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RUNNING FOR THE FUTURE: REPRODUCTIVE FUTURITY IN CANADIAN BREAST CANCER SURVIVORSHIP DISCOURSE

RACHAEL PACK

Abstract: *This article critically examines the proliferation of images of youthful breast-cancer survivors within Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation's (CBCF) promotional materials, explicating how such images of survivorship are inextricably tied up with the (re)production of gender, sexual, temporal, and citizenship norms. Focusing specifically on the 2013 Run for the Future campaign, I trace how the figure of the prepubescent child and narratives of emerging (hetero)sexuality operate to project a vision of the future, which is marked by the inevitability of both breast cancer and fractured nuclear families. I consider how such imaginations of an unstable future are mobilized to promote participation in the Run for the Cure (the philanthropic event promoted by CBCF's multimedia campaign). Drawing on insights from queer theory, I highlight how the youthful survivor subject is embedded within a discourse of reproductive futu-*

Resume : *Cet article examine de façon critique la prolifération d'images de jeunes survivantes du cancer du sein parmi les documents de la Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation (CBCF), et explique comment de telles images de survie sont inextricablement liées à la reproduction des normes de genre, de sexualité, de temporalité et de citoyenneté. En me concentrant surtout sur la campagne Run for the Future de 2013, je retrace comment l'image de l'enfant prépubère et les récits d'(hétéro)sexualité naissante agissent pour projeter une vision du futur qui est marquée à la fois par l'inévitabilité du cancer du sein et par celle de la fracturation de la famille nucléaire. J'étudie comment ces images d'un futur précaire sont employées pour encourager la participation à la campagne Run for the Cure (un événement philanthropique parrainé par la campagne multimédia de la CBCF). A la lumière de la théorie Queer, je souligne comment le sujet de la jeune survivante s'inscrit dans un discours de futurité re-*

rity in which her nascent citizenship is inextricable from her projected motherhood and heterosexuality. I suggest that the campaign constructs breast cancer as a disease that threatens the integrity and continuance of the heterosexual, nuclear family, and thus constitutes an unavoidable risk that must be addressed by citizens in the name of the future. Ultimately, I argue that participation in the Run for the Cure is styled not as a strategy to protect girls and future women, but rather to safeguard an imagined, desired heterosexual future.

productive dans lequel la citoyenneté nascente est inséparablement liée aux attentes de sa maternité et son hétérosexualité. Je suggère que la campagne présente le cancer du sein comme une maladie qui menace l'intégrité et la survie de la famille nucléaire hétérosexuelle et constitue ainsi un risque inévitable auquel les citoyens doivent faire face au nom du futur. Finalement, j'avance que la participation à Run for the Cure est représentée non pas comme une stratégie destinée à protéger les filles et futures femmes, mais plutôt pour sauvegarder un futur hétérosexuel imaginé et souhaité.

INTRODUCTION

I'm proud of my daughter. As a toddler, she was strong and confident, so of course, when she was a teenager, we argued a lot (sigh)... But she grew into this woman who could accomplish anything. Now, it's my turn to be strong for her. Now that she has breast cancer. I'm running for my daughter. (Godsall and Diller, "Delia")

This passage, from a 2013 promotional video for Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation's (CBCF) annual CIBC Run for the Cure, may appear at first to be unremarkable, similar even to the dozens of public narratives about breast cancer and philanthropic giving that we encounter. However, Delia—the narrator at the heart of this drama—is remarkable; she is a child. The advertisement collapses time and asks the viewer to imagine pre-teen Delia's future as a mother with a daughter of her own, a daughter that has breast cancer. Delia speaks in a soft, distinctly childlike voice of a future—her future—that has not yet been realized with a chilling certainty; her daughter will have breast cancer. In response to this unknowable

truth, Delia pledges to participate in the Run for the Cure and to do her part, as a mother and a citizen, to bring a “future without breast cancer” into being.



Figure 1, Delia

I came across Delia and her impossible narrative of motherhood and civic participation while conducting my doctoral research, which traced how breast-cancer survivorship discourse operates to shape and reinforce our ideas about what it means to be a woman and responsible citizen. While my study was concerned with the discursive construction of adult breast-cancer survivor subjectivities, I found that children figured prominently in the philanthropic texts produced by the CBCF. While children were frequently present in my archive of texts, none of them were quite like Delia. These children were silent figures, more objects than actors. Their physical and relational proximity to their mothers was designed to draw on the heartstrings of viewers and remind them that the breast-cancer survivors at the heart of these advertisements were first and foremost mothers. So, imagine my surprise when Delia spoke of herself as an agentic—if impossible—subject. This discrepant text demanded investigation.

Delia’s video is part of a 2013 video and print campaign united under the slogan “Run for the Future.” Each of the 8 print and video advertisements in this series features a child who speaks in the voice

of their future adult self about their heterosexual family that has been disrupted by the breast-cancer diagnosis of a daughter or wife. This disorienting campaign is organized around a vision of the future that is suspended in a complex temporal arrangement that blurs the boundaries of the future and the present. The temporal ambiguity threaded through the campaign operates as a powerful discursive strategy that unsettles the viewer and appeals to their sense of morality and responsible citizenship. While both types of child figures—the silent and the speaking—are invoked in breast-cancer philanthropic discourse to construct participation as a moral imperative, the meaning attached to each of these figures is profoundly different.

In this article, I take the figure of the speaking child featured in the 2013 Run for the Future campaign as the object of my analytic attention. Drawing on insights from queer theory, I trace how the figure of the prepubescent child and their narrative of emerging (hetero)sexuality operates to project a vision of the future, which is marked by the inevitability of both breast cancer and fractured nuclear families. I consider how such imaginations of the future of the Canadian nation state are mobilized to promote both participation in the philanthropic event and reproductive futurity. In exploring the temporal dimensions of this unique survivorship discourse, I highlight how the youthful survivor subject is embedded within a discourse of reproductive futurity in which her nascent citizenship is inextricable from her projected motherhood and heterosexuality. I suggest that the campaign constructs breast cancer as a disease that threatens the integrity and continuance of the heterosexual, nuclear family, and thus constitutes an unavoidable risk that must be addressed by citizens in the name of the future. Ultimately, I argue that participation in the Run for the Cure, in this campaign, is styled not as a strategy to protect girls and future women, but rather to safeguard an imagined, desired heterosexual future.

BREAST-CANCER PHILANTHROPY

The Run for the Future campaign is situated within the context of the North American breast-cancer philanthropy, a thriving form of health-consumer activism that calls upon corporations and private citizens to address the problem of breast cancer through the donation of money and time and the purchase of sponsored products (King 46). The unprecedented success of these charitable campaigns and the philanthropic organizations behind them—most notably the American Susan G. Komen Foundation and the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation—are in large part due to the cheerful, optimistic pink imagery that has become an inextricable part of breast-cancer culture (Ehrenreich 47). This pinkwashing has rendered breast cancer as a palatable disease and a cause that is “blissfully without controversy” (Goldman 70). Pinkwashing and the relentless hope and optimism threaded through philanthropic campaigns has effectively transformed breast cancer into a “rite of passage” and a “normal marker in the life cycle, like menopause or greying hair” (Ehrenreich 48). The unremarkability of breast cancer is particularly dangerous, as it operates to constrain women’s possibilities for action by delegitimizing responses of anger, distrust, and critical engagement and reinforcing both traditional femininity and paternalistic relationships with biomedicine (Dubriwny 50).

Breast-cancer philanthropy and mass-participation events like the Run for the Cure have come to occupy a significant place in North-American breast-cancer culture and play a key role in shaping public perceptions of the disease. These events have also transformed the landscape of breast-cancer research, generating tens of millions of dollars each year for cure-oriented biomedical research (Sulik 12). While corporate sponsorship supported the creation of a multi-billion-dollar, breast-cancer research industry, this prominence has come at a high cost—namely its activist potential. Maya Goldenberg argues that, while contemporary breast-cancer activism and cure-oriented fundraising campaigns appear on the surface to be concerned with improving the conditions for women’s health, these mainstream campaigns actually operate to support and reinforce the

status-quo through an “unquestioning support of the medical model” (151). In effect, the current state of breast-cancer organizing restricts women’s field of possibilities for participation and action to the consumer realm and the purchasing of supposedly socially conscious products (King 46). Such acts of consumerism are framed as activism, and meaningful productive ways to address the problem of breast cancer, and thus have become central components of responsible citizenship (Goldenberg 158).

CANADIAN BREAST CANCER FOUNDATION

The CBCF, founded in 1986, is currently the largest charitable funder of breast-cancer research in Canada. In concert with its corporate sponsor, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC), CBCF has organized and administrated the Run for the Cure since 1992. Over the years, the Run for the Cure has become the largest, single-day, volunteer-run breast-cancer fundraising event in Canada. The Run is currently held in 63 communities across Canada and attracted 97,040 participants in 2016, raising over 17 million dollars (“About the CIBC Run”). Since the inaugural event in 1992, the Run for the Cure has maintained a strong public presence, through widespread advertising campaigns (e.g., through websites, billboards, bus-shelter ads, television, YouTube, Facebook, and so on) that call for awareness and fundraising. The widely popular Run for the Cure and the CBCF remain the most public and recognizable face of breast cancer in Canada.

In my larger study, I illustrated how CBCF promotional materials over the past decade have almost exclusively represented breast-cancer survivors as young, beautiful women, and often mothers (Pack). I argued that this intense focus on youth and vitality produced the figure of the *Universal Woman At-Risk*, who functions as a symbol of national urgency and constructs breast cancer as problem that must be responded to with conspicuous acts of personal generosity. I suggested that the proliferation of images of young, seemingly healthy breast-cancer survivors enacted a cultural disarmament, disrupting the idea that youth is a time of protection from disease and that the

cultivation of health offers a protective shield against the disease. This discursive severing of youth from the expectation of health interrupts cultural conceptions of the life course, enabling the possibility of disease, disability, and death to puncture the everyday. More simply put, the broader archive of CBCF texts address all women as survivors and presumes the emergence of the disease in their future. Counter to public-health narratives of risk reduction (Conway et al. 758), the disease is figured as entirely inescapable. This strategy of address underpins the central marketing strategy of the CBCF and is also visible in the Run for the Future campaign.

This notion of *universal vulnerability* is central to my reading of the Run for the Future campaign. Through its collapsing of time, the advertisements in this series further expands the field of breast-cancer survivorship to incorporate women and girls who have yet to come into maturity or existence, predetermining their diseased futures. This is highly visible in Delia's prediction of her own daughter's present/future diagnosis. The temporal expansion that enables Delia to be simultaneously a child and mother of an adult daughter is made possible through the queering of time, in which both her and her daughter's future have already been destabilized by civic neglect of their reproductive futurism. Time, in this sense, is more than the organized passage of minutes and hours; it is a socially constructed system that operates to regulate, direct, and compel bodies towards particular—"normal"—ends (Freeman 18), which the advertisements suggest civic inaction has already compromised, leading to "queer" dead ends. Adopting this notion of "queer time"—as time that has been directed away from reproductive ends—enables a critical examination of the temporal trajectories and orientations in which the orating child and their pre-diseased loved one are implicated, further revealing the subtle and complex ways that breast-cancer survivor subjectivity is produced and towards what ends.

CHRONONORMATIVE NARRATIVES

The temporal trajectory that underlies the narrative in the video advertisement *Sean* is decidedly normative. *Sean* features a young blonde-haired boy sitting on a swing in a park. Gazing intently at the viewer he states:

I love my wife. We met in fourth year on campus. It was love at first sight; she'd say second sight. We got married not too long after graduation. Last October we got the bad news. The doctor found a lump in her breast. I'm running for my wife (Godsall and Diller, "Sean").

Sean's narration of an anticipated future in the present, like Delia's, produces a disorientating temporality. The first portion of his narrative maps neatly onto an idealized, anticipatory life trajectory marked by heterosexual romance, advanced education, and family formation. This trajectory is reflective of the dreams and aspirations that many Canadian parents and families hold for their children—the reproduction of the nuclear, heterosexual family and the cultivation of a middle-class life.



Figure 2, Sean

While the desire to cultivate a timeline such as Sean's may appear to be natural, this "naturalness" is an effect of the socially constructed

rhythms of time that work to shape bodies into forms that synchronize with larger structural and political goals (i.e., capitalism), thus enabling citizens to participate in dominant forms of sociality (Freeman 18). As an effect of chrononormativity (Freeman 5), bodies, like Sean's, that can ease into the desired tempo are incorporated into the fabric of dominant culture and rendered intelligible citizens. This normative timeline, in turn, binds bodies to the rhythm of capitalism and heteronormative notions of the nuclear family and reproduction. Chrononormativity extends beyond the level of individual and infiltrates the national, producing a chronobiopolitical society in which the state and its institutions fuse disciplined bodies to narratives of progress and teleological strategies of living, such as marriage, reproduction, and the accumulation of wealth (Luciano 9). To this effect, Elizabeth Freeman argues that, "in the eyes of the state, the sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments is what it means to have a life at all" (5).

The alignment of the first act of Sean's narrative—heterosexual love, post-secondary education, and marriage—with the values of the Canadian, chronobiopolitical state renders him as an intelligible citizen. It is through his participation in these teleological strategies that he and his unnamed wife come to matter to the viewer and the nation. It is precisely Sean's productivity that makes the disruption of his anticipated life course tragic. The emergence of breast cancer and the possibility of losing his wife to the disease threaten to sever his chrononormative life trajectory. This tragedy, however, is made queer by the collapsed temporality of Sean's narrative. Sean, a child, is faced with the prospect of losing his wife, with whom he fell in "love with at first sight," years before he will meet her (Godsall and Diller, "Sean"). His fairy-tale, campus romance and heterosexual family are at risk before they can ever be realized. This pre-emptive interruption of Sean's future has two important discursive effects. First, the presentation of his nameless wife's breast-cancer diagnosis as pre-determined reflects the incorporation of all women and girls (refigured as latent survivors) into the expanded field of breast-cancer survivorship. Second, the curtailing of Sean's (re)productive timeline is made politically compelling through his child body, con-

structuring financial and civic support of the CBCF as a moral imperative.

THE AGENTIC CHILD

The driving force in the drama of breast cancer in the campaign is the child at risk of an interrupted future. It is the plight of the child and potential curtailment of their normative life course that signals the urgent need for civic action and public generosity. The centrality of "the Child", the figure that drives this campaign, is reflective of the "reproductive futurism" that Lee Edelman asserts underpins the heart of heteronormative culture and politics in the Western world (21). Reproductive futurity and its intensive focus on the Child facilitates the reproduction of society itself without difference and, in so doing, upholds and reproduces gender, citizenship, sexual, and temporal norms (Edelman 21). Of course, the Child invoked in this campaign is figurative rather than "real." The advertisements *Delia* and *Sean* do not call for public investment in the futures of either child or their future families; it is the future itself that requires investment. This political symbol—the Child—is a placeholder for the future and its innocence; adult citizens are charged with the responsibility of ensuring its protection. This responsibility to safeguard the Child and the next generation of innocence is integral to reproductive futurity. From standpoint of heteronormativity, abandoning the Child is akin to embracing the death drive (Edelman 27).

The audience addressed by the Run for the Future campaign, however, is already accused of abandoning the Child. Their neglect and civic inaction has necessitated this queer collapse of time and the deathly acceleration of the child's life course. The jarring juxtaposition of childhood innocence and the responsibilities of secure citizenship and reproductive futurity are visible in the print ad *Elijah*. The advertisement features a young, black boy with wearing a slate gray t-shirt. Below his relaxed, half-smiling face, the bold statement, "I'M RUNNING FOR MY WIFE" is printed in white, childlike font.

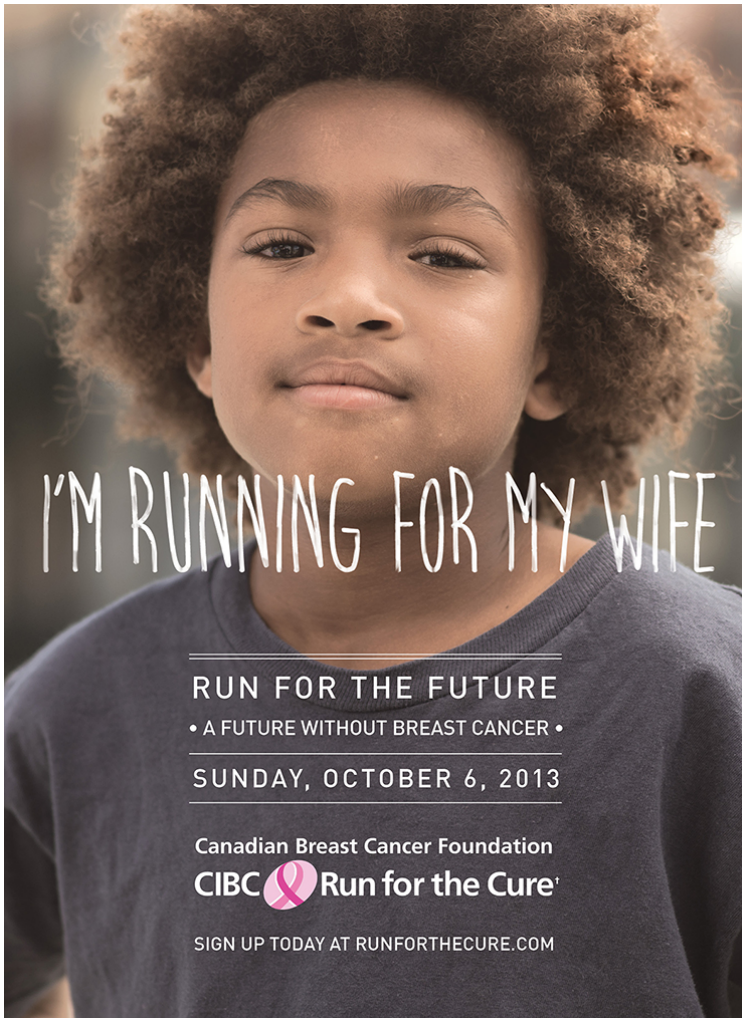


Figure 3, Elijah

This white font lays bare the collapse of Elijah's childhood innocence, adult agency, and (hetero)sexuality brought about by the lack of philanthropic effort. He, a child made responsible before his time, is left to take up the role of protecting the future through civic partic-

ipation. This text at once admonishes the narcissism and irresponsibility of Canadian citizens for their failure to invest in the future and acknowledges the nascent sexuality and agency of children. We, the viewers, are asked to suspend disbelief and view the children simultaneously as innocent, non-sexual beings in need of our protection, and as active participants in politics exercising agency in the name of their own futurity. In so doing, the text produces a strange form of queer time that is appropriated and deployed towards heteronormative ends. But what remains is the fleeting ephemera of childhood agency and sexuality; these traces offer queer possibilities that might subvert or at least complicate the logic of reproductive futurity and the imagined Canadian state.

In contrast to these fleeting possibilities, the heteronormative conservatism of the campaign is laid bare in the absence of the woman for whom the Child pledges to run. Nameless, faceless, she is spectral survivor—a mere idea, rather than a person worthy of investment. Strikingly, personal generosity and participation in the Run for the Cure are disarticulated from any sense of anger or injustice at women's suffering, the high rate of breast-cancer diagnoses, and the devastating effects of biomedical treatments on women's bodies and lives. In other words, the diagnoses of (future) wives and daughters in the campaign are not made tragic because women themselves are suffering, but rather because of the potential severance of their nuclear family and their reproductive possibilities. Suffering, in this campaign, is articulated through concerns about the potential effects of the disease on the nuclear family. In this construction, women's lives come to matter solely through their intimate, reproductive connections to others. In this context, participation in the Run for the Cure can be read as a citizenship practice that articulates one's commitment to the nation by protecting and preserving both women's traditional roles (i.e., as mothers and wives) and the nuclear family—the site through which new citizens are produced and nurtured.

A UNIVERSAL CHILD

The children featured in the Run for the Future campaign appear in all respects to be ordinary; there is nothing remarkable about their appearance. Their clothing, styling, bodies, and locations (i.e., bedroom, park, and so on) are all reflective of childhood. Their ordinary appearance tempers their adult-like patterns of speech and the content of their impossible narrative. Taken together, the children read as uncanny; they are strange and yet familiar. The unsettling ordinariness of these children is by design, as Stockton argues that “normative strangeness” is central to the Child and accounts for its entanglement of whiteness and middle-class sensibilities. This entanglement signals innocence: as Stockton reminds us, “it is a privilege to need to be protected and thus have a childhood” (514).

Although the Child is often imagined to be white and middle-class, the children featured within this campaign are racially diverse. While Delia and Elijah are visually non-white, their narratives of heterosexual marriage and reproduction align neatly with that of Sean. Any difference produced by the racial diversity of the children is thus obscured by the (re)productive teleological markers that pepper their narratives. The uniform timeline that runs through their stories suggests that difference is permissible as long as it fits within the chronobiopolitical order. This sentiment maps neatly onto the Canadian national myth of diversity, inclusion, and equality for all. Echoing Jose Munoz, this single narrative suggests that the only “sovereign princes of futurity” are those that can synchronize their bodies and lives to matchup with a normative timeline (95).

The unremarkable appearance of Delia, Sean, and Elijah and the signals of middle-class whiteness present in their narrative transform them into a compelling visual placeholder for the “average” Canadian child. Effectively, Delia, Elijah, and Sean signal a “universal child”: a figure that communicates ubiquitous vulnerability to breast cancer and suggests that no one is safe from the potentially devastating effects of the disease. This universal figure also functions to incorporate both male and female children into the field of breast-cancer sur-

vivorship, highlighting their *mutual vulnerability*. While female children are rendered vulnerable through their bodies—the eventual sites for disease emergence—male children are made vulnerable through their assumed intimate connections to their future female partners. Significantly, what are made vulnerable in this configuration are not so much the bodies of girls and future women, but the stability and continuance of the structure of the heterosexual nuclear family.

The dismissal of the material bodies of girls and future women is reflected in the campaign's obfuscation of difference. It is well established that social determinants including race, poverty, and social exclusion are key factors that shape the health and well being of the population (Ratcliff 2). Canada has seen a significant reduction in breast-cancer deaths in the past two decades; early detection of the disease facilitated by widespread screening programs is often credited with this reduction (Jatoi and Miller 252). While on the surface it appears that Canadian women are reaping the benefits of public-health interventions and increased awareness, these population-level statistics cover over some important disparities. Specifically, inadequate and inequitable access to screening is a substantial problem in Canada that disproportionately affects racialized, immigrant, and poor women (Vahabi et al. 679). As a result, these populations have some of the lowest rates of screening utilization and concerning disparities in diagnosis, treatment, and survival exist (Kerner et al. 161). Ensuring equity in breast-cancer care requires more than an outpouring of public generosity; an understanding of the broader structures that yield such disparities is vital. But to recognize that the structure of the Canadian state creates and supports inequality would puncture our national fantasy of equality, inclusion, and multiculturalism. Furthermore, it would demand that we recognize the humanity and value of bodies that do not or cannot synchronize to the normative timeline.

REPRODUCTIVE FUTURITY AND SURVIVORSHIP

As I have argued, the Run for the Future Campaign frames breast cancer as a problem that comes to matter on the national stage through its anticipated disruption of future nuclear families and the heteronormative fabric of Canadian life. The ways that breast cancer is attached to the heterosexual nuclear family in the Run for the Future campaign supports Lauren Berlant's argument that the conditions of women's citizenship are increasingly attached to reproduction and futurity (148). Within this discourse of citizenship, the imagined future that women are charged with bringing into being is one that does not belong to them. Women thus are simply vehicles for (rather than subjects of) the future; the temporal trajectory made available for women is a circular trajectory of birth, marriage, motherhood, and death.

The homophobic implications of this imagining of the future are clear. The vision of a future without breast cancer promised through the CBCF discourse is a heterosexual future in which women's citizenship value is derived from her connections to the nuclear family unit. Further, the youthful breast-cancer survivor invoked within the Run for the Future campaign is a subject firmly situated in reproductive futurity. Her status as wife and potential future mother are central to her value as a citizen about whom we should care and whose future we should attempt to secure through acts of personal generosity. Glaringly absent from this campaign are women independent from the nuclear family—they are outside the boundaries of intelligibility. The non-appearance of women who defy heteronormative and patriarchal norms speaks volumes; these are women whose lives and futures are not worthy of public or personal investment. These women are not visible as citizens within the CBCF's construction of the survivor and its imaginings of the Canadian nation.

What I suggest in this brief analysis is that the Run for the Future campaign operates to do more than appeal to Canadians' sense of moral and civic responsibility and encourage an outpouring of personal generosity to create a "future without breast cancer." Specifically, this campaign and the figure of the Child operate to invoke anxi-

ety in the viewer by threatening the reproductive futurity of the nation and leverage this anxiety into philanthropic giving. Ultimately, this discourse on breast cancer calls upon citizens to act in the interest of securing the continuation of hegemonic society in which only certain bodies and forms of suffering matter, and only certain women (and children) are recognizable and intelligible as at risk and deserving of protection.

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IMAGE NOTES

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