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# Fat, Queer, Dead: ‘Obesity’ and the Death Drive

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Francis Ray White

The fantastically apocalyptic rhetoric of the ‘obesity epidemic’ emanating from politicians, medical experts, public health policies and the media over the course of the last decade has provided critical scholars with some exceptionally rich fodder for analysis. Foremost there is the commonplace trope of an obesity ‘timebomb’, conjuring visions of a fatty, fiery end of days. This is supported by a slew of morbid scenarios that have been seized upon and interrogated in the field of fat studies. Hence, ‘the sight of amputees will become much more familiar in the streets of Britain’ (Rich & Evans, 2005:353); ‘kids and their parents may be lining up for heart bypass surgery at the same time’ (Gard & Wright, 2005:18); ‘the United States is eating itself to death’ (Saguy & Almeling, 2008:53); ‘we are facing a potential crisis, on the scale of climate change’ (White, 2009:73); ‘fat Brits told exercise or die’ (Rich & Evans, 2005:342); ‘this will be the first generation where children die before their parents’ (Evans, 2010:31). The future, according to those preaching the reality of the ‘obesity epidemic’, will not be worth living for.

The literature cited above utilises such vivid proclamations of the horrors of the ‘obesity epidemic’ in order to subsequently debunk or demystify them by revealing their scientific uncertainty or ideological underpinnings. Such work is vital in providing accounts of the meanings, origins, history and effects of the intensification of the medicalisation of obesity in the West and its characterization as an epidemic (see works already cited and Saguy & Riley 2005; Oliver 2006; Boero 2007; Gard 2010), or in offering critical perspectives on

the construction of fat bodies, the intersections of fat, gender, sexuality, race and class and the workings of fatphobia (see Cooper 1998; Braziel & LeBesco 2001; Rothblum & Solovay 2009; Tomrley & Naylor 2009). Central to many of these careful accounts is the argument that superficial concerns for 'health' or longevity apparent in the construction of the 'obesity epidemic' mask a panic about the moral threat(s) obesity poses, for example, Saguy and Riley's assertion that, 'the *epidemic of obesity* represents concern about the spread of immoral behaviour' (2005:913). The aim of this paper is to unpack what is often left unarticulated in these claims, namely the deeper cultural anxieties that produce 'panics' about morality. It will ask what it is about sloth and gluttony (the two 'deadly' sins most associated with fat people's ascribed immorality) that makes them particularly threatening, and why this threat is often located temporally in the future.

These questions will be addressed by proposing that the bleak future foretold by dominant 'obesity' discourse is born in part from fears of social disintegration or regression that are frequently manifested in the idea of a death drive. To make this argument I draw on Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) and his concept of 'reproductive futurism' as the consensus of all politics and that which makes a (better) future the goal of all political intervention. Social order organised by reproductive futurism is propelled ever-forward towards a glorious future through a continuous disavowal of the death drive, the supposed instinct towards extinction and nothingness. Edelman's key argument is that the death drive is displaced onto the 'queer', which then comes to figure that drive and must be expelled to ensure the future viability of the social order. This paper will engage with Edelman's use of the term queer, and through an examination of Change4Life, the UK government's most recent anti-obesity initiative, argue that contemporary obesity discourse positions fatness as 'queer' in that it is constructed as the anti-social Other to reproductive futurism's One. A comparison of the discourse of Change4Life with late nineteenth century theories of degeneracy will further highlight how cultural anxieties about evolution and social death are displaced onto figures who are constituted as lacking the morality, rationality and self-control required to produce a viable, civilised future.

The aim of this is not to challenge an erroneous link between fat and death, but to address a tension in the theorisation of fat politics identified by Samantha Murray in *The 'Fat' Female Body* (2008). Murray critiques forms of fat politics that rely on proclaiming a positive

or proud fat self for insisting on, 'identity as unified, knowable and unambiguous,' and a, 'reliance on, and reproduction of, the problematic mind/body split' (2008:90). This approach ultimately limits the horizons of fat politics because it fails to recognise the fundamental ambiguity of experience and the intersubjective nature of being-in-the-world. Murray argues that some fat politics actually reproduce the systems of power/knowledge they are seeking to deconstruct and that,

changing oneself and one's place in the world is not simply a case of changing one's mind. This is precisely because (tacit body) knowledges and identity exist beyond pure cognitive function, and are never experienced as rational and disembodied (2008:114–115).

Murray resolves this tension via a phenomenological approach to fat embodiment. This paper will propose an alternative reading of obesity discourse as a manifestation of the logic of reproductive futurism. Following Edelman, who advocates queers embrace their status as figures of the death drive in order to refuse the social order that abjects them, I will ask whether it is possible or productive for fat activists to do similarly.

### ***No Future for fat?***

Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) has been central to the 'anti-social turn' in queer studies in the 2000s. (In)famous for its appeal to 'fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorised' (2004:29), Edelman's project ambitiously sets out to critique the logic of all politics, an inescapable consensus which he names reproductive futurism. He sees radical and conservative politics alike as part of the same logic, one which ultimately works to authenticate and ensure a future for the social order. The unquestioned value of futurism is figured as the Child in whose name all political efforts are undertaken, thus reproductive futurism compels us to 'think of the children' when we think of politics. The Child's 'other' in Edelman's theory is the queer, or that which, 'comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity' (2004:4). He argues that the queer names the place of the social order's death drive, the space of chaos and destruction which is so fatally threatening because,

whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproductions of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more

ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism (2004:11).

The threat posed by the queer is not that of an unpalatable future, but that of no future at all.

If, as Edelman argues, reproductive futurism underpins all politics, I want to suggest that it is also at the core of the 'obesity epidemic' and informs constructions of fatness in the dominant imaginary. After all, what is the 'obesity epidemic' if not a panic about the future? 'Obesity epidemic' rhetoricians talk about a '*time-bomb*' and the apocalypse, as Bethan Evans rightly points out, is deferred, allowing for, 'a form of pre-emptive politics – attempting to control the future through action in the present' (2009:21). As Edelman foretells, the Child is again the 'fantasmatic beneficiary' of this political intervention (2004:3) as the regulation of bodies and populations in the present is undertaken in the name of a (better) future.

However, if Edelman's thesis is to be useful for examining the 'obesity epidemic' it is necessary to clarify what he means by 'queer' and the extent to which fatness can be conceptually considered as such. This is a vexed question due to the tensions in his deployment of the term. He uses it both to refer to a structural or 'figural' position of anti-sociality, but also seemingly to name specific subjects or, 'all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates' (2004:17). In this vein Edelman makes the case that,

the stigmatized other *in general* can endanger our idea of the future, conjuring the intolerable image of its spoliation or pollution, the specter of its being appropriated for unendurable ends; but one *in particular* is stigmatized as threatening an end to the future itself (2004:113).

This suggests that 'queers', those identified with/as sexual minorities, threaten the social order absolutely while other 'others', which for the purposes of this discussion would include fat subjects, figure a bleak future, but a future nonetheless. Following this definition it is not possible to claim that fatness is sufficiently 'queer' to figure the death drive. Throughout *No Future* Edelman overwhelmingly materialises the queer in the sexual practices and bodies of (white) homosexual males (see also Brenkman, 2002:179–180).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps in an attempt to mitigate against the kind of criticism lodged above, Edelman simultaneously deploys queer to name a position in the social order, rather than a specific constituency of people. He acknowledges that many of those identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender remain wholly invested in reproductive

futurism (2004:17) and emphasises 'queer' not as a fixed identity, but as that which *queers* the social order, arguing,

The queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such – on disturbing, therefore and on queering ourselves and our investment in such organization. *For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one* (2004:17 my emphasis).

This alternative reading of queer is conceptually broad enough to encompass a theorisation of fat as queer. This is not entirely novel, indeed the intersections between fat and queer and the utility of queer theory for understanding fat are a frequent, if marginal, feature of fat studies (see Moon & Sedgwick, 2001; LeBesco, 2001, 2004, 2009; Murray, 2005, 2008). Elena Levy-Navarro (2009), for example, discusses the use of queer historiography for writing fat histories. Like Edelman's notion of queer as that which 'disturbs', Levy-Navarro argues that we embrace, 'a more expansive definition of "queer" that is more expressly inclusive of all who challenge normativity, including fat people' (2009:15). Indeed, fat can be queer(ed) in multiple ways and Murray evokes one which is extremely salient to developing an understanding of fat as figuring the death drive. She says, 'the "fat" body is maddening: it will not fit' (2008:5) – a statement that perfectly encapsulates the catalogue of transgressions fat commits against normative standards of gender and sexuality, health and morality.<sup>2</sup> That fat not only doesn't fit, but is 'maddening' suggests precisely what is at stake in its disturbance of normativity and the threat it poses to the rationality asserted to suppress the chaos of the death drive.

A particularly striking, but not atypical, instance of fatphobia discussed by Murray illustrates this further. One of Murray's key arguments is that in medical and public health discourses fat people, 'are explicit moral and ethical failures that are positioned as unethical and unwilling to assume a "proper" responsibility for their own health and the health of society more generally' (2008:71). In this context she recounts the comments of psychotherapist Irvin Yalom who says, 'I have always been repelled by fat women. I find them disgusting ... how dare they impose that body on the rest of us?' (Yalom, 2005 in Murray, 2008:41). Murray's analysis of this statement highlights how such encounters are not simply scientific or objective but also moralising and normalising. She further argues that,

the anger her body allegedly elicits in Yalom threatens his own self-control, compromises his position as the authoritative, rational and

objective subject, and thus impels him to position her as the abject 'other' to his 'proper' self. In doing so, Yalom reinstates a necessary distance between himself and the 'other' that both haunts and threatens his very sense of self (2008:41–42).

In light of Edelman's theorisation of reproductive futurism it is possible to view the threat posed to morality and self-control by fatness as the threat of 'no future' and a (re)eruption of the destructive powers of the death drive. Where Edelman argues that, 'queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance, by figuring sexuality's implication in the senseless pulsions of that drive' (2004:27), what he is asserting is that in the contemporary moment reproductive futurism has displaced its death drive onto the non-heterosexual, and it is the specifically sexual, but not procreative, 'pulsion' of the drive which predominates in defining it. Viewing fatness in the place of the death drive suggests other types of 'senseless pulsion' can produce this figure. In relation to obesity, rather than perverse sexual urges it is a lust for food and sloth that apparently fuels the death drive's appetite for destruction.

Edelman's conceptualization of the death drive in psychoanalytic terms, derived largely from Lacan, following Freud, also requires reconsideration if it is to be made to fit fat. Jonathan Dollimore argues that ideas of an inner drive towards self-destruction or social disintegration circulated as normalising discourses in literature, philosophy and religious texts long before Freud's implantation of them, 'into the "new" world of interiority created by psychoanalysis' (2001:193). Common to these accounts are the twin fears that 'death is not simply the termination of life ... but life's driving force' (Dollimore, 2001:192), and more threateningly that civilisation will be undone if that destructive compulsion is permitted to resurface. Such narratives also inevitably produce abject figures, conjured as repositories for these wider cultural anxieties.

One historical iteration of this can be found in the nineteenth century theories of degeneracy discussed by Dollimore (2001: 128–144). While degeneration theory has been dismissed for its lack of scientific rigour, moral crusading and deployment to regulate socially marginalised groups, it offers a rich point of comparison with the contemporary 'obesity epidemic' – a discourse that has been critiqued for its lack of scientific rigour, moral crusading and deployment to regulate socially marginalised groups. Dollimore describes degeneration theory as, 'sufficiently obsessive and persecutory to be able to explain every kind of evil, from individual illness, through

to national economic decline', and asserts that, 'metaphors of disease and plague have always come naturally to believers in degeneration – and not surprisingly, since to them degeneration threatens contagion, the loss of immunity and, ultimately, the threat of social death and species extinction' (2001:128). A declaration of this from Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), the most popular European text on the subject and the focus of Dollimore's discussion, illustrates the kind of rhetoric characteristic of the time. Nordau states, 'we stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; a sort of black death of degeneration' (in Dollimore, 2001:131). The parallels between this and obesity discourse are evident, indeed Rich and Evans cite a *Daily Mirror* headline from 2004 which proclaims, 'War on Obesity: Docs Fight New Black Death' (2005:342). Beyond the rhetoric there are more thoroughgoing similarities between the concerns at the heart of both degeneration and the 'obesity epidemic'. These will be considered via a comparative reading of degeneration and the UK government's Change4Life campaign, specifically of the ninety-second video, *What is Change4Life?*, which launched the brand on British television in January 2009.<sup>3</sup>

### **Change4Life**

Change4Life claims to be the first and most ambitious attempt at implementing behaviour-change policy on obesity in England. Change4Life was introduced in the wake of two major government documents on obesity. The report *Tackling Obesities Future Choices*, published in October 2007 by Foresight, a government-linked futures planning body, was significant for its attempts to understand how the 'obesogenic environment' contributes to obesity. In 2008 *Healthy Weight Healthy Lives: A Cross Government Strategy for England* (herein HWHL), was published which drew on Foresight's findings and set out the direction of future policy on obesity, including the introduction of Change4Life. The primary goal of Change4Life is that, 'in future, all individuals will be able to maintain a healthy weight. The initial focus will be on children under 11, where the Government's target is to reduce the percentage of obese children to 2000 levels by 2020' (DH, 2009a:5). Already this makes clear its privileged motifs of the future and the child.

*What is Change4Life?* was made by Aardman Animations and utilises the brand's palette of bold primary colours in a combination of two-dimensional animation and Claymation. The video introduces the campaign's characters, the 'Get Up and Gos', a selection of faceless, 'people' with 'no gender, age, ethnicity or weight status'



(DH, 2009a:44). The video was designed to recast the issue of obesity as an outcome of ‘modern life’ (DH, 2009a:61) and did so by staging it in an evolutionary narrative. The voiceover narrative tells the following story:

Once upon a time life was pretty simple. It could be hard, the food was pretty fast, but it could be fun if we caught our mammoth, or bison, or whatever.

Then, gradually, life changed. In many ways it got easier. Nobody had to run around for their food, or anything else much for that matter. Until one day we woke up and realized that nine out of ten of our kids would grow up to have dangerous amounts of fat build-up in their bodies, which meant they’d be more likely to get horrid things like heart disease, diabetes and cancer, and many could have their lives cut short. So we thought, that’s not more of a life, that’s less of a life, and that’s terrible because we love the little blighters. Maybe we should get together with our kids and eat better, move more, live longer and change for life. And we all lived happily, not exactly ever after, but more ever after than we have done (*What Is Change4Life?*, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

At the start of the video four Get Up and Gos are seen chasing prehistoric creatures around an empty landscape and gathering apples from a solitary tree. Then, as history advances, houses, shops, fast food takeaways, cars and buses fill the screen and the Get Up and Gos are now seen seated in a kitchen eating pizza, chips and hot dogs and drinking fizzy pop. One of the small Get Up and Gos is in the next room playing a videogame on an over-sized television screen. At the point that the voiceover describes the ‘dangerous amounts of fat build-up’ there is a view inside the figure that shows flecks of white ‘fat’ emanating from a central pulsating repository and flowing outwards around the body. The figure itself does not get larger during this, but the ‘fat’ builds up. When the scene cuts back to the room, ‘game over’ flashes on the videogame screen as the message about increased mortality is delivered. At this point one of the larger ‘parent’ Get Up and Gos drops the hot dog it is eating and snatches the smaller ‘child’ figure by the hand whisking it instantly into a neighbouring park. The final section of the voiceover accompanies scenes of multiple Get Up and Gos running around the park, playing sports and eating apples.

The video’s vision of obesity situates it firmly within the discourse of the ‘obesity epidemic’, affirms its reliance on a logic of reproductive futurism and exhibits a number of the anxieties and tensions, which are also central to theories of degeneracy. Before all else the significance of the name ‘Change4Life’ suggests not only long-term

behaviour modification, but also that unless a change *for* life is undertaken, death is all that remains. The video, like much ‘obesity epidemic’ discourse, constructs fat only in terms of disease and death, and in terms of being a ‘cost, or burden’ on both the individual and society (DIUS, 2007b:59). Nowhere is the suggestion that life can be worthwhile, meaningful or ultimately livable as a fat person – it is ‘less of a life’, and one headed swiftly toward death. It is this that compels the active or conscious decision to ‘change’ in order to live, ‘happily, not exactly ever after, but more ever after than we have done’. Such an endeavor echoes Nordau’s demand that action must be taken in respect to degeneracy to, ‘resist for a given time the influence upon us of Nature’s forces of dissolution’ (in Dollimore, 2001:134). Thus, Change4Life reanimates the fear, central to degeneration, that a lack of conscious action will allow the death drive to triumph, while simultaneously having to admit the ultimate futility of such action.

Framing the ‘problem’ of obesity in an evolutionary narrative also allows it to be positioned as a threat to social evolution, mobilising the anxiety that progress itself contains within it the seeds of its own decline. The video reiterates the discourse that obesity is rising because humans are ill-adapted for modern life, an argument previously expounded in the Foresight report. A key passage from the report’s summary states:

There is compelling evidence that humans are predisposed to put on weight by their biology. This has previously been concealed in all but a few, but exposure to modern lifestyles has revealed it in the majority. Although personal responsibility plays a crucial part in weight gain, human biology is being overwhelmed by the effects of today’s ‘obesogenic’ environment, with its abundance of energy dense food, motorised transport and sedentary lifestyles. As a result, the people of the UK are inexorably becoming heavier simply by living in the Britain of today. (DIUS, 2007a:1)

This account hints at the evolutionary inevitability of an ‘obesity epidemic’ that bears a striking similarity to the way degeneracy was understood to be an inexorable outcome of modern life at the turn of the century. Dollimore observes that,

we discern an underlying fear that degeneration is not just a hiccup in evolution, but somehow its logic and destiny... Instinct and the unconscious, far from being the forces which might guarantee evolutionary progress, are prime carriers of degeneracy (2001:132).

In each case social progress has awakened an environment that may ultimately bring about civilisation's downfall. The Change4Life video represents this in the suggestion that primitive man did not get fat due to the energy expended in securing scarce and limited foodstuffs. In the absence of those external/societal checks our inner 'predisposition' can indulge itself to oblivion.

Casting obesity as the inexorable outcome of evolutionary progress also helps explain Change4Life's universalised address. Gard and Wright identify this tendency of 'obesity epidemic' discourse as an 'everyone everywhere' frame where, 'we are all potentially vulnerable and we must take all measures to ensure we do not fall victim' (2005:19). This is evident in the Change4Life brand guidelines which state that, 'at the broadest level, our target audience is therefore everyone in England, as everyone is potentially at risk (DH, 2009b:4). It is also visualized in the video by the Get Up and Gos' supposedly unmarked bodies – as previously mentioned, they have 'no ... weight status', yet in all their permutations none of the figures are visibly 'fat', suggesting it is not only the visibly corpulent who need to take note. Leaving aside the impossibility of representing a humanoid figure without a 'weight status', the Get Up and Gos signify Change4Life's relocation of fat from the outside to the inside of the body. Thus, the video uses the rather euphemistic 'fat build up', complying with the campaign's directive to, 'talk about "fat in the body" rather than "a fat body"' (DH, 2009c:7). This relocation posits 'fat' as a source of inner decay, an internal reservoir of cankerous goo suggesting literally the presence of some dark force lurking inside every individual. The image also echoes what Nordau characterizes as the 'terrifying proximity' of degeneracy to the 'normal' body: 'Not only do those who now carry the seeds of social death within them embody a condition which was once normal and healthy, but even now they remain barely distinguishable from the normal' (Dollimore, 2001:141).

Reframing fat as a source of potential abnormality in everyone enables Change4Life to (re)assert medical authority over the definition and measurement of 'obesity'. This is articulated in HWHL in statements that suggest that not 'everyone', and particularly not parents, can legitimately recognise obesity. It is asserted that, 'because they can't immediately "see" the consequences of unhealthy behaviour ... parents had an inaccurate picture of their own and their children's weight' (DH, 2008b:11–12), and additionally that, 'terms like "clinical" or "morbid" obesity encouraged priority cluster families to disassociate themselves from the issue and think,

“This is nothing to do with me” (DH, 2008b:13). Hence, Change4Life ‘rarely uses the word obesity’ (DH, 2009c:1) but employs clinical measurements, namely BMI, in order to subjugate parents’ (specifically mothers’) knowledges and impose a rational and disembodied regime of regulation.

Herein lies an inherent contradiction at the heart of Change4Life. Despite the strong insinuation that obesity is evolutionarily inevitable and caused by factors far beyond the control of the individual, the ‘change for life’ must occur at an individual level. Thus the campaign’s brand guidelines advise that, ‘in the end it’s down to individuals . . . Change4Life ultimately requires families to change their lifestyles and habits, so the buck stops there’ (DH, 2009b:8). This tension between the structural and individual was also apparent in discourses of degeneration. Dollimore notes that although Nordau feared degeneracy was endemic, he also believed it to be containable – a kind of manageable, external threat that could be identified and mitigated against (2001:136). The means of this mitigation is explained thus;

survival in the face of degeneration requires a vigilant repression of man’s ‘insensate and self-destructive appetites’. Overt, conscious repression is a necessary condition of progress; survival requires nothing less than, ‘the expansion of consciousness and the contraction of the unconscious; the strengthening of will and weakening of impulses; the increase of self-responsibility and the repression of reckless egoism (Dollimore, quoting Nordau, 2001:133).

The ‘cure’ for degeneracy is thus a question of mind over matter, and so, as Evans et al. assert, ‘an ideal, rational subject remains at the heart of what is considered healthy’ (2011:338). Individuals are required to exercise ‘conscious’ self-control to stave off degeneracy in a manner chillingly like that required by public health campaigns like Change4Life.

The centrality of self-control in this analysis also returns the discussion to Murray’s argument that anti-obesity initiatives demonstrate, ‘the tacit assumption that a “healthy”, “slender” role model embodies morality and an ethical lifestyle, thus relegating “obese” subjects to the position of immoral, irresponsible citizens’ (2008:30). A reconsideration of obesity discourse as an instance of reproductive futurism suggests why it is that obesity is subject to such moral opprobrium. It is not just that it signifies an individual failing, but it raises the spectre of the anti-social forces that all must repress

in order to guarantee the survival of civilisation. Consequently, as Nordau elegantly puts it, 'whoever looks upon civilisation as a good, having value and deserving to be defended, must mercilessly crush under his thumb the anti-social vermin' (in Dollimore, 2001:144). What Nordau and Change4Life reveal is the moral superiority of the autonomous rational subject, and its centrality to reproductive futurism. If, as Murray contends, this subject is also privileged in some kinds of fat politics it follows that they too are organised by reproductive futurism and thus counter-productively play a role in reproducing fat's own future abjection. The concluding section of this paper will consider the possibility of fat politics beyond the logic of reproductive futurism.

### **If not this, what?**

In *No Future* Lee Edelman sets out the 'ethical' position of queer in response to its figural relegation to the place of the death drive within the logic of reproductive futurism. He argues that,

queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social . . . Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it (2004:3–4).

What he proposes is that any attempt by queers to disidentify themselves with the death drive in order to imagine a better future (or a future at all) is doomed to 'reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism' (2004:4) and thus queer's abjection. In place of this Edelman advocates that queers accept their figural capacity to undo the social order, and attempt to imagine a, 'political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of . . . reproduction' (2004:27). This is a compelling call to arms for a new kind of queer anti-politics, one that does not reason with those in power to get a seat at the table, or attempt to reverse or resignify existing discourses. Rather, it advocates the uncompromising insistence that 'the future stop here' (2004:31).

Edelman's proposal may also displace the reliance on a stable rational subject at the heart of existing politics. He sees existing politics as compulsively driven to ask 'if not this, what?' (2004:4), which for him results in the production of fixed positions and stable subjects to occupy them. Refusing this compulsion would preclude the demand for a

unified/fixed subject as the actor who effects such politics, thus opening up the possibility of accounting for the ambiguity and intersubjectivity of experience that Murray theorises. However, Edelman's polemical scheme is far from being a blueprint for practical action and is problematic and unclear on a number of fronts. Firstly, as Edelman himself states repeatedly, his is an, 'impossible project' because it aspires to access a sphere that is both outside and unthinkable from within the logic of reproductive futurism. On top of this, such a project has no guarantee of 'success', if success is measured in terms of assuring some 'good' (2004:4). In fact, Edelman says, 'such queerness proposes, in the place of the good, something I want to call "better", though it promises in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing' (2004:5).

These self-acknowledged caveats are not the only potential limitations of Edelman's project. Far less clear is what he means by 'to accede' to the place of the death drive. What is the nature of this accession? Is it something undertaken deliberately, and if so by whom? Edelman adopts an address seemingly to queers (his comment that, 'we might ... do better') that suggests he has fixed some stable and positive subject that refuses the social order. Moreover, actively engaging in 'acceding' or indeed 'embracing', 'refusing' 'accepting' or 'imagining' appears to not only reinscribe a rational, choosing subject, but suggests some sort of action which must be, by Edelman's own logic, future-oriented and thus governed by reproductive futurism. Finally, his abstract construction of 'figures' also makes it unclear whether 'embracing' or 'acceding' are actions he intends actual people to undertake, and if they did how would this effect a 're-figuration' of a symbolic position?

And yet, despite these limitations, Edelman's future-negating, anti-social anti-politics remain an attractive proposition for those who want to willfully misread his instruction to cease asking 'if not this, what?', and seek out new 'whats'. In his discussion of Edelman, Robert Teixeira questions whether works like *No Future* should be translatable into practical action (2009:155). Edelman has contributed a valuable critique of heteronormativity, which as the discussion above has shown, is also useful for an understanding of fatness. However, Teixeira also argues that,

*No Future* can lead us toward fundamental questions about the kind of social order we want to affirm and what possibilities for becoming we enable and foreclose when we produce specific intelligibilities about who we think we are and what we are capable of doing (2009:159).

Some of these possibilities are already evident in fat activism, and can be read precisely as future-negating politics. The activist ‘gang’ known as the Chubsters are one such example. Formed in 2004, the Chubsters are the brainchild of the London-based fat activist and scholar Charlotte Cooper and are a vicious, fat, queer girl gang one does not have to be vicious, fat, queer or a girl to join (Cooper, 2009:28). The Chubsters are not organised in any traditional political sense, nor are they interested in pursuing a specific set of aims. They operate transnationally and occupy a space somewhere between fantasy (or nightmare) and ‘reality’. They are not invested in convincing anyone that fat people are healthy, beautiful or normal, in fact the members’ profiles on the gang’s website vividly illustrate their rejection of such norms in favour of emphasising fighting prowess, weapons proficiency and the general likelihood they will ‘fuck you up’ if you ‘mess with’ them (Chubsters, 2004–11). They are fighting, but not for the children.

It is certainly possible to read the Chubsters as a refusal of both more established fat politics and of reproductive futurism more generally. The openness of membership criteria disturbs the notion of a fixed ‘fat’ political identity, whose boundaries would ultimately require policing, and suggests a ‘queering’ of identity not unlike Edelman’s. Furthermore, when Judith Halberstam argues that what anti-social politics needs are, ‘contemporary moments of alternative political struggle and high and low cultural productions of a funky, nasty, over the top and thoroughly accessible queer negativity’ (2008:154), the Chubsters appear to fit that bill. However, even in their willingness to embrace the negative the Chubsters cannot avoid being, at some level, engaged in the production of a future. Gang leader “The Beefer” warns that, ‘it won’t be long until fat freaks like us rule the world’ (Chubsters, 2004–11), thus indicating a projected future and an implicit means of getting there. This appears to be the point at which Edelman’s argument precludes consideration of what happens when future-negating politics are enacted. By his logic the Chubsters have failed to refuse the social order and are thus recuperated back into reproductive futurism. His reasoning effectively closes down the possibility that, as Teixeira argues, ‘all acts (and act we must), contain both a utopian moment that contests norms, potentiating a becoming-other, and a line of power that recapitulates hegemonic teleologies. Both moments exist in the logic of practice’ (2009:155). The future envisioned by the Chubsters is a very different one from that modeled by Foresight in their intricately projected scenarios (DIUS, 2007b) or the one that Change4Life attempts to shape, but Edelman’s theory seems

unable to distinguish between them, nor separate what, in Edelman's terms, might be 'better' about one of them.

In conclusion then, a recognition of how reproductive futurism organises both obesity discourse and fat politics, as outlined in this paper, can be invaluable in opening up the possibility of multiple queer futures for fat which, despite their apparent anti-sociality, may in fact offer some of us more of a life.

## Notes

1. Edelman is one of many theorists to highlight the proximity of queer sex and death. Indeed it is specifically the non-reproductive nature of homosexual sex that Edelman identifies as constituting its destructive and anti-social character. See also Bersani (1987) and Watney (1997) on the construction of homosexuals as future-negating in relation to AIDS. Furthermore Edelman's psychoanalytic orientation makes his iteration of 'queer' appear ahistorical and universal, yet it is clear that the kinds of homosexual practice he equates with queer are historical and locatable as the products of specific intersections of gender, homophobia, class and race in the contemporary West.
2. Fat's disruption, or queering, of normative gender is central to Murray's overall argument. She states, 'I would argue that beneath the authority of medical language ... lie the same anxieties about normative (female) embodiment' (2008:4). I agree and though the discussion here does not focus specifically on these anxieties I develop this argument elsewhere (see White, 2012).
3. At the time of writing Change4Life is still operational, though the Coalition government have announced plans to withdraw funding from the initiative and look to the private sector to fund it in the future (see Lansley, 2010).
4. The certainty with which the claims about disease and mortality are made here are not only misleading (Evans, 2009:32) but in direct contravention of Change4Life's own language guidelines (DH, 2009c:6).

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