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Keeping the True Self Alive through Intelligent Resistance: Opposing the Cultural Crusade for Female Physical Perfection through Media Literacy Education

Since growing into my womanly curves I've never felt that the way my body exists in the world was simple. Indeed, the relationship between my body and the perceptions of men and women alike struck me as deeply mysterious and mysteriously upsetting one day my sophomore year of high school, when I looked around and realized how so many of the girls I'd grown up with had shrunk into frailer, tighter ghosts of their sinewy elementary school frames. I silently realized, "Oh, we are supposed to be really skinny." Of course I had encountered this pressure long before, in the middle school cafeteria and bunks of sleep-away camp, where we girls swam in endless discussions of thigh girth, forbidden late night feasts, and Pilates DVD's. For a long time, perhaps until this moment, I never really thought of myself as being part of these discussions. I was sure I was too bookish and coarse- inside and out- to ever be considered beautiful; while I worried about the consequences of my fate as "the ugly one," I was also determined to make peace with it, and thus left all the vocal worrying to other girls who maybe had a shot at achieving loveliness, devoting myself to the cult of books rather than of beauty. I also had a secret weapon- I was naturally skinny, like my mom, who always got praise for her slender limbs and tiny waist from all the other moms. Perhaps I would not be desirable to boys, but I would be envied by girls.

On this day, however, midway through high school, I realized I could no longer rest, comfortable and complacent, in my genetic gifts. Sitting in the cafeteria I made a comment about how, "I don't need to watch what I eat! I'm thin for Chrissakes." My

good friend looked down and said nothing, and something in her silence scared me. This is when I thought for the first time to look at how the girls around me looked- how would I compare to them? Once a bony little child, I now bore on my body the natural developments of womanhood, and so my long-held sense that I was exempt from the task of monitoring my measurements, shattered. I suddenly knew I had lost incredible tenth grade power and social status by failing to prevent the rounding of my breasts and stomach.

So began a period of feeling vaguely uneasy about my body and always *sorta*, *kinda* wanting to look different, be thinner, like the buzz of a refrigerator- perpetually whirring, too normal and inconsequential to really think about. Back in that middle school camp bunk I learned my nose was too big and my hair too unruly, but now, in addition, my thighs were thunderous and my bloated stomach unfit for viewing. Worst of all, my new chest spilled out of every bikini and bra in my drawers. Literally, I began to carry a new weight on my heart that only got bigger and bigger. My new silhouette made me feel unwieldy, obnoxious, *fat*. While I never dieted or actively tried to lose weight, I did believe that if somehow I woke up tinier, life would be much better and simpler.

Going through the day with a body that felt fundamentally different from the one I had known for the last sixteen years, I had to figure out how to arrange and package it so that I might still feel like me. This physical presence seemed to change everything and, without my consent, overwhelm the person I felt to be inside. Quiet, shy, and more comfortable dreaming up impossible trysts with rock stars than flirting at dances, I worried my voluptuous figure would send the wrong message. *I'm not cool or adventurous enough for this body*, I thought. *I really just want to share the company of a*

*freckled boy who will do puzzles with me!* The idea that I would be the automatic object of sexual desire by just about any heterosexual man agitated me, while at the very same time I desperately craved proof of my desirability. Walking down the street or school hallways I hid my curves as best I could, and hot, prickly embarrassment ran down my spine if I felt eyes following my body; yet just as often, bitter tears stained my face as I wondered, *Why can't I be one of those hot girls who gets attention? Will I ever be beautiful and seen, maybe even admired, by the rest of the world?* Indeed, I demonstrate here the universal human desire, emergent during strange, tender adolescence, to be in our lives the person we are in our hearts; to know that others value us in all our glorious individuality. What I find significant and worthy of critical investigation is the deep-seated sense that my inner gifts- my curious mind and kind spirit- would be irrelevant and ignored if they did not come wrapped in pretty packaging.

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How is it possible that I could be so preoccupied with appearance having grown up in the nineties, when “Girl Power” slogans flooded the cultural marketplace and girls were encouraged to play football right alongside boys in gym class? Contrary to what many might expect given the accomplishments of the feminist movement of the 1960's and 70's, women in our culture remain fundamentally judged for their physical appearance. In fact, many would argue that because of a variety of social, cultural, and technological forces at work, in many ways the culturally mandated drive for female attractiveness has become more intense and debilitating than ever.

In every historical period, not just our own, girls have struggled to define themselves within and against the contours of femininity. Often this attempt to make

sense of cultural definitions of what is properly female begins in adolescence. Simone de Beauvoir believed it is during this time that “girls realize that men have the power and that their only power comes from consenting to become submissive adored objects. They do not suffer from the penis envy Freud postulated, but from power envy” (Pipher, 21).

According to psychologist Mary Pipher, girls sense this great power at stake and thus experience a conflict between “their autonomous selves, and their need to be feminine, their status as human beings and their vocation as females” (Pipher 21, 22). This splitting of the self into the authentic and the socially acceptable creates a psychological, spiritual crisis in young girls, one of whom describes feeling like “a perfectly good carrot that everyone is trying to turn into a rose” (Pipher, 22); as a carrot, she has a bright, orange color and leafy top, but when carved into a rose, she withers and turns brown. Once talkative, energetic, endlessly curious little girls become shy, depressive, deferential, and self-critical adolescents. Studies show that their math, science, and IQ scores drop while their speech turns tentative and their relationships fragile. How do we explain these startling changes? In training for the feminine role, girls

are expected to sacrifice the parts of themselves that our culture considers masculine...and to shrink their souls down to a petite size. Claudia Bepko and Jo-Ann Krestan call it “indoctrination into the code of goodness,” which they argue is essentially unchanged since the fifties. The rules remain the same: be attractive, be a lady, be unselfish and of service, make relationships work and be competent without complaint (Pipher, 39).

What all of these constructs of the proper feminine personality have in common is that they turn girls into objects of others’ lives rather than subjects of their own lives, forever serving an external expectation rather than listening to their own internal voices; girls stop being and start seeming.

Looking back at my adolescent years, these theories help me understand my

seemingly incoherent desires to be gazed at and to hide, of aching to be beautiful while despising that ache as a foreign invader. Pipher and de Beauvoir would recognize this schizophrenia as a typical response to a young girl's inauguration into the feminine role. I internalized the cultural imperative that, as a girl, I must be beautiful (*thin*), forever seeing myself through the eyes of male onlookers, even while doing so seemed to strip me of everything that felt real and authentic in my soul.

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This femininity training is perhaps most pronounced in the policing of the physical self. In *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*, Susan Bordo explains how the body serves as one of the primary sites in which we act out the presiding cultural values of our time. She suggests that hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, all labeled as individual pathologies by the culture at large, are in fact the ultimate expression of that which the reigning culture demands of women. For example, the household agoraphobic of the 1950's literally enacted the period's supremely domestic feminine ideal, damning herself to the world of cooking in the kitchen and making babies in the bedroom in a hyperbolic, almost mocking internalization of the expectations being thrust upon her.

I think it is important here to note how, "The concept of "woman" effaces the difference between women in specific contexts" (hooks, 206), at times implicitly presenting the notion that all women share the same experience when, in fact, racial and socioeconomic background are as important as gender in the way an individual responds to mainstream femininity; these embodied manifestations of the culture will vary depending on a woman's social location. Historically, the women's movement has been plagued by a tendency to overlook non-White and working-class womanhood, mistaking

the White, middle-class perspective on the female experience as the only one.

At one point in my research it became clear that I, too, had been universalizing the experience of my privileged peers from my hometown and Hamilton College. I had the opportunity to move beyond the environment I come from when I visited Girls Inc., an organization in Syracuse, New York devoted to empowering young girls with a very different background from my own. I visited ready to bestow on these girls my knowledge but quickly saw they would have much to teach me. Being in their community, I realized that I had failed to recognize the importance of race and class, replicating in my own research framework this same problem that haunted the women's movement and the some of the very texts I had been reading. From then on I broadened my research objective in order to address the diverse experiences of diverse populations of girls.

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Whether looking at contemporary constructions of femininity through a lens of history or psychology, feminist researchers appear to be in agreement that today's American women and, even more so, adolescent girls, are facing a time of crisis, a culture more adept than ever at turning juicy carrots into gnarled roses. Evidence from Pipher's experiences with her adolescent patients suggests that the consequences of femininity training described earlier are taking on new and more extreme forms. After witnessing the same themes reoccurring in patients of varied backgrounds- worry over weight and appearance, searching for acceptance through sex, depression and anxiety linked to body hatred- she determined these issues were "rooted in cultural expectations for women rather than in the "pathology" of each individual girl" (Pipher, 35). The

individual traumas of her patients were symptomatic of cultural developments; she wants her patients and readers to understand that, when it comes to the female body, the personal is undeniably political.

What is it about the contemporary scene that makes it harder than ever for girls to emerge from adolescence with an authentic self intact? “Beauty [has always been] the defining characteristic for American women” (Pipher, 183), but now it is more important than ever. The obsessive pursuit of an elusive, unattainable ideal of feminine beauty “has become the central torment of many women’s lives” (Bordo, 92); women’s bodies are continually subject to transformation and improvement and therefore defined by lack and failure. Through the disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress, the principle ways in which women organize the time and space of their day, “we memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of...never being good enough” (Bordo, 91); their bodies become docile bodies, which, inevitably, leads to docile spirits.

The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls provides a historical explanation of how girls’ relationships to their bodies have changed due to changing cultural conditions. Largely drawing upon girls’ diaries, Joan Jacobs Brumberg explains how, unlike in any other period of American history, “girls today [of all backgrounds] are concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their individual identity” (Brumberg, xxi). Girls in the nineteenth century might have written an enthusiastic entry about a new hair ribbon or dress, but these personal embellishments were not linked to their self-worth in the ways they are today: both parents and community considered character more important than beauty and thus did not collude with the adolescent girl in her preoccupation with her body. Today, however, “girls learn

from a very early age that the power of their gender [is] tied to what they looked like and how “sexy” they [are]- rather than to character or achievement” (Brumberg, 195,196). I spoke with a few seventeen-year-old girls from my town, and they expressed in very brutal terms precisely this idea:

[Feeling attractive] is one of my biggest struggles. I’m so unbelievably conflicted. One of my biggest problems with myself is, logically, to be happy- that ultimate goal- it comes down to...holding onto your appearance becomes a necessity to have the confidence...It’s a reliance on it, when you go to school, parties, when you meet people...You’re going to have to work a little less for things to go your way. It’s also that other people are so gorgeous there’s a lot of competition for boys.

I thought it meaningful how this girl trailed off and had many incoherent, incomplete thoughts. She clearly struggled with how to articulate the importance of appearance in her life, no doubt because it is so very basic to her modes of interaction and integrated into her sense of self; she does not consciously think about the social value of female beauty in the same way we don’t often think about the oxygen we need to breathe.

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Cultural shifts in the way we view and handle certain parts of the female experience, such as menstruation, has led to girls’ modern understanding of their bodies as unfinished projects. Unlike in the Victorian era, modern mothers and doctors approach menstruation in terms of its threat to personal hygiene rather than its significance in the development of a girl’s sexuality. The focus has turned from internal maturation to outside appearances and keeping clean, contributing to the transformation of the adolescent girl’s body into an ongoing project in need of careful inspection and personal control. Technological innovation allowed for the rise of a hugely successful sanitary products industry, perhaps making domestic life easier for women but also strengthening



a market-based incentive to exert control on an intimate bodily process.

Brumberg notes similar developments in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when for the first time girls had the cultural mirrors of motion pictures, magazines advertisements, and department store dressing rooms. Moral objections to makeup faded away as women found themselves wanting to look more like the powdered, rouged faces on the big-screen. Also new in the 1920's was the more widespread acceptance of dieting: one girl discusses in her diary how she hoped to change her social status at school by losing weight and buying new clothes, evoking the modern notion of the transformative power of a "makeover," which once might have been considered sinful and shallow. This girl, however, freely tries on a new identity when she buys a slinky silver dress. By showing more skin and breaking down the boundary between the public and private self, she shows a glimmer of the modern femininity that involves "some degree of exhibitionism or, at least, a willingness to display oneself as a decorative object" (Brumberg, 107).

Acceptance of dieting, of course, only intensified from that point forward. Adolescent diaries since the 1960's repeat the same mantras of "I've been eating like a pig," suggesting that the preoccupation with shrinking down one's size is "persistent rather than episodic; it characterizes the teen years of most middle-class girls, regardless of race" (Brumberg, 119). Millions of women at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century do not have anorexia or bulimia but are "sufficiently fearful of fat to become a restrictive eater- that is, someone who habitually monitors food consumption" (Brumberg, 122). The author uses the example of one suburban teenager who, because of her vigilance, kept her weight within an 8 pound range between the ages of sixteen and nineteen; where she fell

within that range determined her overall happiness and sense of worth. The pressure to control the body has only ratcheted upward with ever more stringent mainstream ideals, which today demands that girls be not only thin but also “lean and taut with visible musculature” (Brumberg, 123). In addition to weight, girls of the 1990’s worry about specific body parts, such as “thunder thighs,” which entered the lexicon in the early 1980’s. They battle daily with “bad body fever,” “a continuous internal commentary that constitutes a powerful form of self-punishment” (Brumberg, 196).

Brumberg believes that part of adolescent girls’ difficulties can be attributed to the dissolution of the adult community that once helped to ease girls out of childhood and into womanhood. The marketplace and medical establishment replaced mothers as the primary authority on menstruation; meaningful relationships with girls other than one’s own daughters are essentially nonexistent, unless as part of one’s profession. Because of this lack of maternal involvement, girls end up unduly influenced by and unprepared for a popular culture that makes clear all the ways a body can fall short of perfection. In an effort to be different from their sexually stodgy and restrictive parents, middle-class Baby Boomers gave their daughters the freedom to explore and fend for themselves in this environment. But such parents oversell the value of adolescent autonomy in a visual consumer culture that breeds body hatred:

As long as young girls feel so unhappy with their bodies, it is unlikely that they can achieve the sexual agency that they need for complete and successful lives in the contemporary world. Girls who do not feel good about themselves need the affirmation of others, and that need, unfortunately, almost always empowers male desire (Brumberg, 212).

When girls want so badly to be wanted, they will be less likely to be discriminating about their partners and more likely to choose boys and men who flatter, manipulate, and even

abuse them. Brumberg calls for the return of a community of older women to help guide girls through adolescence.

Courtney E. Martin, a recent Barnard alum, has done a quite recent investigation of body-image issues in Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters. During her college years, Martin experienced widespread and accepted obsession with fitness, food, and body competition among her Ivy League peers. In the book she discusses the startling rise in eating disorders across the globe as a single, severe expression of young women's general preoccupation with achieving the perfect body. Their focus on finding time to go the gym or resisting the temptation of a wanton cheeseburger terrorizes women, resulting in feelings of failure and self-hatred, stealing their mental, emotional energy away from the activities, relationships, and careers that they care about deeply.

Martin acknowledges that there may be differences between women of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and attempts to prove that obsession with body is no longer a white, upper-class phenomenon. She provides evidence that working-class Latina girls in Sante Fe, New Mexico feel the same searing pressure to be thin as do white, upper-class girls from Manhattan. However, the entire premise of the book betrays a blind spot about the diversity of women's experience. Martin proposes that today's driven women do not often realize their full potential because of an obsession with sculpting the perfect body, but such a problem requires a certain level of financial comfort and privilege. "Young women believe we are fully capable of taking over the world, but we also believe that we must be thin and pretty to do so" (Martin, 124). This is true, but only for a certain segment of the population. I did not notice this overgeneralization while reading the book for the first time, since the reality Martin

describes happens to be the one I have lived. However, there are other realities that need to be addressed, too. In a spoken word piece the author's friend implores the audience to put into action what they've learned in the classroom about false beauty ideals:

“Shouldn't we start taking responsibility for all of our [progressive, feminist] thoughts and words? What else then is the point of all this education?” These are true words that my liberal-arts peers and I need to hear, but it leaves out masses of women who have not had the opportunity to experience the transformative power of new ideas and critical thinking.

It is interesting to note that the international obsession with thinness has become so widespread that the rules described by Martin which the average “perfect girl” lives by are nearly the same as the commandments espoused in the Pro-Ana community, blogs that endorse anorexia as a legitimate way of life. The documentary *Arresting Ana* describes the following “Ana commandments”:

1. If you aren't thin you aren't attractive
2. Being thin is more important than being healthy
3. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty
4. You can never be too thin
5. Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success

These are, in fact, the same ideas that large masses of girls live by in their hearts and minds; they are the rules that can be extracted from the average media text, be it advertisements in magazines or reality television. The film follows a young French woman struggling with anorexia who maintains a blog called “My Search for Perfection.” She explains, “that's what anorexia is,” while Martin claims we have a whole generation of girls striving for perfection; large sets of women demonstrate anorectic tendencies without the full-blown physical manifestation. Unsurprisingly, pro-Ana blogs increased

by 40% between 2006 and 2007.

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By the spring of senior year of high school I had become more fit and confident. When a male friend offhandedly referred to me as a “hot girl,” I squealed inside—apparently I had ascended to that oh-so-sought-after status. Now I could frolic and prance and tease boys, have some sort of *effect*, cause ripples on my social environment instead of being invisible, silent. While I also wanted to be seen for my sense of humor and passions, it seemed a prerequisite to be recognized for my beauty and sex appeal. Indeed I would experience this sort of validation within the first few weeks of my freshman year at Hamilton. My flirtations were absolutely thrilling, making me feel like an ugly duckling who had finally blossomed, yet the thrill of attention quickly melted away and left behind deep disappointment. I started to crave validation for other things. I became sick of guys telling me I had great hair or lips; why didn’t they ever think to tell me how funny I am?

I took Women’s Studies classes in hopes of understanding how I could go from feeling powerful to powerless over the course of a night. If I was a femme fatale reigning in boys with my slamming body, why did I end up feeling rejected and foolish after the full mating dance was complete? Why couldn’t boys and I communicate honestly about our feelings (or lack thereof) for one another? How could I convince other girls and, more difficult still, myself, to step off the hamster wheel powering our claims to hotness, since I had experienced first hand its promised rewards to be lies?

My women’s studies classes functioned as the sort consciousness-raising sessions of my mother’s college years, as I started looking at the world around me with a more

critical eye. A few days into summer after my freshman year, I came down with a terrible stomach bug that had me next to the toilet throughout its duration. As soon as I was well, I met up with a friend from high school and we went swimming. She said to me, “Ari, you look so skinny!” This was clearly meant to mean, “You look so good!” Something felt wrong- I deliberately responded by saying “Oh” instead of “Thank you.” I refused to take it as a compliment that I looked good after not having eaten for days. It seemed to me a huge problem that my friend assumed I wanted to be as tiny as possible. I might mention that this friend was a well-adjusted girl who regularly joined me in an ice cream and only went to the gym on occasion. No physician or dietitian would diagnose her with an eating disorder, and yet, she lived and breathed the worshipping of thinness. She, like me, heard the refrigerator buzz whispering sweetly about the dynamo you’d be if you could just lose 5 more pounds.

The buzz about our bodies seemed louder than ever on campus when I returned in the fall, perhaps because I could do no longer accept it as a normal and benign part of life. Why were my smart, hilarious, driven girlfriends and I spending even a precious second devoted to the nightly ritual of debating whether or not to have ice cream? Why was it so important who went to the gym and who didn’t? Supposedly I was too hip and evolved to care about such things, but deep down they seemed to matter. I wanted to keep questioning the notion that perpetually working to lose weight is “just part of being a woman.” How did we all get so obsessed?

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In another course entitled “Women, Gender, and Popular Culture,” I started to learn about how “the entertainment media, for good or for ill, is one of the most powerful

vehicles of non-formal education of postmodern life” (Tisdell and Thompon, 654). There is an undeniable link between women’s intensified monitoring of their own bodies and the nature of today’s media. First, its increased penetration and proliferation through readily accessible television programs, movies, music, and websites means that

the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images. As a result, femininity has come to be largely a matter of constructing...the appropriate surface presentation of the self...we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behaviors are required” (Bordo, 94).

If “the average American youth spends 900 hours in school and 1,023 hours watching TV every year” (Guy, 17), and “the average American sees 2 million commercials by age sixty-five” (Guy, 17), then clearly the messages that the media transmits are going to have an effect on the values of large populations of Americans. It just so happens that those messages often suggest that women be evaluated first and foremost in terms of their physical attributes.

I spoke to Andrea Gitter, a psychotherapist in private practice who explained how, “Just as the primary caregivers create a psychic structure, so does the culture parent.” At the moment, the latter is failing its daughters. “Girls and women objectify ourselves. That’s the media’s message to women, that we are always being looked at, from somebody from somewhere.” She reports that, “Most everyone I’ve worked with is aware that there’s some cultural expectation that they’re striving for because of something outside of themselves, some image; but [doing so] is so normalized,” it does not occur to most people that perhaps there is an alternate way of living.

That is where the Women’s Therapy Center Institute comes in. WTCI, where Gitter is a teacher and board member, trains therapists in a psychoanalytic model that also

includes an understanding of how cultural values and structures affect the individual's psychic health. Therapists learn to recognize a certain kind of speak about the body that needs to be decoded. If a patient mentions hating her thighs, for example, the therapist educated in this model knows to explore that statement further and say, "Let's examine this experience of hating a part of your body." The therapist will also help a patient relearn to respect her internal signals regarding satiation and hunger rather than an external source such as Jenny Craig. "How can she know what you need and when? How could anybody?" It's very empowering for women to learn it's legitimate to look inward to figure out what is nourishing for their bodies.

A 2009 critical review in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* investigated the link between the mass media and body dissatisfaction, a primary risk factor for eating disorders. A psychological schema of body dissatisfaction consists of and feeds "three fundamental components: idealization of slenderness and leanness; an irrational fear of fat; and a conviction that weight and shape are central determinants of one's identity" (Levine and Murnan, 11). Such weight and shape concerns tend to emerge in childhood, when children begin to devour television programs, books, and home videos, all of which are filled with the implicit message that thinness is normal and desirable, perhaps essential, even. "Girls (and boys) as young as 4 or 5 have no trouble finding in mass media the raw materials for [a] maladaptive but entirely normative" set of core assumptions about gender and attractiveness. Because of their ubiquitous reflection in mass media, such beliefs masquerade as undeniable facts and create in girls a readiness to think and respond in terms of the following fundamental principles:

[Women are] naturally invested in their beauty assets and thus beauty is a woman's principle project in life; a slender, youthful attractive "image" is really



something substantive, because it is pleasing to males and it demonstrates to females that one is in control of one's life; and learning to perceive, monitor and indeed experience yourself as the object of an essentially masculine gaze is an important part of being feminine and beautiful (Levine and Murnan 15)

Additionally, advertisements create the sense that the only path to such beauty is located outside of the self through the use of various and ever multiplying products.

Being beautiful, according to the mainstream media, means being thin. Studies of adolescent girls and undergraduate women demonstrate that exposure to magazines featuring the thin ideal is "positively correlated with disordered eating, even when controlling for personal interest in fitness and dieting" (Levine and Murnan, 18). In both the Ukraine and Fiji, internalization of a thin beauty ideal and body dissatisfaction increased following the introduction of a market-based mass media. "For European American and African American girls ages 7 through 12, greater overall television exposure predicted both a thinner ideal adult body shape and a higher level of disordered eating 1 year later" (Levine and Murnan, 19). Another study found that, among a group of 11-year-old girls, the extent of the individual's awareness of how thinness is represented in media correlated with the strength of appearance-based self-image models a year later. In addition to general angst and self-hatred, the heightened tendency to self-objectify is also associated with poor body image.

A survey "of nearly 550 working class girls aged 11 through 19 revealed almost 70% reported that the pictures in magazines have an influence on their conception of the perfect body shape" (Levine and Murnan, 27); the more often these girls read women's magazines, the more likely they were to think about one day achieving the perfect body and to want to diet and lose weight. Additionally, a 2006 study at Northwestern University found that many young women "have the clear and strong expectation that

looking like a media ideal will transform their lives in multiple, positive ways” (Levine and Murnan, 28). Furthermore, “the perception that peers and people in general are influenced by thin-ideal media can itself be a form of media pressure that motivates young people to diet in an attempt to meet that ideal” (Levine and Murnan, 31). The media not only exalts extreme thinness as the female body ideal but also vilifies fat. As American girls and women become heavier, mass media promote “the normative prejudice that fat is ‘horrible and ugly,’ and that getting fatter is a sign of...extravagance, gluttony, greed, sloth, and pride” (Levine and Murnan, 15), five of Christianity’s Seven Deadly Sins.

I have so far described mainstream beauty ideals and their toxic effect on vast numbers of young women. Does reaction to these portrayals differ amongst women of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds? Is the long-held notion that the idealization and pursuit of thinness applies exclusively to the white, middle-class experience still accurate? Many now argue that we need to reevaluate the assumption that because of a Black culture that values a voluptuous figure, Black women are protected from the negative effects of media representations of the body. A paper titled “Eating Disorders and the Cultural Forces Behind the Drive for Thinness: Are African American Women Really Protected?” addresses the misconception that Black women are inoculated against eating disorders. According to one scholar, “to imagine that African-American women are immune to the standards of slenderness that reign today...is to come very close to the racist notion that the art of glamour...of femininity belongs to the white woman alone” (Williamson, 66). The author notes that it is foolish to believe that non-Whites are not subject to the influence of the dominant culture, as if entirely isolated in

their individual communities. Indeed, the White beauty ideal reaches any girl with access to magazine covers and television. It's quite possible that eating disorders go undiagnosed in non-White girls because of such widespread assumptions that the pressure to be thin does not apply to them (Williamson, 67).

The article further describes how dominant constructions of feminine beauty do not include Black physiques: "We live in an environment which institutionalized the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their White counterparts" (Williamson, 68). In "Selling Hot Pussy," bell hooks discusses how Black models are often represented as creatures, mannequins, and robots. While the inclusion of these Black women in the world of fashion may suggest Black beauty is culturally endorsed and legitimized, Black models must resemble white women to be considered beautiful, she notes. Furthermore, "The black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant" (hooks, 117). This, unsurprisingly, has serious consequences for the self-image of Black women, leading to eating disorders in some cases. Some Black women develop anorexia and bulimia in their refusal of stereotypes of sexual promiscuity:

In stifling the sexual appetites which may fuel the image of "looseness," these girls may act out repressed sexual urges by bingeing, or, in some cases, denying their hunger for food. The starved, pared-down, child-like body is unlikely to elicit unwanted whistles" (Williamson, 66)

Williamson bemoans a lack of culturally-based eating disorder treatment models and believes it is important for more researchers to talk to Black women about the unseen issues of self-esteem and body image.

In "The Politics of Protection," the author talked with 15 Black female college students about their feelings toward their bodies. The discussions revealed that, "young

black women are indeed feeling pressures to be thin...and a strong sense of being misrepresented by media images of thin Black women” (Poran, abstract). Other explorations of this issue are less conclusive. A 2006 meta-analytic review, “Are Black-White Differences in Body Dissatisfaction Decreasing?” asserts that, “A considerable body of research suggests that Black women are more satisfied with their bodies than are White women” (Roberts, Cash, Feingold, Johnson, 1), but that there is a growing sense that these differences are rapidly diminishing. The authors call for greater efforts by researchers to examine body image disturbance in Black women. Another study conducted in 2008 with 510 undergraduate women found that, compared to White women, self-reported bulimic symptoms were much lower among Black female students (Lokken, Worthy, Ferraro, & Attman).

A 2009 study investigated how young Black women’s responses to “thin ideals in Black-oriented programming” (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad) might vary depending on the moderating role of ethnic identity, that is, the extent to which an individual identifies with his or her membership in a socioracial group. The authors consider why Black women might be less likely to internalize the media’s idealized thin body:

When members of stigmatized groups receive feedback from others, they often ponder whether it truly reflects who they are or reflects stereotypes regarding their social identity. This “attributional ambiguity” can act as a protector such that attributing negative outcomes to prejudice provides a buffering effect protecting one’s well-being (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 263).

Members of oppressed and stereotyped groups use “in-group rather than out-group comparisons” (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 263). Therefore images of thin white women do not have an effect on Black viewers because such images are not their benchmark for social comparison.

According to this theory, if a Black woman identifies strongly with her culture of origin, which generally accepts more varied body types than mainstream White culture, she should logically be less likely to internalize thinness as attractiveness, even in representations of non-White women. The study found this to be true. In fact, among Black women with strong ethnic identity, increased exposure to thin-ideal rap videos actually decreased body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness (Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 270).

A 2005 article “Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up,” takes a different perspective on the body image issues of Black women. The author argues that the dominant construction of Black femininity as strong and stoic is actually limiting rather than empowering because it does not allow for social acknowledgment or personal expression of the inequalities Black women face. The image of the “strong Black woman” demands a selflessness that can border on self-abuse, as they

typically take on a social script that acknowledges them primarily when they tolerate the intolerable...the complexities, pain, and struggle [of a strong black woman] are somehow made mythic, and she who so desperately needs our support is placed on a pedestal to be admired rather than helped (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 106).

This expectation of having superhuman abilities, of being “the mules of the world,” connects to the problem of compulsive overeating among Black women. By overeating, which leads to overweight and obesity, these women silently protest the demand that they suffer silently in the face of adversity. Their overweight represents an embodied manifestation of their suppressed emotions and desires, as “overeating can be a way of paying attention to oneself” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 120) in the absence of social opportunities to do so. It is interesting to note how socioeconomic status affects these

behaviors. Research suggests that highly educated, upwardly mobile Black young women are much more likely to develop eating disorders and experience concern over weight than their working-class counterparts (Williamson).

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How do we combat this media-based, cultural obsession with female physical perfection that exacts such a cost on the lives of today's young women? As Alice Miller notes, "It is what we cannot see that makes us sick" (Pipher, 44). Once girls understand how culture has an effect on their lives, they can begin to fight back and make conscious choices about how they want to respond to the culture. Many studies have been done to test the effectiveness of various kinds of media literacy interventions- educational programs that promote an understanding of the effect media has on individual consumers and society at large. These programs aim to reveal the ideologies and messages embedded in the media images that surround us on a daily basis and which teach us, alongside our peers and parents, who we are and who we want to be. As bell hooks explains in her short film *cultural criticism and transformation*, "One can't reasonably deny the link between [media] representations and how we live our lives." The Media Education Foundation is an important producer and distributor of documentary films that ask viewers to think critically about the impact of American mass media. Founder Sut Jhally explains on his website that "media education matters if you think people should be aware of the things that influence them in their daily life."

A 2009 study about media literacy interventions set out to understand "What makes them boom or boomerang?" It begins by explaining the cognitive processes involved in translating the awareness raised by such programs into real changes in

attitude and behavior. “People’s reactions to the messages they read, see, or hear in the media depend considerably on the way the message is interpreted and the thoughts and memories that are consequently activated” (Byrne, 4). The goal of a media literacy intervention, then, would be to permanently trigger a different and more critical response to a given media text, winning against the reality that “the initial activation of [critical media literacy] concepts at the time of learning may weaken and then vanish as the individual enters different stimulus situations” (Byrne, 5).

The findings of the study suggest that this tendency to revert to old responses can be addressed by “rais[ing] the cognitive resources a person is willing to devote to initially encoding the material” (Byrne, 5). One hundred fifty-six children in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade were assigned to either a control group or one of two media literacy interventions designed to combat the effects of media violence. Both interventions involved an instructional element, but one included an additional cognitive activity in which the children wrote a paragraph about what they learned and were videotaped reading it aloud. These children demonstrated a greater reduction in willingness to use violence than the other two groups, suggesting media literacy interventions must have a cognitively active element to reinforce information presented in lecture or readings. Additionally, the study showed, providing simple facts about the media is not as effective as “evaluative content” in which participants make critical evaluations of media texts.

In dealing with media literacy programs that specifically target the internalization of messages about the female body, many studies suggest it can be effective to highlight the vast discrepancy between the uniform thinness seen in media and the reality of people’s naturally diverse body types. They also point out how pursuing a weight or

shape that is not natural for a given individual can lead to unhealthy and dangerous behaviors. These tactics suggest that the presiding beauty ideal is a false and harmful one, but I believe it is also important for any media literacy intervention to question the expectation that *any* beauty ideal factor into one's basic sense of self and daily routine. Participants should learn to think critically about how our culture continues to judge a woman "first and foremost, by her appearance" (Williamson, 64) and, no matter how talented and accomplished, demand that she perform the "female 'duty' to be decorative" (Williamson, 64).

One particular media literacy program conducted for girls aged 9-14 "emphasized the narrow and constructed nature of beauty ideals, as well as the futility and health costs of seeking to actualize this artificial perfection" (Levine and Murnen, 25). Lessons ranged from 40-135 minutes and improved body image and reduced glorification of thinness for several months. Another media literacy program conducted for high school and college-age women used Jean Kilbourne's video *Slim Hopes*, which highlights how beauty standards have changed throughout history and yet remain similarly restrictive. The program asks the participants to consider: Do real women in my life look like the models in advertisements? Will using the product being advertised really make me look like the model in the advertisement?

The program then draws attention to all the processes that go into producing media images and thus how they are nearly entirely false depictions of reality. The models and production staff working together to create the images construct an artificial image, at all stages, from cosmetic surgery to airbrushing and Photoshopping. Participants are encouraged to think about how these "perfect" women are used to inspire



feelings of inadequacy in the consumer and, thus, desire to purchase the product that promises to make that individual more closely resemble the image presented. This intervention was shown to reduce internalization of the thin beauty ideal.

In another study, Wade, Davidson, and O’Dea set out to test how media literacy programs compare to self-esteem enhancing programs in helping to reduce eating disorder risk factors. The study points out the problem that programs that explicitly address eating disorders can sometimes have the unintentional effect of increasing disordered eating behaviors. So, how to achieve the desired impact? The program designers adapted the intervention from the GO GIRLS! curriculum, teaching three basic components over the course of several sessions: literacy, “the ability to evaluate media messages”; activism, “efforts to protest or praise media products conveying unhealthy or healthy messages; and advocacy, “tactics to allow communities to express their own story in their own words” (Wade, Davidson, and O’Dea, 375). They devoted ample time to small group activities and discussion, such as having the grade 8 participants define body image and list three things that influence the way they think they should look. The self-esteem program focused on teaching that each of us is an individual who should not feel pressure to conform to stereotypes. The researchers concluded that “media literacy programs combined with interactive, student-centered framework may potentially be a safe and effective way of reducing risk factors for eating disorders” (Wade, Davidson, and O’Dea, 381).

A 2009 study in the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychology also found that media literacy interventions are an effective way in which to reduce adolescent’s concern over body-related messages in the media. Five hundred and forty 8<sup>th</sup>

graders participated in 2 lessons per week for 4 weeks and received a take-home workbook with additional lessons. The participants completed questionnaires before the program and 1 month, 6 month, and 30 month later. Those in the media literacy intervention showed greater reduction of shape and weight concern, dieting, body dissatisfaction, and feelings of ineffectiveness than those in the control group. The researchers emphasize the importance of an interactive rather than didactic teaching style and also suggest that media literacy programs be implemented younger than age 15, before disordered eating behaviors begin to emerge and while conflicting messages from different sources- parents, TV, anti-obesity campaigns- can be particularly confusing.

In the article “Seventh Grade Students and the Visual Messages they Love,” researcher and teacher Belinha De Abreu explains how “most seventh grade students partially define themselves through everyday media messages...visual images unconsciously shape [their] thinking and their perception of the world” (De Abreu, 35, 38). So, she believes it is very important for students to fully understand the nature of those images. She assembled a team consisting of a technology teacher, English teacher, and a library media specialist to develop a unit in which the students use photographs, PowerPoint, and journal writing to “describe and understand how their personal responses were influenced by various media messages” (DeAbreu, 35). In English class, for example, the students discussed the meaning of visual “messages,” using websites that provide examples of altered photographs that are routinely used in magazines. Looking at the original image and the doctored final product inspired much discussion of the ethics of photographic editing in contemporary media culture. Additionally, the students examined Toys R Us flyers and discussed whom the advertisement seemed to be

targeting. It caused quite a stir when the students identified the implicit racism of the ads—the more expensive toys were always associated with the white child in the picture, while less expensive toys were associated with a child of another race.

Analysis of an adult education class also suggest that, rather than the teacher leading the analysis, it is most pedagogically effective for students to offer their own responses to how a given media text portrays race, class, and gender. Many report how “enlightening and energizing it is to critically analyze” (Guy, 21) these representations. Some of the more “media savvy interview participants were not [previously] aware of the extent to which pop culture and entertainment media infiltrated their lives” (Guy, 23), highlighting the usefulness of such interventions. It was also proven very effective to have students create their own media and struggle with issues of representation.

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When I sat in on a Girls Inc. media literacy program, conducted as part of their summer camp, I learned about the challenges of trying to turn the findings of academic pursuits into on-the-ground progress. It is one thing to discuss ideas in an academic environment with professors and peers well versed in theoretical jargon, but it is something else entirely to make those ideas seem relevant to the greater community. A few times during the activity I tried to interject some of what I had been reading, curious to see what these thirteen-year-old girls really thought about the media’s representations of feminine beauty, but my questions seemed to fall on deaf ears. As much as I tried to highlight my patience, openness, and genuine interest, something in my style of delivery was disquieting to many of the girls, and I could tell they were more interested in me than in my questions; I was, after all, a complete stranger suddenly asking for deep

introspection about a topic (seemingly) far removed from whatever else filled their day-dreamy eyes. But I did not leave discouraged. These girls were being made to spend their summer sitting around a table, listening quietly as authority figures droned on, and yet they were still excited and moved to think critically during the following exercises.

The leader began by asking the girls to define media, and their answers included magazines, TV, movies, music videos, and celebrities. She noted how a lot of what we watch has drama, which nowadays means drugs, sex, and violence, implying that we might want to view these glorified depictions of reckless behavior with a skeptical eye. When asked what an advertisement for Girls Inc. would look like, one girl said, “It would show we’re independent.” “We would cover up,” chimed in another, beginning a theme that would come up again and again- the girls demonstrated a strong conviction that the way in which a girl presents herself, both in clothing choice and body language, sends a particular message out to the world. When pressed further about the Girls Inc. ad, they said that “Girls of all colors, sizes, and shapes” would be featured. They produced the answer robotically, as if this fine message of inclusion had been drilled into their heads from weeks spent in Consciousness-Raising Boot Camp. I wondered, what might our country look like if all children received this kind of education along side arithmetic and spelling?

For the first hands-on activity, the girls were to examine certain ads, write about how the ad made them feel, and figure out what the person creating the ad wants the viewer to feel. Pointing to a Sketchers ad featuring a scantily-clad Christina Aguilera, the leader asked, “What are they using in the ad to get you to buy [the sneakers]?” One girl called out, “it looks like porn.” “She looks nasty.” Another marveled, “aren’t most

Sketchers for little kids?” The leaders probed, since men don’t wear Sketchers, why would the company use an ad like this to appeal to women? The girls immediately replied that, well, “girls want to look sexy like her.” So, the leader explained, the ad is trying to claim that sneakers are sexy by creating an artificial association with the “sexy” girl.

In their analysis of an ad for weight loss pills that features a toned young woman, the girls commented, “It tries to make you think you will have the body in the picture.” But, one says, “It’s hard to believe because there are so many ads like that.” Nonetheless, “it makes you want to do it.” When asked generally about how women are portrayed in these ads, one girl got very fired up, saying, “as objects! It’s always a damsel in distress looking all sorry and wearing as little as possible. It’s very rare to see guys [put in these positions].” On another note, the girls responded positively to a Dove advertisement: “They all look happy to be in their own skin.” “You can look like yourself and be accepted.”

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What can be done to raise the level of media literacy among all those girls who do not have a Girls Inc. nearby? A film called *The Strength to Resist Media’s Impact on Girls* suggests many basic habits that parents and teachers can themselves develop and encourage in the girls in their lives. First, girls can start a consciousness-raising notebook in which they keep track of sexist remarks and images. Gloria Steinem suggests to viewers that they stop looking at false images and instead only look at real women: “when you look at different bodies with all their “imperfections,” you see that each one makes sense on its own terms.” Young people can be reminded that they have the right to define themselves and decide what is meaningful, rather than being shoved into small

categories of what is male and female. Girls can write about the women they love and admire and ask themselves, how many of them look like models? This puts perspective on what really matters. Girls can also begin to explore media outside mainstream popular culture. bell hooks notes the resistance potential for representations of black women in avant-garde film. “When we are willing to dare, to risk, to stretch the bounds of the visual, moving our imaginations all over the place, all will be possible” (hooks, 108).

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While abroad in Spain this past semester I ate whatever the hell I wanted and never looked back. I thought, who knows the next time I’ll have homemade paella or Nutella crepes from a Parisian street vendor, so why resist any craving, any gastronomical curiosity? I also had neither the time nor energy to exercise. Unsurprisingly, I gained some weight. But guess what? I felt more lasting joy, inspiration, and core strength during that semester than ever before in my life. I made wonderful friends, spoke Spanish with intriguing men in bars, navigated maps and railroads, and floated away in the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca. I started thinking more about what I wanted and less about how others saw me (Simone de Beauvoir might say I became the subject of my life after years spent as the object of others’ gaze). I started to redefine beauty for myself: I felt beautiful on days when I felt strong and excited, not the other way around. Mirrors became less and less relevant, as everything I needed to know radiated out from within and had nothing to do with pimples or love handles. This centeredness is where the real prize lies.

Sitting at the library, writing this paper, I notice an old librarian with papery, hanging skin covered in all sorts of blotches- purples and blues and browns that weave in

and out. I can't help but find her beautiful and her skin a work of art, no doubt the envy of artist Miquel Barcelo who uses anthills of paint, rubber bands, and curdled milk to achieve the kinds of color-texture combinations naturally occurring in this woman's flesh. I probably would not have felt this way before this project: all that I've discovered in my research has inspired me to change my ways- not just my beliefs- and to reject popular culture's false cult of female perfection through my everyday behaviors.

Just as the body shows the print of restrictive femininity, so does it have resistance potential. "The body [can be seen] as a site of struggle, where we must *work* to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination" (Bordo, 105). I now practice thinking of my body in terms of all that it accomplishes for me in a given day. As I exercise, building muscle and increasing my lung capacity, I enjoy how my increasing physical strength gives me greater freedom to move about in the world. My diet rules mostly consist of eating when I'm hungry and stopping when I'm full. I try to "resist others' attempt to evaluate and define [me by my] appearance" (Pipher, 57), reminding myself that I feel most joyful when cultivating my passions and looking out at the world's wonders rather than down at a makeup mirror. Most important of all, I share what I've learned with the other women in my life in the hopes that they, too, might glimpse the liberation that comes from accepting your body as your own, to define and cherish.

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