

In the Eye of the ~~Beholder~~ Patriarchy

An Exploration of the Origin and Effects of Women's "Beauty Myth,"

Yesterday and Today

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Thesis Statement

Women and their bodies have been oppressed, degraded, and treated as “the second sex” for millennia. As Western women have begun to fight against this oppression and gain rights, advertisers and corporations, recognizing the “beauty myth” as the final obstacle to gender equality, have created an impossible beauty standard for Western women and their bodies which has resulted in mental health and body image disorders. The eradication of the beauty myth is necessary to promote gender equality and positive intersectional female representation so that all women can progress, change, and turn their attention to much-needed feminist activism.

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Introduction

I felt compelled early on in my thesis to share a section of my research with a male friend who I'd known for many years. It's from Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, a book on which much of this thesis is based, and it seemed to touch the deepest part of me and my own self-confusion around beauty standards. An excerpt:

“Let's say a man really loves a woman; he sees her as his equal, his ally, his colleague; but she enters this other realm and becomes unfathomable.... He may know her as confident; she stands on the bathroom scale and sinks into a keening of self-abuse. He knows her as mature; she comes home with a failed haircut, weeping from a vexation she is ashamed even to express.... Nothing he can about this is right... Whatever he says hurts her more. If he comforts her by calling the issue trivial, he doesn't understand... If he agrees with her that it's serious, even worse: He can't possibly love her, he thinks she's fat and ugly... In the dialogue, the man has said something that in a culture free of the beauty myth would be as loving as can be: He loves her, physically, because she is who she is. In our culture, though, the woman is forced to throw his gift back in his face: That is supposed to be less valuable than for him to rate her as a top-notch art object.... If he appreciates her face and body because it is hers, that is next to worthless” (171).

I must have read this passage in particular at least ten times when I first came across it. It resonated so deeply with me as I recalled my previous relationships and my reactions to ex-boyfriends' compliments. It was true- nothing a man could say was right. I asked my friend what he thought of this, almost certain that he would say something along the lines of, “Wow. That's amazing. I've always wondered why women were this way, thank you for explaining it,”

because this is exactly how I felt upon reading it. Perhaps he would at last understand the mysteries of the women in his life and see their confusing behavior with renewed clarity.

“Interesting” was what he said in response. I pressed him for further comment. “I understand this, but what I don’t understand is why women see the model in the advertisement and then think that they need to look like that to be sexually appealing to men. I see a model in an advertisement and I think, *That’s a model*. So why do women feel like they need to look like that in order to be attractive?”

I thought that I was the expert of experts on this topic, prepared for any query, but this question left me dumbstruck, mouth agape mid-conversation. I fumbled through Wolf’s pages, through my journal filled with scribbles, notes, citations and theories, scanning, sorting, searching. I came up short. “Well, women have never had cultural role models like men have...” I began, meaning to explain how advertisements in women’s magazines were perhaps the only source of female culture for a long time (which *is* true), but I stopped. That wasn’t quite it, it didn’t fully answer his question. Maybe it was the sexualization of images in advertising? Closer, but that still wasn’t the precise explanation.

Huh, I thought to myself. *Yes, indeed*. Why *do* women think like that? Why *are* women inclined, after all of their advancements politically, socially and economically, to pick themselves apart in order to be attractive to a man? When I look at the cover of *Vogue* or at the yards-long advertisements in Times Square or the social media influencers on Instagram, why do I feel like *crap*?

On one hand, it’s easy for me as a college-educated young woman to say that I know, with 100% certainty, that most of these images are fake. They are fabricated, digitally altered,

airbrushed, stretched and slimmed beyond what is natural. They are unjust, and wrong, and immoral... And yet my mind betrays me when I see an advertisement of a woman I consider to be immensely beautiful. She's thinner than me, no doubt, a slimmer face, toned stomach. No rolls when she sits down. No pouch of fat between her armpit and her breast. Her eyes, sparkling or sultry, meet mine, and my inner ten-year-old is shell shocked. I scoff, roll my eyes, "that bleeping beauty myth," I say, but my gaze travels hungrily to every part of her scantily-clad Body, her thin, young Face.

I look in the nearby mirror at my own hormonal acne, my own protruding stomach, my own slouching shoulders and curly hair, and feel dissonant chords tugging in my gut. On one hand, I know this woman I'm comparing myself to isn't real. I know there are men who have and will love me for exactly what I am. I know that I am unique in my body, my fingerprint, my voice, this marvelous tireless machine that keeps me alive. And yet, I feel somehow off, even upset as I look at this woman. I tell myself it's wrong for me to blame her or be upset at her, this model, for being what she is- she's *beautiful*- but I do blame her. I'm angry. I'm disgusted by her. I'm disgusted by myself. The feeling stays with me for hours.

They are insidious and sneaky little bastards, aren't they? Those thoughts? They've been with me, seated at the table of my mental council, since I was very small. Before I knew how to say my first word, as I drooled and smiled and sucked on my toes, I absorbed anti-fat, pro-thin, pro-"beauty" messages, messages that monitor what I eat, what I buy, how I act, who I speak to. It wasn't until I was twenty or so that I began to understand the falseness, the pointlessness of these messages. I couldn't have before- the things I thought felt real to me. They were a part of me. The lies my inner critic told me about my body were true.

My stomach fat has always taken the most brutal of my mental beatings. I was nine the first time I discovered I could contain and flatten it by buttoning it into my jeans. This was the same age I began to diet, often following the South Beach Diet- abstaining from carbohydrates and fruits for two weeks to lose up to nine pounds, and then gaining it back, and then losing it, and then gaining it back. I started following Pinterest boards with pictures of the Body I wish I had. One pin led me to a pro-ana (pro-anorexia) website. Pictures of impossibly thin bodies in dark filters flooded my screen, unhealthy messages abound. *You'll regret that extra cookie you eat. You won't regret that extra mile you run.* I knew this wasn't right, but I couldn't look away. "Look in the mirror," one picture instructed me. I looked fine. "Now turn to the side." I was horrified at the view of my slouched, pouched body from a profile angle, my belly hanging over the waistband of my jeans. "Don't stop working until you're satisfied."

At age eleven, a personal trainer I was working with asked me to create a poster board of fitness inspiration. I pulled out a Victoria's Secret magazine and marvelled at the models' flat stomachs, their round breasts perfectly cupped in lavender fabric, soft hips and firm legs. I cut their images out, careful to trace with my scissors along every curve, between each thigh, and pasted them onto a plain white board. I presented my trainer with my collage and she laughed. "Don't let my husband see that," she said.

At the same time that I desperately wished to be them, I often scoffed at thin peers around me. I assumed them to be unbearably stupid and unable to hold conversations, and believed myself to be far superior. I was a smart girl. Pretty girls weren't smart like me. Smart girls in movies had braces, wore glasses, and their first kisses were with pimple-faced nerds at a party their hot best friend dragged them to. I believed that men wanted one thing, and one thing only-

to have sex with a physically desirable body. Men wanted to move and play from one woman to another, and I wasn't among that coveted group of women. If I wasn't desirable, then I had no bodily purpose in the eyes of men, which even then was intricately tied in my mind to the eyes of the patriarchal world at large. The most handsome and popular boys in my middle- and high-school knew me only as smart, overachiever, try-hard. I retreated to my cerebral pursuits and proved to myself over and over that pretty girls were dumb, smart girls were ugly. If I wanted to be smart, I needed to be ugly. I made love to my schoolwork. I let my shoulders hunch.

When I was freshly twenty I became interested in self development and mindfulness. I began to pay attention to the thoughts in my mind instead of fully entertaining them. One of my most potent observations came to me on a breezy summer evening in front of my bedroom mirror. I realized that every time I looked in the mirror, I had a habit of turning my body to one side and gazing at my stomach, noting its size and judging my "beauty" against this measurement (a habit that still stands if unchecked). This realization properly horrified me. I remembered the dark pro-ana website and clenched my fists in anger. A simple click on a Pinterest pin had transformed my vision of myself and controlled my brain and even my unconscious movements. I felt my cheeks redden and my eyes well with tears. I bounced around my bedroom, breathing heavily, unaccustomed to dealing with anger until I felt a surge of desire to confront my body. I ripped off my clothes and stood in front of the mirror, sniffing and hiccuping. I looked at my naked body and let my gaze travel from my toes, to my stomach, to my face, and when I reached my eyes I saw a terrified young girl staring back at me, terrified of being yelled at, of being hurt, of being seen. The dam burst, a brain cell broke. I wrapped my

arms gently around my stomach and crumpled to the floor. “I love you, I’m sorry,” I chanted between sobs, talking to the belly I had chastised for two decades. “You never did anything wrong.”

I cried until my throat was hoarse, until a peacefulness washed over me and I lay on my back on plush carpet, eyes swollen shut. *It’s okay, Amanda*, a small voice within me said. *You didn’t know any better. All is forgiven. I love you, too.*

This thesis is an exploration of the Pandora’s box that I released on that (dare I say fateful?) summer evening. It is an explanation, long overdue, for the reasons why I hated (and still sometimes hate) my body in the first place, and with such *fervor*. I never stopped to think critically about the cultural, social, political, or societal intersections that created this monstrous inner critic- I just took it’s words as truth. I was silent and powerless in its presence, and sometimes still am, believing the lies that have been planted in my mind, solely because my mind is female. These learned messages have grown from saplings to oak trees with time, and I am learning to build houses in these trees, play with them, shake their branches, rattle their leaves.

I am learning to find the child, the nine-year-old dieter, the red-cheeked radically-shy radiantly *beautiful* girl and reclaim her, color with her, look in the mirror with her and point out what is bright and bold and beautiful. On my weak days I remind myself that at the very least my ex-boyfriends have loved my body just as it is, and in doing so still play into the misogynist hand of the patriarchy. But on my strong days I am unstoppable, light pouring in from a bay window

as I dance in the mirror, singing into my toothbrush or hairbrush, swirling my hips, rustling my hair, falling in love with the woman and child that smile giddily back through the glass.

Creating The Beauty Myth

Excluded From History: Female subjugation in the West

It would be foolish to discuss beauty and body standards without first discussing feminism, because the lack of equality between man and woman is probably the first of all social injustices. Women¹ have long been seen as Simone de Beauvoir's "the second sex," the original sinner, always the "other" compared to a man... Woman was the first to be marginalized and, as 52% of the world's population is Woman, constitutes the largest minority on the planet (Adichie, "We Should All..."). In contemporary times, textbooks often don't mention women's achievements- women didn't hold enough power *to* achieve, at least within the patriarchal definitions of "achievement." Historians and scholars aren't exactly sure when society became a patriarchy, or what the reasons for its existence are, but theologian Carol Christ paints a picture of life before it started- in the Paleolithic age, a time that scholars call "prehistory."

This term, prehistory, is rather lame, as it implies that anything before the written word is negligible at best. It doesn't take into account the rituals, artifacts, and art that served as history and can tell us perhaps as much, or more, about the cultures we've studied than text does. To emphasize and accept the rationality of written text is valid, but so too is the embodiment of

¹ I acknowledge that the term "woman" is somewhat complicated based on the separation of biological sex and chosen gender and self-identification. Throughout this thesis the mention of "woman," "women" or "she" relates to folks that have women's bodies, as it is the bodies that have been objectified, but also to folks who identify as women who feel that this research resonates with them.

culture through rituals which women of the fourth century and earlier may have performed, or the artifacts that are critical to their time (Christ 77). The fact that, for much of more recent history, male priests and boys who attended school were the only members of a given population who could read and write, and thus dictate history, furthers the lameness of the word.

In current times, we're moving in the right direction as we encourage girls, racial minorities, and folks of differing abilities and sexual orientations to seize more opportunities and enact public policy to match this progression, but it's worth considering- what would history look like if women and men were taught how to read, write, and could contribute to history from the get-go? What would our modern language look like if there were female grammarians? Black grammarians? Native American or gay grammarians? Would the Industrial Revolution have occurred, and would its consequences have been so damaging to the earth, if more women were involved in leadership and policy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What about trans women- how would their valued opinions have changed our current society?

Unfortunately, it's impossible to know. Thanks to the research of feminist scholars like Christ, we now understand that much of women's history and contributions have been excluded from the narrative- but there *were* contributions, and they have shaped our civilization as we know it. Christ argues in her book *Rebirth of the Goddess* that it was actually women who founded agriculture- as gatherers, they were more likely to notice the relation between a dropped seed here or there and the plant that followed (52). As gatherers, women also provided up to 80 percent of food for the community by way of plants and small animals like snails, lizards, turtles, fish, and birds. If a mother saw an abandoned animal, she may have cared for it, having experience taking care of human babies for many generations- thus, women were likely the first

to domesticate animals. As preparing and storing food was the role of women, it's not hard to imagine that the earliest practice of pottery was within their domain, and weaving is a cross-culturally feminine act, suggesting that it's origins lie within the creative powers of these Paleolithic women (Christ 53).

If women made such significant contributions in the Paleolithic era alone, why haven't we heard about it? Why have women played second fiddle for as long as we can remember? When did society transition to a patriarchy, catering to men and dehumanizing women? We're not entirely sure. Christ and others believe that the invention of the iron plow had something to do with it- with more land to tend to and farm, and being the biologically stronger in a pair, the man was out of the house more tending to the fields and helping less with the children (Christ 54). It also made sense for men to lead at a time when brute strength was more valuable and available than intellectual strategy. Men have ten times the amount of testosterone in their bloodstream which helps build muscle (Angier 321), and the biological scales are tipped in their favor in the "strength" category. Men ruled the world a thousand years ago because the physically stronger person was more fit to lead. But a) being fit for leadership is no excuse for the oppression and silencing of half of the world's population, and b) there's no hormone for what it takes to be a leader today. Innovation, creativity, intelligence, critical thinking- both sexes/all genders possess these mental capacities equally (Adichie, "We Should All...").

The most perceptive of women throughout history probably always felt snuffed by these injustices but lacked the means of social, political and financial power to counter them. As quality of life improved and the Western world developed, however, female thought leaders could afford to question their surroundings. Perhaps, the nineteenth-century woman mused,

women could also get a fair shot at innovations and leadership? Perhaps she could be evaluated for her intellect and perseverance over her gender role? Would it be so unbearable to a man for a woman to be treated as an equal? A human being? Maybe, just maybe, women could stand a fighting chance if they rallied together to make real change.

Cue “hysteria”- the patriarchy’s weapon to wield against the wisest women of Western culture, and one of the first examples of a woman’s anatomy defining her destiny.

Hysteria is a cluster of symptoms that ultimately point to an excess of emotion. Hysteria comes from *hysteria*, meaning “womb” (charming, right?) and saw its diagnosis most prominently in early nineteenth century Victorian England. Female suffragists began to advocate for their own rights, beginning with the right to vote, and refused to back down through their protesting and coalition-forming. These women were independent, assertive, and veered from the gendered norm of passivity and childbearing. They were thus diagnosed as “hysterical” and needing to be tamed. One doctor of the time wrote that these women were “of strong resolution, fearless of danger, bold riders, having plenty of what is termed nerve” (Ussher 4). In today’s vocabulary, that’s the description of a confident and independent mover and shaker who gives nary a crap about the patriarchy’s reigns. In Victorian terms, however, the hysterical woman was a headache and a pain in the rear, and (all-male) doctors were quick to suppress their strength with medical oppression. Neurasthenia, similar to hysteria, was another popular diagnosis for women. Symptoms included masturbation, erotic expression, and “eating like a ploughman,” all indicators that women had strayed too far from their role as sexually, politically, and socially mute (Ussher 7).

It was clear to these women's husbands that their beloved had gone too far, and men would bring their wives to the local doctors for a "cure." These "cures" for female "insanity" were, frankly, terrifying. For reasons still unclear, one male gynecologist, Dr. Bennett, encouraged other doctors to attach leeches to the vulva and ovaries and count how many "fell out." Some leeches entered the cervical opening, causing unbearable pain (Ussher 7). Women who wanted to take advantage of the 1875 divorce law (go feminists!) were declared hysterical and insane and forced to have a clitoridectomy, the removal of a woman's clitoris. Some doctors removed the clitoris *and* the labia. Ovariectomy, the removal of ovaries, was another popular cure (Ussher 7).

Women's genitals, arguably the essence of the cisgender woman at the time, were mutilated in an acceptable and encouraged practice not even two hundred years ago. This is not to say that women did not suffer from mental illness in Victorian England- they really did, and likely suffered worse treatment than what has been documented. But feminist scholars often point out that these symptoms of hysteria were a natural reaction to an oppressive system which boxed and suffocated all women (Ussher 6). The fight for equality is traumatic and exhausting, and social rights activists often experience "activist fatigue" (Chen and Gorski 1). With an assumedly small support network and tight restrictions from their husbands, the liberal, patriarchy-fighting Western woman's "insanity" was likely a manifestation of despair and desperation for a more equal political landscape.

Even earlier than this, American women were being corporally punished on the basis of religion. Founded on New England soil as an escape from religious persecution, the Puritan American colonies were far from gender progressive. Puritan women existed merely as "a means

to an end,” the means being childcare, housekeeping, and general tending to their husbands, and the end being children to carry on the Puritan tradition. Their destinies were defined by their anatomy.

Being born of Eve, she who was so easily tempted by Satan, women were seen as the weaker sex, and thus much more fallible when it came to accusations of insanity- or witchcraft. Most of the young girls accused of witchcraft were orphaned in the Indian War of 1622 and stayed with family or strangers who subjected them to servitude, physical and psychological abuse, simply because they were female (Rosen 25). Their “witch” experiences could have been, as in England, a manifestation of oppression.

In no uncertain terms, the basis of a woman’s treatment in Victorian England and in colonial America was her body. She was punished for intellectual pursuits and manifestations of mental illness through her genitals which, in cisgender terms, biologically defined her sex and were the core of her physiological being. No matter how intelligent, strong, passionate or creative in England, or how forcefully she was abused in America, the suffragist or accused witch was, in the end, reduced to the second sex, the original sinner, the original other- the woman. The girl. The Eve who unleashed all hell on humanity, Satan’s original friend, Adam’s lifelong partner.

To the woman, “God” said in the Bible, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children; yet your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.” Said Napoleon Bonaparte: “Nature intended women to be our slaves. They are our property.” From Nietzsche: “When a woman has scholarly intentions there is usually something wrong with her sexual organs.” From Martin Luther: “Women were made either to be wives or prostitutes” (Luna and Herrick 33-35).

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, says “God.” There is something wrong with her if she’s smart, says Nietzsche. Grab her by the pussy, you can do anything, says Trump. And the man’s world continues to turn.²

Following The Narrative: The impact of fairy tales

To the best of my knowledge, women are no longer treated gynecologically with leeches, nor are they accused of being witches and hanged. Women still suffer physical abuse, all over the world, all the time, simply because of their gender- absolutely. But another layer of this bodily oppression is the emphasis that society has always placed on women’s bodies and women’s “beauty.”

The narratives of American culture have primed women with the most innocent of disguises. Most, if not all, young American girls have been socialized by fairy tales. These may seem “harmless” at the outset and appear to be just a book of old stories, but research has shown that the human mind (especially the *young* human mind) follows narratives very closely. Stories absorb us so much so that they “transport” us to different mental places (Perloff 370), and studies have found that when we learn something from a story, it’s more likely to stick accurately and for longer periods of times in our brains. Some research suggests that facts are 20 times more likely to be remembered if they’re part of a story (Boris).

The stories we hear, especially early on, teach us lessons on how to behave and who we should strive to become. For most young girls in Western society, fairy tales are among the first

² A laughably offensive quote from Pat Robertson, Southern baptist minister: “The feminist agenda... is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians” (Luna and Herrick, 35). ... Sure, Pat. Whatever you say.

of these early childhood stories that endorse such a recipe for behavior. Classic Disney fairy tales include Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, and Snow White. They absorb us with their animation, color, and vivid characters- a fair, lovely, beautiful young princess, a charming and wealthy prince, and, in Cinderella and Snow White, an evil old crone who wishes to keep their hated princess far from their “happily ever after” of marriage. Young girls learn that their “happily ever after” is the recipe for success (Luna and Herrick 4), and that in order to experience great joys, pleasures, and the happiness of all happinesses, to be the princesses of their own lives, they must get beautiful, get noticed, and get married. If one is not married, well, she ends up a haggard, jaded, and ugly old woman with warts and a bitter soul, jealous of the seemingly eternal youth of her foe, the princess. Young girls thus fear an unmarried life and solitude itself.

In *Cinderella*, Cinderella uses her beauty to escape a life of emotional abuse and physical labor which her jealous stepmother and stepsisters impose upon her. The prince, knowing only her beauty from one dance at the ball, saves her from this abusive life based solely on her appearance. *Belle* in Beauty and the Beast (“belle” meaning beauty in French) is taken prisoner by the Beast, a man who frightens her and is cruel to her. Instead of escaping an abusive relationship like Cinderella, Belle uses her sexuality and demureness to take on such a relationship with the Beast and become a princess (Luna and Herrick 7). In *Snow White*, Snow White’s stepmother is so jealous of her stepdaughter’s radiant beauty that she banishes her to be killed in the woods- only the stepmother can be the “fairest of them all,” emphasizing that beauty is the highest value a woman (especially an older woman) can have. Snow White becomes a housekeeper to seven men in exchange for protection, but does not go undetected by the stepmother’s magical mirror, a further symbol of beauty. The stepmother tries multiple times to

murder Snow White and succeeds with a poison apple (Eve reference!). Snow White's saving grace? A non-consensual kiss from a man who falls in love with an unconscious young girl solely based on her beauty- in short, he objectifies and assaults her.

In each fairy tale the princess is a slim White "beauty" whose youth and innocence is in some way used against her, either by a jealous stepmother or an aggressive beast. None of these young women could save themselves from their situations- they had to wait for a man to rescue them. This gives young girls the illusion, beneath the song, dance and animation, that in order to find their "happily ever after" they must be submissive to *and wait on* the whims of a handsome man to come their way and provide for them. There's little use in proactively trying to make a life for oneself or find happiness outside of a romantic relationship, as all of the true happiness comes from the recognition of one's beauty and a coveted kiss of recognition.

"There," a man must say, "is my princess. I pick you, out of every woman in the crowd. You are special, more special than any other I have observed or gazed at or objectified, simply because you are extraordinarily 'beautiful' (read: young, thin, White, blue-eyed, fertile, docile, domestically inclined). You have won the beauty competition, and you have won my heart. I shall have you as my bride.

Your father will walk you down the aisle in a ceremony implying that you were his property, and now you are mine. You will take my last name to erase your identity. On our wedding night we will consummate our marriage... I will have had plenty of experience in this arena and consider myself quite the lover, but due to slut-shaming and lack of education around female pleasure and sexuality (even though you possess the clitoris *whose sole purpose* is sexual pleasure), you will have no idea what to do except look pretty and bleed. Nine months later you

will birth a daughter, whose life I most likely will not be a part of. You will stay home with her and keep house while I fight wars and deal with princely intellectual matters. You will socialize our daughter in the same way you have been socialized, and she will do the same for her daughter, most likely without question, or without societal power or protection enough *to* question.

But you're beautiful and quiet, like a house plant, so you won't mind, right? And you've been told all your life that you're a pretty girl, right? And you've been taught at every turn that your girlish interests in boy bands, fashion, makeup, and astrology are lame, so being a girl is lame, and girls who have been chosen to be girlfriends aren't lame, they're saved by their boyfriends, right? And you've seen women who stand up for themselves against these injustices get abused, raped, murdered, or reputationally destroyed, right?³ Genitally mutilated? With leeches crawling in their cervix?⁴

All you've wanted since you were five years old was for a man to pick you out of a crowd, sweep you off your feet, tell you that you're beautiful, give you a kiss and live your happily ever after, together, right?

Right.

Let's get married."

³ The Association for Women's Rights and Development, a global feminist organization, keeps a running tab on their website, awid.org, of women activists who have been murdered for speaking out. Few are American. Their stories are haunting.

⁴ And that's only White women!

She is Risen: The creation of the Face

Fairy tales and story-based reiterations of the “happily ever after” narrative are important aspects of our American culture. Culture functions to preserve and continue the civilization to which it belongs through traditions, customs, and norms (Adichie, “I Decided...”), and the dominant culture and beliefs of a society, passed down from generation to generation, determines the roles and ideals that certain individuals or groups of individuals have. It may seem that it is not within American “culture” to punish women’s bodies or “cure” them of insanity- again, the American woman today is rarely if ever genitally mutilated or hanged for witchcraft. It may also seem that the fairytales with which we socialize our daughters are harmless fun and not worth a second look. But the early message to our children is that a woman is a beautiful housekeeper, nothing more, and that her only way to obtain a marriage, which is arguably her only means of “success” given the fairy tale message, is through her “beauty.” The punishment of women based on their bodies has not disappeared as much as it has changed form. The subjugation, objectification, and emphasis on beauty and appearance which women’s bodies undergo is now being used to keep Western women from fully realizing their liberties as human beings and helping their underprivileged sisters.

Feminist author, journalist and political advisor Naomi Wolf was among the first to introduce this idea to academia. Her book *The Beauty Myth*, published in 1990, describes the titular phenomenon in which women are valued more for their “beauty” and silent appearance than for any other attributes. The myth itself is that there is one single ideal for a woman’s beauty and body that she must attain in order to be more attractive to men. She must have the

Face and the Body that are thin, White, young, and flawless. The beauty myth asserts that within the whole populus of women there is a vertical hierarchy, from most beautiful to least, that determines the resources and access to resources which women have. A young, thin, potentially malnourished and very self-conscious girl is more highly valued than an older, plumper, healthier and abundantly self-loving woman, as the latter is far more dangerous to the patriarchal structure from which men still benefit (Wolf 10).

Wolf posits that the beauty myth is more related to behavior than appearance. It's aim is to keep women as self-conscious as possible, chasing an unattainable ideal, so that their formation and flourishing as full-fledged human beings with equal rights is perpetually stunted by this added layer of injustice. The chains that bind women are not the lipstick, makeup, high heels or razors themselves, but the lack of choice in the matter of the manner in which they use them. The beauty myth "is summoned out of political fear on the part of male-dominated institutions threatened by women's freedom, and it exploits female guilt and apprehension about our own liberation- latent fears that we might be going too far" (Wolf 16). As Western women with immense privileges already, who are we, we may ask ourselves, to further our liberation? Especially looking like *this*? This guilt bleeds into all other areas of our life as we begin to believe that we are not "good enough"- not good enough daughters, not good enough mothers, not good enough activists, but, overall, not "beautiful" enough to live "happily ever after."

Worse yet, the current economy depends, even flourishes thanks to, this beauty myth as pornography, diet, cosmetics and cosmetic surgery industries continue their billion-dollar growth. These billions of dollars, when reallocated to funding women's education, liberation, and political advancement in Western society and the safety and equality of women in

developing countries, would revolutionize and reinvigorate feminist efforts (Wolf 113). Instead, women are shamed into voting with their dollars for a perpetual cycle of competition and comparison, passed down from mother to daughter, which keeps women in a cage. It is a pervasive, worldwide force that, to the uncritical eye, is nearly invisible because it is so normal.

But, *isn't* it normal? Surely women were *always* supposed to be thin, glamorous, and gorgeous- that's just how women are supposed to be, right?

Absolutely not.

Long before the Industrial Revolution, women were not thinking about “beauty” in the same way that we do today, chiefly because there was nothing for them to compare themselves to outside of images from the Church. The family unit emphasized productivity, being equal in it's distribution of labors between men and women, so a woman's value was measured by her work ethic, her fertility, her strength and her economic sense rather than her appearance (Wolf 14). In fashion terms, women's waists were strictly confined and defined by their corsets, but below the waist, their bodies were completely covered. The shape of a woman's hips, legs, ankles, and thighs were irrelevant because neither she nor her partner could compare those parts of her body to any other woman's (Mazur 283). Advertisements and mass communication weren't even a germ of an idea yet, thus universally accessible standards of head-to-toe beauty didn't exist.

As entertainment expanded its scope and became one of the first forms of “mass” visual entertainment, women began to see more, much more, of other women's bodies. Vaudeville and burlesque theater rose to popularity, introducing more voluptuous performers and revealing more

and more of the woman's body. Because there was so little revealed before, even a performer's ankle was scintillating at first, and the sensationalization of entertainment and pushing its limits called for more and more of a woman's body to be commodified. The more voluptuous performers led to a more voluptuous ideal, matching the women of size depicted in high-class European art. In the 1880's, believe it or not, US women celebrated each pound gained as they worried about being too thin (Mazur 285), but this did not last long. The thin ideal would soon take hold.

At the turn of the century, as the Industrial Revolution took off, the family model was deconstructed, if not destroyed, by urbanization. Men went away to work in factories while women were delegated to their sphere of domesticity, and gender roles became more enforced. More capital per family meant that living standards rose, and women began to attend school (Wolf 14). Soon after the Industrial Revolution's boom, as the "breadwinners" of the house left each morning to go to work, the woman waving out the window to send them and their children off was a literate, capable, and dreadfully bored housewife. The new economy came to depend on this housewife to purchase top-tier innovations like microwaves, ovens, and refrigerators for the home. Women's submission to and seclusion within the domestic space enabled the industrial development of America's capitalism to thrive... at the cost of female liberty (Wolf 15).

Perhaps the housewife's only saving grace from sheer boredom and that infamous "hysteria" was the women's magazine. Throughout its history, the women's magazine has been one of the only, if not *the* only, spaces where women's interests were taken seriously- the originator of an all-women's culture. Especially in the "man's world" of the early 1900's, the woman's magazine was a safe space for the exploration of women's mass media and women's

issues. Usually the magazine contained advertisements for and articles about beauty products, cleaning supplies, the latest domestic technologies and fashion. It was among the first materials to create a nationwide, communicated standard of women's function traceable to print (Wolf 70).

As much as the magazine kept the twentieth-century housewife in the loop of current events, it also kept her constrained. Due to the explosion of mass communications as television, radio, film and recorded music joined the magazine and newspaper, the standard for women's "beauty" was becoming unified across the country. For perhaps the first time, every middle-class woman across the nation was viewing one unified standard of beauty which would change subtly but rapidly with each new generation, and even each new decade, within the advertisements of these magazines.

At first it was male illustrators who took to popular magazines of the time to draw what their ideal women looked like. Companies like Currier and Ives illustrated "the steel engraving lady" who was delicate, susceptible to damage, and was the first to promote an unhealthy image as fashionable. The famous "Gibson Girl," drawn by Charles Dana Gibson and debuted in Life magazine, combined the voluptuousness of the entertainer with the slimness of the steel engraving lady, creating a strong, slender, athletic woman who mimicked the "liberated" woman of the workforce. The image of a "healthy" woman didn't last long, as advertising took to the slender, smoking androgynous flapper, without a silhouette or curve-hugging attire. Her "gams" were her most important feature, second only to a face full of makeup (Mazur 286-288).⁵

Around the time that this flapper image appeared, Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, used his uncle's psychology to rationalize that the masses would subconsciously

⁵ This flexibility in beauty ideals from decade to decade points to their silliness. Understanding how beauty ideals fluctuate every decade, if not every year, if not every *month* helps to loosen its grip on a woman's conscience.

desire to do whatever beautiful and powerful people were doing. Bernays applied this psychology to the tobacco industry. Advertisers wanted to expand their profitability by marketing specifically to women, who weren't buying cigarettes at the time. Bernays' first move was to advertise drawings of extremely thin women in cigarette advertisements and gain doctor's endorsements for cigarettes to claim them as healthier than desserts or fatty foods. He then played on the women's liberation movement, associating through words and images the liberation of women through the act of smoking cigarettes, a ticket to freedom and an "in" to the man's world. It worked, and cigarette sales skyrocketed (Luna and Herrick 11). *Life* magazine was no longer the only place for visions of thin women's bodies- she was in advertisements everywhere.

When the male work force returned from World War II, the women that had replaced them were strongly uninterested in returning to the domestic sphere, and they maintained their position in middle-class work. The mid-century woman was working now- the patriarchy couldn't change that, but it could add more onto her psychological plate and enhance her fixation with thin "beauty." If the advertisers of the magazine, women's one role model and specifically female space in the world, couldn't get the American woman to buy clothes or kitchen appliances because she'd left the domestic space, they could target really the only thing left over, her body. Following Bernays' lead, they named women's natural state in their bodies as the largest problem they had ever faced, "*the female moral dilemma* (Wolf 67)", and so the body image crisis began.

Advertisers, ever-loyal to their monetary success, simply adjusted their tactic to perpetuate the ideal. A Pond's cold cream ad from this time read: "We like to feel we look

feminine even though we are doing a man-sized job... so we tuck flowers and ribbons in our hair and try to keep our faces looking pretty as you please” (Wolf 63). Another ad from a cosmetics company dictated that while lipstick was not the chosen weapon of the war, “it symbolizes one of the reasons why we are fighting... the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely” (Wolf 63). Working women then, as they are now, were still reduced to secondary imposters of a “man-sized” job whose main focus should be on “looking pretty” and being “feminine and lovely” rather than strong, smart and capable. Advertisements haven’t really promoted women’s courage and confidence until recently with the body positivity movement- that’s almost a hundred years of messaging instructing women to sit still, stay quiet, and look pretty, lovely and feminine.

Women’s magazines (and their editors) needed these kinds of advertisements to stay afloat post-war. Being the aforementioned sole space for women’s issues and interests of the early twentieth century, the women’s magazine took on the role and voice of a trusted female role model. Under the hypnosis of the beauty myth, a woman could not trust her mother for lessons about beauty and seduction- her mother was aging, and thus obsolete⁶. Professional

⁶ An aside: At the time of writing I work as Marketing Coordinator in a local spa. It’s a wonderful place, spacious, filled with passionate and kind-hearted people who love what they do, and I enjoy this job like no other. The position touches on this intersection of feminism and anti-aging, though. Our marketing photos are of young women in their late teens and early twenties, while our target demographic is in their thirties and forties. Our skincare products are touted for their ability to reduce fine lines and wrinkles or reduce the appearance of aging- but this further implicates the aging woman as obsolete. Eternal youth is prized- why? Writes Wolf, page 121- “If she ages without the cream, she will be told that she has brought it on herself, from her unwillingness to make the proper financial sacrifice. If she does buy the cream- and ages, *which she is bound to anyway*- at least she will know how much she has paid to ward off the guilt. A hundred-dollar-charge is black-and-white proof that she tried. She really tried. Fear of guilt, not fear of age, is the moving force” (italics mine). This is something I struggle with as a marketer. Women want to reduce their wrinkles. They pull the skin of their faces back in the mirror, look right and left, wishing to go back in time, so much so that they are never really in the present. The beauty myth asks women to fear the future, to fear their wrinkled faces- but within these faces lives the evidence of *life expressed*, of joy, and happiness. It is within these wrinkled faces that women show their experience, their thoughts, anger, happiness and laughter, trials and tribulations. Eternal youth is a hoax and I am unsure how to stop its perpetuation without damaging the profit of the company, which I am tasked with increasing.

mentorships were no use either, as such “trivialities” were outside the scope of training (Wolf 74). The women’s magazine posed as a trusted and intimate voice, seeking to soothe the middle-class woman and offer solutions to her peskiest appearance problems- not the last of which was the fat on her body. Women listened, and they purchased, giving their economic power to the patriarchy that strove to cage them.

As mentioned before, women were not concerned with the fat on their body for much of American history- in fact, in high European art, heft on a woman was to be respected, as it indicated that she was wealthy enough to be well-fed (Mazur 285). But advertising shifts like Edward Bernays’ in the cigarette industry and the rise of the flapper image perpetuated a new ideal of thinness being “in.” Over the course of the early- to mid-twentieth century, fashion shifted and changed rapidly, with each decade seeming to possess its own fashion trends and icons. In 1969, fashion magazine *Vogue* offered up “the Nude Look,” likely in an attempt to stabilize the ever-changing market. This look focused as much on the naked body itself as the clothes it provided (Wolf 68), and though the emphasis on the thing, young, White Face and Body had been around for many years at this point, there was not previously a direct emphasis on or calling out of the fat on a woman’s body. More magazines followed suit and adjusted their content accordingly, and the diet industry boomed, especially in the 1980’s. Diet-related articles in magazines rose 70 percent from 1968 to 1982. From 1983 to 1984, the number of dieting books on bookshelves tripled, from 100 to 300 (Wolf 68). In 1990, the diet industry was worth \$33 billion (Wolf 17)- it is now worth \$72 billion, an increase of 118% (“The \$72 Billion...”).

Starting in the 1960’s, strengthening in the 1980’s and exploding in the early 2000’s, the image of a young, impossibly thin, and potentially unhealthy girl was considerably more

“beautiful” than an older, healthier, plumper woman. The image of that Face and Body began its descent upon American society, the impenetrable and unavoidable Face- thin, young, White, perhaps with a sexually provocative expression. Women’s magazines, in partnership with advertisers, perpetuated this idea and, because they dictated women’s cultural sphere for years, enforced on women an image of thinness and dieting and a corresponding anxiety that did not exist before. It was completely culturally fabricated and unprecedented, and has extended, often with unhealthy consequences, into today’s advertising world, where women have absorbed the message and strive in vain to conform to an unattainable ideal.⁷

The Beauty Myth’s Effects

Our Living Death: Women’s silence today

“[Women] are volcanoes,” Ursula Le Guin once said. “When we women offer our experience as truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains” (Solnit). The same quote is offered as a preface to Luna and Herrick’s *Your Story is Your Power*, which guides women through the act of deconstructing the stories that they’ve been conditioned to believe within the circles of family, culture, and personal experience, leading to a new and empowering self-asserted truth. When women speak and tell their stories, the ones impacted by their family,

⁷ How lovely this realization was- that the ideal I have tried so desperately to achieve was, in fact, a creation, something completely impersonal which I can choose to reject and in so doing empower myself and other women around me. I posted on my Instagram about new crows feet I saw popping up, how scared I felt around them, and then about how I realized that “the patriarchy wins when I hate my body.” Friends enjoyed this and rejoiced in this revelation with me. Now when I look in the mirror and catch my inner critic chattering, I remind myself that the inner critic is simply my internalized misogynist and patriarch. That shuts it up pretty quickly.

their culture, and the life they live everyday, they validate the experiences of other women and inspire them to make change. They fill the hole that millennia of gender oppression has created and start to change the shape of their society, one word and one woman at a time.

Women's voices are critically important, not just because they make up *half* of all voices on the planet, but because the woman's perspective is unique and too often kept in the shadows. For much of human history, as we saw with Christ's research into the contribution of women to civilization and the Victorian England and colonial American punishments, women's voices have not been heard, valued, or even *thought* to be valued. Women have been the invisible, servile other since the patriarchy became dominant worldwide, often an afterthought in the procession of male-oriented politics and social structures. Women have been silenced, and so have learned to become silent, afraid of using their voices to tell their stories.

"The history of silence is central to women's history," writes Rebecca Solnit in an article for *The Guardian*. Solnit is a writer, historian and activist whose work often touches on feminist issues. She argues that the oppression of women through violence, rape, denial of suffrage and pro-life movements has served to fortify and enforce the silence of women, and this silence is profoundly stifling. One who talks in a society- or, more accurately, one who has the ability to speak up, participate, and experience freedom- has power. "Who is heard and who is not defines the status quo," Solnit writes, and women simply are not heard. We are often not listened to or believed, we are brushed aside as hormonal, crazy, bitchy, bossy, our ideas are not valued or are stolen outright by men- why would a woman talk in a society that does not listen to her? A woman speaks, is not heard or is denied or is attacked for speaking, and decides that it's not worth the risk to stand up and speak again. She teaches this to her daughter. The cycle continues.

Hilary Clinton became the first female nominee to run for United States presidency, ever, in her 2016 campaign against Donald Trump. The position of U.S. president has often been called “the leader of the free world”- an extremely powerful and influential position, arguably the highest a politician, or a person, can hold on a global scale. Running for president is perhaps the most public and widespread form of “speaking” (being visible, being seen, using her voice) that a woman can do.

From the very beginning of her campaign, supporters of Trump attacked Clinton with *ad hominem* fallacies about her gender and appearance. An excerpt from Peter Beinart’s article for *The Atlantic* chronicles the propagandic merchandise available at a Trump during the campaign, details representative of the overall rhetoric from Clinton’s opposition:

Black pin reading “Don’t Be A Pussy, Vote for Trump in 2016.” Black-and-red pin reading “Trump 2016: Finally Someone with Balls.” White T-shirt reading “Trump That Bitch.” White T-shirt reading “Hilary Sucks but Not Like Monica.” Red pin reading “Life’s a Bitch: Don’t Vote for One.” White pin depicting a boy urinating on the word “Hillary.” Black T-shirt depicting Trump as a biker and Clinton falling off the motorcycle’s back alongside the words if you can read this, the bitch fell off. Black T-shirt depicting Trump as a boxer having just knocked Clinton to the floor of the ring, where she lies face up in a clingy tank top. White pin advertising “KFC Hillary Special. 2 Fat Thighs. 2 Small Breasts ... Left Wing.” (Beinart)

In her campaign to achieve one of the highest political leadership positions on the planet, Hilary Clinton was objectified and vilified solely on the basis of her gender. The disgusting nature of the counter-campaign by Trump supporters further demonstrates that women’s bodies are being shamed and denigrated, valued only for their “beauty,” their male-defined sexuality,

and their conformation to deeply-ingrained American gender roles. In using her voice to run for office and demand political change, Clinton was defying the role of submissive, passive, secondary sex, and because of this was verbally assaulted. Any woman watching this reaction unfold, if she did not agree with Trump supporters' statements, may feel frightened to enter political action for fear of being objectified and slandered in the same way. Why would she speak if the world wouldn't listen? She would remain silent.

The statistics of sexual assault indicate another layer of silence imposed on women, in this case physically. Between 15% and 35% of sexual assaults are reported to the police, and survivors cite the following reasons for not reporting their assault: "not important enough to respondent," "did not want to get offender in trouble with law," "did not want family to know," "did not want others to know," "fear of the justice system," and, most troublingly, "feel the crime was not 'serious enough'" ("Reporting Sexual Assault"). Due in part to these low reporting rates spurred by such fears, only nine percent of rapists are prosecuted, five percent are convicted as felons, and three percent will spend a day in prison ("Reporting Sexual Assault"). Ninety seven percent of rapists walk free.

This means that women stay silent not only in fear of verbal assault, but also in fear of physical assault. If a woman can be sexually assaulted by absolutely no fault of her own, simply for existing, why would she feel comfortable being bold and risking her small safety net by pushing boundaries? She shrinks herself to avoid contact. She remains silent.

Women live in fear of speaking in the workplace, too. In their article "The Confidence Gap" for the Atlantic, journalist Katty Kay and writer Clare Shipman reveal some poignant statistics about high-achieving female professionals. For example, women negotiate their salaries

four times less than men do, and when they *do* negotiate, they ask for 30% less than male counterparts ask for. Men apply for jobs they're only 60% qualified for, while women apply for jobs they are 100% qualified for. When a male student flunks a test in a notoriously difficult class, he attributes externally, saying "Wow, this class is tough." When a female student flunks the same test, she attributes internally- "See, I knew I wasn't good enough for this class" (Kay and Shipman).

Kay and Shipman also report that in one study, both women and men were asked to take a test completing spatial puzzles. In the first round, women scored significantly worse than men... because they hadn't even attempted all of the questions. When the study was repeated, and participants were told to answer *all* of the questions, women's accuracy matched the men's. Women are just as smart, just as capable, just as integral to the professional world, but they take themselves out of the arena before giving themselves a chance to try. Women are expected to fail because they are the secondary sex, and they internalize this belief to predict their own failure. They learn to be unconfident and step aside.

This unconfidence, this inability to speak loud and proud at meetings, in restaurants, on the streets... to what do we attribute it? The social cues that a girl learns about her father being head of house, breadwinner, decision maker, the lack of education around women's pleasure, sexuality and empowerment, the wage gap and the war waged on outspoken women- these factors certainly contribute to Western women's silence. But if a woman sees a certain image of her gender everywhere, the Face and the Body selling every consumer good imaginable, kissing every "good guy" in every movie, becoming successful based on looks alone, and the mirror does not (*can not possibly*) reflect this Face and Body, she believes that she must *become* that

image to achieve what she wants. She compares herself on the hierarchy to the Face and the Body, and the more she lacks from this ideal, the worse she feels about herself. As brilliant as she is, as much as she may understand that it's fake, she is trapped by this image and constantly compares herself to it. If she focuses her mental efforts on lighting, posture, fashion, makeup, sucking in her stomach, perming her straight hair, straightening her curls, restricting her caloric intake, exercising excessively in an effort to keep up with a beauty ideal that she truly believes she must attain to live a "happily ever after," then she likely does not have the capacity nor the interest in speaking up. This internalization of never being enough steals her words before she can say them.

"No wonder a girl loses confidence," Natalie Angier writes in her book *Woman: An Intimate Geography*. "If she is smart, she knows that it is foolish to obsess over her appearance. It is depressing and disappointing... But if she is smart, she has observed the ubiquitous Face and knows of its staggering power and wants that power... By all indications, a controlled body and a beautiful face practically guarantee a powerful womanhood" (230). Brilliant women, unintelligent women, happy and sad women, tall, short, medium-sized, blonde-haired, brown-haired, armpit-haired, Democrat, Republican, cisgender, trans, economists, physicists, plumbers, professors, chefs, housewives, rich and poor women, Black, White, Latino and Indigenous women, and every woman in between... All of them, all of *us*, are controlled by the beauty myth. No matter how capable a woman is, it seems that she cannot be fully powerful until she adheres to and aligns herself with the ideal, and that is an explicitly impossible task. She never feels enough. *We* never feel enough. A woman's entire identity is predicated upon their so-called "beauty," writes Wolf, "so that [she] will remain vulnerable to outside approval,

carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air” (14). Until she is thin, impossibly thin, attractive, young, conforming to the template set forth for her, a woman is not powerful, and cannot know her power. She cannot speak. She can barely breathe. And she definitely can’t tell her story.

“Being unable to tell your story is a living death,” Solnit writes. Women are slipping away without being seen for who they truly are. They are undervalued, they are overworked, and they are dying without a word.

Double Standards: Women in the workplace

A working woman faces two evils- workplace gender roles, and the “second shift” of domesticity. There has been little budging in the assignment of these two evils. They are stamped on her chest upon entering the workplace and brand her for the rest of her life. Because she is a woman, and because of how both sexes have been socialized, she is expected to dress a certain way, perform a certain way, keep her mouth shut a certain way in the office, and then walk through the front door of her house to prepare dinner, clean messes, wash and fold laundry, and manage myriad other responsibilities. Ninety percent of women and 85% of their husbands say that the woman does “all or most” of the housework in their American home, and estimates confirm that working women come home to do 75% of the housework (Wolf 24). It is safe to say that this is exhausting work- and yet she’s paid 80.6 cents to the man’s dollar *on* the clock (Elsesser), and zero dollars and zero cents for her house labor *off* the clock.

If a woman works, she must consider her appearance as the beauty myth demands that women look “beautiful” at all times or else risk being discarded. If she wants to be taken

seriously and treated professionally, should she dress like a man, or like a woman? Pants, or a skirt? Hair in a bun, or down and styled? Short hair or long hair? Makeup, no makeup?

She will be criticized, even fired, either way. In 1986, “beautiful” Mechelle Vinson’s professional dress was offered as evidence that she welcomed rape from her employer at Meritor Savings Bank (Wolf 38). Ms. Hopkins in *Hopkins v. Price-Waterhouse*, who brought in the most business of any employee for the company, was denied a partnership because she needed to “walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely,” and “wear makeup.” Nancy Fahdl was fired from the police force because she looked “too much like a lady.” Sondra Tamimi was fired from Howard Johnson Motor Lodge for not wearing makeup. In *Andre v. Bendix Corporation*, the judge ruled it “inappropriate for a supervisor” of women to dress like “a woman.” In *Buren v. City of East Chicago*, women who worked for the city had to “dress to cover themselves from neck to toe” because the men they worked with were “kind of nasty.” In *Diaz v. Coleman*, an employer instilled a dress code of short skirts and then allegedly sexually harassed female employees because they complied with it (Wolf 39).

Men do not have to choose between professionalism and masculinity, as the two have always gone hand in hand- a suit is a suit is a suit. Men have never been required to wear makeup to work to hide their imperfections, or fired for not doing so. A man has never, not once, been accused of workplace sexual assault based on what he was wearing. He is free to wear what he wishes, professionally speaking, without consequence or fear of verbal or sexual assault. He is powerful in his body because he is not seen as a body, he is seen as a man, confident, respected, and intelligent. He is seen as a human being, and treated as such. A woman is not seen as a woman, she is seen as a body, sexualized, objectified, and diminished. She is seen as an object of

sexual desire, and treated as such. A woman's power lies in the perspective of the male. She does not have bodily power of her own, and she must cater to it, arranging herself for the day.

There is nothing inherently feminine about a skirt (one oval of fabric), just as there is nothing inherently masculine about a pair of pants (two ovals of fabric)... And yet for a man to put on a skirt (though, admittedly, this is becoming much more popular in the most confident and self-expressed men) would inspire criticism, cajoling, disbelief, perhaps even aggression from his friends and family. For a woman to put on pants- fine, great, professional. Boy's stuff is good enough for girls, but girl's stuff is not good enough for boys. Girl's stuff is lame and, well, *girly*- who wants to throw like a girl? Who wants to perform like a girl? Who wants to *be* a girl? Girls are weak. Girls are secondary. Girls are the second sex.

So what does she wear, the woman in the mirror? In an ideal world, she would dress how she wishes, aligning with the true meaning of fashion in self expression and creativity. In the real world, she dresses how men command her to, whether implicitly or explicitly, and prays to God that it's enough. She prays that on the walk to work she will be safe, if she walks fast enough and looks mean enough and talks on the phone and keeps her hair down she will be safe. She prays that when she hears the soft click of a door shutting behind her, and her ears ring in the silence of her boss' office that she will be safe, and listened to, that he won't reach for the buttons of her blouse or the hem of her skirt. She prays for guidance as she enters the meeting, hands shaking, but doesn't ask for the raise after all. She doesn't want to be seen as bitchy, or bossy, or too demanding. She slumps into the chair of her desk, her male colleague makes a sexist joke by the watercooler, and she can feel her self-anger morph into self-shame.

Her Greatest Adversary: Competition among women

The value of beauty in society creates a feeling of unsafety in a woman when she is around other women. Her greatest adversary, in fact, is an unknown woman, Another Woman (Wolf 75). When patriarchy took hold of society, women were no longer autonomous individuals or free human beings. To satisfy their needs and feed their children, they had to go through men, who possessed all of the power, resources, and access to privilege and opportunity. Until very recently, if Jane “stole” Mary’s husband away from her, Mary had no resources or access to the safety and financial resources that her marriage provided her. “A man was no longer a mate,” writes Natalie Angier. “A man was air. You don’t argue; you have to breathe” (315). If a man’s resources were necessary for a woman’s survival, and a woman’s “beauty” was the contingency upon which she is chosen by a man, then it would be natural for women to compete with each other. Another Woman who was more “beautiful,” a seductress, a femme fatale who could entice her man would seem to take a woman’s breath away. She couldn’t survive without him.

For economically-independent Western women nowadays, however, this competition is keeping female communities and female intimacy and female support from all of the women who need it, which is all of the women alive. The competition based on a Face and a Body and a hierarchy which are not even *real*, for heaven’s sake, inauthentic portrayals of what men want and what women think they need to be, is robbing women of something men have always had—community. The *fraternite* part of *liberte et egalite*. Bosom buddies. Breast friends.

This is a problem, because women benefit greatly from the company of other women. Marginalized folks benefit from connecting with other folks who share the same experiences and can relate in ways that other peers cannot. Women's relationships are important because of this. In the nineteenth and twentieth century in America, all-women quilting groups, women's clubs, and settlement houses provided opportunities for women to form rich connections with other women who had similar experiences in a patriarchal society. Within these connections a woman may have felt a certain weight off of her shoulders as "obstacles to self-expression, learning, and female relatedness... were dissolved" (Martinez Aleman 122), and we can likely see this mimicked in present-day women's groups. Research also shows that female same-sex friendships show "greater involvement" than those of men, last longer than male friendships, and have a greater emotional depth (Martinez Aleman 124, Angier 300). Women without female friendships lack this emotional connection and involvement and miss out on their benefits.

Because the beauty myth perpetuates the idea that there is one type of beauty, one single Face and Body that must be achieved, and that beauty is young, thin, and more often than not White, aging or mature women are deemed obsolete. Wrinkles are a horrifying atrocity, gross, meant to be covered up and straightened out. Thanks to countless advertisements for anti-aging, age-defense, age-reversing, fine-line-and-wrinkle-reducing creams and oils, the desired effects of which are *impossible*,⁸ and because the Face is thin, young, made-up, and likely Photoshopped of

⁸ Professor Albert Kligman of the University of Pennsylvania said that these products "simply cannot function as their backers and makers say they do, because it is physically impossible for them to get deep enough into the skin to make any lasting difference to wrinkles. The same applies to the removal of lines or wrinkles, or the permanent prevention of the aging of cells." Anita Roddick, founder of natural beauty products chain The Body Shop, said that "There is no application, no topical application, that will get rid of grief or stress or heavy lines.[...] There's nothing, but nothing, that's going to make you look younger. Nothing." Anthea Disney, editor of *Self* magazine, said "We all know there isn't anything that will make you look younger." "Sam" Sugiyama, co director of makeup and beauty

blemishes, most women are trained to fear their aging bodies, especially their faces. They don't see advertisements of older women, sexualized images of older women, love scenes of older women. Within the beauty myth, an ideal that prizes youth, whatever is aging is "unfashionable and unprofitable" (Wolf 68), thus unworthy of value or attention. Aging women are then unworthy of value or attention. Their rank on the hierarchy falls with each passing year. It is the young and the young only who receive the benefits of "beauty," and once youth has passed, a woman is encouraged to chase it in an endless, impossible loop. Young women are left looking anxiously to the future, avoiding older women lest they be reminded of the dreadful inevitable. Older women are left looking mournfully to the past, wishing they could change their appearance to gain their power back. And the present, where liberation is held and political action is demanded, is ultimately unavailable.

It is such united political action as relationship and love that catalyzes social change. As long as women are apart, and see each other through a veil of competition based on "beauty," we easily separate ourselves from each other, staying divided, staying oppressed. It is through the collective joining of women together, young *and* old, the rise of the "proletariat," so to speak, that will cause enough momentum to enact social change. Perhaps our greatest hope, second only to in-person, face-to-face communication and community, lies in the rise of the Internet, which has connected people globally like never before. But the incessant Internet is at once an outlet of hope, creativity and connection and, at the same time, just another ally in the divisiveness of women. A new world and definition of "beauty" has emerged, reinforced daily by the online space. The tools of social media, Photoshop, and the "attention economy" have perhaps made it

brand Shiseido, said that "If you want to avoid aging, you must live in space. There is no other way to avoid getting wrinkles, once you are out of the womb" (Wolf 111).

even more difficult for the otherwise financially and politically “free” Western woman to liberate herself from her own “beauty” oppression. The augment of technology has only increased women’s bodily dissatisfaction and carried on the work of early advertisers, but perhaps the connection between women online points to a stronger future, *together*.

A New World of “Beauty”

App-Happy: The rise of a new economy

The simple truth is that the Face and Body that women saw at first in magazines and now see on television, in films, in commercials, on billboards, on Instagram, in Instagram advertisements, on Facebook, in Facebook advertisements, on Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat stories, around every corner selling every kind of consumer good with their breasts, butts, and all body parts objectified and capitalized is not what men want. It’s what advertisers want women to see. There was no men’s movement in the early 1900’s, no corporate workers holding signs and protesting in the streets saying “We want thin women! We want our wives to diet! They are fat and ugly and terrible people!” (And if they *did* say such things, it was because they uncritically internalized messages of a pervasive popular culture and benefited from a system which degraded women and pinned them as the second sex). The emphasis on thinness and dieting and the creation of a culture which values and enforces this on women’s bodies was fabricated by very intelligent advertisers who studied cultural trends and consumer attitudes. These advertisers used the “norm” of gender roles and women’s behavior as the yardstick against

which to measure their campaigns. They needed buyers so they capitalized on insecurity, creating a dire need for female guilt, shame, and anxiety that did not exist before.

In a patriarchal society, female objectification and commodification is normal, accepted, and expected. That same beauty ideal is now being perpetuated in a plethora of different ways through a changing advertising landscape, a world of it's own at everyone's fingertips and in 98% of Americans' back pockets- the smartphone ("Demographics of...").

The pervasiveness of the smartphone in America has created a mobile-first economy. Just over half of all smartphone users access the internet and news from their phones rather than their laptops, and researchers predict that that number will jump to three quarters by 2025 (Handley). If folks aren't using their laptops anymore, advertisers would be smart to shift their marketing efforts toward mobile innovations, and many have already turned to social media for better profits. It's a lucrative move- Americans spend roughly 2 hours and 22 minutes per day on social media alone, mostly on their smartphones. YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are the top apps used, all of which are owned by Facebook (Salim). These social media and online news sites are swimming with information thanks to the 24/7 news cycle and the nonstop availability of content creation tools. Researchers estimate that 463 exabytes of data will be created each day globally by 2025- that's the equivalent of 212,765,957 DVDs *per day*(!), all through actions like scrolling Instagram or Facebook, sending emails, writing Tweets, text messaging friends, and even conducting Google searches (Desjardins). Our current reality of nonstop data and being "plugged in" has been aptly named "The Information Age," and has resulted in a new advertising landscape called "the attention economy."

The attention economy functions exactly as it sounds. With so much information, marketers must pull at a user's attention, distracting them long enough from their mobile experience to elicit a click that will hopefully elicit a purchase. This results in pop-ups, paywalls, and advertisements scattered at random which disrupt "the scroll" through otherwise "free" apps. If a user is spending over 2 hours per day on social media, they will likely see these advertisements on those apps.

Social media sites seemed innocent enough in their intentions to keep people connected on a no-cost Internet forum. Facebook's original motto was that Facebook would always be free (Micheal), but as social media use has exploded and integrated into the lives of 2.3 billion users - nearly *a third* of the world's population- social media sites have begun to capitalize on user's time spent on their sites (Busby). Users have become more than the "product" of social media sites, they've become consumers, too, perhaps without even knowing it. Companies use data collected through likes and accounts followed and even through tracking users across various websites to create targeted advertisements that data shows will resonate with them⁹ (Eddy).

Facebook, Twitter, and other companies keep users on their sites through methods popularized in gambling. Perhaps the most comparable method is what psychologists call the variable reinforcement schedule (Busby). When a casino-goer pulls the lever of a slot machine, they're either rewarded with a prize (three bananas in a row, for example) or nothing at all. The

⁹ For example, in a recent job search I navigated to a company's website, putzed around many pages within the website, explored their social media accounts and viewed their LinkedIn page within the span of maybe an hour from the same web browser. Since then, I have seen no less than five advertisements in a week from this company announcing that they're hiring on news sites like The Guardian and social media apps like Facebook and Instagram. This is because many websites (77% of them!) use "hidden trackers across the web that are scooping up your information," writes Max Eddy in his PCMag article, and these trackers communicate with each other to create targeted ads. One of Eddy's interviewees Bill Budington, a senior staff technologist with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, pointed out that this may be dangerous if, say, a recovering alcoholic is continually spammed with liquor store advertisements. The triggers are everywhere. It's just plain *spooky*.

results are random and unpredictable, which means a user is just as likely to be rewarded as they are to come up short- and that's where the behavioral addiction begins. "Pull the lever" on a social media site (or 24 hour news site) by refreshing the page, and your chances of attaining the "reward" of new content is quite high. The quality of the content itself doesn't really matter- what matters is the fact that it's new. Humans are novelty-seeking creatures, an attribute which has led to our very best innovations and our very worst judgment calls. Nevertheless, novel stimuli (in this case, a new Instagram or Facebook post, a new Tweet or article) create dopamine hits in the brain, which keep us coming back for more (Costa, 556). Social media revenue is measured in clicks and time spent on an application. To create a habit of checking social media, clicking, exploring, refreshing and possibly purchasing, is to amplify revenue opportunities. Facebook alone made \$21 *billion* in 2019 through profits made off of advertising, available funds thanks to the habits formed of checking social media (Busby). The longer a user is on the application, the better.

The notification factor also plays into the mindless addictiveness of social media. More and more users are reporting "phantom" notifications, in that they're hearing a phone buzz when there wasn't a notification in the first place. After a while, the external triggers of notifications, which implore the user to check the latest on Twitter, Snapchat, or whatever media they're using, are no longer necessary. Users develop an internal trigger which guides them to check in, and for some users, this internal trigger causes behavior as soon as every two minutes (Busby). Users continue to chase micro-hits of dopamine by staying connected to these apps, forming habits, and becoming behaviorally addicted.

What does this all have to do with women's body image? Well, because social media is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and new information, advertisements and posts *never stop coming*, the opportunity for women to compare themselves to their peers has increased exponentially (Perloff), and has almost become unavoidable. Also, just as gambling in real life can lead to anxiety and depression, so too can the addictive properties of social media (Busby, Holland and Tiggeman 101). Whereas a woman could compare herself only to the Face in magazines ads, billboards, television shows, television ads, films, book covers, shopping catalogs, mail advertisements, and other similarly "analog" media, she now has a *literally nonstop* source of body comparison across *billions* of other social media users that she checks habitually. She can compare herself professionally to her boss on LinkedIn as much as she can compare herself physically to photos of celebrities, social media influencers, and models from their individual accounts *and* in the advertisements which flood website sidebars, email inboxes, and news feeds across multiple platforms.

Worse yet, the algorithms which drive social media create an "echo chamber" effect. Social media apps and websites show advertisements, suggested groups and accounts to follow, and posts that are most likely to resonate with and interest the user. The more a woman engages with content that triggers body image, the more frequently she is shown such content (Perloff 366, Holland and Tiggeman 106, Goodyear 49). And because women's bodies are used to sell all kinds of consumer goods, and most advertisements feature a young, slim and attractive female (Holland and Tiggeman 101), the content a woman sees is most likely to trigger body image issues.

Numerous researchers have published studies on the connection between social media and women's body image, especially young women. They've found that the attention economy and social networking sites are not only linked to anxiety and depression, but the use of them can predict body dissatisfaction, the internalization of thin body ideals, and eating disorder symptomatology in preadolescent girls and young women (Perloff 363, Holland and Tiggeman 101, Hogue and Mills 3). If that wasn't bad enough, these advertisements and images wreak even more psychological havoc through their reinforcement of the woman-specific phenomenon, self-objectification.

A “Hot” Commodity: Self-objectification in women and girls

Gender role socialization processes (read: the way women are raised) indicate that girls learn from an early age what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior for their gender. Girls as young as 3 have been shown to “ascribe positive traits to thinner targets” (Perloff 364) and children as young as 5 can understand the “negative social consequences” of obesity (Wood 84). The beauty myth, then, which states that there is one unified form of beauty in thinness, is reinforced from as young as 3. Girls are taught that thinness is good and fat is bad in black and white terms.

The beauty myth and emphasis on external appearance has psychological consequences on young women that often go undiscussed. Because much of advertising, entertainment and social media are image-based, and women are seeing one image of the ideal represented, the Face, they begin to internalize the idea they should appear like these images. Many, if not the majority, of these images not only portray an unrealistic beauty standard, but the women within

them are sexually objectified, reduced only to her body or certain parts of her body, like breasts, thighs, or lips (Claudat 17). The woman's desires, fears, philosophies, opinions, achievements, failures, and that vital story within her are reduced and discarded in favor of her two-dimensional image. Only her appearance matters, and her appearance, she realizes, must fit the beauty myth mold that she sees in advertisements. Her "happily ever after" recipe for success *depends* on it. Advertisements are well-lit productions, Photoshopped, airbrushed, enhanced, edited... in other words, not real. But women internalize the idea that they must look like these advertisements because they have learned to self-objectify (Perloff 364) (Holland and Tiggeman 101) (Claudat 17) as a result of seeing themselves as objects in advertisements which sell all conceivable kinds of consumer goods.

The pornography industry has contributed to this self-objectification as well. In a typical pornographic scene, a woman is doing something within the home (cooking, maybe, or simply going about her day) when a man stumbles upon her. So strong is their desire, so salacious their banter, that, in full makeup, hair, and spray tan, the couple disrobes and begins their intercourse in performance-ready lighting. Much of pornography focuses on the woman, hooded eyes, giggling and breathless with ecstasy, the camera literally from the perspective of a man's face looking down at the woman performing sexual acts. The camera's gaze is always focused on the woman. Out of context this would be a very "feminist" thing, as the camera seems to be focusing on the woman's pleasure, but this is not so, because her pleasure is not truly her own- it is filtered through the expectation of what men want to see. It's performed. Filming from the male perspective means that "what little girls learn is not the desire for the other, but the desire to be

desired” (Wolf 157). Observing the woman from a male perspective in every pornographic scene turns her into an object of desire. It is not a celebratory gaze, it is an objectifying one.

This is in explicit pornography, but because sexualized advertisements attract consumer’s attention, increase their positive attitude towards the advertisement, and facilitate their interest in the brand (Choi et al. 825), a successful marketing campaign may very well be a sexualized one. These advertisements are what Wolf calls “softcore” pornographic, and women make up most advertisements that have these sexualized images (Choi et al. 823). In these eroticized stills, Wolf points out, the women are not actually responding to anything sexual. The “warm dialogue” of sexual desire, characterized by the small physical, mental and emotional turn-ons that we observe in those we’re attracted to, is silenced in these advertisements. The women are sexualized without context, holding a piece of chocolate or sun tan, feigning stale, two-dimensional desire for an object. The woman becomes the object.¹⁰

“Young men grow up trained to eroticize images that teach them nothing about female desire,” writes Wolf. “Nor are young *women* taught to eroticize female desire. Both men and women, then, tend to eroticize only the woman’s body and the male desire” (158). Both men and women then *value* only those two components of a much broader and more exciting network of sexual communication. In a patriarchal society, feminine desire, just like in pornography, is consistently filtered through a male point of view. Her body is commodified, valuable only in its ability to sell something, and her pleasure is left out of the picture.

Thanks to rock and roll, widespread jokes about male adolescence and patriarchy in general, men have a wide array of sexual role models. Women do not have these authentic role

¹⁰ See Appendix

models, because their sexuality is rarely discussed or encouraged. A sexual culture has already been created for men, embodied, sung about, written about, filmed, understood, and internalized. Women do not have this luxury, and see only images of themselves through the eyes of males. They come to take this gaze upon themselves and become self-conscious of how their body is viewed. Instead of exploring the many different avenues of men's sexualized bodies that young girls desire, they see only themselves, "their searching hungry gaze returned to their own bodies," Wolf writes. "The questions, Whom do I desire? Why? What will I do about it? are turned around: Would I desire myself? Why?... Why *not*? What can I do about it?" (157). Women feel pressured to become more "beautiful" by changing themselves to fit the mold.

When only a woman's body is valued, and not her desire, and only a male's desire is valued, and not his body, there's a silencing on both ends, a clash, an inhibitor to intimacy. It's safe to say that the pornographic undertone of mass media keeps women interested chiefly in how they appear during sex rather than what they're physically experiencing, and men, not knowing any differently or knowing how to value feminine desire, are also chiefly interested in how women appear. The woman is concerned about if she appears as those in pornography and advertising do, though to appear this way in a non-staged environment is implausible and takes considerable effort. Her consciousness is exported to how she appears, forming a mental ring around her most sexualized areas at all times.

This objectification is pervasive in many areas in a woman's life. Young girls and women are socialized, through exposure to such advertisements, to see themselves "as objects to be viewed, evaluated, and attractive to men" (Claudat 17). Sexually objectifying (and degrading and disempowering) films, shows, books, jokes, and other pop culture references contribute to the

perpetuation of this behavior. Self-objectification and hyperawareness of the body's positioning and others' perspectives of one's body can lead to body surveillance, which is the "habitual monitoring of how one's body appears" (Claudat 18). Body surveillance and self-objectification lead to "psychological disturbances" in a woman's view of her body, including dysmorphia and distortion (Perloff 365) (Claudat 17).¹¹ These body comparisons, including those available at a young woman's fingertips on social networking sites, can cause an increase in shame and anxiety, which may manifest into eating disorders (Holland and Tiggeman 101).

Thus, young or old, thin or fat, a woman is constantly surveilling her body, objectifying her body, thinking, really thinking about her body. All the various angles, all the fine lines, all the soft and bony parts, the tightness of her bra strap, the visible lines of her underwear. How does her hair look? How should she hold her pen? Is she slouching? What does she look like from behind? From the side? From the front?

Richard Perloff argues in his 2014 paper "Social Media Effects on Young Women's Body Image Concerns" that women at risk for body image problems have the following attributes: low self-esteem, depression, perfectionism, internalization of the thinness ideal, and centrality of appearance to self-worth (367). Because of the photo-centricity of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, women can find reassurance and validation about their appearance on these platforms through upward or downward comparisons in photos of other women. They can compare upwardly by viewing the accounts and photos of someone they find

¹¹ Coming across this research was truly life-changing for me. I thought, like so many of us think, that I was the only one who experienced this phenomenon of constantly monitoring my body and it's appearance, considering how it appears to men. Do I appear desirable? How do I position my pen or pencil to make myself look attractive? Should I tilt my head this way or the other way? Hair in front of our over my shoulder? If I find a man in one of my classes or in any given room attractive, my peripheral is always on him, interpreting his angle, and I adjust myself accordingly. These behaviors are far from vain- in fact, most of them are unconscious. I felt validated and considerably less "crazy" after discovering the self-objectification theory and understanding this behavior is no fault of my own.

more “beautiful” than themselves, like a celebrity, model, influencer, or even a peer, or they can compare downwardly by viewing the accounts and photos of someone they find less “beautiful” than themselves. They can also escape from “appearance-related personal distress” (369) in these technological ecosystems which are created, as we’ve seen, to keep users online and engaged for as long as possible.

Young women are kept in a cycle in this way, looking at other women (whose content may or may not be sexualized, and if so, adding another layer of comparison), ruminating on parts of their bodies that they dislike through comparing themselves to attractive and less attractive peers. This can lead to “reinforcing spirals” that augment the already-harmful impacts of social networking sites on body image (Perloff 368). Women are continually objectifying and commodifying themselves and their peers based on the Face and Body ideals. Worse yet, as is the nature of social media, young women present idealized versions of themselves on their accounts through their images (Hogue and Mills 1), two-dimensional selfies and pictures of experiences that are often known as a “highlight reel” of a person’s life. Some retouch their own Instagram photos, removing blemishes or even altering their face shape.¹² As a consequence, in their echo-chamber of targeted advertisements and followed accounts, women see idealized images and compare their real bodies to these idealized selves- a fruitless effort (Hogue and Mills 1).

¹² I was at a baseball game once and watched two young women, one was maybe twenty and the other sixteen, edit the photo they’d just snapped. Baseball stadium seats are notoriously shallow, so I was able to watch them completely from start to finish. The way that they approached it was so casual and simple- it was their natural inclination after snapping the photo to open another app and start editing. Completely subconscious. I watched the older sister zoom in on her own face, digitally tweezing, blushing, shaping, shining. They even asked their nearby mother for advice, showing her the photo before editing and after, and the mother made suggestions. This nauseated me. I understand that social media is 100% fabricated, cultivated, curated, that’s the name of the game, but this age, between twelve and twenty five, is a time of growing, changing, exploring, not creating a false, censored, edited identity. This memory and its implications break my heart.

When women engage in this cycle, they are in essence rating themselves and others within the hierarchy of the beauty myth- does this user they're observing conform to the beauty myth, do they have the Face and Body? Does the young woman herself conform to the beauty myth, does *she* have the Face and Body? If not (and likely she does not, because this Face and Body, however pervasive, are usually Photoshopped, altered, fabricated and imperfect within their natural state which the media has robbed of women and increasingly more men), where does she rank in the hierarchy? Where does she stray from this image? Where is she *not enough*?

What parts of her body, exactly, do not conform? Is it her rounded stomach, jiggling thighs? Her vitiligo, her freckles, her upper lip and arm and armpit hair? Dark-brown, almost black eyes? Hooded eyelids? Too-thin or too-thick eyebrows? Are her cheekbones too low on her face? Are her cheeks too round? Is her smile crooked or gap-toothed? Is her nose too large? Are her fingers too short? Are her ankles too fat? Is she too short? Is she too tall? Can she not pout properly? Is her butt too long, too stout, does she have cellulite, stretch marks, hairy areolas, asymmetrical breasts, too much pubic hair, too thick of leg hair? Does she slouch? Is her hair short of luscious? Are her eyes short of sultry?

When young women who have depression and low self-esteem and suffer from perfectionism have internalized the thin ideal and connect appearance strongly to their self worth, as Perloff described, they're particularly likely to turn to these social media to validate and reassure themselves and to convince themselves that they "measure up" to the impossible ideals of the Face and Body that they see around them. The pressures they face on social media then- to gain enough likes, for example- can exacerbate body disturbances and impact mental health (Perloff 369, Holland and Tiggeman 109). These body comparisons and augmentations of

low self esteem can even lead to a mental illness with the highest mortality rate (Day)- an eating disorder.

The False Image: Photoshop and eating disorders

In 2009, Ralph Lauren, a fashion company, released an image of model Filippa Hamilton on the cover of their catalog. In the image, Hamilton's waist is smaller than her head, her hips are not much larger, her arms are stick-thin and her face is gauntly, ghastly slender (see Figure 6 in Appendix). Internet outrage prompted Ralph Lauren to release a half-hearted apology for "the poor imaging and retouching that resulted in a very distorted image of a woman's body" (Horwath).

Advertisements from Target have been under similar fire (see Figure 7 in Appendix), and celebrities like Lady Gaga, Kerry Washington and Zendaya have spoken out about their Photoshopped bodies in magazines.¹³ Using Photoshop to doctor, edit and smooth women in advertisements everywhere, from magazine to mobile phone, is a widely used advertising technique.¹⁴ Because most advertisements feature women and women's bodies, these doctored images impact women the most, and perpetuate the beauty myth even further. When the beauty myth, the Face and the Body, were created in the early 1900's, Photoshop did not exist- advertisements were hand-drawn, and the illustrator could draw whatever dimensions on a woman would sell their product best. In the digital age, hand-drawn advertisements are rare, and

¹³ Wrote Gaga in an Instagram post in reaction to her Glamour cover, which was obviously Photoshopped: "It is fair to write about the change in your magazines. But what I want to see is the change on your covers... When the covers change, that's when culture changes" (Vagianos). See Appendix Figure 8 for Gaga's cover.

¹⁴ For the life of me I could not find any study or article from a reputable source which gave statistics on, say, what percentage of advertisements are Photoshopped, or how prevalent this problem actually is, but the photos in Figures 9-12 in the Appendix show the drastic changes of just a few models.

a body can be manipulated by anyone with the Photoshop app and a desire to learn. Professionals spend hours in “post,” editing, tweaking, slimming, augmenting, taking the Face and Body templates and applying them for the umpteenth time to another model or celebrity. The beauty myth persists.

The images of the Face and Body are everywhere, waiting for our young girls, and they simply are not real. Just as the thinness ideal was culturally fabricated, so too are the overwhelming majority of professional photos. Adult women are now starting to edit their own photos, stretch their own limbs, preen their leg hair, edit out their blemishes, smooth their acneic face- if not, an app like Snapchat, Instagram, or even the camera applications built into the Samsung Galaxy phone will automatically restructure, recolor, and smooth their image (Coslett) or apply filters with similar aims. Women are expected, and expect themselves, to “look pretty” and present “beauty” at all moments, in part because their online personas are an echo chamber of objectifying the female body, scrutinizing and comparing it, and also because they are led to believe that these images capture “real” women’s bodies.

A clear-cut line cannot be drawn between Photoshopped advertisements and eating disorders, because an eating disorder is a mental illness, and mental illnesses manifest from many different sources of a person’s life. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illnesses’ website, an eating disorder is a complicated web of causes, including family history, age, environment, emotional health, life changes experienced and vocations and activities (“Eating Disorders”). But the ideal that has emerged and holds strongly in the female mind can exacerbate a woman’s symptoms. A thinness of impossibility, fabricated through the digital stretching and reducing and altering of a (young White) woman’s body in advertisements and

fashion photography, has created an utterly unattainable goal, and young women are the most perceptible to the manifestation of an eating disorder.

Fifty percent of girls between the ages of 3 and 6 worry about their weight (Roeder). Forty two percent of girls in grades 1-3 want to be thinner. Sixty nine percent of American elementary girls say that photos in magazines influence their concept of ideal body shape, and 47% say that those pictures want to make them lose weight (“Media & Eating...”). Half to 60% of middle- and high-school girls consider themselves overweight and have tried to diet (Martin 422). Fifty three percent of 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, and in just four years, at age seventeen, that percentage skyrockets to seventy eight. Three of the most common mental health problems among girls and young women- eating disorders, depression, or depressed mood/self-esteem- are linked to the presentation of women in the media. And thirty percent of high school girls suffer from disordered eating (Day).¹⁵

These anxieties and statistics are not natural. Women are not made for this. They are not programmed in the womb or inclined upon birth to be afraid of fatness, to hide themselves, to destroy their own self-images- they are born as human beings, and they learn. Through their mothers stepping on scales, yo-yo dieting, pinching their own body fat and making derogatory comments to themselves in the mirror, through jokes, snide comments, popular culture and entertainment, before and after photos and advertisements for all dieting apparatuses and appetizer suppressants under the sun... they learn. They learn to want to be thinner. They learn to strive for perfection. And they learn to struggle with eating, both a nourishing act and an act which incites guilt upon the socialized young girl.

¹⁵ Another statistic was haunting and widespread, but I could not find a study, article or reputable source for it. From Day: Adolescent girls are more afraid of gaining weight than getting cancer, losing their parents or nuclear war.

Boys, eat up, get seconds, help yourself, we say. But girls, watch your figure- it'll go right to your hips. It's always about the body, never about the silent suffering, the calloused knuckles, brittle hair, cracked lips, bloody diarrhea, lack of focus, energy, satisfaction, youth. Always about the stomach, the thighs, the breasts, the arms, never the brains or ambitions or soul. Always about the veil of beauty, the impossible dream, and never the girl crushed beneath its weight. The myth becomes reality as girls and women with eating disorders fade away without being seen for who they truly are. They are undervalued, they are overworked, and they are dying without a word.

The Clarion Call

Thinness culture, fatphobia, and the degradation of women cannot thrive without misogyny and patriarchy. These two concepts have existed long before any of us arrived on the planet, and will likely exist long after. There is unfortunately no one person to blame for this society's structure, as it exists within all of us. We are all to blame, and we are all empowered to change the system in varying ways.

The perseverance of the Face and Body can be seen as something entirely negligible in the grand scheme of female oppression. Some argue that there are bigger fish to fry on the feminist agenda, and I wouldn't disagree that it's not our number one priority. I will also point out that almost 100% of the research that backs up this thesis was conducted with middle-class American White women, and pertains chiefly to that socioeconomic class. Women of a racial minority face much more severe discrimination, oppression, objectification and subjugation than the women included in these studies and articles. There are genuine atrocities- child brides, sex

trafficking, “gender”cide (abortion and infanticide of female babies and fetuses), daily if not hourly assaults that are completely acceptable if not encouraged- that occur around the world, sometimes in the US, but not as often as globally.

However.

This issue takes up way too much space in the psyches of privileged American women like myself. It traps us, sucks our energy, exhausts us, and we simply cannot afford to be exhausted. There’s too much to do. If our mental space is being compromised by an internal misogynist, and we are doing 75% of the housework, and we are fretting over what to wear, and we are judging other women based on their appearance instead of forming alliances with them for the betterment of society, then we are failing our sisters who desperately need our help, and face atrocities that we will never know.

There is arguably a civic duty, then, for those of “us” who have these privileges to throw our ideals about beauty to the wind, deconstruct the hierarchy, and see ourselves for the radiant beauties that we are no matter what we look like. It is high time for the veil to be lifted and for all women to look at other women differently and see them, truly, instead of the mask of competition which plagues us. There is no time for patriarchal baloney anymore. The environment needs us. Our children need us. Our sisters need us. The *world* needs women, the other half, now more than ever to save it, and we cannot do this until we eradicate such an unnecessary psychic layer as the beauty myth.

I read an article a month or two ago by Mandy Len Catron called “Women can reclaim power over our bodies – by talking about them.” The subtitle: “If we can’t talk about our reproductive lives, we can’t defend them.” In the piece for *The Guardian* Catron details the

ignorance of many Americans, women included, around reproduction, citing statistics about how 21% of Americans surveyed believed that a stressful argument could terminate a pregnancy and 55% believed that miscarriages were “uncommon” and ended less than 6% of pregnancies- they end one in four (Catron).

The article takes an interesting turn, however, when she discusses the state of our country and the dangers of misconceptions around reproduction. She writes:

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that the lives – and basic humanity – of women are at stake here: black women and indigenous women and trans women and rural women. The problem with being ladylike is that spending all your energy managing what other people think about women’s bodies makes it impossible to actually protect them.” Each of the categories of women she mentioned- black, indigenous, trans, and rural- had links to click for further reading on these communities. I clicked through them. I read them all.

I felt my shoulders tense, my jaw tighten, tears well in my eyes as I read each article. The statistics boggled my mind.

Black women are three to four times as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes as their white counterparts. Infants born to college-educated black parents are twice as likely to die as infants born to similarly educated white parents (Villarosa).

Indigenous women in Canada are being “approached, harassed, [and] coerced into signing” consent forms, while in labor, agreeing to their forced sterilization. Indigenous women were told they could not leave the hospital and could not see their newborn until their tubes were tied, cut, or cauterized (Moran).

Vicky Gutierrez, 33, a transgender woman from Honduras was stabbed and had her body set ablaze inside her Los Angeles home on January 10. Regina Denise Brown, 53, a trans woman of color, was found dead in her burning home in South Carolina on October 7 (“Violence Against...”).

In 2015 the maternal mortality rate in large central metropolitan areas was 18.2 per 100,000 live births—but in the most rural areas it was 29.4. More than two thirds of rural counties in Florida, Nevada and South Dakota have no in-county obstetrical services (Maron).

It was at this point in my research that I found what I could not, will never, understand—clear and pointless injustice in the world against those who shared the title of “woman.” My mind flashed back to my seat in a room on the second floor of Old Main two years prior, to a class I took on the Holocaust. The professor, a Jewish woman, told us weekly about the atrocities faced by those in the concentration camps. One class lectured about the experiments that Nazi scientists were ordered to conduct. In one of these experiments, a new mother was strapped to a table after giving birth. Her newborn infant was strapped just out of reach next to her, and she was forced to watch her child starve to death without his mother’s abundant milk.

Imagine that.

I left the room and sobbed, wide-eyed in the bathroom stall, maternal instinct ripping my chest apart. Her wails of horror, men in uniform standing by, scribbling notes, hours and hours on a cold metal table to witness this miracle from within you, starved and pale and taking it’s very last breath.

Reading these articles, I felt my heart hammering three words into my brain- “Listen to me.” These women, trans women, rural women, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, White, Black,

Latina, these women, simply for being women, were burning in their homes and dying in their hospitals. “Listen to me.” These women were screaming to be heard, Kitty Genovese killed outside of her apartment because no one would aid her, someone else will help her, someone else will listen, they were screaming then and they’re screaming now and no one will help them. And yet here “we” are, the ones who *can* help, paralyzed with dissatisfaction in the mirror, feeling hatred, jealousy, guilt crawl up our spines and into our brain stems, telling us that we are not enough.

The psychological manifestations of the beauty myth cause a mental injury that is real and valid. It has caused generations of pain for the women of my family and many families I know. It has, in part, caused anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia and eating disorders in women I love. It has also effectively kept “us” in a gelatin mold, fretting unconsciously over our appearances and the appearances of other women and our ability to find and keep a man while women all over the world and within our own country are experiencing an immense level of devastation with no one to speak for them. *We need to be the ones to speak for them.* We need to amplify their voices. The effects of the beauty myth are real, and they are valid, and the eradication of them will allow the freest of women to free other women, to pay attention to them, to listen to them at last.

White people listen to White people. White women will listen to White women. We need White women with their privilege to use their “platform” of Whiteness and speak up for those that have not been spoken up for, that have not been listened to. Because, really, how many Black mothers and Black babies must die before they’re listened to? How many trans murders and roadside births, terrifying assaults and gruesome rapes? How many times must a woman be

called a bitch or catcalled or killed before they're listened to? How many women must slit their wrists, shove their thumbs down their throats, wish, like I once did, to take a knife and slide it's edge through the fat of their stomach or arm or thigh, clean it off like a deli slicer, before they understand that their body is not the enemy? How many women must check their back seats, hold their keys in their knuckles, cross their legs, walk a little faster before men act differently? How many vaginas must be mutilated, how many feet shrunk, necks elongated, faces injected, how many Indian women must be gang raped and murdered and how many South Asian women must be married as children and just how many girls under the age of 15, which makes up 50% of sexual assault cases worldwide, must be battered, raped and traumatized before they're listened to?

How many women have I not listened to or ignored just because they're a *woman*?

How many have *you*?

Advertising and representation 100% matter. We need the eradication of Photoshop. We need more women of size and color and different abilities in our advertising ecosystem. We need to educate other women on this beauty myth, expose it, so that the Face and Body become just one of thousands of role models as diverse as the women who view them. And in the midst of tearing down what has held us back, we will become free to use our privileges for the benefit of our sisters.

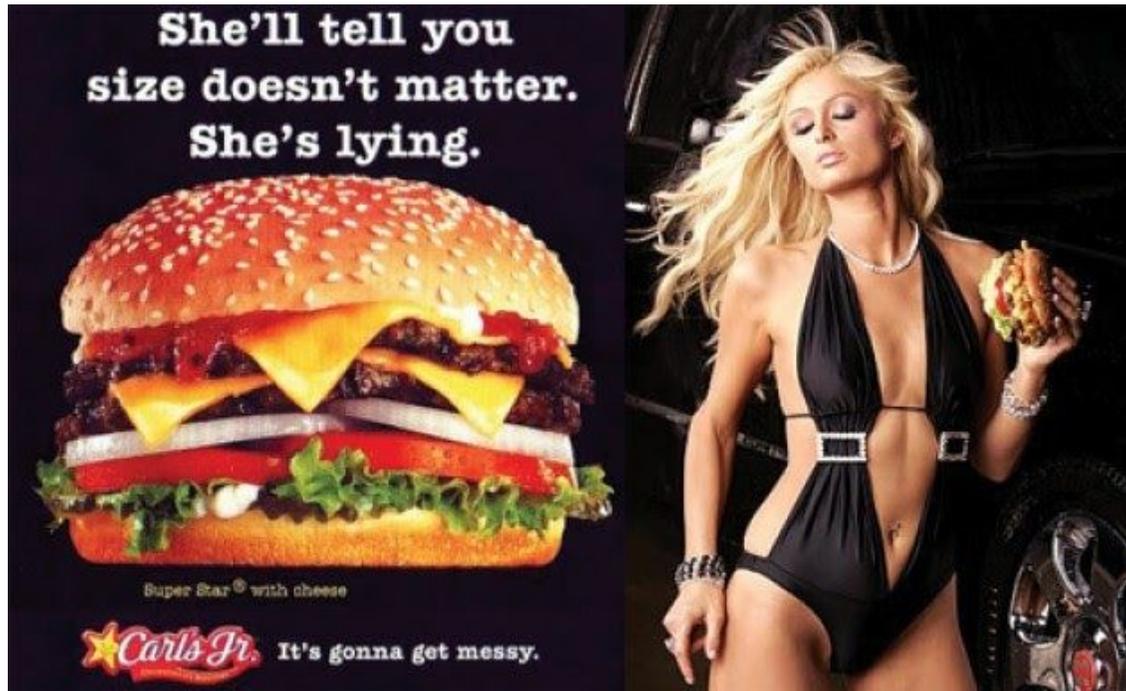
We cannot afford to maintain the beauty myth anymore. We need to relieve women of the burden of their "beauty," the burden of competition with one another. We need to empower women to *destroy* their inner misogynist and seize the incredible opportunities that they may only be 60% qualified for. We have been trying for thousands of years to bring back the divine

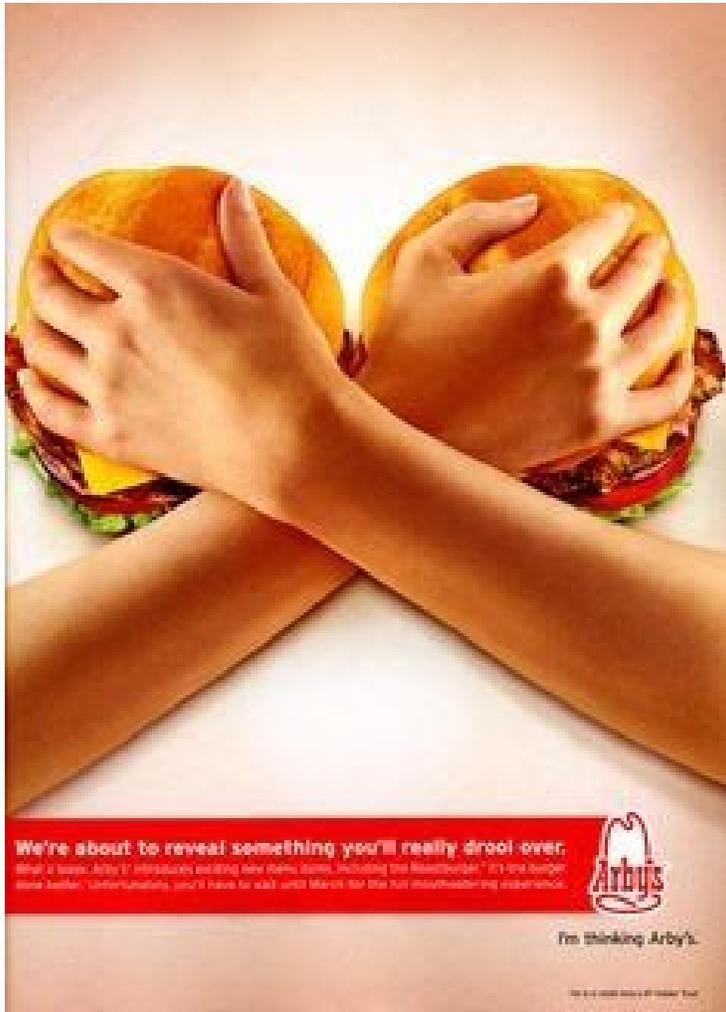
goddess in our society, the patriarchy, a land where men, women, children, Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Native Americans, rich, poor and everything and everyone in between are treated as human beings. And we will try for another thousand, until one baby girl comes screaming and bloody from a vagina and spends the rest of her life in peaceful equality. Until there are zero rapes, we will try. Until there are zero murders, we will try. We will try until every girl can look in a mirror and delight at it's reflection, until every girl can decide for herself whether or not she'll shave or wax, whether or not she'll have sex, whether or not she's a girl at all. We will try until every girl has access to education and sanitary products, fresh water, clean clothing, safety. Until no girl has to recoil at the memory of her assault. Until the only problems a woman faces are the problems men face, too.

Until Woman is respected and revered we will try, without even a second glance in the mirror.

Appendix

Figures 1-5: Some well-known, blatantly sexualized advertisements in recent history:





We're about to reveal something you'll really drool over. Introducing Arby's® Introducing exciting new items, including the Baconheart™. It's the burger you've been waiting for. Available while supplies last. Visit us online for more information. www.arbys.com

Arby's

I'm thinking Arby's.

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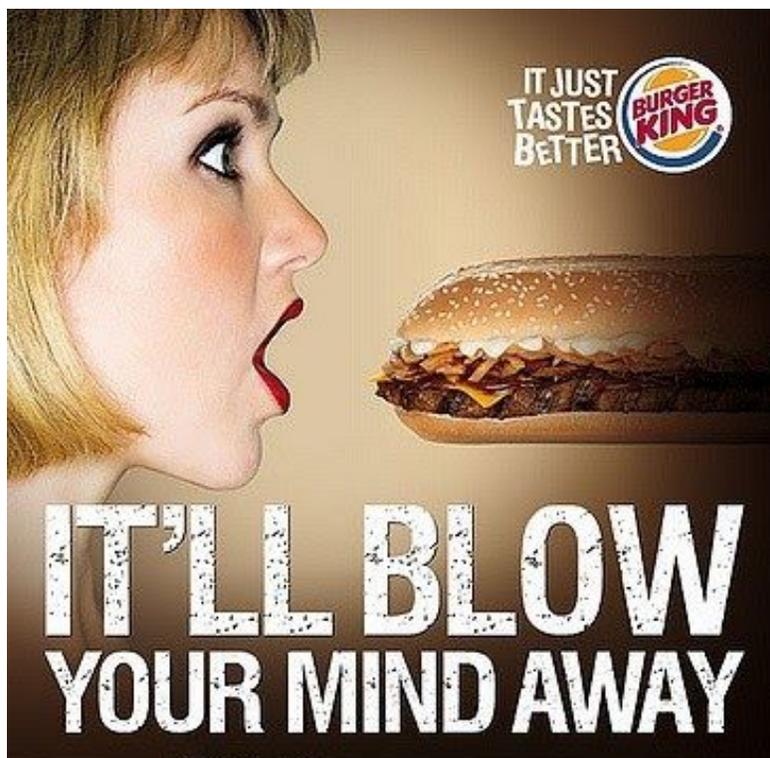
You know you're not the first.

BMW Premium Selection Used Cars

www.bmw.gr

BMW

Sheer Driving Pleasure



IT JUST TASTES BETTER **BURGER KING**

IT'LL BLOW YOUR MIND AWAY

Figure 6: Filippa Hamilton from Ralph Lauren's 2009 campaign on the left, and on the right with a considerably more natural shape.

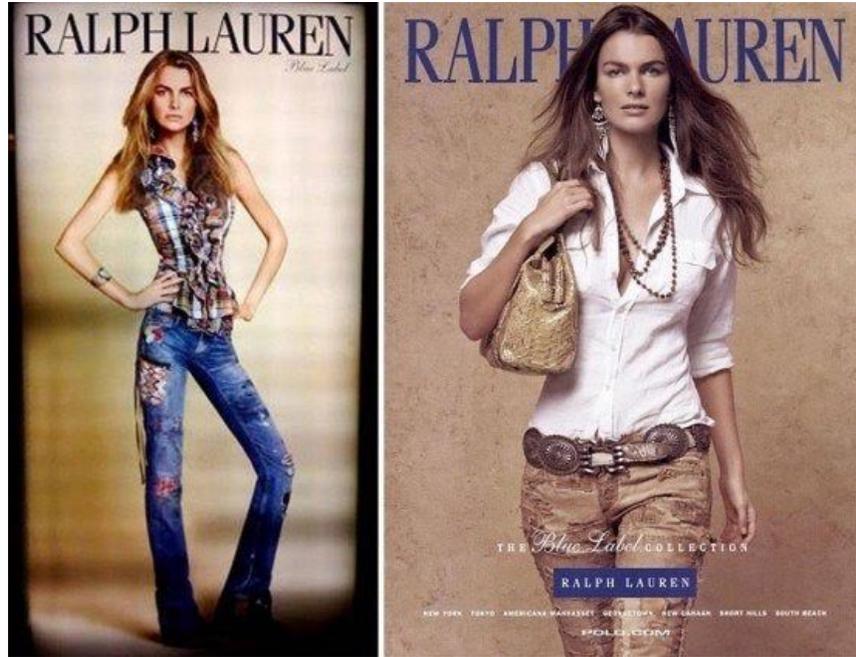


Figure 7: Target's "Photoshop fails" create unnatural proportions and even remove a model's labia.



Figure 8: Lady Gaga's cover.



GLAMOUR

Women of the Year

Starring
Lady Gaga

And Ten More Heroes & Rebels You'll Never Forget

+Meet the Girl Who Stood Up to the Taliban

Flip for More Gaga Fabulousness →

500
Best Holiday Party Looks

Plus
What to Do With Your Hair Tonight

How to Be Healthier by December 31
Page 159

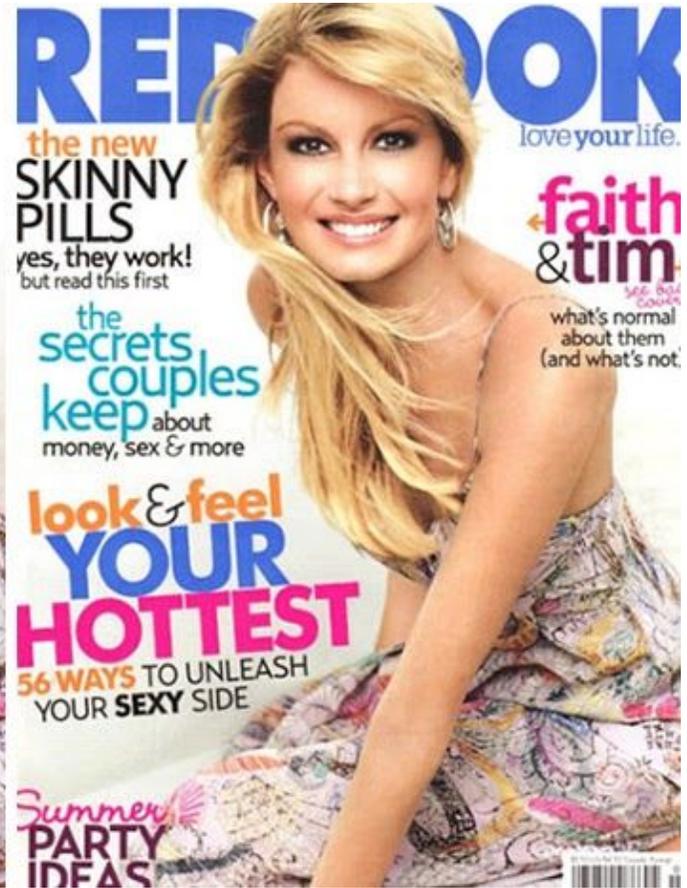
Gift Guide
59 Easy Ideas for Picky People

Guy Poll
Why They're Psyched & Freaked About Marriage

DECEMBER 2013

Figures 9- 12: Here are some before-and-after-Photoshop images I found helpful in seeing it's effects.





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