

Body

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It is glory that these body-loss-obsessed men and women [in weight loss groups] seek, in making themselves “lost,” rapacious glory in a society constraining them in rituals around limitless loss. They externalize the return of the repressed in this society which, more than others, is rationalized around the ledger sheets and the accountants of gain, whose most serious intonations are about the “bottom line”—which has remade the “full plate” into the latest idiom for dealing with bad news.

—Sohnya Sayres, “Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess,”
ST 16 (1986)

While Barack Obama began his historic presidency with a “full plate” of economic and political challenges and an athletic build complete with a “six-pack” duly captured by the long lens of a paparazzo, the woman who had arguably paved the way for his election with her early endorsement began her year on a rather different note. Oprah Winfrey started 2009 by appearing in a series of television spots castigating herself for regaining the weight that she had once lost (and gained and lost and gained again over the course of her nearly three decades in the public eye). In this spectacle of self-rebuke that promoted the newest season of her *Live Your Best Life* series, Winfrey asserted that everything she has accomplished in every other arena was rendered meaningless unless she controls her weight. “All the money and all the fame and all the attention and the glamorous life and the success,” Winfrey said, “doesn’t mean anything if you can’t fit into your own clothes . . . if you can’t control your own being.”¹

Winfrey’s epic battle with herself, waged as a battle over her weight, has always guaranteed ratings hikes for the talk show host and now overshadows (and perhaps serves to camouflage) the immensity of her cultural

and political influence. Indeed, her televised confessional concerned itself in part with whether she would fit into the gown that she'd chosen for the inaugural festivities. *Would she fit? Would she fit in?* is the perennial self-doubt available to anyone who has ever felt themselves an outsider whether on account of size, or shape, or color, or the objects of their desire, or their manner of elocution, or their differences of ability, or belief, or disposition. In this moment of unprecedented historical achievement—with the inauguration of the first African American president—the woman who has been welcomed into the living rooms of millions of Americans and had helped to make way for the Obamas to claim their place in the people's house publicly expressed her concern about how she'd fit—not on account of her race, but now on account of her size.

The cultural fantasy that body size and shape are largely functions of individual willpower, rather than of genetic predispositions and socioeconomic environment, renders this ongoing saga of Oprah's battle with her weight a morality tale where her legitimacy and moral authority are both threatened (“not walking the walk”) and maintained (through confessional spectacles of self-reproach).² Epic battles of personal strength are waged not against oppression or inequity or social or economic injustice, but against one's appetites.

While Oprah's public battle with her weight shared the spotlight with Obama's historic inauguration and the global financial implosion, the mainstream press had already begun to comment on Michelle Obama's figure, suggesting that her elegant and athletic physique may help dispel the stereotypical image of the African American woman as the rotund Aunt-Jemima-mammy, lush and nurturant to everyone but (presumably, in a fitness-preoccupied culture) neglectful of herself.³ A November *Newsweek* magazine cover story titled “The Meaning of Michelle” noted that Michelle Obama's dedication to a fitness regimen might serve as a positive model for African American women: “A self-proclaimed fitness junkie who works out every morning, Michelle could actually encourage women of color to take better care of themselves.”⁴

Women who heretofore had not “put themselves on the top of their own to-do list” (in the language of Oprah's best-life advice) would somehow find a way to make personal fitness their top priority. Somehow they would find the time for the workouts amid the multiple jobs and extra shifts necessary in a subminimum-wage economy. Somehow they would eke out the money for the gym membership or the treadmill or the step-climber. Michelle Obama's personal appearance would, somehow, render such personal change possible (and desirable) for millions of African American women who work two or three low-wage jobs as they struggle to support their families, who have ready access primarily to nutritionally compromised food in low-income neighborhoods where fast-food restau-

rants proliferate, and who find themselves famished for sleep as they juggle their many responsibilities. The same *Newsweek* article that asserted that Michelle Obama would break through stereotypes for black women also noted her ability to tone down her personality: “Early on in the primaries, after she was labeled too forward and too loud, Michelle demonstrated *self-restraint and discipline* by dialing back” (emphasis added).⁵ By announcing herself as Mom-in-Chief—and downplaying what must have seemed to many to be a surfeit of talent, intelligence, beauty, and professional accomplishment—Michelle Obama proved that she, too, could fit in to the traditionally diminished expectations of women. By exercising such self-discipline, she helped ensure that her husband would be deemed fit to govern the nation.

At the end of an era of both unprecedented expansion and inequality, the Obamas appear fittingly and fit: as the antidote to an epoch of excess, as the embodiment of the virtues of self-control and self-discipline that had long been abandoned in an era of free-marketeering and unabashed extravagance. Barack Obama has been catapulted to the presidency on the wave of our dreams of racial equality, but also on the hope that he can limit our collective losses as the model of free-marketeering unravels. Michelle Obama shows herself not only fit, but willing to diminish herself in an effort to fit in. And Oprah Winfrey serves as our avatar of limitless loss with her claim that “nothing I’ve done is of any worth unless I can lose (weight).” In their respective capacities for limiting (and limitless) loss, all three of these groundbreaking African American cultural icons gain their highest ratings, quantified in the metrics of approval polls and television audience shares. These three *Os*, Oprah and the Obamas, call upon the nation to revel in a new era of belt-tightening and personal restraint. One might ask if fitness, long associated with fitness to govern—with the governance of the self as a prerequisite for the governance of others—has become the new white?⁶ Will corpulence be inaugurated as the new negritude in the wake of the historic advancement marked by Obama’s ascendancy to the highest office in the nation?

Readers of *Social Text* familiar with Sohnya Sayres’s prescient 1986 essay “Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess” (*ST* 16) would find the drama of Oprah’s self-flagellation and the Obamas’ fitness regimens—along with the public’s fascination with both—utterly unsurprising. As with the best of cultural studies, her insights remain remarkably relevant as a consequence of the deep structure of her analysis. Back in 1986, Sayres noted the aggravation expressed by many African Americans when faced with an emerging cultural demand that they conform to a new lean model of beauty: “I remember too from so many other kinds of fat discussion and weight control groups how piqued some black woman felt

about the shift to glamorous slenderness in the new black woman. They had had to be the rock and the earth and the daintiest dancers in chiffon and heels you could imagine. Big mammas and nymphs of the cornucopia.” (As a point of reference, the Somalian beauty Iman had broken the color barrier of *Vogue*’s pages in 1976, following swiftly on the heels of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1973 photographic chronicle *The Last of the Nuba*.) Indeed, Sayres contended that the 1980s mean vogue for slenderness had “niggerized” the self-described “food addicts” whom she chronicled: “All those less than physically ideal know in their gut how this current or that current style has niggerized them; what fear they then think they spy behind those white masks of the not-natural beauties.” Sayres directed her readers to Georges Bataille, quoting his essay on expenditure in *Visions of Excess*: “Fortune does not serve to shelter its owner from need. On the contrary, it functionally remains — as does its possessor — at the mercy of a need for limitless loss. . . . Connected to the losses that are realized in this way — in the case of the ‘lost woman’ as well as in the case of military expenditure — is the creation of unproductive values, and the one that makes people most rapacious, is glory.”⁷ Although one might quibble — perhaps even argue full-tilt — with Bataille’s formulation of a general economy in which a natural excess (“the accursed share”) always requires an ongoing expenditure of this excess in displays of luxury, spoilage, or carnage, his observation that economic surpluses are dispatched in wasteful displays, such as destructive wars, seems incontrovertible. Fortuna requires virtue and sacrifices both small and large: the mornings on the treadmill and the diminution of all one has ever achieved, the high ratings of *The Biggest Loser* gleaned from its contestants’ capacity for loss.

In its earliest days, in the days of the emerging field of cultural studies, *Social Text* concerned itself with an analysis of these everyday or quotidian concerns — with aspects of daily life and popular media read as social texts to be unpacked not only as symptoms of systematic social malaise but with an eye toward social and political remedies. Denigrated in the popular press as “Oprah studies”⁸ — yet ironically carried out in the pages of its newspapers and magazines⁹ — the cultural studies imperative of *Social Text* seems to be an almost lost project in our own ranks. The work of intervening in the multiple and seemingly trivial social texts that surround, envelop, and produce us has been gradually supplanted by a focus on grander narratives of globalization, empire, and urgent political economies. As *Social Text* looks back and ahead on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary and one-hundredth issue, perhaps the radical nature of the everyday will return as an entree at our tables, however full we may find our respective plates.

Notes

1. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 5 January 2009.
2. Micki McGee, "Resolute We Are," OUP Blog, 16 January 2006, blog.oup.com/2006/01/resolute_we_are/.
3. See Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–5.
4. Allison Samuels, "What Michelle Can Teach Us," *Newsweek*, 10 November 2008, 42; online as "What Michelle Means to Us," www.newsweek.com/id/170383.
5. Samuels, "What Michelle Can Teach Us," 42.
6. See, for example, the use of the theory of Michel Foucault on self-mastery and fitness in Jennifer Smith McGuire, *Fit for Consumption: Sociology and the Business of Fitness* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 135–36; Toby Miller and Alex W. McHoul, *Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 65; and Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 127–30, 132.
7. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 128, as cited in Sohnya Sayres, "Glory Mongering: Food and the Agon of Excess," *Social Text* 16 (1986): 94.
8. Amy Benfer, "Broadsheet: Spanking Oprah," *Salon.com*, 27 January 2009, www.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/feature/2009/01/27/oprah_depression/index.html.
9. For example, Maureen Callahan, "Bloated, Depressed: As Oprah Goes, So Goes the Nation," *New York Post*, 24 January 2009, www.nypost.com/seven/01242009/postopinion/opedcolumnists/the_oprah_syndrome_151684.htm?