

Christopher Eng

Professor Ashley Dawson

ENGL 866 Insecure Bodies

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## It's a Fat World After All

### Securing the Spectral Fat Child Body in a Neoliberal Disney State

Intimately felt and embodied, insecurity indexes a complex interplay among multiple affective registers. Explored through the body's relationship to fatness, shame functions as a mode by which fat individuals are to read their own bodies as unhealthy, inferior, and ugly. In addition to shame, guilt is evoked to police behaviors, encouraging individuals to retrospectively evaluate their habits and behaviors as (un)healthy. Both these affects, in no way mutually exclusive, collude with fear, separating out what forms of body demarcate the precarious distinction between life and death. Insecurity connects these affects, among many others, to reframe the fundamental ways in which we relate to our bodies. Engaging with William Wilkerson's claim that biodiscipline has become a form of self-regulation enacted through individual bodily actions, I am interested in exploring how these multiple affective registers of insecurity facilitate the relationship between biodiscipline and neoliberal thought.<sup>1</sup> How do the different discursive strategies frame which issues are capable of signaling feelings of insecurity? Specifically, how do we *feel* and *embody* the widespread materialist insecurities wrought by neoliberal capitalism? As such, in what ways does the feeling of insecurity function as an affective technology of neoliberalism?

This task of examining neoliberalism with insecurity engages and extends Cindi Katz's astute analysis of the multiple forms of insecurity that are ascribed onto the figure of the Child.

Katz writes: “Ontological insecurity is associated with anxiety about the future, which is in part channeled in and through concerns about children and the nature of childhood”; she specifically lists three types of futures that become objects of anxiety: “the political economic future[...], the geopolitical future[...], and the environmental future.”<sup>2</sup> I assert that her elegant articulation of how intimate feelings of bodily insecurity connect with these multiple social contexts and converges in the framing of the child as spectacle is best demonstrated by an examination of the Fat Child Body and its enmeshment within the circular logics of neoliberalism.

As an increasingly politicized frontier in the battle for national security, the fat body embodies both American insecurity and the insecure American. Fatness, I contend, reconfigures Priscilla Wald’s argument of outbreak narratives, in which contagions are framed as threats that travel unidirectionally from the global South to the global North.<sup>3</sup> Instead, distinctly imagined as an issue occurring within domestic borders, fatness is used to mobilize a nationalist community through an insecurity implicitly grounded on the acknowledgement that the consequences of neoliberalism result from actions by key players within the nation-state. The fat body materializes, as Julie Guthman argues, the contradictions of neoliberalism, configured as the result of overconsumption that can no longer be ignored. While Guthman frames this contradiction primarily within the paradoxical disciplining of citizens as consuming/dieting subjects, I would argue that this post-recession moment has fundamentally altered the forms of rhetoric surrounding consumption.<sup>4</sup> Underscoring the need for the exercise of responsibility (exercise also becomes the metaphoric indicator of responsibility), the terms have shifted to an increased emphasis on dieting—with all its implications of exercising austerity in decreasing certain kinds of economic consumption—and a drastic policing of *what* and *how* to consume responsibly.

A number of discursive regimes provide the conditions of possibility for such a policing of the body. While this discursive economy around fatness spans a wide range of terrains, it becomes most obsessively localized onto the representational body of the Fat Child. The construction of this child body embodies a number of anxieties: the fear that America has consumed too much without considering its own ramifications; that current parents have acted in ways that jeopardize the future (of their child); that this is a body that poses a problem; and, that the Fat Child specifically marks particular intersections of race and class formations (mainly lower class racialized minorities). This set of assumptions have proliferated a nationwide discourse and obsession over the Fat Child in the construction of what is termed a Child Obesity Epidemic.

The prominence of this discourse and its material implications has mobilized a number of efforts to combat obesity, most notably, that of the First Lady Michelle Obama. In 2010, Michelle Obama launched her first comprehensive campaign, *Let's Move!*, with the mission of eliminating "childhood obesity" within one generation. With the support of governmental funding and a number of key, wealthy corporate players, *Let's Move* targets a wide range of social institutions and practices. The four stated key objectives demonstrate the campaign's ambitious goals and comprehensive scope: "(1) empowering parents and caregivers; (2) providing healthy food in schools; (3) improving access to healthy, affordable foods; and (4) increasing physical activity."<sup>5</sup> To accomplish these goals, the initiative necessarily exceeds the realm of pure policymaking. Of interest to this specific project is the broad marketing strategy behind *Let's Move*. In addition to creating a website entirely dedicated to this campaign, the First Lady has enlisted the help of a number of television networks, celebrities, athletes, and sports organizations. The campaign's YouTube channel "letsmove" collects the many video

clips that it produces. While some are more serious in nature and specifically targeted at parents, others are more cheerful in tone, aimed at younger audiences, and include cameos by celebrities and athletes. These visual components of the campaign discursively frame for the American public the ways in which the construction and very terms undergirding “childhood obesity” are apprehended and approached.

The marketing strategies illustrate that the campaign is not restricted to any distinct realm of government and policy. To interrogate the cultural politics surrounding these discourses, my project also looks at a series of commercials aired on the Disney Channel. In these commercials, we can see that, starring alongside a number of Disney Channel stars, Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move!* campaign against ‘childhood obesity’ manifests in the sublimated *Magic of Healthy Living* series launched by Disney, which I will discuss further in the next section. Despite the constant framing of ‘child obesity’ within these campaigns, the very instability of this constructed phenomenon necessitates a number of discursive placeholders, such as the behaviors operationalized as indicators for the variable of ‘healthy living,’ which is deemed the solution to combating childhood obesity. Within the ‘about’ page of the campaign’s website, the term “common sense” is listed as a key driving force of the campaign, justifying and reproducing a much larger set of dominant ideologies and assumptions that are already grounded in the fat child body.<sup>6</sup> Interrogating these discursive strategies, I argue that the campaigns’ construction of childhood obesity perniciously visualizes the Fat Child body as an always already failed/failing embodiment that must be eradicated at all costs.

For this project, I employ the methodology of a *sideways* reading practice, which challenges vertical explanations that privilege causality by instead examining the ways in which lateral discourses interact, resonate, shape, and are articulated through one another.<sup>7</sup> That is, my

readings explore how the rhetoric, contexts, and logic of multiple concurrent discourses interplay provide the conditions of possibility for the sustenance of one another. Specifically, I examine how the *Magic of Healthy Living* and *Let's Move* campaigns are mutually dependent of and articulated through one another. Through this exploration, I aim to expose the radical instability and fundamental contradictions inherent within the discourses of the 'obesity epidemic.' I further examine how these campaigns open up other discourses: most specifically, neoliberal ideologies. This project emphasizes how even allegedly beneficent attempts to counteract the 'epidemic' are violently caught up in the logics of neoliberalism that obscure and excuse other key players that contribute to the symptoms that the Fat Child is made to embody. I argue that the spectacularity of the Fat Child body and the discourses surrounding the obesity epidemic is dependent upon the spectrality and erasure of the Fat Child. Reproducing fears of insecurity through unacknowledged logics of neoliberal thought, these campaigns dangerously and unjustly dismiss the personhood of the Fat Child.

### **The Magic of the Disappearing Fat Child Body**

The Disney Channel has gained particular momentum within the ever-growing empire of Disney. Targeting a growing audience of kids/tweens/teens, the channel allows for the constantly available presence of Disney through the medium of cable television. Furthermore, it has become a launching pad for a number of best-selling pop sensations, including Hillary Duff, Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, and the Jonas Brothers. Given its success as a cultural platform for younger audiences, it is then perhaps not so surprising that Michelle Obama directly chooses this as one of the many sites to promote her campaign. In fact, she personally appears alongside a number of Disney Channel stars, in a series of commercials that promote exercising, recycling,

and healthy cooking/eating in the *Magic of Healthy Living*.

Partnering with *Let's Move*, Disney features not only eight different commercials in this campaign, but also two newly designed websites. These commercials alone appear beyond the Disney Channel, broadcasting in their partner channels, most notably ABC, as well as “the Ad Council’s network of 1,700 stations.”<sup>8</sup> Examining these commercials alone, they may initially seem to promote a central movement advocated by Fat Studies scholar: Health at Every Size. This movement asks us to disaggregate commonly held (mis)perceptions that naturalize the link between weight and health, reframing the dominant logic of health whereby one’s body size is seen as a transparent indicator of one’s health. Instead, it calls for an engagement with healthy activities that cuts across people of all weights and sizes. Indeed, this does seem to be the “healthy living” that the Disney stars promote in the direct focus on a set of behaviors. In the “kickoff” video clip of the series of commercials, a group of Disney Channel stars gather around Michelle Obama to introduce the premises of the campaign as follows:

Jonas: Did you know that getting up and getting active for just sixty minutes a day is all it takes for you to get stronger, look better, and feel great?  
 Song: Or that fresh fruits and veggies aren’t just healthier and crunchier, they can taste better too?  
 Obama: Eating better and getting more active is easier than you think.  
 Lee: And, it makes you feel amazing!  
 Dolley: We call that magic.<sup>9</sup>

Articulated thus, the magic of engaging in these behaviors is the purported outcome of positive affective responses. Disney promises that the performance of these behaviors will lead to a sense of happiness and a cluster of other positive emotions that seemingly serve as the solution for the multiple affective registers of insecurity listed earlier. In other words, healthy behaviors will magically conjure feelings of happiness. Despite the positive messages proffered throughout the campaign’s video segments, I argue that the magic that these behaviors conjure is not depicted as

being available to all bodies. I attempt to explore how this campaign is haunted by the specter of the Fat Child. That is, even it focuses on the promotion of healthy behaviors that maintain the size of non-fat bodies, it continues to function as a crusade against the existence of extant fat bodies. Configured as the antithesis of health, fat embodiments are not allowed to feel the magic of these behaviors.

Disney's campaign thus emphasizes the tension between obesity and healthy behaviors, in which the tenets of neoliberal thought provide the discursive justifications for the advent of biopolitics. Although the term 'health' substitutes any explicit references toward obesity and fatness, I argue that the weight of the spectral Fat Child haunts the campaign. In other words, I contend that the spectacularity of the Fat Child is contradictorily and necessarily constituted by its spectrality. Within a series of commercials aimed at obese children, the absence of this embodiment bears considerable weight. More specifically, this is demonstrated by the selection of Disney Channel stars selected to represent the campaign through its commercials. While the Disney Channel does cast several actors who are identifiably fat (many of whom appear in the same shows in which the actors selected for the campaign star), none of them appear in these commercials.

Along with the absence of fat bodies in these commercials, the Disney campaign is haunted by the crusade against childhood obesity taken by *Let's Move!*, from which this campaign is birthed. The juxtaposition between these two campaigns underscores the contradictions within the originary *Let's Move*. In this sense, although the discourses aimed at the children, as provided by Disney, suggests that health and the magic of positive feelings is available to all, Michelle Obama's rhetoric in her PSA's reveal the open secret among adults that this is a lie; the fat body must be eliminated at all costs. The absence of the Fat Child haunts the

images circulated by *Let's Move* as well. Most recently, Obama has been visiting a number of schools, dancing alongside students to a song by Beyoncé to promote the fun and healthy movement of dance. A video clip of just one school visit was posted on the campaign's YouTube channel. Viewing the rows upon rows of middle school students, we are confronted by a mass of thin bodies in motion. Despite the scores of bodies visible, there are *no* 'obese' bodies visible; there are hardly even any fat child bodies visible.<sup>10</sup> Where are all these fear provoking obese children that we should be on the lookout for? The reason for this stark absence can only be left to the interpretation of the viewer once again. Perhaps these bodies cannot dance; they are already a lost cause. From Nick Jonas to these rows of thin bodies, the already lack of fatness of these bodies are visualized as the ideal embodiments. The Fat Child becomes a ghostly figure, as the possible future of presently thin children that *Let's Move!* aims to prevent at all costs.

Examining this spectrality in conjunction with notions of individualism, I argue that the process of Disneyization defined by Bryman materializes not only in the Disney commercial campaigns, but also in the childhood obesity epidemic as framed through *Let's Move*. "Disneyization," Bryman writes, "has been painted as a set of principles that address a consumerist world in which McDonaldization has wrought homogeneity and in its place projects an ambience of choice, difference, and frequently the spectacular."<sup>11</sup> Disneyization, as a process that frames spectacular consumption through the rhetoric of both choice and variety, strongly parallels the tenets of neoliberal thought. Disney, that is, exemplarily exercises the virtues of neoliberal thought. Ironically, the medium of Disney as a platform for the campaign literalizes the paradoxical and circular logic of neoliberalism as ascribed onto the Fat Child body.

The increasingly evident rhetoric of neoliberalism, I argue, also reveals the awareness on

the part of Michelle Obama and *Let's Move* about the need to retool what Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism” within political discourses.<sup>12</sup> Reframed through the Fat Child, Obama articulates that if the future is configured through the embodiment of children, then the prevalence of fatness signals that embodied futurity is perhaps at a loss. That is, futurity is no longer a certainty for the national body politic. Michelle Obama conveys this very clearly in her PSA, which is notably addressed toward an older (i.e. non-children) audience when she definitively asserts that “our kids are running out of time, they’re the first generation that might not live as long as their parents.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the enemy, the threat to the protection of children does *not* come from any ‘outside.’ Instead, “we” (i.e. parent) must save children from *themselves*. That is, parents must stop children from killing themselves. Embedded within this fear is the queerness of the Fat Child, framed as a child going astray, “growing sideways,” as phrased by Kathryn Bond Stockton, in her/his development.<sup>14</sup> Concerns over obese children perversely extend beyond the life of their own bodies onto the very question of reproduction itself. I argue that insecurities about the *queerness* of the Fat Child, in the uncertainty of her/his future (in terms of longevity), as well as the future of the nationalist as a superpower reframes concerns of reproduction into the rhetoric of sustainability.

Through this collusion of state and media, these campaigns, launched by both the First Lady and Disney, participate in discourses surrounding the Fat Child, constructing this bodily terrain as a site fraught with the circular logic of neoliberalism. As Lauren Berlant argues: “The obesity epidemic is also a way of talking about the destruction of life, of bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under contemporary regimes of capital.”<sup>15</sup> I would further claim that the site of the fat body is then framed as materializing the destruction and contradictions under neoliberal capitalism. The fat body manifests both the contradictions and ambivalences of

neoliberal ideology with its discursive economy undergirded by a larger nationalist insecurity over environmental, economic, and political decline—several of the most disastrous consequences wrought by neoliberalism.

### **The Un/sustainable Problem(atic) of the Fat Child Body**

An examination of the other campaigns proposed by the Disney Channel as well as the First Lady illuminates the intimate fears of a nation overly focused on consumption and not enough on production. The Fat American comes to symbolize the fearful outcomes of neoliberal philosophy: a persistent and unregulated consumption that inevitably leads to decline. Collectively, these campaigns reveal the means through which the fat body becomes folded into economic and environmental anxieties through discourses of sustainability. Vandana Shiva astutely articulates the paradox of neoliberalism, which rhetorically aims for futurity and social reproduction while actively eliminating the material conditions needed for such a future to become possible: “The neoliberal recipe to dismantle Social Security in the present for future generation’s security is not really based on the consideration of welfare of future generations.”<sup>16</sup> By disaggregating the discursive framing of reproductive futurism and the material neoliberal policies set in place by the nation-state, we can actively interrogate the possibilities for sustainability. The Fat Child is discursively constructed as this impossibility under neoliberalism.

While the fat body is written as bearing the harmful symptoms of globalization, the posited solutions of exercise paradoxically reincorporates the fat body back into neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and self-regulation. The call for sustainability as the solution consistently individuates these problems, evacuating the social and political contexts. In addition to the commercials that focus on physical activity and eating healthier foods, there is a

subset of commercials that focus on activities such as recycling. In one Disney commercial, three of the stars are gathered inside a garage that functions as a garden. Their task: find the most number of recyclable containers within a certain timeframe. Although cultivating these green practices is arguably a noble deed and perhaps even behaviors of “healthy living,” situating this commercial back within its context of Let’s Move, it begs the question: how exactly does recycling combat obesity?

Recycling becomes a metaphor of sustainability that directly links the behavior of the individual body to the stakes of a global future. That is, children must be taught how to actively produce the future. These efforts aim to secure the national body politic by disciplining Fat Children into 'fit' consumer-citizens through an embodiment that is presumed as both productive and reproductive. Positing the Fat Child as the antithesis to what Hannah, borrowing from Edelman, calls a “futurist biopower,” the fat child complicates the question of which bodies deserve care and put weight on the circular logics of neoliberal thought and discourses.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the body of the Fat Child becomes folded into the policing and power of not only the state, but also corporations. The relationship of the Disney Corporation to its campaign that I discuss here emphasizes the various modes of biopower that Hannah reads as being in play. A press release of this campaign in Disney’s policy of “corporate citizenship” asks us to examine Disney in the context of what Hannah describes as an anthropomorphizing of corporations in the quest of gaining biophilic modes from the state.<sup>18</sup> These campaigns illustrate how understandings of what constitutes responsibility for corporations become rerouted. Here, this responsibility peculiarly manifests as the duty to disseminate its own mode of biophilic biopower. This marriage between culture and politics, and, more importantly, the private sector and the state through discourses and practices of neoliberalism calls for an interrogation of the

necropolitical underpinnings of what is discursively framed as a biophilic biopower.

In this case, the fat body becomes a hypersymbolic site, rife with politicoeconomic anxieties and interests. I suggest that this call for individual responsibility toward environmentalism parallels the crusade against obesity: both domesticate an anxiety about a sustainable national body politic in the face of economic uncertainty and global warfare. What new resonances and relationships can be teased out in examining contexts underlying the War on Terror and the War on Obesity? How then do we place these cultural and political efforts toward performing fitness and citizenship in conversation with anxieties wrought by consequences of neoliberalism, namely the growth of anti-American sentiment and the decline of America as a superpower?

Looking at other initiatives advocated by both the Disney Channel and Michelle Obama, situates the fight against obesity within a different nationalist context. The Disney Channel promoted several other campaigns prior to and/or at the same time of this initiative with the First Lady. The first, "Send It On," and its sequel "Make a Wave," utilized the full powerhouse of Disney Channel star power to promote environmental activism. Disney extended this campaign through its website, urging its viewers to sign pledges agreeing to more environmentally conscious behaviors as well as partaking in local volunteer opportunities. Another campaign called "Pass the Plate," which has also become folded into the *Magic of Healthy Living*, rehearses calls for global diversity through its promotion of purchasing local food produce and showcasing fresh, 'exotic' foods worldwide.

Significantly, this series features Disney star Brenda Song. While she holds the coveted title of being the longest acting Disney star, as a Hmong American, she also embodies the form of multicultural difference that this campaign advocates. The commercials all start with her

introduction of a particular local food item that she encounters during a trip to what are presumably stands by local farmers. After her short talk, the camera zooms into the food item. This transitions to another Disney Channel star, who comes from one of the many other countries to which the Disney Channel has extended its empire. This star introduces a similar yet regionally specific version of the food. Such transitions occur several times within this journey for exotic foods before returning back to Brenda Song. Although the campaign allegedly calls for viewers to cook a wider array of food, it is more significantly enmeshed within the advocacy for purchasing and consuming local food produce. In other words, the viewer is *not* encouraged to venture out and try different cuisines. On the contrary, the commercials themselves are meant to satiate this consumption of foreign goods to lead the American viewer back to the purchase of locally produced American food.<sup>19</sup> This vision of the globalized world asks us to remain interconnected in our differences: it acknowledges other cuisines only to reaffirm the superiority of American produce and reaffirm a notion of division that asks everyone to be contained within their own borders.

The task of containing anxieties about foreign competition within domestic concerns of production as executed by these campaigns is not exclusively targeted at the viewership of tween/teen audiences targeted by the Disney Channel. It also manifests in more 'serious' forms of programming as evidence in the more prominent television station owned by Disney: the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). As one of the Big Three Television Networks, the ABC continues to play a significant role in shaping cultural and political discourses. The nationalist undergirding of the station extends beyond its nomenclature into its most prominent news programming. (Of course, I do not mean to suggest that other forms of news media outlets are exempt for participating in a discursive regime that serves to consolidate the interests of the

nation-state.) This is particularly evident in a recent series in its program “World News,” which airs in the 6:30 PM (EST) time slot. Significantly, unlike the multiple broadcasts of local news programming throughout the day on this channel, “World News,” like the primetime television programming, airs throughout the country on ABC. Despite its claims of worldliness, this program reproduces certain claims of U.S. neoliberalism.

Its series “Made in America,” launched in 2011, proves a case-in-point. This series poses the challenge for American families to examine how many of the products in their household are ‘made in America.’ ABC argues that their mere spending of a few extra dollars on U.S. made products would allow for a drastic increase of American jobs. The framing of this segment implicitly casts the question of production as an economic competition, suggesting but never actually saying the basic conviction that other countries, especially China, are stealing American jobs, taking over American production, and controlling the American economy at the expense of an American public plagued by high unemployment rates.<sup>20</sup> What the program fails to critically examine, however, is the role of companies functioning under neoliberal practices. That is, laborers of other countries are figured as maliciously agreeing to work for lower wages in order to steal competition.

This framing legitimizes practices by companies and never questions the premise that American businesses do not *need* to send production abroad. Instead, this practice of outsourcing is based on a profit-driven mentality that depends on the willful complicity of corporations in exploiting racialized labor. That this capitalist logic of exploitation remains unquestioned points to the power of neoliberal thought as it is reproduced in cultural politics. This set of ideological assumptions renders the possibility of businesses inaugurating fairer wages toward its laborers at the expense of a smaller profit margin preposterous. This turn

demonstrates a turn in the nation's discursive relationship to neoliberalism. That is, the justification of the shift of the U.S. toward a service economy while restructuring the globe into a hierarchal, racialized division of labor is no longer entirely sufficient. The American public now demands a return of production to the homeland.

The anxiety around national decline and U.S. production sheds new light upon the multiple functions served by the rhetoric of sustainability. I am *not* suggesting that *Let's Move* does not make any attempts to examine the sites surrounding food structurally in their marketing campaigns. Indeed, a key component of the campaign addresses the issue of "food deserts," geographical locations in which access to fresh produce is limited. The linkage offered between this phenomenon and 'obesity,' however, is fraught its own set of problems. In a video clip entitled "Eliminating Food Deserts in America," Michelle Obama both introduces the scope of food deserts and also the solutions proposed by her initiative. The clip situates the viewer directly into scenes of destitution, what is notably marked as an inner-city community, largely populated by racialized minorities. The camera pans onto neon signs of fast food restaurants that advertise unhealthy food options. In response, Michelle Obama advocates the plans by the initiative to build new stores to provide access to fresh foods in these food deserts. The camera tours a newly opened grocery store abundant with goods, a stark contrast to the architecturally decaying city that opens this clip. The viewer is invited to relate with the First Lady's emphasis on why the campaign needs to take such initiatives urgently. An abrupt shift in her speech occurs, however, when she ultimately frames this initiative as a vital step in combating obesity.<sup>21</sup> How exactly are we asked to arrive at such a conclusion?

The First Lady maps a causal relationship, wherein lack of access to fresh food leads to obesity. Such a reductive equation, however, effectively evacuates the multiple, complex factors

within such geographical sites. I am *not* making a moral judgment against the First Lady's active initiatives toward addressing food deserts. Nevertheless, as scholar Julie Guthman argues against the limits of analyzing foodscapes, it is important to interrogate the uncritical assumptions made between obesity and food deserts, in which a lack of access to fresh foods is seen as directly leading to obese bodies.<sup>22</sup> That is, how can one adequately know the consumption practices—what one eats, how much, and how often—along with exercise practices and metabolism rates, of individuals within such locations?

Furthermore, amid video clips that mostly posit obesity as an unsettlingly universal threat that can and does target all Americans, this video troublingly constructs those fat bodies as particularly belonging to poor racialized minorities residing in geographically neglected spaces. They are the abjected bodies produced by the very processes of neoliberal economic policies. In a lecture, Dr. Bianca Wilson suggests that this particular focus on poor Black communities by Michelle Obama reflect historical practices in which an elite class of Black Americans directly policed other Black bodies in order to conform and perform to a normative notion of citizenship that they were structurally denied.<sup>23</sup> Another troubling dynamic is that poor racialized communities, who are already marginalized, are once again framed as the bodies that are contributing most to a national epidemic. Moreover, the First Lady's efforts can be conveyed as acts of care for racialized communities toward whom she is expected to have allegiance.

This examination of the campaign against food deserts connects back to the First Lady's emphasis on cultivating home-grown gardens. If food deserts are framed as an issue particularly endured by inner-city, poor racialized communities, home-grown gardens may serve as a solution for access to healthy, fresh produce. This solution provides the possibility of self-reliance, producing one's own means of consumption. Therefore, a clip by Disney shows how

one can “Plant an Herb Garden” in the kitchen through the use of recyclable cans and bottles. In her most recent clip on gardening for spring 2011 in the White House garden, Michelle Obama plants alongside a number of children, most of whom are racialized minorities and none of whom is fat. This clip serves as a shocking departure from most clips provided by the First Lady. At the very end, she is actually shown discussing with the children the crusade of Let’s Move against childhood obesity, a goal that has almost always been solely disclosed to parents. Here, she provides a quite direct delineation of how she envisions the role of gardening in this crusade. Her logic is not without its contradictions, however. Speaking to the children, the First Lady argues that by gardening and cultivating vegetables, children will have the opportunity to discover how great fresh produce can taste.<sup>24</sup> With this newfound proclivity, these children should then actively ask their parents to cook more meals with fresh produce. This logic awkwardly assumes that the mere act of gardening would inevitably lead to penchants for fresh produce. This, of course, reflects foodscapes arguments that assume that people would eat healthy only if they had the chance to access fresh foods.

Furthermore, despite the prevalence of African American children depicted as cultivating produce alongside Michelle Obama, the spaces for such cultivation reveal that this is not particularly a viable option for inner-city communities. Consequently, while the two projects of addressing gardens and food deserts may initially seem to complement each other perfectly, this examination of the rhetoric reveals a fundamental tension: this solution is hardly a possibility for those framed as the most vulnerability population. Should we expect that the White House will host all the kids of America to expose them to the joys of gardening? We are left with an unanswered question: is the campaign for homegrown gardens (“home” being a particularly contentious term as well in its fraught relationship with domesticity) really posed as an

availability to the supposedly most vulnerable communities when these communities, quite literally, do not possess the grounds for bringing such gardens into fruition?

Contradictions similarly abound just within the analysis of food deserts as well. What is blatantly omitted from this campaign is any interrogation of *why* and *how* these food deserts came into existence. Consequently, these poor racialized groups are seen as complete victims to their social environments who are completely unable to exercise control over their own bodies against these food deserts. In this sense, I argue that this gesture toward attending to structural inequities, which discourses of neoliberalism predominantly effaces, is returned to the scrutiny of the neoliberal gaze. That is, the acknowledgement that the social serves as a key factor shaping these groups, which in turn constrains the illusory notion of individualism prized by neoliberalism effectively devalues the worth of these individuals.

As a result, certain groups are forced to bear the blame for being victims of the violent consequences of neoliberalism. Intimately connected with this omission, I posit, is the exemption of neoliberalism's key players once again. It is my contention that we need to be cautious about the multiple, complex factors that are discursively encapsulated within fatness. While positing a campaign against childhood obesity may serve as an opportunity to fold in initiatives against the structural inequities behind food deserts and lack of access to fresh goods, the issue cannot be adequately addressed if the discourse continually incorporates it back into the rhetoric of fatness. Instead, it reveals the key disconnect between the efforts that Michelle Obama takes toward targeting structural inequities and her marketing clips that advocate individual actions.

## **Conclusion: Fat Kids Are People Too**

Situated within the contemporary moment and the multiple fronts waged against the Fat Child, this seemingly self-evident statement that “fat kids are people too” appears to be increasingly called into question. A recent article headlines the possible ways in which the ‘war on obesity’ breeds stigma and discrimination against fat children, who are perhaps questioning their own value and personhood.<sup>25</sup> While this article looks at a controversy over a campaign by Georgia that places the Fat Child directly on display in billboards, I argue that the spectral body in the campaigns by the First Lady and Disney are also extremely harmful and vicious. These different strategies demonstrate that both hypervisibility and invisibility have been used against the Fat Child. I assert that the discursive grounds that construct this child, along with the material practices that such narratives sustain, requires a fundamental shift in order to allow for a larger discussion around the Fat Child that starts with the fundamental recognition of her/his personhood.

What would it mean if Let’s Move and the Magic of Healthy Living focused on the call for healthy behavior without the reference point of the spectral Fat Child? What would it mean, as psychologist Rebecca Puhl asks: “to be sure we are fighting obesity, not obese people”?<sup>26</sup> What would it mean to combat obesity and weight discrimination? More importantly, as I have been suggesting, how may we take the opportunity to directly address issues of structural inequity that cut across racial and class lines *without* the scapegoat of obesity? This turns us more broadly to the central question that I have been exploring throughout this project, how can we disaggregate the Fat Child away from the material and discursive practices of neoliberalism to demand accountability by the state and private sectors that shift and individuate the responsibility of neoliberalism’s violent consequences onto its victims?

Before closing, a discussion of the strange bedfellows that have seemingly been wedded to fat studies scholars and activists is warranted. A number of prominent conservatives, including Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh, and Michele Bachman, have stepped forward as strong critics against Michelle Obama's campaign. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is dangerous to uncritically latch onto the support to these figures because their concerns are undergirded by some of the fundamental neoliberal tenets that connect them to the campaign that they allegedly oppose. Underlying the claims of these figures are key neoliberal arguments against state regulations. Let us take Palin's statement as an example: "Instead of a government thinking that they need to take over and make decisions for us [...] just leave us alone, get off our back, and allow us as individuals to exercise our own God-given rights to make our own decisions and then our country gets back on the right track."<sup>27</sup> In demonizing Michelle Obama's efforts as an impingement of the state on individual rights and choice, Palin once again reconsolidates the family as the representative unit of a private sphere. Indeed, although she passionately defends notions of individual rights, she clarifies that the initiative impedes parents from making choices *for* their children. Another point of contention is the ways in which Michelle Obama implicitly acknowledges the flaws and dire consequences of neoliberalism. In closing her statement, Palin broadens the debate toward its implications for the future of the nation. In doing so, she links fatness once again to the neoliberal metaphors of individual choice and consumption. Her vision, however, completely obscures an examination of the violent consequences wrought by neoliberalism and suffered globally after the recession. Consequently, their objection to the campaign once again relegates the fat child into invisibility.

Returning to *Let's Move!*, if the effort is to eliminate obese children within this generation, perhaps accounting for their personhood is a non-issue. Within this timeframe, these

children (if still alive), would have become adults, either fat or skinny. The children who arrive at their heels, however, would then be under scrutiny. These campaigns presume the impossibility for any not-yet-existent children to become obese. If we are to believe the other basic tenet of the campaigns, however, that the insistent anxiety about promoting healthy behaviors and structural change is needed precisely because the goal of eliminating obesity is never quite possible, then we must be prepared to create the condition of possibility for a future fat child to step onto discursive and material grounds as a recognized person.

By putting weight on these discursive displacements of responsibility onto fat children, I argue that we must become attuned to the particular ideologies that are unjustly reproduced, enacted, and felt when health and fatness are regulated to the realm of common-sense. In other words, the most “unbearable weight,” to borrow the term of Susan Bordo, is *not* the constructed measurements of fatness, but rather the various symbolic weights that are uncritically mapped and imposed onto these bodies.<sup>28</sup> As I have been suggesting, this calls for the need to expose the pernicious strategy of displacement employed by neoliberalism and to redirect efforts toward demanding that the U.S. nation-state and the malicious corporation that it supports, rather than the Fat Child, take responsibility for the violence and inequities that are wrought globally and are increasingly invisible within American borders.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> William Wilkerson, "Neoliberalism, Biodiscipline, and Cultural Critique," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48 (2010): 64-73.
- <sup>2</sup> Cindi Katz, "Childhood as Spectacle: Relays of Anxiety and the Reconfiguration of the Child," *Cultural Geographies* 15.1 (2008): 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 34.
- <sup>4</sup> Julie Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009), 192.
- <sup>5</sup> White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation* (Washington, DC, 2011), 1.
- <sup>6</sup> "About Let's Move," accessed March 4, 2011, <http://www.letsmove.gov/about>.
- <sup>7</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.
- <sup>8</sup> "Michelle Obama Stars in Disney 'Healthy Living' Ad Campaign," *The Associated Press*, September 30, 2010, accessed April 11, 2011, [http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/fitness/2010-09-30-michelle-obama\\_N.htm#](http://www.usatoday.com/yourlife/fitness/2010-09-30-michelle-obama_N.htm#)
- <sup>9</sup> Along with Michelle Obama, the quoted speakers are the following television stars of the Disney Channel: Nick Jonas, Brenda Song, Daniel Curtis Lee, and Jason Dolley. See Disneychannel, "Magic of Healthy Living – Kickoff –Disney Channel Official," Video clip, [Sept. 30 2010], *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JHac4QFa54>, (accessed March 3, 2011).
- <sup>10</sup> Letsmove, "Flash Workout with First Lady Michelle Obama," Video clip, [May 3, 2011], *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqtgw-qZsHw>, (accessed May 4, 2011).
- <sup>11</sup> Alan E. Bryman, *Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 13.
- <sup>12</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Letsmove, "Michelle Obama — Let's Move," Video clip, [February 8, 2010], *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/user/letsmove#p/u/50/t2U9Zy1OAY8>, (accessed March 1, 2011).
- <sup>14</sup> See Stockton.
- <sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33.4 (2007): 764.
- <sup>16</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 32.
- <sup>17</sup> Matthew G. Hannah, "Biopower, Life and Left Politics," *Antipode* (2010): 15.
- <sup>18</sup> Hannah, 3.
- <sup>19</sup> [http://www.disneychannelmedianet.com/web/showpage/showpage.aspx?program\\_id=3114203&type=lead](http://www.disneychannelmedianet.com/web/showpage/showpage.aspx?program_id=3114203&type=lead).
- <sup>20</sup> See Bradley Blackburn and Eric Noll, "Made in America: A Brief History of U.S. Manufacturing," *ABC News*, February 17, 2011, accessed April 12, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/made-america-middle-class-built-manufacturing-jobs/story?id=12916118>.
- <sup>21</sup> Letsmove, "Eliminating Food Deserts in America," Video clip, [May 24 2010], *YouTube*, [http://www.youtube.com/user/letsmove#p/u/29/pZ6qGAs\\_4W8](http://www.youtube.com/user/letsmove#p/u/29/pZ6qGAs_4W8), (accessed March 1, 2011).

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- <sup>22</sup> Guthman, 189.
- <sup>23</sup> Bianca Wilson, "Fat, the First Lady, and the Politics of Health Science," *Queer Embodiments Seminar: Race and Global Queer Body*, QUNY, The CUNY Graduate Center, Feb. 25, 2011.
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- <sup>25</sup> David Crary, "Amid 'War on Obesity,' Skeptics Warn of Stigma," *Yahoo! News*, May 1, 2011, accessed May 2, 2011, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110501/ap\\_on\\_re\\_us/us\\_obesity\\_backlash\\_1](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110501/ap_on_re_us/us_obesity_backlash_1).
- <sup>26</sup> See David Crary.
- <sup>27</sup> "Sarah Palin: Americans Have "God-Given Right" to Be Fat?," *CBS News*, November 30, 2010, accessed May 4, 2011, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763\\_162-20024104-10391704.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20024104-10391704.html).
- <sup>28</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1993).