Chapter 15
Women Can't Win:
Gender Irony and the E-Politics of The Biggest Loser

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ABSTRACT

This chapter employs irony as a tool to make clearer the workings of one form of the e-politics of food, namely, the structural food oppression linked to the weight and shape of the female body. The authors argue that the e-politics of the weight and shape of the female body is one of the most important incarnations of the e-politics of food and one of the most vigorously contested. This chapter examines many forms of public discourse and e-politics, from Bing to Tumblr, from Huffington Post to the Mirror (UK), from TV news in Lacrosse, Wisconsin to The Times of India, from the documentary film Killing Us Softly to the book You Are What You Eat, and from WebMD to Twitter, in the end, with a central focus on Rachel Frederickson on the TV show, The Biggest Loser. The critical rhetorical analysis finds some support for the Women Can't Win thesis. Women are in a Catch-22 situation, trapped between fat-shaming and skinny-shaming.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter employs irony as a tool to make clearer the workings of one form of the e-politics of food, namely, the structural food oppression linked to the weight and shape of the female body. The authors argue that the e-politics of the weight and shape of the female body is one of the most important incarnations of the e-politics of food and one of the most vigorously contested. As a window into this realm of the international e-politics of food, the study focuses on Rachel Frederickson, the 2014 winner of the *The Biggest Loser*, an American television reality show that now has several international adaptions.

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To support the argument that the weight and shape of the female body is an incarnation of the e-politics of food, the analysis points to the broad acceptance of the statement: "You are what you eat." This claim about the food-body relationship may have deep religious roots but, in the modern era, it usually is attributed to Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1826), Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach (1864), or Victor Lindlahr (1942). Today, *obesity* is one of the dominant themes in the e-politics of food, suggesting that both what and how much one eats are contentious sites in public discourse.

A cartoon attack on Michele Obama, an advocate for healthy school lunches, demonstrates just how contentious this discourse can be. A mocking *Breitbart* cartoon (2011) portrays Michelle Obama devouring hamburgers while saying, "Pass the bacon." Even though this cartoon commits the *ad hominem* fallacy, it reveals the passion underlying the e-politics of food, as well as the gender irony. Michele Obama has been praised for being "fit" and attacked for being "fat." In the shorthand refrain of this essay: Women Can't Win.[1]

The controversy surrounding Rachel Frederickson on *The Biggest Loser* proves the point. *The Biggest Loser* originally was an American television reality show that debuted on NBC October 19, 2004. There now are different variations of *The Biggest Loser* around the world. The show focuses on "obese people competing to win a cash prize by losing the highest percentage of weight relative to their initial weight" (*The Biggest Loser* wiki). The central irony in this reality TV show is contained in the title. In ordinary language, "the biggest loser" is a phrase with derogatory connotations, as it describes a poor example of a human being. However, the TV show transforms the connotation of "loser" into "winner" by reframing the context into that of success in losing weight.

This transformation suggests that only in the context of weight does "loser" move from a derogatory to a complimentary term. However, in an odd form of gender irony, women cannot "win." "Winner" Rachel Frederickson, who began the 2014 show weighing 260 pounds, lost 155 pounds and was then accused of being too thin at the end of the season. According to Dr. Brenda Weber, professor of Gender Studies at Indiana University:

A lot of people feel like it's unfair and inconsistent to say someone is too fat, and now say they're too thin, like there's no place for a person to win … especially a woman. The obese person and the anorexic person actually trigger very similar kinds of reactions, and it's about these extremes that get written on the body, and they both code as rule- breakers…

The Rachel Frederickson controversy, then, is at the center of this study. But gender irony in the e-politics of food has much broader implications.

This topic is of broader significance due to of the prominent role of food talk in contemporary public discourse (Ferguson, 2014; Frye, 2012; Nestle, 2002/2013; Pollan, 2006, 2009, 2013). One of the best examples of the politics of food can be seen in the national debate over the passage and the subsequent repeal of the so-called "fat tax" in Denmark (Strom, 2012). This case illustrates the complexity of food politics, located as it is at the intersection of nutrition, health, budgets/revenues, business, consumerism, politics, and social policy. Moreover, the tragic toll that structural food oppression takes on women demands attention from those who analyze the e-politics of food.

While the double-bind that women face ("Women Can't Win") is not a novel subject, the use of irony as a tool to help us to understand the e-politics of food breaks some new ground (Hahn, 2015). Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1991) initiated this sort of discussion when she wrote about "The Three Paradoxes of Choice" (p. 35) and the "double pathologizing" (p. 40) faced by women. Female bodies that previously