications that worked to establish a dominant interpretation of the photo's meaning. The hands-on style of interacting with this image was more influential than the actual finale in deciding that Bob and Jillian, the trainers widely known as authorities on health and fitness, were horrified. Within minutes of the explosion of shares, the overwhelming majority of gossip blogs concurred that this picture "told the whole story," giving legitimacy to the perception that Rachel's win was upsetting. Within

one day of the finale, news of Rachel's horrifying weight loss spread offline, leading to a veritable media firestorm with morning news shows, late night talk shows, and print magazines quickly following suit.

The image-sharing phenomenon underscores the importance of updating Barbara Creed's framework to include a consideration of social buzz, particularly when the image, show, or film in question becomes a pop cultural event. While abject imagery will always play a role in triggering and sustaining expressions of ambivalence on the part of the audience, the nature of viewership has increasingly shifted from I to We. The desire for an immersive individual viewing experience still lingers among certain moviegoers, but even there the trend is shifting toward a habit of expressing opinions about a film via social media. This trend isn't showing any signs of slowing down: the conversation that once surrounded the viewing experience will continue to merge with the act of viewing.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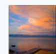
jheinle @jheinle · Feb 5
@kirstinbenson look at Tania's face. She looks absolutely horrified.

26—Jillian and Bob are shocked

Rituals of defilement

Genre and narrative expectations are also powerful elements that shape audience perceptions of images onscreen. As discussed in section 2, Goodnow suggests supplementing Creed's account of horror film with additional insights from Kristeva's ideas on ritual. Just as the Judaic and Christian traditions developed specific practices of dealing with defilement, so, too, has the horror film genre: films with mass appeal tend to offer recognizable rituals for ejecting (which is to say processing) the abject images onscreen (2010, 52-53). Horror fans love the genre for its repeated ability to deliver the experience of transgression within predictable storylines. Thrills are contained within archetypal good versus evil story structures, featuring characters with recognizable values. In other words, audiences expect a particular genre experience prior to seeing a new horror film, and know that they will be encountering abject imagery in a way that resembles their past viewing experiences. In cases where expectations are not met (fan complaints tend to criticize the thrills and ideas, rather than the story), viewer investment in a story does not take place.

For *TBL*, narrative expectations function in a similar way to genre expectations. For its first 14 seasons, the show delivered consistent and reliable narratives of emotional/physical journeys that concluded with a promise that the contestants will continue to invest in health and wellness, and with a show of love and support from the trainers and fellow contestants. As we saw in Chapter 4, the "emotional journey" narrative contextualizes the abject imagery featured in *TBL*. The repetition of this transformation narrative led fans of the show to expect that all new seasons would follow this familiar structure, albeit with new challenges and new faces. Rachel's win broke the familiar structure through a visual disruption (extreme weight loss), a social

disruption (not considered healthy or socially acceptable by the trainers or other fans), and a media firestorm that defined the win as controversial. Viewer divestment in the season resulted from the disruption of the show's own "ritual of defilement."

The contrast that Goodnow draws between *Alien* and *Kitchen Sink* speaks to Rachel's disruption. *Alien* provides a safe (predictable) structure and relatable characters that allow viewers to purify themselves of horrifying alien images, whereas *Kitchen Sink* provides horrifying thrills with no purgative structure, leaving the viewer stranded, and truly, profoundly horrified (Goodnow 2010, 52). A similar distinction can be drawn between Seasons 1-14 and Season 15 of *TBL*. Whereas Seasons 1-14 provided viewers with a narrative structure that contained abject imagery within feel good stories of positive transformation, Season 15 failed to give its viewers a "higher meaning" through which to understand the season's worth of grueling physical workouts. Rachel broke the show's character archetypes by winning the title of Biggest Loser through an "unhealthy" weight loss that was not celebrated by the press, by the trainers, or other viewers. Divestment occurred because the narrative "ritual" was broken.

CONCLUSION

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I am optimistic about the power of philosophical engagements with pop culture to encourage critical reflection on the social and mass mediated forces that structure present-day experience. My optimism, however, is tempered by the recognition that "sparking critical thought" presumes an individual living in a social context that fosters self-expression and education. As bell hooks notes in the introduction to her essay collection *Outlaw Culture,* "Cultural criticism can be an agent for change, educating for critical consciousness in liberatory ways [if] we start with a mind-set and a progressive politics that is fundamentally anti-colonialist, that negates cultural imperialism in all its manifestations" (2008, 7). The act of crossing borders between academic research and pop culture resists forces of oppression and domination by creating "a vital location for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new epistemologies" (7). By way of conclusion, I reflect on how future research on TV audiences might begin from a progressive, anti-imperialist foundation.

Identifying critical potential within TBL *fan communities as a starting point*

In what ways can future research address *Real Fit*'s finding that viewer investment in *The Biggest Loser* (*TBL*) indirectly contributes to social oppression and conservative ideology?

As I suggest in Chapters 2 and 3, *TBL* impacts viewers in a way that is indirectly harmful to society. However, it doesn't follow that we should oppose interest in the show, or go so far as to suggest that it should be taken off air. To cast *TBL* as a force harmful enough to warrant active

intervention would constitute a misunderstanding of how hubs of political and cultural power are maintained over time. There is no causal connection between any single source of authority and the beliefs of a group of individuals—*TBL* alone could not support the mainstream status of pathologizing discourses. Further, there is no way to determine in advance whether severing ties to the show would do more harm than good. Especially given the deep personal relationships that have been formed around the show (see Chapter 3's exploration of *TBL* fandoms)—most of which are developing in unprecedented ways that are entirely disconnected from the show—alternative forms of authority could emerge from within invested audiences, disrupting the ideological impact of *TBL*.

Future research could use *Real Fit*'s ethnographic approach to study the evolution of conversations that occur within fan communities, with an eye to identifying organic voices able to spark discursive shifts. These shifts need not be revolutionary. The worry about individual pathology, following Kelly Oliver (2004) is that it promotes ongoing blindness with regard to institutional and cultural responsibility for social oppression in the United States. For this reason, studying scenarios in which questions about institutions or cultural influence are triggered are perhaps the ideal starting point. Is there a certain context in which fans are most likely to call their basic assumptions on health and weight gain into question? Is there a type of conversation mood or tone that is most conducive to asking questions on fan forums? What types of fans are most successful in encouraging their fellow community members to consider alternative ways of talking about bodily health?

Hermeneutical gaps as a starting point

The methodological limitations I encountered while writing *Real Fit* would also provide a fruitful starting point for generating future projects. By opting to use digital ethnography and social listening (discussed in detail in the Introduction and Chapter 3) I limited myself to text, images, and other forms of recognizable expression and dialogue. Asking, "what is not being said?" and "who is not talking?" could serve as a strategy for both supplementing *Real Fit*'s method, and additionally may provide an avenue for assessing the alienating effects of a TV program. What could we learn by comparing styles of engagement among invested viewers who occupy different types of socio-economic contexts? To what extent is silence on the part of viewers determined by the presence of violence in the historical context of particular social positions?

A combination of offline ethnographic field work and sociological analysis would be crucial for identifying what kinds of attitudes are present among viewers who don't engage online, or who aren't talking about *TBL*. Offline fieldwork could be used as an opportunity for researchers to identify alternative (non written, non-digital) form of expression. Findings from the field would provide a basis for conducting a national or state-level survey of audiences, yielding a map-based visualization of patterns of active engagement vs. silence among people who watch *TBL*.

José Medina's work on social silences would be a helpful point of reference for the epistemic orientation of the fieldwork/survey methodology. Medina argues that we need to predicate hermeneutical gaps of the context of individual experience and relationships between individuals, with a greater plurality than is offered by Miranda Fricker's contextualism (Medina 2012, 206). Hermeneutical gaps, or insensitivities, understood in the context of social listening,

can be thought of as the cultural blind spots that prevent us from hearing, seeing, or sensing non-normative communicative acts (207). Medina's call to action provides a strategy for overcoming the epistemic limitations of digital fieldwork mentioned above. In order to pick up on non-dominant voices, and to understand non-normative forms of communication, "it is crucial to develop a *hermeneutical sensibility with respect to embryonic and inchoate attempts at communicating* about experiences that do not yet have standard formulations" (209).

Employing digital fieldwork to study TV audiences, in future projects, could begin by asking the researchers to develop an attunement toward incoherence (one type of hermeneutical sensibility). The key, as Medina notes in *The Epistemology of Resistance,* is to develop a resistant imagination as a way to counteract stigmatizing ways of imagining (2013, 25-6). Building on the Deweyan experimentalist model, Medina recommends imaginative and experiential work that leads to productive friction or dissent that yields alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and engaging (6). Taking this recommendation seriously in research on TV viewership may mean that digital fieldwork should include a preliminary (offline) period of engagement. Offline immersion would provide an opportunity to learn about the range of communication styles present among audience members, so as to be able to pick up on nuances present in their online engagement.

An opening

Future projects on viewership conducted from a philosophical perspective should aim to bring unheard voices into academic scholarship. My experience conducting research on *Real Fit* provided me with a grasp of the vast landscape of human expression. While carrying out the

fieldwork, I would regularly find myself surprised by the online worlds of meaning that unfolded before me. Being caught off guard by new voices has had a deep impact on my thinking, and on my ideas for future projects. What began as frustration with qualitative data has developed into an appreciation for the range of communication styles through which TV audiences convey their points of view, their pleasures, and their pains.

It is precisely because I will never have a complete grasp on the constantly multiplying ways that humans interact with visual media that I am driven to continue exploring the affective life of the viewer.

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