

Supersizing America: Fatness and Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties

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Supersize, supersize, the American way
Going down, going down
All day, every day
Supersize, supersize, the American way
Getting fat, getting broke
Either way you're gonna pay.

(Theme song from *Super Size Me*, performed by Toothpick)

AT THE 2004 SUMMIT ON OBESITY, SPONSORED BY TIME AND ABC NEWS, US Surgeon General Richard Carmona made the following observation: "As we look to the future and where childhood obesity will be in 20 years . . . it is every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today. It is the threat from within."¹ Although Carmona's analogy may seem hyperbolic, it nonetheless suggests that similar anxieties underlie both the "war on obesity" and the "war on terrorism." The film *Super Size Me*, also released in 2004, provides a particularly interesting articulation of these anxieties, which revolve around American expansion and American vulnerability in a post-9/11 world. *Super Size Me* follows filmmaker Morgan Spurlock's month-long experiment in fast food consumption and charts the gradual deterioration of his physical health. Made for US\$60,000, the film brought in US\$11 million at the domestic box office, making it one of the highest grossing documentaries in US history. Along with the requisite DVD release, the film has also spawned a book by Spurlock, two TV series, and a counterdocumentary called *Downsize Me*.

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Nominated for a Best Documentary Feature Oscar, the film enjoyed considerable critical acclaim in the popular press, and Spurlock himself has become something of a celebrity. The film's financial and critical success suggests that it has tapped into cultural anxieties pervasive in post-9/11 America, manifested in America's "moral panic" over fatness (Campos xxiv).

According to Hillel Schwartz's work on the history of dieting, declarations that the United States suffers from an "obesity epidemic" have recurred regularly since at least the early 1920s (159). Historically, fat has served as a flashpoint during times of national emergency or social crisis, providing Americans with a coded way of talking about difficult and confusing issues.² Unease about fat frequently serves as a proxy for unease about changing gender roles, sexual mores, race relations, and class differences. Obsession with body size has also provided an outlet for worries about overconsumption amid plenty (Schwartz 327). Fast food in particular evokes the stressful, hurried lives typical of late capitalist society and the concerns about safety that arise from industrialized food production and distribution (Meneley 34–35). *Super Size Me* fits many of these historical patterns, but in a way that especially resonates with post-9/11 America. Although the film is certainly not the only manifestation of contemporary American culture's preoccupation with fat, it does provide a particularly clear and representative example of how fatness becomes a site for dealing with post-9/11 cultural anxieties.

Super Size Me attempts to resolve these anxieties by focusing on changes to an individual body. In this sense, it has something in common with the makeover genre of Hollywood films (and more recently, reality TV shows). According to Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, makeover films promise control and empowerment through physical transformation, an especially appealing notion in "times of political, economic, or cultural confusion" (68). Spurlock's film offers what might be deemed a "reverse makeover." Far from becoming more svelte, more conventionally attractive, and healthier over the course of the film, Spurlock's body transforms in the opposite direction. He ends up a fatter, sicker version of his previous self. *Super Size Me* thus depicts a "redemptive fall" away from the ideal, in which excessive consumption by a straight white male body appears as a salvific act, a form of heroic sacrifice for the good of the nation. By suffering for our sins, Spurlock shows us the way to proper citizenship, encapsulated in hypervigilance about our unruly bodies.

Laura Kipnis argues that fat phobia in dominant US culture is motivated, in part, by fears about insatiability: “a fat person is [seen as] a one-body smash-and-grab riot: like that anarchic rebellious moment when social control fails and you take what you want, when you want it” (104). Kipnis’ formulation resonates with two fears that often surface in public discourse about the war on terrorism: America’s arrogant bullying, on the one hand, and the total breakdown of social order, on the other. In *Super Size Me*, fatness represents both of these fears. First, fat bodies manifest the US’s insatiable greed for land, resources, and conquest. Fatness stands for the destructive ways in which America throws its weight around, running roughshod over the rest of the global community. In Paul Campos’ words, the US’s current obsession with weight “has become a convenient way of avoiding a more direct engagement with any number of issues regarding America’s size, excessiveness, and out-of-control consumption,” especially “that we are threatening to consume the entire planet” (234).

The film’s reliance on antifat rhetoric, however, undermines this moderately progressive critique. Drawing on moralistic antibody discourses makes fatness a scapegoat for America’s perceived vulnerability. Imagined as lazy and hedonistic, fat people signify both the physical incompetence and the moral turpitude that weaken America. They jeopardize the nation’s vigor, security, and dominance at a time when America is under attack from internal and external subversion.³ External threats to the nation are often conflated with domestic threats to straight white masculinity, as seen in Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson’s claim that civil libertarians, progressives, queers, and feminists were partly responsible for 9/11. In *Super Size Me*, fatness signifies a crisis for the straight white male body, supposedly the guarantor of American strength and security. To become fat is to become contaminated with femininity, disability, impotence, darkness, and poverty. The film thus plays on fears about the decline of the United States at a time when it is engaged in a “clash of civilizations” and a metaphysical struggle between good and evil.

The twin anxieties at the heart of *Super Size Me* ultimately feed into each other: we expand to fight off our sense of vulnerability, which just ends up making us more vulnerable. The film offers reduction and restriction as a way out of this dilemma. The directive to “consume less” assuages fears about the expansion caused by consumer capitalism, while the directive to “master the body” assuages fears about the

vulnerability caused by moral decline and the weakening of white masculinity. The desire for bodily transcendence underlies both directives. In her book on violence and mourning in the aftermath of 9/11, Judith Butler argues that “loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20). Bodily transcendence, represented in antifat discourses by the discipline of diet and exercise, promises that we can control our destructive appetites and ward off the vulnerability that comes with having a body. The desire for disembodiment links two seemingly disparate ideologies that are particularly central in post-9/11 American public culture: neoliberalism (with its focus on scientific expertise, rationalized governance, and a self-monitoring citizenry) and right-wing Christianity (with its focus on salvation, damnation, and the metaphysical struggle between good and evil). By bringing these two strands together around “the war on obesity,” *Super Size Me* confounds a more radical critique of American expansion; instead, the film reproduces moralistic notions of health, safety, and normalcy.

Eating the World: Anxieties About American Expansion

Two of the most common reactions to the film articulate seemingly incommensurate feelings: cries of “I’m never eating fast food again!” exist alongside confessions that watching the film made some viewers “want to run out and eat a burger.”⁴ Such comments suggest contradictory feelings about the surplus of goods made available by late capitalism. We revel in the plentitude capitalism makes possible, but we also fear its negative consequences. A scene where Spurlock consumes his first “supersized” meal illustrates this unease particularly well. Sitting in his car after exiting a McDonald’s drive-through, he pulls “supersized” fries out of the bag and holds them up to the camera to emphasize the huge portion. Explaining that the burger “has more calories than anything,” he dubs it “a little bit of heaven” before tucking into it with gusto. As he eats, it becomes progressively more difficult for him to finish the food. In language reminiscent of a drug overdose, he describes the physical effects of the experience as the “McStomachache,” the “McSweats,” and the “McTwitches,” concluding “I feel a bit McCrazy.” The technique of periodically blacking out the

screen and reporting how much time has elapsed heightens the scene's nauseating effect. After twenty-two minutes of this increasingly tortuous meal, Spurlock's body finally rebels, causing him to vomit out the car's window. The camera peers out the window to show us the regurgitated remains of the food, a shot which elicited loud groans from my fellow audience members. Just as we watch his pleasure turn into pain, so our fascination turns into revulsion.

A reviewer from *Slate* sees Spurlock's binge-purge scene as peculiarly American: "this is the American dream, isn't it? To sit in your oversized car (where you don't have to make eye contact with anyone) and eat an oversized meal of crap" (Edelstein). Here consumer indulgence represents the telos of American visions of the good life, but it must be practiced in secret because secretly we are ashamed and afraid of it. By combining close-ups of food, Spurlock's uninhibited eating, and physical illness, this scene simultaneously evokes the fantasy and the nightmare of limitless consumption. The close-up shots of food, repeated obsessively throughout the film, recall what Rosalind Coward has termed "food pornography," a type of image that speaks to our desire for the forbidden (qtd. in Willson 159). Margaret Willson argues that customers of coffee cafes see their daily trips as an "indulgence" that "could be permitted in small doses, thereby limiting its effects and simultaneously allowing them to think of other spaces and activities as 'good,' through which they could recover so they could be 'bad' again" (164). Witnessing Spurlock's indulgence in fast food lets us experience the forbidden in a similar way. By giving us the opportunity both to relish and to scorn Spurlock's hyperconsumption, the film allows us to be both "bad" and "good" vicariously.

The notion that being "good" makes up for being "bad" echoes Susan Bordo's contention that dominant US culture under late capitalism has normalized bulimic patterns. Late capitalism requires not only hyperconsumption, but also an appropriate work ethic to offset it. "The extreme development of the hunger for unrestrained consumption" exists "in unstable tension alongside the requirement that we sober up, 'clean up our act,' get back in firm control on Monday mornings" (Bordo 201). By promising to reconcile these competing demands, bulimia emerges as the model of perfect citizenship in late capitalist society (LeBesco 56). Although reminiscent of clinical bulimia, Spurlock's vomiting demonstrates the ill effects of hyperconsumption more than a righteous desire to "get rid of" or "make up

for” hyperconsumption. He does not even use exercise as a means of purging, refusing to do more than a minimal amount of physical activity during his experiment. Rather than having the seemingly well-managed body of the bulimic, then, Spurlock’s (fattening) body does not “register as a fully productive body” (LeBesco 55). Fatness appears as a failure of citizenship, brought about by an imbalance between consumption and work.

Like the binge-purge scene, several other scenes in *Super Size Me* illustrate what happens when the American Dream becomes an American Nightmare. For instance, during the film’s opening sequence, an American flag lingers on the screen while Spurlock declares, “everything’s bigger in America.” He then lists the specifics: cars (accompanied by a shot of an SUV limousine), houses (a huge mansion), companies (a Wal-Mart Supercenter), food (the world’s biggest cookie), and—the coup de grâce—people (a fat woman at the beach). Statistics showing that the United States is now “the fattest nation in the world” follow this litany, complete with a color-coded map illustrating the increasing incidence of obesity in each state. This trajectory threatens to end in death, both for individual citizens and for the nation as a whole. The deadly consequences of hyperconsumption appear later in the film, during an interview with the son of one of the founders of Baskin-Robbins. He describes growing up surrounded by ice cream, eating ice cream for breakfast, swimming in an ice-cream-cone-shaped pool in his backyard, and having a commercial freezer stocked with multiple flavors of ice cream in his home. His father Irv Robbins developed diabetes, and his uncle Burt Baskin died young of heart disease. He attributes their conditions to fatness, which the film symbolically links to the decadent consumption of extreme affluence.

In some ways, Baskin-Robbins represents the archetypal American success story; as Robbins’ son notes, his father “manufactured and sold more ice cream than anyone else on the planet” during his lifetime. By linking such an American and capitalist triumph to disease and death, however, this interview emphasizes the dark side of the American Dream. Here fatness stands for the fatal consequence of greed, the quintessential American characteristic that created national prosperity but now jeopardizes the nation’s very existence. The not-so-subtle message: although late capitalism has blessed us with abundant goods and convenient services, it has also made it possible for us to consume without limits, a process that heralds our destruction.

That said, the film does not frown on capitalism per se, but on the particular form that capitalism has taken in late-twentieth century America. The film's opening sequence, for instance, presents a quotation from Ray Kroc, the founder of the McDonald's franchise: "Look after the customer, and the business will take care of itself." The evocation of Kroc reflects a nostalgic longing for the entrepreneurs of an imagined "Golden Age" before capitalism gave rise to huge corporations, a nostalgia repeated in the film's laudatory attitude toward local food suppliers and restaurants. *Super Size Me* thus indicts capitalism gone too far, with transnational corporations epitomizing the corruption of the American Dream. Through their relentless drive to multiply and replicate, large corporations are taking over, homogenizing our culture, and making us fat. In the words of one interviewee, America "has been franchised out," creating a monotonous landscape in which Kmart, Wal-Mart, and McDonald's repeat on an endless loop throughout the country. Such "McDonaldization" threatens to spill over from the domestic scene into the international scene. On one of the DVD extras, Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, notes the eeriness of McDonald's slogan "one taste worldwide," saying "it's like, you know, 'seig heil.'" Schlosser's comment bestows a darker meaning on an earlier image from the film, in which golden arches pop up all over the globe and then turn into dollar signs. Here McDonald's exemplifies America's brand of imperialistic (bordering on fascistic) capitalism. Like its fat citizens, the United States risks "violating territorial limits" and using up "too much room [and] too many resources" (Kipnis 102). *Super Size Me's* tale of consumer capitalism run amok thus reiterates a common progressive stance on American imperialism: the United States uses its military and economic might to advance its own interests at the expense of other people and even its own democratic values, a pattern that contributes to the "blowback" of terrorism (Johnson).

Fat and Lazy: Anxieties About American Vulnerability

Like theories about "blowback," *Super Size Me* suggests that the flipside of American expansion is American vulnerability. In other words, the more we invest in unfettered capitalism, which supposedly makes us the most powerful nation in the world, the weaker we become. Antifat

rhetoric is central to this logic, insofar as fatness represents both the excesses of late capitalism and the vulnerabilities that come along with it. With its connotations of softness, laziness, and selfish indulgence, fatness evokes qualities antithetical to the hardness, readiness, and sacrifice supposedly necessary for securing the nation's predominance in a post-9/11 world. The film depicts fat people as failed citizens by repeating an image that has become highly conventional in mainstream media accounts of the "obesity crisis," namely a fat person's body shot from the neck down. Under the guise of "protecting" the individual fat person's identity, the headless shot replicates the very stigma that it supposedly deflects. By rendering fat people faceless, this type of image turns them into dehumanized objects of disgust and ridicule, devoid of the agency necessary for full citizenship.

The anonymity of these shots also suggests that the fate of fatness could befall anyone—fatness is catching if you do not take the appropriate steps to inoculate yourself against it. If fatness is catching, people whose privilege relies on distance from the body risk picking up the stigma of the "overembodied" (Berlant 195). In the words of Richard Klein, ridicule directed at fat people signifies a "compromise between the fear that we may be just like pigs and the fleeting assurance that we aren't" (205). Similarly, the film plays on apprehensions about the permeability of social boundaries, particularly those separating straight white masculinity from its various others.⁵ Spurlock's white male body begins the film as a paragon of fitness according to the medical establishment. We watch doctors measure, test, and quantify his body, describing his health as "normal," "perfect," and "excellent." The deterioration of his body from "perfection" to "disease" over the course of the film symbolizes a decline in status, demonstrating fat's metaphoric power as a contaminating agent. With its associations of femininity, queerness, disability, working class status, and racial difference, fatness stands as a "specter of downward mobility" (LeBesco 56).

For instance, *Super Size Me* deals with class-based anxieties primarily through an opposition between fast food/fatness/sickness and organic food/thinness/health. The film contrasts the artificiality of processed fast food with the naturalness of fresh organic food (Lupton 89–92). Under this logic, fat people's eating habits result in "dirty bodies heavily poisoned by meat and denatured products," whereas thin people have "light [pure, clean] bodies" (Ossipow 139). Roberta Seid notes

that “as prepared and refined foods became cheaper and more available, the affluent classes began to want unprocessed foods, which had formerly been associated with pre-industrial peasants” (200). Cheap fast food thus gets linked to lower class vulgarity, irresponsibility, and closeness to the body, while more expensive, rare organic food gets linked to affluence, bodily transcendence, and moral righteousness. In fact, during the first episode of Spurlock’s TV show *30 Days*, his girlfriend Alex Jamieson points out that they will not be able to afford their usual vegan dishes once they embark on a month-long challenge to subsist on minimum wage.⁶ Her comment reveals the displacement by which “responsibility for overconsumption and gluttony” gets assigned to “the social class by far least culpable of overconsuming” (Kipnis 101). Indeed, fears about losing self-control amid abundance seem particularly middle/upper class, since late capitalism’s plentiful goods and services are not equally available to everyone.

Similarly, the film’s fat phobia is arguably rooted in Eurocentric notions of beauty, health, and morality.⁷ For instance, Joan Gross argues that fatness among male rappers in hip-hop culture symbolizes a form of hypermaleness, bestowing respect and control (67). *Super Size Me*, in contrast, portrays fatness as a feminizing force that undermines the physical superiority of the male body. We get numerous close-up shots of Spurlock’s softening body, exposed during his doctor’s appointments. He pokes at his flabby stomach and chest, even showing us that he is developing “breasts.” The sight of a male body, which is supposed to be “contained, dry and controlled,” turning into “the soft, viscous body of a woman” portends a breakdown between “inside” and “outside” (Petersen and Lupton 81). The symbolic feminizing and darkening of Spurlock’s body serves as a metonym for the dissolution of the clear, rigid borders protecting the nation from external violation. In particular, it conjures the threat to white dominance from the influx of racial and ethnic others. “The hardness, resistance, and tightness of the male body” take on particular importance at times of war, since it guarantees the nation’s impenetrability and triumph over its (non-white) enemies (Petersen and Lupton 81).

Sexual impotence contributes to the further decline of Spurlock’s masculinity. Jamieson informs us that, since Spurlock is “not as energetic during sex” as he used to be and is “having a hard time getting it up,” she now “has to be on top.” This confession is paired with a shot of Spurlock lying on a bed, yawning, his gut hanging out. The film’s

conclusion includes a diagram of the negative physical changes that Spurlock's body has undergone; the diagram shows a circle drawn around his penis, with an arrow pointing downward to the word "worthless." The film thus equates the fat male body with emasculation and with queer sexuality in its broadest sense, namely the inability to practice the "proper" form of heterosexuality that places the man on top.

Anxieties about the feminization of (white, middle-class) men parallel anxieties about (white, middle-class) women's abandonment of domesticity, seen most obviously in the film's nostalgia for home cooking. In the film's opening minutes, Spurlock shows us several photographs of his mother as a happy homemaker; smiling and wearing an apron, she works diligently in the kitchen, the very picture of idealized white, middle-class domesticity. A photograph of Spurlock and his siblings as thin children contrasts with the numerous images of fat children that appear throughout the film. This sequence thus illustrates the "web of regulation and normalization around the family," by which social institutions place the feeding (i.e., civilizing) of children at the heart of motherhood (Lupton 41). Here being a good mother means ensuring that one's children stay thin. In this way, mothers fulfill their maternal obligation to propel their children "from the creature of pure instinct and uncontrolled wildness of infancy into the civility and self-regulation of adulthood" (Lupton 39). Obesity, in contrast, represents the detrimental effects of women's "liberation," which harms children's health and their ability to become good citizens. By claiming that mothers like Spurlock's have become rarer and rarer, this sequence evokes a nostalgic longing for a time when women stayed in their place and devoted themselves to their families.

Losing Weight for America: Fatness and Citizenship

To better understand the solution that *Super Size Me* poses to the twin problems of American expansion and American vulnerability, we can consider the differences between the film and Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation*, which Spurlock cites as one of his inspirations. Although Schlosser's book does identify obesity as one of fast food's negative consequences, its discussion of body size takes up a relatively minor four pages out of 270. The rest of *Fast Food Nation* highlights the environmental and labor costs of the fast food industry's practices,

denouncing America's blind faith in industrialization and the free market (269). In contrast, *Super Size Me* focuses on fatness as the worst of fast food's sins. Because the book and the film diagnose the problem in different ways, they end up calling for different sorts of responses. *Fast Food Nation* touts political activism, such as antisweatshop work, governmental regulation, and consumer boycotts. *Super Size Me* calls on McDonald's to make some changes to its menu but ultimately concludes that—since “businesses just do what businesses do”—real change must come from consumers who refuse to eat there and who take personal responsibility for their body size. As Subway spokesman Jared Fogle tells a teenage girl struggling with taunts about her weight, “the world is not going to change, you have to change.”

The film's emphasis on individual bodily discipline echoes the logic of what has been called “the new public health.” According to Alan Petersen and Deborah Lupton, public health represents one of the primary ways in which modern liberal democracies govern their citizens. Public health heralds “the recent emergence of the concept of the entrepreneurial self; that is, the self who is expected to live life in a prudent, calculating way, and to be ever-vigilant of risks” (xiii). This self underlies a neoliberal vision of citizenship, which balances the discourse of rights with a discourse of duties to facilitate “governing at a distance” (xiii). *Super Size Me* invokes the entrepreneurial self by offering reduction and restriction as the solution to America's post-9/11 problems. The film implicitly calls on audiences to lose weight “for America,” as a way of ensuring that they deserve the rights given them as US citizens. By not demanding too many resources and by striving to make their bodies hard, strong, and invulnerable, they help the nation avoid the twin risks of expansion and vulnerability.

The film's vision of good citizenship draws not just on neoliberalism, but also on a quasi-Christian ideology. Antifat discourses in the United States have their roots in Puritanism, with its emphasis on spiritual transcendence through hard work and denial of the body. Being overwhelmed by bodily desires threatens to drag us from the sacred into the profane. This logic equates fat with pollution and sin, a fall away from purity and godliness (LeBesco 25; Lupton 137–38). Perceived as a peculiarly American affliction, fatness interferes with the nation's divine mission. In contrast, good citizens embody the enterprising spirit that has made America the shining city on the hill, avoiding the sloth and decadence that threaten to make America weak

in the face of its enemies. *Super Size Me* thus bridges two seemingly contradictory ideologies (the scientific discourse of neoliberalism and the religious discourse of right-wing Christianity) via appeals to disembodied citizenship. The film connects these two discourses through an appeal to diet culture, through the metaphor of “addiction,” and through antibody moralism.

Consuming to Get Thin: The Paradox of Diet Culture

Campos describes America’s obsession with weight as a form of “chronic restrained living,” exemplified by a diet culture that commands us to “eat less than you want to eat, and don’t eat many of the things you would most like to eat at all” (120). By embarking on what might be called an “anti-diet,” Spulock purports to show the harmful consequences of hyperconsumption and thus to call for the constraint represented by diet culture. Whereas Bordo emphasizes how purging (hard work) makes up for binging (hyperconsumption), dieting attempts to prevent the binge from ever happening in the first place. It proposes that one can consume just a little bit, seeming to provide an antidote to the binge-purge cycle. However, in its perpetual reproduction of unfulfilled desire, diet culture ends up reinforcing the consumer capitalism it appears to repudiate. “As consumers, we must be constantly hungering for ‘more’ . . . Thus, a kind of institutionalized sense of recurrent dissatisfaction is critical to the health and expansion of consumer markets” (Campos 231). Just as consumer capitalism produces the very desires it promises to satiate, diet culture promises a goal that can never be reached, namely a body controlled through the consumption of the right (diet) products.

This paradox shows up in *Super Size Me*’s suggestion that we stop buying fast food, only to start buying local organic food. One of the DVD extras follows Spurlock on a trip to the supermarket, accompanied by a nutrition expert who instructs him on how to shop properly. This sequence exemplifies what Spurlock calls becoming a “conscious consumer,” and it posits moderate consumption as a way to avoid the excesses of hyperconsumption (Havrilesky 1). As Spurlock insists in an interview with *Salon*, “I love a good burger, and for me, a good burger just doesn’t come from a fast food restaurant. I’d rather go to a mom and pop place down on the corner, a little diner that uses

fresh ground beef" (Havrilesky 3). By advocating that Americans turn their backs on transnational corporations in favor of local food suppliers, the film reworks a popular progressive slogan: "think globally, eat locally." Appleton Central Alternative High School embodies this slogan. It procures its lunches from a local cooperative that provides organic, low-fat, low-sugar foods. The film implies that Appleton Central has managed to turn "troubled," "at risk," and "out of control" kids into model citizens by changing their diets.

Helping audiences become "conscious consumers" echoes neoliberal public health strategies. By transmitting expert knowledge to the lay public, such strategies promise to "empower" individuals to make the "right" choices about their health (Petersen and Lupton 12). Public health thus constructs its subjects as rational and autonomous actors, able to "conform voluntarily to the goals of the state and other agencies" (12). It masks how the very notion of "rationality" relies on moralistic exclusions (seen, for instance, in the belief that fat people remain fat because they irrationally refuse to listen to well-meaning advice about their health). Under this logic, thinness becomes a prerequisite for proper (i.e., rational and autonomous) citizenship.

Acting as a good citizen requires not only the "right" (i.e., "rational") modes of consumption, but also the proper work ethic, represented by exercise. The film objects to the No Child Left Behind Act because it has led many schools to cut recess and gym. In the words of the executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, cuts to physical education could leave us with a nation of "fat readers." This disdainful comment adds a new twist to the anti-intellectualism that has undermined critical discussion in US public culture since September 11 (Butler 3). It suggests that intellectualism prevents us from taking decisive action by making us soft, weak, and unprepared to fight the threat of obesity/terrorism. The antidote to this potential vulnerability lies in the promotion of vigorous exercise, exemplified by Madison Junior High School's physical education program. With the help of private donors, Madison has a state-of-the-art gym, and we are treated to shots of children working out on bikes, treadmills, and weight machines. This sequence highlights the production of hard bodies, thereby easing fears about American vulnerability in a post-9/11 world. Images of future citizens participating in "wholesome" physical activity become especially significant at a time of indefinite war. "As in the discourse of war, the process of hardening and

toughening individual bodies acts as a metonym for the toughening of the nation's moral fiber" (Petersen and Lupton 69). Children's physical fitness thus prefigures the nation's future triumph against evil.

Food as a Drug and Fatness as a Disease: The Metaphor of Addiction

Spurlock likens his experience to an "addiction"; as soon as he is done eating a McDonald's meal, he feels a high and then wants more. The addiction metaphor contributes to the film's framing of fatness in medicalized and pathological terms. While *Super Size Me* exhibits skepticism toward corporate authority, it places strong trust in medical authority. Under constant medical surveillance, Spurlock submits himself to various experts who treat his body as a series of parts that either do or do not measure up. Reliance on quantifiable knowledge and observable facts seems to guarantee the objective truth and legitimacy of antifat discourses, while also providing justification for "moral judgments about the worth of individuals and social groups" (Petersen and Lupton 60). Such judgments often have material effects on how people treat their own bodies, as well as on how medical and health care institutions treat them. *Super Size Me* portrays gastric bypass surgery, for instance, as a perfectly reasonable medical cure for the disease of obesity, ignoring the potentially negative side effects that have made it highly controversial within fat acceptance and medical circles. For those wishing to avoid surgery, the film provides another cure for fast food addiction, namely a "detox diet." Spurlock goes on such a diet at the end of the experiment, which helps him lose the twenty-five pounds that he had gained. If fatness is a disease and eating is an addiction, then food becomes a drug, either "a poison to be controlled or a medicine to be dispensed" (Klein 99). In either case, state and medical agencies retain the power to regulate peoples' bodies, and good citizenship requires voluntary submission to and compliance with such regulation.

Purifying the Body: Moralism and Transcendence

If fast food is a poison that makes people fat, the cleansing, pure food of the detox diet is a medicine that makes people thin. Attaching notions

of “cleanliness” and “purity” to food reflects the moralistic dimension of antifat rhetoric and connects the film’s quasi-scientific overtones with its quasi-Christian overtones. Sections titled “The Last Supper,” in which Spurlock eats his final organic meal before the experiment, and “The Last McSupper,” in which he eats his final fast food meal, bookend the film. This framing turns renouncing the products of large corporations and embracing locally grown organics into an issue of sanctimony. The reward for such ascetic virtue lies in a thin body, a pure, light body not unduly hampered by the lusts and desires of the flesh (Lupton 131). By deliberately moving away from this ideal, Spurlock sacrifices his body for the greater good. The film thus positions Spurlock as a Christ figure, albeit with a rather tongue-in-cheek tone. For instance, a painting in the film, done in a kitschy style, literally depicts Spurlock as Jesus, gesturing benevolently to the fast food set in front of him. If in the past “holy anorexics” starved themselves to demonstrate religious piety, Spurlock stuffs himself to demonstrate the metaphysical damnation awaiting a nation that lacks dietary piety.⁸

Spurlock insists on continuing the experiment even though he begins to experience physical pain and his doctors advise him to stop. He thus exhibits the Christ-like suffering and striving toward mastery of the body that underwrite white masculinity (Dyer 17). Like Christ’s death and resurrection, Spurlock’s redemptive fall seems to sacrifice white masculinity only to recenter and revive it as a guarantor of citizenship. Michael Warner argues that, in western liberal democracies, good citizenship requires the ability to self-abstract, that is, to distance oneself from the particularity, subjectivity, and irrationality of the body (239–40). *Super Size Me* repeats this logic, but with a particular focus on thinness. The distinction drawn between Michael Moore and Spurlock in the popular press is instructive in this regard. Described as “more benevolent,” “more personable,” and “less heavy-handed and in your face,” Spurlock allegedly avoids the bias, demagoguery, and “ambush tactics” characteristic of Moore (Gleiberman; Caro; Puig). Such comparisons seem related to perceptions of the filmmakers’ physical fitness, which comes to signify their civic and moral fitness for participation in the public sphere. Often referred to as a “fat slob” by his detractors, Moore loses credibility for his unruly tactics, and his working class persona throws his objectivity into question. Spurlock, in contrast, is well disciplined,

as evidenced by his (low) weight and his (civil) engagement in public discourse.

The contrast between Moore and Spurlock also suggests that thinness has become “the secular equivalent of a state of grace,” while fatness has become the secular equivalent of a fall from grace (Campos 233). As a symbol of illness and weakness, fat represents the flesh’s triumph over the spirit and hence the fat individual’s immorality. The notion of “spirit” operates in a double sense here, designating both “incarnation, being that is in the body but not of it” and “enterprise,” the “get up and go” that underlies western imperialism (Dyer 15). Under this logic, good citizenship has a divine aspect, dependent on distance from and control over the sinful body—and over the bodies of those who have less willpower. Richard Dyer explains how the capacity for “spirit” and “enterprise” has historically been seen as the exclusive province of white Europeans, a notion that has justified their power over nonwhite peoples (30–31). *Super Size Me* transposes this belief onto body size. Despite their greater capacity for self-abstraction and self-control (white) Americans are getting fat and failing to reach their God-given potential. If they fulfill this potential by losing weight, they will display their greater moral authority and hence validate their right to control the world’s resources and people. Thus, *Super Size Me* reinforces the very assumptions that drive the American imperialism it otherwise critiques.

Demonstrating their capacity for self-abstraction requires good Americans not only to lose weight themselves, but to monitor the weight of their fellow citizens. As Kipnis notes, “the unapologetic exposure of fat provokes the most savage forms of policing, with the citizenry transforming itself into a private militia dedicated to squelching the potential insurrection naked fat somehow seems to threaten” (111). By repeatedly putting fat bodies on screen for audiences to rebuke, *Super Size Me* encourages just this sort of vigilance. It thus bears a disturbing resemblance to demands that people report “suspicious” behavior as part of efforts to combat terrorism. In both cases, appeals to safety and moral righteousness justify a disapproving gaze, if not outright harassment, turned on those deemed deviant. Purging fat people from the body politic seems to guarantee the security, divinity, and preeminence of the nation. Politics merge with metaphysics, turning the seemingly secular war against fat into a cosmic war against evil.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of the film, Spurlock willingly subjects his body to a number of mental, emotional, and physical changes. Rather than showing the transformation from fat to fit, as many makeover shows do, he allows his body to go from fit to fat. Such a reversal would normally hold him up for ridicule and censure. The film's epilogue, however, reassures us that he returned to his original weight and health after a considerable amount of hard work. Since his transgression is temporary and contained, it illustrates that thinness is possible for anyone with enough willpower. But it also suggests that becoming fat is much easier than becoming thin, raising fears about contamination and justifying even stronger calls for hypervigilance.

Through his "redemptive fall," Spurlock puts his body on the line for our sins. He gains weight, which the film presents as unhealthy, in the name of promoting health; he embodies the "bad" citizen in the name of revivifying good citizenship. Ultimately, his fall acts not to legitimize the deviant, but to relegitimize the ideal—the bodily transcendence that promises to protect us from our own insatiable desires and from our vulnerability to external threats. Like heterosexuality, masculinity, whiteness, and middle-class status, thinness gets aligned with the "not body," that is, the ideal self not weighed down, hampered, or limited by the body. This ideal self can stand as the generic human, "the subject without properties"—and without vulnerability or sin (Dyer 38–39). The capacity for bodily control is not only required for full political participation, but for moral and metaphysical righteousness. In this way, the film attempts to reconcile the demands of neoliberalism with the demands of right-wing Christianity. The moral panic over obesity serves as a metaphoric way of bridging various kinds of divides, since fighting the scourge of fatness produces the exclusion and stigma against which "normal" and "good" Americans can unify themselves.

Super Size Me draws on America's deeply cherished fantasies of transformation, in which the desire for social change gets displaced onto individual bodies. Anxious about the environmental and economic consequences of unrestrained consumption under late capitalism? Worried about the United States' seemingly insatiable desire to extend its economic and political hegemony? Concerned that the United States is vulnerable to another terrorist attack and that our way

of life is under assault? The film's answer: go lose weight—and make sure that your neighbors do, too. The idealization of noncorporeal citizenship may have even stronger appeal in a post-9/11 context; it promises to ward off our heightened sense of vulnerability, demonstrate our moral superiority in the cosmological war against evil, and master the harmful desires that drive consumer capitalism and imperialism.

Although the war on obesity performs ideological functions similar to the war on terrorism, it is potentially more powerful because more indirect and naturalized. I do not mean to suggest that antifat rhetoric is entirely uncontested, but that, relatively speaking, it is less contested as “common sense.” Indeed, one of the most frequent criticisms of *Super Size Me* stems from the supposed self-evidence of its premise. Dissenters typically ask why we need a whole film to tell us what everyone already knows. I also do not mean to imply that *Super Size Me* is universally loved. Considerable debate surrounds the film, with most of it focused on the issue of personal versus corporate responsibility. In such debates, both sides assume that fatness signals bad health, although they disagree about whether individuals or corporations should bear the brunt of the blame.

The naturalization of antifat attitudes occurs partly through aesthetic judgments, seen primarily in the conflation of health, morality, and beauty (Lupton 137). Ugliness, for instance, gets attached to unhealthy commodities that distort the ideal body and that tempt people to succumb to their baser instincts (Petersen and Lupton 67). We can see this dynamic in the binge-purge scene in Spurlock's car, as well as in the repeated shots of fat bodies that are supposed to elicit disgust in audiences. Just as vomiting rids Spurlock's body of the corrupting influence of fast food, so bodily discipline will help rid America of the corrupting influence of fatness. We can make the body politic whole, beautiful, and pure by eliminating the unhealthy, the dirty, and the ugly. In this way, revulsion at fatness comes to seem like a “natural” response to ugliness, while attraction to thinness comes to seem like a “natural” desire for beauty.

This essay has identified the problematic consequences of such taken-for-granted attitudes, questioning “the assumption that ‘health’ should be a priority for all and act as . . . a criterion for citizenship” (Petersen and Lupton 179). Doing so suggests that we need to rethink dominant notions of both health and citizenship. Advocates of the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement, for instance, argue that fitness

must be separated from body size. Although the HAES approach disarticulates health from fatness, it continues to place most of its emphasis on individual behaviors like eating, exercise, and self-acceptance.⁹ A productive complement to HAES would stress the larger conditions that contribute to both individual and social health (for instance, poverty, access to quality health care, environmental degradation, unsafe labor conditions, inhumane treatment of animals and other people, and inequality and injustice in general). Moralistic demands for individuals to “clean up their acts” deflect attention from these conditions and therefore allow them to persist. The amelioration of such problems requires, not individual bodily discipline, but sustained engagement in democratic activity.

Making democratic activity more inclusive, radical, and transformative requires reworking the notion of citizenship that underlies dominant discourses of health. One possibility might lie in replacing disembodied models of citizenship with embodied ones. Although I do not have space to develop this idea fully, I can suggest a few directions that it might take. First, we would need to see embodiment not as a limitation needing to be transcended, but as a precondition for social life, for politics, and for citizenship itself. Embodied citizens would rely neither upon a denial of corporeality nor on an antagonistic relationship between mind and body. Rather, they would appreciate the body’s potentialities and limitations as key to political engagement. On this view, the body makes agency possible in the first place; we exercise agency with, not over, our own bodies and those of others. The question remains: what can be done to make such understandings of embodiment more viable than losing those last 10 pounds?

Notes

1. See <http://www.time.com/time/2004/obesity>.
2. See, in particular, Schwartz, Seid, and Stearns for historical overviews of notions of dieting and body size in the United States.
3. The intensification of antifat attitudes during wartime has several historical precedents. See, for instance, Schwartz and LeBesco.
4. See the message board at the film’s Web site (<http://www.supersizeme.com/msgboard.aspx>) and comments at the International Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390521/usercomments>).
5. For a more overt example of the racist, sexist, and classist underpinnings of antifat rhetoric, see Crister’s *Fat Land*. He concludes with a call for stricter boundaries, “an unpleasant but good thing for affluent white people,” which are “also a good thing for poor black people” (121).

6. This episode pays homage to Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*, in which the author tries to survive on minimum wage jobs and ends up eating quite a bit of fast food. She has neither the time nor the energy to prepare home-cooked meals after a full day of manual labor, some of her living places lack the necessary cooking equipment, and fast food is relatively affordable and accessible.
7. See de Garine and Pollock, Kulick and Meneley, Braziel and LeBesco, and Childress for discussions of nonwhite and/or non-American cultures that value ample female bodies, as well as the tensions between such alternatives and the white-dominated images of American mass media.
8. See Brumberg on the phenomenon of "holy anorexia."
9. For more information on HAES, see the peer-reviewed medical journal *Health at Every Size* and Glenn Gaesser's book *Big Fat Lies*. For additional critiques of and alternatives to dominant notions of "health" in American culture, see Airhihnenbuwa, Petersen and Lupton, and Clarke and Olesen.

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"Supersizing America: Fatness And Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 43.3 (2010): 441-462. Web. 17 Apr. 2016. This article focuses on the film *Super Size Me* and how fast food and the "super size" culture of America is "every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today." This article gives a look into the authors view on the "American Expansion" and how as a culture we are prone to hyper consumption. Mostly though in this article, the author talks about the film and why it is so dangerous, making Americans fat and lazy. She speaks about how The article was called *Supersizing America: Fatness and Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties* it was a very interesting article that talked about the film *Supersize Me* which is a film about Americas habit of overeating, and always having large portions of food. This article compares the film to our post 9/11 fears and goes on to mention that, American cultures preoccupation with fat, it does provide a particularly clear and representative example of how fatness becomes a site for dealing with post-9/11 cultural anxieties. BAILEY, COURTNEY. "Supersizing America: Fatness And Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties." *Journal Of Popular Culture* 43.3 (2010): 441-462. Academic Search Complete. Web. *Supersizing America: Fatness and post-9/11 cultural anxieties*. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43(3), 441-462. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York, NY: Routledge. Google Scholar. Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Google Scholar. Butler, J. (1997). *The other side of the looking glass: The marginalization of fatness and blackness in the construction of gender identity*. *Social Semiotics*, 15(2), 143-152. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Solomons, N. W., & Kumanyika, S. (2000).