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Signature:

Sheri Davis-Faulkner

Date

**Precious Opportunities: Black Girl Stories and Resistance Pedagogies as
Critical Race Feminist Responses to the Childhood Obesity Epidemic**

By

**Sheri Davis-Faulkner
Doctor of Philosophy**

Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts

**Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, PhD
Associate Professor of Institute of the Liberal Arts
Advisor**

**Debra Vidali, PhD
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Committee Member**

**Kristen Buras, PhD
Assistant Professor of Educational Policy and Reform
Georgia State University
Committee Member**

Accepted:

**Lisa A Tedesco, PhD
Dean of the Graduate School**

Date

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By

**Sheri Davis-Faulkner
B.A., Spelman College, 1997
M.A., The Ohio State University, 2001**

Advisor: Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Ph.D.

**An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney Graduate School of Emory University
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2012**

Abstract

Precious Opportunities: Black Girls Stories and Resistance Pedagogies as Critical Race Feminist Responses to the Childhood Obesity Epidemic

By Sheri Davis-Faulkner

Black girls have been featured throughout the “real” genre of televisual media as universal representatives of obese youth in America. Statistically, they are the youth population with the highest prevalence of obesity. *Precious Opportunities* is attentive to the treatment of black girls bodies within the “childhood obesity” visual narrative through a critical examination of commercial mass media. This dissertation is organized around four major areas: American consumer culture, feminist body theory, critical race theory, and resistance pedagogy. Using a critical race feminist framework, this project seeks to challenge the framing of “childhood obesity” within popular media. It also challenges neoliberal recommendations that individual youth simply “eat better” and “workout.” The dissertation argues that the fiercening of capitalism and expansion of media conglomerates through acquisitions has significantly influenced individual decision-making and consumer choice. A multi-sited media ethnography, it begins with a content analysis of *Too Fat for Fifteen: Fighting Back*, the first televised reality series dedicated to “childhood obesity,” followed by an interrogation of corporate actions by primary parent companies involved with the series. *Precious Opportunities* advances humanities-based responses to the framing of childhood obesity in a “pedagogy of mass consumption.” The first response explores the treatment of black girls’ bodies within black feminist literature as an alternative to televisual media. Using Sapphire’s novel *Push* as a counterstory, it analyzes “childhood obesity” from the perspective of Precious Jones, a fat black girl protagonist. The second response engages youth directly in an eight-week summer camp, Camp Carrot Seed. As a “pedagogy for social change” it offered a group of black teenagers opportunities to develop multiple literacies including: organic gardening, grocery shopping, cooking, creative expression, and environmental stewardship in exchange for studying their decision-making regarding food and physical activity.

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**Introduction:
The “Childhood Obesity Epidemic” as a Pedagogy of Mass Consumption**

On September 19th, 2008 CBS News aired a story about a young girl named Tiffany King entitled “One Girl’s Struggle: her fight to lose weight” as part of *The Early Show* Healthwatch segment. News anchor, Julie Chen, prefaces the story with “the CDC says 16 percent of children in the United States are obese” (King 2008). News correspondent, Priya David then begins the segment by describing King as a popular 12 year-old from Raleigh, North Carolina. Her investigation reveals that King started gaining weight after her father died in a car accident, and that her mother, Christina Benson, “had struggled with her own weight for years.” In a recorded interview, King says to David “you don’t think you have anyone to talk to, so basically I turned to food.” What is apparent here is King’s cognitive dissonance evident in her shift from first to third person; she distances herself from her body in talking about her weight.

David frames the remainder of the story on a seemingly viable solution, a weight loss camp. She explains that Tiffany King was given the opportunity, via scholarship, to attend a weight loss camp called Camp Pocono Trails. The camp provides a place for overweight youth to live, eat nutritious meals and participate in physical activities for as little as three weeks to two months. King was granted an eight-week scholarship because she wrote a dynamic essay impressing the program director. When she arrived she weighed 365 pounds; when she left she had lost 42 pounds. David closes the story by saying...

Tiffany did such a great job at the camp that the camp director promised she could attend next summer for free if she keeps the weight off. So far it seems like she will do that and more, since Tiffany came home she has lost an additional 13 pounds (King 2008).

By most accounts this is a success story, however there is one important detail that gets lost in the text-based transcript that is very present in the television broadcast. Tiffany King is African-American, yet neither her race nor her gender informs Chen's introduction or David's report of the issue. Statistical data promoted on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website suggests that for the growing number of children considered obese that race and gender matters, particularly for black girls (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2009). The CDC also indicates that, "obesity among children aged 6 to 11 more than doubled in the past 20 years... and among adolescents aged 12 to 19 [it] more than tripled" (2009).

Data from NHANES III (1988–1994) through NHANES 2003–2006 showed that non-Hispanic black adolescent girls experienced the largest increase in the prevalence of obesity (14.5%) compared to non-Hispanic white adolescent (7.1%) and Mexican American adolescent (10.7%) girls (Ogden, Carroll and Flegal 2008).

In fact in 2009 African-American teenage girls between 12 and 19 years old were identified as having highest prevalence of obesity of all teenagers at 27.7%. That means approximately 1 in 4 black girls were considered obese in 2008. Tiffany represents more than obese teenagers, she represents the group with the highest prevalence of obesity, yet

this fact is not only obscured in the CBS news story but also throughout popular narratives in American televisual media. Popular recommendations for addressing the childhood obesity epidemic are based on assumptions that parents are primarily responsible for children's diets. These recommendations promote individual lifestyle changes for children that are rooted in assumptions about parents' moral obligation to conform to American ideals of "good parenting." Popular scripts in broadcast media rarely discuss how marketing practices that directly target youth as primary consumers, not their parents. The culture of consumption that is widely promoted in American mass marketing industries is not interrogated fully in televisual media addressing the "childhood obesity epidemic."

By analyzing the framing of this public health crisis within mainstream media, *Precious Opportunity: Black Girl Stories, Resistance Pedagogies, and A Critical Race Feminist Response to the Childhood Obesity Epidemic* seeks to: 1) demonstrate how the popular narrative masks structural and cultural aspects of the obesity epidemic; 2) challenge the normal body ideology upheld by scientific discourses where bodies are organized into a gendered dichotomy and furthered divided by race for comparative analysis only; and 3) broaden the analytic frame to include private industries which greatly influence children's relationship with food. The Tiffany King news story symbolizes: the dominant representation of black female bodies and the frequent erasure of black female stories in American visual culture.

The Black Female Body in American Visual Culture

Large black female bodies do a particular type of cultural work that promotes white femininity as the desirable norm. Absent a discussion of black girls experiences, their bodies are used to tell a story about who is valuable in American culture. Doris Witt, a cultural critic, explains that while black women are largely excluded in discourses on eating disorders, representations of black women as fat women are prevalent and indeed normalized in American visual culture (Witt 2002, 246-247). In her essay, “What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture,” Witt asserts that the visual history of the black female body as “large body” and “wrong body” in popular media is a construction. Focusing on Tiffany King’s body in a universal discourse that does not consider race or gender specifically obscures political and historical narratives of oppression. Tiffany King’s story serves as an example of the hypervisibility of black women’s bodies as overweight bodies, particularly in mass communications.

The construction often has devastating consequences that are best revealed in what I refer to as “black girl stories,” which are not typically found in popular media. Priya David identified that a traumatic event triggered Tiffany King’s weight gain. Yet, David’s determination of King’s success is based solely on weight loss not recovery from the pain of her father’s death. When Tiffany King is pictured reading her essay, David’s analysis of the essay is edited in as a voiceover. The key focus of Tiffany’s essay is obscured until she asserts her desire to change her lifestyle to change her body so that she can be recognized as beautiful. She says...

I would rather lose weight than die from being overweight. I want to be acknowledged for once in my life like the plump caterpillar in hibernation just waiting to escape from its fleshy cocoon and fly away after its transformation into something new and beautiful (King 2008).

These experiences demand accountability for racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination that are considered distractions from larger mainstream issues. One arena where black girls stories thrive is in fiction, particularly literature. Black girl stories represent a type of counter-story because they counter majoritarian narratives of whiteness and maleness as normal. The literary, and now film, character that provides the best contemporary counter-story to the childhood obesity epidemic is Claireece “Precious” Jones. Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996) and Lee Daniel’s film adaptation *Precious based upon the novel Push* (2009), provide a striking disruption because both the text and the film present a first person narrative account of a black girl who is also obese.

Using Precious’ story as a counter-story renders an account of the fact that there is more to obesity than bad choices. Precious represents a teenage black girl who has been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused by her parents; she has been pregnant twice, she is a single mother, she is illiterate, she is HIV positive, she is poor, she lives in Harlem during the height of the crack cocaine era, *and* she is obese. The current treatment of childhood obesity in popular media cannot address Precious’ major concerns because there is no interest in hearing her voice or voices like hers.

In *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (1998), Patricia Hill Collins discusses the effectiveness of centering black women's experiences to disrupt normal ideologies that privilege White male experiences. She also cautions that when Black women "become "fixed" in the public eye, the strategy of breaking silence may be rendered less effective" (52). The inclusion of Tiffany King in the popular narrative of the childhood obesity epidemic is more a function of the integration of images than absorption of dissent, but her body provides a visual signifier of the universal nature of this issue, while concurrently negating her personal experience. Precious is a powerful character because readers do not have to wait for her to break her silence. As an audience, we are privileged to know her inner thoughts from the very beginning because she narrates her own story when she is silent and after she breaks her silence. In fiction, Precious' experiences drive the story, whereas in non-fiction King's experience is just one example of "one child's weight loss journey."

Establishing the Norm in American Broadcast Media

The underlying assumptions presented in this CBS news story about childhood obesity are: overweight and obese people are not and cannot be beautiful, and all people above "normal" weight range are unhealthy. Weight is presented as the primary marker of health and beauty, which distorts the fact that many Americans, including people of "normal" weight, have poor eating habits and are experiencing health complications because of their diet. Her story actively ignores the existence of healthy active people who fall outside of the "normal" body size range determined by the body mass index (BMI) and westernized notions of what it means to be normal, healthy, and beautiful. Finally, these assertions justify continued discrimination against overweight and obese

people by promoting a homogenized ideal body type that all people should aspire to attain.

In Priya David's attempt to present a mass "market" story, she fails to provide a race or gender analysis that would contextualize Tiffany King's story. Erasing the importance of race and gender masks the structural reasons why black girls may be more susceptible to being overweight or obese. It also downplays the constraints that would keep most young black girls from being able to attend Camp Pocono Trails, as it is located in northeastern Pennsylvania and priced at \$1000 per week. On the surface the camp seems like a great opportunity. However considering the distance and the costs of the camp it is not only prohibitive for Tiffany's mother, but also for most American families. The camp is not a practical solution for dealing with the childhood obesity epidemic, so why would David present it as a viable option?

If the news segment is analyzed within the context of American broadcast television interests the framing of the segment makes more sense. In the landmark essay "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall's description of the production of media messages in broadcast television indicates that media networks construct messages that fit within their institutional interests (Hall 2001). Ien Ang illustrates in *Desperately Seeking the Audience* how audience measurements (i.e. ratings) govern the relationship between the advertising industry and American television networks. She explains:

In economic terms, production for profit is the sole objective of the commercial broadcasting industry, which has for decades been dominated

by three national networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC. To finance the whole system, the networks are dependent on advertisers as sponsors....

Advertisers see the audience as potential consumers, and thus it is the audience's attention that advertisers want to attract.... [what] advertisers buy from the networks is not time but audience: commercial television is based on the principle that the networks 'deliver audiences to advertisers'... (Ang 1991, 53).

This description of the relationships and interests that govern broadcast media provides a general explanation for why important details are excluded from Priya David's story, and seemingly less relevant information is at the forefront. Tiffany functions as a consumer in this story, Camp Pocono Trails is a product, and the story itself is an advertisement.

This story is more about promoting the success of a particular weight loss camp than the needs of Tiffany King or black girls like her. For King the camp is accessible contingent upon her keeping up with her weight loss while she is at home. If Tiffany King was a central concern support would be provided based upon her needs and not her ability to continue to lose weight. Indeed the real targeted audience is not black girls, who tend to come from working class or poor class backgrounds. This story targets a middle-to-upper class audience of consumers; specifically parents who can afford to send their children to the camp based upon the children's needs and not upon subsequent lifestyle changes.

Derrick Bell, leading critical race theorist (CRT) and legal scholar, describes “interest convergence” as the guiding legal principle used to decide “racial cases both before and after Brown [v. Board of Education].” He writes...

The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of white (Bell 1995, 22).

Interest convergence is a key tenet in Critical Race Theory. On the surface this principle may seem irrelevant because this news story is not a legal case of racial discrimination. However, thinking about this principle in concert with CRT legal scholar Patricia Williams’ essay “Metro Broadcasting, Inc. v. FCC: Regrouping in Singular Times” providing critical commentary on the U.S. Supreme Court majority decision to uphold “limited preference programs that increase the number of minority owners of broadcast stations” makes it more relevant (Williams 1990, 1). Williams asserts,

Broadcasting diversity is often portrayed as an attempt to propagate special-interest markets or to ghettoize audiences into “mass appeal,” on the one hand, and minority markets, on the other. Its implications, however, are more complex; a real notion of diversity includes a concept of multiculturalism. This entails a view of the market in which there are not merely isolated interest groups, of which “mass market” may be one, but in which “mass” accurately reflects the complicated variety of many peoples and connotes “interactive” and “accommodative” rather than “dominant” or even just “majoritarian (192).

Consider this race-conscious depiction of Tiffany's story contextualized within the institutional interests of mass-market media. Camp Pocono Trails, a for-profit company owned and operated by a white male, was granted a free three-minute promotion on a network television station that is also owned by white males, and Tiffany King, an African American girl, was granted an opportunity to attend an \$8000 weight-loss camp for no charge. To be clear, Priya David's story is not about racial equality or equity. But the idea that Tiffany King's interests were accommodated because they converged with the interests of a small business owner in the weight loss industry, and broadcast network industry interests provides a realistic explanation for David's focus on Camp Pocono Trail, a luxury consumer product. Another option for King might have been therapy or creative expression activities to help her cope with the tragic loss of her father; giving her someone to "talk to" so that she did not have to "turn to food" or leave home for eight weeks.

The U.S. Supreme Court's affirmation that diverse minority ownership affects the types of stories broadcast, suggests that Tiffany's story may have been framed differently were it presented through a minority owned network. Priya David's news story reflects the guiding principle of mass communication, universalism. To be universal means Tiffany's story had to be neutral, color-blind, adhere to the popular standards of normal healthy bodies, and advance consumerist interests of CBS sponsors. David's story reflects diversity by featuring an African-American girl, but more importantly it promotes consumerism as a central recommendation for addressing childhood obesity.

Media Literacy and Pedagogies of Consumption

A recent body of literature on mass marketing media effects on children presents mass media as a central part of American life. Jean Kilbourne's *Can't Buy My Love* (1999), Susan Linn's *Consuming Kids* (2004), and Juliet Schor's *Born to Buy* (2004) provide a macro analysis of how marketing practices influence children's consumer desires and habits. They also give a particularly frightening overview of the types of consequences that target marketing has for children and teenagers.

Certain aspects of Kilbourne, Linn, and Schor's findings illuminate the prevalence of mass media in American culture as well as trends in food marketing. Their work provides the foundation for my preliminary analysis of the way in which mass media outlets promote a "pedagogy of consumption" that exacerbates childhood obesity. In the introduction of the edited volume, *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption* (2011), Jennifer Sandlin and Peter McLauren discuss how "education and learning intersect with consumption in multiple ways" (2011, 6). They describe how critical consumption research regarding "pedagogies of consumption" in a "market as educator" paradigm explores...

[how] children become socialized into becoming consumers through advertising, marketing, and media such as television shows aimed at them.... [and] how consumption shapes identity, "American-ness," and ideas about family, gender, and power (7-8).

The multi-sited analysis of media use and media power advanced in this project is aimed at understanding and responding to "pedagogies of consumption, where the overwhelming message is focused on the hegemonic power of these various sites of

consumption to shape individual identities in the service of consumer capitalism” (Sandlin and McLauren, 8).

Jean Kilbourne has been writing for more than thirty years about the damaging effects of mass marketing that both circulates images of women and girls and targets them as a media audience. In her chapter, “In Your Face...All Over the Place” (2000), she illustrates Arjun Appadurai’s concept of “mediascapes” which speaks to the centrality of mass media in everyday life (Appadurai 1990). Kilbourne writes...

Advertising not only appears on radio and television, in our magazines and newspapers, but also surrounds us on billboards, on the sides of buildings, plastered on our public transportation. Buses in many cities are transformed into facsimiles of products, so that one boards a bus masquerading as a box of Dunkin’ Donuts (followed, no doubt, by a Slimfast bus) (Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think* 2000, 57-58).

Kilbourne indicates, “the average American is exposed to at least three thousand ads everyday.” That is more than one million ads per year. Susan Linn says children are exposed to more than 40,000 television commercials every year (Linn 2004, 5). This means parents who may have the ability to choose their child’s school have limited control over the consumer education s/he encounters via mass media.

While there are definitely a pervasive number of advertisements throughout the physical landscape, particularly in urban spaces, television is an extremely important medium that promotes the pedagogy of mass consumption. Unlike other mediums,

television has the potential to engage the viewer's audio and visual senses. Sut Jhalley, cultural critic and filmmaker, explains...

[the] visual images that dominate public space and public discourse are in the video age, not static. They do not stand still for us to examine and linger over. They are here for a couple of seconds and then they are gone (Jhalley 1994, 84)

The increased pace of television ads combined with a constant barrage of advertisements discourages critical thinking and serves to normalize consumption. According to Dennis Attick,

[M]uch of the content of television advertising to children and adolescents encourages young people to consume specific items or ideals if they wish to be considered normal. The main goal of this advertising is to get young people to think of consumption as a worthwhile activity and possession of 'things' as an indicator of one's worth in society (Attick 2008, 52).

Susan Linn points out how race is a factor in determining youth viewing habits in *Consuming Kids* (2004). She describes different levels of media usage by black and Latino children as well and explains that marketers are strategic about targeting specific products to particular youth populations. However, her qualitative analysis does not explicitly address issues regarding race. She does not investigate what it means for black and Latino children to have a much higher exposure to commercials, the reasons why they may watch more television, or the long-term consequences for these consumption habits.

Juliet Schor's *Born to Buy* (2005), on the other hand, does provide a more race-conscious analysis, particularly as it relates to target marketing. Below are quotes that provide a narrative of how the pedagogy of mass consumption targets specific youth for specific products food. The following extensive collection of quotes reveals how a "pedagogy of mass consumption" can be particularly detrimental for children of color.

Upon arrival at the schoolhouse steps, the typical first grader can evoke 200 brands (19).

Researchers have chopped up the 52 million plus children in the age-twelve-and-under demographic into discrete age, gender, ethnic, and products segment, each with tailored messages (21).

The number one spending category [for children], at a third of the total [spending], is for sweets, snacks, and beverages (23).

Food is an area where influence marketing and the decline of parental control has been most pronounced (24).

Kraft has reassured investors with promises to continue focusing on fast-growing sectors such as snacks; to step up marketing to African-Americans and Hispanics, two groups with especially high rates of overweight [people] (128).

This crucial analysis of how marketing functions in commercial mainstream media provided by Kilbourne, Linn, and Schor is an absolutely necessary foundation for understanding relationships between targeted marketing and childhood obesity. But the picture is not complete without a more qualitative account of how youth actually engage

with mass media and participate in American consumer culture. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (2001) by Elizabeth Chin, an anthropologist, is an often-overlooked ethnographic case study that provides an alternative perspective of how marginalized kids experience American consumer culture.

Chin's work suggests that it is important to engage with youth directly to hear their experiences, and then draw on critical social theories to further develop our analysis of media and youth consumerism. She also asserts that race, class, and gender matter beyond comparative statistics, and that often the complexity of reality is masked in empirical research. Chin's research presents a localized, nuanced account of black youth experiences with consumer culture, and disputes the popular image of black youth as "combat consumers," i.e. thieves, in mainstream media (Chin 2001, 61). She argues that the consumer sphere has been historically constructed to exclude blacks, a point that does not get discussed in any of the previous works.

Chin also challenges the tendency to center the experiences of white, middle to upper class youth in the dominant narrative. She puts poor black kids at the center of her research, and uses their narratives to understand their logic and better explain their engagement with consumer culture. She asserts, "taking a long view of consumption in the lives of black Americans illustrates the familiarity of supposedly new dilemmas, while also pointing to the structural reasons for consumption orientations that differ markedly from the 'mainstream'" (Chin 2001, 28). In her research Chin calls for critical consumer scholars to consider what it means to *not* be able to consume in a world where media functions the mass form of public education.

Attending to the discussion of childhood obesity in mass media means recognizing that every major media outlet is sponsored by the advertising industry. If you agree that commercial media functions as a mass form of public education, then the advertising industry might be likened to the school board and superintendent. The implications of commercial sponsorship are reflected in the presentation of childhood obesity as “the problem,” and assumptions that individual people/consumers are primarily responsible. Commercial sponsorship also ensures the solutions are framed within terms of consumption. Therefore Camp Poconos Trail is presented as a “solution” for Tiffany King’s “problem.” By limiting the recommendations to individual lifestyle changes the influence of the marketing and advertising industries on consumer decision-making is rendered invisible. In effect Kilbourne’s point that “advertising is our environment” is not a central part of the discussion. The widespread consumer lifestyle promoted in mass media, however, is not presented as part of the “problem.” Thus mass media broadcasts promote statistics about obesity tripling in teenagers in the last two decades without including in the frame of the report how...

McDonald’s spent over \$1.3 billion on advertising in 2002 in the United States alone.... Pepsico spent more than \$1.1 billion.... Burger King spent \$80 million just on advertising to children [in 2000] (Linn 2004, 95).

The pedagogy of mass consumption effectively promotes the idea that if you are obese, then you must be a bad consumer. The diet and fitness industry is then presented as a viable path to normalcy, which is paved via consumption.

According to Kilbourne, diet industry profits reached over \$35 billion by the close of the twentieth century, and “no one loses, especially the dieter” (123).

The theoretical and methodological approaches I employ in this project critique the corporatist recommendation that counter-marketing or social marketing for appropriate lifestyles addresses the complexity of issues underlying obesity as a public health crisis. I situate this dissertation project within a tradition of critical literacy geared towards empowering youth. It is my strong belief that youth have the potential to determine a healthy body politics based upon sustained engagement of their experiences, their social location, and the primary concerns they identify. If childhood obesity was not the “official story” in mass media, how might Tiffany King’s story been reported differently in a multicultural democratic media system?

Conceptual Framework: Critical Race Feminism

The conceptual framework used for this project is Critical Race Feminism (CRF). Adrian Wing describes, CRF as “[having] strands that derive from [Critical Legal Studies], [Critical Race Theory], and feminism....” Coming out of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement of the late 1970’s and 80’s, CRF incorporates many of the tenets of CRT. However, by “[highlighting] the situation [of] women of color” it challenges CRT and traditional feminist theory that centrally focus on race and gender respectively.

According to Wing, the earliest use of the phrase “critical race feminism” is Amii Larkin Barnard’s “A Critical Race Feminist Application to the Anti-lynching Movement” in the UCLA Women’s Law Journal in 1993. Barnard blends CRT, which is rooted legal scholarship, with black feminist analyses of race and gender to illuminate the ways that black women in the anti-lynching movement challenged White Supremacist and True

Womanhood ideologies governing the criminal justice system. Legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw provides a theoretical basis, intersectionality theory, for arguing that scholars and activists address the intersection of race and gender identities in order to understand the anti essentialist plight of women of color. The guiding principles of the CRF approach that guide this project include: using counter-stories as guides for methodological inquiry; race and gender conscious analysis; historically contextualized explanations of interest convergence; intervention driven (non-neutral) research; interdisciplinary scholarship, and a belief that racism and sexism are endemic in American culture. Taken together the core tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and feminist theories, particularly of the black female body, also provide the critical analytical lens for interrogating the “healthy body” narratives within the context of American ideals about the body.

While majority of the work under the banner of CRF is legal scholarship, Wing explains that CRF scholars, like CRT scholars, “[endorse] a multidisciplinary approach to scholarship in which the law may be a necessary but not sufficient basis on which to formulate solutions to racial dilemmas” (6). I assert that the law is not sufficient to address dilemmas faced by women of color, particularly in light of the influences of mainstream media to shape popular opinion. CRF approaches, like CRT, must be applied in other influential arenas. Encouraged by the incorporation of CRT into Education Studies, my research seeks to expand CRF beyond the boundaries of legal studies, towards an interdisciplinary application in the humanities and social sciences, focused specifically on mainstream media. I assert that popular American media shape cultural discourse as much as, if not more than, the judicial system. The O.J. Simpson homicide

trial in 1994 provides an example of a famous black man who won his case in the courtroom, but lost in the “court of public opinion” facilitated via commercial media.

My research is premised upon Patricia Williams’ “Metro Broadcasting, Inc. V. FCC: Regrouping in Singular Times” (1990), which I consider to be a foundational text for making a Critical Race Feminist (CRF) intervention in Media Studies. Her critical assessment of the 1990 U.S. Supreme Court majority opinion “which upheld limited preference programs to increase minority owners of broadcast stations” (Williams 1990, 525) provides ten CRF tenets for a democratic media system. These political tenets highlight the relationship between mass media ownership, media content and democratic values. They are as follows:

1. Broadcast diversity is a compelling government interest (525).
2. Television is not a neutral, contentless, mindless, and unpersuasive vessel (535).
3. The “mass” in mass market should a) reflect complicated variety of many peoples and b) connote interactive and accommodative rather than dominant and majoritarian views (529).
4. Regulations of broadcast media should not supplant history with individualized hypothesis about free choice (526).
5. Regulatory agents of broadcast media should recognize and address the connection between ownership and broadcast content and disperse rather than concentrate ownership (537).
6. Broadcast media is increasingly used to spread (rather than exchange) information about markets (rather than ideas) (534-535).

7. Televisual media and media products are replacing libraries as cultural conveyors, and primary supporters of the broadcast media industry are corporate and private philanthropic sponsors (535).
8. The “neutral” ethic of individualism is a corporate group identity advancing political claims for that group identity, which is overwhelmingly dominated by *wealthy white males* (535, *emphasis mine*).
9. Monolithic “universal” culture promoted in popular media is a disguise of our nations overlapping variety that also locates non-white people as “separate,” “other,” even “separatist” (536).
10. Multicultural ownership in broadcasting enables access to the market and the marketplace of cultural images (537, 545-546).

Williams addresses the role of government, the function of the market, and the significance of multicultural representations of American bodies and perspectives in televisual media. I argue that her insights are broadly applicable to theories of media power beyond “Metro Broadcasting Inc. v. FCC” and should be engaged more thoroughly in critical media scholarship. Her work signals the importance of attending to media ownership and corporate identity in concert with research on broadcast content and representation. My scholarship seeks to put into practice her arguments regarding the relationship between media ownership, the market, and the cultural marketplace of ideas and images by coupling her focus on media content and media institutions as the foundation for a Critical Race Feminist approach to media scholarship.

In “Transcending Traditional Notions of Mothering: The Need for a Critical Race Feminist Praxis” Adrian Wing describes praxis as a key principle of critical race feminism. She writes...

Critical race feminism involves not only discussion of the theory surrounding definitions of mothering, but also involves "praxis"--encouraging change through putting theory into practice (Wing and Weselmann 1999, 275).

She lists survival, nurturing, and transcendence as essential components of a critical race feminist praxis applied to mothering. *Precious Opportunities* expands Wing’s care ethic in critical race feminist praxis to the work of black women scholars and activists attending to the depiction of black girls and women in televisual media.

A Procession of Chapters

This dissertation proposes a critical race feminist praxis which begins with critiques of commercial media messages about childhood obesity, argues for broadening public health discourses to include literature as one contrasting medium, and makes recommendations for addressing youth food decision-making based upon action-oriented research. Chapter one, “Critical Race Feminist Praxis: Advancing a Critical Race Feminist Intervention in Media Studies,” provides an overview of the methodology applied in each chapter of the dissertation. As such, this CRF praxis model employs multilayered methodological approaches to determine a multiple solutions for public health issues. Chapter one introduces a CRF media praxis that uses a multi-sited media research methodology that accomplishes two tasks. One, it offers a subject-centered,

issue-focused, black feminist cultural critique of media texts. Two, it engages in a “fierce critical interrogation” of media texts alongside an analysis of the media institutions that control and distribute the texts.

Critical race feminist praxis, however, requires broadening the analytical frame from the politics of representation in televisual media to include an examination of literary texts that centralize black girl narratives and counter universal body narratives. Therefore, the second section of chapter one describes two CRF responses to the dominant presentation of the “childhood obesity epidemic” in mass media. One response is situated within an alternative medium to televisual media, and the second explores the lived experiences of youth. The methodological approach for the CRF literary response is black feminist literary criticism and for the CRF action response is participatory action research. Chapter one explains the primary units of analysis as well as methods employed in each of the remaining chapters.

Chapter two, “As Seen on TV: Looking Within the Frame at the Official Story,” critically examines the Emmy nominated cable reality series *Too Fat for Fifteen* set at Wellspring Academy, a weight-loss boarding school. This chapter analyzes the first season of the first ever reality show dedicated to the topic of childhood obesity. It is positioned within the context of “real” genre television programming that addresses the topic of childhood obesity, including news segments and popular talk-shows as primary sites of analysis “within the frame” of televisual media. By centering black girl stories, “As Seen On TV” illustrates the limitations of the reality program and Wellspring Academy, as media product and weight-loss consumer product respectively, to address contributing factors to youth decision-making beyond the framing of the official

“childhood obesity” story. Obesity is determined as their primary problem and body management through dieting and working out are the solutions.

Chapter three, “800lb Media Gorilla: A Fierce Critical Interrogation of Corporate Troubles At Home,” builds upon the previous chapter, establishing the central character, the cable distribution network, and the primary commercial product promoted in *Too Fat for Fifteen* as a starting point for multi-sited media research. This chapter moves “beyond the frame” of media texts to investigate the practices of the owners of the cable network and the weight-loss boarding school in the material world. The data is interpreted within the narrative framework constructed by the media text producers whereby obesity is the primary problem and poor parenting is the cause. The results of the “fierce critical interrogation” reveal that the relevant parent companies “beyond the frame” not only distribute images and messages about one central character at Wellspring Academy, but they are also part of her off-camera media and physical environment at home.

Stories by and about black women and, to a greater extent, black girls are often absent even when our bodies are visible and/or being discussed in American popular media. Chapter Four, “Recovering a Precious Presence: A Critical Race Feminist Literary Response,” reviews literature featuring black girl protagonists drawing upon critical race scholar Carl Gutiérrez concept of racial injuries. In order for black girls to be made whole—i.e. to obtain remedies for racial injuries—their bodies and narratives must be presented cohesively. Using classic texts within African American women’s literature, I center black girl protagonists’ counterstories to challenge the dominant narratives about black girls lives and their bodies. Sapphire’s protagonist, Claireece

“Precious” Jones, from the novel *Push* provides the most powerful and complex contemporary counternarrative to the childhood obesity official story. By putting specific literatures from the humanities *and* health sciences in dialogue this chapter advances black girls stories as central to the project of “critical race feminist praxis” that seeks remedies for race *and* sex injuries sustained by black girls in American culture.

Chapter Five, “Camp Carrot Seed: Embodied Epistemology and a Pedagogy for Social Change as Ethnographic Practice,” concludes the CRF praxis model by incorporating action and reflection as critical practice. Camp Carrot Seed, a participatory action research project, blends pedagogy with ethnographic research to study consumption habits of black youth. This ethnographic study included working directly with a small group of middle school and high school aged black youth who either worshipped or lived in the women’s shelter at a mission in northwest Atlanta, Georgia. Camp Carrot Seed, an eight-week summer program, exposed them to multiple literacies regarding food and community assets focused specifically on the natural environment. “Camp Carrot Seed” reflects on a pedagogical approach that advances literacy as a form of sociopolitical action having greater potential to recover diverse black girls’ bodies and to respond to the concerns raised in their stories.

Chapter 1
Critical Race Feminist Praxis:
Advancing a Critical Race Feminist Intervention in Media Studies

Precious Opportunities advances a critical race feminist intervention in media studies as a means to dissect the childhood obesity narrative in popular television and to illuminate the politics of fat black girl's bodies in this universal narrative. This chapter presents an overview of critical race feminism as the primary conceptual framework for the dissertation. It also establishes a methodology that is premised upon ethnographic media research that guides the critical inquiry for chapters two and three. Finally it provides the conceptual and methodological framing for critical race feminist responses featuring literature and literacy as humanities-based interventions in public health.

Why Critical Race Feminist Media Studies?

Media scholars are often organized within two camps regarding the primary site(s) of power and primary units of analysis in media. Political economists regard media institutions such as large corporations, which function as gatekeepers of mediums of mass communication, and government agencies as primary sites of political and economic power in media. The emphasis in political economy media research ranges from the structure of media ownership and the culture of industry regulations to corporate influence over the political process via mass media. Cultural studies scholars, on the other hand, identify cultural producers such as writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians and their popular content as key sites of power. As such, the work of cultural critics is typically focused at the level of media texts such as popular television programs, films, commercials, music, newspapers, magazines, and YouTube videos. However, as media

conglomerates consolidate ownership of communications infrastructure, technology, cultural producers, content providers, and content these lines of demarcation between the two camps have blurred.

Critical Race Feminism insists upon the recognition of race and gender hierarchies, explicitly White supremacy and heteropatriarchy, as primary social oppressions upon which all dominant cultural structures such as law, education, medicine, and media in the U.S. are organized. A Critical Race Feminist approach to Media Studies attends to the reality that women of color broadly, black women in particular, are largely regarded in media scholarship as marginal scholars and marginal subjects of research. Likewise, women of color are regarded as marginal subjects in the production and circulation of media texts as well as in the realm of reception, as media audiences. Furthermore, women of color are less likely to be in high-level decision-making roles in media companies, media conglomerates, and institutions that regulate media entities in comparison with whites and males. Yet black women's bodies have a long and storied history in print, film, and televisual mass media.

Critical Race Feminism, born out of critical race theory in legal studies and black feminism, highlights the growing power of mass media to shape American culture and rights discourse. However, there are very few Critical Race or black feminist scholars that situate their research explicitly within the field of Media Studies. Likewise, Media Studies has not incorporated CRF media research by scholars such as Patricia Williams, Toni Morrison, and Jacquelyn Bobo within key works in traditional media scholarship. I argue that a Critical Race Feminist approach to Media Studies would promote a "black

feminist subjectivity” that contributes alternative, oppositional, and intersectional perspectives to analyses of the American mass media experience.

Critical Race Feminist Media Studies places black feminist cultural criticism squarely at the center of the political economy and cultural studies debate. This debate has historically excluded the voices of and research by women of color, particularly in regards to media research. Rooted in the Marxist tradition, political economists, also known as critical scholars, believe media institutions are dominated by members of the “ruling class” who use media as a tool to distribute capitalist ideologies, who have more power to influence the democratic process and who dictate culture to the masses. Therefore, political economy research is often focused on the structures, social relations, and practices of media entities and/or policies governing media industries. Political economists (PE) in Media Studies tend to categorize audiences as “the masses,” i.e. a large body of people networked via mass media, that are misguided by popular media and therefore exist in a state of “false consciousness” regarding their political and economic interests. Identifying class as the central organizing principal, PE’s either exclude or absorb differences such as race, gender, and sexuality—to name a few—within a class analysis (Garnham, 70).

Cultural studies scholarship in media studies is rooted in Marxist and Freudian thought; it emphasizes the importance of researching popular media texts and the culture of everyday life. As such, cultural studies research prioritizes the message (structuralism/semiotics) and images (psychoanalysis/postmodernism). In reception studies scholars argue there is power in the “popular,” that the distribution/consumption moment, also known as the reception moment, in the circuit of communication is an

important point of entry for studying media power (Hall 2001). Media reception scholars argue audiences bring their own knowledge and experiences to the interpretive process and do not represent a homogenous mass body of dominant readers. Also, cultural critics foreground “the politics of representation” recognizing that race/ethnicity, sex/gender, sexuality and nationality function as politically and historically important variables in a media power analysis. Critical Race Feminism employs storytelling, more specifically counterstories, as an essential starting point for methodological practice. This tendency to begin with media texts also situates CRF within the tradition of cultural studies in media scholarship.

Black feminist cultural critics focus on the “politics of representation,” but some also discuss how power is disbursed unequally throughout the circuit of communication including the reception moment. In “Negative Images: Towards A Black Feminist Cultural Criticism” Michelle Wallace addresses the need for black feminism to develop a black feminist cultural criticism that acknowledges not only the cultural studies approach, but also invests in a political economy approach to analysis. Wallace explains that as blacks begin to participate in and be recognized more in cultural production there needs to be a tradition of criticism that looks beyond the media texts and their circulation. She encourages a black feminist project that examines the “inner politics” of television’s portrayal of black women and women of color; the politics of gatekeeping in black cultural production; and the economic and political state of black audiences in the “real world.” Wallace asserts that “if a black feminism of women of color, is going to thrive on any level as a cultural analysis, it cannot continue to ignore the way Freud, Marx, Saussure, Nietzsche, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault have forever altered the

credibility of the obvious truth, ‘common sense’ or any unitary conception of reality” (248).

Critical Race Feminist Media Studies is necessary because Feminist Media Studies, black cultural criticism, and traditional media scholarship often ignores, erases, or subordinates black feminist creativity and scholarship. Feminist Media Studies provides a theoretical framework for examining gender and the perpetuation of patriarchy in media. However, gender as the primary unit of analysis does not address the multiplicity of oppressions that contour both the representation of women of color throughout mass media or their everyday experiences with media as cultural workers— i.e. filmmakers, actresses, and cultural critics—as intended/unintended audiences, and as consumers. Similarly, anti-racist cultural criticism has, at times, rejected “black feminist creativity” or discounted it. Significant examples include the negative reviews and/or protests against Ntozake Shange for her Broadway production of *For Colored Girls* (1975); Michelle Wallace for her critical text *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979); and Alice Walker for her novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) and the subsequent film (1985) by Steven Spielberg (Wallace, 131-132; Bobo, 43-51). Sapphire’s novel *Push* (1996) and the subsequent film *Precious: A film based on the novel Push* (2009) is the most recent example. While it is important to criticize black feminist works, intra-racial criticism of black women’s work silences, controls, and, to a certain extent, polices black women’s narratives, which depict multiplicative intersectional epistemologies.

An important example often discussed in Critical Race Feminism in legal scholarship is the mistreatment of legal scholar Anita Hill by congressional

representatives and her subsequent misrepresentations in popular media. She is a relevant critical subject for media studies because she was vilified throughout mass media outlets. The intense scrutiny of her work and her values as well as the denial of her right to fair representation as a women of color citizen was amplified throughout mainstream media long after the congressional hearings ended. When Anita Hill testified about, then U.S. Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas' sexual harassment in the workplace she "aired dirty laundry" in public and, critics argued, chose her gender over her race. On the other hand, the reduction of the narrative to sexual harassment rooted primarily in sexism and gender oppression obscured the multiple intersecting oppressions at play during the hearings. This limited frame obscured the racialized socio-historical narrative of black female hypersexuality underlying images of Hill circulating via mass media.

Black feminist cultural criticism is key for scholarly practice in CRF Media Studies for four reasons. One, it centers what Michelle Wallace describes as a "radical black feminist perspective" that...

[examines] the interplay of 'sex,' 'race,' and class in Anglo-American and [African-American] culture as they may shape the 'production' of knowledge, the structure, content and 'circulation' of the 'text', as well as the 'audience' of consumption (Wallace 2008, 242).

Two, it insists upon a "fierce critical interrogation" of widely circulated media texts as an important part of scholarly practice. Three, it calls for scholarly critical interpretations of media texts by African Americans of African-American work created for African-Americans. Four, black feminist cultural criticism promotes audience research that articulates which media texts are considered popular with black audiences

and why, as well as a variety of black female audience interpretations of media texts.

Interdisciplinary scholarship is a hallmark of both CRF and Media Studies. My work engages texts from various fields and disciplines including, but not limited to, law, communication studies, literary studies, film studies, women's studies, and media anthropology to develop a foundation for Critical Race Feminist Media Studies. The media reception analytic framework for chapters three and four of the dissertation is premised upon the work of legal scholars Adrian Wing (2003) and Patricia Williams (1990); black feminist cultural critics Michelle Wallace (1990), bell hooks (1992), and Jacqueline Bobo (1995); novelist and literary scholar Toni Morrison (1997), and feminist communications scholar Beretta Smith-Shomade (2002). These texts reflect an interdisciplinary black feminist project of "doing" media scholarship that speaks directly to the ongoing cultural studies and political economy concerns in media studies.

In "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," Michelle Wallace describes "black feminist creativity [as] inherently (potentially) subversive of a patriarchal hegemony, as well as of a racist and exclusionary white cultural hegemony" (Wallace 2008, 252). Wallace's work indicates that the "problematic of silence," invisibility, and the hypervisibility of women of color goes beyond the "politics of representation" in media texts precisely because media permeate every aspect of the social fabric in the U.S. Furthermore, Black women's presence in media texts does not equal power in terms of agency or opportunities to influence the "cultural marketplace of ideas." She asserts that, "black feminism must insist upon a critical oppositional representation of the black female subject" (252). Addressing the presence of our bodies and absence of our diverse critical voices in media is a central part of the black feminist

cultural criticism project.

Adrian Wing, a CRF legal scholar, explains in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (2003)...

Women of color are mired at the bottom of American society according to every social indicator. Whether they be African American, Latina, Asian, or Native American, these women have failed to be successfully integrated into the mainstream, much less the upper echelons, of American economic, political, social, or educational life (Wing, 1).

This exclusion and erasure means the contributions, needs and concerns of women of color, both as cultural producers and consumers of media, have been and continue to be devalued. Wing also states that, “[a] broad range of stereotypes about the various groups of women abound: incompetent, powerless, invisible, inferior, lazy, voiceless, sexually submissive, sexually brazen, irrelevant, welfare queens, unfit mothers.” Black women’s exclusion from all levels of power is even more egregious considering “white cultural gatekeepers have also drastically undervalued social and economic impact of black women as cultural consumers” (Bobo 1995, 21). In a market driven media system, being an undervalued consumer market limits black women’s ability to resist against a predominately white male owned media industry that—by circulating narrow stereotypes and misrepresentations—makes black female bodies hypervisible globally. A popular example is the proliferation of televisual images of silent black women performing in rap music videos widely circulated in the U.S. and internationally.

Wing’s *Critical Race Feminism* collection brings together a range of key essays by women of color legal scholars who discuss the limitations of the legal system and their

professional experiences. Wing's reader illuminates critical legal inquiry and activism that centers women of color as subjects of analysis and highlights their narratives of professional experiences studying and working in their field. Wing's defines the contours of CRF in the US and providing references for the origins of "critical race feminism" and CRF practitioners. Wing's CRF reader is a model for generating similar narrative exchanges across and between "the law" and "the media," two of the most culturally influential systems in the U.S. Legal scholars, Patricia Williams and Kimberly Crenshaw regularly critique mass media from a legal perspective. On the other hand, media scholars and critics like Beretta Smith-Shomade and Toni Morrison critique non-fiction legal practices portrayed throughout mass media outlets.

Novelist and critical race scholar Toni Morrison, along with Claudia Brodsky Lacour, co-edited *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, Spectacle and the O.J. Simpson Trial* (1997), which discusses the political and cultural implications of contemporary print and broadcast media organizations that construct mass distributed master narratives. *Birth of a Nation'hood* models *interdisciplinary cultural criticism* of media texts and institutions as well as *issue-focused media research*. *Birth of a Nation'hood* includes scholarship from American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Legal Studies, Critical Race Studies, Literary and Linguistic Studies, and Women's Studies. The essays provide sharp oppositional commentary on a single issue representing a critical moment in U.S. history, the O.J. Simpson trial. Morrison's introduction frames the edited volume with a description of how an "official story" gets developed specifically via image-based mass communication outlets. The overall purpose of the project is to critique the cultural and

political work of mass storytelling and the role of “spectacle” in U.S. mythmaking and master narratives.

Filmmaker and communications scholar, Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, authored *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* (2002) chronicling the seminal texts in television studies and the dearth of scholarly attention to black women in television. Smith-Shomade offers a *subject-based approach* to television studies by intentionally organizing her research with black women at the center of the analysis. She analyzes fiction and non-fiction representations of black women throughout popular genres including sitcom and music videos. Smith-Shomade also interrogates the portrayal of “real” black women on news programs and of course talk-show mogul, Oprah Winfrey.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks encourages more black women to engage in black feminist cultural criticism of popular media texts in addition to literary criticism in her essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” Hooks says, of the oppositional gaze, “[that] all attempts to repress our/black people’s right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire.... By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality’” (116). She laments the dearth of scholarship on “black female spectatorship” and proposes a method for critical black female spectatorship called “fierce critical interrogation.” Hooks wants spectators to interrogate popular images recognizing that “the real world of image-making is political” (5). In “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” hooks demonstrates a black feminist cultural criticism through her multi-

media review where she interrogates the circulation of black female bodies in televisual, film, advertising and print images. Hooks asserts that

representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were not part of the 19th century racism and which still shape perceptions today (hooks 1992, 62)

Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) essentially responds to hooks by highlighting the cultural work black women do as cultural producers and as an "interpretive community" of cultural readers. Bobo connects the interpretive work of black female readers of literature and black female spectators of film by drawing upon reception theory and audience studies to demonstrate her critical scholarly treatment of mainstream film texts. She elevates the "black feminist creativity" of black women filmmakers, actresses, and audiences to signal the importance of critically engaging cultural producers and cultural workers, who create media texts or work within the culture industry. Bobo's work engages two film texts, *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*. The former represents a mainstream film directed by, celebrated white male filmmaker, Steven Spielberg, based upon Alice Walker's black feminist/womanist novel. In contrast, the latter is an independent film written and directed by, black feminist filmmaker, Julie Dash.

Bobo's selection of texts provides a broad field for analyzing multiple moments on the circuit of communication ranging from issues of accessibility, translation from novel to film texts, essentialist assumptions about black woman as cultural readers, and the cultural gatekeeping practices that restrict the circulation of black feminist cultural

products in the “cultural marketplace of ideas.” Bobo employs qualitative methods to explore perspectives of “black women as cultural readers,” asserting that black women represent an under-examined, yet extremely important “interpretive community.”

Collectively these black female scholars and critics of film and television call for: race *and* gender conscious subject-centered approaches to content analysis; recognition of black female interpretive media audiences; and politically engaged scholarly critiques of popular visual media. My research attends to the gaps and overlap between Critical Race Feminism and Media Studies. I demonstrate potential types of inquiries for researching televisual media that are made possible using a CRF approach. In addition to storytelling, specifically emphasizing counterstories, this approach “wholeheartedly embraces... praxis” as a guiding principle of methodological practice. Wing explains...

Since many of us come from disenfranchised communities of color, we feel compelled to “look to the bottom,” to involve ourselves in the development of solutions to our people’s problems (Wing, 6).

The most important contribution of a CRF approach to Media Studies is the notion of praxis, i.e. reflection/accountability in addition to theory and action. It is not enough to engage a critical race feminist praxis that only critiques mass media representations and institutions. Scholarship for change must also *respond* to dominant media narratives by highlighting alternative mediums, such as imaginative literature, that center black girl stories. Another response is ethnographic action research—i.e. direct engagement—with black youth to qualitatively assesses their consumer logics in the context of their lived experience and offer them access to a broad range of literacies, including media literacy, in exchange for participation.

Media Power and Youth Audiences

Research focused specifically on youth media usage (Kaiser Family Foundation 2010) indicates that they are, through the use of multiple media platforms, managing to increase their daily media usage within the same time span. In other words they are cramming 10 hours of media engagement in seven hours because they are using multiple media at the same time. The “media effects” argument is based upon the idea that electronic media platforms are widely available to youth universally. However, the number of youth living in poverty reached more than sixteen million in 2010, up 4.8 million from 2000 (Children's Defense Fund 2011). With 22% of U.S. children living in poverty, some homeless and/or displaced from their homes, the assumption that youth universally use multiple forms of media or have television(s) in their homes is debatable.

The “uses and gratifications” approach may be more applicable for vulnerable populations of youth. However one major challenge to a core belief in this approach is vulnerable youth are less likely to have a variety of choices in their media consumption (platforms and media texts). A more accurate assumption is youth use what is made available for them under the constraints of institutions that provide youth access to media such as libraries, schools, and homeless shelters, community centers in addition to what their guardians can afford to give them. This dissertation argues for a both/and approach to the media-centric “effects” paradigm and the socio-centric “uses and gratifications” paradigm.

In this project I incorporate the CRF “looking to the bottom” tenet as a guide for thinking about youth of color whose images are circulated in media and who are also targeted as media audiences. My methodological approach assumes that power is

situated mostly with media institutions, particularly media owners, who can dictate dominant or “official” narratives for mass circulation in popular media. It also assumes audiences have limited power individually to have oppositional and negotiated readings (Hall 2001) of pervasive and unavoidable media messages such as those presented in outdoor advertisements throughout American visual landscapes. Audiences also have power to be selective regarding the media content they choose to engage with regularly. However, even if audiences choose to avoid direct engagement with media platforms media messages are intertextual and therefore circulated culturally through language and socially in workplaces and schools. Audiences also have the ability to organize collectively to impact media content through fandom, to challenge corporate media practices through boycotts or campaigns, and to influence media policymakers through lobbying and protesting.

Broadly defined, it assumes an exchange theory approach that does not isolate media practices from everyday social practices but seeks to examine the construction of American body politics within televisual media. In “As Seen on TV,” I begin with intersectional research subjects (Crenshaw 1991, 377) within media texts and in “800lb Media Gorilla,” I proceed beyond the frame of media texts to examine relevant media entities involved in the production of the selected media text. Finally, I reframe the data collected beyond the frame of the primary media text using the narrative ideology presented in the primary media text to assess the data about media producers.

“As Seen On TV” draws upon critical race theory, black feminism, and cultural criticism for the theoretical framing of the content analysis of *Too Fat for Fifteen: Fighting Back*, the primary media text. Two important guiding features of this CRF

reading are issue-focused and intersectional subject-driven research. The central issue explored in this dissertation is the “childhood obesity epidemic.” The primary subject of my research is Tanisha Mitchell, a contemporary obese Black teenage girl featured as a central subject in the primary media text.

Content-based research includes an analysis of narrative structures, semiotics and myth, character analysis—subjects vs. objects, format and genre, and more. Typically a raced or gendered analysis is used to contextualize media texts historically, culturally, or politically to determine media producers’ intended meaning(s). An intersectional analysis calls for broader and deeper inquiries into the complexity of a character’s narrative and of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination relevant to them as central subjects. For the purposes of this research project, I do not presume to be able to explain the various decisions made by the variegated media producers regarding which content is selected to air on television. I also do not assume that my reading of the material is a reflection of the majority opinion or dominant readings of the primary media text in circulation.

My methodology assumes that media organizations are impacting audiences beyond the point of media reception, as citizens, workers, as well as consumers. I intend to demonstrate for academic and non-academic uses, an oppositional method of active inquiry both *within* and *beyond* media texts, which transgresses intended interactive web-based methods of audience participation solicited by televisual networks via weblogs and discussions websites. I argue that my methods of inquiry push the boundaries of media epistemology; insisting that actual bodies depicted in mass media be treated ethically and

that media organizations be accountable to the ideologies circulated via the media texts they produce and distribute.

Critical Race Feminist Media Praxis

The conceptual process of this media praxis is organized into three phases. Phase one is an issue-focused and subject-centered content analysis that situates silenced black female bodies as intersectional black feminist subjects. Phase One includes a race *and* gender conscious critique of the official story within a genre specific context. Phase two examines the intertextuality of media messages, foregrounding the endless stream of televisual text and the underlying capitalist motive to promote products throughout broadcast television. This phase incorporates a wide-angle lens (Spitulnik 2010), a media ethnographic practice that broadens the analytic frame in order to contextualize the selected media text within a linear pre/post televisual narrative moving across genres over time. Finally, the wide-angle lens inquiry also includes an analysis beyond the television frame, which incorporates a multi-sited “follow-the-leader” (Marcus 1995) ethnography, whereby “leader” represents the chain of ownership leading to the parent company of the media producer and the central product promoted within the central media text.

Phase three radically reframes the data collected “beyond the frame” about parent companies alongside the “within the frame” subjects and narrative ideologies. A comparative analysis of the individual character subjects and corporate subjects, I believe, provides a more just depiction of cause of public health issues such as childhood obesity. Employing Arjun Appadurai’s concept of financescapes, technoscapes, ethnoscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes provides guidance for assessing data collected through the wide-angle lens inquiry on childhood obesity in popular television. More

importantly, “scapes” provide critical areas for analyzing the overlapping complexity of the corporate practices of large parent companies, particularly media conglomerates, in the nation.

Phase one involves a close reading of *Too Fat for Fifteen*, which includes a narrative and genre analysis. Through transcription of various segments, I identify patterns of character behavior as they are presented within the media text as well as camera angles used within the genre. The units of analysis may include both still and moving images; narration and voiceovers, interviews and dialogue; in-program and edited music; and commercials immediately before, during, and after the official broadcast scheduling for the program. The media text in this study is defined as the content within the eight episodes of the first season, not including the commercials. The genre analysis highlights the rules and practices of the genre and narrative objectives of “real” televisual formats.

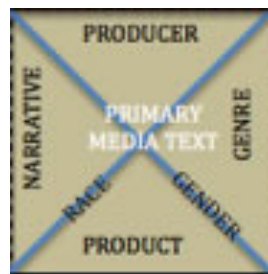


Figure 1:
Two-dimensional
square

Figure 1 represents variables analyzed within the primary media text focused centrally on an intersectional subject-centered approach, which allows for diverse perspectives within race and gender specific readings. It also makes visible complex subjectivities of characters experiencing these and other differences collectively. It

“recognizes the importance of locating racism within a fluid and contested history of racially based social structures and discourses” (Omi and Winant, 71). This approach also allows for diverse and non-normative representations of genders, bodies and sexualities. Collectively this lens brings into focus a complex analysis of characters as subjects and the politics of the “official story” promoted via televisual media.

The focus is then shifted to the financescapes (corporations) and technoscapes (television) involved with the production and distribution of the primary media text. A prism metaphor is incorporated to attend to the cultural work inherent in the circulation of certain images within these financescapes and technoscapes of mass media.

Feminist literary scholar, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, uses a prism metaphor to explain her method for reading popular icons that continue to circulate over time in visual and material culture. In *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* she asserts that when an icon such as the mammy figure is metaphorically likened to a prism, the investigation more accurately illuminates the desires of a culture and its’ cultural producers. She writes...

It may be most useful...to think of the mammy as a multifaceted prism used to illuminate a continuous spectrum of American views and attitudes about racial hierarchy. Just as Newton’s prism demonstrated that white light was composed of rays different colors, the prism of scholarship exposes fragments that constitute mammy as a whole.... [It] is instructive for new critical approaches to racial and gender stereotypes (Wallace-Sanders 2008, 12).

Wallace-Sanders work is a historically contextualized oppositional reading of the continuous deployment of the mammy figure in literature, monuments, dolls, and ephemera over time. She argues the circulation of the mammy figure reveals more about American culture and the culture industry than it does about black women's actual lives. Building upon the prism metaphor, my media research model uses the square bottom pyramid. Unlike a solid glass prism with refracting surfaces, the pyramid can be further manipulated to demonstrate a contemporary investigation of media producers that influence culture within and beyond media texts.

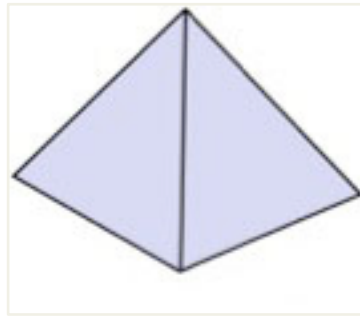


Figure 2: Three-dimensional Square-bottom pyramid

The triangle on the left (Figure 2) represents the financescape, making visible the central product promoted in the primary media text as a unit of analysis. The triangle on the right (Figure 2) depicts secondary media texts representing the technoscape. This unit of analysis focuses on different televisual genres such as talk shows or news segments that feature characters and products from the primary media text. The triangle on the right represents the progression of the “official story” beyond of the primary media text. The three-dimensional perspective focuses on images and narratives that are *seen* within the televisual frame (technoscape) in addition to drawing attention to *unseen* practices of

sponsoring corporations (financescape). However, this gaze does not show the narrative and genre analysis of the media text from Phase One and presents only half of the four-sided pyramid. Therefore, I shift the gaze to a birds-eye view of the pyramid to access all four triangles in the pyramid.

Figure 3: Birds-eye view of
Square-bottom pyramid

The closed pyramid (see Figure 3) still hides the content analysis completed in Phase One, but the combination of a birds-eye view with an open-face pyramid (see Figure 4) presents a wide-angle research frame where “fierce critical interrogation” originates.

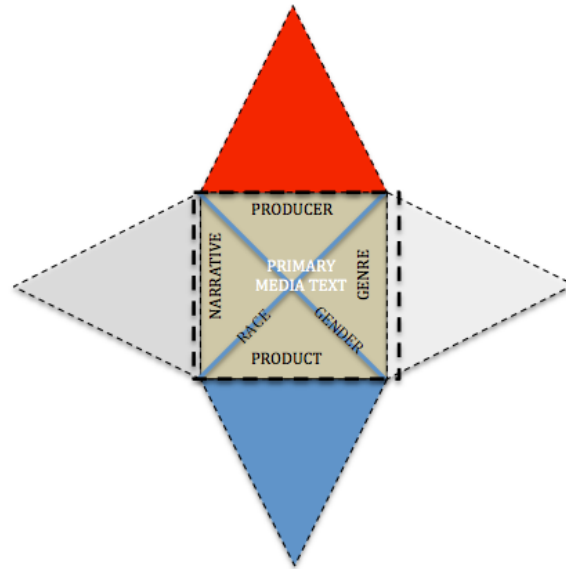


Figure 4:
Open face Square-bottom pyramid

Media anthropologist, Debra Spitulnik, explains in her essay “Thick Context, Deep Epistemology: A Meditation on Wide-Angle Lenses on Media, Knowledge Production and the Concept of Culture” that...

[A] more enriched or focused way of doing wide-angle media research might entail a series of dynamic moves such as carefully examining the lines of influence and connection within a context, looping back to the core research question, potentially shifting the question, and then taking a fresh look at the conjectured relations and objects within a wider context and revising them accordingly (115).

Spitulnik suggests “one way to enrich wide-angle research is ... directly [acknowledging] the use of open-ended discovery procedures...” (116). The open-face pyramid recentralizes the primary media text symbolized by the square, and each triangle symbolizes open-ended research along two axes. From this perspective the race *and*

gender conscious analysis of subjects within the media text as well as the narrative and genre assessment of the media text is accessible. Furthermore, it showcases the horizontal axis of the televisual narrative circulating before and after the initial airing of the primary media text. It intersects with the vertical axis of the media producers (network) and product distributors (sponsors) at the point of the media text.

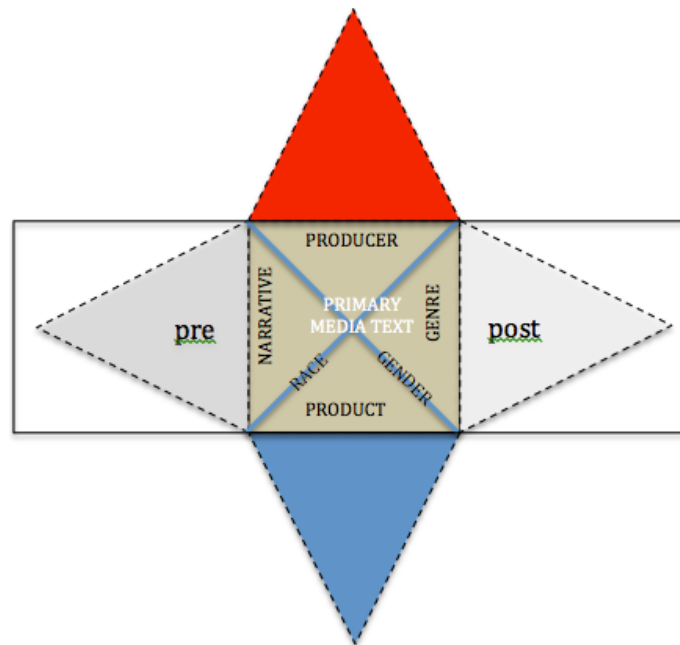


Figure 5:
Wide-angle Horizontal Lens

The wide-angle horizontal lens (Figure 5) provides a panoramic view of the “official story”—the childhood obesity epidemic—as it is depicted over time via intersectional subjects such as Tanisha Mitchell. The open-face perspective includes an emphasis on the historical framing of the issue in addition to recognizing the present and future uses of the primary media text as part of the “official story.” The narrative, genre, and central subjects of the primary media text can be read within a broader chronology of the televisual narrative. The televisual texts I include in my research are also part of the

“real” genres—news, talk shows, and reality shows. I specifically focused on television programming that addressed the issue of childhood obesity and included subjects similar to those represented in *Too Fat for Fifteen*.

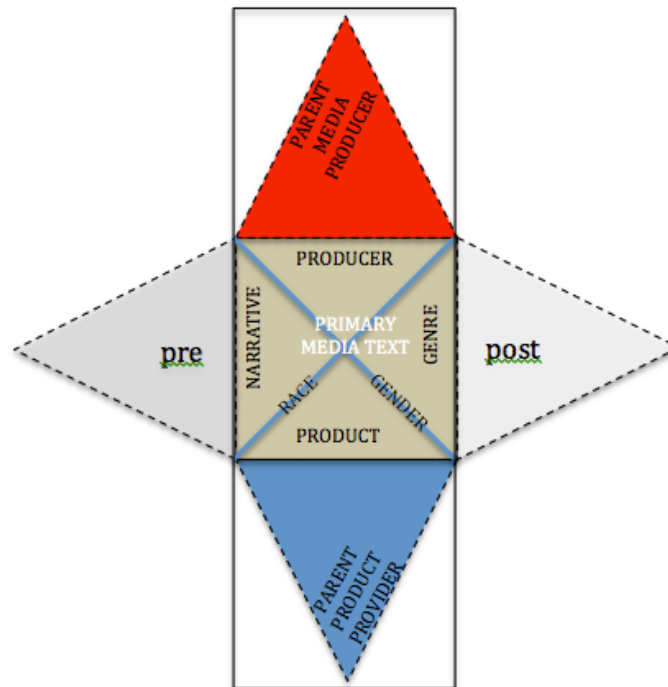


Figure 6:
Wide-angle Vertical Lens

The wide-angle vertical lens (see Figure 7) examines relevant media institutions and organizations that either own the network that distributes the primary media text, *Too Fat for Fifteen*, or invests in the main product promoted via the primary media text. These entities represent the “corporate bodies” that are *unseen* within the televisual frame’s narrative structure. For instance, *Too Fat for Fifteen* is distributed by the Style Network and promotes Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas, a weight-loss boarding school, as a solution for addressing the childhood obesity epidemic. By identifying the parent company of Style network as Comcast Corporation and the parent company of

Wellspring Academy as Bain Capital, I examined how each company addressed the childhood obesity epidemic outside of the televisual frame.

Phase Three has four final steps, which are intended to recontextualize “within the frame” of the primary media text my analysis of the relevant data collected “beyond the frame.” The purpose is to situate data collected about media institutions alongside the intersectional characters upon which the official story pivots on television. Research questions made possible by this radical reframing include: If the corporate body was assessed within the ideological framework established by the media text how would it be portrayed? How are parent companies who own or invest in the media text or central product conducting their business beyond the televisual frame? How do the practices of the parent companies of the media producer and product distributor in the “real” world inform the official story in televisual media?

Figure 7:
Reframe Layer
Parent Company #1
 If the corporation was assessed within the ideological framework established by the media text how would it be portrayed?

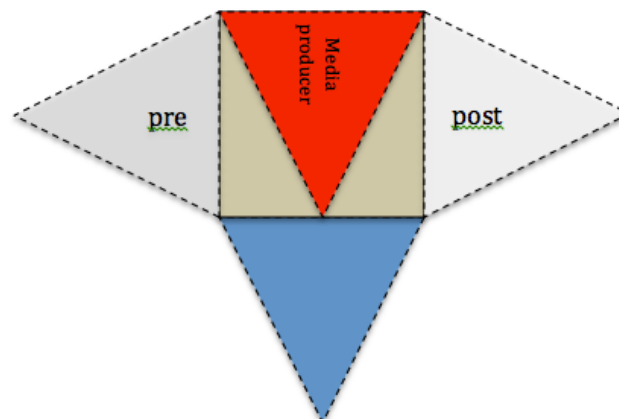


Figure 8:
Reframe Layer
Parent Company #2
 Do parent companies business practices affect characters beyond the televisual frame?

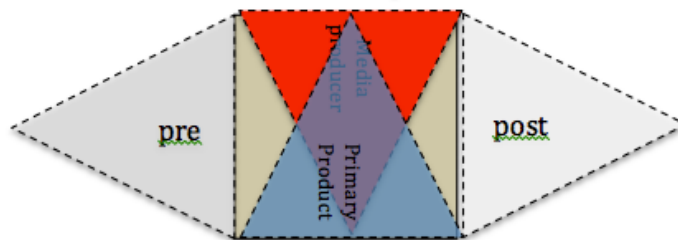


Figure 9:
Reframe Layer
Pre-Media Texts
 Is there a relationship between the media producer and product distributor that relates to the “official story” beyond the televisual frame?

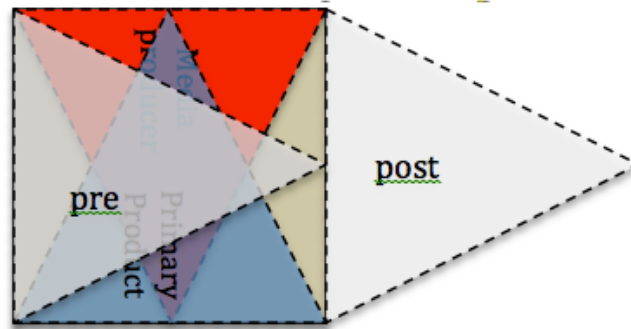
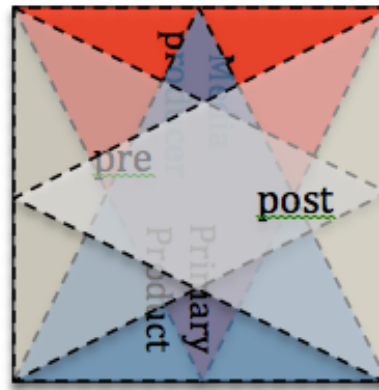


Figure 10:
Complete Multilayered
Unit of Analysis
 If the relationship between the parent companies of the media producer and product distributor were televised would it inform the “official story?”



Guiding research questions are as follows: Does *Too Fat for Fifteen* effectively promote solutions for the concerns raised by obese children, particularly black girls? Whose interests converge with this form of media intervention? How might a race and gender conscious analysis significantly shift the narrative of, specifically, and the childhood obesity epidemic narrative more broadly?

By working specifically with a reality television show, I signal that the reality genre offers unique opportunities for methodological inquiry. I widen the frame of analysis to interrogate relevant owners involved with the production and distribution of *Too Fat for Fifteen*. I introduce corporate subjects into the ideological narrative of the primary unit of analysis based upon Patricia Williams’ assessment that media ownership dictates the dominant ideology of mass media as a “cultural marketplace of ideas.”

Through a “follow-the-thing,” multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 106), I provide a critical narrative of the “corporate bodies” and “corporate families” of parent companies involved with *Too Fat for Fifteen*. Finally, I re-engage the original research questions regarding intended effects of *Too Fat for Fifteen* within the childhood obesity framework; interest convergence; and the implications of a race and gender conscious analysis on the framing of the “childhood obesity epidemic” narrative. This combined critical analysis of media texts, media institutions and media producers via subject-based and issue-focused research allows me to craft a compelling counterstory of *Too Fat for Fifteen* as a media product; the owners of Wellspring Academy; and the producers and distributors of *Too Fat for Fifteen*. My findings suggest that there is much more to the televisual campaign against the “childhood obesity epidemic” than initially meets the eye.

Critical Race Feminist Responses

Chapters four and five of this dissertation argue that literature and literacy offers humanities-based responses to public health concerns. As critical race feminist responses, the research counters official stories about black female bodies in popular media and challenges limited representations of youth, particularly youth of color, as poor decision-makers regarding food. As an American Studies project the methodology employed in “Recovering a Precious Presence: A Critical Race Feminist Literary Response” begins with a review of black girl stories in imaginative literature, followed by a critical reading of public health and health science discourses regarding childhood obesity. I put specific literatures from the humanities *and* health sciences in dialogue with an express interest in developing a “critical race feminist body praxis” that centers

black girls experiences in an effort to determine remedies to race *and* sex injuries sustained by black girls in American culture.

The first section of “Recovering a Precious Presence” explores common tropes in black women’s fiction regarding black girls’ being “visibly invisible” and simultaneously hypervisible. My reading of these black girl centered texts highlights fiction by black women writers over the last four decades that draws attention to a variety of reasons for black girls feelings of low self-worth not only due to their skin color and now their weight, but a multiplicity of oppressions. Sapphire’s *Push* is the black girl story I use to explore a recovery model that centers black girls’ bodies and demonstrates methods for supporting young girls seeing themselves as valuable. The body praxis recovery model that Sapphire presents in her novel includes: literacy for social and economic survival, interventions to ensure safe living spaces, health care support, popular education, encouraging the development of a “crew” among extremely vulnerable populations of girls.

Deborah McDowell presents a philosophy of the body conveyed via the literary work of Toni Morrison, prose by Audre Lorde, and legal and medical research by Dorothy Roberts in her essay “Recovery Missions: Imaging the Body Ideals.” She argues that Morrison’s view of the body is...

not only as a mortifying imperfectible organism, but also as a fundamentally elusive entity not easily graspable, at least not through visual lenses and logics alone (308).

McDowell proposes that we “broaden [the] analytic paradigm” in cultural studies of the body from an emphasis on the visual, particularly focusing at the level of skin. She

rejects the belief that black women's bodies can be recovered in popular visual media, arguing instead that scholars look to the humanities and also take action. Building upon her concept of recovery missions, I developed four critical intervention sites that demand interdisciplinary engagement of the health sciences with the humanities. The first site is at the individual level of the body, and it calls for "attending to the 'buried zones'" (308) of black girls, which I argue can be accessed via black girl stories. The second site is at the level of the social body with a focus on challenging the framing of black women and girl's body issues at the intersection of an ahistorical science-based medical discourse and a consumerist driven American popular media that profits from distortions of black women's bodies. The third site is at the level of the political body that demands a re-contextualization of black women's health issues within a historical context of intersectional oppressions.

The fourth intervention site advances a pedagogy for social change that foregrounds black women's epistemological decision-making regarding their health. Therefore the final chapter of this dissertation reflects on a participatory action research project, Camp Carrot Seed, conducted during the summer of 2010. Camp Carrot Seed builds upon Elizabeth Chin's *Purchasing Power: Blacks Kids and American Consumer Culture* (2001), which provides an ethnographic account of black kids experiences of/with the consumer sphere. Chin's use of social geography to study the consumer behavior of black kids growing up in a working-class and increasingly impoverished urban community provides critical insight for developing a critical race feminist praxis.

First, Chin maps the neighborhood, "consumer sphere," largely through the eyes of her research subjects, young black girls. Second, she offers a brief historical

description of the social, political and economic shifts that impacted the visual culture of the community over recent decades. Third, following her youth informers' lead, she foregrounds food consumption in the narrative of their consumer habits, corroborating Juliet Schor's account that food consumption, particularly snacks and beverages, constitutes the category for the highest youth spending. Fourth, she compares her informants' neighborhood with the wealthier neighboring community to contextualize the young black girls' consumer experiences with their treatment by storekeepers in both consumer spheres.

"Camp Carrot Seed" advances a research design that studies young people's relationships with food by working closely with a group of approximately ten middle school and high school aged youth who lived in Northwest Atlanta, Georgia the summer of 2010. This research project is best defined as participatory action research, modeled after the Students at the Center (SAC) program in New Orleans, Louisiana (Buras 2010, 46-49). SAC, in brief, offers a pedagogical approach that begins with the experiential knowledge of the participants.

Similar to another pedagogical approach, Problem Based Learning (Center for Science Education at Emory University 2007), the educator's role is to facilitate students' ability to answer their own questions and to develop solution to their own "problems." The difference between SAC and Problem Based Learning (PBL) is with SAC the "problems" are determined by students. Typically with PBL the educator/facilitator(s) present a problem assumed to be relevant to students' interests.

Camp Carrot Seed investigates youth food decision-making as an underlying problem of the childhood obesity epidemic. It blended the previously mentioned

pedagogical approaches with ethnographic research relying primarily on embedded audio-visual recording devices and participant observation for data collection. Through an eight-week summer program I engaged youth in a curriculum that explored accessible local foodways and youth consumption habits. The curriculum was divided into four pedagogic projects: organic gardening, food preparation, shopping, and environmental community service projects that provided multiple literacies as a form of intervention. In the process of conducting the camp I observed not only their typical snack and beverage choices, but also the willingness of black youth to grow, purchase, cook, and eat “healthier foods,” such as fresh fruits and vegetables, in the program.

Chapter 2

As Seen On TV: Looking Within the Frame at the Official Story

November 2010, Tanisha Mitchell and her family from Suitland, Maryland were introduced to Style Network television audiences via a new reality television series called *Too Fat for Fifteen*. This “docu-drama” is set at Wellspring Academy, a private weight-loss boarding school, in Brevard, North Carolina. *Too Fat for Fifteen* follows Tanisha Mitchell, a Suitland, Maryland native, and four additional students during spring semester of their academic year and during summer break. The premise of the reality program is documenting the “weight-loss journey” of six youth between the ages of eleven and seventeen at two key observation sites: Wellspring Academy and their home environments.

In the first episode, “The School of Last Resort,” Mitchell’s father drives the family up the gravel driveway in a mini-van. Tanisha Mitchell is introduced visually via image and text *i.e.* a subtitle with four identifying facts: her name, age, hometown, and arrival weight. Meanwhile three Wellspring staff members are introduced visually and verbally. They each provide voiceovers to describe Tanisha Mitchell and the student type she represents. When Mitchell exits the van, Program Director, Tim Tilson’s opening statement is as follows: “[when] I first saw Tanisha I was scared. I have thirty-four kids that I have to take care of and you don’t want to have to take them to the hospital if they fall.” As the camera follows Tanisha Mitchell shifting from a full body angle to a close-up, two additional Wellspring staff describe Mitchell as super-morbidly obese (SMO); define “the SMO students” as students “who are 150lbs to 200lbs over what their body weight should be;” and express their excitement that Wellspring will mean the difference between life and death for her.

The audience is then briefly introduced visually and verbally to Wellspring Executive Director, David Boeke; Mitchell's father, Curtis Harrod; and Mitchell's mother, Melody Harrod. Melody, explains in an individual interview that she brought Tanisha Mitchell to Wellspring because she heard they had helped other girls. She also reveals that Mitchell's father "had to take [twenty-five thousand dollars] from his 401K retirement plan to pay for this school." She follows this statement with a pause, nods her head and says, "that's a lot of money.... I want my daughter to live."

Finally, Tanisha Mitchell is presented visually and verbally with a full-body camera shot in an individual interview setting. Her opening statement is...

[this] is the right place for me to be right now. This is the place where I
[word shift pause] am going to get the help that I need (The School of Last
 Resort 2010).

The remainder of her interview is a combination of voiceover for a montage of past photographs, current footage of Mitchell's restricted mobility, as well as Mitchell directly engaging with the audience via the cameraperson. The photographs reveal Tanisha Mitchell as a 6 month old, a five year old, and a six year old. The video footage shows her walking to her dorm room and sitting outside during her interview. Through a "mash-up" of audio clips she states,

I was a normal child. I wasn't exactly overweight... not as much as I am now.... My body works against me.... Insults like under people's breath that I still catch... and looks.... They look at me as if I'm some kind of alien. I'm just taking it one step at a time and before I know it...it will be time for me to leave and I can be with my family (waving her hands over

her upper body) again the way that I want to be (2010).

Later in the episode, we learn from Mitchell that she has Blounts disease and that she has “had eight major surgeries on her legs in the last decade” (Trouble At Home 2010) to fix the “inwardly bending.” She indicates that her disease is exacerbated by her weight.

Within *Too Fat for Fifteen* Tanisha Mitchell represents an SMO student who functions as an extreme challenge for Wellspring Academy. Within a broader contemporary televisual framing her body is used to provide a visual narrative of a worse case scenario of childhood obesity. However, Mitchell is one among numerous youth presented within the framework of the “childhood obesity epidemic.” A glimpse of selected television broadcasts centered on the topic of “childhood obesity,” both before and after *Too Fat for Fifteen* aired on the Style Network, reveal an ongoing stream of cross-genre messaging.

This chapter is organized into three sections that provide context for Tanisha Mitchell’s narrative as it is presented in televisual media. Section one positions Mitchell within the mediascape of black female bodies represented in “real” television through the “childhood obesity epidemic” narrative, including examples from news segments and talk shows. Section two situates Mitchell as a black female within the technoscape of the “reality” genre in televisual media. The purpose is to identify key messages, narrators, and narrative frameworks for constructing the “childhood obesity epidemic” body narrative. I center Tanisha Mitchell, as a young Black girl, within a historical televisual narrative of the black female body within “real” and reality television broadly as well as the constructed narrative of *Too Fat for Fifteen: Fighting Back*, specifically. Section

three examines both the financescapes and ideoscapes of *Too Fat for Fifteen* presented through underlying cultural stories about the Wellspring Academy cohort. Also, by attending to the three black female characters as primary subjects of analysis, I present a critical reading of the dominant “body narratives” presented within the media text.

Section One: Childhood Obesity and the Making of an “official story”

In the “Introduction” to *Birth of a Nation’hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle* Morrison writes that spectacle is...

[the] best means by which an *official story* is formed and is a superior mechanism for guaranteeing its longevity. Spectacle offers signs, symbols, and images that are more pervasive and persuasive than print and which can smoothly parody thought. The symbolic language that emanated from unforeseen events supplies media with the raw material from which a narrative emerges—already scripted, fully spectacularized and riveting in its gazeability (Morrison, xvi, *emphasis mine*).

At 3pm on May 27, 2008 the Journal of the American Medical Association issued a media release in text-based and video format for the article “High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003-2006” due to be published the following day. The article provides updated findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), which according to the release “are nationally representative surveys of the U.S. population” (JAMA, 2008). The major highlight from the text based and video releases are entitled, “Obesity Levels Among Children and Teens Stabilize,” and “Prevalence of Obesity Among U.S. Children and Teens Does not

Increase,” respectively indicating that there was “no significant increase in the prevalence of obese children and teens between 1999 and 2006.” The minor point of the release explains:

Prevalence estimates varied by age and by racial/ethnic group. Non-Hispanic black and Mexican American girls were more likely to have a high BMI for age than non-Hispanic white girls. Among boys, Mexican Americans were significantly more likely to have high BMI for age than non-Hispanic white boys (Journal of the American Medical Association 2008).

Even though this press release based upon a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report indicates that the numbers stabilized, there have been numerous news segments and talk shows on the topic of the “childhood obesity epidemic.” September 2008, the CBS News program *The Early Show* aired a three-and-a-half minute news story “One Girl’s Struggle: Her Fight to Lose Weight.” To briefly recap Tiffany King’s story, an Asian-American female news anchor explains “This summer we followed a girl from North Carolina on her changing journey.” In this “Healthwatch” segment Asian-American news correspondent, Priya David, follows the weight loss progress of thirteen year-old King over an eight-week period. The majority of the coverage highlights the activities provided at Camp Pocono Trails, a weight-loss camp in Northern Pennsylvania. King receives a tuition waiver based upon the strength of her personal essay, according to Camp founder and director, Tony Sparber. King loses 42lbs over the duration of the camp, and she is offered the opportunity to return if she continues to lose weight while at home.

Approximately 18 weeks later on January 26th, 2009 “The Oprah Winfrey Show” aired a two-day series dedicated to the childhood obesity “crisis.” Winfrey introduces the show with...

The number one health concern of America’s children is not smoking. It is not drug abuse. It is being fat. This could be the first generation of children to not outlive their parents. That's how bad it is. Think about that.

Take a look at what is feeding this crisis (The Oprah Winfrey Show 2009).

The first episode “Obese Families in Crisis: The Intervention” recaps the participation of sixteen teenagers and their parents in an intervention model developed by, a white heterosexual married couple counseling team, Yvonne and Rich Dutra St. John. The couple started a program called High School Challenge Day and had been featured before on The Oprah Winfrey Show for their work. Winfrey brought the couple back to engage with the group to determine what the “obese” youth “are really hungry for.” Yvonne and Rich explain...

Yvonne: Today, what we are intentionally doing is inviting a conversation around food, around weight, about the emotions behind the weight, because it's not about our weight. It's what is the hunger for? What are we hungry for?

Rich: Our goal in this activity - - it's always about bringing people together, but here it was to make a safe place for all these young people to be able to tell the truth about what's going on for them in their life and what's behind the eating.

The youth cite parental health issues and drug abuse, neglect, abuse, loneliness, death of a parent, absent parents, incarcerated parents, and bullying at school as concrete reasons that contribute to their negative feelings about themselves and their use of food to soothe ongoing pain and sadness. The eight-hour intervention required youth to explain their feelings to their parents and for their parents to listen. Ultimately the youth are asked to determine what they are really hungry for, be it attention, forgiveness, validation, or support healing from traumatic events.

Winfrey's two part series on childhood obesity in 2009, "Obese Families in Crisis: The Intervention," was exceptional for "real" television because she asked them "what they were really hungry for." They responded they were hungry for acceptance, support, peace, and positive attention.

Jessica: ...I'm sad I can't accept myself the way I am.

Raven: I've gotten teased over the years and it, like, hurts because they don't know what's going on. My mom had brain surgery in December a week before my birthday and it's kind of, like, stressful because I have to take more responsibilities now.

Stephanie: School, basically, is pretty much hell. I mean a lot of kids make fun of me. I'm used to it now, but it still hurts.

Josh:...I've been through abuse. I've been through drugs addictions, alcoholism. It's nothing that a child needs to be raised in. I think it's mostly my dad. That's the reason I eat so much.... I do feel lonely, because my mom wasn't there, because she was in a state penitentiary.

Working with guest facilitators, Yvonne and Rich Dutra St. John, during the intervention the predominately white group of youth revealed a range of emotional needs that were not being met in their individual families. They elaborated on the abuse and shame they experience in the privacy of their homes and the sanctioned discrimination they endure in public spaces such as schools, restaurants, and stores.

Jessica: I'm angry that it's not just students picking on me at school, its' teachers.

Female (teen):...I'm angry that when I go to stores I always cry in fitting rooms because nothing fits me and it's sickening.

Christian: I'm angry, because it kills your heart [talking to her mother] that I don't have a father.

Winfrey sums up the discussion of why the teens are angry saying, “[broken] families, sick parents, checked out moms and dads, some struggling with their own weight issues—it's no wonder that childhood obesity is an epidemic in our country.” The guest facilitators guide parents and audience(s) through appropriate adult responses to the anger teens expressed during the intervention. Yvonne explains...

[The] point, I think, is if we can be there with our loved ones, there's no better way to say “I love you” than just be there.

Dutra St. John identifies three essential adult responses to youth anger: ask what is bothering them, listen intently, and *be there with* them.

Part two of the series, “Dr. Oz Reports: Why America's Kids Are Fat,” focused primarily on the measurement of young “obese” bodies and the measurement of food products within the context of individual healthcare. Dr. Mehmet Oz, a regular guest

contributor on The Oprah Winfrey Show, explains how the excess fat is biologically impacting the functions of the participants' bodies. He reviews the results of their biophysical tests gaged according to "250 samples [looked at in] the blood. Oz explains that their excess weight causes inflammation in their bodies, which causes irritation of the arteries; poisons the liver; squeezes the kidney, and raises blood pressure. The result that surprised him most was...

the boys would start looking like girls hormonally and the girls would start looking like boys hormonally. And what that means is you're going to have trouble with fertility and sexuality. And when you've got a lot of fat on you, the fat comes alive. It becomes another organ and that organ takes estrogen, for example, and manipulates it so that you get more problems with resistance to insulin. But it takes, in the boys, their testosterone, which they're making normally, and it converts it to estrogen (The Oprah Winfrey Show 2009).

The remainder of the program is focused on informing participants to read food labels and address portion size. The final guest contributor is David Zinczenko, author of *Eat This Not That*, a book for kids. In *Eat This* he identifies food product myths and reveals food-marketing ploys regarding promotions of "healthy" foods versus fast foods. Zinczenko tests Winfrey and her live studio audience on selecting the food product that is best for them.

Oprah Winfrey: ... I know many teens go through drive-throughs on the way to school or after school. So let's go -- let's do this Dunkin donuts -- which is healthier? "A" their multi-grain bagel with low fat cream cheese,

or "B" a glazed donut? Multi-grain bagel with low fat cream cheese, or a glazed donut? Results -- multi-grain bagel with low fat cream cheese wins in this audience. The true answer is...

David Zincenko: Is "B". It is "B". The correct answer is "B". The ...

Oprah Winfrey: The correct answer is "B", it is a glazed donut.

The goal of the two part series is for the youth to address what they are really hungry for and incorporate the tips, i.e. label reading, portion control, and healthy food choices learned from their Oprah experience into their everyday lives.

A brief recap from press release to two-part talk show event indicates that momentum for mass media televisual messaging is growing. However, while the childhood obesity epidemic is statistically considered a universal concern for youth across racial backgrounds, the race and gender differences discussed in the initial public health report are not taken up in mainstream televisual discourse. The concerns youth raised about personal tragedies, social discrimination, and family hardships are also not responded to within the "official story." Instead youth are encouraged to fear internal happenings of their bodies in gender binaries and heterosexist frameworks. They are also lectured on improving consumer behaviors through a simplified form of media literacy.

Toni Morrison further explains...

[the] spectacle is the narrative; the narrative is spectacularized and both monopolize appearance and social reality. Interested only in developing itself, the spectacle is immune to correction. Even and especially when panels are assembled to critique the process, the dialogue is confined to the terms the spectacle has set (Morrison, xvii).

On February 9, 2010, another important event occurred that spurred a new round of news segments and talk shows on the topic of “childhood obesity epidemic.” First Lady Michelle Obama launched the “Let’s Move” Campaign, a government sponsored social marketing campaign to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity. The main organ of the campaign is the website “letsmove.gov,” which features an online overview entitled “The Epidemic of Childhood Obesity,” outlining obesity as a national problem and explaining primary causes for the epidemic. On the day of the launch First Lady Obama stated...

The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake.

Another report available on the website, “Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation,” outlines recommendations for solving the obesity problem.

Also in 2010, Style Network was preparing to air the first ever childhood obesity reality series, *Too Fat for Fifteen: Fighting Back*, featuring Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas in Brevard, North Carolina. Tanisha Mitchell emerged as a “star” of the Emmy nominated *Too Fat for Fifteen* series, having lost more than 276lbs in two years. She then became a central figure in broadcast media as a “success story” in the fight against “childhood obesity.” Mitchell was featured along with her mother, Melody Harrod, on a *Today Show* news segment, “Too Fat Teens Speak Out.” She was also featured on *Dr. Oz*, who like Oprah Winfrey aired a two-part talk-show series entitled, “Win the Fight Against Childhood Obesity” and “Is it Child Abuse to Have a Fat Child?” Once Mitchell lost a significant amount of weight her personal narrative was scripted to tell two stories. The first story lifted up the success of Wellspring Inc., the weight-loss boarding schools

and affiliate programs. The second story assigned blame to her mother for her former weight.

In each instance of the media trajectory I chronicle, black girls and women are central “real” figures that contribute significantly to the childhood obesity official story as “victims or survivors,” “hosts,” or “advocates.” Black girls have been identified as the youth population with the highest prevalence of obesity, and I assert it is no coincidence that Tiffany King, Oprah Winfrey, Tanisha Mitchell, and Melody Harrod are featured as part of the “childhood obesity epidemic” official story. The “official story” is a universal colorblind narrative that incorporates black female bodies as spectacle within the televisual frame. More specifically, their black female bodies are spectacles in media discourses where race is a subtext left unexamined like the raced and gendered details of the minor point in the initial 2008 American Medical Association press release.

Section Two: The Veracity of “Reality” in Entertainment Television

Toni Morrison further explains that...

[the] fortuitousness of the event which contributes to the construction of a public verity can mislead us into thinking that the power of persuasion lies in the events themselves, when in fact it is the already understood and agreed-upon interpretation of the events that is sold and distributed as public truth (xvi).

Too Fat for Fifteen: Fighting Back as a reality television program offers its’ viewers the ability to survey a weight-loss program intended to change “bad bodies” into “good bodies” via assimilation programs advancing neoliberal concepts of appropriate

consumption. According to television studies scholars, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, reality television as a genre is constantly shifting formats to attain legitimacy as a narrative format that presents “real” life. In their edited volume *Reality TV: remaking television culture*, Murray and Ouellette explore significant shifts within television as a result of the reality TV genre. Asserting that reality television has become the “go-to genre for cable and broadcast networks,” they lay out three common features of contemporary reality programming: do-goodism, everyday investigation, and “expert” guidance.

Part of what reality TV teaches us in the early years of the new millennium is that in order to be good citizens we must allow ourselves to be watched as we watch ourselves and those around us, and then modify our conduct and behavior accordingly. (Murray and Ouellette, 9)

While the “realness” of the program narrative is marketed, the ethical concerns regarding representations of “real” are limited to surface distinctions between fiction (scripted) events and real (unscripted) occurrences. Murray and Ouellette critique how program producers and media network producers successfully distance themselves from ethical obligations concerned with the “deliberation of veracity” i.e. presenting valid and truthful information to their audiences. They also avoid “ethical concerns over human subjects” typically associated with the documentary genre. Media producers avoid these obligations, which are associated with other “real” TV genres such as news/journalism, because reality TV exists under the banner of “entertainment.”

George Lipsitz, literary and cultural critic, describes in “The Greatest Story Ever Sold: Marketing and the O.J. Simpson Trial” the ways in which “real” entertainment

television functions in commercial media. I quote from this text at length.

Stories about the O.J. Simpson trial enjoyed a powerful presence in the market, in part because they could draw on the main themes that organize televisual discourse in the United States: the primacy of products as the center of social life, the stimulation and management of appetites, and alarm about the family in jeopardy. A story linking any two of these categories will always make the news.... One reason why the O.J.

Simpson trial became so prominent in the media is because...it was a story about products, appetites, and the family in jeopardy (13).

Reading Tanisha Mitchell as a spectacle that facilitates and advances an official story communicated via “real” *and* reality television genres about products, appetites, and the family in jeopardy contextualizes *Too Fat for Fifteen* as a media text and entertainment product doing significant cultural work. With this in mind, my content analysis begins by identifying key organizing features of the media text including: subjects, messages, the genre, and the medium. Then I explore the distinct narrative history and function of each feature before conducting a contextualized alternative reading that presents a more fleshed out and recognizable subject at the center of analysis. The primary subjects of analysis are black girls, and the central interrogated messages are weight-loss products, obesity, and family roles and responsibilities. Finally I examine subgenres under the banner of “real” entertainment television including reality television, docudrama, news segments, and talk shows.

“Real” Black Females on Camera

Smith-Shomade’s *Shaded Lives* attempts to push the politics of representation discussion beyond a simplistic binary of positive versus negative representations of Black women on television. She situates black women as fictional and “real” actors within the field of television studies. Her critical engagement with black girls and women illustrates that they have not simply been passive objects. She states...

As I examine images of African-American women, objectification emerges as both a mandatory condition and a complex process. Sitcoms, music videos, television news, and talk shows reflect the dialectic between objectification and agency, the negotiation between containment on the one hand and reappropriation and transgression on the other...(177).

Smith-Shomade further explains that looking at black women through the lens of television as a historical medium showcases their ability to “insert themselves into the larger cultural consciousness.” She indicates that black actresses and television personalities gained a certain degree of agency and subjectivity through actions such as “moving beyond appropriate speech [and] controlled or centered narratives” and through ownership i.e. Oprah Winfrey and Harpo Productions. Smith-Shomade accurately asserts...

The danger of analyzing representations within popular culture is in supposing finality. The possibilities of this work for both spectators and producers lie in its ability to persuade each other to engage television more critically, with an open mind, and to foster substantive discussions with women whose lives are impacted by television scenarios (187).

Nonetheless, black female actresses and artists still complain about a lack of access to

good long-term central narrative roles and opportunities to produce themselves. It seems what few opportunities were available in fiction television have shifted to the non-fiction, exceedingly popular format of the “reality show.” While Smith-Shomade engages the “real” i.e. news and talk show programs her work predates the contemporary surge of “reality tv” in the 21st century.

In my analysis of *Too Fat for Fifteen* I study Tanisha Mitchell as a young black female *subject* with some level of agency and insist that media producers have an ethical responsibility to her as a human subject and not just an “obese” body to be fixed. An appropriate alternative narrative should therefore begin with Mitchell as a complex subject rather than as an “obese” body. Allow me to reintroduce Tanisha Mitchell using data collected from the first season of *Too Fat for Fifteen*; a counterstory.

Hello, my name is Tanisha Mitchell and I am from Suitland, Maryland, located right outside of the nation’s capital. I am seventeen years old and the proud daughter of Melody and Curtis Harrod. I have two wonderful little sisters who are like best friends to me. I am an avid reader; I read everything I can get my hands on sometimes two or three times. I plan to study law and to one day become a justice on the Supreme Court.

I have a disease known as Blounts that is essentially a growth disorder that causes the leg bone to bend inwardly. I hate going to hospitals because I have had so many surgeries on my legs that I lost count. I have numerous scars on both legs and I was bed-ridden for much of my life because each surgery required a six to eight-month recovery period.

“My body works against me.” Over the years, I gained a significant

amount of weight, which exacerbated the disease. The combination of Blounts and my weight makes it extremely difficult for me to walk. It is difficult having a disability and being “overweight as much as I am now” because “insults like under people’s breath that I still catch...[and] looks...they look at me as if I’m some kind of alien.”

Despite my circumstances, I have managed to maintain a positive attitude and I am a great student. I love my home-school teacher; she came to my apartment twice a week every year since the second grade. She always tells me that I am her best student. While I do not want to leave my family and my teacher, I believe “Wellspring is the place where I am going to get the help I need.”

Toni Morrison states, “*underneath the commodified story...is a cultural one*” (xvii). In order to fully understand the cultural story we must consider the making of a “docudrama” as a genre that originates in documentary filmmaking, which shares disciplinary ties with visual anthropology. Early usage of the video camera within anthropology attempted, unsuccessfully, to empirically document and measure movement of the body via proxemics. The use of video cameras in anthropology allowed for an extension of anthropometry including cultural assessments based on measurements of the body through still images followed by the measurement of body movements via moving images. Visual anthropologist, Jay Ruby explains in his chapter “Researching with a Camera: The Anthropologist as Picture Taker,”

[There] has been a shift in interest away from the physical features of body movement to conceiving of the body as cultural symbol

characterized by the term *the anthropology of the body*. It is narrowly claimed by medical anthropologists, who explore the body in terms of social constructions of health and illness (Lock 1993) and social theorists like Michel Foucault (1977), who characterize the body as site of contestation in which women, gays, and other oppressed people struggle to reclaim their identity and resist an image assumed to be designed by the culture industry to augment their oppression. Neither of these approaches creates an interest in the microanalytic or the mechanics of body movement (Ruby 2000, 51).

Too Fat for Fifteen, along with another extremely popular reality television shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, revives anthropometry--body measurements—and draw attention to the mechanics of body movement. Daisybeck Productions' usage of the camera to “document” the malleability of bodies is an effort to dramatize the weight-loss process as part of the spectacle. Unlike mainstream and documentary filmmaking where a single person i.e. the director/scholar, is primarily responsible for representation, within reality television there is often a team of camera people, editors, and producers. This disperses accountability for the representation of bodies as subjects amongst a variety of *unseen* people within media production (Griffiths 2001). Daisybeck Productions as a media producer functions as authorial filmmakers. C. A. Griffiths essay “Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze” is one of few scholars and filmmakers exploring the tensions between the *unseen* people behind the camera and editing tables and the *seen* black female bodies represented on film and in television. She recounts her experiences as a cameraperson filming black female dancers and actresses in music videos, and as

such participating in the construction of the “male gaze.”

Another black filmmaker does an important experimental exploration with presenting black women’s bodies as subjects in film. Black lesbian independent filmmaker, Cheryl Dunye’s mockumentary film *The Watermelon Woman* highlights this relationship between the filmmaker and the black female body represented on film. Dunye simultaneously stars in and directs *The Watermelon Woman*. Cheryl “the character” researches a fiction black female actress from the 1930’s and 1940’s. She films herself within a scripted narrative structure that blends her “real” body with a fictional account that mimics documentary research of a made-up “real” person, “the Watermelon Woman.” The veil of the unseen cameraperson is lifted when she represents her own body as a subject and as filmmaker. Dunye’s avant guard approach to filmmaking, whereby she makes a film about making a film, brings all key participants into the visual frame of analysis.

The “reality TV” genre does provide new avenues for depicting real African American women as long-standing characters, unlike talk-show guests. Reality television also offers additional areas of inquiry for media scholars to reimagine reality show participants as characters, human subjects and audiences simultaneously.

Bell hooks asserts in *Black Looks* that...

Many audiences in the United States resist the idea that images have an ideological intent. This is equally true of black audiences. Fierce critical interrogation is sometimes the only practice that can pierce the wall of denial consumers of images construct so as not to face that the real world of image-making is political—that politics of domination inform the way

the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed. (5)

It is extremely important to consider agreements between media producer(s) and human subjects regarding collecting and distributing their images for reality television to understand 1) why people choose to participate in reality television shows, 2) what agency participants have to tell their own stories, and 3) their ability to control the immediate and future uses of their image in media texts. Reality television characters are human subjects whose images are mass distributed and whose bodies are available for scrutiny by television audiences. Using hooks' concept of "fierce critical interrogation" I developed a subject-based counterstory that critiques the dominant narrative by situating it within a critical frame of the genre and the medium.

According to George Lipsitz' three important themes of television, the commodified story—i.e. the media text *Too Fat for Fifteen*—promotes Wellspring Academy as a "product at the center of social life." The weight-loss boarding school is made relevant by the "childhood obesity epidemic," which is a nexus of the two remaining themes, "stimulating and managing appetites" and "the family in jeopardy." There are three defining ideological themes within the body narrative of *Too Fat For Fifteen* as the commodified story. 1) Big bodies are bad bodies, dangerous bodies, and bodies-in-danger, requiring surveillance. 2) Big bodies should be regulated and taught body management (personal surveillance) via assimilation and normalization projects. 3) Big bodies result from poor parenting and therefore parents should be held accountable for poor decision-making. In the next section I reread *Too Fat for Fifteen* through this ideological framing, with the three black girl characters as the central subjects of analysis.

Section Three: The Body Narrative and the Family Name

1) Big bodies are bad bodies, bodies-in-danger, and dangerous bodies that require surveillance

Commodified Story: Too Fat for Fifteen Cohort Introduction

Too Fat for Fifteen is a documentary style television program with eight episodes the first season. The story follows four teenagers and an eleven year old over the course of a semester and the summer break. Each episode is approximately forty minutes without commercials, but airs for one hour at 10pm Eastern Standard Time. The first episode of *TOO FAT FOR FIFTEEN* entitled “The School of Last Resort” introduces four of the five main reality show characters: Scotty Basso, Tanisha Mitchell, Emily Hodge, and Terinna Cypress.

Scotty Basso is a thirteen year-old white male from Athens, Illinois. He explains that his weight is out of control and that he has to change his eating habits. The Wellspring Academy Director states, “Scotty Basso needs to lose 150lbs and he needs to do it quickly.” Both Scotty and his mother indicate that he suffered from bullying at school by his peers to the point where he did not want to attend school any longer. His mother explains that she and her husband had “lap band surgery” and that Scotty became more depressed the more weight they lost. Staff members identify Scotty as a “slacker,” early in the season. He is the only male on the program.

Tanisha Mitchell, as I have explained, is a seventeen year-old black female from Suitland, Maryland. Tanisha is identified by Wellspring Academy staff members as supermorbidly obese or SMO, which according to the Medical Coordinator, means “students that [are] 150lbs to 200lbs over what their body weight should be.” Tanisha represents the “challenge” because she has had numerous surgeries on her legs for Blounts Disease. She is identified as the largest participant to attend the Academy thus far.

Emily Hodge is an eleven year-old white female from Raleigh, North Carolina. She attends Wellspring because her parents required her to come. A staff person states, “Emily is 11 years old and the youngest to ever come to Wellspring. She is 216 lbs. She needs to lose 100lbs to get to a healthy weight. She’s at an age where this is critical to her success in life.” Emily explains that her parents have been losing weight and that her siblings are small. Emily’s mother laments that she cannot “lock the pantry and control overeating.” Emily does not want to be separated from her family, but she indicates that she will do her best so that she can return home with her family. Emily is presented as the young homesick “crybaby.”

Terinna Cypress is a seventeen year-old biracial, Native American and African-American, female from Clewiston, Florida. She is introduced as a “stubborn, tough individual.” She explains upfront, “I hate this place.” She also indicates that she is an emotional eater and that in the past she would eat very sweet foods and did not care about what she put in her body. Terinna also says as a child she did not care about her weight. She further explains that she started eating more after her father passed away. Terinna represents “the rebel” on the show.

Miranda Nichols is at the forefront of the *Too Fat for Fifteen* promotional image, however she is not introduced until the third episode, “Parent’s Weekend.” Miranda is a returning student who has been at Wellspring Academy for approximately two years. She is a seventeen-year-old biracial African-American and white female who plans to graduate from Wellspring Academy once she completes spring semester. She represents a Wellspring “success story,” according to staff members.

According to Wellspring staff, one third of all youth in the United States are

overweight or obese, and if they are obese as children then they will likely be obese adults. There are three basic assumptions in the presentation of Wellspring Academy. First, youth are categorized as normal weight, overweight, and obese based upon the body mass index formula and chart developed according to sex, height, weight, and age. Second, being overweight and obese means youth are likely to have health complications including: diabetes, high blood pressure, and low self-esteem. Three, the solution to the childhood obesity epidemic is weight-loss via lifestyle changes including: decreasing food consumption, adjusting the types of foods they consume, and increasing physical activity. The general assumptions are: big bodies are dangerous bodies for the national body politic; big bodies constitute bodies-in-danger; big bodies require the constant surveillance provided by Wellspring Academy and Daisybeck Productions.

Cultural Story: The Diversity Principle & Three Black Girls in Majority Programming

Wellspring does not explicitly indicate that approximately one in four Black girls in the United States are considered overweight or obese, having the highest prevalence of all youth populations, according to the NHANES 2003-2006 survey. Furthermore, the survey does not account for biracial identities in the report. Also, Native American youth are completely excluded from this CDC sponsored report (Ogden et al.) due to insignificant results attributed to the small population size. Race specific data on Indigenous Americans suggests they are the population with the highest prevalence of overweight and obese people in the United States (White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity 2010).

The overarching televisual narrative of *Too Fat for Fifteen* focuses solely on body size to define difference. The important difference is confined body size, “normal

weight” versus “obese.” In fact, there are very few references to any of the participants’ racial backgrounds except discussions related to food. Each participant is presented as universally representing obese teenagers, with difference expressed in terms of age, size, ability, class and gender. Of the five major characters three would be identified as Black girls, according to the legal and scientific definitions of race in the U.S., based upon the “one-drop rule.” A study by Harvard psychologists, Arnold K. Ho and James Sidanius, indicates that hypodescent continues to inform the hierarchical organization of biracial people in the U.S. with their “minority” parents’ racial status (Ho and Sidanius 2011). Miranda and Terinna, are biracial and while they may be legally defined as “Black” they would be more accurately described as “culturally white” and “culturally Native American,” respectively. Terinna explicitly identifies herself as a “mixed” member of the Seminole Nation. The “one-drop rule” is complicated regarding Terinna because she is a member of two “minority” groups, her deceased father is African-American and her mother is Native American. I identify Miranda Nichols as culturally white because she is typically depicted in images and video footage with white friends and her white extended family members. These cultural specificities are revealed in representations of the girls in their communities during their home visits.

Effectively, *Too Fat for Fifteen* offers a visual narrative of Black girls and obesity without actually discussing race. It is important to recognize race for multiple reasons. One, it is extremely rare to have three black female characters, real or fiction, on a regular television program that is not considered a black production. Which raises the question why would media producers break with the long tradition of limiting black female characters on universal programming to one character amongst many white

characters or one among a multicultural group, usually including a white male and female?

Demographic diversity within television content became more of an issue within the broader discussion of the “diversity principle” during the 1990’s under the leadership of FCC Chairman Kennard, according to communications scholar Robert Napoli. His essay, “Deconstructing the Diversity Principle,” references social science content analysis studies that research the percentages of roles by race and gender in comparison with census demographic data to determine equitable representation in broadcast television. Of the three sub-sections under content diversity: format, demographic, and viewpoint, Napoli dedicates two and half pages to deconstructing format diversity, another two and half pages to explaining viewpoint diversity, and two paragraphs to the discussion of demographic diversity.

Napoli could have explored the limitations of social science content research that focuses on race and gender as separate categories that rarely provide accurate data about intersectional subjects such as black females. Another page would have afforded Napoli the opportunity to engage in a more political discussion on how “a monolithic ‘universal’ culture [or lack of diversity] functions as a disguise of the United States’ overlapping variety that also locates non-white people as ‘separate,’ ‘other,’ even ‘separatist’” (Williams, 536). He might have also included a more complex discussion about overlapping issues inherent in demands for content, demographic and viewpoint diversity. Napoli’s limited examination excludes a political discussion such as that provided by Patricia Williams in “Metro Broadcasting V. FCC” where she asserts that

“diversity includes a concept of multiculturalism” and “mass market” in television should reflect “a complicated variety of many peoples” and perspectives (Williams, 529).

A broader multidisciplinary discussion could have addressed the importance of representing human variation by reflecting body diversity i.e. differences in skin colors, genders, abilities, and sizes reflecting “real” diversity. Instead, Napoli’s two paragraphs on demographic diversity reflect either a lack of interest or lack of knowledge of the depth of issues presented within demographic diversity related to the politics of representation.

Numerous efforts have been undertaken since the 1950’s to address exclusion and degrading representations of “racial minorities” on television with the goal of multiracial and multicultural representations of viewpoints (Shomade, 11-12). Some may attribute the media producer, Daisybeck Productions, and Wellspring Inc.’s decision to feature three black female characters as representing post-racial ideologies. Kimberly Crenshaw’s critical perspectives from her lecture “Racing to Post-Racialism: King’s Dream or Fool’s Gold” suggests that colorblind narratives center on symbolic images and events that signify inclusion and integration without actual evidence of either gaps closing in racial or gender disparities or shifting beliefs and behaviors of the majority.

Crenshaw’s essay “Colorblind Dreams and Racial Nightmares: Reconfiguring Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era” recalls a time when blacks would yell in the streets and call their friends to spread the news that there was a “colored on TV.” She asserts that OJ Simpson functioned as a colorblind symbol

in mass media with roles ranging from television commercials to mainstream films. Simpson's onscreen career emerged at a moment when the pressure to include more blacks and "positive" black roles on television converged with the commercial interests of media institutions. Not only do three black girls in majority programming function as colorblind symbols of the "childhood obesity epidemic," but they also advance the ideology of post-racial progress for black females in television.

The problem with attributing the decision to feature three black subjects to post-racial progress is the concurrent "whitewashing" occurring throughout broadcast and cable television ranging from a surge of fiction programs set in early European history, i.e. *Spartacus*, to early 20th century segregated America with *Madmen*. In this era of "whitewashing" *Too Fat for Fifteen* is representative of a shift in demographic diversity practices, so the question still remains, why?

Critical Race scholar, Derrick Bell introduces the "interest convergence" principle in legal scholarship in his essay "*Brown v. board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma" (Bell 1995). Bell asserts that decisions in racial legal cases have been guided by the interest convergence principle, which means

The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites.... [The] Fourteenth Amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites (35).

Bell suggests that when there are critical shifts that defy past practices in institutional decision-making, we must consider the “decisions value to whites” not just in terms of morals, but also politically and economically. Interest convergence is as applicable to “the law” as it is for “the media” because it illustrates common practices in the financial arena of the media economy.

Critical race feminist scholar, Patricia Williams asserts that the broadcast media industry’s primary supporters are corporate and philanthropic sponsors. She further explains that the “neutral” ethic of individualism regarding media ownership advanced in the judicial system is rooted in a subjective corporate group identity, which is overwhelmingly dominated by wealthy white males. If the question regarding Mitchell, Cypress, and Nichols’ casting is constructed within a critical race feminist framework of financial and cultural media economies, then what is the financial value of this decision to include three black girls in the initial season of *Too Fat for Fifteen* for wealthy white male corporate sponsors of broadcast media, i.e. media producers? What is the cultural value of their inclusion for active producers, i.e. Daisybeck Productions and Wellspring Inc.?

Mitchell, Cypress, and Nichols present not only a range of shades on the spectrum of blackness including dark skin, brown skin, and light skin, but also a multiracialism via images of their mother’s bodies (for Cypress images of her community and reservation). Their bodies are in service to a financial marketing strategy that targets wide-ranging female audiences, including black and Native Americans who happen to represent the two populations statistically identified with having the highest prevalence of obesity

amongst youth in the U.S. More specifically, featuring three black females of five major characters visually represents the fact that girls of color, i.e. Native American, Black, and Latinas, have the highest prevalence of obesity without addressing race explicitly. Their bodies are used to attract diverse audience markets. However, without an acknowledgement of racial differences in the “factual” narrative offered by Wellspring staff, their cultural stories are restricted. As such, their bodies are depicted as part of a “universal” masternarrative of inappropriate bodies to be fixed via appropriate consumption.

Mitchell, Cypress, and Nichols also provide an opportunity for a pseudo-multicultural visual narrative about their mother’s bodies, which are Black, Native American, and White. Within the color-blind narrative, race and class is discounted as an important determinant, but the size and sex of the parent is explicitly discussed as an important determinant. This is made clear when Cypress’ mother is not willing to appear on camera to complete the visual narrative. Cypress’ grandmother, Esther Buster, functions as a visual substitute. Furthermore, the desire to make the mother’s body present for the narrative is so strong that Cypress’ white female behavioral coach attempts to provide a visual of Cypress’ mother, verbally. She states...

Her mother has been over three hundred pounds and has had a gastric bypass surgery and now is at a healthy weight. A majority of the people in her family struggle with being overweight (Daisybeck Productions 2010).

Mitchell, Cypress, and Nichols also collectively illuminate a historically popular visual narrative of black women’s bodies in television. The decision to include three Black girls in the first season of the first multi-episodic reality program on the “childhood

obesity epidemic” is also an example of the hypervisibility of black women’s bodies as fat, particularly in mass communications. Doris Witt, a cultural critic, writes...

For if Black women have been absences in the discourses of eating disorders, they most certainly have been highly visible in the specularization of corpulence in American culture. The widespread conflation of black female bodies and fat is inseparable from the phantasmic desires and (cultural representations) of the hegemonic white imaginary (Witt, 246-247).

Witt explains in her essay, “What (N)ever Happened to Aunt Jemima: Eating Disorders, Fetal Rights, and Black Female Appetite in Contemporary American Culture,” that the visual historical conflation of the black female body with “fat body” in popular media, particularly film, is an intentional construction. She cites Donald Bogle’s work on Louise Beavers, a black female actress who was consistently tasked with overeating or “padded” to present the appropriate “mammy” body type.

Witt suggests that American obsessions with Aunt Jemima throughout the 20th century and with Oprah Winfrey in the contemporary moment...

foregrounds one axis of American desire, for Black women to be the ever-smiling producers of food, to be nurturers who themselves have no appetite and make no demands... [and] another, complementary axis,... that is, American fear of what Black women consume, or perhaps more precisely American obsession with Black female appetites (Witt, 241).

Absent a discussion of black girls experiences as raced and gendered subjects, their bodies are used to tell a story about which bodies are valuable in American culture. Their

presence does a particular type of cultural work that further promotes white femininity, i.e. thin beauty, as the desirable norm for all women and girls. Moreover, Mitchell, Cypress, and Nichols' bodies function as postmodern fat black female bodies in that they are malleable and their identities and cultures are fluid and "fixable." Their bodies do financial work by symbolically selling the Wellspring product, like Aunt Jemima, while simultaneously consuming the Wellspring product. Through Daisybeck Productions' surveillance of Wellspring participants these black girls bodies are also in service to the broader marketing interests of Style network and Wellspring Inc. By modeling the process of becoming "good" consumers for television audiences while promoting not only "good" products but also "bad" products, they must also be recognized within the tradition of one of the most powerful promoters of consumer products and neoliberal lifestyle, Oprah Winfrey. Their purpose is to demonstrate the reform process visually by becoming smaller girls and via their acceptance of what Wellspring considers the appropriate consumer identity.

2) Big bodies must be regulated until such time as they have adopted self-surveillance as body management strategy.

Commodified Story: Wellspring as "the expert" on appropriate lifestyles

Katherine Sender's essay "Queens for A Day" offers a critical review of a popular reality television makeover program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which the marginalized group, gay men, are "the experts" while the normal group, straight men, are the group needing behavior modification. Sender suggests that this role reversal works because the neoliberal assimilation project that *Queer Eye* engaged in constructed appropriate consumption as "the norm." In *Queer Eye* the problem with straight men was their inability to attend to the intimate details of their domestic lives i.e. clothing,

grooming, interior design, cleaning, and culture (food, wine, activities).

Sender critiques the multilayered approach that makeover shows use, including technology, genre, format, and messaging, to encourage subjects to feel “strange” and in need of modification. Surveillance, she asserts, is a central feature of behavior modification reality programming because in concert with the gaze of “the experts” it induces or enhances feelings of shame. Sender asserts that “makeover” subjects adopt “an internal mode of surveillance” so as not to feel the “anxiety of rejection of their whole person,” associated with feeling shame (Sender 2009, 221).

Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas functions as a major character on the show. Staff members include: the co-founder, a director, a clinical director, an academic director, a medical coordinator, program directors, program coaches, behavioral coaches, and fitness coaches. The staff dress in casual wear such as warm-up suits, khaki’s and polo shirts, and other casual clothing. They are diverse in age and sex, however their body types and skin tones are homogenous—all relatively thin or athletic and all visibly White-skinned. In addition to working directly with the participants they function as narrative authorities on “The Wellspring Way” and visual representations of “managed bodies” or “weight controllers” in *Too Fat for Fifteen*.

According to George Lipsitz’ three important themes of television, *Too Fat for Fifteen* depicts Wellspring as a service product, youth bodies as spectacles of American appetites; and youth bodies as primary “sites of struggle” for American families. Wellspring Inc., in collaboration with Daiseybeck Productions, presents three sites for surveillance: they film participants at their academy and camps, during off-site events, and in the privacy of their homes. In addition to guiding participants in the academy,

they provide authoritative advice for families, and are the authorial voice for the wider television audience.

According to Wellspring co-founder, Dr. Daniel Kirschenbaum,

There are seventy-five million kids in the United States today. Twenty-five million are overweight or obese. Wellspring is about getting kids to make choices that are healthier (Daisybeck Productions 2010).

The overall goal at Wellspring is behavioral modification that transitions participants toward becoming successful “weight controllers” through the management of their appetites. The long-term objectives are weight-loss via radically changed eating habits and increased physical fitness. The weekly goal is weight loss. The characters often refer to being “on program” and “off program” meaning they meet daily goals of taking 10,000 steps (equivalent to five miles) and limiting food intake to 2000 calories per day. The school day begins at 6:30am with morning fitness class and ends with evening fitness class 5:30pm. There are three fitness classes, with coaches, in addition to academic classes each day. The cohort has weekly behavioral therapy sessions with their behavioral coaches. Every Monday morning students line up to get on the scale for their weekly weigh-in. Students are also weighed whenever they return home or go off-campus during a break. Wellspring staff members also require surprise weigh-ins upon returning from sponsored off-campus outings.

All entering students have phone, media, and mobility restrictions until they advance to a certain level in the Wellspring Level system which has five levels: 1) Traveller; 2) Explorer; 3) Adventurer; 4) Discoverer; 5) Guide. When students move up in levels their phone privileges increase in time increments as well as their ability to leave

campus during family visits. A Traveller, level one, gets “ten minutes two calls a week and the time increases as they move up the levels.” A student has to reach the level of an Adventurer, level two, to go off-campus with family. There is a Weekly Compass Ceremony where everyone gathers to celebrate students moving up in the level system, which means they demonstrate being “on program.” Participants respond to the “Wellspring Way” each in their own way. During off-campus challenges and home visits the participants are filmed making decisions about their consumption both in terms of food product choices and food portions. Wellspring is “the expert” and the justified surveillance is a medium for promoting the general service product that Wellspring offers, but also a wide array of commercial products, usually food products.

Scotty Basso tricks his mother into believing he is eating “on program” at a Twin Dragons Grand Buffet (The Breaking Point 2010). While he selects various foods a tagline pops up at the bottom of the screen to reveal the name of the dish and the number of calories and grams of fat in each dish. Basso consumes Teriyaki Chicken (260cal/9grams of fat), Chicken Quesadilla (525cal/13grams), Roasted Chicken (184cal/4grams), and second helpings of Teriyaki Chicken and Chicken Quesadilla. The fact that Basso’s meal consists of three chicken dishes and that a Chinese Buffet serves Chicken Quesadillas speaks to the erratic profit-driven organization of American fare available throughout the nation. However this is not the focus of the segment, the audience is invited to shake their head in disappointment of Basso’s poor food choices and his ability to manipulate his seemingly incapable mother.

During Emily Hodges’ break before Wellspring summer camp, she sneaks large portions of Kellogg’s™ Rice Krispy Treats that she makes with Jet Puffed™

marshmallow creme in her kitchen in preparation for her twelfth birthday party (Trouble At Home 2010). The way the scene is shot suggests that her father is in the other room and that she is checking to make sure no one is watching, even though there is clearly at least one cameraperson in the room. Hodge also explains that the treats are “on program” because marshmallows are basically “air.” Once again, the audience functions as witnesses participating in the disappointed gaze of Hodges poor choices.

When Terinna Cypress is on camera making food choices during a home visit where there is seemingly no parental or elder involvement. The cameraperson speaks to a vendor at the Seminole Festival, who describes how to make pumpkin bread. The narrative is tightly focused on traditional foods as “bad foods,” even though the frybread recipe is dangerously close to the “all-American” pancake. Again, Cypresses behavioral coach provides visual and verbal narration explaining that there are limited alternatives to traditional foods, besides convenience stores and fast food restaurants, available to Cypress. There are no camera shots of a sit-down restaurant or kitchen. Cypress and her cousin are filmed eating in their car with the passenger side door open for the cameraperson to get a clear shot of the Subway™ foot long sandwich. The cameraperson films from two angles, while Cypress eats her sandwich. She remarks, “mine tastes like heaven,” as the cameraperson films from the backseat (Smells Like Teen Angst 2010).

Miranda Nichols, on the other hand, is depicted having full parental support. As a Wellspring veteran, she cooks “on-program” meals for herself with appropriate ingredients that she describes for the camera while she cooks a meal with her family and again during a separate trip to the refrigerator. Her list includes vegetarian meat substitutes, veggie hot dogs, fat-free sour cream, fat-free pudding, fat-free half-n-half,

Egg Beaters™ egg substitute, small flour tortillas, and Smart Balance™ butter (Parents Weekend 2010; Spring Breakout 2010).

Unlike previous participants, Mitchell's mother verbally describes what a typical breakfast, lunch, and dinner included for Mitchell prior to attending Wellspring Academy. Melody Harrod states...

Taking the program foods from Wellsprings to home has been sort of difficult for us. For Tanisha it has not been difficult.... The breakfast for Tanisha would be regular eggs, cheese, some toast on the side with butter. Okay. Which is my favorite, okaay. The lunch would maybe consist of a pizza with the works or something like that. And dinners would consist of two fried chicken wings, macaroni and cheese, and corn. And now, she would probably eat like a turkey sandwich or something, you know (Spring Breakout 2010).

The images portray ingredients of Mitchell's current meal plan: strawberries, watermelon, melon, lettuce, tomato, and a can of tuna to which her mother, Melody Harrod, remarks "it's not cooked." Unlike Mitchell's cohort, the framing of the discussion is not on Mitchell's food choices, but her mother's acceptance of the choices for herself.

Cultural Story: Surveillance for Shaming and Food Product Placement

For some reason when Mitchell is home the narrative focus broadens to include her mother's acceptance of Wellspring even though Mitchell is the central character. Their mother-daughter interactions are used to reflect family tensions regarding the Wellspring program. Tanisha Mitchell's complete acceptance is highlighted against her

mother's struggle to accept the Wellspring diet in support of her daughter. Also, Harrod makes an extremely important remark about Mitchell's dry tuna with tomatoes on a bed of lettuce lunch. She says in a barely audible voice, "it's not cooked," which suggests it is unfinished, either missing ingredients such as mayonnaise, which is common in tuna salad or that she prefers meat or fish that is cooked. Food is an extremely cultural topic, yet the Wellspring program instructs students to eat certain foods and food products and encourages them to reject traditional ethnic food, i.e. pumpkin bread and fried chicken. Harrod's comments marks an important feature lacking in the Wellspring program. The school does not attempt to be culturally relevant or conscious of differences that might affect youth food choices. Fat free food products and uncooked tuna are presented as appropriate consumer choices.

In the "Mayhem and Meltdowns" episode, the protective barrier of Wellspring Academy is breached and their authoritarian surveillance is circumvented. Students removed items from the food pantry when camp counselors for a "boys camp," simultaneously onsite, left the pantry unlocked. The evidence of what was stolen is prominently displayed with camera shots of empty wrappers in a trash bag and empty boxes. The list of inappropriate products in this segment includes: Pop-Tarts™, Rheddi-Wip™ whip cream in a can, Starbursts™, Reeses™, Kit Kat™, and Quaker Chewy™ granola bars. Additional food products such as Baked Lay's™ Potato Chips and Splenda™ are prominently displayed in clips of the participants eating lunch but left unexamined.

During the students lunch period, the thin white female Program Director complained about the snack theft, ironically while wearing a tee shirt that reads "Cupcake

Harvest Festival.” While the staff does not directly accuse Terinna Cypress of stealing the food, she is the featured character depicted laughing in her dorm room in the accompanying footage for the segment. According to the Program Director, she is mostly concerned with knowing how students are getting out of the dorms (Mayhem and Meltdowns 2010), which suggests they were locked inside the dorms or the dorms were guarded. This segment points to a few major concerns. The first is the vast array of sweet products typically provided for youth at camps, afterschool programs, and general youth activities. The second concern is that the cohort is never depicted in cooking classes at Wellspring Academy nor are they shown learning to grow food as part of their curriculum. The food narrative presented in *Too Fat for Fifteen* emphasizes students choosing appropriate products rather than developing literacies about growing and cooking whole foods.

Another concern is the student who is too accepting of the “Wellspring Way.” Tanisha Mitchell emerges as a star of *Too Fat for Fifteen* because she fully accepts the Wellspring Way. Mitchell demonstrates that she has internalized the monitoring gaze of Wellspring staff by continuing to do Monday morning weigh-ins at home over the summer. She unconditionally adopts the Wellspring staff advice to limit her caloric intake to 2000 calories and to maintain 10,000 steps daily. However, during a visit from her fitness coach at the end of Mitchell’s summer at home, Mitchell indicates she has lost 24lbs by drastically undereating, averaging 600 calories per day, and completing less than 5000 steps daily. Her weight loss success is also overshadowed by her coaches concern that the remaining black females, her mother and sisters, in her house are not supporting Mitchell by also adopting the “Wellspring Way.” So whereas Tanisha Mitchell was

feeling great about her weight-loss as proof of her acceptance of Wellspring authority, she is made to feel ashamed that her family is not participating in the Wellspring program. Her success, unlike her cohort, is based upon her continuous promotion of Wellspring at home and beyond.

3) *Big bodies are the result of poor parenting and individual reform is the best solution*

Commodified story: Personal Responsibility & Appropriate American Identity

Wellspring Academy blends an academic setting with a therapeutic retreat center.

There are numerous shots of the landscape presenting a serene, secluded outdoor setting with a lake, hiking paths, rolling hills, lots of trees, and recreation areas. The facilities look like group retreat centers or camps rather than the marble clad buildings found at elite private schools with similar tuition and fees. As a private boarding school it functions as an education product that also provides a health service, or vice versa, a health product that provides an education service. Either way it fits within Lipsitz argument that a product that addresses multiple needs makes a successful story (13). It also advances a neoliberal political project that focuses on reform approaches that “change the individual” versus “changing the culture.”

If Tanisha Mitchell and Miranda Nichols are success stories because of their acceptance of the program, Terinna Cypress is definitely a failure because she refuses to assimilate to the Wellspring program. In the first episode, “The School of Last Resort,” the introductory segment for Cypress includes spliced together video and audio clips that not only describe her personality but also her feelings about Wellspring Academy. During this segment the narration shifts back and forth from Wellspring staff to Terrina Cypress, and from interview to voiceover. Key phrases in her introductory segment are as follows:

Program Director: *(talking to cameraperson in his office)* Terinna she is a very tough stubborn individual, *(cut to footage of her working out)* but that's how she was raised.

Terinna Cypress: *(talking to cameraperson in first outside location)* I hate this place... *(voiceover)* Even if I wasn't hungry I would go to food. I would eat something big or *(talking to cameraperson in second outside location)* eat something very sweet or with a lot of sugar and I didn't really care what I ate or put into my body.

Behavioral Coach: *(talking to cameraperson in a hallway)* Terinna comes from Florida in the everglades and she has spent all of her life on the reservation there the Seminole Tribe.

Terinna Cypress: *(talking to cameraperson in second outside location)* We were sent to Florida to die out by—I mean no offense—*(cut to image of Cypress playing a sport)* by the white people....” *(talking to cameraperson in second outside location)* I'm African-American and Native-American and both sides of my family are diabetic....

Cypress, unlike her cohort, directly challenges Wellspring as an authority figure and is the only participant who “talks back” to the Wellspring staff, Daisybeck camerapeople, and the childhood obesity narrative. This montage is made up of a variety of video clips and audio clips that combine real events within an edited script.

Terinna Cypress: I was I guess you could say chubby whenever I was a kid. I really didn't care whether if I was big or fat or whatever you want to call it *(cut to footage of Cypress walking outside with cousin)* Whenever

I had something (*talking to cameraperson in second outside location*) like on my mind or something. I wouldn't talk to my mom I wouldn't talk to anyone I would eat...(*cut to footage of Cypress in cafeteria eating macaroni and cheese*) and that kind of was my place to run was to eat (*talking to cameraperson in outside location #2*) and then my dad passed away whenever I was 13 (*cut to footage of Cypress writing in a notebook listening to music in the cafeteria*) and I ate whenever I thought about it and I didn't want to think about it so all I did was eat. (*cut to footage of Cypress walking out of the cafeteria with headphones on her ears*).

Like Tiffany King, the theme of black father's dying surfaces again. Unlike Mitchell and Nichols, Cypress does not accept Wellspring as the authority. Cypress does not adhere to the belief that her "body works against her." She rejects Wellspring ideology about bodies, the belief that Wellspring is the best place for her to be, and Wellspring rules and regulations. As evidenced by her allegedly sneaking out of the dorms, her refusal to return on time from home visits, and ultimately her decision not to return to Wellspring Academy once she was eighteen years old.

Not only does Cypress defy the colorblind narrative of *Too Fat for Fifteen* by addressing the cameraperson directly as a white person, but also by discussing U.S. genocide against Native Americans. Cypress also challenges the monitoring gaze of the cameras' surveillance by eating "off program" on and off camera. Ultimately she verbally refuses the overall "on program" normalization projects of Wellspring Academy, and yet she still manages to lose weight.

As a fat Native American *and* Black American girl, Terinna Cypress also

symbolically bridges a dark history of American assimilation projects like boarding schools with current U.S. normalization projects, like Wellspring. There are a variety of reasons why Cypress may “hate” Wellspring the private boarding school none of which are likely to be explored in a commercial media product. Boarding schools are an important part of Native American history. Currently there are campaigns throughout the Americas, as part of the Boarding School Healing Project (The Boarding School Healing Project 2008) has campaigns throughout the Americas to address boarding school abuses ranging from sexual and physical abuse, child labor, kidnapping, and thousands of deaths of Native American children. Cypress and her cousin are not the first Seminoles to be sent to boarding schools for assimilation under the guise of “education,” progress, and security. Youth from Big Cypress attended federal boarding schools throughout the 20th century, which were developed to acculturate Seminole’s into the dominant white culture. An historical narrative may provide a more contextualized explanation for why Cypress does not want to be at any boarding school, let alone a boarding school encouraging cultural and physical reform of her personality and her body. *Too Fat For Fifteen* presents as an underlying narrative that Cypress is not as successful as she could be because she is, in fact, unassimilable. Within the frame of black female televisual tropes she is the Sapphire. She is labeled “an angry child...[with] a lot of built up anger” and her mother is explicitly identified as the source of that anger (Spring Breakout 2010).

Cultural Story: Mother Blame, Absentee Fathers, and Middle-class homes

A major sub-narrative in the “childhood obesity epidemic” official story is mother’s taking full responsibility for their child’s weight. Even though youth include their fathers when discussing their “parents,” narrators often refocus attention to mothers.

This is particularly true for Tanisha Mitchell's mother Melody Harrod, who is framed as a "bad mother" within *Too Fat for Fifteen* and beyond the frame of the reality show. Fat Studies scholar, Natalie Boero asserts in her essay "Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the 'Epidemic of Obesity,'"

The weight of one's children has increasingly become a litmus test of good mothering.... [Evaluating] the fitness of mothers based on the size of their children obscures larger structural issues of racism, economic inequality, fat phobia, and sexism among others (113).

Boero goes on to explain that women of color "are particular targets in explaining high rates of "childhood obesity" among Hispanic and African Americans." She cites a range of areas where pressure is on mothers of color as solely responsible for fixing their children including community programs that identify mothers and pregnant women as primary targets for intervention (116).

Terinna Cypress describes her mother as a recovering alcoholic who does not "notice her." According to Esther Buster, Cypress and her mother have difficulties living together because they argue regularly. She is generally depicted as a formerly obese and neglectful mother. Cypress does not come from a traditional middle-class suburban home environment; she lives in a trailer home on a reservation. However, her mother is judged as neglectful within the context of the middle-class standards espoused within *Too Fat for Fifteen*, which imagines equal access to resources and opportunities for people of all backgrounds in United States.

In Andrea Smith's *Conquest* she describes violent campaigns against Native American women as an intricate part of the American historical and contemporary

narrative. Smith discusses the cultural and physical genocide inflicted on indigenous women by governments and corporate entities throughout the Americas as an ongoing project. She includes within her framing of violence against women federal and Christian run boarding school abuses, interracial and intra-racial sexual and physical violence, widespread sterilization campaigns, sanctioned kidnappings, environmental racism, and more. However, for the purposes of *Too Fat for Fifteen*, Cypress' mother is restricted to invisible, low-income, formerly obese, alcoholic mother, without a historical or cultural context. Since Cypress' father died when she was thirteen and her mother is depicted as incapable of providing the reform and discipline Cypress needs to be a successful woman in American culture, Cypress is framed like an orphan who is better off at Wellspring.

Contrary to Cypress, there is very little emphasis on Miranda Nichols' mother. Carol Nichols is presented as a responsible and reformed white middle-class mother, who also happens to be a big woman. Bruce Nichols, Miranda's African American father, suggests he is indirectly responsible for Nichol's weight gain because, as a naval officer in the military, he was absent for months at a time during her childhood. Both of her parents indicate that Miranda substituted her time with her father with eating, and that Miranda gained nearly 80lbs once when he was deployed (Parents Weekend 2010). There is a subtext regarding black fathers as absent fathers in *Too Fat for Fifteen*. Bruce Nichols represents an *acceptable* absent father because he was serving his country. Also, he provides a comfortable middle-class home and lifestyle for his family. The Nichols' home is presented as a safe zone once Miranda has mastered being "on program" and her family has demonstrated their full assimilation into the "Wellspring Way" via appropriate consumerism.

More importantly, Bruce Nichols financially supports a variety of efforts to reform Miranda's body. This includes paying nearly \$32K per semester at Wellspring Academy for approximately two years. It also includes the cost of additional Wellspring camps, and an agreement to pay for cosmetic surgery to have her excess skin removed once she reached her target weight. Miranda Nichols functions as the tragic mulatto within the televisual tropes of black women. The tragedy is that she is fat and that her size is an obstacle to her enjoying the privileges of white-skinned feminine beauty.

Tanisha Mitchell's family, on the other hand, is an example of a family in need of reform. While Mitchell demonstrates her acceptance of the Wellspring Way, an important part of the personal narrative is centered on her mother's decision-making. In fact, her mother is continuously singled out as being solely responsible for her daughter's excessive weight gain even though she Tanisha lives in a two-parent household. Curtis Harrod is present during the initial drop-off and during parent's weekend, however, during home visits Mitchell's mother is depicted as a single mother of three. Mitchell's father, Curtis Harrod, is inexplicably absent from each segment within the domestic sphere and from follow-up talk show and news segment appearances. The following quotes are examples from *Too Fat for Fifteen*, the *Today Show* and the *Dr. Oz* talk show, which feature Tanisha Mitchell as a Wellspring success story. In each instance the hosts and narrative authorities focus on Harrod and Tanisha Mitchell refers to both her parents. In episode four "Spring Breakout," Mitchell is doing an interview speaking directly into the camera. She says...

I don't take offense to them not eating you know eating the same things that I do. You know doing the exercises that I do. It's just that it's gonna

take them awhile.

Then in episode eight “What Happens Next” Mitchell is home for the summer talking with her Wellspring coach who visits her in Suitland, Maryland. They are filmed talking outside Mitchell’s apartment building.

Tanisha Mitchell: I understand that it is not going to be easy to do what I do...and that it’s not going to be an easy adjustment for my parents, they need time to make it....

Behavioral Coach: Let’s, speaking of eating a full meal and enough calories, how about we get what we need to make your mom some pizza and show her that healthy food can also be good and what she wants.

After the first season of *Too Fat for Fifteen* Tanisha Mitchell is featured in a news segment entitled “Too Fat Teen Speaks Out” on *Today Show* with host Matt Lauer. Other guests are Mitchell’s mother, Scotty Basso and his mother.

Matt Lauer: Let me go to the moms here for a second now. Melody, I think a lot of parents are probably sitting at home and they’re saying how did it get to this point? How did these two young people in their teens get so overweight? How do you answer that question? You know people are asking that.

Melody Harrod: Sure, of course, they probably are. I think mostly Tanisha’s did stem from her Blount’s disease, her being bedridden for a while because she did have a lot of surgeries. So she couldn’t be as active as other teenagers and other children.

Another post-season guest appearance for Tanisha Mitchell was on *Dr. Oz’s* talk show

entitled “Win the Fight Against Child Obesity.” In the introduction he speaks directly into the camera in front of a live studio audience and says...

If it's child abuse to have an obese kid then the home is the scene of the crime. Sometimes the only option is to take them out of the abusive environment. One school says they have the answer when parents run out of options.

During a montage of video images from the first season of *Too Fat for Fifteen* a disembodied narrator says in a voiceover...

Wellspring Academy is the only school of it's kind. A boarding school where every child enrolled is obese.... By taking kids out of their homes, Wellspring has the room to reprogram dangerous eating habits learned from and enabled by their *parents* (Dr. Oz 2011)

Even though Tanisha Mitchell's mother is not a guest on the show, Dr. Oz includes excerpts of her from the series. In one video clip Harrod is talking into the camera stating “I don't like cooking,” and then she is shown ordering fast food.

Melody Harrod: Beefy five layer burrito.

Drive Thru Window Voice: Anything else?

Melody Harrod: Yeah let me have two of those.

During the in-studio interview Dr. Oz questions Tanisha Mitchell about her mother. He says...

Tanisha let me ask you a question because you had to go through part of your life at over 500lbs. What role does your *mom* play in all of this? Do

you think there was an element of child abuse that allowed you to get to that weight?

Tanisha responds to his question by saying...

I think my *parents* are partially responsible for my weight gain. I also as a child I was diagnosed with a bone disease. So I spent a lot of time bedridden and not getting any activity. I was immobile, but I was also being fed unhealthy foods. I think my *parents* just didn't know what they were doing. *They* didn't understand. *They* needed to be educated on healthy choices.

Dr. Oz's statement that the "home is the scene of the crime" also furthers the political narrative of black mothers as criminals in need of state intervention. According to journalist Ron Barnett, "state courts in Texas, Pennsylvania, New York, New Mexico, [and] Indiana... expanded the states legal definition of medical neglect to include morbid obesity, and ruled that the children were victims of neglect" (Barnett 2009). Barnett chronicled a prominent case where Jerri Gray, a black single mother in South Carolina, was charged with "criminal neglect" because her son, Alexander Draper, weighed 555lbs. She was instructed by South Carolina Social Services to turn her son over to them to be put into foster care. Gray, instead, left the state with her son, but she was arrested in Baltimore, Maryland and promptly returned to South Carolina to stand trial.

Dr. Mehmet Oz inviting Tanisha Mitchell to co-sign his argument that her mother was guilty of abuse and that Wellspring's intervention "saved" her is not benign. Using a clip that aired during the first season, Oz frames Melody Harrod as representative of

“abusive parents.” Without Harrod present to defend herself, Oz asserts the need for state intervention to “save children who are crying out for help,” while promoting Wellspring Academy as a viable solution. Tanisha Mitchell is simultaneously used to sell Wellspring Academy and to further the narrative of black mothers as criminals.

Also, Daisybeck Productions’ footage of Melody Harrod is not benign surveillance. Her image has been circulated throughout various media texts such as Dr. Oz’s talk shows, which has ramifications beyond the original intent for the collection of images. This raises questions about the ethical treatment of human subjects within the reality television genre by media producers. The criminalization of mothers, specifically black mothers, in conjunction with this “official story” is literally creating a justification for state sanctioned kidnapping. Why are mothers targeted as solely responsible for the “obesity epidemic?” What is the states role with regards to supporting parents with basic social and medical care when their children have disabilities?

Tanisha Mitchell and Melody Harrod indicated numerous times that she has been living with a bone growth disorder that left Tanisha bedridden and immobile. However, the “official story” does not entertain questions about access to rehabilitation through health care or even a disability rights framework. There is not one mention of Mitchell going to a rehabilitation center or having a personal physical therapist support her and her family during her numerous recoveries from surgery. Did Mitchell have access to public services for rehabilitation or were her parents left to fend for themselves? Mitchell’s family may not have quality health insurance. If this is true the costs of Mitchell’s numerous surgeries may have put a significant strain on the family income. Mitchell’s father may, like many working families, have multiple jobs to cover not only past

medical debt but also Mitchell's current private school tuition. This may be hypothetical but it is a more grounded and realistic explanation for Mitchell's father's absence from the home. His absence, however, is not relevant within the dominant narrative because Mitchell's mother is the only required presence for the narrative. She must be present as the normalized subject for scrutiny.

Tanisha Mitchell is a remixed mammy figure in that she is depicted as completely accepting the all-white Wellspring staff as "the experts" on her body and appropriate consumer habits. She is loyal to the Wellspring family and serving them by promoting the "Wellspring Way." Wellspring Inc. has branded her body so if her body continues to shrink she will visually validate the Wellspring product. Through the framing of Tanisha Mitchell's body as a product of Wellspring, Daisybeck Productions essentially condemns Tanisha Mitchell's home environment as dangerous and promotes Wellspring Academy as her protector and savior.

The "official story" response to the "childhood obesity epidemic" via *Too Fat for Fifteen* and subsequent television programs suggests removing youth with culturally inappropriate bodies from their natural environment until such time as they have been visually and behaviorally reformed, for a large fee. There is no complementary effort in commercial media to shame or punish those who individually or institutionally discriminate against, bully, or abuse people based upon their weight and body type. There is no sustained political agenda promoted by corporate media challenging the institutional and structural impediments to making "healthy choices." There is no sustained public discourse about the need for increased government support for parents being able to protect their children from commercial (food) marketing. Since big bodies

have been deemed bad bodies public (government) responses organized within mass media messaging either advance the prosecutorial efforts to criminalize mothers of “overweight” and “obese” children or promote government funded “anti-obesity” ad campaigns.

In the film, *Advertising and the End of the World*, Sut Jhalley discusses the shift from product marketing to lifestyle marketing whereby the product is embedded within the social interactions of central subjects. In the case of *Too Fat for Fifteen* the subjects not only live within the product, but their entire lives are organized through the primary product, i.e. Wellspring Academy, and around secondary products, such as food items. Wellspring and *Too Fat for Fifteen* essentially present themselves within the “do-goodism” framework of contemporary reality shows where Wellspring staff function as “the experts” with the ability to solve the nation’s “childhood obesity epidemic.” Through Daisybeck Productions’ “everyday investigations,” audiences learn about the behavioral modification program that has saved over 300,000 real children with dangerous bodies. Finally, parents are warned to not let their child(ren) be part of “...the first generation of teenagers who might not live as long as their parents” (Daisybeck Productions 2010). Most importantly, the “Wellspring Way” can be yours for as low as \$31,000 per semester—as seen on TV.

Chapter 4
800lb Media Gorilla: A Fierce Critical Investigation of
Corporate Troubles At Home

Participation in ownership of anything, but most particularly of broadcast stations or other tools of mass communication, is the gateway to our greatest power as Americans. Ownership enables one not merely to sell to others or to offer oneself to the call of the market. It provides the opportunity to propagate oneself in the marketplace of cultural images. Participation in the privileges of ownership thus involves more than the power to manipulate property itself; it lends an ability to express oneself through property as an instrument of one's interests.

Patricia Williams

“Metro Broadcasting, Inc. v. FCC: Regrouping in Singular Times”

Action for Children's Television (ACT) was founded in 1968 by a group of concerned housewives and mothers. In 1969 ABC broadcasting network aired the *Hot Wheels* television program, a “program length commercial” that promoted Mattel *Hot Wheels* line of toy racing cars (Rostron 1996). In 1971, ACT filed a petition asking the Federal Communications Commission to institute rules supporting increased educational programming on television and the “elimination of sponsorship and commercial content in children's programming” (Rostron 1996-1997, 59). In 1974 the FCC response the commission refused to create the rules nor did they define “program length commercial,” but they did agree to “exercise scrutiny over the commercial content of children's television programming” (59-60).

Black Citizens for a Fair Media (BCFM) was founded in 1971 by New York community activists. This organization “educated themselves concerning the laws governing the use of the public airwaves” (Emma Bowen Foundation 2012, 3). They bargained with major network executives for the “hiring and training of Blacks, the creation of management community affairs positions, and... [to] improve minority

images on television” (3). BCFM challenged media companies that refused to bargain by attempting to block their broadcast renewal license with the FCC. In 1982 BCFM filed a petition to challenge the FCC’s radio and television broadcast license renewal restructuring (United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia 1983). This restructuring extended the licensing renewal period from five to eight years for television broadcast companies; BCFM argued the extension “failed to comply with the reasoned decisionmaking requirements of the [Communications] Act” (6). It also “eliminated all questions regarding nonentertainment programming” and “entertainment programming such as children’s television” (1983, 1). In 1984 the US Court of Appeals for the D.C. circuit upheld the FCC changes to the renewal application effectively limiting the power of citizens to use broadcast license challenges for negotiating for a fair and representative media and public dissent.

ACT was largely concerned with media impact on children and BCFM was concerned with black youth having access to media power. ACT’s founder, Peggy Charren, was a white woman who was a housewife and mother of two (The Museum of Broadcast Communications 2012); BCFM’s founder, Emma L. Bowen, was a black woman community organizer and widowed mother of three (Emma Bowen Foundation 2012, 1). ACT lobbied for increased FCC regulations regarding media products and “media effects” issues; BCFM bargained formal agreements addressing issues of inclusion and diversity in production practices as well as political economy concerns. Both groups, organized prior to the deregulation frenzy of the 1980’s, recognized the important role of televisual media particularly regarding youth socialization and opportunities. They also worked collaboratively, at times, to hold the public and private

sectors accountable to democratic ideals of a media system that served public interests. The story of these mother-initiated media advocacy organizations provides important context for thinking about the “mother-blame” trope in the childhood obesity “official story.”

The docudrama, *Too Fat for Fifteen*, operates as a “pedagogy of mass consumption,” that is on the surface a “program length commercial” for Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas as a product. The Wellspring curriculum teaches weight-loss centered on appropriate food product choices. The major difference between the *Hot Wheels* children’s television program and *Too Fat for Fifteen* is the latter is not technically a children’s program. It is, however, an educational program framed as entertainment within the reality genre that relies on children to promote a \$26K commercial product for solving a public health issue. It also symbolizes the shift from product-based marketing to lifestyle marketing. In this context the healthcare and weight-loss industries are one in the same and a child reality character’s weight/health problem is the fault of parents as parent-consumer subjects (Sandlin and McLauren 2011). As a black female central character in this childhood obesity docudrama, Tanisha Mitchell’s role as the reform spokesperson in this neoliberal narrative promoting the Wellspring Academy product represents multiple layers of interest convergence within mass market media. In this chapter, a critical inquiry of *Too Fat for Fifteen*, I pose the following questions: Who are the educators in this “pedagogy of mass consumption?” Who controls the market and the cultural marketplace of ideas? What would a parent-producer subject look like? What constitutes “reasoned decision-making” by privately owned corporations and regulatory agencies for protecting the public interest?

In this chapter I use narrative to illustrate corporate embodiment and corporate body politics and to counter the prevailing childhood obesity epidemic discourse presented in mainstream televisual media. I discuss the findings of my vertical wide-angle pyramidal investigation of media producers (Style Network) and the primary product featured in *Too Fat for Fifteen* (Wellspring Inc.). The ideological framework established within the primary media text dictates three dominant messages: 1) Big bodies are bad bodies—dangerous bodies and bodies-in-danger—that require surveillance; 2) Big bodies should be regulated and taught body management via assimilation and normalization projects; 3) Big bodies result from poor parenting, and therefore parents should be held accountable for poor decision-making.

It is not my intention to suggest that childhood obesity is not an issue that requires national attention. My position is that the hegemonic narrative lacks a sustained critical inquiry of extremely powerful *unseen* actors that profit from promoting unhealthy lifestyles and marketing “health solutions.” The prevailing discourse intentionally promotes market-based solutions such as Wellspring Academy, the weight loss boarding school, even though it is not a reasonable option for the masses of American families. In this chapter, I move beyond the frame of the media text to discuss the real world “footprint” following the financescapes, mediascapes, ethnoscapes, and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990) of two major corporations involved with *Too Fat for Fifteen*. The first corporate entity, Bain Capital, is a private equity firm that exemplifies corporate strategic management and investment practices with wide influence on the U.S. marketplace. The second company, Comcast Corporation, provides a rich example of rapid corporate growth via mergers and acquisitions. “800lbGorilla” tells a story of two parent

companies that are not only influencing “childhood obesity” but are also invested in the “childhood obesity epidemic” beyond the televisual frame.

Wellspring Academy: A Fierce Critical Interrogation

“Media Effects” Research and Responses

Tanisha Mitchell’s body and home environment are available for public consumption in *Too Fat for Fifteen*. Her body is used to depict an extreme example of the childhood obesity epidemic and together with her home environment they are presented as primary sites of struggle. Media effects scholars and activists (Linn, Kilbourne, Schor, Quart) assert that corporations and corporate mass media are primarily responsible for many of the mental and physical health issues youth experience because they advance pedagogies of mass consumption through commercial advertising content. Typical effects research regarding obesity looks at the psychological effects visual advertisements, such as food marketing, have on children. They blame both the content and pervasiveness of commercials throughout American culture for influencing children to make poor consumer choices.

Burger King (BK), for example, has been targeted for inappropriate food marketing to youth by the Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC). Susan Linn, author of *Consuming Kids* and founder of the CCFC, indicated that at the beginning of the millennium Burger King spent more than \$80 million on advertising to children alone. Over the past decade BK’s marketing campaigns to children have included television ads; collaborative ads with blockbuster films (some of which are not age-appropriate for children’s meals) and with celebrity spokespersons like Sean “P-Diddy” Combs, mobile phone ads, and a free online advergame featuring “the king” in a violent action video game. Most of this advertising is designed to completely bypass parent

mediation and to flood youth media environments with food advertisements for products that are generally priced within their budgets. Within an economic deterministic framework one organized response has been consumer campaigns targeting individual corporations to change their behavior and lobbying to demand more and improved government regulations regarding commercial advertising that targets children. This response, based on a “media effects” paradigm, aims to shift the balance of power from self-regulated corporations to government, as protector of the public interest.

Effects research based upon technological determinism advances the belief that media innovations have caused children to be more sedentary and less active because of their high levels of media engagement with television, computers, smartphones, video games, and other screened platforms. Sociological studies, like the Kaiser report “Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8-to-18-year-olds” (Kaiser Family Foundation 2010), examine the amount of time youth spend using media, the types of media they use, and how they use it. Solutions include recommendations for changing family consumer habits. Based on an audience-as-consumer paradigm (Livingstone 2005) the choices range from suggesting that parents regulate children’s screen time, encourage children’s play that does not involve media, and purchase interactive movement video games (Vander Schee 2008). Similar to the economic determinism media effects research, my research also focuses on corporations as powerful and influential, but I take a different approach to media effects research. Rather than looking specifically at the corporate practices of media conglomerates in the realm of cultural production and circulation of media products, my inquiry focuses on corporate growth practices such as vertical integration and market share monopolies. In addition I study corporate actions in terms

of employment practices and sponsorship relationships. I situate my work within the traditions of ACT and BCFM targeting media corporations as content providers and employers. I also employ the CRF “looking to the bottom” approach to identify radical sites of struggle and to model a radical form of inquiry.

In *Too Fat for Fifteen*, Wellspring Academy is presented as an education product and “The Wellspring Way” is a weight-loss behavioral modification product marketed as health care. *Too Fat for Fifteen*, the media product, promotes an education product within a hybrid education/entertainment reality genre called the docudrama. It is a program length commercial for Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas that both raises awareness about the problem of childhood obesity in the U.S. while also marketing “The Wellspring Way” as a solution. Wellspring Inc. is a private company operating within the relatively recent paradigm of “conscious capitalism.” Their business is addressing the obesity epidemic within a public/private partnership advocating for increased government spending for health care coverage to offset more of the costs of the private school tuition. *Too Fat for Fifteen* is best understood as social marketing within the “cultural marketplace of ideas.” This docudrama is an example of the financial interests of Wellspring Inc. and the Style Network converging with the rehabilitation interests of central reality character, Tanisha Mitchell, a black teenage girl living in a working-class household.

Trouble At Home: “Follow-the Owner” to Find the Treasure

“Trouble at Home,” which aired towards the end of the first *Too Fat for Fifteen* season is the featured episode for this chapter. During this episode there are three major

segments depicting Tanisha Mitchell maintaining the “Wellspring Way” in her home environment. The first segment promotes Comcast onDemand fitness television products that Mitchell uses to work out at home. The second segment promotes the Wellspring brand by demonstrating Mitchell’s increased mobility after losing 100lbs within two semesters at the Academy. The final segment centers upon the limited selection of take-out restaurants in her neighborhood and Melody Harrod, Mitchell’s mother, as a barrier to Mitchell eating “on program.”

Critical Race Theory founding scholar, Derrick Bell explains in “*Brown v. board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma” (Bell 1995) the principle of “interest convergence” in legal scholarship. This concept provides an appropriate bridge between “the law” and “the media” regarding the financial arena of the media economy (Fiske, 1982). Bell asserts that decisions in racial legal cases have been guided by the interest convergence principle, which means

[The] Fourteenth Amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites (Bell 1995, 35).

Bell suggests that when there are critical shifts that defy past legal practices in institutional decision-making, we must consider the “decisions value to whites” not just in terms of morals, but also politically and economically. I argue that interest convergence is an appropriate concept for televisual media because while there has been more integration of images, i.e. there are more people of color on television, black characters are rarely central in “mainstream” predominantly white television programs.

Also, it is important to note that vertical integration of media companies within single large media conglomerates has increased distribution of black cable television networks that air “black shows” targeting black audiences. However, there are currently no black owned networks on cable or broadcast television. Media ownership continues to be concentrated among wealthy white males.

Within the commercial American media system where audiences are conceptualized as an audience-as-consumer identity, large corporations subsidize a market-as-educator approach to advance pedagogies of mass consumption. The “childhood obesity epidemic” is an “official story” discussed throughout public and private mass media outlets. Tanisha Mitchell starring as an ongoing central character in the first prime time reality series on a “mainstream” cable network represents the financial interests of the Style Network (mass distributor) and Wellspring Inc. (product sponsor) converging with Tanisha Mitchell’s (body) need for rehabilitation.

Social marketing messages promoting public health problems and solutions via commercial media outlets not only frame public health problems as the responsibility of individuals as consumers, but also as private business opportunities. Within commercial televisual media, audience members, particularly women and girls, learn to fear their size and/or weight gain because bodies depicted on television as “normal” are typically thin. Audiences are also targeted as markets for private companies to “educate” about appropriate consumer behavior. A brief review of the ownership chain of Wellspring Inc. reveals a corporate group identity with deep connections with “the market.” This overview offers a critical assessment of Wellspring Inc.’s financial interests and a counterstory of their corporate “footprint” specifically related to childhood obesity.

Wellspring Academy of the Carolinas, a weight-loss boarding school in Brevard, North Carolina is the featured product on *Too Fat for Fifteen*. The founder of Wellspring Inc. is Ryan Craig, formerly a Wall Street money-market investor, who argues the school is a healthcare program first and a boarding school second” (Abraham 2008). He is a young, highly-educated, thin white male; a perfect example of the “mythical norm” in America. In “Weight Training” (2008), journalist Carolyn Abraham writes that Craig’s wife wrote a “feature article for Newsweek magazine on childhood obesity.” Abraham describes Craig and Wellspring Academy in this way:

The Canadian founder of California's private Wellspring Academy claims to have the formula to battle the skyrocketing problem of childhood obesity: Harvard-level tuition, behaviour modification and a cult-like isolation from family and friends (Abraham 2008, 4).

When asked if he was a “fat kid” or had “an overweight child or parents,” Craig explained to Abraham, “there is no personal connection for me...just a clear need that needs to be addressed.” While Craig may not have a personal corporeal connection to childhood obesity he does, however, have a business orientation towards advancing a privatized education agenda. Prior to starting Wellspring, Craig was a board member of the Aspen Education Group, a collection of private rehabilitation boarding schools for youth. In addition to being President of Wellspring Inc., Craig is also a partner with University Ventures Fund, which supports entrepreneurial efforts for for-profit education companies. Craig’s biography on the UVF states

Craig is an entrepreneur and investor in the education industry.... He began his career as a [management] consultant with McKinsey and Co.”

(United Ventures Fund 2010).

“Open since 2004, Wellspring Academy is the leading provider of treatment programs for overweight adolescents and young adults” (PRWeb 2008). Wellspring has since grown from two small camps to two boarding schools and now boasts more than eleven summer camps and afterschool programs throughout the United States.

Wellspring Inc.’s owner is a health network called CRC HealthGroup. CRC was co-founded in 1995 by Daniel Newby and CEO and Chairman Dr. Barry W. Karlin, who received an engineering Ph.D. with a specialty in Decision Theory. Their career backgrounds are real estate and strategic management consulting, respectively. The CRC healthcare “network” is the largest provider specializing in behavioral and outpatient services such as drug addiction, “eating disorders, obesity, and mental health disorders.” Wellspring Inc. currently functions as CRC’s youth division, accounting for approximately 28% of the company’s total sales, second only to addiction recovery at 66% (CRC Healthgroup Company 2011). The CRC Healthgroup website declares...

As a leader in behavioral health care, we have extensive resources at our disposal to help people achieve lasting recovery. We also have a responsibility to be a voice for large-scale change in the health care system. Because we take this responsibility seriously, CRC is actively involved on a national level in advocating for better access to behavioral health care and insurance reimbursement for patients (CRC Healthgroup Company 2011). The health care industry is booming because health related problems

continue to increase as the population ages. Health care costs have risen significantly each year over the past decade and health care coverage is still a major concern in the US. In the past, health care had been a coupled with work benefits, but as health care costs continue to increase corporations have reduced/eliminated benefits or shifted the costs of these benefits to individual workers.

CRC HealthGroup, a private service provider, expanded their network through acquisitions of companies and property (Hoover Company 2012). Wellspring Academy, also a private service provider, charges twenty-six thousand dollars per semester for tuition to deliver a weight-loss product framed as healthcare. Wellspring Inc. is positioned at the intersection of three major industries: real estate, private education, and private healthcare. Property values and interest rates are extremely low and foreclosures are extremely high due to the 2008 recession. Approximately one in ten youth are categorized as obese and prosecutors in North Carolina and Ohio are criminalizing mothers of obese children for medical neglect and placing their children in foster care. Network television talk show host, Dr. Mehmet Oz, suggested that children be “rescued” from their homes and sent to Wellspring Academy. These are prime conditions with prime time social marketing via “program length commercials” for expansion within the behavioral modification industry, of which CRC claims to have the largest market share.

The parent company of CRC HealthGroup and consequently Wellspring Inc. is Bain Capital, a powerful private equity (PE) firm that handles \$65 billion in assets

annually (Bain Capital 2011). Bill Bain, the founder of Bain & Company and one of the “lords of strategy,” was very successful during the period widely referred to as the “Reagan-era,” more aptly described as the “deregulation era.” He along with presidential nominee Mitt Romney, a partner in the Bain & Co. firm, launched the private equity firm Bain Capital in 1984 (Kiechel 2010, 297) and Romney ran the company until 1999. Bain Capital “acquired” CRC Healthgroup for \$720 million in 2005, and CRC subsequently expanded their operation by purchasing the aforementioned Aspen Education Group in 2006 (CRC Healthgroup Inc. 2007).

Bob Drogin of the Los Angeles Times describes Bain Capital in this way...

It’s a buyout firm. In 1984, [Romney] was tapped to set up a — what began as a venture capital spin-off of a management consulting firm in Boston called Bain & Company. And Bain Capital began with these small investments in what were then startup companies, but very quickly, within a year or two, it became what’s known as a leveraged buyout company. They would put up a million dollars or so and borrow ten or twenty or fifty more and buy into troubled companies and then strip assets and lay off workers and close factories and ... charge enormous fees and sell it as quickly as possible (DiStefano 2005).

Business journalist, Walter Kiechel III, describes private equity firms such as Bain Capital’s work as follows: purchase businesses, strategically reorganize them to make them more profitable for owners and shareholders, and then take them public or sell them within a short time period, usually five to seven years (92). In his book, *The Lords of Strategy: The Secret Intellectual History of the New Corporate World*, he indicates that

the rise of strategic management consulting firms occurred during the Reagan-era.

The size of the junk bond market in the U.S. mushroomed from around \$30 billion in 1980, to \$136 billion in 1986, to \$242 billion in 1989....

The level of activity in the buying and selling of companies was extraordinary, more than ten thousand deals between 1982 and 1988 (204-205).

Bain Capital, the private equity firm, is significantly different from Bain & Company because rather than consult with companies, Bain Capital purchases companies, overhauls them using Bain & Company strategies, and then sells them for a large profit. Bain Capital has more power to control decision-making in companies because Bain Capital executives do not work for companies as consultants they work “with” them as their owner. The combination of strategic management practices and corporate ownership contributes to what Kiechel describes as a “fiercening of capitalism” (8) and an overall “triumph of shareholder capitalism” (201). This fierce capitalism, I argue, contributes greatly to increasing profits for shareholders by making unethical investments and unreasonable decisions that negatively impact public interests.

Even though there are no empirical studies proving Wellspring Inc. successfully intervenes with long-term solutions for youth struggling with weight, it makes perfect business sense for Bain Capital to invest in weight-loss boarding schools that charge families approximately \$52,000 per school year. But is it ethical for Bain to also invest in fast food restaurants that market cheap convenient foods to youth as the *parent company* of a weight-loss boarding school? Over the last decade, Bain Capital “acquired” Dominoes Pizza (1998-2004), Burger King (2002-2006), and Dunkin

Doughnuts (2005). Sankaty, a multibillion-dollar credit affiliate of Bain Capital, invests in Church's Chicken and the American Institute of Gastric Banding, according to Bain Capital's website.

Network producers do not intend for their audiences to mine reality shows for data to critically analyze the parent companies of the central products promoted in the program. Yet *Too Fat for Fifteen* audiences can follow Tanisha Mitchell to her hometown Suitland, Maryland where the camera directs the gaze towards Mitchell, her mother, and their living space. Rather than view the program as entertainment, I studied it as ethnographic data, drawing upon the original intent of ethnographic filmmaking of which the reality genre emerges. Pushing my gaze past the sanctioned images and speech within the video footage, my investigation beyond the frame informs my secondary reading of the media text with knowledge of Bain Capital as an *unseen* actor. Re-viewing *Too Fat for Fifteen* after learning about Bain Capital reveals another layer of data coded within the reality program.

Who's to Blame? Parent-consumer subjects vs. Parent-producer subjects

In the "mother blame" segment I discussed earlier, Daisybeck producers edit together a collection of interview clips of each female family member describing "take-out Fridays." It is described as a weekly ritual organized by Melody Harrod, who picks-up family members' favorite food selection from various local take-out restaurants. The list of typical foods presented in the montage of their responses includes: "Chinese food, pasta, Wendy's, french fries, pizza, burgers, fried fish, fried chicken, ... [and] Pizza Hut." The purpose of the segment is to highlight Melody Harrod as a barrier to Tanisha Mitchell's weight loss progress. My survey of fast food restaurants, located within five

miles of a Suitland apartment complex visually resembling the complex depicted on *Too Fat for Fifteen*, owned by Bain Capital between 2000 and 2010 revealed twenty-one Bain fast food restaurants literally surrounding the property.

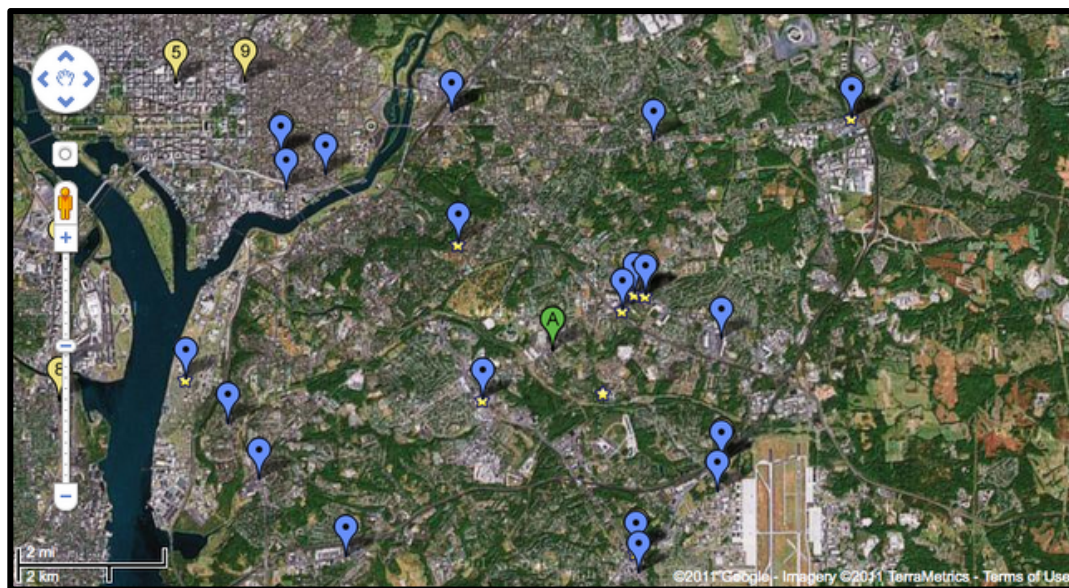


Figure 11: Google Map of Bain Capital related fast food restaurants. Suitland, Maryland.

In April 2011 there were nine Domino’s Pizzas, six Burger Kings, and five Dunkin Doughnuts within a five-mile radius surrounding the Imperial Gardens apartment complex identified using google maps. According to Census data, Suitland, Maryland is approximately 4.25 land area square miles.

Shifting the audiences perspective from the dominant “mother blame” gaze constructed by Daisybeck Productions to a fierce critical oppositional “parent company” gaze reveals that Bain Capital is a present absence in Mitchell’s physical environment. In Suitland, Bain Capital as an owner of fast food restaurants is present as a “cheap” contributing factor to the obesity epidemic based upon the standards of the Wellspring program. In Brevard, Bain Capital is present as part of an “expensive” solution for the obesity epidemic. Yet, Bain Capital is completely absent from the “official story” about

the childhood obesity epidemic.



Figure 12: Photographs of apartment complex featured in *Too Fat For Fifteen* and of Burger King, Dunkin’ Doughnuts, and Dominoes within five miles. Suitland, Maryland.

In another segment of “Trouble at Home,” the Daisybeck camera crew follows Tanisha Mitchell as she tours the Supreme Court in Washington, DC for the first time. This segment is meant to show how much more mobile Mitchell is now that she has lost 179lbs. It also serves to promote Wellspring’s success through Mitchell; which further advances the belief that Wellspring is a superior authority figure to parents. Mothers depicted in *Too Fat for Fifteen* are derided for making poor decisions in their personal choices of foods, for allowing their children to become overweight or obese, and for general neglect. Taking the logic of the present absence further, I assess Bain Capital’s “footprint” beyond their ownership of fast food restaurants. Looking deeper into the practices of Burger King and Dunkin Doughnuts reveals yet another layer of unethical parent company decision-making.

Too Fat for Fifteen is not the only location where Bain Capital promotes solutions for the childhood obesity epidemic. In Boston, during the fall of 2010 *Celtics onDemand* aired Paul Pierce's videos from his "Truth on Health" initiative. Paul Pierce is an all-star player with the Championship Boston Celtics professional basketball team, which is partially owned by partners in the Sankaty firm, a credit affiliate of Bain Capital. The Boston Celtics play in the Dunkin Doughnuts Center in Providence, Rhode Island. Special Celtic youth fans have the opportunity to watch Paul Pierce play basketball from the Dunkin Doughnuts KidZone as well as workout with Paul Pierce FitClub34 videos on *Celtics on Demand*. These same youth fans are given Dunkin' Doughnuts gear to wear for photo opportunities with Celtics players. Marketing Dunkin' Doughnuts at Dunkin' Doughnuts KidZone events would appear to be part of an unwritten agreement for youth participation. I am not suggesting that Dunkin' Doughnuts food products alone cause obesity in children. David Zinczenko did identify doughnuts as the healthier product choice over the multigrain bagel on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. However, most of the menu items would not constitute "on program" food products for Wellspring staff.

Too Fat: Intervention or Interest Convergence?

Comcast Corporation and the "Obesity Epidemic"

The segment of "Trouble at Home" where the Daisybeck cameraperson(s) films Tanisha Mitchell working out in her living room with an onDemand exercise program represents a critical moment. Opening this "reality" communicative event (Hall 2001, 508) where audiences view a televisual image of Mitchell viewing a Comcast Corporation product using Comcast technology while her image is recorded by a camera and then distributed via the Style Network cues the technoscape and financescape that flows through Tanisha Mitchell's media environment. In this segment of the reality show

the media producers' direct the audiences' gaze towards Mitchell's body and her home environment. The two-second clip demonstrates how she continued the weight controlling practices of the "The Wellspring Way" program at home. Mitchell completed her daily workout regimen using a fitness television program that was available through onDemand, a Comcast Corporation product. I argue that the presentation of Mitchell home with her family depicts them as present absences within the parameters of the "official story" of childhood obesity discourse. Present, in that audiences are supposed to pay attention to their bodies and behavior, but absent because the fullness of their lives beyond the obesity narrative is excluded.

This section of the chapter seeks to "courageously look" (hooks) at Comcast Corporation, the powerful disembodied entity that makes Mitchell and her family available for scrutiny. Comcast functions as an influential absent presence in the childhood obesity public health crisis. Absent, in that Comcast's corporate body and behavior is not widely available for scrutiny, yet as a media conglomerate who owns and invests in a diversity of media products (content providers and content), communications services, technological platforms and equipment, and physical property they are an influential presence throughout U.S. media environments.

In this critical "two-second" moment Mitchell, her mother and her sisters are positioned as television characters and a family television audience simultaneously. The television program featured in Mitchell's workout segment is called "21 Day Cardio," which aired initially on ExerciseTV and was subsequently available through Comcast's Video on Demand service. Looking closer at this product placement within *Too Fat for Fifteen*, I learned that Comcast Corporation is not just Tanisha Mitchell's cable provider

for the primary visual media source in the Mitchell/Harrod household. *Too Fat for Fifteen* is a Passion Distributions media product distributed by Style Network. During this first season, Comcast Corporation was the direct parent company of Style. In other words, Comcast Corporation owns Style Network and is the largest cable network company in the U.S.

In an effort to make Comcast Corporation present for interrogation this section looks closely at available demographics of its corporate body, its growth strategies, and its corporate practices. The first step towards seeing Comcast Corporation more clearly is through a process of metaphorical embodiment. The next step is to assess Comcast according to the CRF “looking to the bottom” tenet, which means listening to the voices of workers, subscribers, and public interest advocacy groups. This section of the chapter uses the discursive rules Style Network, Passion Distribution, Daisybeck Productions in corporate in *Too Fat for Fifteen* to structure the presentation of Tanisha Mitchell’s body as a problem and applies them to Comcast’s corporate body.

Com Robber: “Whiteness As Property” in Media Ownership

The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inhering in whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded. The courts played an active role in enforcing this right to exclude determining who was or was not white enough to enjoy the privileges accompanying whiteness. In that sense, the courts protected whiteness as any other form of property (Harris 1993, 1736).

Style Network's president is Salaam Coleman Smith, a black female executive primarily responsible for programming and branding, according to her biography on the Style Network website. Smith, however, is not the owner of Style Network. Comcast Corporation, a family-owned yet publically traded company, owns Style. After Comcast's 2011 acquisition of NBCUniversal (NBCU) Style became the direct property of NBCU within the hierarchy of vertical integration. Comcast Corporation acquired 51% control of NBCU, broadly defined as a broadcast network and film company, from General Electric. Comcast Corporation remains Style's parent company, and through this acquisition Comcast also owns Style's network competitor Bravo. For the purposes of my research I only focus on season one of *Too Fat for Fifteen*.

Acknowledging the important distinction between president and owner in this scenario reveals a deep tradition of media ownership being consolidated among a particular class of "individuals"—wealthy white males. Of the African-American-targeted cable networks, TVOne, Black Entertainment Television (BET and Centric), and OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) none of the African American owned media companies has majority ownership of a television network. Cathy Hughes, owner of Radio One, does not own majority interest in TVOne. Robert L. Johnson, the only African-American to own a cable television network, sold BET to Viacom. Oprah Winfrey, owner of Harpo Productions, shares ownership with Discovery Communications of The Oprah Winfrey Network. Hughes is a joint owner of TVOne with Comcast Corporation's Brian Roberts; her family owns less than 50% interest. Sumner Redstone is majority owner of BET. Winfrey is joint owner of OWN with Discovery Communications Inc.'s founder John Hendricks. Roberts, Redstone, and Hendricks are all white males. There are no cable

networks where African-Americans have majority ownership, and no national broadcast television networks where African-Americans have majority or joint ownership. During the 1990's Bill Cosby, a successful black male comedian and actor whose popular television sitcom *The Cosby Show* revived the NBC network, tried to buy NBC from General Electric. The responses to his offers were "not for sale," according to USA Today. Due to deregulation of ownership rules in the communications industry large media conglomerates like Comcast Corporation who are majority owners of cable, broadcast, and film networks function as gatekeepers.

Whiteness *and* maleness is the baseline for participating in televisual media ownership, but recognizing the race and gender of media owners is not enough. The privileges accrued through white-maleness and ownership of media property in the form of workers, audiences, and actual property is of much greater importance. Cheryl Harris explains in "Whiteness as Property" that whiteness has been legally constructed to mean having the absolute right to exclude and the right to own property in the form of human labor, i.e. slaves, and land through the removal of Indigenous peoples. In the hierarchy of media ownership race and gender matter because it is the baseline for accessing property rights in the form of vehicles for mass distribution of images. White-maleness represents an established line of demarcation between having majority ownership of mass media distribution capabilities and all other media companies.

As media corporations vie for legal personhood, i.e. "commercial free speech," and increased "property ownership" rights, monitoring the size of corporations and having an established accountability and regulatory structure are crucial for a democratic media system that is accessible and accountable to diverse constituencies. In *Corporate Bodies*

and Guilty Minds: The Failure of Corporate Criminal Liability William Laufer describes the judicial and legislative treatment of corporations in the law since the 1800's. Reviewing cases of corporate fraud, Laufer discusses defining phases regarding regulating and convicting corporations for fraud, which are typically dictated by the politics of the economy during each time period. Most important for my research he charts the development of legal personhood for corporations and discusses when and how the corporate body is hidden or put on display in cases of criminal liability (Laufer 2006). He explains...

To some, the conception of personhood was bounded by a methodological individualism that limits the understanding of social and group phenomena—corporate action—to the acts of individuals or agents. The features of biological and corporate persons differ in critically important ways. Without a soul and a will, judges concluded that the idea of attributing a guilty state of mind or corporate mens rea was too much of a fiction. Corporations are a 'mere abstraction of law.' Without a body, the act requirement of the criminal law also could not be realized (11).

This quote, discussing guiding principals for thinking about corporate personhood in the 1800's, touches on three major concepts that I find useful for my research: corporate personhood, individualism, and corporate dis-embodiment. Laufer suggests that in the current political environment, corporate power has grown because corporate personhood is legally deployed to access rights and privileges via the 14th Amendment. He also indicates that the practice of punishing and regulating corporations as persons has been left to prosecutorial discretion rather than a standard for "fair and consistent

processing of cases.” He argues that it is “this discretion and substitution [that] tends to emasculate the substantive corporate criminal law” (49), which is employed on a case-by-case basis.

The tendency towards “methodological individualism” supports Patricia Williams argument in guiding principle No. 8 that the “‘neutral’ ethic of individualism...[obscures] the corporate group identity advancing political claims for that group identity” (535). Williams describes the “corporate group identity” more specifically as a “wealthy white male” collective. However, the people who make up the corporate body are often much more diverse in terms of class, race, and gender, and they are organized within hierarchies of power, privilege, and vulnerability.

Laufer explains that the fiction theories of corporations’ personhood in the law suggest either the idea that there is no “body” to stand trial, therefore you cannot convict a corporate entity, or the belief that all members of a corporate body should not be punished for a few “rouge” employees’ actions. Laufer uses Arthur Andersen accounting firm as an example of the corporate body being made visible. He describes Andersen employees wearing tee shirts stating, “I am Arthur Anderson” (45), at a company organized protest during the corporations’ sentencing trial for fraud.

Unstable legal definitions of corporate personhood coupled with the doctrine of individualism underlying corporate liability allow corporations to use their bodies tactically. Laufer explains that another tactic used by corporations is to isolate less powerful parts of the body and target them for personal blame for corporate crimes. The expansion of private media corporate bodies and commercial free speech privileges, in the form of commercial and political advertising and brand campaigns, as well as

limitations of public regulatory bodies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) are part of a neoliberal agenda to shift the balance of power significantly in favor of private corporations.

Building on the “official story” of the childhood obesity epidemic described in chapter two, I apply the neoliberal ethic of individual responsibility promoted through Wellspring’s weight-loss solutions to a metaphorically embodied Comcast Corporation. This embodiment is my attempt at making the *unseen* seen in order to present a corporate body for public interrogation. It is also intended to provide a platform for including diverse voices of relevant marginalized people in a counternarrative about Comcast Corporation. If Comcast had a body what would it look like? What visual logics would we use to describe it? Based upon a diverse collection of critical stories about Comcast’s “footprint” I present a fictional embodied corporate person I like to call Com Robber.

“Who is Com Robber and how did get so big:” Corporate Bodies and Media Environments

At the beginning of 2011 Comcast Corporation added NBCUniversal to its long list of mergers and acquisitions in a more than four-decade campaign of corporate growth. This merger made Comcast Corporation the largest cable company in the United States (Mehta 2003). By metaphorically embodying Comcast as a collective of human workers and property we can more accurately describe the corporation’s ability to influence masses of individual bodies through the work environments and media environments they control. This anthropomorphic approach provides a competing visual narrative of obesity by focusing on corporate growth strategies, contemporary uses of large corporate bodies, and the regulations governing corporate actions. It is a counternarrative structure that foregrounds corporate ethics and liability regarding expanding media corporations. The

following table describes the corporate body I developed based upon data taken from Comcast's "Corporate Overview" and "Television" websites.

Comcast	Body Part	Race/Gender/Size/Property
Brand Logo	Face	xfinity
Founder Chairman, CEO	Head	Ralph Roberts (white male) Brian Roberts (white male)
Board of Trustees	Head Hair	8 white males; 1 white woman; 1 black male
Shareholders	Skin	unsure
Senior Executives	Neck	Corporate: 21 white males; 12 white women; 1 black male; 1 black woman Cable: 17 white males; 2 white women; 2 black men
Mergers/Acquisitions and Accounting Divisions	Upper Arms (Muscle)	Corporate: David Cohen (white male)*
Community Relations Comcast Foundation	Lower Arms	Corporate: Charisse Lillie (black woman)*
Legal Divisions General Counsel	Wrists	Corporate: Arthur Block, Esq (white male) Cable: Douglas Gaston (black male) (American Customer Satisfaction Index 2008)
Public Relations (Lobbyists)	Hands	Meredith Baker (white female)
Network Connections	Fingers	TV, Movies, Internet, Cable, Cellular
Corporate Offices	Chest	Comcast Center Philadelphia Headquarters
Content Providers and Content	Stomach	Content Providers: Style, NBCU, QVC, E! Entertainment, Oxygen Media, Bravo, USA, A&E, The Weather Channel, Hulu, Comcast Sportsnet... Content: <i>Too Fat for Fifteen, The Biggest Loser...</i>
Subscribers/Customers	Waist	45,600,000
Sports Teams and Facilities	Thighs	76ers, Phillies, Flyers, Comcast Spectacor: Wells Fargo Center and Global Spectrum.
Customer Service	Lower Legs	Diverse men and women
Cable/Network Technicians	Ankle Feet	Union (diverse males) Non-union (diverse males)

Figure 13: Chart of Comcast employee and content data collected from information posted on Comcast websites between March 2011 and September 2011.

As a family owned company, the "head" of Com Robber has always been white and male. Comcast is a publically traded corporation, however, before stepping down as Chairman and CEO, Ralph J. Roberts created a separate class of stocks restricting ownership to himself and his son, Brian Roberts. This ensures that the "head," which is determined based upon shareholder voting power, remains unchanged for the foreseeable future. This corporate practice also explodes the myth of meritocracy as an American work ethic. Originally a small cable company bought by Ralph J. Roberts (and two

partners) in the 1960's, Comcast has grown to be one of the most important and influential media companies in America with 24.2 million cable-TV customers, 14.9 million high-speed internet customers, nearly 6.5 million voice customers (Comcast Corporation 2009, 37), and more than 100,000 employees nationwide. Once the Federal Communications Commission approved Comcast's acquisition of 51% of NBCUniversal, an online finance website identified Comcast as "a media 800lb gorilla" (iStockAnalyst 2011).

Ralph Roberts is quoted saying, "[our intention] is to continue to grow" (DiStefano 2005). According to C-Net staff writer, John Borland,

...[the] mid-1980s [is when] the Roberts family began showing the appetite for growth that has now become its hallmark. In 1986, Comcast doubled its size with its first major purchase of another cable TV company, and it became a founding investor in the QVC home shopping network....

The next decade saw the Roberts family make steady growth in the business, largely through acquisitions (2004, 3).

The first major run of acquisitions included QVC, half of Storer Communications, and American Cellular Network (AMCELL) in the 1980's. If "acquiring" is metaphorically likened to eating and media and telecommunications companies are the "food" then Com Robber has gained significant weight, i.e. millions of subscribers and thousands of employees, by "eating" companies, sometimes via hostile takeovers. These acquisitions have contributed to developing Comcast's large and ever expanding corporate body and property holdings.

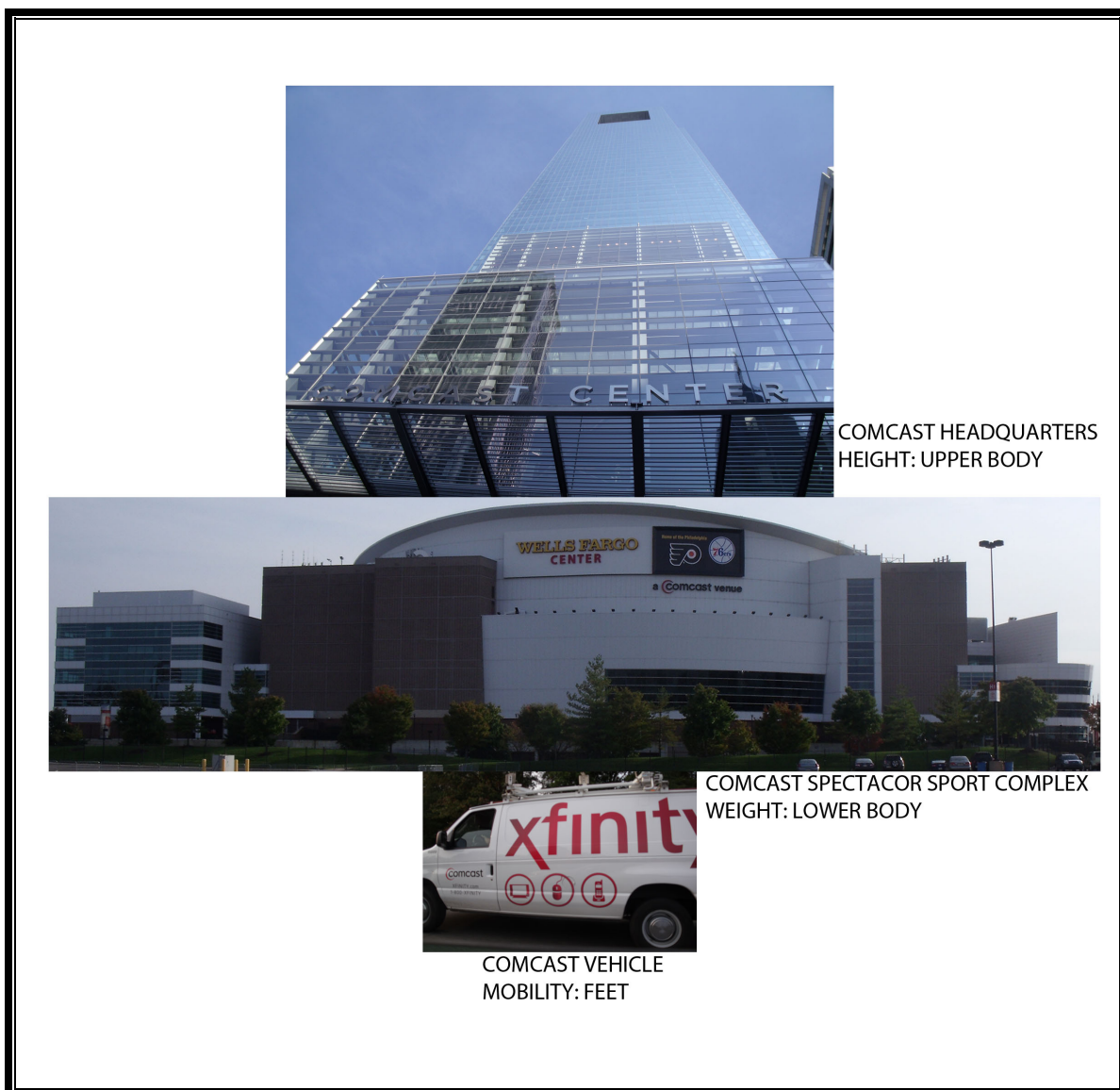


Figure 14: Photographs of Comcast properties in or near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Comcast’s property ownership can be described in terms of employees and audiences, physical structures, and technological equipment and infrastructure. They are deemed the largest cable provider because of the number of subscribers they have—i.e. their audience and consumers. Comcast recently built the Comcast Headquarters, the tallest building in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, symbolically representing who is “king” in the former capital of the nation. Comcast also owns the Comcast Spectacor Sports Complex as well as the Philadelphia sports teams that play in the arenas in order to

control advertising revenue at the source.

Using the language of Wellspring Academy, Com Robber is in fact “super-morbidly obese” much like the initial assessment ascribed to Tanisha Mitchell. There are no scales for culturally measuring corporate bodies, therefore I calculated Com Robber’s metaphorical body mass index according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention four-category BMI scale—underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese. For the height variable of the formula I use the corporate headquarters in Philadelphia, at 976-feet tall (translated to nine feet seven inches for BMI). For the weight variable I use Boreland’s weight analogy that Comcast is an “800lb media gorilla” because of their influential standing in the media industry. According to the CDC BMI calculator, thirty and above is considered obese and based upon Comcast’s height and weight their BMI calculation is 42.5. The recommended weight for Comcast ranges between 348-468lbs, which is about half its size, therefore I assert Com Robber’s corporate body represents “corporate obesity.” If Com Robber is studied within the context of peer corporations one might suggest there is a “corporate obesity epidemic” in which the highest prevalence of obesity is among this wealthy white male corporate group identity in the US. National tolerance for this epidemic is either much higher than that of individual obesity or perhaps cultural silencing is a side effect of “corporate obesity,” particularly in a predominantly corporate owned media environment.

Comcast’s Footprint: Corporate Obesity and Parent Company Decision-making

The 2003 Forbes article “King Comcast” by Stephanie Mehta retells the dominant narrative of how Brian Roberts became the “king of cable.” Like similar articles, Mehta focuses on the deals, acquisitions, and overall business

philosophy that brought the Robert's family to power; their financial standing and interaction among their peers/competitors in the industry; their innovative approach to technologies in the industry; and Brian Robert's slender physique. The size of Comcast's corporate body is rhetorically framed solely within context of the company as a threat to their industry competitors. Mehta does not, however, mention any of the concerns raised by Comcast workers or the consumers they have "acquired."

In this section I focus on the marginalized voices of groups and individuals who have challenged Comcast's size and attempted to warn the public and Congress about the corporation's abuses of power. This section "looks to the bottom" for the voices of workers, consumers, and public interest and advocacy groups in the American Rights At Work "No Bargain!" report; the Jobs with Justice "Workers' Rights Board" hearing report; Joe DiStefano's unauthorized biography, *Comcasted*; print and online periodicals; and the Reel Grrls digital video on YouTube to present a counter to the dominant narrative of Comcast. In this section my focus is on how Com Robber uses his size for influence.

Joe DiStefano, journalist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, authored *Comcasted*, an unofficial biography of Comcast, which includes multilayered discussions of consumer dis-satisfaction with the company among other critiques. Social justice and worker advocacy groups, Jobs with Justice and American Rights at Work (ARAW) published reports in 2004 and 2005 respectively highlighting concerns of Comcast workers about the corporation. These accounts reflect Com Robber's abuse of his size and power in the marketplace and in the

workplace. The following quotes provide a “minority report” of the corporation’s footprint in the real world.

Early in 2001, Comcast put the merger department...to work drafting a plan for a hostile takeover of AT&T Broadband (DiStefano, 151)

After firing more than 5,000 [AT&T] workers, [Comcast] held mass rallies at Comcast offices all over the U.S., opened new customer-service centers, and exhorted contractors to work harder. Customer complaints poured in... (DiStefano, 170).

This parent company’s decision-making has significant impact on the lifestyle of workers and consequently parents. These following two quotes represent voices of acquired Comcast workers.

A worker and her colleagues at a suburban Chicago Comcast facility have been stuck in delayed contract negotiations since 1999. When Comcast acquired AT&T Broadband in late 2002, she believed that the company would live up to its promises to negotiate a new bargaining agreement with her union.... While she did receive a small, one-time pay increase during the five-year delay, her stagnant wages have not kept up with the escalating costs of basic living expenses (American Rights at Work 2004, 19).

Maintenance technician Shannon Kirkland worked for Comcast and its predecessor company Barden Cable for 11 years. ‘Comcast acts like a bully, refusing to adhere to the rules or community standards,’ he told the Board. ‘We once had 125 employees in Detroit, now there are 48.

Comcast uses its disproportionate power to deny workers their rights.

Meanwhile, our customers are paying top dollar—but they receive substandard service in Detroit’ (Workers Rights Board 2004).

DiStefano explores the link between Comcast working conditions and customer service asking...

Just how bad is Comcast’s customer service?

In 2003, the 100,000-member National Quality Research Center ranked Comcast below even the despised Internal Revenue Service, and tied...for the worst rating of the airlines, utilities, and governmental services evaluated (163).

This collection of quotes presents a thread from corporate takeover to customer service concerns over the last decade. They also speak to the influence Comcast has on worker and consumer communities, which are not mutually exclusive, nationwide. When media entities are discussed regarding their role in the childhood obesity epidemic the focus is on their media practices, such as child-targeted food marketing, but not the impact of their employment practices on family decision-making. Corporate entities who suppress wages; contribute to high unemployment rates even when they are profitable; and maintain stressful and/or poor working conditions are not directly implicated or left completely un-interrogated as part of the problem.

Jackson Katz, a cultural studies scholar, explains the concept of an *absent referent* as the obscured identity of an actor who discriminates against a group of marginalized people but who is not framed as a subject for interrogation regarding

the discrimination. The attention, instead, is focused on the group that is discriminated against. He discusses this concept in his film *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*, stating that dominant categories (white, male, heterosexual) tend not to be interrogated within a context where their impact can be best understood. He further indicates that when people in dominant categories are acting “normal” according to the understood social rules for the category, i.e. men being aggressive, then the dominant group’s behavior is not interrogated as part of “the problem” (Katz 1999). Katz uses an example of a news article on school shootings in the U.S. where the important fact that all the shooters were male is excluded from the analysis. The prevailing narrative focuses on “kids killing kids;” the sex of the shooters is expressed once in parenthesis and their whiteness is not mentioned at all. This concept of absent referent is relevant to an analysis of Comcast and its behavior in the “real world.”

Unlike more affluent members of her cohort, Mitchell lives in an older apartment in a working-class neighborhood. The 2011 journal article “Neighborhoods, Obesity, and Diabetes—A Randomized Social Experiment” in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that the poverty level of a neighborhood impacts the “prevalence of extreme obesity and diabetes” (Ludwig, 1509). The 2010 report by the Task Force on Childhood Obesity addresses the possible relationship between hunger and obesity, indicating that the “low cost of nutrient-poor, energy dense foods promotes overconsumption of calories, leading to weight gain” (61). Unemployment, underemployment, and depressed wages contribute to poverty levels nationwide (Workers Rights Board 2004), and

poverty has been shown to influence the food “choices” families make. Poverty is a key variable in the childhood obesity public health crisis. People living in poverty are typically the center of research and official reports and are therefore the primary targets for campaigns related to reducing obesity. Their current/former employers or major U.S. employers in general do not incur the same attention; they are the absent referent.

Laying off workers, increasing remaining employees workloads to unreasonable levels, requiring mandatory overtime, refusing to bargain with unionized workers, and depressing wages and benefits contributes to the escalation of financial insecurity and poverty in neighborhoods nationwide. These corporate actions in the form of labor practices by large corporate bodies are absent, in fact deemed irrelevant, for Mehta’s narrative of the “king of cable.” They are also absent from scholarly research and government reports that discuss approaches to decreasing the prevalence of childhood obesity. Comcast workers concerns as well as the corporation’s refusal to respond has been documented in the 2004 American Rights At Work Report, *No Bargain*. According to the report, Comcast’s expansion via mergers and acquisitions has consequences for cable and telecommunications workers in major cities across the country in such as Detroit, Chicago, and Dallas. The report indicates competitive pay has been a major issue for workers in the cable and telecommunications industry because of Comcast’s refusal to acknowledge union shops and bargain collectively.

In 2005 Comcast CEO Brian Roberts took home nearly \$28 million in compensation and stocks combined; in 2010 he paid himself \$30 million. A

review of online resources suggests that the Comcast minimum wage is approximately \$12 for hourly workers. Whereas the Telecommunications Industry was known for providing middle-class union employment opportunities, workers doing similar jobs for cable corporations make on average \$13,000 less according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (American Rights at Work 2004).

Data gathered by Cornell and Rutgers University researchers demonstrates that cable technicians earn approximately 30% less than workers in any other network establishment, despite the fact that cable firms face relatively little competition in their local markets, since they average a 73% market share (American Rights at Work 2004).

The metaphorically embodied Comcast (see Figure 13) reveals an upright hierarchical structure whereby the highest paid board members and executives are the “neck” and “head” of the corporation, and the lowest paid employees are literally the “feet” on the ground. Comcast’s expansion puts increasing pressure on its lower legs and feet i.e. customer service workers and cable technicians, which would explain widespread complaints about service.

Comcast’s ever-expanding services, driven largely by technological advancements, have a significant impact on the breadth, scope and volume of work performed by its employees. Comcast workers across the country report that they: (1) are required to perform more work within the same amount of time; (2) are evaluated according to unreasonable and unfair standards; and (3) are frustrated by management’s unresponsiveness to their concerns about unsafe work conditions (American Rights at Work

2004, 10).

Comcast workers have demanded predictable work schedules, the right to choose overtime versus “mandatory overtime,” and manageable workloads. Worker’s inability to bargain collectively for some level of control over their labor translates into their parental decision-making and family care. Children and families pay the highest costs for parents’ unpredictable work schedules. One worker explains,

“We care about the customers, but we have to go home and take care of our families,” said one service technician. “When I get home, my kids are in bed. I get up early and go to work. I’d like to go home once or twice a week on time.” (American Rights at Work 2004)

Working conditions are not the only concerns for Comcast workers. Comcast’s size restricts workers’ ability to demand higher standards and a voice within the corporate body. Thus while Comcast is widely accused of maintaining high prices for their products by controlling the market share in many local communities, Comcast is undercutting years of contract bargaining that raised the living standards for telecommunications workers. Through multiple maneuvers Comcast has blocked workers from organizing a union; downsized and moved jobs out of unionized shops acquired through mergers and acquisitions such as with AT&T Broadband; and refused to bargain with workers who managed to successfully organize unions (American Rights at Work 2004). “[ARAW] researchers reviewed 150 Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charges filed against Comcast from 1990-2004. Almost two-thirds of the ULP’s alleged that the company refused to bargain collectively with the representatives of the employees.” Comcast uses its size to enhance a climate of depressed wages, job insecurity and stress

for their most vulnerable employees, many of whom are likely parents.

Connecting the dots between Comcast labor practices and the campaign recommendations that are socially marketed to parents and caregivers through First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move efforts is illuminating. One suggestion is that parents "[walk] and [play], and even [shop] together" with their children. The fifth simple step in the campaign recommendations for parents is to...

EAT TOGETHER AS A FAMILY

When families sit down and eat together, children are more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables and less junk food. Plan and make healthy, affordable meals for the family. Keep the television off and sit at the table and enjoy talking together.

Parents are advised to be more cognizant of their eating habits to set a good example, and to watch their weight because children of obese parents are more likely to be obese. They are also advised to schedule time for physical activity. These recommendations may be relevant for a family where parents enjoy some measure of control over their working conditions. But these recommendations are not "simple" for working-class Comcast families who complain of "mandatory" overtime, being overworked, having depressed wages, being frustrated by their working conditions, and barely seeing their kids each day.

A critical assessment should include a macro focus on parent-producer subjects (product distributors and media producers) in addition to the micro focus on parent-consumer subjects. Reviewing Bain Capital's ownership of fast food restaurants that crowd Mitchell's predominantly black neighborhood in conjunction with Comcast's

corporate actions regarding their most vulnerable workers suggests that reasoned decision-making should be scrutinized within a wider frame that includes all relevant parents.

While Tanisha's body is presented as one that takes up physical space her large body is not represented as powerful. In fact, her size is presented as her weakness. Wellspring staff members consistently identify Mitchell's ability to lose weight as her primary demonstration of her power. They laud her desire to be smaller as not only the path to health, but also improved social treatment by others. Tanisha Mitchell, an obese young black girl, is only expected to demonstrate power over her own body as a "weight controller." She exists within the televisual frame as a reflection of her mother's poor decision-making even though her father is also present in the home.

Com Robber, an obese white male corporation, "takes up space" because as the largest cable company in the U.S. it is a leader and thereby expected to wield power over its competitors, consumers, and especially their workers. Contemporary corporate practices of mergers and acquisitions for the purposes of expanding corporate body size have a greater potential for macro level material impact on the health and wellbeing of the national body. The ideological focus on individuals, as depicted in the childhood obesity narrative promoted via *Too Fat for Fifteen*, as the site of power and consequently the primary site for making change is a gross misrepresentation. Demanding lifestyle changes in the home without also instituting regulations requiring equitable distribution of wealth and resources within corporate bodies is absurd.

Also, it is not enough to limit the interrogation of Comcast's corporate body to a class analysis like the one provided in the "No Bargain!" report. Class does

not tell the whole story for black girls and women and it does not capture the concentration of power within this “800lb media gorilla.” Even though the face of Comcast is their brand logo, which recently changed to “xfinity,” the cable giant can be accurately described as having a racial and gendered identity. As a white male owned corporation it discriminates against those on the lowest rungs of class and racial hierarchies within their corporation, customer service operators and maintenance technicians.

On their corporate website, Comcast promotes their diversity rankings by Black Enterprise magazine. However, a closer look at the number of people of color who are corporate and cable executives (See Figure 13) and at Black Enterprise’s explanation (Black Enterprise 2008) for the ratings indicates that Comcast’s diversity is concentrated in the base of the employee structure, not senior management where company wide decision-making occurs. In fact, racial diversity is not only situated in the body below the neck, but it is heavily concentrated (in the legs if you include the athletes) at the feet. Comcast’s commitment to diversity did not provide a path for Cathy Hughes to have majority ownership of the African-American targeted cable channel, TVOne. Comcast’s expansion did not provide a progressive structure for people of color to flourish, raise families, and advance to the highest levels of the company through an ethic of meritocracy. Comcast uses its size and power to maintain a vulnerable semi-skilled multiracial labor force that wealthy white male owners can continue to exploit for profit. Furthermore, Comcast as a corporate body exerts influence over family decision-making on a mass scale through its more than 100,000

employees. Yet, their large size is lauded and their concrete contributions to creating stressed working and living conditions go unexamined within the framework of public health concerns and the American body politic.

Com Robber's Footprint: Sponsorship for Censorship

Corporate sponsorship is another method Comcast uses to exert power and control.

Sponsorship could be defined within the media environment as promotions of the BK (Burger King) Kid's Meal on multiple networks via cable and online media in collaboration with the movie *Hop*. *Hop* is a Universal Studios movie; Universal Studios is a subsidiary of NBCUniversal; and Comcast is majority owner of NBCU. Another form of sponsorship is providing financial support for community groups or non-profit organizations. In early 2011, Comcast's corporate sponsor reputation was tarnished when Comcast Vice President, Steve Kipp's response to a Comcast sponsored organization's criticism revealed Comcast's sponsorship is also about surveillance and censorship. A member of the Reel Grrls, a youth media education non-profit organization, "tweeted" on their Twitter "*OMG! @FCC Commissioner Baker voted 2 approve Comcast/NBC merger & now is lving FCC for A JOB AT COMCAST?!?!*" Kipp promptly emailed a response to the organization,

"I respect your position on freedom of the press," he wrote. "However, I hope you can respect that this tweet has put me in an indefensible position with my bosses. I cannot continue to ask them to approve funding for Reel Girls, knowing that the digital footprint your organization has created about Comcast is a negative one" (Fernandez 2011).

Comcast Corporation had agreed to sponsor the non-profit's "summer workshop for

teenage girls” by giving the Reel Grrls \$18K to teach “young women about filmmaking [and] media literacy and issues related to media consolidation.” Rather than retract their “tweet” and ask for their funding from Comcast, two Reel Grrls responded with a youtube video.

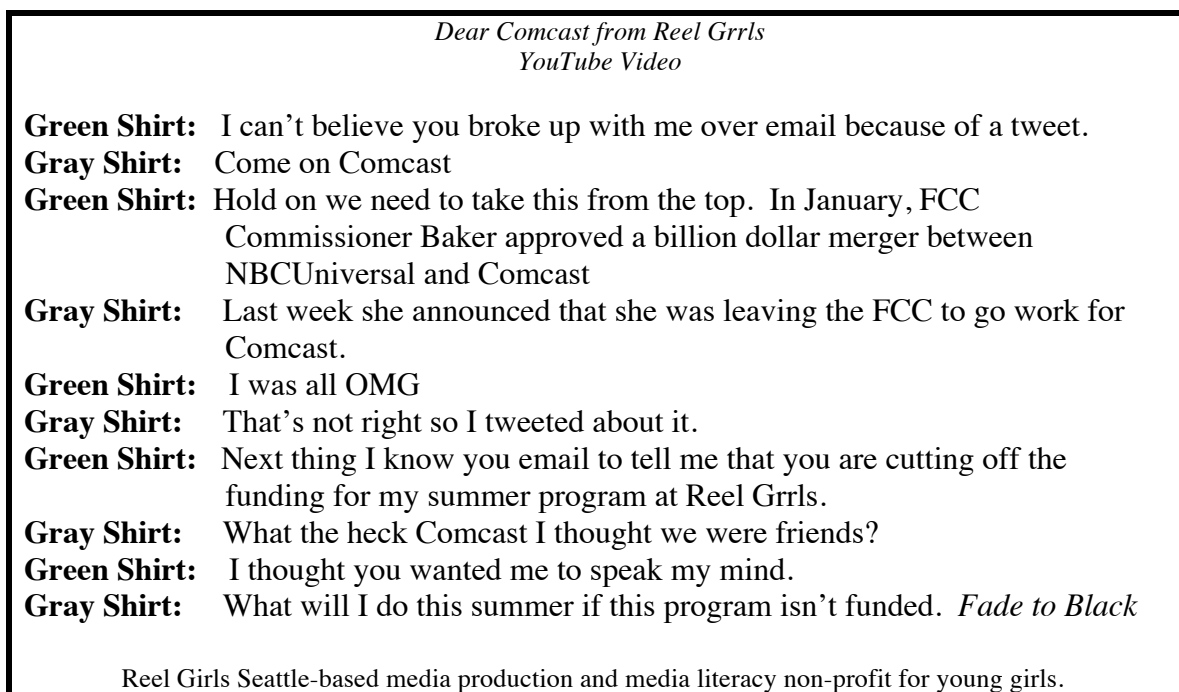


Figure 15

Reel Grrls YouTube Transcript

Bob Fernandez, staff writer with *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, rightfully questioned Comcast's surveillance of the Reel Grrls twitter feed as well as the retaliatory response, which is a form of corporate censorship. Comcast's Senior Vice President's behavior signals to other sponsored organizations that speaking against their sponsor is prohibited, which represents a policy of "sponsorship for censorship." Comcast's response changed, however, when they learned of the widespread press Reel Grrls had gotten for exposing Kipp's email to the public. Like William Laufer explained, a Comcast spokesperson very quickly isolated Kipp as a rogue employee whose actions did not represent Comcast's beliefs. In essence, his role in the corporate body was reduced in an effort to protect the

reputation of the entire body. Just as there are no standards regulating sponsorship via food marketing in television, there are no regulations dictating Com Robber's behavior towards sponsored organizations.

Too Fat: Property Integration, Body Regulation, and Surveillance

Whereas Tanisha Mitchell's body attracts round the clock surveillance, body regulation and behavioral modification via Wellspring Inc., Com Robber outright rejects regulation and behavior modification from the NLRB and the FCC. Network neutrality is the next frontier of corporate media ownership and Comcast is playing a leading role in attempts to privatize not only internet service, but also access to internet content. Com Robber's behavior undermines the FCC regulatory agency by ignoring rules and legally challenging the right for the FCC to regulate their corporate actions. As the Reel Grrls pointed out, part of Com Robber's lobbying strategy included hiring former FCC Commissioner Meredith Baker after she voted to approve the Comcast and NBC Universal merger. As worker's rights groups have indicated, Com Robber refuses to negotiate contracts with organized workers and has been charged with hundreds of Unfair Labor Charges. Independent media producers, consumer advocates, professors, and labor leaders testified against the Comcast Corporation and NBC Universal merger arguing it would further reduce diversity in programming, decrease jobs, and contribute to increased costs for consumers nationwide during a recession.

“Participation in the privileges of [media] ownership thus involves more than the power to manipulate property itself; it lends an ability to express oneself through property as an instrument of one's interests” (Williams). Comcast's size is not likely to be scrutinized as a primary target within the “official story” of the obesity epidemic or any

other national public health issue. Since Comcast exerts an unethical amount of control over content and content distribution via majority ownership it retains significant power to control the “official story.” Through mergers and acquisitions leading to vertical and horizontal integration Com Robber owns/controls too many media outlets in too many industries to be made available for public consumption in the manner that Tanisha Mitchell and her family were displayed on Style Network.

Acquiring NBCU expanded Comcast’s ownership of media properties through vertical and horizontal integration including: content providers via broadcast and cable networks, film studios, theme parks, content in the form of film and television products and franchises, and Hulu the online digital content distributor. A prime example of horizontal integration is the fact that Comcast now owns, Style Networks’ competitor Bravo. Prior to the merger Com Robber was already a majority owner of: a content/shopping cable network, telecommunications companies, cable companies, cellular companies, professional sports teams, telecom infrastructure, and more.

If ACT and BCFM were still in existence these mother-led organizations would surely be challenging the seemingly unchecked media power, both in terms of content and employment opportunities, that Com Robber wields. How does this relate to the childhood obesity epidemic? *Too Fat for Fifteen*, the “Let’s Move” campaign, news segments, and talk shows all promote simple changes for parents, kids, schools, and communities, but none of the recommendations include zoning regulations, media regulations, or any measure of corporate regulations that advocate on behalf of parents against corporate “speech” in schools, youth targeted marketing and advertising, and the saturation of nutrient-dense food products in communities of color. None of the

recommendations encourage parents and communities to organize themselves to protect their children from advertising and branding throughout media environments nationwide. None of the recommendations address the fact that many youth living in impoverished neighborhoods are malnourished even if they are not obese. Finally, none of the recommendations address unethical corporate parents, such as Bain Capital, or unreasonable corporate growth as major contributing factors to the obesity epidemic even though they both systemically flood markets with cheap nutrient-poor foods and food marketing while also suppressing workers' ability to control their income and working conditions. Parent companies strategically work to control markets in order to dictate consumer choices, parental choices. Without a democratic media system, including principles of fair ownership, large media corporations will continue to market the epidemic and the contributing factors while also selling neoliberal solutions as part of a pedagogy of mass consumption.

Neither Tanisha Mitchell nor her parents are primarily responsible for the childhood obesity epidemic, contrary to their depiction in *Too Fat for Fifteen*. Their "reality" situation must be viewed with a wide-angle lens focusing on "real life" social inequality and economic injustices that exist beyond the frame of the television screen. Real parents need real options to make better decisions. It is not in the interest of private equity firms or obese media companies to solve public health epidemics, there is simply too much profit in poor health and the perception of poor health as primarily caused by individual consumer choices.

Action for Children's Television and Black Citizens for a Fair Media are historical models of mothers organizing. Reel Grrls offer contemporary models of media savvy

youth mobilizing, but as a nation we need strong media policies and corporate oversight to protect the public interest. As Patricia Williams asserts, we need to “[regroup] in singular times.”

Chapter 4
Recovering a Precious Presence: A Critical Race Feminist Literary Response:

She does not know her beauty
 She thinks her brown body has no glory
 If she could dance naked under palm trees
 And see her image in the river
 she would know
 Yes, she would know
 But there are no palm trees
 in the streets
 No palm trees in the streets
 And dishwater gives back no image
 (Simone 1966)

Black girls in the United States have been statistically identified as the youth population with the highest prevalence of obesity, and typically this is the end of the story. This chapter situates Claireece “Precious” Jones, the protagonist from Sapphire’s novel *Push*, at the center of the popular narrative on the childhood obesity epidemic. I look to this character because her counterstory illustrates an array of issues that are absent in popular media discourse, particularly those illustrated through black girl’s stories. While black girls’ bodies may be visible, their stories are too often invisible. I argue that through literature the bodies and stories of marginalized black girls are brought into focus and present another story—a counterstory.

Critical race scholar Carl Guttierrez-Jones defines the impact of racial oppression that people of color experience as “racial injury.” His work, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (2001), explores the political implications of disciplinary conceptualizations of the term “injury.” He argues that institutions such as the judicial system, commercial media, and the academy work together to obscure access

to race conscious remedies for racial injuries, by controlling the narrative. Gutierrez-Jones explains that the role of race and racism in shaping the boundaries of governing institutions as well as disciplinary methodological inquiry works to maintain a liberal individualist status quo premised on a white supremacist system of privileges and the “right to exclude” in American culture.

He insists that narrative analysis reveals the disciplinary rifts that preclude systemic redress and that experimental storytelling provide narrative interventions that create alternative points of entry into debates regarding race and racism. Gutierrez-Jones issues a call to expand the use of narrative interventions, a core tenet in Critical Race Theory, beyond legal studies. He argues for interdisciplinary readings of “race and the practice of racism” in the humanities and social sciences to complicate the definitions of “injury” constructed and maintained by the law.

The predominant definition of injury emphasizes its association with a verbal act.... [The] law violated by injury is sustained with verbal practices and allegiances, by oaths of filiation to established authority.... While one definition for the term emphasizes a willful action of hurt, and therefore resulting blame, another definition treats injury as an effect without focus on the agent. In this sense, injury marks a dichotomy in legal thought that establishes distinct poles as adjudication works through either the perpetrator’s or the victim’s perspectives. (Kindle 456-75/4796)

Gutierrez-Jones’ perspective on how to “read” racial injuries is profound, yet limited in that “race,” in this case “black,” is conflated with “men.” While he calls upon numerous black feminist scholars such as Kimberly Crenshaw, Patricia

Williams, and Cheryl Harris to support his arguments, most of the stories are about black men and thus the “racial injuries” are also focused on black men. As Crenshaw’s groundbreaking essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” indicates, black women are not legible as full subjects when they must choose whether their discrimination is sex-based or race-based and cannot make a case for both.

One example of “racial injury” towards a black female in Gutierrez-Jones’ work discusses seven year old Sherrice Iverson’s rape and murder by a white male teenager, Jeremy Strohmeyer, witnessed by a white male undergraduate, David Cash, Jr. He argues...

The impulse to respond to ethical paradoxes by adopting a model of moral equivalences—where every injury has an assigned agent, every loss an assigned blame—leaves [academic and legal] institutions and discourses largely incapable of registering the larger spectrum of interaction that exists beyond the roles of perpetrator and victim... (Gutierrez-Jones 2001).

In this example, however, Sherrice Iverson emerges as a body with no voice—the victim. The problem with Gutierrez-Jones’ argument for including more voices is that that black girl victims of racial injury are rarely recognized. When black girls are registered as victims of racial injury their gendered injuries are not explored. Furthermore black girls suffer not only interracial racial *and* gender injuries but also experience these injuries within their race. Interracial injuries put the voices of black girls as victims in

competition with that of perpetrators, “witnesses, bystanders, collaborators, and resisters.”

Elaine Scarry's, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), constructs a narrative about universal human interaction based upon one body's inability to communicate pain to another body. The first half of the text is organized through the lens of war and torture. She argues that war is “remarkable in its ability to produce an outcome in one kind of activity (injuring) that is able to translate into a wholly different vocabulary, the right to determine certain territorial and extraterritorial issues.” The framing of human interaction through war is grounded in the idea of nations as subjects at a macro level. Torture is defined on a micro level whereby one subject, the tortured, is a body without a voice; and on the other hand, the second subject, the torturer, is a disembodied voice because it does not feel pain (139). Scarry argues that injury is what differentiates war from other kinds of contests in the end. In both instances, war and torture, women and girls are absent from the narrative. Women are not considered as either soldiers or casualties of war, therefore their pained bodies are rendered invisible, even though it has been widely documented that the rape and torture of women continues to be a tactic used in civil and international wars. Also, war is constructed as something happening “over there” or having happened in the past, but not in a contextualized domestic present.

In the second part of *The Body in Pain*, Scarry does address women through a biblical narrative of creation; however, these women's bodies have no voices. Instead the overarching voices in the remainder of the text are that of God, Marx, and Freud. This universal account of bodies, with no clear subjects, not only genders the body male, but

also renders the female body invisible except through their ability to reproduce. Situating all of her examples in Western ideology, Scarry conflates white male bodies with a universal body, or “normal body.” By removing female subjectivity from her exploration of “the body” and looking only to white male scholars who function as omniscient narrators, the stories render the “pained bodies” of women illegible.

On the other hand, Scarry’s concept of the “injured body” as “the body with no voice,” is useful for understanding the making of Precious Jones’ body as a political body in multiple arenas. Scarry explains that, “[the] political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly, and very early, ...and that [what] is “remembered” in the body is well remembered (109). Scarry’s rendering of a politics of the body and a national body politic indicates that, “the human body is political in peace as well as in war.” She states...

It might even be argued that the attributes of a particular political philosophy... are most apparent in those places where it intersects with, touches or agrees not to touch, the human body—in the medical system it formally or informally sponsors that which determines whose body will and whose body will not be repaired; in the guarantees it provides or refuses to provide about the quality and consistency of foods and drugs that will enter the body... (111).

Speaking at the level of a universal body, Scarry discusses torture that happens between national or “civil” bodies if the conflict is intra-national. However, the universal body masks the stories that might provide context for “whose body will and whose body will not be repaired” or which bodies are less likely to seek and receive remediation through the state.

Precious, as a black girl character, represents black girls who experience “racial injury” to a degree not legible in law or popular discourse; therefore their “racial injury” is less likely to be considered for remedy in either arena. I also argue that in instances where the making of black girls’ political body is as an injured body, it happens on multiple levels within the nation, across and within race, and even in the homes. When black girls’ injured bodies are called upon to act as if they are part of a universal national body, their actual injuries are not only ignored, but they are potentially compounded.

The focus of this chapter is to make racially injured bodies legible for remedy. Using classic texts within African American women’s literature, I engage counterstories offered via black girl protagonists, which I identify as black girl stories. I argue that stories by and about black women and, to a greater extent, black girls are often absent even when our bodies are visible and/or being discussed in American popular culture.

My work, a critical race feminist response, offers a corrective to Gutierrez-Jones work insisting that race and gender are symbiotic, particularly when attempting to read individual bodies. From this platform, I advance an inquiry into the treatments of black female narratives and bodies in black feminist literature. This chapter puts specific literatures from the humanities *and* health sciences in dialogue with an express interest in presenting a “critical race *feminist* body praxis” that centers black girls experiences to determine remedies to race *and* sex injuries for black girls in American culture.

Black feminists have used various genres of communication to articulate philosophies of the black female body. Nina Simone sang “Images,” a poem by Waring Cuney, at a concert in 1964. It is a short haunting ballad that renders an accessible body praxis that is, I argue, useful for understanding black girls’ struggles with embracing their bodies as they are. In less than ten lines Simone explains how “she,” black women and girls, “does not know her beauty;” that black women and girls “[think their] brown bodies have no glory.” The first section of this chapter explores common tropes in black women’s fiction regarding black girls’ being “visibly invisible” and simultaneously hypervisible. My reading of black girl centered texts highlights how black women writers have been trying to draw attention to issues related to black girls’ experiences of low self-worth that continue to plague many marginalized black girls, now not only due to their skin color but also based upon their weight.

Sapphire’s *Push* is a black girl story, a counterstory, providing a recovery model that centers black girls’ bodies and demonstrates methods for assisting young girls with seeing themselves as valuable. The body praxis recovery model in Sapphire’s work includes: listening and being there when black girls break their silence; focusing on the issues they prioritize; providing historical context and tools to address the concerns they raise; and engaging in continuous dialogue whereby youth have the agency to determine appropriate interventions.

Deborah McDowell illuminates a philosophy of the body conveyed via the literary work of Toni Morrison in her essay “Recovery Missions: Imaging the Body Ideals.” McDowell proposes that we “broaden [the] analytic paradigm” in cultural studies of the body that emphasize the visual, particularly focusing at the level of skin.

She suggests that this paradigmatic shift would reveal the limitations of reliance on visual epistemologies of the outer body. It would “attend to the buried zones” inside the body, highlighting the “reciprocal relation between...visible and invisible ‘matter.’” McDowell argues for a “total body compass” philosophy of the body, and “evaluating the state of black women’s physical bodies within [the] larger social body...[as] crucial and demanding body work to undertake” (309). As such, McDowell rejects the belief that black women’s bodies can be recovered in popular visual media which focuses almost exclusively on “visual lenses and logics.”

She does not know her beauty. She thinks her brown body has no glory
Recovery Mission #1: A Total Body Compass Attending to the Buried Zones

Push is an extension of “the line,” that Cheryl Wall describes in her book, *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. She discusses black women’s use of music lyrics, literature, photographs, storytelling, and poetry to tell and retell black female stories in mediums where these women can be heard. She also indicates that black women writers who seek to recuperate lost narratives use a variety of media to reconstruct stories from limited archival materials. Wall explains that “worrying the line” is a concept taken from blues music genre. She describes her usage of the phrase “the line” to mean...

the line as metaphor for lineage and the line as metaphor for the literary traditions in which [certain] texts participate. *Worrying the Line* focuses on the points of intersection between these two meanings (8).

Wall discusses African American Women’s literary tradition from two perspectives. She claims that a major black women writers’ project is to recover untold

stories by giving voice to marginalized black female characters in canonical literary texts. She also indicates that black women writers' major contribution to the African American literary tradition has been their focus on more intimate aspects of the private sphere such as relationships between mother's and daughters, girlfriends, and men and women.

Sometimes I pass by store window and somebody fat dark skin, old looking, someone look like my muver look back at me.... Who I see? I stand in tub sometime, look my body, it stretch marks, ripples. I try to hide myself, then I try to show myself. I ax my muver for money to git my hair done, clothes. I know the money she got for me—from my baby. She usta give me money; now every time I ax for money she say I took her husband, her man. Her man? Please! Thas my mutherfuckin' fahver! (Sapphire 1996, 32).

Sapphire's *Precious Jones* is a literary descendent of Toni Morrison's *Pecola Breedlove* and Alice Walker's *Celie Johnson* of *The Bluest Eye* and *The Color Purple* respectively. *Push* provides an example of how black girls stories, particularly told from their perspective(s) through imaginative literature, can bring black girls bodies into focus. Using the concept of visual "lenses" literally and metaphorically offers a unique comparative assessment of these black girl protagonists in terms of the distance between them as the central character and the reader. This section of the chapter focuses on *Push* as part of a literary lineage of a particular black girl story focused on the lives of marginalized black girls. *Push* is "worrying the line" in terms of "literary traditions" and the "lineage" project as an incest narrative.

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, in *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering From Stein to Sapphire* (2001), asserts that *Push* represents an extension of

the incest narratives written by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* (1982), that originated with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Doane and Hodges' work provides a chronological, interdisciplinary review of popular media discourse, autobiographical accounts, self-help literature, fiction, and legal literature that present incest narratives in American culture. They applaud African American women writers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, for focusing attention on the narratives of incest victims via fiction. Doane and Hodges also indicate that Sapphire's *Push* constitutes a new genre of telling incest narratives that deliberately blends autobiography with fiction (Doane and Hodges 2001).

Sapphire "[worryes] the line" by providing a first person *present* account from the perspective of the incest victim. When considered within the framework of Wall's "worrying the line," Sapphire's novel is a call to action like McDowell's "Recovery Missions." McDowell states...

...[The] times call for resisting the lure of the ideal body, while mobilizing to keep the real ones alive, lest we be left with ever-dwindling bodies to represent, bodies to recover (315).

Essentially, Sapphire broadens the scope of the lineage project from a focus solely on genealogical recuperation of ancestors so that it also includes the recovery of living descendants. While *Push* does "worry" the incest narrative "line," Sapphire's focus in *Push* is on recovery of the present or recent past rather than recuperating a distant past like her predecessors, Morrison and Walker. Nevertheless, I argue that *Push* is part of this literary lineage because Sapphire uses imaginative literature to recover details from the protagonists' "buried zones" about the contemporary internal struggles of

marginalized black girls. Sapphire extends the lineage in the direction of the descendants as well as connecting them with “ancestral figures.” In doing this, Sapphire advances a new project of recovery focused on present-day concerns for black women and girls’ about their bodies and the treatment of their bodies in American culture.

Precious represents the third generation of a particular black girl character in late 20th century black women’s literature in the U.S. Her two literary predecessors are Pecola Breedlove of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Celie, the protagonist in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Similar primary characteristics of the three novels are the father-daughter incest narrative, black girls as protagonists, tragic father figures, and difficult mother-daughter relationships. Common secondary characteristics in all three novels are displacement represented by economic instability and political powerlessness; vulnerability as exhibited through experiences with physical, sexual and emotional child abuse; and the indirect impacts of white supremacy through the conflation of blackness with ugliness. There are four themes addressed in these novels that provide insight on black girls thoughts, feelings, and experiences with their bodies in American cultural context: abuse, neglect, teenage pregnancy, and survival.

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, tells a story of a Midwest black family in post World War II America. The novel is divided into four seasons of one year; chronicling the happenings that lead to Pecola Breedlove becoming pregnant with her father’s baby at 12 years old. The main narrators are 9 year-old Claudia McTeer and an omniscient third-person narrator. We do not hear from Pecola Breedlove in the first person until the end of the novel when she “hallucinates a self” (215). Pecola Breedlove is an important character because she represents the first generation of this

particular black girl character in popular 20th Century Black Women's Literature. Toni Morrison is careful to explain that Pecola Breedlove does not represent the norm, but the extreme. However, it is important to note that Morrison provided us with the first novel that is centered on a black girl-child who has been the victim of incest. This marks the beginning of the shift of the incest narrative from the perspective of the perpetrator solely to include that of the child (Doane and Hodges, 38-43).

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is published in 1982 after *The Bluest Eye*, but the story is set in early 20th Century American South. The story of Celie's life is revealed through a series of letters, most of which are from Celie to God in the form of journal writing. It is unclear whether Celie is writing the letters, thinking them, or a combination of the two. She begins the story with her account of how the sexual abuse by her father, which resulted in two pregnancies and the birth of two children, began. Unlike Pecola Breedlove, Celie is the narrator and also the central subject in the novel. She is in fact telling her own story and the story of those in her community based upon her personal perspectives and understanding of the world. Walker was vilified by many, primarily, black male critics for telling this incest and domestic violence narrative solely from the perspective of Celie, who journeyed from being a black girl victim to a black woman survivor.

Sapphire's novel *Push* removes the distance of time and space from Precious' physical and sexual abuse. The readers are made to experience her abuse from her first person perspective through her narration of current events, body memories, and raw journal writing. Precious is intentional about telling her story, but she slips uncontrollably back and forth in time and space when she is triggered with body

memories. Because she is isolated in an abusive home with her mother, is marginalized in school by teachers and peers who ignore and/or mistreat her, and is illiterate, there is no place for her to dispose of her experiences safely.

Like Pecola and Celie, Precious is a poor black girl growing up in the United States in the 20th Century. She has been physically and sexually abused by both parents, and impregnated by her father by the age of twelve. The attack on Precious' body is beyond anything we know about Pecola or Celie. She is forced to eat large quantities of food by her mother. Both her father and her mother sexually molest her and require her to perform sexual acts on them for the majority of her childhood. Precious cannot remember when her abuse began, so her understanding of her body is intermingled with her development in an extremely abusive environment. Her political body is developed as a *sexually* and *racially* injured body.

In "Disclosing The Details of Child Sexual Abuse: Can Imaginative Literature Help Ease the Suffering," Dr. Elizabeth Harrison, RN, writes about the benefits of healthcare workers employing literary analysis of imaginative literature, such as *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. She argues that healthcare workers could use imaginative literature to better understand the depths of children's experiences of abuse rather than requiring them to recount and relive the details of those experiences. Harrison asserts that this research method could "contribute valuable information about the lived experience of abused children" (Harrison 2005, 128).

In her review, Harrison identifies Precious and Pecola as "helpless, withdrawn, and... anonymous" (130). The term anonymous does not accurately reflect Pecola's and Precious' status because secondary characters in the two novels not only *recognize* these

protagonists, but they *need* Pecola and Precious to make themselves feel better. What is anonymous is the full extent of their abuse. More accurate terminology and a common trope reflected in African American women's literature is the story of black women and girls feeling either invisible, hypervisible, or both. These marginalized and victimized black girl characters are invisible because people in their family, community, and greater society do not want to *see* them because they are considered "ugly." Yet at the same time Pecola, Celie, and Precious are all hypervisible as problems within and beyond their communities.

The Tragic Pecola Breedlove

Pecola is invisible because of her own efforts as well as the efforts of adults and peers in her environment, who represent both the dominant gaze within the community and that of society at large.

[Pecola] hid behind [her ugliness]. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom (39).

She was the only member of the class who sat alone at a double desk....

Her teachers had always treated her this way. They never tried to *glance* at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond (45-46, *emphasis mine*).

Morrison takes great effort to explain the moment of the white male gaze and the black body of this character.

The gray head of Mr. Yabowski looms up over the counter. He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her.... Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere

between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old-white immigrant storekeeper... *see* a little black girl? (48).

The response of the teachers and the shopkeeper are similar in that they do not want to see Pecola, but the difference is the teachers have to engage her on some level, whereas the shopkeeper has no accountability. For Mr. Yabowski, she truly is a non-entity.

[Pecola] does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. (48-49).

For him, she remains invisible until her continued presence and inability to communicate what she wants from him forces him to engage her. Her presence constitutes a problem for Mr. Yabowski, therefore she is hypervisible as a problem. She is the girl he can not see, who will not speak to identify the Mary Janes candy she wants, and whose hand he does not want to touch to receive payment for the candy. But he does touch her hand to get her to leave his store and ultimately to solve his problem.

She is hypervisible because black male children see her as a place to dispose of their self-hatred (65), and Junior's "pretty milk-brown" middle-class mother sees Pecola as a class of black girls that she has never wanted to be associated with...

Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt....
 Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything.... The end of the
 world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between
 (92).

For her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola is a disruption of her fantasy world. Mrs. Breedlove's expectation was that Pecola would be invisible while in her white family employer's home and that she would leave quietly. Unfortunately, Pecola attracted two additional young black girls to the pristine upper class white home, and she burned herself when she knocked over Mrs. Breedlove's hot blackberry pie. For her mother, like Mr. Yabowski, Pecola is a problem to be removed rather than a child deserving care.

Finally her father, Cholly Breedlove, when he sees Pecola washing dishes in the kitchen through his drunken haze, feels a surge of emotions: "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love."

What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her?

What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? (161).

These emotions and his confusion over what to do with them ultimately lead him to rape her. Unlike everyone else who tried not to see Pecola, Morrison asserts, "Cholly loved her" (206). One important lesson is that we lose Pecola when she believes she has made the ultimate improvement to her "ugliness" by obtaining blue eyes—the ultimate Westernized symbol of beauty. Her body becomes hypervisible to everyone because she is a pregnant twelve year-old in a slightly integrated Midwestern town in 1941. The people in her community no longer want to have to look at her so Pecola, the pregnant

child, is expelled from school. Pecola and the remaining members of her family, Mrs. Breedlove, end up living on the edge of their community.

As a reader, trying to see Pecola feels like looking through binoculars in that she is difficult to locate and generally out of focus. Pecola is not the black girl telling her story; this narrative is told from the third person perspective of Frieda McTeer, an adult black woman, who is “[remembering]” a significant year of her childhood experience that centers on Pecola Breedlove. Morrison employs an omniscient narrator whose “images provoke stories that close the gap between past [and]... present” (Wall 2005). A narrator that supplements Frieda’s reflection on events that she herself does not witness. For instance, the most important scene, Pecola’s “dishwater experience,” is told via the omniscient narrator rather than by an actual character. As readers, we become present to the ways that a wounded community in American culture is implicated in a young black girl’s racial injury. There is no intervention or recovery for Pecola Breedlove, and her tragedy continues to haunt Frieda McTeer into her adulthood.

The Long Journey to Celie

Celie is invisible because adult men consider her ugly, particularly in comparison to her younger sister Nettie and other adult women who are regarded as pretty. Walker shifts Morrison’s emphasis on whiteness and white standards of beauty to the background, offering an intra-community, pre-electronic media, set of beauty standards where Celie, Shug, Mister and other characters do identify dark complexioned women as beautiful (6, 20, 122). Furthermore the black girl body is rendered visible and valuable for reasons beyond external appearances. Walker emphasizes a gender division of labor

that is radically different than that of the Midwestern Postwar families that Morrison investigates in *The Bluest Eye*.

Celie is invisible because she is isolated from her extended family members, especially women, who live in another town. Her mother gets ill and dies apparently from consecutive childbirths. Celie and her siblings are left in the care of her mother's husband, who she refers to as Pa. Celie conveys after delivering her first child at fourteen that "[don't] nobody come see us," (2). She reflects on her teacher, Miss Beasley, visiting during her first pregnancy saying, "when Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (10).

Celie is hypervisible because as a black girl in the early 20th century rural south, she is vulnerable to black male authority and a particular form of gendered violence—child abuse, incest, rape, and forced labor. Consider this passage in Celie's seventh letter to God when she recounts Pa and Mister discussing Mister's second request to marry her sister Nettie.

...I can't let you have Nettie. She too young.... But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice....

She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it (10-11).

Celie is both invisible and hypervisible in the marriage negotiations. The fact that she is to be separated from the one person who truly sees her, Nettie, is not relevant. The fact that Celie knows very little about Mister and does not want to marry him is

seemingly irrelevant. She is invisible as a human being; discussed only as an object in which case her thoughts and feelings—her buried zones—do not “matter;” they are both immaterial and irrelevant.

Celie, like Pecola, is hypervisible to black men as a problem “with benefits.” Both Pa and Mister see Celie as the woman they do not want, but they also see value in her body as a laboring body. Celie’s body’s value is discussed in terms of her ability to work as well as the availability of her body for sex without the economic burden of children. Walker’s account is a commentary on how the shift from the slave economy of the American south to a post-slavery system that allows for black male land ownership impacts the value of some black girls bodies. During slavery, part of black girls’ economic value was their ability to reproduce the slave labor force, however, in the post-slavery economy, there is also value for widowed men with children in the inability to reproduce. Mister prioritizes his needs over his desires and agrees to take Celie instead of Nettie (10-11).

On the other hand, Celie’s pregnant body is a problem for her mother and her teacher, Miss Beasley, not necessarily because she is unmarried and pregnant at the age of fourteen, but more likely because they both suspect her Pa is raping her. In an agrarian economy, teenage girls who were married and/or pregnant were not necessarily considered abnormal. Celie’s pregnancy, however, functions as a marker of the vulnerability of black girls as well as black women’s lack of power to either prevent the abuse or intervene to protect them. Teenage pregnancy becomes an issue when the American economy shifts to an industrial economy that does not support large families, particularly large black ones. Incest, however, is a moral issue shrouded by assumptions

of biological consequences and the shame and blame is more likely attributed to mothers for not protecting their children and young girls, especially if she “[gits] big”—i.e. pregnant.

Alice Walker is “worrying the line” by giving readers a longitudinal account of Celie, who is exposed to a myriad of abuses as a young woman beginning with child physical and sexual abuse. The turn in the narrative is Celie, unlike Pecola, begins a recovery process as an adult in community with other women. Walker pushes the narrative beyond the year when the incest began and the pregnancy occurred, and beyond Celie’s childhood such that readers metaphorically see Celie’s life through reading glasses, used for longer focused looking. Even though the narrative is told in the first person, Celie’s story is based on a wholly reflective account therefore readers are still protected by the distance of time and space offered via the epistolary style of the novel.

Recovering a Precious Presence

Precious, unlike Pecola who is a passive character, demonstrates a complex fluidity of having power yet being helpless, while being hypervisible and invisible in the same body. The onlooker determines the treatment she deserves; but unlike her predecessors, Precious may respond in anger, fighting back physically and/or verbally. Even if she does not express her feelings to the characters in the novel, she definitely expresses her opinions directly to the reader.

Unlike Pecola and Celie, Precious uses her size, which she describes as “big, five-foot-nine-ten, [weighing] over two hundred pounds,” to intimidate teachers and peers and more importantly to protect her secrets (6). In school, Precious sits quietly in the back of the classroom until her teacher “calls her out.” She responds by challenging the white

male teacher and disruptive students in an effort to keep them from knowing she is illiterate (4-6).

As a post-Civil Rights and Black Power movement character, Precious recognizes herself as a black person with rights. When she is pregnant for the second time and the school administrator, Mrs. Lichenstein, threatens to suspend her, Precious tells her “[you] can’t suspend me for being pregnant, I got rights” (8), and then tries to attack her. While Mrs. Lichenstein sees Precious’ pregnancy simply as a problem, Precious identifies benefits with being pregnant, including being invisible to the men she encounters on her way to and from school.

No one say nuffin’ to me now my belly big. No “Yo Big Mama” n’ “all dat meat and no potatoes” shit. I’m safe. Yeah, safe from dese fools on the street... (23).

Precious Jones may be illiterate, but she is able to “read the world” enough to recognize that fat, dark-skinned girls are not considered valuable—which, by definition, means “beautiful” for girls in American culture. Precious recalls hearing in elementary school, “[focus] on the ones who *can* learn, Principal say to teacher” (37). She cannot read the words on a test, but she understands that the purpose of the test is to confirm that she is not worthy of engagement.

The tesses paint a picture of me an’ my muver—my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible....

I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, watch TV, do what my muver say.

But I can see when the picture come back I don’t exist. Don’t nobody want me. Don’t nobody need me. I know who I am. I know who they

say I am—vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, find a job for...(30).

Her reading of the injustices of racism, sexism, and poverty; whiteness as the standard of beauty; and white supremacy as the dominant ideology are sharp.

I wanna say I am somebody. I wanna say it on subway, TV, movie, LOUD. I see the pink faces in suits look over top of my head. I watch myself disappear in their eyes, their tesses. I talk loud but still I don’t exist....

I been out the picture so long I am used to it. But that don’t mean it don’t hurt (32).

This passage presents Precious as a critically thinking subject who may not be able to read and write “the word,” but she can “read the world,” as Jacqueline Royster writes in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* (2000). By thinking through and sharing her story, Precious demonstrates her radical opposition to the unjust system that governs her life. Sapphire’s account builds on Morrison’s foundational point in *The Bluest Eye* that Precious is not the problem, the problem is how others *see* or do not *see* her.

The lesson Sapphire promotes is that there are multiple sites for making change not only at the level of the politics of the body, but also the American Body Politic. One objective is to improve black girls’ feelings about the value of their own bodies without requiring them to change their bodies to feel valuable. Another objective is to shift popular discourse such that black girl’s stories and bodies are not ignored completely, and their bodies are not viewed simply as problematic. Sapphire also makes the

important point that young people know more than they are given credit for knowing. The first recovery mission is to hear their stories and try to view their bodies through their eyes so that scholars and activists can understand and connect with the way black girls are “reading the world.”

Precious Jones gives us a three dimensional (3D) view of her story such that we know not only what has happened to her, but more importantly what is still happening to her. The illusion created by 3D glasses is one where the reader feels close enough to hug Precious, feel her pain, and her unwanted pleasure. More importantly, there is not enough distance between the readers and the protagonist to maintain our comfort zones and still be able to access Precious’ story, her “buried zones.” Sapphire’s work *pushes* her readers to feel the urgency to take action now to recover living black girls’ bodies by seeing them and listening to their stories.

There are no palm trees in the streets and dishwasher gives back no image

Recovery Mission #2: Language and the Body in Context

While Gutierrez-Jones explicitly states that his focus on injury does not take up the concept of trauma, Scarry does address trauma and injured bodies in her work. Precious complains that her past and present get confused like clothes in a washing machine. For Precious, getting control over her body is not about weight management; it is about security and stability. Furthermore, Precious’ work to gain control over her body includes talking through and writing about both her internal feelings and the external happenings with her body. Rather than trying to: 1) measure herself against a standardized body, 2) avoid talking about “the body,” or 3) ignore her body completely, Precious locates *her body* at the forefront of her struggle.

I..., in my inside world, I am so pretty, like a advertisement girl on commercial... JeeZUS! It's 8 a.m. o'clock.... I got to be at school by 9 a.m. Today is first day. I been tessed. I been incomed eligible. I got Medicaid card and proof of address. All that shit. I is ready. Ready for school. School something (this *nuthin'*!). School gonna help me get out dis house (35).

While Precious talks about her “inside world,” Sapphire clearly rejects the notion of “the separation of the psyche and the soma, inside from outside, [and black girls individual bodies] from the social body” (McDowell, 311) in the way that the novel is written. Precious demonstrates the need to change her environment, and she understands education as part of the solution. Conversely, Pecola focuses on changing her body to try to fit into an unhealthy environment, which further dissociates her psyche from her soma. Precious comes into a loving community, and Pecola moves further away from community.

Through reading and writing, not talking in therapy or with the social worker (Sapphire 1996, 124), Precious is able to begin the process of getting her involuntary dissociation under control so that she can be in the present and think about her future.

I always thought I was someone different on the inside. That I was just fat and black and ugly to people on the OUTSIDE. And if they could see *inside* me they would see something lovely and not keep laughing at me, throwing spitballs... and polly seeds at me, that Mama and Daddy would recognize me as ...as, I don't know, Precious! But I am not different on

the inside I am not different on the inside. Inside I thought was so beautiful is a black girl too (125).

Sapphire further “worries the line,” troubling the incest narrative with a black girl protagonist who is fat. Margaret Bass reflects on the horrors of her childhood, indicating that being black in the south was not her major issue because her parents and community provided the care she needed to be proud of her race (Bass, 219). The betrayal she experienced as a child was when her father, teacher, and peers berated her because of her weight. Bass explains that she had support to calm her fears about racial discrimination when she moved to the segregated south as a child. However, she was not supported or protected from the rampant social discrimination invoked because she was a “fat” child. Bass describes feeling even more isolated when her mother, who was a fat black woman, lost weight and began to torment her like others in her community. Like Bass, Precious does not have access to a black female icon who could help her understand and love herself not only as a black girl, but as a fat black girl. If Precious lived in the current era of the “childhood obesity crises,” the initial issues she prioritizes such as education, safety, security, and love would be completely overlooked. She would be further burdened with the “unbearable weight” of America’s “War on Obesity.” Sapphire offers a model of a young woman who chooses to fight her own battle rather than end up a casualty in yet another American war.

The “War on Obesity” and Precious’ Battle for her Body

While Scarry’s work looks solely at militant wars, I believe her concept of the “making of the political body” should be applied to a rhetorical war of national proportions. A chief strategist in the “War on Obesity” is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC). This is probably the most cited health research organization in popular discourse on the topic of obesity. The CDC is responsible for setting the health standards that govern the American Body Politic. Interestingly enough, the “childhood obesity” literature available to the public via the CDC website avoids using language about the body. In fact in the nine main webpages, which is the equivalent of twenty printed pages, dedicated to childhood obesity, the term “body” is used fewer than twenty times. The main “Childhood Overweight and Obesity” page does not use the term at all.

The few times the actual term “body” is used is within phrases such as: body mass index; body fat; body fatness; body weight; excess body weight; and body measurement(s). Most often the term “body” is subsumed within the phrase “body mass index” or the “B” in BMI. The “body” literally disappears into the acronym BMI, which is the number calculated from children’s height and weight used to determine “body fatness.” Once BMI is defined as the main terminology used to talk about the body, it is then used within the following phrases: BMI number(s); BMI categories; BMI-for-age; BMI-for-age percentiles; BMI-for-age growth charts; BMI-for-age weight status categories; BMI age-and sex-specific percentiles; BMI calculator; BMI percentile calculator; and BMI-related. What is lost in the medical discourse on the body is language that talks about actual bodies.

The staircase so skinny both sides of me touch some part of the building
when I’m going down the stairs. Maybe after I have baby I lose some
weight. (23)

For Precious her body is not lost or hidden; it is present in her thoughts, her writing, and her speech. However, the distinct bodily functions and potential fluctuations of female

body weight--i.e. puberty, menses and pregnancy, which mark a body-in-process, especially between the ages of twelve and seventeen--are outside the discursive framework of the childhood obesity narrative. Furthermore the male body is discreetly standardized in that both the examples for interpreting sample BMI numbers are based upon the height, weight, and age of boys.

I feel the baby in my stomach. Don't feel good. I try not to think about my stomach big like this—the heavy pressing down on my bladder parts, like a fucking watermelon under my skin (51).

“Pregnancy” is included in parenthesis or footnotes to explain that “pregnant females,” “pregnant adolescents,” or “pregnant women,” were excluded from the NHANES studies cited in the CDC website. The process of exclusion is not available to the public. Which leads me to ask: how did the research team determine whether “females,” “adolescents,” or “women” (strange terminology considering the article’s focus on children and adolescents) were pregnant? Did they ask research participants via written or verbal survey; did they take urine samples; did they make the determination visually? Also, were the participants excluded if they had recently delivered a baby or had a late miscarriage? If not, did they consider post-pregnancy weight in their assessment?

Last time they want to weigh me at school I say no. Why for? I know I'm fat. So what. Next topic for the day (11).

Moreover, did the researchers consider research participants’ feelings about their bodies being measured? Did participants understand why the research team was taking measurements and did the youth have the right to refuse? These critical moments

between researcher and research participants are where the humanities and the sciences conflict.

In the passage below, Precious reflects on the first time she delivered a baby and the nurse's confusion regarding her age. Precious thinks it is because of her size—height and weight—but it is likely the confusion was because of her pregnancy and her age.

...[Nurse] say, "How old are you?" I say, "Twelve." I was heavy at twelve too, nobody get I'm twelve 'less I tell them. I'm tall. I jus' know I'm over two hundred 'cause the needle on the scale in the bathroom stop there it don't go no further (11).

Girls' bodies represent "unstable bodies" in that there are natural processes that occur with bodies-in-process, particularly when they are coming of age. What is missing is an assessment of health that takes into account McDowell's "total body compass," which prioritizes emotional health as part of the wellbeing assessment of youth, black girls in particular. Sapphire is keen to focus on the things that are actually most pressing to Precious. Therefore the nurse's confusion and concern is age related to pregnancy, not weight. Furthermore, Precious begins the novel as a fat pregnant teenage girl and she ends the novel as a fat teenage mother, her recovery is not to be read through her body size, but how she feels about herself in her body.

One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am. Maybe one day I like that too, who knows (96).

Focusing on the total body compass allows for a separation from the assumptions that larger bodies are either markers for diminished physical health, emotional health, or

cognitive health. The best example of a black girl story that competes with that of the character Precious is actress, Gabourey “Gabby” Sidibe, who plays Precious in the film *Precious Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*. Ms. Sidibe became an “overnight sensation” gracing the cover of numerous popular magazines, appearing on various talk shows, and receiving an Academy Award nomination for best female actress. Ms. Sidibe’s physical description closely matches that of Precious in that she is a dark-skinned young woman (not a teenager) and she is identified as being overweight or obese. However the story of Gabby’s childhood functions in complete opposition to the character Precious.

In her “personal life video” on The Oprah Show she introduces viewers to her neighborhood, her parents, and her friends. She speaks affectionately about her mother working as a street performer to support her and her brother. She also indicates that she had some difficulties as a child, but not to the extent of Precious (Harpo Productions 2009). In other publications she also talks about being a psychology major in college and she projects a very “bubbly” personality. While there are major differences in their stories, one similarity is that they had to decide to love themselves, in their own bodies. During her interview with Oprah Winfrey Ms. Sidibe discusses her body.

Oprah: Where does all this confidence come from? You I’ve been complaining about my weight, lamenting about my weight since...since I was twenty-two years old. You walk into a room obviously not a size two (pause) or twelve, but have such great confidence about it doesn’t seem to even bother you at all.

Gabourey: It's something I had to work at...like I've been...I was on a diet...my first diet started when I was six years old, and so I've never been a small girl. One day I like I had to sit down with myself and decide that I loved myself no matter what my body looked like, no matter what other people thought of my body. I had to love myself.... And so I really had to have a conversation with myself and find what I love about myself.

Looking at the character and actress together reveals the limitations of their bodies to reflect their stories. Thinking about Precious and Gabby collectively illuminates the manner to which the problem is a mass media culture that promotes the normalization of Westernized standards of beauty and emphasize the visual over all other senses.

“Psychosocial” problems is listed on the CDC website as one of the major consequences youth are likely to experience because of obesity. The underlying assumption is that the psychosocial problems are solely related to weight, and that the maltreatment that overweight and obese people experience is normal and uncontrollable. Rather than address widespread social discrimination as the problem, the rhetorical strategy is to put the onus on the individual to change their body.

There are two major issues with focusing solely on “visual lenses and logics” regarding obesity in popular discourse. First, “experts” promoting obesity as a health crisis obscure or leave out data that competes with normal standards of beauty. Second, the racist and sexist history of the eugenics movement and its connection to body measurement technologies, i.e. anthropometry, has been completely erased from the current circulation of the obesity discourse.

Another example of important information getting lost in translation from body to BMI is the fact that size and health are not always directly correlated. In other words there are unhealthy people, with poor eating habits and limited physical engagement, who fall within the “healthy weight” category. And there are very healthy people who eat well, are very active, and their BMI is above the “normal” weight category. In the past few years the phenomenon of people within the normal weight range with characteristics that are identified with obesity has been identified as “normal weight obesity” or “metabolically obese normal weight” individuals (Ruderman, et al. 1998). Rather than reconsider the effectiveness of the weight categories, the popular message of “experts” maintains that external fat is bad, but internally there is good fat and bad fat. The burden is placed on the individual to educate themselves about the differences in unseen fat. What is missing from the experts discussion of “normal weight obesity” are the findings that reveal that nearly half the people identified as overweight and a third of the people categorized as obese are healthy according to CDC cardiovascular health standards. While nearly a quarter of the “normal weight” people are identified as unhealthy (Wildman, Munter and Reynolds 2008).

The use of Western standards of beauty to justify scientific claims is not new, in fact Charles Darwin used standards of beauty to support his claims of people of color and women being inferior to white men in the 19th century. E Frances White argues in *Dark Continents of Our Bodies* that Darwin’s command of language, i.e. his use of analogies and metaphor to explain his scientific findings, situate him as a “missing link” between “popular culture” and “scientific discourse.” I quote extensively here from *Dark Continents of Our Body...*

Men choose as mates those women who meet their race's standards of beauty. The attributes that appeal to men are slowly and gradually exaggerated, "having selected during many generations for their wives the most strongly characterized and therefore most attractive women" (1871 n.d.:908) Since these standards vary from race to race, different characteristics are bred into each race overtime. "For my own part," Darwin revealed, "I conclude that of all the causes which have led to the differences in external appearance between the races of man, and to a certain extent men and the lower animals, sexual selection has been the most efficient" (908). From this—believing apparently in the "objective" validity of his own standards—Darwin concluded that there was a link between the perceived ugliness of primitive peoples and their inferiority. (Kindle Edition 925-38)

White explains that the rise of a new science in the 19th century was used to solidify racist and sexist narratives of people of color and women as inferior to white men. Women of color were considered unmodifiably inferior. White explains...

Once "woman" had been shown to be indeed analogous to lower races by the new science of anthropometry and had become, in essence, a racialized category the traits and qualities special to woman could be in turn used in an analogical understanding of lower races. These analogies now had the *weight* of empirical reality and scientific theory. The similarities between a Negro and a white woman, or between a criminal and a Negro, were realities of nature, somehow "in" the individual studied.

Whereas the explicit racist and sexist language that previously accompanied anthropometry have long since been erased, the cultural work of scientific body measurement still plagues black women to this day. The current work of analogy is to equate body size with health, and to target individuals for not adhering the “scientifically” determined standards of weight, which have been contoured by Western standards of beauty and the weight-loss industry.

Looking to feminist visual culture scholar Lisa Collin’s “Economies of the Flesh” helps illustrate the important rhetorical work that Sapphire is doing in *Push*. Collins writes...

...artists Emma Amos, Alison Saar, and Renée Stout create work that tries to reposition the Black female body within...already established visual economies. They try also to expand the range of visual possibilities by taking the body elsewhere. For example, both Saar and Stout fuse Western and non-Western histories, concepts, and artistic practices in their endeavors to expand a limited and limiting history (L. Collins 2002, 114).

Collin’s “taking the body elsewhere” in visual arts illustrates the manner in which Sapphire’s body narrative engages three different communities through one dynamic character. Sapphire: 1) makes a multiply injured body visible; 2) empowers an illiterate black girl to tell her story in her own words; 3) reveals the faulty epistemes in objective scientific discourse. Perhaps the most controversial challenge is that her explicit portrayal of a poor black girl experiencing extreme sexual abuse at the hands of her parents is to the black community. This portrait defies a politics of respectability and “airs dirty laundry.” Second, *Push* was published in 1996, two years after the publication

of *The Bell Curve*, providing a damning critique of the failures of the education system to not only to teach Precious to read but also to identify the signs of extreme abuse and intervene to protect her. Also her work explicitly challenges the scientific racism of the late 20th century by asserting that issues with Black underachievement are social, not biological. Third, Sapphire's decision to center a fat black girl protagonist and refuse to engage the obesity discourse directly is the most effective method of "talking back." Like Precious, Sapphire does not even dignify the rhetoric with a response. As a fat black female protagonist, Precious is not just at the intersection of racial/gendered injuries and the childhood obesity rhetoric. A critical reading of the obesity discourse with Precious at the center reveals the deep eugenics roots of body measurement, i.e. anthropometry, within European and U.S. histories of modern science.

Push is a narrative intervention in African-American women's literature, feminist body theory, and incest literature precisely because Sapphire attempts to suture together this black girl's body and self through Precious' journey towards literacy. Sapphire's narrative advances the work of Morrison and Walker by extending the lineage in the direction of the descendants rather than the ancestors. She elevates the voices of black girls in trouble right now and provides a sense of urgency for addressing their issues right now, while they are still young. Precious begins her recovery as a teenager, not through therapy, but through critical literacy. Sapphire asserts that black girls who have a learning space where they feel safe, social services to meet their basic needs (room/board and child care), support groups/recovery programs, literacy, black literature, and a deep connection with other girls/women can reclaim their bodies in myriad ways that reflect a celebration of the diverse lived experiences of black girls as survivors.

Sapphire's work suggests that black girls who can celebrate their bodies as they are can begin to celebrate the beauty within. To begin this journey towards celebration, black girls have to break the silences that imprison them in their own bodies, and "transform [that silence] into language and action." Sapphire's decision to provide a first person present account invites readers to engage with Precious as she tries to understand what has happened to her body using language available to her as a young urban undereducated black girl. Precious breaks her silence by speaking directly to readers and telling her own story as she is experiencing it. Sapphire does not simply tell this story for awareness, she retells this narrative so that the readers will do something for themselves and/or the collective body of young black girls. Sapphire writes a philosophy of the black girl body that is messy, explicit, current, and in-process. Like Morrison, she provides commentary on the larger social body that creates the circumstances that black girls must negotiate. Building on Walker, she offers an engaged-pedagogical approach to recovering actual black girls bodies from destruction. Sapphire does not offer black feminist body theory, but black feminist body praxis inclusive of narrative, theory, action, and reflection for the purposes of recovering black girls bodies now.

If she could dance naked under palm trees and see her image in the river she would know

Recovery Mission #3 Black Girls, Healthy Interventions, and Political Projects

Nina Simone sings in "Images" that "she" needs a safe environment, represented by "palm trees," for creative expression, represented by "dancing," to call forth an embodied epistemology. McDowell suggests it is not enough to know that black women and girls' bodies are under attack; we must take action. Part of Sapphire critical commentary is her imaginary alternative school, *Each One Teach One*. She presents a

critical race feminist praxis of teacher as caregiver and literacy as sociopolitical action. In public health research action has come in the form of obesity prevention studies directly targeting black girls between eight and ten years old in “low-income areas” (Robinson et. al 996). Two of the four studies known as Girls’ health Enrichment Multi-site Studies (GEMS) were conducted in Memphis and Oakland over a two-year period and the results revealed that these obesity interventions targeting black girls between the 25th and 35th Body Mass Index percentile did not significantly reduce their BMI. The Memphis interventions included “behavioral counseling to promote healthy eating and increased physical activity...or self-esteem and social efficacy...(Klesges et. al 1007).

In Oakland researcher initiated culturally tailored interventions in the form of “afterschool hip-hop, African, and step classes and a home/family-based intervention to reduce screen media use.” While the “main outcome measure” for the Oakland program like the Memphis program was reducing body mass index numbers, the conclusions for the Oakland (Stanford) report indicate,

A culturally tailored after-school dance and screen time reduction intervention for low-income, pre- adolescent African American girls did not significantly reduce BMI gain compared with health education but did produce potentially clinically important reductions in lipid levels, hyperinsulinemia, and depressive symptoms (Robinson, et al. 2010, 995). There was also evidence for greater effectiveness in high-risk subgroups of girls.

Similar to Sapphire’s Each One Teach One, the program met the girls needs for afterschool engagement five days a week for the entire school year, with snack and

homework support, as well as performance opportunities. Their dance teachers were African American female college students or recent graduates from the community. The girls learned, practiced and choreographed routines and could attend as often as they liked. In addition, the families of the girls who participated in the dance intervention were in engaged in...

Sisters Taking Action to Reduce Television (START)...a home-based screen time reduction intervention designed to incorporate African or African American history and culture, including up to 24 lessons during 2 years (996).

There many positive lessons that can be drawn from the Oakland based “active-placebo intervention.” Most importantly the researchers did not simply focus on BMI to determine the success of the program. Also, the researchers address concerns about the potential negative impacts an obesity program can have on girls’ body image indicating...

We found no evidence of increased weight concerns or body dissatisfaction, consistent with prior findings that interventions designed to prevent obesity have not put girls at higher risk for disordered eating problems (1002).

Two major critiques of the research-based program design is in order to control for variables some black girls were excluded from the program because they were *homeless*, did not own a television in their homes, were “normal weight,” had disabilities, or were too “obese.” Furthermore, the GEMS addresses social and cultural changes geared towards improving health outcomes, but it does not explicitly indicate a concern for

political struggles against poverty and health disparities. Being a culturally relevant and age appropriate program is phenomenal, but if it is not connected with a broader political agenda it is likely temporary.

Maintaining consistent culturally relevant, secure, and engaging afterschool programming for young girls to creatively express themselves through dance is a political project, not an obesity prevention program. While the participants were offered a form of body literacy (dancing), media literacy (family program), and potentially food literacy (snack), a next step might have been working with the group to recognize that individually we can be “healthy at any size and any weight,” according to Surgeon General Regina Benjamin. But also knowing that black girls and women, have fundamental rights to care (childcare support), protection (safe environments), multiple literacies (numeracy, political and historical knowledges), and creative expression (cultural engagement).

Sapphire’s *Push*, an autobiographical novel of a young black girl, is a brilliant illustration of the potential of McDowell’s broader analytic paradigm for recovering black female bodies. When Precious’ story is placed in dialogue with popular narratives of childhood obesity it “illuminates” the limitations of the discourse. By attending to the “buried zones” and the “reciprocal relationship” between the outside body and the inside body, Sapphire’s novel disrupts the childhood obesity epidemic narrative. The dominant narrative of childhood obesity locates the problem at the site of the individual body and insists that weight is the primary problem and the solution to childhood obesity is simplified so that weight-loss is the only measure of success. *Push* is a contemporary black girl story that offers readers a surviving black girl character and a narrative of self-

recovery that does not rely solely upon the young girl changing her external body as the primary goal.

Precious, as a fat black female protagonist speaking in the first person present, gives voice to a variety of pertinent under-addressed issues that dwell in the “buried zones” of silent and silenced girls. Sapphire’s narrative intervention demonstrates the urgency of McDowell’s argument for broadening the scope of analysis beyond the visual logics of the body. When we listen to counterstories that reveal the gaps in the discourse on racial injury and locate black girls’ bodies in mediums that make their injured bodies visible, only then can we begin to ask the right questions that lead to the recovery of actual bodies. Recognizing that changing the body is not the only appropriate response to total body health and wellness, scholars must begin to thoroughly interrogate the impact of social *and* physical environments. Furthermore, shifting away from a universal “colorblind” body towards a race and gender conscious awareness of all bodies as political bodies facilitates the construction of complex interventions that address a multiplicity of injuries simultaneously. As such, the final chapter directly attends to the lived experiences as well as physical and social environments where black children’s political bodies are currently being shaped.

Chapter 5
**Camp Carrot Seed: Embodied Epistemology and a
 Pedagogy for Social Change as Ethnographic Practice**

The significance of literate practice grows richer and richer not just at the critical juncture of acquisition...but in terms of the momentum created by the circles of activity made possible by those moments of *opportunity* (Royster 2000, 42-43, *emphasis mine*).

This dissertation is entitled *Precious Opportunities* because Precious Jones' counternarrative disrupts both the dominant body narrative of childhood obesity and the dominant literacy narrative which prioritizes reading and writing over all other literate practices. Through *Precious'* narrative we gain *opportunities* to explore a pedagogical approach using a broader definition of literacy that seeks to address an array of complex issues, especially those raised by youth. Sapphire's emphasis on Precious having a diverse crew of girls, learning via multiple forms of creative expression, being aware of and using community and government resources, and sharing her lived experiences and her worldview with adults offers *precious opportunities* for lasting interventions for social change.

This chapter concludes my critical race feminist praxis bridging McDowell's "body recovery" concepts with Jacqueline Royster's "literacy as sociopolitical action" in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. Deborah McDowell suggests it is not enough to know that black women and girls' bodies are under attack; we must take action. The fourth recovery mission is demonstrates pedagogy as ethnographic practice through embodied epistemological exchanges.

Embodied epistemology is a deep sense of *knowing* self as your individual body, your social body, and your political body. Knowing that successful self-care, not to be confused with “personal responsibility,” does not necessarily mean changing the way bodies look. Knowing that as black girls and women we have fundamental rights to care, protection, safe environments, multiple literacies (skills building and socio-political history), and creative expression (cultural engagement) as remedies for racial injuries. This *knowing* is a form of critical consciousness that is cultivated in community through multiple literacies.

Jacqueline Royster draws upon the legacy of Sojourner Truth seeking to broaden the analytic frame of literacy. Her framework situates reading and writing “as part of a whole cloth of communicative practices in which orality, literacy, and other symbolic systems are all intricately entwined” (42). This broader view of literacy, I argue, incorporates body praxis with literacy practice. Royster uses the metaphor of “the stream” to depict a long tradition, ancestral lineage, of African American women as educators, orators, and writers who used “literacy as an instrument for producing spiraling effects in both sociopolitical thought and sociopolitical action” (42).

Sapphire’s *Push* demonstrates this broader definition of literacy as not just Precious’ ability to “read the word,” but also illuminating the manner in which she “read the world.” Precious’ journey to literacy served as an instrument for beginning her “body recovery.” Royster defines literacy as...

a sociocognitive ability. It is the ability to access information and to use this information variously to articulate lives and experiences and also to identify, think through, refine, and solve problems,

sometimes complex problems, over time (45).

Sapphire's attention to "literacy [as] a human experience" (44) and recovery via "reading the word" and "reading the world" in *Push* demonstrates a critical race feminist praxis for attending to a broad range of needs among black youth, black girls in particular.

Literacy as a Process for Sociopolitical Action

As the Camp Carrot Seed program creator and an engaged researcher I assert that a pedagogy for social change with an alternative epistemic framework can reveal data through shared experiences over time that may not ordinarily register as valid or valuable knowledge in traditional empirical research. I also assert that certain embodied knowledge surfaces through shared experiences that are not communicated via the word—text or speech—or simplistic visual logics about bodies. As the researcher, I relied on my interpretation of shared experiences both in person and by evaluating speech and actions from audio and video recordings of activities. Evaluations of participants are based upon their interactions with one another, interactions with me, attitudes about collective work and activities, demonstration of skills developed over the course of the camp, and more. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate through my experiences with eight to ten teenagers the alternative ways of knowing that are beneficial for the researcher as well as the participants. This study does not simply avoid harming the subjects to gain access to data, but seeks to provide benefits to subjects in exchange for access to data. It will show that a combination of engaged pedagogy and a broader analytic view of literacy produces complex generative themes for assessment.

The purpose of Camp Carrot Seed, like Each One Teach One, was to focus on literacy as a means to illuminate the wide range of issues teenagers experience, examine

the logics of their decision-making, while exposing them to alternative lenses for seeing their communities and themselves in community with one another. The pedagogic process by which literacy becomes sociopolitical action happens through various forms of embodied epistemological exchanges. Embodied epistemology refers to knowledge centered within our bodies and what our bodies tells us, for instance, “being hungry” or “feeling fidgety.” Other types of embodied knowledge may be remembering a dance routine, feeling the pain of a bruise, or knowing how to do a three-strand braid.

Embodied epistemology also refers to knowledge based on how we physically and materially experience the world such as knowing it is not safe to stand in the middle of a busy street at night time or knowing that having choices regarding housing requires a certain amount of money. More specific body politics for young women may include knowing the safest route to a bus stop or knowing which local store carries your favorite food. A central objective was to validate youth as knowledgeable subjects with a particular “reading of the world” as well as to challenge their knowledge with my own. At the same time, I expected that through my experiences working with youth regularly they would challenge my preconceived notions about them.

Camp Carrot Seed 2010: Participatory Action Research

During the summer of 2010 I spent two days each week with my Camp Carrot Seed crew and we packed those days with daily gardening and cooking, environmental activities and service projects, neighborhood mapping, grocery shopping, sweet potato cake baking, corn and squash harvesting, a recording session, dance routines, mural painting, and a culminating teaching luncheon to share the results of our four main

projects: gardening, cooking, outdoor education, and local food systems research with our friends, family members, and program sponsors.

This participatory action research project was inspired partly by the radical pedagogy depicted in Sapphire's alternative school, *Each One Teach One*, in her novel *Push*. The name comes from the children's book, *The Carrot Seed*. Published in 1945, it tells a story about the youngest member of the family who decides to grow a carrot. He puts a seed in the ground, he pulls up the weeds, and he waters it. His older sibling and parents intermittently express to him that the carrot will not grow; he carries on. In the end he harvests a carrot nearly the size of his body that he wheels away in a wheelbarrow. At no point does he ask for or receive help from adults, nor does he respond to his family's discouragement. This little boy wanted a carrot, he got the tools, he did the work, and he harvested his carrot. This children's book inspired me to have faith in the power of youth determination.

It also inspired an engaged research project focused on food and the environment working with a group of black youth in exchange for their time, participation, and experiential knowledge. I spent eight weeks with a small group of eight to ten youth between the ages of thirteen and nineteen years old. I observed their interactions with food, the local food system, and worked with them to either make their favorite meals differently or to try new foods. In my time with this youth collective I learned that they are not poor food decision-makers. In fact, I would argue that these poor and working class youth of color are good decision-makers with poor options. The purpose of my field research was not to study youth specifically for generalizable data. My central

objectives were to include youth in collective research in their communities and to value their various “readings of the world” as legitimate knowledge.

Camp Carrot Seed was hosted at, City of Refuge (COR), a faith based mission church on Joseph E. Boone that provided ninety day transitional housing for single women and mothers with children. COR is located within the 30314 zip code, which is an impoverished and desolate area in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. Onsite, they offer daycare, job training, a health clinic, and a culinary arts program that provides thousands of meals monthly for COR residents and people in the surrounding area. The church mission primarily employed white males to carry out the tasks of providing care for a predominantly black female service population. Most of the volunteers I encountered were white people who lived and worshipped outside of the metro Atlanta area, and some even came from neighboring states.

The youth in my program were either residents at the women’s shelter or members of the church from the surrounding neighborhood. COR offered bible study programs for all youth, and by participating in bible study and service projects youth could earn trips to Six Flags, water and nature parks, and out-of-town retreats if they demonstrated good behavior. Each day women residents were required to find work and/or go to work during the day, which means they had to leave their children in the care of COR staff. While the mission provided daily programming for preschool and elementary school children, there was no regular programming for middle and high school youth. Due to funding restrictions and limited staff support, I conducted Camp Carrot Seed two days per week. I worked with the group between 9am and 3:30pm using

a skeleton schedule: pick-ups, breakfast, gardening, break, cooking, lunch, cleanup, break, food research/community activities, and drop-offs.

The following sections employ counterstorytelling as a method to discuss three generative themes from the camp experience (ethnography) and present reflections and lessons from my experience as the educator (pedagogy).

Counterstorytelling: Dialogic Pedagogy and Generative Themes

Focus on the Buried Zones: Absent(ee) Fathers

Sitting at a picnic table under an umbrella with my Camp Carrot Seed crew on day I asked them what they liked to watch on television. Surprisingly they listed programs from the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon Network, and asked them to be more specific in terms of how often they watched television, not thinking about the fact that most of them were living at a women's shelter. After a few probing questions Justice finally said to me "Ms. Sheri we don't have no TV." Keisha's response was that Bernard had a television at home and Justice replied "Dang he got a tv and a daddy." That statement haunted me for the rest of the camp.

Justice's "reading of the world" was insightful because this very point of absent black fathers is a thread that runs through every chapter of this dissertation. On *The Early Show* Tiffany King's African American father was deceased and she states, "you don't think you have anyone to talk to so basically I turned to food." On *The Oprah Winfrey Show* "Obese Families in Crisis" Christian, a black teenage girl, states "it kills [her mother's] heart that [she does not] have a father." On *Too Fat for Fifteen* Terinna Cypress, a biracial teenage girl, explains that her African American father passed away

when she was thirteen and that she ate to suppress her feelings. Miranda Nichols, a biracial teenager, started gaining weight when her African American father was deployed with the military, according to her parents. Precious Jones' abusive African American father dies midway through the novel, *Push*. Finally, Justice's father was also deceased. Except for Bernard, I never met any of the remaining participants' fathers likely because majority of the participants were living at a women's shelter.

Focus on Health: Diabetes or Obesity

Once a lunchtime discussion with the CCS crew the topic of diabetes came up and each participant indicated that they knew someone either in their families or peer group with diabetes. Bernard shared that his aunt passed away from complications with diabetes. Terinna Cypress explained that both sides of her African American and Native American families were diabetic. Diabetes is another major thread in this dissertation. In popular media diabetes is discussed within the obesity epidemic discourse as primary threat for obese youth. On the final day of Camp Carrot Seed we invited family and friends to a luncheon at COR where participants presented reports related to food. Kelly, Justice, and Bernard's presentations on food and food products included references to diabetes, not obesity, as a central concern.

Kelly reviewed ingredients for the stir-fry she and Justice prepared for the luncheon. First she explains that the stir-fry included tilapia, which is "high in protein and low in fat;" bok choy, which "has lots of vitamin C, calcium, vitamin A;" carrots; and fresh garlic. In the following passage the specific focus is on the nutritional value of onions explaining...

“This is our lovely onion,” says Kelly. “It makes you cry,” interjects Justice. “It is low in fat and it has calcium. It also has vitamin C, vitamin B-6, chromium, helps control sugar levels in diabetics and it has rich sources of the chromium to help blood cells in diabetics” explains Kelly.

Even though the “official story” in media focused on obesity, weight-loss and obesity were not addressed in their presentation. Kelly and Justice look like they would be categorized as normal weight and overweight respectively. They could have easily presented their stir-fry as a low fat meal within a weight loss framework. Instead they chose to highlight the importance of diabetes.

Bernard, on the other hand, reviewed the typical snack and beverage purchases by participants in the camp. In the following passage he reports on each person’s consumer wish list and he provides sarcastic commentary (listed in italics).

It’s another store called the Grocery Store and it’s right across the street from City of Refuge [pointing to an activities map]. We are here and the grocery store is here. We’ve went and asked each student [pauses to laugh] what would they get if they had four dollars? Kelly said that she would have two PowerAde’s, one bag of hot puffs and hot wings... *[shaking his head] diabetes*. Keisha said she was gonna get a Hershey white chocolate bar, sprite, Cheetos Puffs, and a honey bun...*[shaking head] I feel so sorry for her*. Johnathon said he was gonna get two fifty cent honey buns, two bags of sour cream and cheddar Ruffles, and one kiwi strawberry Arizona. *Good grief*. Kwesi said that he’s gonna get a white Hershey, blue PowerAde, sprite, and another white Hershey with a pack of hot cheese

popcorn. *[rolls eyes up]* *Umm*. Justice says that she was gonna get a orange Fanta, as usual, and barbeque Fritos with a honey bun. *Pretty healthy*. Whitney said that she was gonna, oh my God, Whitney said that she was gonna get a Philly cheesesteak, and Arizona, and a fifty cent honey bun with fifty cent left over after four dollars.

This passage recounts a wish list discussion from the seventh week of the eight-week camp. During the camp participants were provided ingredients to make healthy cooked meals and fruit, but that did not change their habits regarding snack and beverage purchases. The food products they list have high salt and sugar contents and low nutritional value. It represents a youth diet that is not confined to obese youth, but more accurately reflects food consumption habits of these low-income youth of color. It also represents food items that are easily accessible to them, within walking distance and affordable, as well as products that are consistently available throughout the day.

Focusing on body size primarily and available food options as a secondary issue means opportunities for offering food literacy for youth across age, race, body size, class, and region are lost. The framing of “the problem” in the national discourse is such that youth, who are not considered fat but diabetes is prevalent in their families, would not necessarily see a need to focus on changing their diet to maintain or improve their health.

Multiply Literacies as Interventions: Pedagogic Projects for Re-reading the World

This section focuses on a few stories that provide lessons for doing pedagogy as ethnographic practice. Each pedagogic project reflects four essential literacy projects that were the basis for camp activities. This reflection reveals the collaborative work undertaken by the volunteer teachers, camp participants, and myself.

Pedagogic Project #1: A HEALing Garden Project

Immediately after breakfast on the first day of camp we had a garden orientation with the HEAL Inc. garden coordinator, a mid-thirties white female volunteer gardener. She provided a crash course teaching us basic principles, techniques, and dangers related to gardening and garden tools. She demonstrated how to remove weeds from the soil in the raised beds in the garden and immediately the crew was dispersed to remove the weeds from the remaining beds. The garden coordinator, like many of the other teachers and guides engaged the participants in doing a task as the primary method of teaching. During this first lesson we learned about organic soil and rhizomes by weeding the beds. We then focused on getting water to the garden area so that we could water our ten raised beds. For the second garden session we planted ten beds with new seeds. The garden coordinator did not simply demonstrate tasks; she worked with each participant individually to make sure they knew the process.



Figure 16: Photographs of the Camp Carrot Seed mural and garden at City of Refuge in Atlanta, Georgia.

The following week all garden maintenance transitioned to Camp Carrot Seed because the garden coordinator moved to another state. For the next three weeks were on our own.

On the final day of camp one male and one female camp participant led a tour of the garden for an invited group of friends and family. They explained the contents of each box and categorized them by first and second plantings. The following is an excerpt from the tour.

“And this over here would be our radish, as you can see they are too close together so we still have to find a way that we can spread them out.

Before this used to be chives, but that didn't they died,” says Kwesi

“Why didn't it work out?” asked Lorraine

“Because it didn't get enough water,” says Kwesi

“So how do plants make their food?” asked Lorraine

“So what they need is they need water, sunlight, and you have to plant it correctly. And that's one of the reasons why [the chives did not work]

because they was too far down. So when we did water it...the seeds was too far down,” says Keisha

Gardening is the only activity we did everyday the camp met. It was basically a camp ritual. The crew, including myself, learned about whole, as in “non-processed,” foods by growing them from seeds and seedlings, but that is not all that we learned. It was on average ninety degrees so we had to water during camp days and I came on weekends. As the weeks passed we were able to complete the task faster because each participant knew what needed to be done. They cultivated and protected the garden

sometimes in my absence because some lived on site. Over the course of the camp as we transitioned from direct teaching to regular practice issues within their “buried zones” began to surface. Through our experiences growing food we knew by camp’s end that gardening could be difficult work, especially in ninety-degree weather. I also learned that black kids gardening in the summer in the south brought up a range of deep body issues such as colorism and homophobia.

Colorism is rarely, if ever, discussed in literature on garden projects for “urban” youth. I am a light skinned 36 year-old black woman, who dresses rather young—jeans and tee-shirt uniform. Within the first few weeks at least half of my crew complained about being in the sun because it was going to make them “black.” Justice stood under a tree for shade until given a specific task and then she returned to the tree, when I asked her about it she complained that she was going to get “black.” Kwesi explained that if he were my skin color being outside would not be an issue, and LaShawn said if she were my color she would be beautiful. I determined quickly that doing this work meant rejecting a simple focus on food growth and the life cycle. The wrong response would have been to simply tell them “you should love being black because I do.” Recognizing that we live in a hierarchal culture where privilege and discrimination is often color-coded, I decided to investigate their evidence that suggested that blackness was negative. I was not prepared to have perfect discussion about colorism in these situations, but I knew that not talking about it would not make it go away. In fact, I was very cognizant of my light skin because it was a real factor in that space, particularly since we were doing a lot of outdoor activities. After these comments I was conscious to include images

and people in our working space representing not only racial diversity, but also diversity within blackness in terms of shade and color.

Homophobic comments were another regular occurrence, particularly when we were outdoors. Hot weather meant the girls and boys were more likely to lean against one another for support. This led to regular conversations that shifted back and forth from the accusatory “you gay”—i.e. you’re walking gay, you’re talking gay, you’re dressed gay, you’re looking at me gay, you touched me gay—to the pre-action disclaimer “no homo.” I did not habitually regulate their speech around me, even though we all performed a guarded form of public speech in the presence of COR staff members. However, “you gay” I considered a curse word. I explained that I believed the phrase placed unfair restrictions particularly on boys’ movements and interactions with one another. While they still said it in my presence to one another over time they would pause immediately, acknowledge it, and then apologize to me. Spending time with the group consistently over time allowed for many “teachable moments” where I had the opportunity to engage them in the logic of their choices, particularly regarding their treatment of one another.

One morning we went to work in the garden and found kudzu had taken over. It was covering our berry planters and the raised bed with corn. We worked to remove it, trying to locate the roots, using the logic that weeds must be removed at the root. Having difficulty locating a central root for the vines I decided to get shovels so that we could dig deeper. A disturbing conversation happened in the garden among the crew while I was getting supplies in the warehouse. However, the person holding the camera continued to

record so I was able to “overhear” and “oversee” their interaction. This is part of the conversation I listened to when I transcribed the video.

“It’s probably poison bru” says Eric

“No it’s not man I’ll show you mafucker...” says Johnathon “Look Kelly”

“uggghh” says Kelly

“get you ass back in there see...yo bitch ass fell out” says Johnathon

“he jumped he right here.” Says Kelly

“where his homeless ass at?” says Johnathon

“there he go right here you-ont see em” says Eric

“why yo bitch ass live at Eden village now. Broke bitch. Alright ya’ll look at this” says Johnathon

“He gone” [laughing] says Kelly

“Der he go uh come on” says Johnathon

“He right der” says Kelly

“I see em. Alright ya’ll here he go” says Johnathon

“Niggah you kilt him you got em on camera” says Kwesi

“naw I didn look at this” says Johnathon

“You got him on camera” says Kelly

This video raised two issues regarding embodied epistemology. As a researcher who had overtly embedded a recording device with the crew this video presented an opportunity for disembodied surveillance. I was able to determine differences in their speech towards one another based upon my presence or absence by viewing the video. I was also granted limited insight into one participant’s deep sentiments about living at the

women's shelter; his association of residents with homelessness and being "broke." While Camp Carrot Seed could not relieve their sense of instability and insecurity, it could provide some relief in terms of their daily experiences at the shelter.

My goal as the project coordinator was to be conscious of their vulnerable state and to engage them as fully capable and knowledgeable individuals. While I did not like the language I "overheard" in the video, I did not use garden education to try to "fix" their behavior knowing their living situation had them under constant surveillance. The garden functioned as a space beyond the listening ears of City of Refuge staff and me. Because gardening was our ritual they knew when we would garden and what tasks to complete, it provided a place for youth to be themselves and for me to be present with them. In the garden they did learn how to grow certain foods, but growing food from seeds is a long slow process that takes weeks to complete. Garden education as a pedagogic project was a vehicle for being able to cultivate relationships and comfort, in addition to developing gardening skills and alternative food literacies.

Pedagogic Project #2: Cooking Our Own Lunch as Practical Intervention

The cooking pedagogic project revealed additional information about embodied epistemological exchange and recovery. The following section discusses how teaching cooking skills as a form of literacy contributes to social change. I also discuss a few examples where I identified shifts in their language and practices.

Cooking Class: Skills Building and Social Change

The CCS cooking pedagogic project was not technically a nutrition class, it was a cooking class intended to develop basic skills that served two purposes: youth cooking meals and feeding themselves good food. Making lunch meant my crew shared

responsibility prepping the ingredients, cooked the meal, served the meal, and cleaned the kitchen. The goal of this pedagogic project was not simply to expose them to the culinary arts. The purpose was to show them that they were capable of cooking for themselves and their families if necessary, and to develop a practical skill.

A few weeks into this pedagogic project the CCS crew was charged with cooking an entire meal of their choosing with minimal support from the volunteer cook. This two-day exercise is an example of literacy as a sociocognitive ability. They created a menu, selected recipes, created a list of ingredients, went shopping with their list, and prepared and cooked the meal. They seasoned and baked the chicken; boiled and sliced eggs for the salad; chopped the potatoes, celery, garlic, chives, and carrots; assembled the salad; and blended the ingredients for their ranch dip recipe. It was not perfect, but they ate all of their hot wings, salad, celery and carrots. It took nearly two hours for them to prepare the ingredients and cook the meal. The following week they made another meal of their choosing, three-cheese pasta with broccoli and fruit salad. This time they selected a meal requiring less preparation and cooking time. It took them approximately thirty-six minutes with fewer participants and more adult guidance. Cooking full meals twice a week helped build their cooking abilities in a social setting, also they recognized the more they worked as a team the faster they were likely to eat lunch.

Lunchtime Chats: Weight-loss and Dieting were not a Topic of Discussion

Over the course of the camp we discussed basic components of “healthy” meals including: complex carbohydrates (grains), protein (beans and meats), fruits and

vegetables, and sometimes dairy. Weight-loss and dieting never came up in our discussions in eight weeks cooking together. For every lunch prepared on-site, we set two round tables with real plates, cutlery, and glasses and we ate a full meal. The CCS crew, myself, the volunteer cooking guides, and COR staff ate lunch together for about twenty minutes each day and we talked. Towards the beginning of camp during a “lunchtime chat” I asked the crew if we could get the ingredients to make our lunch, which happened to be stir-fry, at one of the local convenience or grocery stores on Joseph E. Boone and we ended up discussing diabetes.

Camp Carrot Seed was not an obesity prevention or diabetes prevention program. We did not train the participants to intentionally change their families’ eating habits. My intentions were, however, to raise their awareness of their food choices by “making the familiar strange” in order to develop their critical consciousness about food decisions within the context of food availability and cooking abilities. As a part of the awareness project I organized an end-of-camp luncheon so that they could report to their loved ones what they accomplished over the summer. Primarily, I wanted the participants’ friends and family members to hear directly from them about the variety of skills they developed, and what they learned from thinking critically about food by growing it, cooking it, and buying it.

For the final presentation about the cooking pedagogic project the CCS crew collectively voted to prepare a stir-fry with a fresh fruit salad for friends, family, camp sponsors, COR and HEAL Inc. representatives, and volunteer guides. They chose this menu of all the dishes they cooked over the course of the camp which included: two pasta dishes, broccoli and chicken sausage pizza, fish burritos, hot wings with salad and home

fries, honey glazed salmon with salad and apples, deli sandwiches, homemade sweet potato cake, and garden fresh sautéed yellow squash. Two participants, with support from a volunteer cook, were responsible for making the meal for approximately thirty people. Then Justice and Kelly explained to this audience why the CCS crew selected the particular menu during our final “lunchtime chat.” Standing at the podium together Justice explained...

Today what you guys are eating is a stir-fry. And the stir-fry comes from China. It's very healthy. It has a lot of protein and carbr...carbohydrates and vita..a lot of vitamins. And that's the reason why we umm made the stir-fry cause it's very healthy. And um it's fast to cook, very easy and um it's very affordable like it was fifty-seven dollars like in all. It was like two fifty per person. So that is like very important. And also the fruit salad uhh we chose fruit salad because it's also healthy and lot of proteins and vitamins in it and it was actually the cheapest thing we could [laughing] ... make it was like in all overall it was like twenty-four dollars and eighty seven cents like a dollar twenty five cent per person....

The remaining ingredients for the stir-fry were ginger, jasmine rice, and cilantro from our garden. Their closing statement about the meal was, “all of the ingredients we used in the stir-fry were to help your body.” They also served fresh fruit salad with oranges, apples, grapes, and strawberries. The cooking pedagogic project gave youth the opportunity to identify their concerns related to food and health, but also to practice cooking meals from individual ingredients. My goal in this pedagogic project was to develop practical options rather than trying to completely overhaul their eating habits.

Another significant moment was when Eric, who did not complete the camp because his mother left COR, recorded himself singing in the kitchen three weeks into the camp. The song was set to the popular T.I. hip hop song “Whatever You Like,” and he sang...

See I’m stepping out with my niggas tonight. Hum-hum-hum whatever we like. I said we can cook whatever we like...Yeah. See I’m cookin i-in my kitchen tonight. Me and my friends we can cook whatever we like. I said we can cook whatever we like...Yeah

Eric had recorded himself the first week of camp rhyming about...

Hittin all these niggas in the mouth... Hit em with a pistol call the pistol hitamouth.... Hit em with the four five. Hit em real hard make a nigga hit the ground....

Hip Hop artist Mos Def, says in the introduction to *Black on Both Sides* that hip hop is a reflection of the people and in order for it to be better the people have to get better. He explains that the people get better when they believe they are valuable. My crewmember’s “remake” reflects Mos Def’s point in that the underlying goal of the camp was to provide care and encouragement for each participant so that they felt valuable in our space. Using pedagogic projects that are centered on nurturing participants rather than focused on specific content or changing youth behavior through discipline can intervene in a manner that is hard to detect. One reflection might be this shift in freestyle lyrics where, if nothing else CCS broadened the possible topics he could think of for his rhyme. Going from “hittin em” and “pistols” on week one to “we can cook whatever we like” on week three is significant.

Rather than thinking about my CCS crew solely as consumers of food products, I chose to work with them as capable producers of homemade meals. The primary objective for CCS was building their skill level so that cooking was a realistic alternative to buying prepared food. Another objective was to introduce additional meal options they could reasonably adopt when they were able to move into their own place. Two weeks after camp ended Keisha called me from the grocery store. She was shopping with her mother and they were looking for an ingredient to make our stir-fry at home but they could not remember the bok choy. Justice and Kelly also shared with me that they continued to cook stir-fry regularly for their mother after camp ended. I believe they remember the stir-fry because they had positive experiences with their cooking guide, they made it twice, and they ate it for lunch three times total. In other words, they developed a taste for it and they knew how to make it. I also think they associated their cooking with positive memories of making songs and joking with each other in the kitchen.

Pedagogic Project #3: Grocery Shopping on Boone

In preparation for the shopping trip to research food options on Joseph E. Boone the crew used Google maps to survey local stores. For this project the camp participants were literally the experts because I had never been inside any of the stores. Kwesi controlled the computer; Bernard, Keisha, Kelly, and Whitney, selected the local stores for our virtual survey and debated the available food products. Using the street view feature in Google maps the group identified and discussed various local stores in order to determine where we could successfully purchase the ingredients for the menu they created. The menu included hot wings, homemade fries, salad, celery and carrots with

homemade ranch dressing, and a sweet potato cake made with basic ingredients. The grocery list included things like potatoes, lettuce, chicken, cheese, eggs, and seasoning salt etc.

Seasoning salt was the only item we successfully purchased from the local stores. I established rules for purchases such as the items either had to be whole foods or products with limited ingredients that they could pronounce and identify. The other rule was all proteins and dairy products must indicate that there were no hormones or antibiotics used. Also these items could not be expired or expiring on the day of purchase. One of the local stores did carry many basic food products such as oil and butter, baking goods, cereals, condiments etc. However, the fresh produce did not look desirable and the vegetable selection was limited to lettuce, tomato, green pepper, and lemons. This store did carry chicken but it was expiring the day we were shopping. The remaining food products that were available on our list had too many unrecognizable ingredients at the local convenience stores.

Due to my rules we had to purchase all food items at the local chain grocery store. We could not use food from the garden because it takes weeks or months to grow squash, corn, and beans. Transportation becomes the major impediment to practical access to the closest grocery store. Due to time restrictions we could not rely on public transportation. I drove camp participants in a van to the two local stores and the grocery store because, using the MARTA mass transit website, the crew identified that the closest grocery store was a thirty-eight minute bus ride from City of Refuge.

The point of the rules was to encourage my crew to look closely at each item before they purchased it. Divided into two teams, each one was responsible for gathering

ingredients for their part of the meal. The girls' team struggled to select chicken because none of the chicken wing options were free of antibiotics and hormones, only the whole chicken. The boys' team struggled with selecting mayonnaise because they did not recognize all of the ingredients in any of the brands. Using the iPod Nanos to record the trip, I created a record of some of the available items as well as the environment in each store. I used the videos for additional observation of their decision-making process and to record how long it took the group to identify eligible items. It took each team approximately forty-five minutes in the grocery store to get everything we needed for the meal. That is a total of an hour and a half in the grocery store.

Upon our return from the shopping trip we debriefed our experience in terms of time, options, and practicality. Our debriefing session revealed that a trip from City of Refuge to the grocery store would take approximately an hour and twenty minutes round trip. While we shopped one participant stated, "I can't wait until the seventh... that's when my momma get her food stamps.... Crabs and shrimp." Another participant chimed in, "that's food stamp day...we can go to the grocery store." During the debrief the participants indicated that the grocery store was often crowded when they went shopping because more families grocery shop when they receive their food stamp check, also known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Finally, they lamented that shopping takes longer and was frustrating because they had to read the label of each item.

The experience of shopping together "uncovered" a range of obstacles that prevent "good consumerism." Public health recommendations that encourage people with low-incomes or people living in impoverished neighborhoods to grocery shop for

meals rather than purchasing prepared foods at fast food restaurants or convenience stores are not promoting practical options, especially for people who are displaced or dependent on SNAP. CCS, in hindsight, did not provide practical options for most of my participants in their current circumstances. If I could do the exercise again I would encourage them to create the healthiest meal possible from the ingredients available on Boone rather than identifying the convenience stores solely as a deficient.

Snacks and Beverages: The Default Youth Diet

Unlike our trip to the grocery store, it took approximately three minutes to walk to a convenience store and nine minutes to complete the entire shopping trip. Each participant was given three dollars to select whatever they wanted, no rules. Kwesi opted to “spend two dollars and save one” or use “[their] own money and save the three dollars for another time.” Collectively they bought oatmeal crème pie, Oreos, packaged hot links, honey buns, Sour Cream and Cheddar Ruffles potato chips, Hershey white chocolate bars, Snickers, and pork skins. They knew exactly where the products were located. They were dancing, singing and even picking out favorite items for one another; they were genuinely happy when we were in the store. In less than fifteen minutes we had traveled from our classroom space, shopped, and they were consuming food and beverages that would likely make them feel full.

During the trip Keisha tried to show me the nutrition labels and ingredients, but I refused to look. I did, however, collect the wrappers from their purchases for a poster presentation, and I reviewed the nutritional information for their purchases later, using product websites. I paid particular attention to the sugar content and ingredients in their beverages. Kwesi, Justice, and Johnathon purchased a green Powerade (32fl oz./56g of sugar), a Fanta orange soda (20fl oz./74g of sugar), and a Tropicana Twister Tropical

Fruit Fury (20fl oz./ 60g of sugar) in that order. In each beverage the first ingredient was water and the second was high fructose corn syrup.

Other common ingredients in the beverages are food dyes and additives such as “red 40” and “yellow #5,” also known as tartrazine and Allura Red AC, respectively. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to ban both “azo dyes” because of multiple studies (McCann et al., 2007; Rowe, 1994) linking them with increases in hyperactive behavior in some children. CSPI also highlights discrepancies in the product formulas based upon distribution site stating, “Coca-Cola’s Orange and Lemon Fanta soft drinks contain dyes in the United States, but not in the UK” (Petition, 2008, 15). One female participant boasted that she drinks two Fanta orange sodas (20fl oz. each) everyday, totaling 148g of sugar and 540 calories from beverage consumption alone.

During our four-dollar shopping discussion they explained that they would “never” buy fruit from convenience stores because it was too expensive and it might be unsafe. In the store, Kelly pointed out the basket of bananas and apples by the check out window to make the point that one banana costs seventy-two cents. Johnathon also indicated that the fruit I brought to camp: strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and grapes were not sold in convenience stores. Even though Johnathon and others tried to regulate our fruit—i.e. jokingly keeping bowls of grapes or strawberries for themselves—their emotions about consuming fruit could not match the excitement they exhibited in the convenience store.

My intention with each pedagogic project was to provide engaging activities in exchange for studying their habits and worldviews. The community activities pedagogic

project provided regular experiences with natural environments to encourage them to see their community from a different perspective. Rather than focusing on sidewalks, stores, and billboards, I wanted them know what it feels like to be enveloped by trees and to hear a waterfall in or near their community. The gardening pedagogic project provided an opportunity for us all to learn the pros and cons of growing our own food. The cooking pedagogic project simply proved that youth are capable of cooking for themselves and others with some guidance. The purpose of the shopping research project was to get my crew to differentiate between whole foods that grow and the food products that are processed and conveniently available at the corner store. In exchange I was able to experience their “default” shopping and eating habits, learn which products they consumed, determine the ingredients in the products, identify how much the products cost, and more.

Pedagogic Project #4: Camp Carrot Seed Community Activities

Skills-building in the form of environmental and food literacy, as well as community activism by attending to the natural world contributed greatly to enhancing their worldview. By organizing the program to include expert guides in environmental education, gardening, and cooking I had the opportunity to experience each learning activity with my crew. My research is intended to function as a corrective to popular perceptions that youth do not know enough about their bodies and the world to make good consumer choices. I evaluated them by the way they worked with one another in the garden; how quickly and methodically they made meals; how they engaged adult guides and natural environments during off-site activities; and how well we worked together to organize their final presentations.

I studied their bodies, not based upon size or looks, but based on the habits and knowledge they demonstrated individually and within the group. I learned about their capacity to complete simple tasks, such as weeding the garden beds, and difficult tasks, such as untangling and connecting five water hoses to fill a water barrel. I learned their preferred forms of creative expression and their personal interests. Within this framework each participant emerged as highly competent in multiple areas. Kelly cooked well while Keisha, LaShawn, Bernard, and Kwesi showed strong interests in cooking. Keisha, Kelly, Eric, and Kwesi were quick studies in the garden. Keisha was great at everything. Justice and Keisha liked dancing and Johnathon, Kweisi, and Eric loved freestyling. Whitney was a trained visual artist; and Johnathon was highly computer literate.

If she could dance naked under palm trees *and* see her image in the river she would *know*...

Dancing Naked: Creative Expression and Freedom at WonderRoot

The second week of Camp Carrot Seed I took eight of the ten members of my crew to an artists community center called WonderRoot for a day. An important reason for having the CCS day in a creative environment was the adult facilitators were deliberate about offering a variety of opportunities for expression. We collectively created the ground rules with the youth participants and the adult roles were to support their creative choices and provide guidance. The visit was organized to ensure time enough for participants to engage activities deeply so if they chose to draw and paint for the entire day they could. They could move from group to group if they were interested in dancing and also recording music. One group chose to write a new song and then record it so they spent time doing creative writing and arrangement and then recorded

their song. There were enough adults present so that groups could be small or large based upon the interests of the participants.

One of the most powerful activities we did as a large group was a storytelling exercise where two people froze in an interactive pose and the group developed stories about the interaction between the two people.

Kwesi, Johnathon, and Eric who were residents at City of Refuge agreed to pose while the group sat in a circle creating the narrative. After the first pose and narrative, a person left and another person joined the remaining frozen person but created a new pose from the old one. New narratives were created for the new pose, and the poses themselves told stories about emotions. This exercise is a powerful example of embodied epistemological exchange through creative expression in that it demonstrates that there are always multiple readings of human interactions. On a basic level the exercise was about reading bodies, changing body narratives, and using our bodies for creative expression. I worked with WonderRoot because the artists and volunteers used creative expression as a form of healing. Some of the volunteers worked with refugee youth, immigrant youth, and displaced youth from New Orleans using the arts to promote connection and recovery from traumatic experiences. As such, the adults were willing to take risks along with the youth participants. Most importantly they let the youth dictate their creative projects and supported them as central decision-makers.

Jonathon described the WonderRoot visit like this...

[A] place we become fond with which is WonderRoot located on the east side in Decatur. Well actually it has a lot of things in there you can paint. It's free...it's free for youth under eighteen. It's safe. You can express

yourself. There's a studio, computer lab, African dancing, Claymation and visual arts studio. Well or actually you can go in there and record and stuff....

The alternative pedagogical style employed at WonderRoot whereby youth learn by making choices and being active demonstrated my overall goal for the camp. An unintended benefit was I learned a little about each participant's talents and expertise. By engaging in a range of activities such as gardening, cooking, painting, digital mapping, hiking, and more I observed the participants teach and guide one another based upon their strengths over the course of the camp. During the first week of camp I asked the participants about their talents, and other than the males explaining their strengths in sports, none of them described themselves as being really good at anything. By week seven I knew that Whitney could paint and teach painting; Kelly knew the fundamentals of cooking an entire meal; Keisha would physically defend herself against males or females; Bernard is a great writer and Justice is an avid reader; Johnathon likely has an eidetic memory, and Kwesi was extremely nurturing with children. When they were free to creatively express themselves, I was privileged to see their complexity beyond the label "displaced youth."

"Under Palm Trees:" Being Present Natural Settings like the Outdoor Activity Center

The second week of camp we also visited the Outdoor Activity Center (OAC), which is an environmental education facility located in a historically black neighborhood. Some of the participants had been hiking recently, but none of them had been hiking in a predominately black neighborhood. In fact, even though many of them grew up with five

miles of the center, they had never visited or even heard of it. I chose to put them in natural settings, either natural to the literacy activity and/or in nature, for three reasons. One, I wanted to observe their engagement when the classroom setting was natural for activity. Two, I wanted know how environmentally literate and comfortable they were being “in nature.” Three, I wanted them to see their community from a radically different perspective.

In Camp Carrot Seed we were privileged to visit and to have an onsite garden for gardening class, an onsite kitchen for cooking class, local stores for shopping activities, a local creek where we learned about water, and a local nature preserve for outdoor education. Taking advantage of local resources permitted the participants to develop literacies via engagement in natural settings. For example, one participant learned about rhizomes by weeding a raised bed in the garden. He learned about this type of root within the context of trying to remove the weed from the root. Another participant found a vacuum cleaner in the creek when they were removing trash from Procter Creek. When he reported on his discovery at the end of the camp he stressed the need to keep the creek clean because it is a source of our drinking water.

When we visited the OAC the group was generally quiet and attentive when we were hiking in the woods, whereas they had been talking loudly inside the OAC facility. The group had a tendency to talk loud in the COR classroom, inside the van, and when we were outside in spaces where they were comfortable. During the hike our guide asked the group to close their eyes and describe what they heard. By doing this he shifted their attention away from him to center the sounds of an airplane, an animal, and the wind blowing in the trees. Being in an unfamiliar space, I believe, encouraged them to be

present. Whether they were watching out for bugs and animals; trying not to trip over tree roots; or trying not to get left or lost; they seemed more attentive.

Justice demonstrated a range of emotions once we entered the woods for our guided hiking tour. She asked about the trust fall platform and our guide explained that you fall back and let your partners catch you. Kelly, Whitney, and Justice responded in sync, “oh naw,” and after the guide explained that you develop trust Justice responded “trust nobody.” Later the guide described how creeper vines “cover the surface area so that trees cannot put out their leaves and the vines get more sunlight than the trees and that’s how they die” and Justice’s response was “oh so they selfish... kinda like people.” During the hike she expressed fear of being left behind, being touched by bugs, and walking too far into the woods. But Justice engaged our guide in discussions about the trees, invasive species, and realized through their conversation that she knew relative lived near the hiking trail. Her comments foreshadowed some of the stories she was holding in her “buried zones” such as the death of her father and a male cousin, which she shared with the crew over the course of the camp. On the last day of camp the entire crew helped her look for her father’s and cousins’ grave in a local cemetery we had passed each time we visited the OAC. She learned trust and witnessed unselfish behavior through our shared experiences.

“See Her Image in the River... [to] Know:” Educators and Historical Context

When I organized the program I deliberately recruited black males and black females to function as guides for the pedagogic projects. The gardening, cooking, and shopping project guides included white women, black men, black women, and one white

male. Recognizing that the environmental movement and the community gardens movement are often identified as “white,” I wanted to be sure that the participants could see themselves in their guides and volunteers. All of the environmental educators that the CCS crew experienced were black men and black women with college degrees and/or experience in environmental science. This matters because there is a dearth of black students studying environmental science in college, yet the participants in CCS would not know this based upon their experience.

The volunteers I recruited and worked with to conduct Camp Carrot Seed reflected diversity in terms of age, race, sex, gender expression, sexuality, skin color, body sizes, hair textures, styles, and talents. The major commonality among them was their commitment to donating their time and talents to develop youth literacies, especially for youth of color. Because of the diversity of volunteers my crew experienced dark-skin, brown-skin, light-skin, and white-skin men and women who disrupted stereotypes about how environmentalists, gardeners, artists, dancers, actresses, yoga teachers, doctoral researchers, recording engineers, bug enthusiasts, and cooks look. The tour guides for our garden tour at the Edgewood Community Garden were two black males who had recently graduated high school. The second wave of garden volunteers at City of Refuge included an older black woman, and two college students, one black woman and one white male. A dark skin black woman, whose government job was as a food inspector conducted, a guided meditation convincing them to read affirmations aloud for nearly half an hour. Their weekly cooking guides were a black male labor activist and a white female doctoral student.

Voluntown Peace Trust, A Center for Social Change and Sustainable Living, in Connecticut describes popular education as...

a learning process that begins with the standpoint of the oppressed; is inclusive; is accessible to people of all education levels; addresses issues people face in their communities; supports people moving towards action/nonviolent social change; is based on the experiences of those participating in the learning; integrates non-traditional methods of learning (Voluntown Peace Trust 2012).

The power of popular education is that the educator has passion for the participants as well as the subject matter; making sure the subject matter is accessible for all of the participants. A female environmental activist captured my crew's attention by asking them to solve mysteries about materials they collected in a nature preserve. She also told them stories about historical uses of the space. She encouraged them to be both present to their natural surroundings and to connect with a distant past. Also, her body in the wooded space disrupted a variety of representations in that she was a black woman who was not afraid to be in the woods; in fact she was extremely comfortable. She was a big woman who was very active with a variety of outdoor activities, and she was enthusiastic about bugs and science in general.

This outdoor education expert with West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) modeled "non-traditional methods of learning" during our visit to the Cascade Nature Preserve in late July. A middle-aged woman dressed in hiking gear, a cap and sneakers took our group on a trek through the woods starting with an old Springhouse and ending at an outdoor classroom. "I can just see them now driving up you know coming to spend

the day here to have a picnic...get the fresh water” she said describing early 20th century usage of the springhouse. At the outdoor classroom we observed her collection of bugs and a piece of wood Bernard collected from a decomposing tree. She explained that in a preserve when a tree dies the caretakers do not cut them down, they let them “naturally go back.” Johnathon and Whitney ate fruit from their lunches while she discussed how “things come and eat off of [the tree].” Even though Whitney, Johnathon, and Kelly insisted on giving her fake names and hometowns as a joke their behavior did not deter her engagement with them. She called them by the names they selected for themselves and related her comments to their hometown, Alaska.

Justice asked her about “bugs that come in a glass” that they use in school, explaining, “I used to have a lot of them.” She then excitedly whispered to the camera “I was stealing them from the school.” Justice, the same teenage girl who was tentative about being in the woods the second week of camp, was excited to share her story about the bugs she “collected” from school with our guide, the self-named “buglady.”

Race and gender consciousness is also important when recruiting educators because, in my experience, black educators are usually more likely to provide relevant political and historical context when they are teaching black audiences. An example of this is a story told to us by another WAWA guide. During an orientation discussion before a creek clean up activity at Procter Creek he discussed wastewater treatment and environmental racism, explaining that the playing field we were standing next to had been covered in raw sewage because manholes had erupted during storm events in west Atlanta. Then he told us that black children from the surrounding neighborhood had been playing soccer and football on the field without knowing it was soaked with raw sewage.

He concluded by telling us that these and other environmental justice issues led to the creation of the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, which is maintained by predominately black staff and volunteers. Counterstories like this one provide context for why children either choose not or are instructed not to play at local parks and playgrounds.

Another historical narrative he shared with us during our hike at the OAC was about a 146-year old tree named Grandfather Beech. He said an arborist's determination of the tree's age indicated that the beech tree had been living since indigenous peoples lived in the area. He also explained that it marked where slaves from local plantations likely gathered on Sundays and that it was located in an area where black people travelled to watch Atlanta Black Crackers Negro League baseball games during segregation. Embodied epistemological exchange in the community activities pedagogic project highlights the importance of safe spaces for creative expression, developing literacies in natural settings, seeing yourself in your teachers, and seeing yourself in political and historical contexts.

"Precious Opportunities:" A Reflection on Critical Race Feminist Praxis

Camp Carrot Seed is an example of literacy for sociopolitical change because it is at its core a political pedagogic project. Participants of Camp Carrot Seed were not required to have perfect behavior or speech to participate. The camp was free for all of the participants and the fact that they were "displaced" was not a central aspect of the research. They were never threatened with being expelled from camp. They did not need prior literacies to participate. No one promoted changing or "fixing" their bodies. Their success or failure was not measured by their body size or their ability to excel in the

projects. Their parents were not devalued as authority figures, in fact Johnathon and Whitney's mother indicated that the camp gave them "peace of mind" when she had to be away from City of Refuge. A camera crew did not record their every movement nor their visits with their families. Their images and stories have not been mass distributed for public consumption within an official story about "displaced youth," "poor black youth," or "urban gardening."

Unlike Wellspring Academy of *Too Fat For Fifteen*, Camp Carrot Seed, which was conducted the summer before the reality television show aired on Style Network, was conducted to investigate myths that youth are bad decision-makers regarding food. Whereas Wellspring at \$26K per semester is an exclusive education and weight-loss product for youth categorized as "overweight" and "obese." Camp Carrot Seed was a free literacy program for teenagers that provided support for parents, particularly mothers, who were residents at or around City of Refuge. Wellspring staff promoted the "Wellspring Way," a pedagogy for becoming a weight-controller to gain access to communication privileges with their family and friends. Camp Carrot Seed promoted environmental literacy, food literacy, creative expression, and community engagement, a pedagogy for social change promoting positive nurturing of self, family, and community.

Unlike the Daisybeck production team, we did not use cameras for surveillance or to catch youth doing something "off program," to borrow from Wellspring language. They aired video footage of Emily eating Rice Krispy Treats in "secret," Scotty deceiving his mother about eating "on program" at a China Buffet, and implicated Terinna in the theft of snacks from the school pantry "off camera." From day one the cameras were circulated throughout the crew, therefore the cameraperson can be identified by their

voice and the “reality” images were determined by what they considered interesting in the moment. That meant the video may reflect someone walking with the camera in his or her hand recording the ground. It also means the participants were free to use the camera to record whatever activities they wanted including themselves singing, rhyming, interviewing one another, fighting, or cursing when I was not present.

Earlier I discussed an excerpt of a discussion I heard for the first time when I transcribed the video. Initially I was listening and not watching the video to transcribe it and I took the brief conversation about someone being homeless and broke completely out of context. I assumed the aggressor was challenging another participant in the camp because he had been known to create tense situations within the group. I also assumed that my crew was laughing at his aggressive behavior towards another member of the crew. When I viewed the video I was surprised to learn he was talking to a cricket in his hand.

This conversation about a cricket is illuminating when situated alongside a story told by Toni Morrison during her Pulitzer prize lecture in 1993. In the story she describes a group of youth asking an old black woman who is blind whether a bird in their hand is alive or dead. Morrison focuses on this critical communicative moment, initially telling the story from the perspective of the adult, who believes the youth to be playing a ruthless trick on her because she is blind.

Morrison explains that she chooses to read the bird as symbolic for language “and the woman as a practiced writer.” Rather than respond to the query of whether the bird is alive or dead the adult masterfully shifts the weight of the moment back to the questioning youth saying, “I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive,

but what I do know is that it is in your hands.” Morrison proceeds to unpack the women’s response explaining that not only did she shift the grounds upon which the conversation occurred, but also managed in that statement to hold the youth solely responsible for their potential past deeds, present misdeeds, and/or future misdoings in regards to the life of the bird. Morrison explains...

She believes that if the bird in the hands of her visitors is dead the custodians are responsible for the corpse. For her a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance.

I too choose to isolate this moment where youth are holding a cricket in their hand; reading the cricket as symbolic of “marginalized bodies.” All of the participants in the discussion were, in fact, residents at Eden Village, the women’s shelter. In the “cricket in the hand” situation my access to the experience was mediated via the camera. This offline conversation serves as a critical moment because: it demonstrates gross differences in youth speech outside of an adult’s presence; it reveals near indifference to disembodied surveillance, using the recording device simply to document their experience with the cricket; and the language “poison,” “homeless,” “broke,” and “kilt” presents a small window of some feelings one, possibly more, of the participants were holding about displaced people and themselves for being displaced with their mothers.

In a typical Morrisonian move, she smoothly shifts to the viewpoint of youth. She suggests that their inquiry might have originated from a sincere interest in the woman's knowledge and experience; they may come to her genuinely seeking guidance. Morrison says from the viewpoint of the youth,

We have no bird in our hands, living or dead. We have only you and our important question....

Why didn't you reach out, touch us with your soft fingers, delay the sound bite, the lesson, until you knew who we were? ...

You trivialize us and trivialize the bird that is not in our hands. Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong? You are an adult....

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place.

(Nobel Prize 1993)

Since I was not present I cannot know whether the cricket survived the experience in their hands. I do, however, know that when the same male aggressor did in fact instigate a fight with Keisha by suggesting that she too was displaced because she was living with a peer's family, I had to intervene at multiple levels. I removed him from the group space and as I walked him to Eden Village through a group of women and mothers I shouted out to them that he "does not respect women and does not respect mothers." I explained to him that his actions dictated this belief. His mother's response was to send him to stay with a friend off-site. She could have been expelled from the shelter because

of his behavior so the stakes were high. I spent hours convincing her to bring him back and even more time begging City of Refuge authorities to allow him back into the camp. Recognizing that he was used to being suspended, expelled, removed, and displaced, I insisted to everyone, including some other participants, that it was important for him to complete the camp with us.

His repeated behavior spoke volumes and for many the meaning they took from it was that he did not deserve to participate in public schools or my camp. What I learned from *being with* (Brown 2009) him was that he needed connection and attention, but that he could not ask for it via the word. Knowing I had never experienced the insecurity and instability that any of them were living, I did not measure the participants' behavior as a determinant for their participation in the camp. By insisting that his mother bring him back, promising her that I could handle having him, that I would care for him, and that I would protect others from him, if necessary, I gained another opportunity to explore his "reading of the world" beyond my interest in his food decision-making.

The same teenage male who was nearly removed was both an asset and my biggest challenge. Inadvertently he was the one who posed the question, what are you going to do about this cricket in my hand, to a disembodied me. My commitment to critical race feminist praxis led me to "reach out" and "touch [him] until I "knew who [he was]." Believing that as long as I kept him within the fold the cricket is more likely to survive. At the end of her speech, after youth side of the story was stated to the black woman, Morrison closes with her response to them...

"Finally," she says, "I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together."

The most critical part of participatory action research requires both the researcher and participants to participate; adults to reject exclusivity in favor of purpose, and willingness, on the part of adults, to be present and to listen and to read young people's actions until we both "can speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures."

Regardless of the numerous crises facing black women and girls, I agree with Deborah McDowell that our recovery is not now and has never been a central project of commercial mass media. Tiffany King, Tanisha Mitchell, Terinna Cypress, and Miranda Nichols stories were presented within the "official story" of the childhood obesity epidemic. These real black girls were made visible in news segments, talk shows, and reality television programs because of their body size, yet the complexity of their stories were situated in the background of the narrative. Instead of much needed social and political discussions about black girl's needing their father's, inadequate disability services and healthcare system, poverty, and widespread bullying in schools and communities across the country the discourse is limited to a consumerist framework of appropriate body types and lifestyles.

Rather than listening to the needs and concerns expressed by teenagers ranging from abuse, neglect, poverty, health challenges, and lack of access to engaging activities afterschool. Adults—academics, health care providers, youth service providers, scientists, government entities, and media outlets—consistently determine youth

problems and solutions without knowing or having youth input. When six-year-old LaNaiyah Bailey cried out on CNN about constantly being bullied at school, a few months later Children's Hospital of Atlanta launched an outdoor ad campaign putting fat kids on billboards, bus shelters, and on buses throughout Atlanta.

In the last two decades rates of extreme poverty have increased significantly. Simultaneously corporate bodies, like Comcast, have grown fat from property and media ownership. Within a pedagogy of mass consumption corporate obesity does not get scrutinized or penalized in the criminal justice system or commercial mass media in same the manner that youth, particularly girls of color who are obese, are put on display nationwide. Black girls may be statistically shown to have the highest prevalence of obesity of all youth in the nation, but like Precious Jones, for many youth obesity is the least of their concerns. A pedagogy for social change that centers recovery and literacy as central projects and embodied epistemological exchange as ethnographic practice provides *precious opportunities* for youth and adults to become literate enough to “see [each other] without pictures.”

The final activity of Camp Carrot Seed was a promised trip to find a local waterfall. We were all together under the protective canopy of large trees. We could see our images in the shallow water. And in this precious moment I knew how *The Carrot Seed* kid felt wheeling his carrot home.

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