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## “I WANNA BE FAT”: HEALTHISM AND FAT POLITICS IN TLC’S *MY BIG FAT FABULOUS LIFE*

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“I wanna be fat.” – This sentence uttered by Whitney Thore, the protagonist of TLC’s *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (2015–), in the third season’s premiere episode is astonishing because, as the public is lectured time and again by media, medical doctors and other so called health professionals, nobody wants to be (or should be) fat. Thore’s declaration becomes even more conspicuous considering its context, namely a reality TV program. Reality TV is a genre known for its investment in turning fat bodies into thin ones, in popular gamedoc/makeover programs such as *The Biggest Loser* (2004–), and *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss* (2011–2015), or in docusoaps like *I Used to Be Fat* (2010–2013) and *My 600-lb. Life* (2012–). In these shows, fat protagonists are exploited to narrate cautionary tales of the dangers the *obesity epidemic* has for American society, and for Western, industrialized societies in general (cf. Delpeuch 2009).

— *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*,<sup>1)</sup> it seems, disrupts the makeover and rehabilitation narrative of fat bodies on reality TV, because it features a fat protagonist, Thore, whose primary interest is *not* to lose weight, but to be “fat and healthy” (*MBFFL* 2016: 3.2). Diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), an often mis- or undiagnosed “endocrine disorder characterized by *obesity* male pattern hair growth and loss, irregular menstruation and infertility, and skin abnormalities” (Fisanick 2009: 106), Thore, in the series, recalls extreme weight fluctuations, the burden these fluctuations have had on her mental health, and her way toward self-love. This love is primarily narrated through her greatest passion – dance. The release of her dance video *A Fat Girl Dancing on You Tube* attracted national attention, which culminated in TLC’s offer to produce a series based on her life in Greensboro, North Carolina. The series accompanies her as she starts dancing again, offers dance classes for *big girls* as she calls them, and manages life in her hometown. This article will focus on season three, which begins with Thore being rushed to the hospital after fainting during a dance performance. In nine episodes, this season addresses her deteriorating health and her work against body shaming, which is of interest to Thore, who has launched her own campaign to promote body positivity, *No Body Shame (No BS)*.<sup>2)</sup>

— The series’ title suggests this is not a narrative of misery and

1)

Onwards cited as *MBFFL*. In Germany, the series is broadcasted as *Whitney! – Voll im Leben*.

2)

Cf.: <http://www.nobodyshame.com> (January 2017)

regret, but of positivity and joy – an unusual take on fatness in popular culture, and American society at large: “Viewed [...] as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as revolting – they are agents of abhorrence and disgust” (LeBesco 2004: 1). “Fabulous” does not imply “abhorrence and disgust,” therefore *MBFFL*, at first glance, seems to defy common representations of fatness; a defiance also shown through the word *fat*. Featured not only in the title, but used by Thore herself, *fat* is not a euphemism<sup>3)</sup> or term of abuse, but an emancipatory adjective. Thore classifies herself as fat. Yet her understanding of this word that is commonly used to express contempt of, and hate towards fat people is informed by fat studies, “an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (Rothblum / Solovay 2009: 2).<sup>4)</sup> Ever since the emergence of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance in 1969, fat activists in the US have used *fat* to fight against fat shaming, as declared in “Fat Liberation Manifesto”: “WE believe that fat people are fully entitled to human respect and recognition” (Freespirit / Aldebaran 2009 [1973]: 341, capitalization original).<sup>5)</sup> Fat activist Marilyn Wann for instance encourages her readers to use the *F-Word*: “[I]t’s time to take this powerful, awe-inspiring word back from the bullies! It’s time to put fat into the hands of people who will use its power for good, not evil!” (1998: 18).

— In *MBFFL* Thore joins fat activists’ aims to re-signify the word as descriptive of both a body shape and political attitude that is not sizeist – that does not (de)value a body because of its size. Yet, as I argue, her fat politics clash with the neoliberal ideology circulated in and through reality TV.<sup>6)</sup> While she promotes these politics, and announces that she is happy being fat, her friends and family are constantly shown challenging her. The series thus sends contradicting messages: Unable to fully commit to fat politics and body positivity, it focuses on Thore’s health problems, and undermines the successes and triumphs she experiences as a dancer and fat role model. Despite her efforts to debunk the myth of fatness as a harbinger of illness, the series holds on to a healthist logic that coincides with the genre’s neoliberal agenda.

— Reality TV is predominantly accused of being cheap and escapist, of exploiting its subjects in order to satisfy the audience’s voyeuristic desire for a spectacular and hyperreal version of reality. “[L]ow production values, high emotions, cheap antics

3)

As popularized by the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, USA/CAN, 2002) which inspired the reality TV series *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* (2012–).

4)

The usage of fat in this article results from fat studies and the novel approach to the word *fat*.

5)

Both authors belonged to the *Fat Underground* (1973–77), cf. Cooper 1998.

6)

The term *fat politics* is used here to suggest politics that oppose the discourse of the obesity *epidemic*, the pathologization and stigmatization of fatness, and demand a more nuanced treatment of fatness by the media and the medical establishment. This factors in the intersectionality of fatness, questions the universality of the Body-Mass-Index (BMI), dieting, and the *logic* that fat equals illness (cf. Oliver 2005, Bacon 2008, Gaesser 2009).

and questionable ethics” (Kavka 2012: 5) place this kind of programming at the bottom of television hierarchy. The “unrehearsed performances of people engaging with the trivia of everyday life” (ibid: 1), and the genre’s aesthetics seem to attest to its triviality and lack of “serious engagement with public issues” (ibid: 2). Reality TV seems to be of no considerable value. This simplistic view needs to be scrutinized, because reality TV occupies a space in our Western mediascape “that exists between reality and fiction, in which new levels of representational play and reflexivity are visualized” (Skeggs / Wood 2011: 6). It has diversified television culture by offering “new possibilities and limitations for representational politics” (Murray / Ouellette 2004: 11), and staging “peer based ethical explorations of identity and selfhood among marginalized communities” (Ouellette 2016: 6). This includes the exploration of fatness in the United States by a fat positive protagonist. This kind of democratization of television culture is paradoxical though: “Such programs cast ‘other’ people as spectacular, unusual and exotic, even as they are also presented as ‘just like us’ in some respects” (ibid: 19).<sup>7)</sup> The paradox is important for the casting of fat characters; they are extraordinary *and* ordinary television protagonists. Put on display as “lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, and lacking in will power” (Farrell 2011: 2), they are also ordinary, because fatness is a common problem, an ‘epidemic’ after all: “The concern in the United States over the obesity epidemic has become one of the most popular social problems among politicians, the medical establishment, media outlets, and academics over the last decade” (Gailey 2014: 3). Fatness is constructed as a *real* concern, and reality TV – a *media outlet* – sends ambiguous messages, ranging from the promotion of weight-loss and transformation to the promotion of self-love and fat acceptance.

— This ambiguity fits to what Jeannine A. Gailey’s calls the “hyper(in)visibility” of fatness (2014). Based on the assumption that “[b]odies move in and out of visible and invisible spheres of perception,” based on context, size, gender, class and race, she argues that “[f]at presents an apparent paradox because it is visible and dissected publicly; in this respect, it is *hypervisible*. Fat is also marginalized and erased; in this respect, it is *hyperinvisible*” (ibid.: 7, emphasizes original). Fat is paradoxical, because it has an immediate visibility, a hypervisibility even. It is publicly discussed as a severe threat to health and the body that is normatively imagined as “able-bodied, having light skin, having

7)

This understanding of reality TV, while valid, is also deceptive, as mere representation does not lead to inclusionary practices and politics, but can serve to reaffirm the mainstream/Other binaries. Graeme Turner for instance discusses the so called “democratic turn” as misleading, arguing rather for a “demotic turn”: “a broad trend that has seen ordinary people become increasingly visible” (2014: 309), but not necessarily empowered.

sex and gender congruity, and being thin or ‘average-sized,’ heterosexual, and middle-class” (ibid: 9). Alarmist discourses aim at marginalizing and erasing fat, and making it hypervisible, thus “[t]o be hyper(in)visible means that a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked, and it can happen simultaneously” (ibid: 7). *MBFFL* pays “exceptional attention” to Thore as her fatness drives the narrative. Yet this attention differs from that of weight-loss programming, because it is, at first glance, motivated by fat politics and positivity.

**“I WANNA BE FAT” – FAT POLITICS IN *MBFFL*** ——— Thore does not miss an opportunity to voice her fat politics. She propagates fatness and fitness while opposing dieting. Talking to her friend and roommate Buddy, she claims to have “other priorities” in life than losing weight: “I don’t have to be thin to have it all. [...] I wanna be healthy. [...] My perfect thing would be to kind of balance and have it all, still be fat, maybe not *this* fat, have my health, have my fitness, have my happiness, because I wanna be fat. [...] It’s like my purpose in life to kinda live in a fat body and be a change in the social perception” (ibid). Statements like these suggest that Thore’s reality TV persona is that of a fat activist and role model. In one confessional, she reacts to critics who accuse her of toying with her health and of setting a bad example: “I have never been able to approach body image or weight-loss in a healthy way. [...] That’s why I hated my fat body and I don’t ever wanna do those things again” (ibid).<sup>8)</sup> She comments on self-hate created by weight-loss and dieting attempts; self-hate that is depicted as more harmful to her health than weight. As a result, she rejects food monitoring and dieting, and rather focuses on fitness and an active lifestyle. In season three, she reconnects with her former fitness coach Will who insists on weighing her, although she does not think “the number matters” (*MBFFL* 2016: 3.7). Her resistance to him eventually leads to their separation.

————— The aversion to dieting, resistance to fat shaming, and investment in fitness is not only caused by her own experiences, but also the result of her fat politics. She calls out fat shaming as a socially accepted form of discrimination. During a talk she gives at her alma mater, as a spokesperson for *No BS*, she asks the audience: “[D]oes anybody care about all the thin people who don’t exercise? No. [...] We just hate fat people, that’s it” (ibid: 3.3). In 1992, the National Institute of Health Technology Assessment Conference found that “90-95% of participants in all weight loss programs

8)

A *confessional* is a typical stylistic feature of reality TV, in which participants retrospectively comment on a specific scene, or moment, into the camera. The confessional is an intriguing feature, because it interrupts the *realness* of reality TV. It admits to the protagonists’ knowledge and participation in the creation of the *real*.

failed to attain and sustain weight loss beyond two to five years. Research was also presented that highlighted the negative effects of failed weight loss attempts” (Lyons 2009: 77–78). Fat activists and fat studies scholars agree that weight loss is more often harmful than helpful (cf. Wann, Bacon, LeBesco, Gailey). Thore repeatedly claims she wants to be fat and healthy: “I think you can be fat and healthy, I think you can be fat and fit” (*MBFFL* 2016: 3.1). She clearly supports *Health at Every Size* (HAES), an approach to body and health that emphasizes “self-acceptance and healthy day-to-day practices, regardless of whether a person’s weight changes” (Burgard 2009: 42). Developed by Dr. Linda Bacon, HAES questions the relationship of weight and health: “Body weight might be a marker for an imprudent lifestyle in some people, but its role in determining health [...] is grossly exaggerated” (Bacon 2008: xxi).<sup>9)</sup> Although Thore does not mention HAES, her approach to fatness seems influenced by this approach. She deems dieting unrealistic, and strives for a relationship to food that is not a “deviation from normal” (*MBFFL* 2016: 3.3). Thore’s relationship to normalcy is intriguing. She wants to show that *although* she is fat, she can do whatever she wants, or rather do things the viewers assume fat people cannot or should not do: “I wanna be reassured that I can do things like normal people” (ibid: 3.2). She also wants to reassure her critics. In season three, she is constantly shown as she overcomes obstacles; teaching dance classes, filming a body positive workout video, training with Will, going on a bike ride, participating in dance competitions despite looking “very different” (ibid: 3.4), trying various winter sports, and swimming.

— Her activism and activities are strategies of rejecting fat stigma; “[t]hrough art, performance, comedy, and protest, some fat activists attempt to shift the collective view of fat as deviant or abhorrent. They seek to normalize the fat body by engaging in behaviors that many fat persons avoid publicly, like eating, exercising, or going swimming” (Gailey 2014: 150). As a reality TV protagonist Thore seeks the public and undercuts dominant (read: negative) perceptions of fatness, for instance during her apprenticeship at a local radio show. In this environment, in which people are uninformed about body positivity discourses, she educates her colleagues and tries to normalize *fat*. During a lunch meeting, Thore asks for a chair that fits her. She does this unapologetically, saying she is just too *fat* for this chair.

Roy (one host): “You’re pretty liberal with the word fat.”

Maney (another host): “Some people don’t like it.”

9)

Bacon argues that each body has a biological “setpoint weight” (2008: 12–13), which, when achieved through methods she suggests in her publication, will end weight fluctuation and frustration.

Roy: "It's a bad word."

Thore: "Oh, but I don't think so. [...] I'd like to destigmatize the word." Thore's "I don't think so" is contrasted by close-up shots of stunned faces and a brief period of silence that stresses her colleagues' incomprehension and discomfort, which later turns into interest and solidarity.

—— *MBFFL* often causes discomfort because it offers space to Thore's fat politics that contradict everything the American public has been taught to think of fatness, namely that it "means' excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy, and sinful habits" (Farrell 2011: 10). Thore counters this *meaning* and demonstrates control and industriousness, especially when it comes to her athletic endeavors. Next to her daily, often comedic adventures, her politics take center stage and redefine fat identity. Yet her presence and visibility on television is facilitated by other factors that need to be considered. Farrell has argued that "[i]n the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, physicians, politicians, and academics used body size as one important marker – along with gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality – to measure one's suitability for the privileges and power of full citizenship" (ibid: 5), an argument that is certainly still valid today if one considers the public discussions of the supposed harm fatness has for society at large. Thore's body size turns her into an unsuitable citizen and woman. She is privileged in other ways though: She is a white, able-bodied, heterosexual woman, who, although not affluent, is shown to live comfortably, as do her parents and her friends.<sup>10)</sup> She neither upsets white, middle-class decorum, nor does she fully subvert the public imagination of the fat body as described by Farrell (2011), LeBesco (2004) and Gailey (2014); the series adheres to a healthist and neoliberal logic, which suggests that Thore's body needs rehabilitation.

**HEALTHISM AND THE NEOLIBERAL BODY** —— *MBFFL* is exemplary of the generic mixing that has become symptomatic for reality TV. It is first and foremost a docusoap, "a subgenre of reality programming that utilizes surveillance footage and the conventions of documentary while assuming serial form and containing complex narrative arcs that extend over several episodes" (Hargraves 2014: 286). With soap-like cliffhangers and sensational revelations, *MBFFL* encourages viewers to follow the narrative. Season three's first episode for instance ends with images of Thore being rushed to the hospital by paramedics after collapsing during a dance-athon. The last shot shows the ambulance as it drives away, its lights

10)

Thore's friendship to Mattie, a transwoman of color is worth more attention than can be offered here, as it turns the series' heteronormativity upside down.

flashing in the darkness, accompanied by the sound of sirens. This shot adds to the spectacularization of the situation, and ensures the viewers will tune in again.

— Next to the strategies of *docusoap-ing*, *MBFFL* is also a lifestyle program, another subgenre of reality programming that provides “everyday advice and guidance on a range of life and domestic issues including [...] healthy food and eating [...] weight loss and fitness” (Lewis 2014: 402). While all reality TV formats have a didactic aim, lifestyle TV is based on the premise that it will assist its viewers in creating a better life, or rather, a better lifestyle. According to Pierre Bourdieu, lifestyle is “a system of classified and classifying practices” (1984: 142). Ideas of a better lifestyle, improvement and transformation inherent to classic lifestyle TV formats such as *The Dr. Oz Show* (2009–), *Extreme Makeover* (2002–2007), or *Supernanny* (2005–2010) suggest the system is hierarchical, or “socially qualified,” ranging from “distinguished” to “vulgar” (Bourdieu 1984: 172). With regard to healthy food, eating, weight loss and fitness, the hierarchy is determined by health and slimness. Everything that is considered unhealthy needs to be transformed and improved. Reality TV, in general, follows “a moral / pedagogic agenda” (Skeggs / Wood 2011: 5), and this agenda, especially in programming dealing with fatness, is voiced through healthism, “a preoccupation with health and well-being [...] grounded in the idea that health is something that anyone can achieve – if they work hard enough – and that it is one’s individual and moral responsibility to maintain their health” (Gailey 2014: 87). A healthist logic offers “no absolution from moral judgment and accountability” (ibid: 87), if Thore fails to lose weight, it is her fault, despite the PCOS diagnosis. Healthism is thus embedded within a neoliberal discourse of citizenship, in which “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 2005: 65). According to David Harvey, “[d]efenders of this regime of rights plausibly argue that it encourages ‘bourgeois virtues’ [...] [t]hese include individual responsibility and liability; independence from state interference [...]; care of oneself and one’s own” (ibid: 181). The highest virtues of this regime are efficiency, productivity and the personal responsibility for one’s failures. Neoliberalism marks “a political shift involving the downscaling of State responsibility for public welfare, and the remodeling of government and citizenship in increasingly privatized and entrepreneurial terms” (Ouellette 2016: 5). Lifestyle TV, with its message of “self-improvement, individual responsibility, and



choice” (Edwards 2013: 114) is a powerful tool to implement these neoliberal ideals.

— Friends and relatives repeatedly appeal to Thore’s responsibility, challenging her fat politics. When she is taken to the hospital, a voice-over by her friend and dance partner Todd contextualizes this event: He claims that Thore’s “health conditions just caught up with her” (MBFFL 2016: 3.1). Other participants are shown crying and watching Thore with concerned and shocked faces, filmed in close-up shots and juxtaposed with Thore’s body lying on the floor. Their sentiments mirror the worry everyone should have with regard to *obesity*. These scenes do not only portray the breakdown of Thore’s body, but also of her fat politics. After her physical breakdown, her parents and some friends stage an intervention, a mock-funeral to show they care about her health. Without her knowledge, Thore is brought to a funeral home to witness her own funeral. This grotesque scene displays the scare tactics of the *obesity epidemic*, which equate fatness with inevitable death. The funeral is used as a tool to implement normative notions about the fat body; it is in danger and is mourned. The staging of Thore’s demise makes her hyperinvisible; she sits isolated and ignored by her loved ones on one side of the room.

— Her aims to normalize the fat body are constantly countered by scenes that *prove* she cannot do whatever she wants. The attempt to ski ends in another bodily breakdown; in pain she lets herself fall in front of the camera and bystanders. This is the second incident of her fat body collapsing, which is again symbolic for the collapse of the empowerment she propagates. As Thore lies on the ground, someone from the production crew runs to her, saying: “I wasn’t there, I’m sorry” (ibid: 3.2), visible to the viewers. The danger the fat body is in, is staged as very serious and *real*. It overrides a crucial principle of reality programming, and breaks down the barrier between protagonist, viewers, and production that keeps up the illusion and staging of reality. When she throws out her back in the shower, Thore is filmed crying while naked and wet, only partly covered by a towel, as her roommate helps her get into bed. These representations of personal breakdown always follow after moments of success, in which Thore has tried to normalize her body and to stand for her politics: in the midst of the dance-athon, after sliding down a mountain on a large inflatable tire, and after defending her usage of *fat* in front of her colleagues. They undermine these successes and indicate that her body is not reconcilable with her politics. After the ski incident, Thore realizes: “I spent so

much time thinking I can do whatever I want” (ibid: 3.2). A visit to the cardiologist convinces her that “to be healthy,” she needs “to focus on food behaviors [...] and on exercising, a lot” (ibid: 3.3). She begins a new exercise regimen, monitored by her former fitness coach Will.

— Will is staged as an expert, a classic lifestyle TV character who serves the purpose to teach uneducated, ordinary people “the ‘correct’ ways of parenting, nutrition, body management, house-cleaning, marriage, and personal appearance” (Murray / Ouellette 2004: 9). He is a neoliberal agent in that he continuously reminds Thore of her responsibility and fault. For him, *obesity* is certainly a “disease of the will” (Ouellette 2016: 88), as he does not miss an opportunity to tell Thore that if she really wanted to lose weight, she could. He accuses her friends and family of being “enablers,” people who support her self-destruction. He, on the other hand shows his “love by holding her accountable” (ibid: 3.6). He repeats this neoliberal, healthist logic in almost every scene, claiming that “Whitney does everything she can to avoid being responsible” (ibid: 3.7). Not only does he monitor Thore’s food intake and weight, he reproduces a good/bad dichotomy, speaking of the “bad choices” (ibid) she seems to consciously make. Their relationship is highly problematic, because he exerts control over her – a woman’s – body, all in the name of male expertise, which is rather common for reality TV, where “male experts still tend to be associated with professional and work-based forms of expertise such as physical fitness, design, professional cookery, gardening and carpentry” (Lewis 2014: 405). Despite this uneven distribution of power, Will is portrayed as a likeable character; he stands by Thore and is invested in helping her. In contrast to her friends and family whose funeral-intervention clearly marginalized Thore and turned her into a passive, hyper(in)-visible object who was merely there to witness how others respond to her, Will activates Thore and repeatedly tells her that *she* is in charge of her own self. This strategy corresponds to the neoliberal values he represents.

— These are further negotiated through the appearance of comedian Kerry Feehan who is interviewed on the radio show Thore works for. On air, she quickly shares her opinions on fatness, calling fat people out for being “moody and cranky” because they are “hungry,” and arguing that “a certain amount of bullying is ok” (ibid: 3.6). Thore’s encounter with Feehan demonstrates the condemnation fat people experience in the public sphere. The comedian uses the same neoliberal logic as Will when she asks

Thore about her “accountability,” and accuses her of a “quitter mentality” (ibid: 3.7). Yet, despite this logic, Feehan is not an expert according to lifestyle TV conventions, and therefore dislikeable. In sexist terms, she is depicted as a *bitch*, while Will is an *expert*. Her opinion is devalued while his is deemed relevant. Nevertheless, both serve as regulating forces that challenge Thore and her politics. They need to be understood as the voices (and bodies) of alarmist discourses of *obesity*. Especially with the introduction of Will, and the recurrent conflicts Thore experiences with her friends and family, *MBFFL* undermines the fat politics and pride it supposedly advertises.

**CONCLUSION** — As Laurie Ouellette has persuasively argued, “[h]ybrid reality formats, including the makeover and the life intervention, problematize the conduct, choices, bodies and lifestyles of disadvantaged and subordinated ‘other’ people, inviting the TV audience to revel in its own normalcy while also learning lessons about good citizenship indirectly via the cautionary tales presented on screen” (Ouellette 2016: 79–80). *MBFFL*, as is quite common for reality programming, is an ambiguous text. It invites the audience to “revel in its own normalcy,” by presenting a fat body that needs to be rehabilitated by others in order to be healthy and productive in a neoliberal society. At the same time, it also propagates fat politics and invites those who are *subordinated* as (fat) Others to identify with Thore and her struggles. The visibility the series offers to her is not to be underestimated in a mediascape in which fat women are still marginalized, ridiculed and controlled. “Revolting,” to return to LeBesco’s description of fatness in American culture, after all, can also mean resistant, disobeying, defiant. She argues that the fat body can be subversive, and can “call into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature” (LeBesco 2004: 2). Thore is revolting when she is proud, when she dances in front of the camera, performs at a fashion show, is intimate with another man, and succeeds in her endeavors. Yet, as I argued, a commercial genre like reality TV cannot fully commit to Thore’s politics, because it will always follow a neoliberal logic that supports the genre’s *moral / pedagogical agenda*.

— In order to circumvent the paradox of circulating both fat politics and neoliberalism, the series turns Thore into an accomplice. She contributes to the privatization of her own health. As she tells a critic who asks how she can spread the message that “fat is ok” when it is a health risk: “I’m just a person, I’m just living my

life” (*MBFFL* 2016: 3.3). She depoliticizes her message by marking her experiences as merely personal. “Health management under neoliberalism calls on citizens to manage their body weight, stress and levels of exercise as care of the self” (Ouellette 2016: 86), and Thore is shown to immerse herself in this rhetoric. Not only outside forces try to implement the neoliberal agenda of (self-)responsibility and accountability by means of a healthist discourse, Thore herself is shown to struggle with the extent of her fat politics, *No BS*-message, and the urgency to lose weight. This struggle is visualized through crying. In every episode, Thore is filmed crying in front of the camera. Feehan attacks Thore for these teary breakdowns, asking why she is always crying, if she is as happy as she claims. The close up shots of Thore crying are *MBFFL*’s *money shots*, the intimate moments that support reality TV’s claim of the *real*. The *money shot* in reality TV, i.e. crying, fighting, or screaming, “makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body” (Grindstaff 2002: 20). As a neoliberal agent, Thore is supposed to achieve “goals of health, happiness, productivity, security and well being through [...] individual choices and self-care practices” (Ouellette 2016: 77), yet the crying opposes the happiness she claims to have found. She has fashioned herself as a fat activist, yet simultaneously, she is shown to suffer, both physically and emotionally. In a recap montage during the season’s final episode, the producers show Thore’s successes and failures, making the instability of the series’ narrative even more visible. Thore has – once again – convinced Will to take her back, promising that she will endure his program this time. In her last voice-over, she tells her viewers: “Even though I lost a relationship, I didn’t lose myself. I’m strong. I can push myself, but mostly, I want to reclaim my joy in my life” (ibid: 3.9). This joy, the happy ending between her and Will suggests, will be achieved through weight loss and her acceptance of personal accountability.

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Dr. Evangelia Kindinger is Assistant Professor for American Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. She is the author of *Homebound: Diaspora Spaces and Selves in Greek American Return Narratives* (2015), and co-editor of *After the Storm: The Cultural Politics of Hurricane Katrina* (2015). Furthermore, she has published articles on vampires and regionalism, diaspora and tourism, and class in reality television, e.g. "Better Redneckognize': The Paradoxical Class Politics in *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*" (2016). She is currently working on a postdoc project that deals with the intersections of class, regionalism and whiteness in American culture, as embodied by the widespread stereotype of the Southern Redneck. Her research further includes fat studies, food studies, American popular culture (particularly television), nineteenth-century American culture, and feminism.

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