Representations of the Fat Male Body on *The Biggest Loser*

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> [G]iven that normative heterosexuality is not the only regulatory regime operative in the production of bodily contours or setting the limits to bodily intelligibility, it makes sense to ask what other regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies (Butler, 1993, p. 17).

The seventeenth season of *The Biggest Loser*, NBC's weight-loss makeover show, premiered on January 4, 2016, and aired over a two-month period. The first episode introduces sixteen contestants, ranging in weight from 232 pounds to 348 pounds, who spend up to three months at a California ranch competing to lose the highest percentage of weight to win a $250,000 cash prize and be crowned 'the biggest loser.' Weekly episodes follow a predictable format, beginning with a 'temptation' that tests the players' will-power in relation to food, money, and other indulgences, and ending with a dramatic public 'weigh-in' on two oversized, side-by-side Biggest Loser Scales, when contestants vote on which one of the two players with the lowest percentage of weight-loss will be eliminated from the show. These players continue their weight-loss journeys at home to compete for a smaller prize, but are reunited with remaining contestants at the season's live finale (Silverman et al., 2016).

In this paper, I analyze representations of the fat[1] male body on *The Biggest Loser (TBL)* through a post-structuralist feminist lens. Media studies scholar Dr. Jayne Raisborough (2014) argues that although reality television is often "denigrated as 'trash' television," it should be given serious academic attention "because media representations *matter*" (p. 162; emphasis in original). As a cultural text, she contends, makeover television "can tell us a great deal about social organizations and ideologies" (p. 157). More than simply descriptive, however, makeover television can be seen "as 'a form of public pedagogy' that *socializes* as it informs" (Evans, as cited in Raisborough, 2014, p. 158; emphasis in original). While Evans referred to citizenship training in media discourses of health and morality, I contend that *TBL* tacitly instructs its participants and audience in the gender norms of Western society, or the "ideals and rules of proper and improper masculinity and femininity" according to traditional binary thought (Butler, 1990, p. xxiii). Thus, as male contestants on *TBL* transform their bodies from fat to thin, they are implicitly represented as striving toward an idealized masculine embodiment in order to 'do' gender in a hegemonically masculine way. Although this transformation has the potential to destabilize the two-sex binary that structures Western culture by exposing the labour required to uphold the "fiction of 'sex'" (Butler, 1990, p. 35), I argue that the corrective discourse of *TBL* counters such a reading through its promotion of an 'always already' male identity which, having been obscured by fat, is enhanced—rather than created—through the show's makeover process.

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[1] I use the word 'fat' in accordance with the practice of size acceptance scholars and activists, in keeping with the political project of reclaiming the term as the preferred neutral descriptor. As Wann (2009) notes in the foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, "[t]here is nothing negative or rude in the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there; using the word *fat* as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice" (p. xii).

Gender as a Regulative Norm

Western societies are founded on a binary gender system, or the belief in the idea of two socially constructed genders (masculine and feminine) that follow from two biologically-defined sexes (male and female). Gender theorist Judith Butler (1990), however, critiques this sex/gender distinction. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, she posits that gender is inscribed onto the surface of the body "through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 179; emphasis in original), which over time come to "produce the effect of an internal core or substance" (p. 173) or, in other words, make the notion of a pre-inscriptive sex seem natural—so natural, in fact, that the "social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief" (p. 179). According to Butler (1990), gender does not flow from sex (contrary to mainstream understandings of it as such), but rather, gender discursively produces and naturalizes the idea of an 'innate' sex. She writes, "perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (1990, pp. 9-10). For Butler, then, 'biological' sex cannot be distinguished from 'social' gender—both are socially constructed.

In Western society, Butler (1990) contends, gender is the source of a regulatory regime in which performances are expected to conform to the male/female binary; bodies that do not fit into either gender fall outside the boundaries of what is properly considered human, constituting "the domain of the dehumanized and the abject" (p. 142). Covino (2004) defines the *abject* as "comprised by those parts of us that we refuse, those aspects of our embodied being that we do not welcome as part of the constitution of ourselves as subjects, as part of the constitution of our identities" (p. 4). In this process of abjection, Butler (1990) explains, the self repudiates some aspect of their identity, labelling it as "not-me" (p. 169). Whatever has been expelled becomes the Other, and because of its otherness, becomes the object of the self's repulsion. This self/Other binarism, Butler (1990) explains, occurs in sexism, homophobia, and racism (p. 170), and by extension, I would argue, in fatphobia. Thus, fat bodies are symbolic of the abject.

Gender and sexuality scholar Dr. Francis Ray White (2014) posits that, "surely a good part of the abject horror with which fat bodies of any gender are regarded resides in the way they muddy the supposedly discrete division between male and female" (p. 96). While many researchers have suggested that fatness, for men, can be feminizing, Bell and McNaughton (2007) argue that fatness does not uniformly undermine masculinity, as size in some contexts is equated with power and hypermasculinity, as in professional football or black rap culture. "Rather than attempting to resolve the debates over whether fatness enhances or undermines gender identity and presentation," White (2014) suggests, we might "entertain the idea that fat is non-normatively gendered – not in that it shifts gender one way or the other, but that it shifts it away from binary categorization altogether" (p. 96). In a system of compulsory heterosexuality "which has cultural survival as its end" (Butler, 1990, p. 177), gender depends upon the fabrication that it is knowable, unchangeable, and exclusively binary. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note that “adherence to gender norms helps to produce a myth of heterosexuality. When men are ‘masculine’ there are fewer…questions about their participation in…the ‘normal’ sexuality order” (p. 7). Accordingly, the threat to gender certainty posed by fat embodiment represents a considerable danger to a heteronormative system.

The ‘Before’ Body

The before-and-after narrative of most weight-loss makeover shows exposes societal beliefs about the kind of bodies deemed to require intervention, and those deemed to be “the ideal and valued result” of such intervention (Raisborough, 2014, p. 157). *TBL*’s representational strategies clearly position gender-ambiguous fat bodies on the ‘before’ side of the before/after divide, and normatively-gendered slender bodies on the ‘after’ side.

TBL represents the male contestants as having become fat as a result of the poor diet and lifestyle choices they have made. This theme is emphasized repeatedly. In fact, the opening montage of each episode features a voiceover that says, “You’re desperate to make a change. There’s only one thing that stands in the way—you can’t resist temptation” (Silverman et al., 2016). Shots of open take-out pizza boxes and clips of people eating potato chips mindlessly on the couch in the blue light of the television set reinforce this representation of overconsumption and inactivity. In one episode, Roberto describes himself as “that fat guy sitting down on the couch with soda and chips” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Money Hungry”). In another episode, upon walking into the food fair at a mall, Luis says, “I mean, there’s a reason that we’re big. We’ve fought these food devils for many, many years” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Taste Test”). The show frames fat as proof of laziness and lack of willpower; its discourses ignore the broader contexts for weight gain.

Common to the makeover genre is the use of humiliation to mark the ‘before’ body, the fat body, as in urgent need of intervention (Raisborough, 2014). For example, performances of masculinity that deviate from acceptably ‘masculine’ behaviour or appearance are regulated through “the shaming of gender” (Butler, 1993, p. 238). Conventional signifiers of masculinity according to a binary logic include strength or hardness, both physically and emotionally, and self-control or discipline (Bell & McNaughton, 2007; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009); male players in *TBL* are repeatedly shamed through association with the affective/feminine. For instance, the men are depicted as physically helpless or weak, especially in the first half of the season—Stephen falls off the back of a treadmill, and Roberto slips from a ladder and dangles, helpless, from his harness. In the gym, as Colby hoists a barbell above his head, the trainer, Jen, says, “Colby! Is that a joke? Let’s add some weight to that” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Ready? Set. Auction.”). Similarly, the men are represented as emotionally vulnerable, particularly Rob—who cries in all but the last two episodes—but each of the men are shown crying at least once. The association of fat embodiment with lack of control, long connected with the feminine, is highlighted in *TBL*’s second episode when the contestants meet with the show’s medical ‘expert’ in an autopsy room. Dr. Huizenga dramatically reveals a mountain of sugar symbolizing Colby’s annual sugar intake, then throws a handful of sugar at him while berating him for his food and lifestyle choices. In a similar manner, trainer Dolvett uses denigrating female descriptors to motivate his male players to try harder, yelling at the men running on treadmills in the gym, “C’mon, ladies, let’s pick it up!” and to his boxing partner, “You hit like a girl” (Silverman et al., 2016).

Raisborough (2014) describes confession as “a key moment in all makeover shows” (p. 160); indeed, intimate moments of confession feature prominently in *TBL* as, throughout each episode, the individual contestants describe their thoughts and experiences directly to the camera and, by extension, to the audience. The analogy of confessionals, or “processes of sin and redemption,” occurs as a relation of power between a dominant and submissive partner (Foucault, as cited in Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 13). In the secularized context of *TBL*’s health and fitness discourse, the dominant partners— “those who hear the confession (the audience…) and structure its practices (health and fitness experts)” —set the parameters for redemption of the submissive partner—the one who confesses (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 14). Throughout the season, every single one of *TBL*’s men confesses an inability to perform certain traditionally-gendered roles as directly related to their size. For instance, Colby and his wife confess their struggle with infertility, which doctors say is a result of their weight; Stephen associates his unemployment and inability to financially provide for his family with his appearance; Rob tearfully tells the audience of his doctor’s ominous warning that if he wants to be around to walk his daughter down the aisle, he needs to lose some weight (Silverman et al., 2016). Roberto says of his desire to play ball with his sons, “It breaks my heart that I’m not being the father that I should be. My two boys are out there, playing by themselves. I need to lose weight for my kids, for my wife, for my family” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Makeover Week”). The men describe how losing weight will help them “retake their societal and family roles and responsibilities” (Raisborough, 2014, p. 162). It is the men’s *intention* to hegemonic performances of masculinity that permits “a more benevolent portrayal, and provides access to the expert intervention that follows” (Raisborough, 2014, p. 160). In this way, the ‘before’ body is promoted to the status of ‘becoming thin.’

The ‘Becoming Thin’ Body

The men whose bodies are now ‘becoming thin’ are rewarded “with some respect, dignity, and personhood” in their representation on *TBL* (Raisborough, 2014, p. 163). Their fat is separated from overconsumption and other self-caused lifestyle crimes, and reinterpreted as “marking external evidence of inner dysfunction” (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 579). A portion of each episode of *TBL* is dedicated to depictions of the weekly group therapy sessions; in the first session, the host, Bob, says to the contestants, “What I want you to realize is that it’s not just about weight loss. It’s an emotional journey, too” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Money Hungry”). Rob discusses this theme of psychological malaise underlying the fat ‘condition’ most explicitly:

> It was a gradual gaining of weight, but around 2008 I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I had one operation. A year later I had to have another operation. Then my best friend and mentor in life passed away. I just became numb. I started eating more and more, and I think my relationship with food is just a numbing agent (Silverman et al., 2016, “Taste Test”).

As the men lose weight, they are represented as working toward not only physical ‘health,’ but mental health as well. Near the end of the season, the show’s host, Bob, comments, “I feel like all of them [the men] are on the right track. They’re all working through their emotions. The further they go here [at the ranch], the further they will go with the rest of their lives” (Silverman et al., 2016, “I Got the Power”).

R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity is useful for understanding the ways in which *TBL* men position themselves in relation to others as they work toward an approximation of ideal masculine embodiment. According to this theory, multiple masculinities, influenced by race, class, ability, and sexuality, among other factors, are stratified “into different categories of privilege and power,” thus determining “each man’s ability to wield and benefit from patriarchal power” (Lorber & Moore, 2007, p. 115). Men who experience oppression within this structure embody subordinated and marginalized masculinities while, at the top of this hierarchy, hegemonic masculinity embodies “the currently most honoured way of being a man” in a specific social context (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In contemporary Western society, the ideal or hegemonic male body has been described as “over six feet tall, 180 to 200 pounds, muscular, agile, with straight white teeth…six-pack abs, a full head of hair…broad shoulders and chest, strong-muscular back, clean-shaven, [and] healthy” (Lorber & Moore, 2007, p. 114).

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note the importance of the body “as a means to establish and negotiate social status” (p. 66). We see this on *TBL* where, although the experts occupy marginalized social locations due to their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity—in the seventeenth season, one trainer is female and the other is black, the celebrity chef is female, and the male fashion and hair stylists are coded as gay—in the context of the makeover show, their status as ‘experts’ places them in a social location above that occupied by the men’s abjected ‘before’ bodies. However, as the men’s bodies begin to approach the hegemonic ideal of increased musculature and decreased body fat, they are able to negotiate some small position of power relative to that of the trainers by challenging the advice they dispense. Colby, for instance, refuses to allow “celebrity hair and make-up stylist” Ken Paves to shave his beard for the ‘big reveal’ (Silverman et al., 2016, “Makeover Week”), and, contrary to the direct evidence provided by his trainer and his FitBit (a wireless-enabled physical activity tracker), Richard insists, “I don’t get ahead in the gym. I burn the most calories in the pool” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Hooked on ‘Tronics”). Challenging the knowledge of the experts, then, works to advance the social status of the transforming male contestants.

Issues of race/ethnicity are not directly addressed on the seventeenth season of *TBL*, despite the racial diversity of the show’s cast and contestants. One indirect reference to ethnicity occurs in the eighth episode, when Latino brothers Roberto and Luis are sent home for a week to experience weight-loss in the ‘real world’ (i.e., outside the contained environment of the ranch). After being away from home for over eight weeks, their family celebrates their return with a traditional Mexican feast. Roberto describes the table: “Oh my god. They got chili con carne, guacamole, sour cream, my mom’s pozole in the middle. This beautiful spread of Mexican luxury food…and I’m not eating any of it” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Homeward Bound”). Positioning ‘ethnic’ food as unhealthy and associating it with the shameful habits of the ‘before’ body, in implied contrast to the ‘healthy’ (i.e., ‘non-ethnic’) values taught by the white nutritionists and celebrity chefs back at the ranch, underscores whiteness as both ‘normal’ and normative.

The ‘After’ Body

The makeover process, Covino (2004) argues, can be understood as both “a process of abjection (ridding ourselves of the unwanted)” and “an act of orientation to a welcoming community, populated by clean and proper bodies” (p. 13). This acceptance into an elite community is clear in *TBL*’s “makeover episode.” This episode—a microcosm of the entire season—offers the three remaining male contestants an opportunity to unveil the performatively masculine bodies they have been building over the past two months. Their new slender-yet-muscular frames are accentuated by designer suits and stylish haircuts as they walk down a red carpet to applause and compliments from the show’s host, trainers, and style experts. The show’s host, Bob—a tall, handsome, muscular exemplar of hegemonic masculinity—says, “Colby, I remember on the first night, you said that famous line, ‘You can’t buy thin.’ How does it feel to actually earn it?” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Makeover Week”). By emphasizing that Colby’s hard work is primarily responsible for his dramatic transformation, Bob gives him credit for being a self-made man and, in doing so, affirms his gender credibility. Reactions from the show’s cast and the contestants’ friends and family focusing on the men’s increased (hetero)sexual desirability, recaptured youth and expanded professional opportunities similarly support their rising status. For example, Stephen says, “One of the reasons I came here was I was having a lot of trouble landing the jobs. In sales, it's all about presentation. Now I just feel great, I feel wonderful." The experts chime together, "You look like you're the CEO! Yeah, you look like you're the one doing all the hiring!" (Silverman et al., 2016, "Makeover Week"). It is in this episode that the contestants are represented as having finally achieved 'true' masculinity, as their bodies now resemble normative physical ideals according to the heteronormative sex/gender binary.

Having established the male contestants as 'real men,' *TBL* sustains this representation throughout the remaining episodes of the season. For example, in contrast to the weigh-in segments of the first nine episodes, during which the camera explored the men's abject, shirtless bodies at unnecessary length, in the weigh-ins of the final three episodes, the men are permitted to wear their shirts. In fact, after the makeover episode, the men are never shown without their shirts, presumably to mask the saggy pectorals and rolls of loose skin that are the inevitable result of such rapid, extreme weight loss, but function to undermine the image of idealized masculinity. In this way, the men's "performative accomplishment" of masculinity is preserved (Butler, 1990, p. 179).

(De)stabilizing the Gender Binary on *The Biggest Loser*

When examining media imagery and representations, Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note, it is important to recognize that although the media present a dominant or preferred reading (i.e., "an interpretation in line with what producers of the text desire"), audiences may not read texts in intended ways (p. 73). It is these 'negotiated' or 'resistant' readings of a cultural text that offer the greatest challenge to dominant ideologies.

One alternative reading of *TBL* considers how makeover television showcases the *production* of gender. The extreme weight-loss techniques of *TBL* could thus be read as the literal and explicit fulfillment of Butler's (1990) metaphoric process of normative gender inscription upon the body. This interpretation positions the men as beginning their journey at "those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as 'bodies'" (Butler, 1993, p. 15); it is only their intense diet and exercise efforts, combined with the work of the show's fitness coaches, doctors, nutritionists, and stylists that molds them into the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) point out that maintenance of the hegemonically male body involves a "disciplined stance that truly requires almost unrelenting diet and exercise plans" (p. 83). This reading poses a threat to the stability of the gender binary since it exposes the continual labour required to uphold the fiction of sex, or, quite literally, what makes the man.

Contrary to Butler's theorizing of the body and gender as performative, however, the corrective discourse of the makeover show promotes essentialist notions of gender and identity. According to this preferred narrative, then, the male *TBL* contestant must first be represented as "male…but not masculine," as he works to reclaim his former hegemonic status that was lost to fat (Mosher, as cited in Bell & McNaughton, 2007, p. 124). Through the show's visual rhetoric, the men are represented as *former* athletes or adventurous risk-takers who are hobbled in pursuit of their passions as a result of their weight. For instance, the audience learns that in his younger years, Richard won the first season of *Survivor,* a reality television show in which players, marooned in a remote location, compete to survive against the elements and each other. In video footage from that show, we see a much thinner Richard fishing with a spear in tropical waters. This image is immediately juxtaposed against the home video footage from his audition video, where 'fat' Richard is shown wedged into a restaurant booth, stuffing tacos into his mouth, and the audience is led to see how far he has 'fallen' (Silverman et al., 2016, "The Big Switch").

The idea that the makeover does not create the man but rather it enhances an always already male selfhood is underscored through the men's own understanding of themselves as embodied subjects. Colby states, “I’ve always felt like there was a thin, strong man under me, under all this fat. …I’m ready to reflect how I feel on the inside on the outside” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Makeover Week”). In Richard’s Transformation Moment, he says, “I’ve *always been* an adventurous guy. Now I’m just *more able* to do that. Life is better” (Silverman et al., 2016, “The Big Switch”; emphasis added). Similarly, Rob says, “She [my daughter] has never seen the *real me*. She’s never seen the confident businessman who got it done, and I just want her to see that” (Silverman et al., 2016, “Money Hungry”; emphasis added). All the men in some way voice this idea of an ‘after’ body emerging from *within* the ‘before’ body. Thus, the dominant reading of *TBL* reinforces hegemonic (binary) notions of gender and sex.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the pedagogic function of *TBL* lies not in providing direct advice about food intake or exercise patterns, but rather in the way it represents and circulates ‘common sense’ cultural knowledge about weight/size, gender, and the consequences for failing to conform to these regulatory regimes. Representations of the fat male body on *TBL* are highly problematic because they reinforce conventional understandings of both health and gender, narrowing the spaces available for non-binary performances of gender and ultimately promoting weight-based stigmatization. In conclusion, I echo Glenn, McGannon, and Spence’s (2013) call for “some representational space for ‘the reimagining of people of all sizes [and genders] as part of the fabric of society, who do not necessarily need to be fixed’” (as cited in Raisborough, 2014, p. 163).

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