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## Towards A Radical Body Positive: Reading The Online Body Positive Movement

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# Towards A Radical Body Positive: Reading The Online Body Positive Movement

## Abstract

Under the auspices of the “body positive movement,” there has recently been an explosion of web-based content dedicated to confronting narrow Western beauty ideals that privilege the white, thin, cis-gendered and able-bodied. Body positivity challenges this exclusionary culture by encouraging the circulation of empowering body-images and advocating for the visibility of bodies that do not fit mainstream beauty norms.

This dissertation is a visual and textual analysis of five English-language body positive web spaces, *Herself*, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *The Body is Not An Apology*, *My Body Gallery* and *Body Revolution*. Exploring site mission statements, submission guidelines, “seed images” of site creators, and participant images and stories, it maps the representational tropes that frame digital body positive practices and the ideological formations that undergird them. It reads body positivity through an interdisciplinary lens, grounding it within a history of discourses on the relationship between subjectivity, the body and its representation to address how narratives of authenticity, visibility, and embodiment are negotiated when the body is digitally performed and disseminated. This dissertation argues that ultimately, the way the body and the image operate within digital body positivity does not significantly distance the practice from the cultural formations it attempts to combat; Instead, it proposes a radical body positive to open up productive possibilities for representing embodiment in the digital age.

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TOWARDS A RADICAL BODY POSITIVE:  
READING THE ONLINE BODY POSITIVE MOVEMENT

Alexandra Sastre

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## ABSTRACT

### TOWARDS A RADICAL BODY POSITIVE: READING THE ONLINE BODY POSITIVE MOVEMENT

Alexandra Sastre

Marwan Kraidy

Under the auspices of the “body positive movement,” there has recently been an explosion of web-based content dedicated to confronting narrow Western beauty ideals that privilege the white, thin, cis-gendered and able-bodied. Body positivity challenges this exclusionary culture by encouraging the circulation of empowering body-images and advocating for the visibility of bodies that do not fit mainstream beauty norms.

This dissertation is a visual and textual analysis of five English-language body positive web spaces, *Herself*, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *The Body is Not An Apology*, *My Body Gallery* and *Body Revolution*. Exploring site mission statements, submission guidelines, “seed images” of site creators, and participant images and stories, it maps the representational tropes that frame digital body positive practices and the ideological formations that undergird them. It reads body positivity through an interdisciplinary lens, grounding it within a history of discourses on the relationship between subjectivity, the body and its representation to address how narratives of authenticity, visibility, and embodiment are negotiated when the body is digitally performed and disseminated. This dissertation argues that ultimately, the way the body and the image operate within digital body positivity does not significantly distance the practice from the cultural formations it attempts to combat; Instead, it proposes a radical body positive to open up productive possibilities for representing embodiment in the digital age.

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## Introduction

In 2012, Lady Gaga declared a “body revolution.” Through her official website *Little Monsters*, the pop star encouraged her followers to “be brave and celebrate [their] ‘perceived flaws’” (Garibaldi, 2012). She modeled this bravery by posting to the site a series of four images of herself clothed only in a pair of yellow undergarments, her gaze systematically averted from the camera. In these seemingly raw, intimate pictures, Gaga poses, contorts and performs a body that, as one of the images’ captions reveals, has suffered from “bulimia and anorexia since [the age of] 15” (A Body Revolution 2013, 2012a). These are photographs meant to “inspire bravery,” and we, as viewers, gawkers, fans or potential participants in this revolution, are meant to recognize this body as true, and to see its presentation herein as an act of catharsis. Yet this pop star is far from the first entertainer (or individual) to digitally reveal her flesh to the world, and is not singular in her call to equate corporeal revelation with personal emancipation. In 2015 alone, size-22 model Tess Holliday was dubbed the “first” plus-sized supermodel and launched the Instagram and Twitter hashtag #effyourbeautystandards. Actress Caitlin Stasey launched a new participatory feminist photography project titled *Herself* featuring a series of professional nude photoshoots and long-form interviews. Reality television star Lauren Conrad declared the word “skinny” would no longer have a place on her lifestyle website aimed at young women, replacing it instead with the term “healthy” (Clements, 2015). Like Lady Gaga before them, what these celebrities recognized was a unique opportunity to leverage their visibility by drawing attention to an increasingly popular cause: body positivity.



Under the auspices of the “body positive movement,” there has in recent years been a proliferation of advertising campaigns, celebrity endorsements, grass-roots activism and digital communities dedicated to nurturing bodily acceptance and challenging the normalization of thin, white, abled, cis-gendered bodies in Western media. Positioning itself against mainstream media images of idealized, largely inaccessible female bodies, the body positive movement advocates for the revision of beauty norms through making visible a greater range of diverse bodies, with related websites showcasing people of all shapes, sizes, races, genders and abilities.

Body positive websites strive to provide a safe space for people to share stories, and more importantly images, of their bodies. They strive, through various means, to respond to a broader need for alternative images of the body, both exposing the dangers and fallacies of normative constructions of beauty and providing space for a more positive and affirmative performance of self. Therefore, from body positive movement’s onset there has been significant attention paid by the popular press to its purported benefits and limits (Baker, 2011; McCombes, 2015; Olya, 2015), with particular focused placed on the question of whether it effectively combats the narrow definition of the ideal body with which women (and, increasingly, men) are constantly bombarded.

This dissertation addresses an aspect of these sites that is less readily interrogated—the *kinds* of performative practices fostered by body positive websites. Specifically, it untangles what such practices tell us about the ideological and representational frameworks that guide digital body positivity. Looking at five websites that ascribe to a “body positive” philosophy, Lady Gaga’s *Body Revolution*, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *My Body Gallery*, actress Caitlin Stasey’s recently launched site *Herself*, and *The Body is Not*

*an Apology*, this work interrogates the ways in which these spaces shape and facilitate the enactment of “body positive” tenets, and how these practices in turn frame the possibility of bodily resistance and emancipation from oppressive representational norms. To do so, it asks the following questions: What sorts of visual and rhetorical practices do these body positive web spaces facilitate? How are these practices captured and documented in the digital realm? How might we theorize the relationships between these practices and constructions of identity and subjectivity in the West? Do these sites actually provide new or alternative models for thinking through the nexus of body and self? And if so, what do they tell us about what a radical representation of embodiment looks (and might look) like?

Though closely linked to more established initiatives like the fat acceptance movement, which itself sets forth to “end size discrimination in all of its forms” (NAAFA, 2016), the boundaries of the body positive movement are difficult to define. Commercial manifestations of body positivity range from therapeutic initiatives to consultation services. But it is its digital instantiation, and the various celebrity narratives within it, that has recently received U.S. media attention. For the purposes of this dissertation, I was interested in spaces that were visible and popular, as I felt they would come closer to a representative sample of what online body positive spaces looked and felt like. Since this work conceptualizes body positivity as not only an ideology, but also a set of discursive practices, it was important that I seek out spaces that were participatory rather than (just) vehicles for celebrity visibility.

Scholarly work on body positivity, which to date has been scarce, addresses how mainstream Western media and corporate campaigns leverage select body positive

rhetoric in attempts to appropriate and repackage feminist discourse for personal consumption (Persis Murray, 2013; Gil & Elias, 2014; Murphy & Jackson 2011). While this work is intimately related to this project, it does not rigorously analyze the quotidian practices of body positivity or their relationship to body positive ideology. It also does not directly address how these practices operate within a digital sphere that inevitably shapes any contemporary conversation on the body, its image record and the circulation of both. This dissertation does both these things and more: it maps the institutional norms of digital body positive practice, grounds them within a history of discourses on the relationship between the photographic image and the body, and proposes a new frame for understanding the radical potential of digital body positivity.

A close look at body positive websites reveals they foster structured paths to participation, encouraging and displaying particular kinds of photographic and textual contributions that together represent the performative practice of body positivity. Though the various body positive spaces explored in this dissertation each negotiate this performative paradigm differently, I argue that overall, body positivity seems to reflect, more than reject, many of the very narratives of conformity and regulation it seeks to push past. Additionally, I argue that body positivity's online manifestation merits careful consideration for the ideological work it does to reposition the body within the public sphere. Cushioned by messages of authenticity, exposure and transformation, body positive websites frequently function as spaces where a particular mode of acceptability is modeled to those liminal bodies that might previously have found themselves stranded in the realm of not-quite: not-quite thin enough to stand in as ideal, not-quite large enough to incite panic, and- critically- not-quite visible enough to merit attention.

Therefore, many of these sites problematically work to bound body positivity into a relatively narrow set of visual and rhetorical practices, despite their paradoxical emphasis on resisting and deconstructing the similarly narrow bodily standards promoted by mainstream Western media. The move to create dedicated spaces wherein even the supposed diversity contained in an idea like bodily acceptance can be transformed into a prescribed set of visual and textual practices can be said to re-inscribe, rather than liberate, the body into a rubric of appropriate, self-conscious citizenship. Echoing a model of neoliberal citizenship that, as Katherine Sender (2006) explains “[replaces] external forms of government...by internal forms where success...[is] increasingly dependent on the ability to self-govern” (p. 135-6), normativity is here not the unspoken measure against which marginalized bodies are deemed thus, but instead a category that ensures no bodies escape the possibility for civic modeling<sup>1</sup>.

In this way, digital body positive spaces seem to foster representational practices that all too readily become mimetic of the very norms and assumptions they seek to counter. Yet what would it take for body positive digital spaces to actually operate as what Anita Harris (2004) calls “border spaces... [those] potentially ideal locales for the creation of narratives that disrupt hegemonic discourses” (p. 156)? I will show throughout this work that, firstly, the sites analyzed here by and large facilitate neoliberal paradigms of contemporary citizenship through discourses of authentic selfhood, personal responsibility and presumptions about the verifiability of both the body *and* its image record. I also propose a turn toward a radical body positivity, intended to trouble the too-

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<sup>1</sup> The opening pages of this introduction are based on my earlier work on body positivity, published in *Feminist Media Studies* (Sastre, 2014)

neat journey emphasized in the movement's current expression and better reveal the complex, experiential, affective dimension of bodily experience.

My proposition for a radical body positivity turns outward, to various works of contemporary photography and feminist thinking. Through a close look at the content and context of these images, I propose an approach to body positivity that is attentive to the image-maker- and the image viewer's- visceral sense of embodiment. As I argue in Chapter 4, these works reflect a critical move to politicized both the body and its representation, and open up the potential for subjectivity and agency in a dense matrix of power that works to render the body its object (Seppa, 2004). Within the practice of digital body positivity, the turn to an aesthetic of embodiment that considers the role of affect therein represents a critical and conceptual departure from rote practice, embracing heterogeneous modes of self-expression. It is also attentive to critical differences between the "analog" photograph, utilized as verificatory tool in the realm of digital body positivity in ways that I argue map an analog past onto a digital present, and the digital image as a distinct process and assemblage of bodies rather than a static object.

Part of shifting online body positivity's representational approach towards a more complex expression of embodiment requires acknowledging and even privileging the baser dimensions of our bodies, questioning what it means that much of our lived bodily experiences are hidden, or otherwise taboo. To problematize the mechanisms of compulsory visibility that I argue narrowly frame much of body positive practice, I turn to the work of various disability theorists (Siebers, 2001; Garland Thomson, 2009), who call for a challenge to Western definitions of a "healthy" body as one that is regulated, exposed, and complacent by embracing the representation of a visceral base, chaotic body

instead. I also turn to new work in the area of selfie studies (Senft, 2015; Rubenstein, 2015) that proposes a shift in how we conceive of the relationship between the body and the body-image. This work pushes us to think beyond the self-image as merely representational and instead emphasizes its porous boundaries as a mobile configuration of data, an object that circulates and fluidly links maker and viewer.

This emphasis on literal and metaphorical fluidity is not unprecedented. Recent media attention has been devoted to objects of popular culture that explore not only dirty, messy body, but specifically the dirty, messy *female* body. From the controversial German dark comedy *Wetlands* (Wnendt, 2013), in which a young woman discovers her sexuality through radically challenging conventional norms of hygiene in favor of reveling in her body's natural filth, to the more recent outcry, discussed in Chapter 4, surrounding the photo-sharing platform Instagram's decision to remove an image of a woman showing her bloody period stain (Sanghani, 2015), the gross body's radical charge has captured recent public attention. Not all examples of radical body positivity chronicled here depict the body's messy flesh, but I examine images and image-making practices that attend to how the body's liveness is *felt*, especially in contrast to expected norms of bodily behavior and regulation. Through it, the normalization of homogenously visible and accessible bodies is ideally displaced to make room for a configuration of the complex embodiment, emotional, affective, visceral and, as of yet, "unruly."

Through elevating these unique and compelling examples, I propose we need to holistically reimagine what the resistance to the hegemony of beauty, as both ideal and practice, looks like. If we are fighting against the compulsory value placed on being beautiful, on *working to be* beautiful, why are we mimicking the visual and literal

language of this mode of oppression? The call to body positivity should be to an honest expression of the dynamic intimacies of embodiment through the overthrow of the mechanics of visibility that compel us to prove not only the veracity and standing of our bodies, but also, increasingly, our unwavering relationship to them. Where body positivity currently calls for a relatively uncomplicated documentation of catharsis through a set of visual and rhetorical practices, we should instead imagine new visual and conceptual ventures on which we might take our bodies. These ventures might include intentionally hiding in the effort to politicize and challenge the will to show; or showing still, but through a visual language more nuanced than our current one. Critically, this radical turn would express not *what* our bodies are, as material objects or verifiable flesh, but *how* they construe part of our lived experience.

This dissertation sits at the intersection of various areas of research, including feminist media studies, visual studies, queer theory, disability studies, affect studies and even the burgeoning field of selfie studies. The digital challenges and complicates the presumed dichotomy between the “lived” and the “represented,” and the case of body positivity’s digitized practice allows us to grapple with what it means to display the feeling of living, embodied, with ourselves. Body positivity is a concept at once flexible and constructively bounded, one that feels accessible and yet, as I will show, remains somewhat perfunctory in its digital expression. Thinking through not only its current state, but also its potential futures allows us to address the implications of a larger set of themes: the significance of embodied identity in the digital age, how gender, race, ability and other identity categories factor directly into the construction of an idealized

contemporary “body,” how modern mechanisms of power continue to inform the representation of bodies, and what a practice of aesthetic resistance might look like.

At this juncture, it is critical to acknowledge that the objects of study here are already, inherently, accounts of agency and resistance. Body positivity, if read solely as the culmination of a long feminist agitation against the representational norms deployed by mainstream Western media, is already by all accounts a success; I do not contend that here. The objective of this dissertation is not to dismiss the increasing success body positive activism has had in making media representations more diverse, nor is it to diminish the experiences of the many people practicing body positivity in the manner chronicled here. Rather it is to build, on an already strong foundation, a stronger house. Body positivity is already radical, in so far as it boldly challenges oppressive expectations about our bodies, and about who we are within them. This in itself is a feat, and my work emerges from an appreciation of the diversity of images and stories the body positive movement has helped bring to mass and digital media in recent years. Yet it is because of the fundamental importance I see in the message of radical and resistant body love and representation that I strive to push beyond body positivity’s current confines, embracing a deeper definition of what it means to radically resist, and eventually overturn, our current body hegemonies.

### **Mapping the Digital Body Positive**

As of May 2015, when you Google the term “body positivity”, 14,800,000 results are generated. Though the sites studied here are not meant to be representative of every iteration and expression of body positivity, they usefully reflect various visual and



rhetorical trends associated with a mainstream, Western, English-language-based body positive ideology. The five sites this project does explore, *Body Revolution*, *My Body Gallery*, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *Herself*, and *The Body is Not an Apology* are all independent of one another, but their missions, content and aesthetic approaches undeniably link them together as part of the body positive movement's digital manifestation.

I chose sites that either expressly utilized the terms "body positivity" in their mission statements, Vision or About pages, or, in the case of *Herself*, sites that expressed a body positive philosophy in slightly different language. I was alerted to the launch of two of the sites, Lady Gaga's *Body Revolution* and Caitlin Stasey's *Herself*, through U.S. media coverage, coverage notably granted to digital projects created and endorsed by wealthy, young, thin, conventionally attractive white women (neither of whom, however, identifies as heterosexual). Others I found via Google search, such as *The Body is Not an Apology* and *Stop Hating Your Body*. Across the board, I located digital spaces that positioned themselves against mainstream, Western standards of beauty that promote youth, whiteness, gender normativity, ability and, critically, thinness as the ideals to which women, and increasingly men, are expected to ascribe through engagement with a billion-dollar industry of diet and weight-loss products and services (ABC News Staff, 2012).

*Body Revolution* content is embedded within Lady Gaga's official website, *Little Monsters*. As of May 2015, it is demarcated by hashtags, the two most prominent of which are #bodyrevolution and #bodyrevolution2014, with 3,467 and 106 posts, respectively. Gaga's aforementioned series of yellow-lingerie images, framed by the

declaration that *Body Revolution* was intended as a space to share images of diverse bodies in resistance to dominant beauty norms, signaled the launch of this new portion of her website. With a clean black, white and red interface featuring the pop star's logo in the upper left-hand corner, the site hosts a collection of images placed side by side in montage fashion. Text is visible, though rendered secondary to image, as headings accompany each picture but comments are hidden and must be expanded to be read. Images of the pop star are intermixed with personal, confessional-style images of fans, and both appear alongside fan art and stock motivational images with body-focused messages that users often post in place of personal images. Clicking on an image expands it in a pop-up box where commentary from site members can be viewed and individual commentary added to the right of the image. The site is also seamlessly integrated with other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, allowing users to link an image found on *Body Revolution* to other social networking sites. Users need to create a login and password to access content on *Body Revolution*.

*My Body Gallery* was founded in 2009 by photographer Odessa Cozzolino, who does not identify herself by name on the site (Orsini, 2012). The About Us page explains the site's mission is to "build a collection of photos that will help more women see themselves more clearly" (My Body Gallery, 2016). It is a less visually rich site than the others, though recent updates have rendered its design simple and streamlined, largely in a palette of black, white and green. It is also integrated with social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook through a small widget. Unlike the other four sites, click-through web ads appear in its margins, lending it a more cluttered, commercial feel. Images make up the main site content, and text is relegated to participants' body data, which appears in

full when an image is clicked on. There is a separate, text-based section of the site, *My Body Gallery Stories*, where stories of participants' body-related struggles are chronicled, though this content is featured much less prominently on the home page. The Gallery Search tool is arguably the site's central feature, providing a way to mine its photographic archive by self-reported data on the height, age, weight, pant size, shirt size and body shape of all participants. This embedded search tool, appearing as the header on each page, facilitates the site's primary purpose- providing images of "real" women users can compare themselves to by searching for images of others who share their individual measurements. As the site's Why page explains, "the Pro-Body community says 'MyBodyGallery.com is spreading the truth' about body size diversity (My Body Gallery, 2016).

*Stop Hating Your Body* lives on the blogging platform Tumblr, and thus takes the form of a blog more so than any of the other four sites. Rather than relaying a singular voice, as blogs typically do, the site aggregates stories of body-related struggles. "Annie Segarra started the blog in October 2010, after some body-positive content she posted on her personal blog unexpectedly went viral" (Baker, 2011), and Segarra still manages the site, curating visual and written submissions. As of May 2013, the site had about 32,000 followers. Its mission is "to support others [and] help build positive self esteem!" and the left margin that frames each page permanently displays a short "Body Peace Oath" declaring, in part, "The Body Peace Revolution!" (Stop Hating Your Body, n.d.). Its design is simple and streamlined, yet its wood-patterned background graphic lends it an air of informality and warmth. Rather than a dense mosaic of images, as appear on *Body Revolution*, *My Body Gallery* and *Herself*, posts are presented in reverse-chronological

sequence, like a typical blogroll. However, accessing the blog's content through its Archive feature restructures its posts into a mosaic of images and renders it visually similar to the other sites, though you have to opt into this view.

*Herself* is the newest of the various websites chronicled here, having launched in January 2015. It was begun by actress Caitlin Stasey, along with Hannah Terry-Whyte and Keenan MacWilliam. Its launch received a fair amount of mainstream press attention because one of its founders, Stasey, is an Australian actress currently appearing in a prominent role on the CW network's series *Reign*. In an interview with Australian paper *Daily Life*, Stasey introduced her site to readers as a feminist photography project intended to "help demystify the female form, to assist in the erasure of coveting it, and to help celebrate the ever changing face of it" (Bastow, 2015). Its brief About page echoes this purpose, framing its message as both aesthetic and political. *Herself*, it is explained, was started by "three passionate feminists hoping to make the world a better place" (About, n.d). This site, Stasey told *Daily Life*, was created with the intention to challenge the cultural linkages between the nude female body and sexuality (Bastow, 2015). Although Stasey does not explicitly use the term "body positive" to describe the site, she does frame it as a feminist project intended to challenge the limited representations of female beauty appearing in mainstream Western media. Therefore, I consider *Herself* to fit comfortably within this dissertation's definition of a body positive website.

By virtue of both its newness and focus, *Herself* showcases less stories and images than any of the other websites analyzed. However, each participant interview and photoshoot is significantly more in depth. Notably, a roster of seven professional photographers are employed to capture the individuals profiled, each in a series of nude

photos- there are no images created directly by participants on the site. The site design is clean and contemporary, with large, high-quality images in both color and black and white dominating the page. Aesthetically sleek and minimalist, the site has no visible advertisements, visually more akin to an art installation than to a website.

*The Body is not an Apology*'s tagline announces it as a space to practice "radical self love for everybody and every body." It is among the largest of all the sites analyzed, and includes a diversity of content. Bright, colorful and visual, a navigation bar at the top of the homepage lays out the various topics the site engages with: Weight/Size, Disability, Race, Sexuality, Gender, Mental Health, Race, Aging, Rad Parents, Men, Global, Intersections and H, short hand for "Handle It," a concept that emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and which the site frames as a "radically inclusive version of 'Man Up'" (Put An 'H' On It, n.d.). On the site's Mission, Vision and History page, *The Body is Not an Apology* is described as "an international movement committed to cultivating global Radical Self Love and Body Empowerment." (Mission, Vision & History, n.d.). The site presents a comparably nuanced understanding of embodied identity, acknowledging that "age, race, size, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, class, and every other human attribute are assets toward unapologetic radical self-love and living" (Mission, Vision & History, n.d.).

*The Body is Not an Apology* was founded by self-described black queer feminist Sonya Renee Taylor in 2014. Taylor writes she was inspired by the response to a Facebook post she shared of herself "in a saucy black corset. [It] was clear that [her] big, brown, queer body was not supposed to be seen or sexy, but [she] posted it anyway" (Mission, Vision & History, n.d.). Its Mission, Vision and History page explains that the

site “was created to remind us that we do not need to wait to feel beautiful, powerful, or worthy tomorrow.” Unlike the other sites examined in this dissertation, *The Body is Not an Apology* does not directly feature any participant images. Rather, it has an active Instagram page, linked to throughout the site, on which people can share images structured around body positive campaigns like “Bad Picture Monday.” Users can follow *The Body is not an Apology* across a range of platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, via easily located buttons on every page. The site itself operates primarily an archive of resources, some free and some, as I discuss in Chapter 2, available for purchase, in the fight against what it frames as the media’s “body terrorism.” It also plays host to a range of text-based discussions on body positive topics. This participant content however, unlike the “Bad Picture Monday” images posted on Instagram, is only accessible by login.

### **Body Positivity in Context**

Researching the body positive movement online reveals much active discussion on the subject, and also calls into question whether it can be considered a movement in the familiar sense. There is no central resource facilitating discussion, no single galvanizing text or figurehead guiding the way. What does appear is a litany of individual blogs, websites and posts linking the move towards a healthier body image to the notion of the visually and textually recorded personal journey. Some of this content is in the form of manifestos touting the value of a positive relationship between the (distinctly conceived) self and body. Other websites link body positivity explicitly with psychotherapeutic approaches, nodding to a potential link between body positivity and

positive psychology. The blog *Psych Central* offers a primer for creating a “body positive manifesto”: “don’t let others rule how you feel about your beauty or yourself,” and “whether you lose or gain weight, you’re still the same person...and you deserve love and respect either way” (Tartakovsky, 2011). There is an emphasis on fat phobia as the primary mode of bodily oppression body positivity targets. This is notable given the similarities between body positive discourse and a long history of fat acceptance activism that challenges the dehumanization of fat people brought about by pervasive narratives relating self-control, healthy and self-worth (Stokes, 2013; Bordo, 1995; Rothblum, 2009; Braziel & Lebesco, 2001).

Though body positivity is rarely framed in historic terms on digital body positive spaces, there is a clear history that can be traced from the *Fat Liberation Manifesto* of 1973, which declared “we are angry at mistreatment by commercial and sexist interests...[that] have exploited our bodies as objects of ridicule” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1973) to today’s pithy hashtags like #effyourbeautystandards. The now canonic manifesto, written by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran of the radical lesbian feminist group Fat Underground, calls out the oppression of fat people, fat women especially, as systemic (Stokes, 2013). The manifesto continues “we single out as our special enemies the so-called ‘reducing’ industries...[including] diet clubs, reducing salons, fat farms, diet doctors, diet books, diet foods and food supplements, surgical procedures, appetite suppressants, drugs and gadgetry...and ‘reducing machines’” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1973). The document is largely a critique of the American diet industry and its hold on public perceptions of fat bodies. It calls specifically for the industry to turn away from framing fat as a “problem of ridicule” to be surmounted by the

purchase of diet goods and reducing products and instead toward responsibility “for their false claims [through] acknowledging that their products are harmful to the public health, and [publishing] long-term studies proving any statistical efficacy of their products” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1973).

And yet today’s discourse of body positivity, while similarly focused on dismantling the representational norms largely produced by the “reducing” industries, showcases a shifting relationship between self-determination and structural forces of oppression. In a neoliberal landscape that encourages the conceptualization and production of the individual self through the targeted consumption of goods and services, body positivity performs a dual function, as at once a term that signifies movements against market-supported beauty standards and a term increasingly appropriated by the industries against which body positive activism claims to rebel. Recent scholarship on the *Dove Real Beauty* campaign and postfeminist advertising, discussed later in this introduction, reflects this polemic (Persis Murray, 2013; Johnson & Taylor, 2008; Gill & Elias, 2014). A particularly salient example comes from the Australian active-wear line *Female for Life*, which used the term “body positivity” in a press release for their company that read, in part:

In recent years a new movement is beginning to shape and show off its curves. I call it... the body positive movement. Made up of women in their late 20’s upwards they have long ago stopped believing that they will grow taller, younger and develop the perfect flat stomach. They are a group of women who are comfortable with their bodies and the more time goes on the more they appreciate that their bodies were built for so much more than hanging clothes on (Montgomery, 2010).



Alongside this, there is a small but growing market specifically for body positive goods and products; the website *The Body Positive* (2016) for example, advertises itself as a consulting service for college campuses, “[implementing] educational programs that transform individual and societal beliefs about weight, body image, and identity.”

Though participation in all of the sites examined in this dissertation is free, as I discuss in Chapter 2 most are linked to commercial consumption in varying, often invisible, ways. Aside from the tools- digital camera, computer and an internet connection- necessary to participate in these sites, Lady Gaga’s *Body Revolution* is inextricably embedded in the pop-star’s brand, as is *Herself* in that of up and coming actress Caitlin Stasey. The photographer who founded *My Body Gallery* sells merchandise like tee-shirts and water bottles emblazoned with its logo. *Stop Hating Your Body* occasionally posts advertisements amongst its regular content. *Herself* employs a roster of photographers whose work constitute the main content of the site. *The Body is Not an Apology* features advertisements on its homepage, and sells various webinars and trainings, some for thousands of dollars. As I detail in Chapter 2, *The Body is Not an Apology* creator Sonya Renee Taylor raised over \$43,000 (after originally requesting \$80,000) via crowdsourcing platform *Indiegogo*, to fund the site, described as “the world’s most comprehensive information, education, and community-building website for radical self-love” (Taylor, 2014).

In tandem with the various consulting, therapeutic and commercial endeavors promoted under the auspices of body positivity, it becomes apparent that many common elements of the movement mirror the contemporary neoliberal logic of consumer-mediated self-regulation it so adamantly positions itself against. Moreover, a distinct set

of presumptions about the stability of the body, self-identity and the photographic image undergird much of body positivity's digital practice. Generally speaking, these sites are not directly encouraging the consumption-oriented bodily practices promoted on myriad makeover shows and magazine covers; in fact, they strive to challenge it, at least on surface level. Yet through framing, intentionally and unintentionally, body positivity as a replicable set of performative practices, and promoting a narrow understanding of the body as stable, accessible and authenticatable through mechanisms of photographic visibility, body positivity's digital manifestation arguably echoes some of modes of bodily oppression it attempts to combat.

### **Reading the Body Positive Movement**

There is little scholarly literature specifically on the topic of body positivity. The pool grows slightly larger when considering that the term "body positivity" does not necessarily call forth all that has been written on the contemporary discourses and practices of "loving your body." Work analyzing such discourses are thus also included in my review in attempts to paint as detailed a picture as possible of existing "body positive" scholarship. This scholarship is relatively recent, spanning the last decade or so. Much of it emerges from a feminist praxis invested in untangling how mainstream media shapes women's relationships to both their own physical appearance and broader definitions of beautiful bodies. Although there are many ways to map what has been written on the subject, my approach here is first to lay out salient contemporary examples of body positive scholarship. Next, it is to engage more deeply with the scholarship that provides the theoretical scaffolding on which scholarly examinations of body positivity

rest. I take this to be not (only) canonical feminist media studies work, but also, and perhaps more importantly, critical theoretical texts that address what it means to be a visible, embodied, gendered, raced person in our increasingly image-saturated, digitized world.

When searching for work on body positivity, a small subset of effects research comes up. This work investigates how viewing media images of the thin, white, abled, cis-gendered bodies we culturally code as “beautiful” affects girls’ sense of their own bodies. This scholarship, though interesting in its own right, parallels media discourses invested in determining the efficacy of body positivity for various ends (Baker, 2011). Richard Perloff (2014), for example, examines how “social media can influence perceptions of body image and body image disturbance” (p. 363) in young women. Nichole L. Wood-Barcalow, Tracy L. Tylka, Casey L. Augustus-Horvath (2009) interviewed young women who already self-describe as having a positive body image, finding links between exposure to positive body messages and images and a personal sense of body positivity. They explain that “when women processed mostly positive and rejected negative source information, their body investment decreased and body evaluation became more positive, illustrating the fluidity of body image” (Wood-Barcalow, Tylka & Augustus-Horvath, 2009, p. 106).

Along similar lines, research by Tiffany M. Stewart and Donald A. Williamson (2003) explores a cognitive behavioral therapy-based “body image therapy program” (p. 154) at Louisiana State University. Aptly titled *The Body Positive Program*, Stewart and Williamson assess its ability to improve women’s sense of their bodies. According to this small study, which looked only at the results of interventions with four white, female

patients who had already received various other treatments for eating disorders, *The Body Positive* treatment enhances conventional approaches to the treatment of disordered eating by highlighting that its attendant effects not only impact eating behaviors, but also patterns of thinking about and perceiving one's body. The *Body Positive* program, notably, uses "mirror exposure" and other techniques of visibility as therapeutic treatment:

Components of the treatment plan consisted of: relaxation and rebreathing training; self-monitoring of body image; cognitive-behavioral treatment for body image concerns, including challenging of irrational beliefs and appearance assumptions; mirror exposure, involving in-session and homework exposure to the body; behavioral exposure, consisting of exposure to feared situations in which body concerns were prominent; and a relapse prevention component (Stewart & Williamson, 2003, p. 154).

The technique of mirror exposure, as this dissertation will show, shares some striking similarities with the digital body positive practices chronicled here. "Participants were instructed to expose themselves to the body part of focus (e.g., thighs or abdomen) and to employ relaxation techniques to decrease anxiety and distress associated with exposure to this body area," (Stewart & Williamson, 2003, p. 161) an exercise that culminated in a full reveal of participant's most "distressing" body parts. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, framing the act of self-exposure as both truthful and empowering is a foundational part of digital body positive ideology practice. It is worth noting that, while the study was very small, "all four participants [did] show a significant decrease in body image concerns by the end of treatment" (Stewart & Williamson, 2003, p. 162).

When expanding the scope of scholarly research beyond the terms "body positive" and "body positivity," several more studies relevant to this dissertation emerge.

This work, unlike the research synthesized above, is less interested in interventions, treatments and effects, and rather presents a theoretical critique of the increasingly present discourses of “body positivity,” “love your body,” and the like. Murphy and Jackson (2011) examine the portrayal of what they term “love your body” discourses in contemporary women’s magazines. “Love your body” discourses are, according to the authors, visual and textual. They rely on the display of female nudity, on the emphatic assertion of “real” bodies as both curvaceous and flawed and on “confessional” narratives of self-acceptance despite this status. Through an analysis of how these magazines represent “body love” the authors contend that what is positioned as an explicit discourse of empowerment is not necessarily so.

According to Murphy and Jackson (2011), “body love” discourses operate in three ways: firstly, they position the body as a vessel for and representation of the internal self within. This move reifies a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, which subverts the body as secondary to the mind. Secondly, these discourses encourage a gendered surveillance that both reasserts the hegemony of the visual, and objectifies women in the face of the male gaze. While the authors take a Foucaultian approach to reading the significance of these “body love discourses,” they differentiate between Foucault’s theories of docility, which I discuss later in this introduction and engage with more deeply in Chapter 1, and their own reading of how power acts upon the bodies implicated in these discourses. Since the bodies displayed for the purpose of demonstrating “body love” have become, according to Murphy and Jackson (2011), “bodies-as-image,” surveillance does not work upon them in the same way as in the productive bodies they contend Foucault is referring to. Their focus is instead on the mechanisms through which the image is policed, though

they fail to articulate a clear theory of its significance. Thirdly, in a move that echoes John Berger's (1972) famed distinction between nudity and nakedness, they assert that these discourses maintain a heteronormative framework as the confidence these nude images supposedly engender is allied with the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

Ultimately, while the authors argue that mainstream magazines' "body love" discourses borrow much of a rhetoric of feminist empowerment, they conclude that their core assertion- that "real" bodies must be loved despite their flaws- reinforces an existing gendered ideology that deems women in constant need of improvement. However, given a Western media landscape that is still woefully lacking in diversity, the authors also recognize that "body love" discourses represent a minor improvement upon the dominant homogeneity of contemporary media messages.

Gill and Elias (2014) analyze what they similarly term "love your body" discourses, which implore women to accept and love their imperfect bodies as they are. They address the message and ideology behind these discourses across a range of sources, from traditional to digital media, personally and professionally generated. As they explain, "Love your body discourses are positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort us to believe we are beautiful...and that tell us that we have 'the power' to 'redefine' the 'rules of beauty' (2014, p. 180). Like Murphy and Jackson (2011), the authors argue that while on the surface these discourses appear to be empowering and counter-hegemonic to older media messages urging women to diet and cultivate the perfect body, they are largely "ambiguous" (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 180), often simply repackaging the message that women must continue to work on (and invest in) themselves. The objective now is (not

only) a body that still, if curvier, is considered sexually appealing, but also and perhaps most critically a well-honed sense of confidence and self-esteem.

Across such “body love’ discourses, like the body positive discourses they parallel, it seems that “no longer is it enough to work on and discipline the body, but in today’s society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind, with suitably upgraded and modernized postfeminist attitudes to the self” (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 185). Here, it is the attitude and not the body that must be made over, in the name of the newest “technology of sexiness” (Radner, 1993) - self esteem.

Two articles that specifically examine the corporatization of body positive narratives do so through analysis of the now-iconic *Dove Real Beauty* campaign. The campaign launched in 2004 (Persis Murray, 2013) and received significant media attention for the decision to feature so called “real” women- with curvaceous, sometimes short, occasionally non-white- at the core of the campaign. Both articles engage with the significance of the campaign’s use of ostensibly feminist narratives, goals and practices to sell a range of *Dove* grooming products.

Dara Persis Murray (2013) looks at print and digital texts from the campaign, and argues that self-making around the practice of beauty becomes an institutionalized objective. This finding is in step with the recent preponderance of self-branding narratives shaping self-expression in the context of late-modern capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Self-esteem building becomes a key technology of *Dove*’s “real beauty,” through the aptly named *Dove Movement for Self Esteem*, targeted towards young women. While, ultimately, “real beauty” advertisements openly sell soap and lotion while attempting to problematize beauty standards, Persis Murray argues that the movement is

little more than a marketing ploy under the guise of feminist self-actualization. As such, she sees it as a quintessential example of *postfeminist* discourse (Gill, 2007). In this media landscape, a feminist critique of the limited and limiting depictions of women in the media folds back onto itself. As Rosalind Gill argues in *Gender and the Media* (2007), while “confident, sexually assertive women dominate, irony is ubiquitous and men’s bodies are [also] presented as erotic spectacle,” (p. 74), the radicality of a feminist media critique is largely erased, and traditional gender stereotypes like the homemaker are simply replaced with a new persona- the empowered feminist consumer.

Johnston and Taylor (2008) take a comparative approach to assessing the ideological foundations of two contrasting “feminist” projects: the *Dove Real Beauty* campaign, and the Toronto-based queer “grassroots, fat-activist” group *Pretty, Porky and Pissed Off* (PPPO). The authors compare the discourse deployed in the *Dove* campaign with PPPO’s activist efforts, investigating whether the corporate campaign actually incorporated any radical feminist ideologies in its messaging. Feminist research, the authors argue, should not so readily dismiss corporate or mainstream feminist projects, given their wide reach and potential political and economic impact. In this project, they are interested in determining how the *Dove* campaign’s constructions of female empowerment hold up against grassroots queer feminist efforts to challenge and destabilize patriarchy.

Both Persis Murray (2013) and Johnson and Taylor (2008) find that while the *Dove Real Beauty* campaign embraces representational diversity through using models of diverse sizes and ethnicities, its messages upholds, rather than resists, heteronormative ideologies. The corporatized notion of “real beauty,” in other words, maintains the



expectation that all women must be (and must *desire* to be) beautiful, and the assumption that women's self-worth is based on their public and personal recognition as beautiful.

**Visibility, representation and the docile body.** What distinguishes this dissertation from other scholarship on body positivity is its attention to the visual and rhetorical practices of body positivity across multiple digital spaces, and its interest in mapping the radical potential of the online body positive movement. In order to do this, it turns not only to the feminist media studies literature explored here, but also to the critical theoretical sources that shaped it. Some of this literature is post-structuralist, pointing to the social construction of the body through discourse. Some is a feminist counter to post-structuralism that allows one to think through the relationship between the body as a social construction, embodiment, and the digital sphere. Still more is expressly focused on the relationship between the body and the image, addressing avenues to the transformation of representational norms. Together, this work is a productive frame for understanding what body positivity means and might mean in the modern West.

Foucault's work on the disciplined body as a tool of the state was pivotal in opening up a new set of understandings about the nature of the body-as-message. The Foucaultian body is (self)disciplined, and as such becomes the object on which power is both visibly and invisibly rendered. "The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed" (Foucault, 1990, p. 139), he wrote, and it is the related technologies developed to facilitate this regulation that "mark the beginning of an era of 'biopower'" (Foucault, 1990, p. 140). While the "social body" (Foucault, 1990, p. 140), or aggregate

of bodies, is the main subject of Foucault's work, institutional power is still expressed at the level of the individual body. Though this body may not explicitly intend to be communicative, or to relay the messages with which it is imbued, it still operates as the vehicle through which state power is expressed in tandem with institutional interventions. It is the body that is quantified in population statistics, body mass index (BMI) charts, academic records and police archives; it is a body that is malleable, docile and embedded in a matrix of power that situates even seemingly individual choices inextricably within a larger web of forces beyond individual control.

In this schema, visibility is a critical mechanism of power. Visibility is a force necessary for full subjectivity within a modernity built on a currency of surveillance and disclosure. The right to be seen- and the right to be recognized- is thus inevitably coded as a fundamental human right in the contemporary West. This is echoed in a language of body positivity that emphasizes the importance of making visible bodies that are compelled to hide in shame because they do not fit normative ideals of beauty. Yet, as Andrea Brighenti (2007) reminds us, visibility has the capacity to create both "the model" and "the monster," for one cannot exist without the other. As Foucault (1995) argues in his exploration of Bentham's Panopticon prison design, detailed in Chapter 1, making yourself visible can be a necessary act of docility. It can provide access to, and relative mobility with, a society that normalizes visibility and positions openness as a moral imperative. Yet it is also an act that reifies assumptions about the *invisible* body as dangerous and threatening, lurking in the shadows. The powerful grip transparency has on the Western imagination- from a pervasive emphasis on excavating the "authentic" self to the constant barrage of visible and invisible surveillance technologies that track

(and insist that *we* track) our daily lives- is a testament to both the power of being seen and the necessity of understanding the economies of viewing that shape *how*, exactly, our visible bodies are read.

Scholarship on makeover culture emerges from a Foucaultian perspective, addressing how what are framed as personal choices around beautification are largely compelled by broader social forces. In the case of makeover culture, the primary force is commercial- the disciplined regulation of the body is facilitated by the purchase of a range of goods and services, and through these transactions proper citizenship is enacted. In her work on reality television weight-loss shows, Helene Shugart notes that such programs “align the consideration and treatment of the obese body with key cultural imperatives of citizenship; the project of overcoming obesity is cast as the building of the fulfilled, neoliberal consumer citizen” (Shugart, 2010, p. 112). Other work on both makeover culture (Sender 2006 & 2012; Jones, 2008; Weber, 2009; Marwick, 2010) and advertising (Bordo, 1995; Jhally, 2007) has exposed the role of narratives about choice-driven, body-oriented self-improvement in the construct of neoliberal citizenship. In many ways, this is the message that the body positive movement espouses to reject- that the project of self-recognition inherent to modernity has morphed into a one of incessant self-improvement through an alliance with the forces of capital (Sender, 2006). And while on the surface these are the oppressive coalitions body positivity challenges, as I argue in this dissertation its visual and rhetorical practices often unwittingly replicate the pervasive call to improve not the body, but one’s imperfect relationship to it.

**The body and the (digital) archive.** Performing this corporeal discipline online brings forth issues of representation, authenticity and neoliberal individualization. It engages a historic understanding of not only *what* the image makes visible, but *how* it does so. In Chapter 3, I trace a brief history of photography that centers on the use of the photograph to build a catalog of bodies and body-types. My interest is in highlighting the development of a Western photographic imaginary that considers the image a neutral conduit of reality rather than a historical product shaped by range of cultural and material practices and presumptions. To this end, in Chapter 3 I unpack how race, gender, ability, class and other modes of identity we associate with the body are entangled within a history of the photograph, and specifically, the body-image, as an object.

Allan Sekula historicized the medical and legal archive and rooted its foundation in the image of the body (1986). The rhetoric surrounding such archives concurrently constructed the category of “the normal” citizen-subject, and asserted standards of appropriate embodiment by positioning the “unhealthy” and “criminal” bodies against it. The camera, and its claims to the production of an authentic record, was key to this process. As John Tagg (2009) explains, the photograph has long been considered “a privileged form of evidence and record” (p. xvi) and the perception that it can authenticate reality has been instrumental in shaping disciplines and institutions from history to the law.

The camera’s ability to objectively capture life has, however, long been both contested and mythologized. Today’s photographic technologies are rapidly evolving and intersecting with the digital in ways that augment and challenge historic concerns about its ability to portray truth and catalog bodies. For example, despite contemporary

anxieties about how photo-editing tools dilute the veracity of the medium, Tagg (1993) reminds us that images were painstakingly color corrected from the camera's invention. Moreover, Tagg (1993; 2009) stresses that understanding the import and impact of the image requires mapping the institutionalization of its production; rather than impartial arbiters of physical reality, photographic practices often (re)produce and perpetuate the raced and gendered cultural imaginaries from which they emerge. Difference, as such, is arguably built into the very architecture of the camera. Lorna Roth (2009) makes this point vividly in her astute history of so-called "Shirley cards" used to regulate color in photographic printing. We can see then, in both the image itself and the mechanics of its production, the central tensions that surround the question of authenticity and authentic representation. Authenticity, here, is presumed to produce representational reliability. However, a simplistic association between the unedited image and the objective capture of reality occludes a history of inequality that reveals authenticity to be a valuation in the service of a raced and gendered status quo.

This analog imaginary continues to inform our cultural perceptions of the work of both the photograph and the bodies whose authenticity it purportedly captures. Yet new media scholars like Mark Hansen (2004) and Bernadette Wegenstein (2006) call for a move away from understanding the image as a fixed object and instead toward recognizing the "almost complete flexibility" (Hansen, 2004, p. 8) that accompanies its contemporary digitality. In today's digital media landscape, pressing concerns about surveillance technologies tracking our every move force us to consider the significance of both how the body is chronicled and how that chronicle circulates, more often than not beyond the visual realm. Our bodies are literally data, stacked and sorted in ways that far

exceed the cataloging capacity of the analog archive. Certainly, the information “gathered” from the digital surveilling of our bodies continues to critically shape subjectivity, from the deceptively benign trend of targeted advertising (Turow & Draper, 2012), to the moral panic of sexting (Draper, 2012), to the more explicitly sinister preoccupation with mapping the threatening body of the terrorist (Puar, 2007). This categorization, though more sophisticated in form, is not dissimilar to how the body-archives of the last century demarcated body “types” that perpetuated racist, sexist, classist and ableist distributions of power (Chong, 1995; Hersey, 1992; Rosenbaum 1995).

But what *is* wholly new about the digital is its ability to be disperse, mobile and, for better or worse, imminently mutable. Crucially, this parallels- or some might argue, merely is- a postmodern understanding of the body as fluid, relational and porous. As Wegenstein (2006) articulates, “thanks to new media...the body has survived not as a whole, but rather in a dispersed and scattered way...able to adapt to new form of wholeness that manifests itself as a multiplicity and plurality of mediative forms” (p. 36). Through a digital imaginary we are better able to recognize the body as a medium. Subjectivity is not fixed on or by the body, but understood as ephemeral and shifting. The body, in other words, is not outside of, or distinct from, embodiment. Rather than a fixation on the body’s wholeness and immutability, this view allows for the productive recognition of the body (and the digital image) as “fragmented [and] heterogeneous...[a] process rather than the result or the finished object” (Wegenstein, 2006, p. 69).

Such a view of the body and the image as multiple, mobile and imbued with possibility is shared by newer work in the burgeoning area of “selfie studies.” A popular

history of the selfie is invested in legitimizing the form by emphasizing its ties to a longer tradition of portraiture as a mode of self-exploration (Saltz, 2014; Cahill, 2013; Rawlings, 2013). Against claims that the selfie represents the apex of a narcissistic culture (Seidman, 2015), there is a desire to recuperate the form as a mode of control over one's image in a society where images dominate. The selfie, as actor James Franco (2013) elaborated in a *New York Times* op-ed, is an opportunity for celebrities to wrest control of their image away from the prying eyes of the paparazzi and allow their fans into their private life on their own terms. Much work in selfie studies is in keeping with this assertion of the selfie as a powerful, agential mode of self-expression. Sharing an ethos of empowerment with digital body positivity, the selfie here is understood an opportunity for people- young women in particular- to display and circulate their body on their own terms (Tiidenberg, 2015).

However, this view of the selfie, pervasive across both popular and scholarly spaces, fits comfortably within the contemporary feminist cultures that Rosalind Gill (2007) frames as “postfeminist,” signaling a close alignment between corporate interests and depoliticized feminist propaganda. Indeed, as Koffman, Orgad and Gill (2015) argue in their piece on “selfie humanitarianism,” the pervasiveness of self-documentation both fetishizes the self, even in acts of purported selflessness, and promotes a “new and intensified focus upon the figure of the girl and a distinctive, neo-colonial, neoliberal and postfeminist articulation of girl power” (p. 157). Yet as Derek Murray (2015) points out, accusations of frivolity leveled at selfie-takers are themselves often covertly (and overtly) sexist. Whether the selfie is seen as an opportunity for agential self-making or merely narcissistic navel-gazing is less of interest here than the observation that discussions

about the selfie are always-already discussions about performing the self in a sexist, racist, ableist and heteronormative culture.

In my view, a more productive and exciting way to understand the role- and potential- of the body-image in the West is to destabilize definitions of the selfie that understand it as merely a contemporary mode of self-portraiture. Natalie Hendry (2014) argues that selfies can be important tools in mental health treatments that help those struggling with their sense of identity. For those wrestling with a fragmented sense of self, Hendry (2014) argues, the process of self-documentation through selfie-taking can encourage a “shift from seeing their identity narratives as split and fragmented to acknowledging their own adaptability and strength” (p. 5). Hendry’s work on the role of the selfie in the treatment of mental illness nods to the power of understating the selfie as a *process* rather than a discrete object or objective mode of representation. Though she, like many others in this nascent field, is primarily interested in problematizing and challenging the selfie’s bad reputation, her work reflects a more recent turn towards theorizing what is *new* about the form. Alise Tifentale’s (2015) work, produced through Lev Manovich’s “Selficity” project (2014), a big-data mapping of global selfie trends from poses to locations to facial expressions, highlights the need to broaden definitions of the selfie to include both its formal qualities, *and* the metadata we do not see on its surface. As Elizabeth Losh asks in her own piece for the Selficity project, *Beyond Biometrics: Feminist Media Theory Looks at Selficity* (2015), “if the emphasis of critical inquiry shifts to embodied activation and away from subject-object viewership, what opportunities exist for rethinking media?”



This is the question that engages Theresa Senft, working at the intersection of selfie studies and feminist media studies. Senft started the “Selfies Research Network” (SRN) “an international group of academics studying the social and cultural implications of the selfie” (The Selfies Research Network, 2016). As of June 2016, the group’s Facebook page has over 3,100 members, and Senft offers a wide range of scholarship, bibliographies and pedagogical resources for the study of selfies on the SRN’s website. Her recent work, *The Skin of the Selfie* (2015), reads the selfie as a site of immanence and potentiality through an affective framework that recognizes how it not only moves through, but also shapes and is shaped by, a network of forces. This perspective also informs the work of Daniel Rubenstein, who’s piece *The Gift of the Selfie* (2015), emphasizes an approach to the selfie that I argue should animate a radical body positive; “the fragile and puerile self,” he writes, “rides the multiplicity of selfies” (p. 167). To chide the selfie as childish is not, in other words, to dismiss or diminish it, but to embrace that the dynamism and inchoateness of youth does not readily give way to a stable, immutable adult self. The former is not a stage; the latter is simply a fiction.

**Affect, embodiment and representation.** The recent work of Rubenstein (2015) and Senft (2015), like Wegenstein (2006) and Hansen (2004) outside of selfie studies, shares a kinship with the study of affect. Shaped significantly by the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, affect theory shifts away from understandings of the body and technology as discrete, separate and separately bounded entities. Instead, they are conceptualized as co-productive of one another, related in varying heterogeneous constellations imbued with potential, rather than foreclosed by fixed definitions and

subject-object positions. Like the shift from the materiality of the analog photograph to the digital photograph's flow of information - temporarily arranged in legible form- affect as an approach allows for, as Patricia Clough puts it, "communication without any fidelity to genus or species, or a hierarchy of forms" (2007, p. 14). For the purposes of a radical body positive, this approach can operate as a multi-modal critique of the work images do to shape the bodies- of the people pictured, and the people looking at pictures- they move between. As Massumi writes in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2005), "the question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?" (p. 15)

Engaging with the complexities of affect allows for embodiment to be conceptualized outside the bounds of subjectivity, productively complicating narratives of body positivity that stabilize the body and locate it within a categorical model of identity. Affect connotes the pre-discursive, pre-cognitive, knee-jerk reaction: laughter, the butterflies that emerge in your stomach before thought and conscious emotion enter the frame and endow them with meaning. It is, in essence, the most bodily of things, without being limited to the singular, skin-encased human body. Affect allows for a recognition of how the body's vitality and potentiality are shaped by the spaces in which it moves, and the actors and objects- human and not- it encounters (Gregg and Seigman, 2010). It can be conceptualized as a feedback loop between agent and environment, one which works to dissolve the very boundary between the two (Massumi, 1995).

As Brian Massumi (1995) argues, affect resists narrativization, for “the skin is faster than the word” (p. 86). Theories of affect propose a dynamic mapping of the varying arrangement of forces that constitute bodies (Grossberg, 2010). Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010) note that affect allows for bodies to be “defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary, but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect” (p. 2). Tactically, this facilitates a move away from individual subjectivity in favor of collectivities and coalitions. But it also adds depth and complexity to models of embodiment grounded in individual identity. Even an intersectional framework, as Jasbir Puar (Puar, Pitcher & Gunkel, 2008) argues, often sees categories like race, gender, sexuality and ability as “entities and attributes of subject”; within affective assemblages they become animated, “considered as events, actions and encounters between bodies.”

Reframing body positivity through theories of affect, however, is not meant as a confounding call to the representation of something essentially unrepresentable. Instead, it is a move to recognize how embodiment is shaped by the images, people and objects we encounter. Part of this work involves articulating the image’s means of production, mapping, as I do in Chapter 3, the varied contexts out of which they emerge. Another part locates and folds into the conversation around body positivity images of our *lived* and *felt* bodies, which in turn connect us to others, people and things, outside the bounds of identification. Following Barthes (1981), it acknowledges the power of images to both reflect and incite a diversity of responses, all informed by the complex assemblage of forces from which they emerge and in which they are engaged. Affect reaches towards what Massumi calls the “expression-event” (1995, p. 87) imbued with a vitality that is

lost when its meaning is conceptualized through a semiotic frame. Affect theory, attentive to the complex experience of living within- and with- flows of power, approaches the object of study with an empathy that allows for the illumination of both the structural scaffolding of modern life and the intimate feelings these systems produce. It is attentive to emotional alignments, to that which, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed (2004), we hate and love and are repulsed by together.

A theorization of the relationship between affect, power and (self) representation offers the opportunity to draw simultaneously from multiple bodies of thought. Alongside a feminist challenge to mass-media representations of gender that draws from a Foucaultian tradition of discourse analysis, another of the most salient challenges to representational norms of the body comes from the area of disability studies. Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2009) unpacks “how we look” by analyzing how “staring encounters” (p. 8) can be choreographed otherwise in the context of disability visibility. Here, the script is flipped through both an acknowledgment of being looked at, and of how the desire inherent in such looking can be utilized as means of empowerment. In other words, the stories, poems and public performances Garland-Thomson examines empower performers because they address, in varying ways, how it *feels* to be stared at, to inhabit a body that elicits a staring response.

These staring encounters, however, do not immediately conform to normative patterns of showing or looking, or corrosive desires to verify the humanity of rejected flesh. They are instead a radical recalibration of *the terms* of representation through addressing how it *feels* to be in our skin. They are an attempt to reconcile the constant negotiation that we make between our self and the image of our selves that is “not the

person we experience ourselves to be [but] the one others see” (2009, p. 49). This distance, which engenders a “self-scrutiny,” is both generative and debilitating. As those classified as disabled “[refuse] to be normalized, neutralized or homogenized” (2009, p. 23) in favor of staging staring encounters on their own terms, we see the power of the image to generate a vibrant exchange. Rather than producing body-images in service of archives that delineate fixed subject-positions (the normal, the disabled, the able-bodied, the beautiful, the citizen), rather than domesticating bodies into docile machines, we instead imagine how the image might capture the unstable, ever-shifting, lived complexity of the corporeal.

In his work at the intersection of art history and disability theory, Tobin Siebers asserts that both theories of the body and its representation presume an able-bodied subject at their center. Siebers postulates that this is because the disabled body incites a fear of our mortality- therefore, we prefer to think and view our bodies through the lens of “pleasure.” A theory of the body based in this Freudian notion of pleasure allows, in turn, for us to imagine the body as “infinitely teachable and adaptable” (2001, p. 742). Within a medical model of disability however, this “adaptability” is oriented towards the body becoming less disabled, to pleasure arriving only through a body that can inch toward “normal,” one that can- eventually, maybe- pass. Siebers (2001) points out that in a medical model of disability which frames the disabled body as merely a distortion of an imagined normal body- “the pain of the disabled body [is represented as] individual” (p. 743). This leaves no room for solidarity, or collective political action around the constructed and lived experience of disability. Pain thus “often comes to represent individuality, [and] as such,” (Siebers, 2001, p. 743) the emotional and physiological

embodiment of both conformity and isolation. It is to be either hidden from view, or used as a tool to galvanize treatment and resources towards eradicating that pain, making the body a little less disabled (and a little more desirable).

An uncritical turn to pain as a resource for change risks diminishing the fraught and varied experience of people with disabilities. Instead, Siebers (2001) proposes a “new realism of the body.” He turns to the work of poet, performer and activist Cheryl Marie Wade, who calls for real talk about the messy, dirty and often indignant realities of living with disability. Representation of such bodies as “weak and inferior” (Seibers, 2001, p. 748), different from most bodies, is both harmful and a fallacy. Capturing the complex reality of lived embodiment through embracing the grittiness of our bodies unseats our Western cultural fixation on an idealized “healthy body” and how it *should* work in favor of focusing on how bodies actually *do* work- in unexpected, unconventional and often messy ways. A “new realism of the body” acknowledges that the body is both a social construction that reflects the stigmatization of disability, and a vital, living organism. Perhaps more importantly, this mode of representation is not specific to disabled bodies, but intended to reshape how we represent and view *all* bodies.

In turning to affect in the final Chapter of this dissertation, I strive to destabilize what I see as body positivity’s limiting call for inclusion into prescribed feminine subjectivities and its increasingly rote visual and rhetorical practices. A radical body positive must reimagine, at multiple registers, the relationship between the body and the image. It might, I argue do so in ways that center the visceral, the shifting and the felt; only in so doing can it delocalize conceptions of the body as what Bruno Latour (2004) has called “a provisional residence of something superior” in favor of a model of

embodiment as a “dynamic trajectory” (p. 206). A radical body positive might also reframe expectations of the image as a representational tool into an acknowledgment of the image as a series of affectively generative material practices. Images, as Barthes (2010) reminds us, can “prick” us swiftly and powerfully (p. 47); images of our bodies, rendered through this lens, become images *about* our bodies- not closed, definitive signs of fixed truths, but sensuous, inchoate, complex, and porous testaments to the many moments we have lived and are living.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation undertakes a discursive analysis of the textual and photographic archives of five “body positive” websites. It also surveys related media coverage of body positivity in an attempt to enrich the picture of what body positivity means, how it is perceived and how it operates. Undergirding this methodology is a consideration of what the body positive practices chronicled reveal about the matrixes of power in which they operate. The philosophical and pragmatic objective of this work is genealogical, in keeping with Foucault’s articulation of genealogy-as-method (1977). In other words, this work untangles the quotidian discourses and practices that together constitute contemporary body positivity; it also excavates the historical narratives- on photography, the body, and the archive- and ideological formations that I argue inform body positivity but are elided in its digital instantiation. Following not only Foucault but also queer studies’ broader methodological investment in illuminating and critiquing the circuits of power that shape our Western cultural imaginary, this work couples the practice of

rigorous close reading with a political commitment to a queer method that functions as a lens through which to see the world and initiate change.

Visual, textual and discursive analyses are the often unsung backbone of qualitative work in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, yet critical reading practices are the necessary foundation for any successful analytical work. This dissertation considers discursive, visual and textual expression not as the neutral intermediaries between subjects and objects, but as constitutive of subjectivity itself. Intentionally, I gather materials from a diversity of digital sites in varying formats, from images, to their captions, to blog posts, to site guidelines and mission statements. Arguably, framing this project as a close look at how ideas about body positivity are formed and circulate within one kind of media text would risk flattening and essentializing a diverse and heterogeneous chronicle of experience. Though critical engagement with the specific ways certain platforms guide certain performances of the body is an important piece of my analysis, looking *across* the five different body positive spaces analyzed here (Table 1) purposefully mirrors how ideas about the body take shape as they circulate between different media spaces. This follows with what Carpentier and DeCleen (2009) call a “macro-textual” approach, which “uses a broader definition of a text, much in congruence with Barthes, seeing texts as materializations of meaning and/or ideology...[and] discourse as representation” (p. 277).

**A genealogical imperative and queer optic.** Foucault’s genealogical method evolved in response to ideas chronicled by Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morality* (1998). Foucault’s chapter on *Nietzsche, Genealogy and History* (1977) details and



expands Nietzsche's challenge to the practice of history that elides the heterogeneity of experience to construct a linear narrative that presents the present as an inevitability of the past. Through Nietzsche, Foucault argues that the task of genealogical history, or of "descent," as the method is alternately referred to, is twofold: to dismantle constructed linear narratives by revealing how they became naturalized, and to meticulously excavate the "subjugated knowledges" that their construction invariably hides. Foucault is not arguing for a revisionist history, but against the very idea of a "true" or "original" history, and against the question of "why" something happened. Instead, a genealogical approach places an emphasis on the question of "how," asking how particular logics became naturalized and excavating the apparatuses of power from which the logics accepted as true emerged. Power is diffuse; it animates subjects, and is manifest everywhere through a whole range of tactics beyond visibly oppressive authority. In this model, we are not "for" or "against" power. Rather, we must rearrange ourselves differently, as there is no "relative to" it. Within a genealogical methodology, it is thus fundamental to recognize and reveal both the conditions of the production of history, and the alternate multiplicities of (sometimes contradictory) experience subsumed by the privileged narratives that *were* remembered. The concern of a genealogical method, ultimately, is with power, and with the revelation of the particular matrixes from which naturalized, historical "truth..., hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history," (Foucault, 1977, p. 142). Without expressly advocating for an exposition of the lies of history, a Foucauldian genealogy is interested in interrogating the processes by which certain narratives have become authoritative. This work, Foucault insists, is not about history in the abstract, but about a history written on and through bodies. Although a genealogy is

not about a revisionist “evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people” (Foucault, 1977, p. 146), histories are always made by and manifested on the body.

“Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history” Foucault (1977) writes, “its task...[is] to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s deconstruction of the body” (p. 148).

This dissertation also employs what can be thought of as a queer optic, reflecting its investment in excavating how power is manifested within discourses at the intersection of mainstream beauty ideals and body positive discourse and practice. As Kath Brown and Catherine J. Nash (2010) explain in their introduction to the volume *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, “‘queer research’ can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations” (p. 4). This is at once recognizable as a deconstructive impulse, and also referential to the queerness of a methodological approach that is multimodal. Using a queer method as a tool for exploring how a range of subjectivities, some explicitly queer and some less-evidently so, are crafted in various body positive spaces also asserts the possibility of political resistance. As Eli Manning (2009) lays out in *Queerly Disrupting Methodologies*, “the goal of [a] queer methodology...is to do several things: first, to challenge invisibility, normalcy and stability which are produced by dichotomous understandings; second, to resist neo-liberal, assimilation and reverse discourses; and last, to expose and deconstruct respectability, heteronormativity and homonormativity” (p. 6).

**Critical discourse analysis.** Foucaultian genealogy's attentiveness to the centrality of power in the very making of bodies makes it an integral approach to any work undertaking the question of the body's contemporary constitution. However, this project is not explicitly intended (solely) as a historiography of body positivity. Pragmatically, it follows the aforementioned efforts to excavate and contextualize flows of power by situating visual and textual records as its primary texts. Foucault considers discursive practice to be that which invests subjects with life, constitutive of the bounded body and its relational configurations alike. As he argues through his repressive hypothesis in the *History of Sexuality* (1990), sex, rather than the unspoken taboo it is thought to be, has been the subject of perpetual discussion in the West since the Victorian era. It is through discourse that sexual practice becomes sexual identity, something one "is" rather than "does." Discourse creates subjectivities, and through a web of institutions and institutionally-mediated practices, discourse operates as a "will to knowledge" or "will to truth," shaping naturalized understandings of ontological reality through articulating the parameters of what can and cannot be said (Foucault, 1971).

Building on Laclau and Mouffe's seminal work on discourse theory (DT), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2014), Carpentier and DeCleen (2007) investigate the possible application of discourse theory to media studies. They read discourse theory against the more common method in media studies of critical discourse analysis (CDA), finding commonalities as well as important distinctions between the two. Discourse theory, as posited by Laclau and Mouffe, builds on the Foucauldian notion that discourse produces the meanings that shape our reality. Within this framework, identity is created through the articulation of possible "subject-

positions” that reflect “the precise discursive conditions of possibility” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 115). As Carpentier and DeCleen (2007) explain, “discourses and identities are thus not defined as stable or fixed” (p. 268) as their significance is contingent upon the particular discursive field in which they are operationalized. Discourse theory is thus critically invested in contextualization, an approach it shares with critical discourse analysis. The distinction Carpentier and DeCleen draw between DT and CDA however, has to do with texts- while DT is amenable to a “macro-textual” discursive schema, CDA has traditionally been grounded in a “micro-textual” approach that defines discourse more narrowly as spoken or written language. With this distinction in mind, this dissertation deploys something closer to a Discourse Theory approach theorizing the constructed nature of subjectivity by considering “discourse” as inclusive of a broad range of texts that together contribute to the articulation of particular, contingent subject-positions.

Andre Brock has proposed a similar methodological approach he terms “critical technocultural discourse analysis” (CTDA). Specifically intended for the study of Internet-based discourses, CTDA “examines Internet phenomena by situating online discourse about cultural artifacts within a sociocultural matrix...[and] analyzes interfaces to understand how the Internet’s form and function visually, symbolically and interactively mediate discourse” (Brock 2009, p. 345). Brock (2009) cites Lisa Nakamura’s (2006) call for Internet scholarship to be critically attentive to how “the ‘contemporary constellation of racism, globalization and technoculture” (2009, p. 345) is reproduced online by using critical race, feminist and other analytics from a cultural-theory toolkit to read an archive of digital discourse that is both visual and textual.

In sum, the methodology of this project begins with the deployment of a genealogical approach to identifying the particular, contested histories of its central terms: the body and body positivity first and foremost, but with visibility, exposure, authenticity, empowerment, beauty and embodiment landing critically alongside them. It takes a “macro-textual” approach to mapping its objects of study, which include website pages, blog posts and digital image archives. It carefully mines these sources to build a rich foundation of data that reflects the disparate and perhaps at times conflicting ways the body is shaped, negotiated and imagined in a body positive context. Throughout, it deploys critical reading practices of interpretation, seeking out both traces of existing ideologies of subjectivity and, ultimately, instances of potential incongruence, rupture and resistance.

**Analytical approach.** This dissertation brings together a diversity of case studies into a mosaic of body positivity. All websites analyzed are recent productions, published within the last five years. All are also intimately woven into a much older fabric of bodies, embodiment, identity and technology. These cases are not intended to be wholly representative of all contemporary discourses on body positivity, but rather were chosen to illuminate what I consider particularly salient themes, tensions and provocations therein. As the question of whether such sites are a positive or a negative influence on self-esteem has already been debated in the mainstream press and in some aforementioned areas of effects research, my object of study is body positive *practice*. In order to study it I have selected five websites as examples of the expression of a body

positive *ideology* and analyzed their visual and textual archives of body-positive stories and subjects.

I have chosen to look at largely stand-alone websites (with the exception of *Body Revolution*, which is a sub-section of Lady Gaga's website), as opposed to body positive pages or hashtags on platforms like Facebook and Instagram for various reasons. Firstly, examining discrete sites, rather than content embedded within larger platforms, allows for an assessment of a clear set of guidelines, mission and vision statements designed solely for body positive aims. It also allows for the exploration of various holistic approaches to aesthetics and norms in spaces unhindered by the normalizing frameworks of larger platforms. Because these sites are expressly designed as body positive spaces, and are not body positive communities emergent from spaces with extant scaffolding, through them we can more easily see how body positivity is conceptualized on ideological and practical levels.

Body positivity is defined here as an outlook and approach that challenges mainstream conceptualizations of beauty that deem (only) thin, young, cis-gendered, able-bodied white women as beautiful by embracing a love of, and facilitating visibility for, other kinds of bodies. Diversifying the representation of embodiment, meaning gender, race, ability and other vectors of bodily identity, is a central aim of body positivity. Usually, the terms body positive and/or body positivity are explicitly used by creators of the various sites studied to describe the online spaces and projects they have created, but not always- in the case of a site like *Herself* where these terms were not explicitly used, I determined whether the project ascribed to a body positive approach by examining its stated aims, as well as the participant stories and images published, looking

for mentions of the body, identity, gender and beauty positioned in contrast to normative Western cultural expectations.

Throughout, body positivity is the frame that unites all my objects of study, and the sites analyzed were selected because of their subscription and dedication to body positivity as an organizing cause. It was also critically important to my site selection process to determine if sites allowed user some form of user participation. Participatory sites not only served as the means to a diverse an array of body positive stories and images, but also provided clear guidelines and directives that helped me understand how digital body positivity was both practiced and conceptualized.

I located my case studies through various means. An early version of this project was initially spurred on by broad media coverage of Lady Gaga's *Body Revolution* launch in the Fall of 2012. Outlets like *Rolling Stone* and *Jezebel* covered the story of Gaga's project to "build confidence in people with body-image issues" (Rolling Stone, 2012). My interest in the story led me to investigate *Body Revolution* further, establishing its links to the concept of body positivity through both an excavation of Gaga's well-circulated press release and subsequent media coverage, and the site itself. To investigate further the meaning of body positivity in the digital realm, I sought out sites to compare to *Body Revolution*. Through a Google search of the terms "body positivity" and "body positive," I located *Stop Hating Your Body*, and *My Body Gallery*. I read about the launch of *Herself* in an interview with creator Caitlin Stasey on the feminist pop culture website *Jezebel* (a subsidiary of Gawker media), and came across *The Body is Not an Apology* via the online magazine *Everyday Feminisms*.

Table 1 *Primary Body Positive Sites Examined (Site analytics obtained from Similarweb)*

Name	Site Address	Founder/Editor	Est.	Website Traffic <i>Total Visits May 2016</i>
Herself	herself.com	Caitlin Stasey, Hannah Terry-Whyte, Keenan MacWilliam	2015	94,300
Body Revolution	littlemonsters.com/tags/s/ bodyrevolution	Lady Gaga (Stephanie Germanotta)	2012	43,400 <i>littlemonsters.com</i>
Stop Hating Your Body	stophatingyourbody.tumblr.com	Annie Segarra	2010	9,700 <i>35,000 Dec 2015</i>
The Body is Not an Apology	thebodyisnotanapology.com	Sonya Renee Taylor	2014	101,000
My Body Gallery	mybodygallery.com	Odessa Cozzolino	2009	491,000

This project is a visual, textual and discursive analysis of the content found on each of these five sites. It is augmented by an analysis of English-language media coverage of body positivity as concept, project and campaign, beyond the confines of these five selected sites, as well as analysis of salient examples of popular culture reflecting contemporary Western attitudes about the body (both body positive and not). I began the first phase of research on this topic in the Fall of 2012, gathering initial data for a short version of this project published in the journal *Feminist Media Studies* (Sastre, 2014). I returned to this work in early 2015, returning to the first three sites analyzed and expanding my research to five sites by adding *Herself* and *The Body is Not an Apology* to the project.



I examined each site's mission statements and vision or stated goals, About, Submission guidelines and FAQ pages and, where relevant, author and contributor bios. I undertook a visual analysis of their design interfaces and their image archives. Depending on the amount of content published on each site, I either looked over their entire participant (visual and textual) archive or, on sites with a greater density of posts and stories, content generally published between January and August of 2015. By looking at users' images and stories alongside the directives provided by site editors, I sought to determine what kind of participation was encouraged: what language was used to guide potential participants and contributors, and what visual and rhetorical qualities were shared by the images and stories posted. The only slight exception to this approach came in the case of *The Body is Not an Apology*. Participants can share their stories and experiences on *The Body is Not an Apology* discussion boards, but only contribute their images to *The Body is Not an Apology*'s Instagram page. Given how I chose to define body positive digital spaces, I chose not to look systematically *The Body is Not an Apology*'s Instagram images, but rather scan them informally.

I assessed each site separately, reading it as its own individual text, then looked comparatively across all five to render a richer picture of the themes that unite the representation and conceptualization of the body within the body positive moment. I was attentive to differences and incongruities in the design and objectives of each site, as well as in the modes of participation officially encouraged and undertaken by users. My objective was to understand both what the similarities tell us about what it means to enact digital "body positivity," and what the differences between sites and users tell us about the various ways these goals are actually engaged with.

While most of the content analyzed here is visible to anyone with Internet access and not password protected, on *Body Revolution* and *The Body is Not an Apology*, you must create a user account to access participant content. It is important to me to respect the privacy and integrity of those individuals willingly stepping into the often emotionally fraught territory of body positive projects. As such, to make sure my research was ethically conducted, no password-protected images or stories are associated with specific users. All content that is publicly available however, is treated as such.

When I gathered the bulk of this data, I coded my findings thematically, identifying salient themes echoed across the multiple sites examined. Chapters were in turn organized to reflect these themes and related tropes. I chose this approach for multiple reasons, chief of which was to demonstrate that the practice of contemporary body positivity can, in essence, be distilled into a series of discursive and representational tropes. These performative tropes, I determine, are meant to reflect, and, importantly, generate the key physical, emotional and practical orientation of body positivity. In other words, the performative practice of body positivity is intentionally allied with a set of feelings that body positivity is meant to elicit in (and solicit from) its practitioners.

Chapter 1, *Authentic Exposure: Body Positivity and the Performance of Realness Online*, examines the visual practice of body positivity through a close look at submission guidelines, seed images and the visual tropes that emerge from both. This chapter addresses the proliferation of exposed, often nude or semi-nude bodies in body-positive spaces. The act of revealing this previously-hidden flesh is regularly captured, and coupled with text that explains the particular body part as one that the participant has always been afraid to show. Often these body parts are personified, and cast as the object

of affection in a cathartic performance of self-love. I argue this trope of nudity and revelation has a series of complex implications, most notably a similarity to the make-over show “reveal” normally reserved for conventionally “beautiful” bodies. I argue these documented practices of exposure function as opportunities for participants to manifest (or, cynically, “prove”) their identities as “real,” as opposed to “ideal,” women, and expose digital body positivity’s narrow conceptualization of authenticity and the “authentic” body.

Chapter 2, *A Beautiful Revolution of Self-Love: Narrative Practices of Body Positivity*, focuses on its textual record. Here I analyze body positive stories and confessionals, from the sometimes brief captions accompanying images on sites like *Stop Hating Your Body* and *Body Revolution* to the longer blog posts and interview entries available on sites like *Herself* and *My Body Gallery*. Across these tales of body positivity, themes of struggle and, consistently, catharsis emerge, as participants reach a body positive state. I argue that these rhetorics of empowerment and triumphant self-love, often encouraged by site creators and editors, closely mirror a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility and personal accomplishment. Rather than emphasize the complexity, fluidity and instability inherent in our relationship with our bodies, these stories largely tell tales of body positivity as a goal achieved.

In Chapter 3, *The Archival Body: Visibility, Visuality and the Image’s Role in the Making of Body Positive Subjectivity*, I use body positive images to argue that the recorded exposure of the body outlined in Chapter 1 recalls a particular history of body verification by medical and legal subjects in the aim of biopolitics. I build on the data gathered in Chapter 1 and link it to a longer history of the image and image-making

practices to articulate the broader political implications of a biopolitical mechanics of visibility in service of an archive of subjectivity. In linking body positivity to a larger history of power and representation in the West, I complicate presumptions of the image as a neutral conduit of body-data and instead argue it is always-already raced, gendered and ableist. I propose body positivity shift from an analog frame that understands the image-and the body- as stable and authoritative to a digital one that allows for both to be recognized as flexible, porous and filled with possibility.

Lastly, Chapter 4, *Towards a Radical Body Positive: Envisioning a New Visual Politics of the Body* steps away from the archive of blogs and websites that has been at the center of this dissertation to consider what a radical expression of body positivity looks and *might look* like. In this chapter, I turn to an eclectic range of photographic and written work that explores the intricacies of representing embodiment in the digital age. The multifaceted work of contemporary photographers Amalia Ulman, Haley Morris-Cafiero and Rupri Kaur pose substantive challenges to expectations about both how our bodies appear, and how we *experience* them. Reading this work in light of theories of affect, disability and feminist representation, I develop suggestions for how a radical body positive might better allow for the nuanced expression of affective embodiment.

## Chapter 1

### Authentic Exposure: Body Positivity and the Performance of “Realness” Online

From Monday, May 9, 2016 through Sunday, May 16, 2016, news and entertainment website *Buzzfeed* declared it “body positivity week.” Under this body positive banner, *Buzzfeed*, a hugely popular site targeted towards young adults and boasting “200 million unique monthly visitors” (About BuzzFeed, 2016), aggregated content published over the last year and created new content each day. In the post announcing this launch, *Buzzfeed* staff member Julie Gerstein (2016) explained that the week’s theme would bring together: “content devoted to exploring and celebrating bodies and our often complicated relationships with them.” “Body positivity week” was intended to highlight “diverse voices” from within and outside the website’s staff, including “brilliant contributing writers, everyday models who have generously shared their images and personal experiences, and *Buzzfeed* community members who’ve volunteered their own incredible stories” (Gerstein, 2016). In addition to providing a wide-reaching platform for these “everyday” images and narratives, “body positivity week” was intended to “provide resources for readers as they [moved] through their respective body image journeys” (Gerstein, 2016); to this end, the week’s tagline was “your body, your self” (Gerstein 2016).

As of May 12, 2016, *Buzzfeed* had published 59 posts tagged “body positivity week.” This content featured posts like “19 Size-Inclusive Clothing Stores Where Friends Can Shop Together” (Whelan, 2016a), “29 Film and TV Moments That Helped People Love Their Bodies” (Rackham, 2016), “Women Talk About Embracing Their Body

Hair” (Whelan, 2016b), “15 Awards Everyone Who Struggles with Body Image Deserves” (Borges, 2016), “This Burn Survivor has Become a Beauty Icon” (Whitaker, 2016), “These Awesome Nude Portraits Show the Range of Trans Men’s’ Bodies” (Talusán, 2016) and “This is What Post-Pregnancy Bodies Actually Look Like” (Warren, 2015).

While still just a sample of the range of body positive content published regularly on *Buzzfeed*, these posts usefully illustrate the resonant themes of digital body positivity this dissertation details. Beauty is lauded. Self-love is the desired objective, accessed through targeted labor (and often participation in the same feminine economies made visible by mainstream media) and rewarded as an achievement. The body is construed as the self’s beloved, and as such, as outside of and separate from it. The real, authentic and “every day” is consistently highlighted and explicitly positioned against “media representations of and misconceptions about bodies” (Gerstein, 2016). Authenticity is signaled both rhetorically and through a pervasive emphasis on the nude or revealed body; the image is the conduit through which the authentic body is accessed.

It is telling that a site as visible as *Buzzfeed*, which receives more than 6 billion monthly global content views (About BuzzFeed, 2016), is invested in the visibility of body positivity. In the digital realm, body positivity has taken off, as not only an ideology, but also a traceable practice distinguishable by its own set of visual and rhetorical tropes. In other words, understanding body positivity is both a matter of distilling its messages and of examining *how* those messages are put into practice, how body positivity is performed through words and images in the participatory spaces of digital media. In this chapter, I outline the various performative strategies used across the

five body positive websites studied to signal one of the most prominent themes of contemporary body positivity, realness and authenticity.

One of the key tenets of mainstream body positivity is that exposing the supposed “realness” of your body, both to yourself and to the world, is an act of catharsis. This principle is expressed through frequently repeated visual and rhetorical forms in body positive content across different media. “Realness” within a body positive frame is decidedly more conventional and arguably familiar. In body positive images, bodies are presented partially or entirely naked. When not fully nude, clothing is lifted or moved aside to reveal specific body parts, identified by text as those about which the individual is most self-conscious. Depending on the digital platform, this text can appear in a caption, in a longer-form narrative coupled with the image, or, in a layering of semiotic meaning, written (and occasionally tattooed) directly onto the body. Mirroring what has become the conventional language of the selfies that dominate digital culture, many of these images are taken in front of bathroom and bedroom mirrors, intimate parts captured in the most intimate realms of the home.

Together, these visual and rhetorical formations signal the act of showing as itself empowering, imbued with the potential to liberate the newly exposed body from the cultural burdens of shame and disgust that kept it long hidden. This is the work that body positivity, as a unifying ideology, ostensibly does— it provides a route through which participants in its digital instantiations can challenge an exclusionary Western beauty culture that almost exclusively grants visibility to thin, white, tall, cis-gendered, symmetrical and able-bodied individuals. This culture deserves to be constantly and consistently challenged, and it has, since feminist and fat activists began tackling the

relationship between popular representations of gender, race and sexuality and larger systems of oppression. But, as I will argue in this chapter, the ways in which digital body positive spaces currently encourage their participants to undertake this challenge too closely replicates many of the visual forms (and underlying logics) of the very popular culture they seek to resist.

Online body positivity first presumes the digital image is able to capture its material reality. This logic rests on dual expectations: of photographic veracity, which has haunted the medium from its inception and carried forth from the analog to the digital realm, and of the body as a stable and authenticatable entity whose fleshy “realness” can be captured on film and in pixels. In other words, within this framework, clothes, make-up, and other accoutrements of conspicuous consumption are understood to occlude the body’s true contours, so their removal is encouraged. In turn, the image record of the nude or partially nude body is understood to relay an authenticity that is sometimes promoted as even more real than reality itself. Critically, this bodily record is emphatically positioned, time and again, as more real than the idealized bodies with which we are inundated in mainstream media.

With the contrapuntal positioning of “real” and “ideal” bodies at its center, body positivity next builds on the expectation of a stable and authenticatable body by aligning the moment of recorded physical exposure with emotional catharsis. At its most reductive, body positivity positions the act of showing one’s body, facing its physicality and then digitally communicating that act through the circulation of its image record, as the means to recalibrating the (supposedly fractured) inner and outer self. Such visibility is seen to generate or restore proper bodily *feeling* of beauty and self-acceptance. Here,



there is an indisputable alignment of subjectivity and sentiment, one that, as Lauren Berlant (2008) has argued, is inevitably gendered, raced and classed within the context of American culture. Body positivity usefully emphasizes the centrality of the (most often female and always visible) body at the center of the nexus of identity and affect. In other words, the display, capture and circulation of the exposed body is not undertaken arbitrarily- it is the means through which body positivity itself, as a state of feeling, is achieved.

Coupling an acceptance of photography as a conduit to a stable bodily truth with an underlying ideology that dictates visibility and self-love to be the ultimate (interchangeable) goals, body positive digital spaces map out a clear performative pathway to reaching a fixed body positive state. In the following pages, I chronicle this body positive praxis through tracing its various visual and related rhetorical formations. As mentioned, these formations include full or partial nudity and exposed flesh often signaled by text as the part of the body the subject is or was most fearful of showing. More often than not, *showing* is deemed the ultimate radical body positive act, even in a culture where public-ness is already increasingly compulsory. I argue in this chapter that there is an intrinsic similarity between these approaches, their underlying logics and expectations, and the contemporary makeover culture body positivity works to resist. In both spaces, pictures and feelings are woven together in much the same way, positioning not only “feeling beautiful” as the ultimate body positive end, but also situating a narrowly-defined set of visual and rhetorical practices as the means to reach it.

Ideologically and practically, mainstream body positivity demonstrates the multiplicity of elements that must align- and labor that must be invested- to produce an

“empowered” and ostensibly liberated subject. In highlighting the slippage between body positive practices and mainstream gendered cultural formations that demand constant, vigilant, visible work on the bodies as the means to reach the “authentic” self, I stress that while the former identifies the latter as a mode of oppression, in replicating its form it doesn’t go far enough. Body positivity certainly functions as a call to diversify *who* can be visible. And as Foucault (1988) argued in his later writing, the work of resistance involves the necessary usage of existing, inescapable languages; in other words, there is not outside to power. That said, the technology of the self as radical act involves a critical and discerning interpellation of the limited tools in our arsenal. A look at the performative tropes that characterize much of online body positivity shows that, as Angela McRobbie (2009) claimed about a postfeminist culture of “girl power” and commercialized self-esteem, both the message and expression of these contemporary forms of gendered, raced and classed subjectivity more often than not work “at the expense of a defined feminist politics” (p. 9). By promoting a resistance to exclusionary cultures of femininity without holistically challenging- and transforming- the visual and rhetorical forms that sustain those cultures, body positivity in its current form simply allows a more people the opportunity to participate in the kinds of cultural practices it problematizes. This in and of itself is not a bad thing, or an unworthy goal. But in a cultural and political moment when the bodies of cis and trans\* women, as well as queer and gender non-conforming people, are under continued threat, body positivity can and should push further to problematize both its content and representational forms, beginning by challenging the very participatory mechanisms at its core.

The body positive digital spaces I examined for this project host a diversity of content. Some sites, most notably *Stop Hating Your Body* and *The Body Is Not an Apology*, demonstrate a more nuanced perspective on body positivity as a concept and the heteronormative, white, capitalist patriarchal social conditions it works to resist. Others, like *My Body Gallery*, are uncritically invested in the work of visibility. Yet within most body positive content I examined, rote *visual* patterns of participation, guided in part by submission instructions and guidelines provided by the sites themselves and more informal (though no less prevalent) participant conventions, appeared time and again. These guidelines are not always directive, but they do build on existing cultural mores surrounding the gendered performance of empowerment that inform the digital performance of body positivity.

The most notable of these was full or partial nudity. Though participants are rarely fully nude, the body is repeatedly shown clothed only in underwear, or with clothes lifted or askew. As I will argue in this chapter, the exposed nude or nearly-nude body functions as a dual signifier. It is itself held as exemplary of realness and authenticity, both of which, at points, are collapsed into conceptualizations of naturalness and positioned in contrast to the idealized bodies saturating mainstream media. In tandem, the act of making visible this “real body,” whose image is often accompanied by captions or text written directly on flesh to indicate that what is being shown has been socially coded as shameful and previously hidden, stands as cathartic. Exposing this “real” body is an act of emotional labor, one that challenges unattainable beauty norms and transforms the participant’s own sense of self. In so doing, the performance of bodily exposure becomes the mechanism through which body positivity is concurrently enacted as practice and

attained as goal. As such, body positivity comes to be dually defined as both a personal act of emotional labor, and a move to displace the hypervisibility of the idealized body with “authentic” bodies that stake their claim to beauty through self-love. What is expressly *not* challenged through this performative paradigm are the gendered expectation of beauty and self-esteem, and the familiar expectations of visibility, all at the core of body positivity.

### **Visibility, Representation and the Docile Body**

In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality* (1990), Michel Foucault puts forth the “repressive hypothesis” and argues that, sex is not suppressed, but rather the object of continual and unyielding discussion in the modern West. It is the fundamental object through which the shift of power from the sovereign’s “right of death” (Foucault 1990, p. 137) to modern “biopower’s” management of life is leveraged, and that which shapes hegemonic ideals of the normal and the perverse, individual subjectivity and medico-scientific “truth.” Coming together at the site of the Victorian bourgeois family, discourses concerning the regulation of the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple and the perverse adult reflect the role of sexuality in the perpetuation of power through the “self-affirmation” of the ruling class. More precisely, these bodies-of the delinquent, the sexual deviant, the mad, the “other” and, in turn, the “self”- are produced at the site where institutional practice and what he terms a “regime of truth” meet (Foucault, 2008). At this intersection is “[formed] an apparatus of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist” in this form before its naming and classification (Foucault, 2008, p. 19).

In Foucault's framework, the seemingly visceral link between identity and sex is merely testament to the forces of power expressed through dominant regulatory institutions such as law, medicine and psychoanalysis that work to maintain order by constituting "sex...as a problem to truth" (1990, p. 56). Within this indelible matrix of power, the body- and by extension the *visible* and available body- becomes the vehicle through which individual compliance is enacted, linked to personal identity, and chronicled at the level of population. At the macro level, institutional authority measures and negotiates deviations from its established norms. At the micro level, hegemonic compliance leads to the body willingly making itself visible and readily available for surveillance. Crucially, these institutional and individual practices are contingent on one another, together forming a system of biopower. Within this constitution of hegemonic power, the individual body's exposure is positioned as the means to personal truth, institutionalized through practices of visibility that include the medical and legal archives.

Foucault's formulation of biopower is thus contingent on the technologies of what can be considered governance through self-governance, or governmentality through the disciplined body. An integral part of self-policing is accountability through visibility, or a sense of continual exposure offered up to an unseen, surveilling eye. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault articulates the constitution of modern power through the framework of Jeremy Bentham's 18th century Panopticon prison model. Bentham's architectural innovation reimagined the layout of the prison by placing an observation tower at its center; from this location, supervising guards had full view of the prisoners inhabiting the cells that encircled the tower in a wide ring. Each prisoner was isolated

from the other, barred from congregating by thick walls. Yet the dominance exerted by the guards was facilitated less by the iron cages and more by the unidirectional visibility- given the structure of the Panopticon, they could see the prisoners, but the prisoners could not return their gaze. In this setup, each cell was transformed into “a small theater in which each actor [was] perfectly alone, perfectly individualized, and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1995, p. 200). Light now cast out the previously protective darkness of the archaic dungeon, rendering even the most mundane actions of the prisoners visible. Moreover, since the prisoners were unable to see into the tower, it was never known when the guards were *actually* watching- the prisoners, in other words, were never granted a respite from their display, never allowed, to continue Foucault’s metaphor, offstage. Visibility here operated as the mechanism through which self-governance was effectively maintained.

Visibility is understood in this framework as a powerful tool through which modern governmentality is exercised, as bodies are rendered docile and compliant to society’s all-seeing, normalizing eye. The body is the perpetual locus of control, the focus of a range of practices of “responsabilization.” It is also situated as the means through which racialized, gendered subjectivity is framed. In this way, the visible body becomes a critical technology of modern citizenship. As Andrea Brighenti (2007) argues, two key dynamics of visibility are “recognition” and “control.” Through both, visibility is strategically operationalized within particular relations of power, which itself is ultimately “an exercise in activating selective in/visibilities” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 339). The presence (or lack) of visibility is thus the tool through which *difference* is marked, through which conceptualizations of both “the ideal” and its opposite are articulated and

normalized. Visibility, Brighenti argues, creates both “the model” and “the monster,” in tandem with one another. “It is not only the model who is endowed with visibility” he writes, but “the monster is too, [for] both the model and the monster are visible, marked, out of the ordinary” (2007, p. 334).

As a mechanism of subjectivization that can work to both instill and deny power, visibility operates in tandem with cultural formulations of the authentic, verifiable body, a body recognized, and by the same token, tracked and categorized. As Robin Weigman (1995) argues, “economies of visibility” sustain our understanding of race, class and other identity categories as markers of identity presumed legible on the body. This is because within an economy of the visual, “the status of the body [is] as the primary readable ‘text’” (Weigman, 1995, p. 8) through which who we are-and how we fit into society- is confirmed. An understanding of the interrelatedness of visibility and power thus always-already implicates embodiment, and understands contemporary processes of body-work as labor that is directly tied to the production of subjectivity. Visibility can be a force for good, a tool through which to call attention to oppression. But invisibility can be a luxury as well, granting increased mobility through the social mechanisms of verification that can themselves oppress.

Feminist media studies scholarship over the last decade and a half (Sender, 2006; 2012, Jones, 2008; Weber, 2009; Marwick, 2010; Bordo, 1995; Jhally, 2007; Kilbourne 1999) sets the stage for this dissertation’s critical analysis of body positivity. This work builds on a Foucauldian understanding of the relationship between power, visibility and the body to argue that what we construe as individual choice actually reflects larger systemic forces. The performance of self today is tied to a tremendous economy of

products that sustain the body as a continual project, reliant “on multiple channelings into the controlled circuits of the economy” (Foucault, 1990, p. 114). As social, political and individual interests are understood within an economic framework, the self becomes the ultimate commodity. Both body and mind ardently regulated through a range of goods and services- from diet pills to waist training corsets to self-help books- readily available on the market. Purchase of these items is understood as an enactment of good citizenship, an investment in the individual self for the betterment of the social whole<sup>2</sup>.

Makeover culture, which subsumes not only a range of television programs and films on the topic, but also a robust industry providing products for maintaining diet and appearance (ABC News Staff, 2012), is unified by formula and ideology. The formula is familiar: a subject is selected for a makeover because their appearance is deemed somehow faulty, money and time are invested in transforming their clothing, body and sometimes lifestyle into a model of contemporary success. All is revealed amidst cheering and applause. The contestant is elated and overwhelmed, grateful for the necessary intervention they may have initially resisted. The ideology is more insidious- these makeovers ensure happiness because they teach subjects how to conform by teaching them how to control themselves, and perhaps most importantly, the *value* of

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that tracing the evolution of Foucault’s thinking on governmentality and institutionally driven self-regulation into the dominance of neoliberalism in the West uncovers an unfinished genealogy that complicates an uncritical application of his notions of docility, surveillance and governmentality to our contemporary capitalist moment. These critical formations of modernity undoubtedly undergird not only neoliberalism but practices of citizenship and subjectivity in the digital age. Yet as Daniel Zamora reminds us, we can read an ideological slippage between contemporary policies of privatization and Foucault’s resistance to the totalizing control of the state. It is important however, to ground these assertions in their historical context. As Mitchell Dean writes, “Foucault belonged to a present in which neoliberalism was shifting from a militant, if marginal, thought collective to a regime of the government of the state” (2014). Ultimately, it is telling that Foucault’s identification of the institutionally-maneuvered yet individualized processes of self-making continue to resonate as control and power have acutely shifted from the state to the market over the last three decades since his death.



self-control (Sender, 2006). The (typically, implicitly) female body in this schema is doubly problematized: it is initially positioned as imperfect and in need of improvement. In addition, the process of improvement is itself regulated and scrutinized, requiring expert intervention and public sanction.

These processes and interventions are, moreover, happening internally and externally. To be made-over implies not only an overhaul of the person's appearance, but also an overhaul of their attitude, culminating in the proper alignment of bodily form and psychological feeling. In the case of both makeover culture and body positivity, the proper feeling is empowerment, "something we owe to society, something that will defray the costs of social problems, something that will create a true democracy" (Cruikshank, 1993, p. 328). As empowerment becomes the path to not only beauty, but proper citizenship, a compulsory state of feeling becomes a practical requirement for subjectivity, the necessary work we owe society and ourselves. "Makeovers depict stories of failed or imperiled selfhood" (p. 5) Brenda Weber (2009) explains, "[positioning] the subject as an entrepreneur of the self, who does and indeed must engage in the care of the body and its symbolic referents in order to be competitive within a larger global marketplace" (p.39). Weber is arguing, essentially, that the makeover is a distinctly neoliberal process, in that it centers on an ethos of personal responsibility made manifest through the purchase of a range of goods and services promoted as aids to a truer- and better- self.

These processes and expectations, moreover, are inherently gendered: As Barbara Cruikshank points out in her analysis of famed feminist Gloria Steinem's 1992 work *Revolution from Within: A Work of Self Esteem*, an ideology of empowerment promotes

the idea that “women have a natural subjectivity that is hindered or repressed by power, rather than shaped and constituted by power” (Cruikshank, 1993, p.341). Crucially, these practices hinge on an ideology of personal choice positioned against institutional interventions that, by comparison, are constructed as oppressive. As will be discussed further in Chapter 2, freedom in this context becomes, among other things, the right (and the obligation) to buy-yourself-well.

The ideology behind the privatized self also implicates institutional agents that work to regulate -and police- broad social definition of the normal and pathological body. Alice Marwick’s (2010) analysis of the makeover program *The Swan* presents a similar take on the ideologies that undergird such content, though *The Swan* is a unique example in that its participants undertake a total-body plastic surgery remodeling. Here, the medical gaze appears at its most literal, scrutinizing bodies deemed abnormally unattractive and thus, socially unacceptable. Participants are often self-proclaimed recluses, shunned and fearful to live a “normal” life because of what they perceive to be their hideous appearance. As always, the stated goal of undergoing a makeover is to uncover and express “an authentic self” (Marwick, 2010, p. 252), here accessible only via radical medical intervention. Marwick argues that *The Swan*’s ultimate message is that plastic surgery is “a morally appropriate” (2010, p. 252) path to achieving authenticity and, by extension, true happiness. Participants, who later compete at the end of the season in a pageant to determine who has been most successfully made over, are offered numerous expensive, time-consuming and sometimes painful surgical procedures to modify their body from head-to-toe. Plastic surgery is no longer treated as taboo, or a choice reserved for the wealthy and famous. Rather, anyone with a bank account (or

approval for a loan) can appeal to “the expert’s gaze” (Marwick, 2010, p.260), go under the knife and uncover their “true” selves.

Programs like *The Swan* subvert narratives that deem plastic surgery an inauthentic intervention into the body and reposition it as a means to happiness and fulfilment. They also collapse the complex commentary on gender, embodiment, artificiality and authenticity that plastic surgery elicits. The very notion of a graceful, swan-like blossoming connotes a mythical, other-worldly transcendence of physical limitations. As Meredith Jones (2008) elaborates in her discussion of the late kitsch icon Lolo Ferrari, who at one time had the largest breasts in the world, “makeover culture [and plastic surgery] ...incorporates the promise of transformation while sleeping” (94) not unlike the mythical sleeping beauty, Briar Rose. While seemingly in contrast to the rigorous work of body-discipline makeover culture otherwise promotes, Jones’ interpretation acknowledges an element of magical thinking in the equation, exemplary of the cruel optimism Berlant (Berlant, 2010) argues drives our contemporary desires under liberal capitalism. Makeover culture hinges on the promise of happiness and power not only because, as Susan Bordo argues (1995), physical appearance and self-control are prized commodities in our current social marketplace, but also because a symptom of the very constitution of our society as a market is that the individual body is positioned as a commodity that can depreciate in value if normative standards are not met. It is not beauty, but happiness in this economy of feeling that is- and remains- necessarily elusive.

At their core, these feminist interventions resist the idea that narratives of empowerment through the physical and mental cultivation of the self are to be celebrated, particularly when they circulate within a Western culture of conspicuous consumption.

They also call attention to how an individualized framing of the gendered, raced, classed and ableist “project” of selfhood works to distract from a sustained critique of systemic oppression. In the last two decades, feminism itself has been increasingly coopted into this schematic and appropriated as a commodity. In her work *Gender and the Media* (2007), Rosalind Gill expressly calls out this new era as “postfeminist.” She explains that, as feminist agitation against gender objectifying norms grew increasingly visible, advertisers responded through sales strategies that newly incorporated a distilled but openly “feminist” message. In a moment when celebrities from Beyoncé to Emma Watson declare themselves feminists, multiple complex, distinct histories of feminist uprising are collapsed into a simplistic narrative of “girl power.” Gill maps out key themes in such postfeminist representation, which rely on:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas . . . and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (2007, p. 254)

She argues that the values listed above are not relegated to representations of the contemporary woman, but life as a woman in a world that sees itself as being past the need of an acutely politicized feminist ethos. The radical power of many decades of feminist uprisings, she claims, is undercut by the repackaging of empowerment as a market commodity. Critically, postfeminism puts a rhetoric of gendered empowerment and feminism to use in maintaining the status quo.

A postfeminist critique of the model of personal empowerment through self-work becomes an increasingly meaningful lens through which to understand gendered digital cultures. In her discussion of “Pretty or Ugly” videos, where young girls solicit feedback on their appearance through social media platforms like YouTube, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2014) addresses how discourses of self-esteem as an individual rather than systemic problem carry into the digital sphere. “Casting these videos as expressions of self-esteem positions them as discrete, individual expressions and problems of girls” she writes, “...however, the move to characterize these videos as expressions of the so-called problem of self-esteem among young girls in the US encourages a distraction from other critical structural factors” (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 85). She continues “the saving of these girls...is understood as a problem of rescuing individual girls. The focus of self-esteem programs and practices is on individual girls, their attitudes and how they can gain personal empowerment, and not on structural gendered or racialized inequalities, or systematic abuses of power” (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 88).

This critique can easily be extended to an ideology of body positivity that approaches its object as the individual responsibility of the too-fat, too-thin, queer, disabled, trans\*, disenfranchised and otherwise alienated bodies that must opt-into a body positive practice as a respite from the social forces that pathologize them. Salvation through a simplified visibility-to-empowerment narrative becomes a burden placed on individual shoulders, which happens in place of radical demands for changes to the legal, medical, academic and political institutions that govern our social life. Body positive spaces and practices are in this way, a critical *part* of the system rather than a challenge to it. Certainly they function as a lifeline for those bodies who are not allowed entry into

the spaces few of us have the luxury of moving freely within and between. Yet in pointing to the formal and ideological similarities between the digital practice of body positivity and a larger culture of “female empowerment,” this work interrogates the linkages between how visibility is operationalized within body positivity and what that tells us about its possibility as a mode of resistance and revolution.

### **Visual and Ideological Mechanisms of “Body Positive” Practice**

#### **Site guidelines, artwork and words on skin- outlining participatory tropes.**

Across the body positive spaces examined, nudity is both explicitly called to and inferred through a set of best-practices whose origins may be diffuse, but whose presence is tangible. Tracing the moment of origin when exposure becomes coded as body positive however, is less important than chronicling the evidence that the visible body has now come to stand as exemplary of – and to be seen as a mechanism for- body positive feeling. Sometimes, full or partial nudity is explicitly encouraged through sites’ submission instructions. More often, exposed flesh simply becomes a regular part of body positive practice because these are the sorts of images that appear, time and again, in body positive spaces. Through an examination of the wealth of participant images that make up the majority of the content on the sites explored for this project, I argue that digital body positive practice is grounded in the presumption that body positivity is both achieved and demonstrated through making the (naked) body visible.

Corporeal visibility is sometimes directly encouraged on a site’s submission guidelines or Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages. On *Stop Hating Your Body*, interested participants are guided by the following information on the site’s FAQ page:

Although an underwear picture is preferred (unless you are under 18) you may of course submit another way. If you are under age, or have other reasons for not wanting to pose in such a manner, then yes, of course, you can submit any picture or video or yourself as long as you express love for yourself, express your feelings about the revolution (FAQ, n.d.)

Nudity is not explicitly discouraged or barred from the site, and in fact “underwear pictures [are] preferred” (FAQ, n.d.). Compellingly, these *Stop Hating Your Body* guidelines emphasize an equivalency between physical exposure and emotional labor. At its simplest, and either-or scenario is set up between showing your body and loving what you chose to show. If you are unwilling or unable to render your body properly visible through (near) nudity, you are encouraged to bare the next best thing- your body positive feelings.

On *Stop Hating Your Body*'s Submit (2014) page, an outline of the site's expectations around nudity and visibility become even more apparent. The second item in a numbered list of guidelines states, in full, that:

We encourage tasteful personal portraits of all kinds. Please avoid unrelated pictures (avatars, group shots, landscapes, etc), photos that include gore or blood, before and after weight loss photos, and photos of genitalia; these are typically discarded. You may pose nude if you SUBMIT IT AS A LINK titled “NSFW 18+: [A title for your photo]” and in the descriptions any trigger warnings applicable. NO NUDE SUBMISSIONS FROM THOSE UNDER 18 (Submit, 2014)

As *Stop Hating Your Body* launched in October 12, 2010 and publishes upwards of a hundred posts monthly, these submission guidelines arguably reflects the relationship between the kind of content the site desires and the kind of content it receives. The boundaries around nudity are notably policed, an effort which strongly indicates that nude submissions- and posts- are a given. Visible flesh is reified as the means through

which to demonstrate body positive self-love. However, participants are also reminded that the emphasis on visibility does not give them *carte-blanche* to show their bodies; there are rules for its proper enactment.

This sort of boundary-policing also appears in *My Body Gallery*'s Image Upload Guideline FAQ (2014). As will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, *My Body Gallery* positions itself as an archive of "real bodies" whose purpose is to provide a resource for women, and more recently men, to see themselves clearly. The site frames submissions as tools to not only counter mainstream media images of aspirational bodies, but also reflect site visitors' own bodily contours back to them. Images are catalogued according to a series of values set by the site, including height, weight, body size and shape. While specific measures are submitted by participants along with their photos (and not verified by *My Body Gallery* site editors), expectations of a visible body are embedded in the site's very mission. *My Body Gallery*'s guidelines primarily focus on the formal qualities of the images submitted. Participants are informed that "all uploads must show at least 2/3 of the body, [and] images that stop at the waist will not qualify" (Image upload guidelines, 2014). It is suggested that "a good rule of thumb is that your shoulders and hips should be visible in the photo" (Image upload guidelines, 2014). None of these specifications outline how exactly the body should be shown- only that it should. However, the issues of "full-frontal nudity" and more specifically, "exposed nipples" are addressed, presumably because the site received a plethora of nude submissions or questions regarding them. Neither exposed- female- nipples or full nudity are permitted on the site. The forbidding of both is chalked up to a vague notion of "community standards" that are acknowledged as sexist- but, notably, not acknowledged as gender-



normative, given the presumption that only cis-gendered women with breasts might submit topless photos to the site- but not challenged. “Female nipple exposure is still taboo in many places (especially in America)” the site explains “and so we will reject photos that show female nipples (this applies to nipples showing through sheer lingerie as well)” (Image upload guidelines, 2014). However, participants are told they may work around these restrictions in various ways, either by using the site’s “handy dandy *My Body Gallery* anonymization tools to block out nipples” their “own photo-editing software, or just strategically place your hands or some object over the area in question” (Image upload guidelines, 2014). Stated limitations on full-frontal nudity echo this reasoning, providing even more specifics on how the body is to be both bared and strategically covered:

We’re totally okay with straggly pubes peeking out (although in certain countries this is a problem). For anything more exposed than that, please have some sort of nether-region garment on or strategically place some creative prop to cover anything that might get us an “R” rating. Merely blocking out the genital region with a black blob will, unfortunately, not be sufficient (Image upload guidelines, 2014).

The specificity of *My Body Gallery*’s guidelines points to visibility as a core value at the heart of both body positive practice and ideology. A foundational presumption, then, of digital body positivity is that it will involve images of the nude body.

The presumption of nudity appears not only within the guiding frameworks of the sites themselves, but also within various visual tropes that distill the core values of body positivity for easy circulation. *Stop Hating Your Body* hosts a diverse range of content, vetted by blog creator and editor Annie Segarra. Alongside pictorial and written

contributions from readers, Segarra also features artistic and creative content that is in keeping with the site's body positive mission.

On July 26, 2015, artwork by Abbie Bevan was uploaded to *Stop Hating Your Body*. The piece is a full-color illustration titled *All Bodies Are Beautiful* (Finally Human, 2015). It depicts a group of seven cis-gendered women of varying ethnicities, their skin tones ranging from light pink to deep brown. The bodies are of different shapes and sizes, and all languish in a different position, suspended against a burgundy background and amongst a smattering of pink hearts. Around them curve the words "All Bodies Are Beautiful." While each figure is rendered individual through distinct hairstyles, piercings and pubic hair styles, all women sport the same expression- contemplative, their eyes serenely closed. All are also completely naked.

This and other images are not proprietary to *Stop Hating Your Body*, but usefully shape and reflect common understandings of what body positive practice looks like. *Stop Hating Your Body*'s central text, the "Body Peace Revolution Oath," implores site visitors and participants to keep eight bulleted promises, including "to think positively," "not to be influenced by weight-loss ads...[or] the media..." and "to stop denying I am beautiful" (Body Peace Oath, n.d.). Its specific intersecting discourses of beauty, self-love, bravery and revolution are discussed further in Chapter 2. But just as the oath emphasizes beauty, self-acceptance and "body peace," as central ideological objectives of body positivity, Bevan's image reminds us that they are understood to be best exemplified in publicly visible flesh.

Another illustrated image, posted to *Stop Hating Your Body* on June 23, 2015, reinforces this message, while also highlighting the practice of exposing specific body

parts as body positive. Nudity, in other words, need not be holistically embraced to perform body positivity. Rather, what is framed as important is that a body (or, critically, body part) that was previously removed from view now be both identified and revealed. At its core, this indicates the *act* of exposure is ultimately as, if not more, important than the visibility of the previously-hidden body. Rendered as a black and white sketch, the piece *An Apology Letter to My Body* (i-believe-I'm-worth-it, 2015) is signed MR'13. It is a sequence of six drawings and epistolary captions depicting a young woman speaking to her various body parts, atoning for her poor treatment of them in the past. The top right hand image shows the young woman lifting her striped tee shirt to expose her soft stomach. The accompanying text reads "Dear Tummy, I'm sorry for every time I left you upset and hungry and told you I hated you. You're perfect" (i-believe-I'm-worth-it, 2015). The other five drawings and captions echo this form, as the subject speaks to her nose, thighs, shoulders, cheeks and butt, respectively.

Each image isolates the body fragment to which she is speaking, personifying each segment of her tenderly depicted flesh. The work of body positivity is tangibly modeled in this sequence. As the woman depicted interacts with each disembodied body part, she does so through a rote series of intimate gestures: the contentious body part is identified, isolated and revealed through the removal or adjustment of clothing. The flesh now publicly displayed is nurtured through a tender diatribe, certain phrases articulated repeatedly: "I'm sorry" most of the captions begin; "you're perfect," most end. The implicit message resonates across the practices enacted within digital body positive spaces: I'm sorry I've kept you hidden. I'll atone by showing you to the world, an act of

pride and praise. This gesture, deeply reminiscent of the classic makeover “reveal,” is here coded as body positive work, reframed as a crucial act of self-love.

Participant images across several sites express this conversational exchange between body (and body-fragments) and self. Pushing the narrative captured in *An Apology Letter...* a step further, these images layer semiotic meaning through text that is often written or tattooed directly onto the flesh in question. An image posted to *Stop Hating Your Body* on March 29, 2015 shows only the bare side of a white torso, a gray sweater lifted up and pair of jeans pushed down. A tattoo of the word “beautiful” in black ink grazes the ribcage, the first letter replaced by a symbol for NEDA, the National Eating Disorder Association (yesterday I got..., 2015). Some images in this body positive genre are more lighthearted: an image posted to the site on March 20, 2015 is a close-up photograph of a belly fully visible under a lace bra. Tattooed at its center is a strawberry frosted donut, underlined by the “Live Fat. Die Yum” (archedeyebrow, 2015).

There is undoubtedly an intimacy captured in all these pictures, and it is easy to see them as a series of intimate gestures. Yet they also affirm the central role of the image of the nude or partially nude body within a digital body positive framework. This role is that of an arbiter, spreading a message of liberation. This message is sometimes explicitly spelled out, in (or on) the flesh. The body is doubly verified, through both nakedness and its pictorial record. It is, through a practice of exposure coupled with a particularized rhetorical exchange, *found*, much in the same way that, as Brenda Weber (2009) argues, “makeover as social practice does not teach individuals how to cultivate the self but how to locate it” (p.5). There is, within this performance, an act of reclamation- one image posted to *Stop Hating Your Body* on June 9, 2015 depicts a pair of bare white thighs

emblazoned with the words “this body is not yours” in bold red text (neckandcollar, 2015). And yet the body positive self continues to be defined in visual and rhetorical terms that echo existing hegemonic cultural formations.

**Seed images and origin stories as paradigmatic body positive models.** As I have shown, site guidelines, participant artwork and body positive images together instruct potential and existing participants interested in joining these communities how to do so. This content operates as an abbreviated introduction to body positivity. It captures the discourses of self-love that serve as the ideological basis of body positivity, and more significantly models how body positivity should ideally be enacted. Nudity and strategic exposure are, of course, not the only visual strategies of body positivity. But, tellingly, they correlate with another important set of images and stories foundational to the practice of digital body positivity- the seed content provided by site creators at the start.

On four of the five sites examined for this dissertation, *Stop Hating Your Body*, Lady Gaga’s *Body Revolution*, *The Body is Not an Apology* and Caitlin Stasey’s *Herself*, seed images of both celebrity and non-celebrity founders provide a direct (and lasting) model for how to enact digital body positivity. These images, always presented alongside a statement or a more detailed origin story, operate as foundational body-positive texts whose form and function are replicated by a community of participants.

*Stop Hating Your Body*’s first post, from October 12, 2010, features an image of founder Annie Segarra wearing only a white bra and pink panties, standing in a bedroom, her arms raised in fists above her head (annieelaine, 2010). She is smiling broadly, her dark hair down around her shoulders. There is large text superimposed on the top right

hand side of the image that reads “Start a Revolution, Stop Hating Your Body.” The caption below the image explains the kind of content the blog will feature through an indirect description of the image it accompanies:

Start a revolution. Stop hating your body. Just me. A shitty webcam. No photo shop. Soft tummy, big hips, and all. And no matter what a photo shop obsessed media says, no matter what society, or the modeling industry, or casting directors, or my own family/friends, or ANYONE says. I am beautiful. And so are YOU (annieelaine, 2010).

While Segarra does not share details of her personal story in this opening post (she has over the years however, regularly shared images and snippets of her life on the blog), it clearly models the visual and rhetorical strategies that have sustained *Stop Hating Your Body*. Images are intimate, perhaps taken with nothing fancier than “a shitty webcam.” They feature “no photo shop” and openly display the “soft tummy, big hips, and all” other body parts participants may be anxious, ashamed or, eventually, in love with. Segarra’s image and caption associate bodily display with beauty, and assert that the display of bodies coded as not-beautiful in mainstream media is, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, a revolutionary act. This post can be easily understood as a template for the content that has sustained and defined *Stop Hating Your Body* for the last five and a half years.

The #bodyrevolution hashtag brings up an archive of images participants have submitted to Lady Gaga’s website, *Little Monsters*. Among this content, images of the semi-nude body proliferate. Lady Gaga launched the *Body Revolution* project in September 2012 by releasing a set of four images accompanied by a statement spread across their captions. These pictures show the pop star clothed in a set of yellow lace

undergarments, and set the tone for the kinds of pictures posted (first in the *Body Revolution* section of the *Little Monsters* site, and then to the *Little Monsters* site and tagged #bodyrevolution) in the years since.

The singer's original visual and textual message of body positivity sets the stage for an alignment of bodily exposure and self-esteem. The *Little Monsters* website has been entirely redesigned since Gaga launched the *Body Revolution* campaign nearly four years ago (Garibaldi, 2012). Back then, her website contained a unique page for *Body Revolution*-related content, whereas the current version of the site organizes submitted content by hashtags. *Body Revolution* images and posts are almost entirely grouped under two main tags, #bodyrevolution and #bodyrevolution2014, indicating content added in 2014. #bodyrevolution is by far the most used hashtag used to signal *Body Revolution* content, bringing up a total of 3647 posts (by contrast, the more specific #bodyrevolution2014 tag is used on only 106 posts) (Little Monsters, n.d.). Across both tags, Gaga's yellow underwear images and their accompanying message circulate freely, although her original post from September 2012 appears to have been taken down (I used the Internet archive, *The Way Back Machine*, to locate copies of her original posts and verify their publication dates, content and formatting). Scattered across the captions of the four original images, Gaga's statement declared:

My mother and I created the BORN THIS WAY FOUNDATION for one reason: to inspire bravery. This profile is an extension of that dream. Be brave and celebrate with us your 'perceived flaws,' as society tells us. May we make our flaws famous, and thus redefine the heinous. Bulimia and anorexia since I was 15. But today I join the BODY REVOLUTION. To inspire bravery. And BREED some M\$therf\*cking COMPASSION (Rolling Stone, 2012).

She continued with a prompt for participation, encouraging her fans to contribute content to the *Body Revolution*, proclaiming that, “now that the body revolution has begun, be brave and post a photo of you that celebrates your triumph over insecurities” (Rolling Stone, 2012).

While neither Gaga’s original statement nor the minimal explanations remaining on the singer’s website (which includes only a brief “About Us” statement declaring the site a space “for us”) presents an unofficial rubric for participant submissions. Gaga’s original underwear images continue to serve as a model for many participant contributions to the *Body Revolution* project. Showing the body as close to nude as possible, revealing presumably intimate flesh, is thus positioned as an act of bravery, a celebration of self and, ultimately, a triumphantly body positive achievement.

Participants still regularly circulate these images of Lady Gaga. Notably, they also pair these images up with pictures of themselves. In an image from December 2014, a young white woman created an image featuring herself on the left next to an underwear image of Gaga on the right. She sports a set of black lingerie cut very similarly to Gaga’s yellow pair and positions her face and hands in imitation of the pop star’s pose. The image allows for an unobscured view of both the singer and her fan’s bodies. The most notable difference between both women is that the young fan is an amputee, with a decorated prosthetic attached to her right knee.

In this way, Gaga’s message and now-iconic images set the precedent for the kind of body positive content participants upload to *Little Monsters* and tag #bodyrevolution. Across #bodyrevolution content, the boundaries between fandom and body positive ideology blur. As participants contribute their images and stories, a performance of body



positivity intermingles with a performance of adulation for the musical idol. In December 2014, another poster shared a mosaic image of her mimicking each of Gaga's four poses, her own bodily contortions featured sequentially beneath the pop star's. The young white woman sports a black bra and thong, and, like Gaga, poses against a simple white wall, centering all focus on her body. Her facial expressions also echo the singer's serene, meditative look. The woman captions her image, in part:

I've been struggling with my weight for 4 years...since meeting Gaga, I feel comfortable with my own body and I haven't felt the need to restrict/binge...She has given me the courage and self-acceptance to love myself at any healthy weight. She has changed my life [sic] (I've been struggling, 2014).

In this way, Gaga's images served as an instructional model for not only visual but also discursive and affective expressions of body positivity. Her images and statement together position body positivity as a practice that involves baring the body and framing that exposure as brave and liberatory.

The origin story of *The Body is Not an Apology* is shared on the site's Mission, Vision and History page. *The Body is Not an Apology* positions itself as a comprehensive space for body positive information and resources. The strongest distinction between *The Body is Not an Apology* and most of the other sites examined here (with the exception of the password-protected *Little Monsters* site) is that the stories contributed by community participants comprise only a portion of the site's content, and are accessible only if you join the site by creating a free account. The bulk of the site's user-contributed image content centers on the concept of "Bad Picture Monday," and is located on its Instagram page, linked to throughout *The Body is Not an Apology's* website. Yet a critical element

of the site's body positive framework is that visibility is a tool for combatting what it terms "body terrorism," the systemic sexist, racist, misogynistic, ableist and heteronormalizing forces that incite "body hatred" (What is Body Terrorism?, n.d.).

*The Body is Not an Apology* promotes bodily visibility as a key resistance tactic to body terrorism by "[affirming] that there is no way our bodies can be on this planet that does not deserve to be seen, valued and loved, radically" ("Bad" Picture Monday, n.d.). While pictorial content is a minimal component of the main *The Body is Not an Apology* site, the impact of visibility and bodily exposure as political tools resonates throughout. As with Lady Gaga's *Body Revolution*, this emphasis is most acutely felt within *The Body is Not an Apology*'s origin story, shared by founder Sonya Renee Taylor. On its Mission, Vision and History page, Taylor shares this story, which revolves around the cathartic act of sharing her own partially nude image on Facebook back in 2011. This picture is arguably iconic to the history of *The Body is Not an Apology*, appearing not only here but, as discussed in Chapter 2, within a promotional video Taylor created for the site's fundraising campaign on the crowd-sourcing platform Indiegogo. It is the foundation on which the institutional history of *The Body is Not an Apology* rests, and so both reflective and productive of the digital body positive practice it encourages.

The image Taylor originally shared is a selfie of her standing before a bathroom mirror, cellphone in hand. She wears an all-black corset that highlights her shape, sporting no other accessories to distract from the contours of her form. While her face is partially obscured by her bright pink phone, her body is visible from her head to mid-thigh. Her cellphone-free hand rests on her hip.

Taylor explains the original Facebook image was accompanied by the following caption:

In this picture I am 230lbs. In this picture, I have stretch marks and an unfortunate decision in the shape of a melting Hershey's kiss on my left thigh. I am smiling, like a woman who knows you're watching and likes it. For this one camera flash, I am unashamed, unapologetic (Mission, Vision and History, n.d.).

The showing is two-fold, as Taylor's body is reflected in both the mirror and the camera's lens. Taylor explicitly asserts the linkages between making visible her non-normative body and her reclamation of a body positive subjectivity. She courts the gaze, making her body available for public consumption. In her framing of the moment for *The Body is Not an Apology*, she further explains her impetus for taking and sharing the image, writing:

I was clear that my big, brown, queer body was not supposed to be seen or sexy, but I posted it anyway. This terribly frightening act was birthed from the outlandishly simple idea that no human being should be ashamed of being in a human body (Mission, Vision and History, n.d.)

A resistance to shame through bodily showing is again positioned as a crucial part of body positive praxis. Like Gaga's assertion of bravery, overcoming the fear incited by body-terrorism becomes a moment of revolutionary, body positive self-making. Like the pop star, who noted that her "boyfriend prefers [me] curvier" (Your Bravery, 2012), Taylor implicates her own sexuality within this body positive act. Making the body visible within a body positive framework is a gesture that acknowledges and validates that body's sexiness and sexuality. A rhetoric of beauty, so pervasive within body positive ideology, is implied in this exchange, as these digitized narratives are ensconced within a Western culture that fosters, as Foucault theorized, a (fallacious) expectation of

silence and occlusion around sexuality. Modeling the links between practice and subjectivity, *The Body is Not an Apology*'s origin story is presented as a cohesive body positive narrative, with the body-image at its center. This image functions as the device through which Taylor takes back ownership of her body, publicly recalibrating her relationship to internal and external forces of oppression.

The *Herself* project does solicit participant image submissions, but instead takes applications for individuals (28 cis-gendered women and 1 trans woman, as of December 2015) interested in being shot by one of the seven participating photographers. While the site's About page (n.d.) identifies Caitlin Stasey, Hannah Terry-Whyte, and Keenan MacWilliam as the creators of the project, it is unclear who makes editorial decisions, specifically the matching of photographers to subjects. However, all of the 28 women profiled on the site are photographed nude. Each individual is portrayed in a series of six photographs accompanied by an in-depth interview. Images of each woman are unique, set in a range of indoor and outdoor locations and reflecting various different aesthetic approaches. Some images cradle the body in soft, naturalistic lighting; others nod to vintage photography through the use of warm sepia tones. Still others turn to the sharpness of black and white monochrome. Some participants appear in what are clearly explicitly staged shots utilizing props such as snakes and flowers. However, all images depict subjects fully nude, and most, though not all, openly display breasts and genitalia.

Nearly half of these photo shoots are conducted outdoors. One woman triumphantly stands on a boulder, arching her back and grounding her legs in a wide, firm stance. Another is pictured with her face gently lifted towards the sunlight, the wide open

sky behind her. Yet another lays in a bed of grass, her pale body cradled by pink petals (Toole, 2015b).

In an image that emphasizes, to a Biblical degree, the particular relationship between nudity, empowerment, naturalism and authenticity *Herself* stresses, a young woman is photographed on a balcony, the steely blue sky behind her in sharp relief against an urban skyline (Toole, 2015c). She is pictured topless and shot from the waist up, staring boldly into the camera. In her arms she cradles a snake that curls around her crooks and crevices, from her elbow, across her chest, and up to her neck.

As we have seen, nudity is a key part of how *Herself* depicts its participants' sense of self and of their bodies. While the site does not articulate nudity as a critical component of its aesthetic or political orientation, its Participate page includes a telling statement from Stasey, where she explains that:

*Herself* is a gesture to women for women by women; a chance to witness the female form in all its honesty without the burden of the male gaze, without the burden of appealing to anyone. These women are simply & courageously existing, immortalized within these photos. Within their words, their experiences and stories are offered on *Herself* in the hopes of encouraging solidarity – that maybe we as women will take comfort in the triumphs of others rather than reveling in each other's defeats. Let us reclaim our bodies. Let us take them back from those who seek to profit from our insecurity (Participate, n.d.).

As *Herself*'s images consistently frame nudity within naturalistic settings and spaces, it is not a stretch to read an equivalence between the nude body and the “female form in all its honesty.” The body, stripped and bared to the world, becomes the ultimate gesture of authentic self-reclamation.

Notably, this is a nude body whose stylings are positioned in contrast to what Stasey characterizes as an aesthetic of the male gaze. In a post she wrote for feminist pop culture website *Jezebel* on July 20, 2015, Stasey details an exchange between herself and Ben Naparstek, senior editor of the Australian magazine *The Good Weekend*. Naparstek wanted to accompany an interview with Stasey with a nude photo shoot to which she did not consent. Subsequently, the magazine decided to run only a limited version of the interview, and much later than originally planned. Stasey aired the email exchange between her team and the magazine due to her frustration with the publication's expectation of nudity. Importantly, she asserts the need for personal agency within any representation of the nude female body- in a media landscape saturated with such images, she argues, destabilizing the male gaze requires giving the women depicted the final say in the making of their own images. This argument is in keeping with how a body positive ideology frames the nude body. However, Stasey also notably calls out an aesthetic that includes "ladies in panties, big hair, big makeup" (Stasey 2015) as inherently complicit in the objectification of female bodies. Visually, this look is the distinct opposite of *Herself's* predominantly soft, naturalistic aesthetic. It is also, according to Stasey, "pretty contradictory to the message of empowerment and bodily ownership I was advocating" (Stasey 2015). It follows then, that "empowerment and bodily ownership" are not abstractions, or even particularly malleable- here they, and the notion of "authenticity" they inevitably call to, are instead aligned with a specific aesthetic of muted colors, dappled sun-light, and a soft-focus lens.

An interview and photo series of Stasey are the first content to have been published on *Herself's* site (Toole, 2015a). The images were shot by photographer

Jennifer Toole, who produced at least a third of the content currently visible on *Herself*. The series, like the images featured across the site, is shot half in color and half in black and white. The images are united by a stark, clean aesthetic. While the minimalist approach assures the focus is on Stasey, she is not captured in sharp contrast, but rather depicted in soft, shadowy, even warm lighting. Though it would appear that the shoot took place indoors, like many of the other photographs produced for *Herself* there is an aesthetic emphasis on the “natural”- even within four walls, Stasey basks in an almost sunlit glow. Notably, the images strike a precarious balance between a clinical and naturalistic gaze.

The cover image, through which site visitors click into the interview, is a close-up of Stasey’s face in profile, her eyes gazing softly upwards. In the images that accompany the interview, we see fragments of Stasey’s completely nude body. The second image shows Stasey in profile, her head tilted towards the camera. Her nude body is visible through mid-thigh. The image that follows is perhaps the starkest in the series, as she faces away from the camera and towards a completely white wall (Toole, 2015a). We can imagine this body in the context of the medical gaze, another body positive trope that will be explored in detail in Chapter 3. It is an acutely unsentimental presentation, at once intimate and clinically detached. The remaining two images emphasize the dichotomy captured across the photoshoot. In one, Stasey leans against the wall, her nude body visible almost in its entirety. In the other, we see an extension of the image of her head in profile, her body fragmented above the waist.

Stasey’s seed images and statement implicate a longstanding feminist dialog around heteronormativity and the appropriation of the female body by a masculine gaze.

*Herself* commits to playing with the boundaries between pornographic nudity and nudity-as-body-positivity somewhat simplistically laid out in the *My Body Gallery* Submission Guidelines discussed earlier. Her introductory words echo John Berger's (1972) distinctions between the naked and the nude body: while the naked body simply is ("simply and courageously"), the implicitly female nude body has been transformed by the act of looking into an object. "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (Berger, 1972, p. 39). Nakedness is a state of embodiment, while nudity is one of representation, and it would seem that the two states can never be reached concurrently.

Within systemic patriarchy, the male gaze, as Mulvey (1975) famously argued, objectifies and takes ownership of the female body. Mulvey (2010) later nuanced her arguments on gendered looking, considering how the position of spectator can be occupied by not only men but women too. Yet her initial call is an important one that is still to be heeded. We must look to new forms of representing the world to disrupt a mechanics of showing that continually replicates a subject-object dynamic between the viewer and the viewed. This is not to say that *Herself's* participants are objectified, but rather that the professed reclamation of their bodies through the act of participating in this implicitly body positive space is coded with an arguably tired set of postfeminist expectations: beauty and empowerment are positioned as central goals channeled through a rhetoric of authenticity that is tied to a naturalized visuality of bodily exposure.

### **Authentic(ated) body positivity- the visible body as "real" body.**

In a world full of images of how we 'should' look it can get difficult to tell how we DO look. Our hope is to build a site where women can see what real women look like. What we really look like. Most women have spent so many years



looking at themselves in the mirror that we can no longer see what's really there. The *My Body Gallery* project's goal is to help women objectively see what we look like and come to some acceptance that we are all beautiful (About Us, n.d.).

The above paragraph is the sole informational text available to anyone interested in finding out about the *My Body Gallery* project. It appears on the site's About Us page, and is repeated, with only minimal rewording, on *My Body Gallery*'s partner site, *My Body Gallery-Men*. It outlines, with striking clarity, the aims of not only this archival project, but also much of digital body positivity: to face, through the mechanics of digital photography, the "reality" of our bodies in order that we might grow to love them. A statement appearing on the left sidebar of each page *Stop Hating Your Body* drives this message home, explaining, "with this blog, you will see all kinds of REAL people, REAL bodies, REAL stories" (emphasis theirs) (Stop Hating Your Body, n.d.).

These statements reflect the logic that sustains the ideology behind digital body positivity. It maintains that is a verifiable, stable state of embodiment, and points to the underlying presumption of body positivity- that our bodies are authentic because they can be authenticated, that our bodies are real not only in contrast to the idealized, manipulated (by extreme dieting and photo-editing technologies alike) bodies mainstream media offers us, but as an ontological point-of-fact. On *Stop Hating Your Body*, a post detailing the site's position on "Unachievable PhotoShopped Beauty" stresses the multiple, embedded meanings within the notion of "real bodies." This page is presented as a resource for *Stop Hating Your Body* participants, one that "that might help [them]...learn some truth" (Submit, 2014). Beneath an embedded video from Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign, the page's text reads:

Women starve themselves, get plastic surgery, botox, take harmful diet pills, acne pills, hair treatments, all to look like the images they idolize. Ladies, you are trying to become an image that doesn't even exist. You are beautiful just as you are.

The “real body” here signals a body that has not been intervened with in a manner that conforms to the mainstream beauty culture that Bordo (1995) and others first called out decades ago. In other words, it is the equivalent to an imagined “natural” body. It is not a body subjected to outwardly violent means of regulation like starvation or elective surgical modification<sup>3</sup>. Such a body is not only rendered “un-real,” but written out of existence, out of a body positive ontology altogether. The real body, in turn, is romantically stripped from these cycles of physical labor, relegated to a pastoral realm reminiscent of the natural oases captured in some of *Herself's* most quixotic photographs. The real body, when properly located through a body positive process, functions as the ultimate escape from beauty culture's oppressive circuitry.

This fixation on authenticity- and the presumption of an accessible authentic body- is a trope found within the makeover show formula that has carried over into contemporary digital cultures through the discourse and practice of the selfie. Makeover programs traditionally situate the subjects fashion sense or, in programs that more explicitly focused on weight loss and body modification, weight as the problem in need of intervention and resolution. Folded into this formula however, is a rhetoric of empowerment that aligns the adjustments made to external appearance with resolution to internal problems of “self-esteem” (Weber, 2009; Marwick, 2010). This approach doesn't

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<sup>3</sup> Various *Herself* participants bear the scars of necessary medical interventions like mastectomies

just understand bodily changes as transferring seamlessly to the interior self, but presents the self as holistic entity and singular commodity, “reflecting a cultural shift from the notion of having a product to *being* a product as a route to personal fulfillment” (Morreale, 2007). The subject’s body, their internal sense of self, and more importantly the relationship between the two, is positioned as the site of neoliberal intervention and improvement.

A discourse of authenticity becomes crucial to this construction of the unified self as a commodity. Successful alignment of the internal and external self- the expected and consistently delivered result of the makeover process- is framed as the discovery of the “real you,” the authentic self that was there all along, merely waiting to be found (Sender, 2006). A typical example of this discourse comes in the program *How to Look Good Naked*. Originally airing on BBC 4 between 2006-2010 (How to Look Good Naked, n.d.) and hosted by stylist Gok Wan, an American spinoff of the same name was broadcast on Lifetime (back then still branded as “television for women”) for two seasons between 2008-2010. The American version was hosted by Carson Kressley, a stylist made famous on the hugely popular makeover program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The formula proved so popular, Swedish, French, Israeli and Italian versions of the program were also developed (How to Look Good Naked, n.d.). The premise of each version of *How to Look Good Naked* is identical, and strips the makeover program down to its essence. The- always female- subjects to be made over are not selected for their poor sartorial choices, but instead for their poor body image. The show’s premise is clearly explained in the description of the British version circulated by the network it aired on, Channel 4:

[*How to Look Good Naked* is] the series that aims to debunk the body-fascist myths of perfection perpetrated by the fashion, beauty and advertising industries. Each show follows one woman who is dissatisfied with her body shape, as stylist Gok Wan shows her how to make the most of what she's got (*How to Look Good Naked: About the Show*, n.d.).

This language closely mirrors the stated objectives of body positive sites like *Stop Hating Your Body* and *The Body is Not an Apology*: not only is “body terrorism” equitable to “body-fascism,” but a body positivity-like challenge to the “unachievable” bodies portrayed across mainstream media was a central part of the premise of *How to Look Good Naked*. The show emphasizes a makeover process that hinges on a recuperation of the authentic body, “saved” from a fate of surgical intervention through the power of self-love. It is perhaps the most distilled iteration of the makeover’s paean to self-improvement, as the object of intervention is the “self” at its purest. As Wok’s opening monologue in the first episode plainly lays out:

Do you avoid getting naked in front of the mirror? Do you get dressed in the dark? Don’t despair and don’t you dare go under the knife, because I’m here to show you how to look good with your clothes on and off (Series 1, Episode 1, 2006).

On *How to Look Good Naked*, the process by which subjects “make the most of what [they’ve] got” is also paralleled in the digital practice of body positivity. The mechanism through which the authentic self is accessed is exposure. Public exposure has, of course, always been a critical part of the classic makeover formula, which culminates in a “big reveal” typically performed in front of an audience of family, friends, experts and, of course, viewers. But on *How to Look Good Naked*, the process of exposure is dually public and private, as the act of participants looking at themselves undressed in the

mirror launches the transformation. They are captured on camera looking at themselves (and, interestingly, the camera capturing them is also captured, in the beginning of an infinite and infinitely networked regression of looking), often for the first time in a long time.

Mirror work has long played a part in the treatment of eating disorders and related “body image concerns” (Stewart & Williamson, 2003). As a practice of structured looking, mirror work involves the fragmentation of the body into parts following a “hierarchy...of body areas [ranked] from most disturbing to least disturbing” (Stewart & Williamson, 2003) and the systematic exposure of these parts before the mirror. Crucially, it relies on a logic that positions the mirror as the device through which a true, unaltered, authentic reflection of the body is delivered. In turn, the *participant* is positioned as having distorted and misjudged their body. The body is established as the fixed and definitive signifier of the self, just waiting to be properly recognized.

Faith in the mirror and camera’s capacity to stabilize embodiment is seamlessly echoed in body positive images and site guidelines. On *Stop Hating Your Body*’s FAQ page, “mirror work” is positioned as a powerful body positive tool that allows you to:

‘learn some truths’ about both deceptive media images of idealized bodies, and the reality of your own flesh. Self-love and resistance can come through “mirror work- practicing every day, telling yourself, reminding yourself that you are beautiful. Let this thought fill you up! (FAQ, n.d.).

The mirror’s power in body positivity is solidified in the selfie. The digital body positive archive, even as a heterogeneous rhizomatic network of disparate elements, is almost entirely composed of selfies, if we define the selfie merely as a contemporary self-

portrait. As genre, the mirror selfie is perhaps “the most distinct subset” of the selfie universe (Saltz, 2014), and it is one that appears again and again across the sites I examined. The mirror selfie is in some sense, exactly what it seems- a self-portrait in which the subject is “usually standing alone, frontally and facing a mirror, holding a camera at their midsection” or covering their face. (Murray, 2015, p. 496). It is perhaps the most conventional form of contemporary self-portraiture because of its apparent ease and accessibility. The formula is simple and effective: mirror, camera, body. Point and shoot. Offer yourself to the triple gaze of the mirror, the camera and the spectator. As Anita Harris explains, the selfie models a “new understanding that young women ought to make their private selves and ‘authentic voices’ highly visible in public” (Harris, 2013, p. 119). A body positive ideology frames the democratization of these forms of exposure as liberatory, and positions the fight for inclusivity in the act of showing oneself as a radical move. Arguably, this inclusivity can also and more cautiously be read as a mere expansion of who is allowed to declare their compliance to a status quo where power is channeled through the voluntary offering-up of the visible, identifiable and accountable self.

If we read the mirror as the ultimate arbiter of an accessible, stable bodily truth, the mirror selfie comes to stand in as the perfect body-positive object, and the tool through which its path to self-love through exposure and visibility is best undertaken. The power of the mirror to presumably understand the body better than it understands itself is doubly reflected as it meets the camera’s “objective” eye. In Chapter 3, the formal qualities of the digital body positive archive and its attendant assumptions about the ability of the camera to do the work of objectivity are chronicled and historicized. In that

chapter, I build on what I have laid out in this chapter to argue that, in fact, the significance of the selfie to the body positive archive problematically reifies traditional understandings of both the stable, institutionally verifiable body, and a photographic objectivity that elides the digital in favor of analog imaginings. Body positivity as ideology and practice still rests on a foundation of what J. Sage Elwell astutely called the “transmediated self”:

not the exclusively online identity of Facebook or the identity construct compiled by data mining companies.... nor the tangibly embodied identity of the analog world [but] the identity experience emerging from the feedback loop between the digital and the analog whereby one domain informs the other in an ongoing dialectic of existential equivalence (2013, p. 11).

As I will address in Chapter 4, a radical body positive should, in turn, reconceptualize the selfie from a representational object to, as Rubenstein (2015) and Senft (2015) have argued, a process, a communicative act that is as, if not more, important for how it moves- in terms of both networks and affects- than for what it is. I would argue that this shift should involve a more expansive vision of what the formal qualities of body positive imagery are. But in tandem with these imaginings should come a critical look at how historical conceptualizations of the image, the camera and the work both do in the name of authenticity and objectivity inform- and limit- body positivity as a radical endeavor. This transformation intentionally queers our understanding of the body as a holistic entity with which we must reconcile, seeing it instead as shifting, sometimes chaotic, perpetually inchoate, perhaps productive, or perhaps irreconcilable altogether.

## Chapter 2

### A Beautiful Revolution of Self-Love: Narrative Practices of Body Positivity

In August 2014, Sonya Renee Taylor launched a petition on the crowdfunding website *Indiegogo* to fund her project *The Body is Not an Apology*. Taylor, a “internationally acclaimed poet and activist” (Taylor, 2014) who self-identifies as “big, black and queer” (Mission, Vision and History, 2015) had actually begun *The Body is Not an Apology* on February 9, 2011. The site’s origin story identifies the moment of its inception as when Taylor posted a bathroom mirror selfie in a black corset, on the Facebook. The image, Taylor explains on both *The Body is Not an Apology*’s Mission, Vision and History page and the *Indiegogo* call, struck a chord with other users of the social media platform for its daring affront to a narrow set of Western beauty norms that excludes any body that is not white, slim, young and able. “I was clear that my big, brown, queer body was not supposed to be seen or sexy, but I posted it anyway” Taylor writes (Mission, Vision & History, 2015). From, “this terribly frightening act” she continues, “a movement was born...[as] people across the country began posting their own pictures and stories...of empowered, perfectly imperfect bodies” (Mission Vision & History, 2015).

Three and a half years later, Taylor turned to *Indiegogo*’s platform in attempts to acquire the resources to grow “the world’s most #1 online resource for radical self-love...and body empowerment” (Taylor, 2014). As a crowdfunding website, *Indiegogo* provides a platform on which individuals or communities can digitally pitch projects that need funds to willing donors. The site connects project creators to an “audience” of



potential, largely individual, donors. While the site provides simple templates for campaigns (and as of 2016, “coming soon” pages for immanent projects that haven’t officially been launched), it largely functions as an intermediary in a digital marketplace where choice is king. On it, and other similar sites like *GoFundMe* and *Kickstarter*, those looking for funding can “tell [their] story [their] way” (How it Works, n.d.) in the hopes of soliciting donations as small as \$1. What a crowdfunding model provides, on the level of practice, is the chance for projects to gain funds through multiple small donations, instead of relying on large sums from a few powerful donors. On the level of ideology, a crowdfunding model epitomizes a neoliberal ethos built on individual choice and individual responsibility. As I will argue in this chapter, the messages espoused within digital body positive spaces, despite their stated unification against “diet culture,” fall comfortably within a normative framework of neoliberal governmentality that shifts the practice and responsibility of government from institutions to “individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfillment” (Rose, 1996, p. 41).

The initial call to fund *The Body is Not an Apology* site was for \$80,000, which was to be largely allocated towards moving the community off of Facebook and building “the world’s most comprehensive online information, education, and community-building platform focused exclusively on radical self-love as a tool for personal transformation and global justice” as well as paying “our dedicated staff of volunteers who work tirelessly to develop uplifting content, share thought-provoking writing, and keep our movement accessible to all (\$32,000) [and covering] the fees of Indiegogo and perk fulfillment (\$8,000)” (Taylor, 2014).

Over its two-month run, the campaign managed to raise slightly over half of the requested amount, totaling \$43,579, but its ethos and tagline powerfully capture the narratives of self-love, empowerment, revolution, and, perhaps most importantly, “responsibilization” (Guthman, 2009, p. 193) that undergird digital body positivity. At the top of *The Body is Not an Apology*’s brightly colored *Indiegogo* project page, the tagline “WhenWeSayYES We Can Build the World’s Most Powerful Radical Self-Love Website” dominates in large bold font. The theme of “saying yes,” functions as the central rhetorical mechanism of Taylor’s pitch for crowdfunded support of *The Body is Not an Apology*. Appearing nearly 30 times within the text of the project page, it is not only a directive to donate- towards the end of the campaign video featured prominently at the top of the page, Taylor gently prods, “I want you to take a look at the perks on the side of the page and say 'yes' to the one that feels right to you”- but to enter into a practice of body positivity. Body positivity, in turn, seamlessly becomes an all-encompassing approach to Rose’s (1996) neoliberal “self-actualization.” By donating to *The Body is Not an Apology*, you are “saying YES” not only to building a digital body positive resource and community, but as the brief talking-head interviews that end the video attest, to “love and compassion,” “care of my body,” “creativity,” and “life” itself. “When I said 'yes' to love and compassion, I let life be my teacher,” says one woman. “When I said 'yes' to take care of my body, I stopped smoking,” says a man. A couple proclaims, “when we said ‘yes’ to love, we were reunited.” Ending the sequence, another woman says “I said ‘yes’ to myself, to experience life” (Taylor, 2014).

In this chapter, I examine textual narratives of body positivity by analyzing the stories, interviews, blog posts and image captions contributed by participants to the five

body positive web spaces researched for this dissertation. These narratives largely come from three sites, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *Herself*, and *My Body Gallery*. As user-contributed narratives on *Body Revolution* and *The Body is Not an Apology* are password protected, I examined but decided not to include this content here, as the text could ostensibly be traced back to participants who had a reasonable expectation of privacy when sharing their stories. From these sites, I include narrative guidelines and, as in Chapter 1, excerpts from the origin stories that help shape current and potential participant ideas about body positivity as concept and practice. As with the images I examined on *Stop Hating Your Body*, narratives were culled from entries posted over the 6 months between February and July 2015. As *Herself* had only 28 interviews posted between its launch in January 2015 and July 2015, I reviewed them all. *My Body Gallery* separates its image content from its narrative content, and aggregates all its user-contributed “stories” in one section that is shared between the original *My Body Gallery* and *My Body Gallery Men* sites. As of October 2015, there were 346 total stories posted over 6 years. For this chapter I examined the 50 most recent of these entries, published between Feb 14, 2014 and Oct 7, 2015.

These body positive narratives, some brief captions, others stories elaborated over several paragraphs in a blog post and still others captured in extensive interview text totaling nearly 3,000 words, fell into four distinct but interrelated thematic categories: “responsibilization,” self-love, empowerment, and revolution. “Responsibilization,” while in some sense a broad category, was the most pervasive theme across the content I examined. Within this category fall messages calling for personal change, to improve and most importantly invest- time, labor, attention and sometimes money- in oneself. While

the self is construed as a project requiring intervention, the critical body positive node is that it is not the *bodily* self that needs to change, as “diet culture” and mainstream Western media messages posit, but the relationship between a nebulously identified interior self and a maligned body that requires recalibration.

The category of “self-love” refers to content that carries a message of love and care towards the self, often specifically towards the embodied self. This content is frequently romantic in nature, applying themes of intimacy, adulation and courtship to the relationship between oneself and one’s body. It operates in direct response to the call for “responsibilization,” as body positivity as an ideal state is framed as a loving relationship between the self (the lover) and the body (the beloved).

“Empowerment” refers to content with a message that emboldens one to act through language of strength and decisiveness, positioned acutely against (largely psychological and emotional) weakness. Empowering body positive messages situate negative self-image as an obstacle to be overcome. As a theme, it is closely related to, but augmented in, narratives of “revolution” that turn more literally to metaphors of battle, war and revolutionary social movements to articulate body positivity as not only a cause, but also a triumph.

These categories are not intended to be exhaustive, and across five diverse sites many idiosyncratic experiences were captured that did not comfortably fit within these boundaries. But an overwhelming amount of entries did, and together they tell a story of how body positivity is conceptualized and actualized as an ideological practice. Body positivity broadly defines its aim as obtaining visibility for a greater diversity of bodies than appear in mainstream Western media. But as this project shows, the call to visibility

is largely individualized, and its visual expression frequently mirrors the very gendered, raced and ableist tropes it attempts to push past. In the case of body positive narratives, their most prominent themes also operate comfortably within, rather than challenge, normative frameworks of individual responsibility and individual labor that not only require “the self” to be understood as a site of constant work, but also construe *not* undertaking this work as a sort of failure. “If success is solely the result of one’s own efforts,” write Micki McGee in her analysis of contemporary self-help narratives, *Self-Help Inc: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005), “then the responsibility for any failure must necessarily be individual shortcomings or weaknesses” (p. 13).

The message, resoundingly, is that body positivity is yours to claim, and claim it you should. *The Body is Not an Apology*’s fundraising call moves beyond the confines of the relationship between body and self to link the act of “saying yes” to career goals, physical health, relationships and life itself. However, the underlying philosophy is one of personal responsibility, of, as Sheryl Sandberg (2013) put it in her wildly popular proposal to mitigate gender disparity in corporate America through women-to-women mentorship, “leaning in.” While it may be tempting to presume that these discourses undergird the *Indiegogo* call only because it is explicitly a fundraising endeavor, this chapter will show that “saying yes” to what can be summated as a practice of revolutionary, empowered, self-love in fact reflect the core values of digital body positivity.

The application of an ethos of responsibility to the inner self, and the framing of self-actualization as not only a worthy endeavor but also a highly individual project, reflect and extend Foucault’s arguments on the docile body as the site through which

biopolitics as a tool of governmentality is exercised. Foucault situated biopolitics as population management through the systematized gathering of “data,” the interpretation of which shaped the very boundaries of the citizen-subject through enacting normative standards. These institutionally sanctioned standards not only framed social, cultural and political understandings of health, sanity, criminality and sexuality, but crucially shifted the responsibility of “keeping up” onto the individual. This mode of governmentality through self-governance created molds to which the docile body was expected to conform, normalizing these expectations through the auspices of the institutions that provided healthcare, educational and protective services. Scholars, most prominently Nikolas Rose (1996), have linked Foucault’s theories of governmentality to the current ideology of neoliberalism, wherein a market logic is applied to the practice of daily life. To put it simply, when the citizen is reframed as consumer, individual choice becomes both the bottom line and the rubric against which freedom and subjectivity are measured. The ability to choose, in turn, begets the ability to choose *wrongly*, and it is your personal responsibility not to do so.

This idea has been examined in the context of contemporary “female” culture, and specifically dominant cultural ideologies of dieting, by feminist media scholars like Susan Bordo (1989). Bordo, whose cultural observations from a quarter century still hold true, understands pervasive messages emphasizing the importance of thinness – reframed in a contemporary context from the diet to the perhaps even more insidious achievement of “health”- as emblematic of a culture she considers bulimic. For Bordo, these messages, like the eating disorder characterized by alternating phases of bingeing and purging, force subjects to oscillate between two extremes in eating and life: a lauded state of disciplined

self-control, and an uninhibited desire for more conditioned by a glutted marketplace. The “hunger for unrestrained consumption...[exists] in unstable tension alongside the requirement that we sober up...[and] get back in firm control Monday morning (1989, p. 201).

While Bordo’s (1989) characterization of anorexia as “the extreme development of the capacity for self-denial” (p. 201) and in particular obesity as “an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire” (p. 201) are problematically reductive, her identification of a central tension in contemporary gendered consumer culture and its relationship to the body is apt. She points to what is now a billion-dollar industry (ABC News Staff, 2012) invested in making weight loss look not just possible, but effortless. Today, companies regularly adopt what Rosalind Gill defines as a “postfeminist” message when marketing to women. “Realness” and “authenticity” are fetishized, and synonymous with what Gill (2007) argues is a hollowed-out feminism built on consumer-oriented “girl power.” In this climate, messages of easy weight loss are notably reframed as a healthful investment in your body, from “clean eating” trends like the popular “Whole 30” diet, focused on eating solely unprocessed food, to reality star turned lifestyle blogger Lauren Conrad’s highly publicized vow to stop using the term “skinny” on her site in favor of the term “healthy.” But the underlying message is the same. Your body needs work, and accomplishing this task is possible with a range of purchasable tools at your disposal.

There is more nuance to body positive messages heralding self-love as an achievable state, and body positivity frames itself as a radical venture by virtue of its resistance to cultural messages allying thinness and beauty. But when understanding those mainstream messages as a reflection of an allegiance between control and worth,

reading body positivity as a wholly radical philosophy and practice becomes somewhat more problematic. The object of intervention is no longer the “unhealthy” body of diet culture or the beautified body of makeover culture (Sender, 2006; Weber, 2009), but instead the emotional orientation *towards* that body and all are united by the call to constant, often meticulous, always difficult labor. What is ultimately missing is a larger institutional critique or politicized intervention *beyond* a framework of individual responsibility. In this way, body positive texts often galvanize what Berlant (2008) has called “cultures of sentimentality,” eliding more direct forms of political engagement in favor of its constituents “acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough” (p.12).

### **Body Positive Practice in a Neoliberal Time**

In his analysis of late antiquity, Foucault (1988) framed quotidian practices, particularly written reflections attending to the state of the body and soul as “technologies of the self”. These acts, whose trace he reads into early Christian monastic traditions, were intended to “effect by their own means...a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). The work of cultivating the self slips readily into the work of disciplining the self, either through rigorous intervention into one’s body or, in the case of body positivity, one’s relationship to one’s body. Self-actualization within the context of contemporary neoliberalism is predicated on a market-based ideology that frames these acts as best facilitated through a purchasable range of goods and services.



Critically, this structural shift is presented as freeing, as “the benefits of choice (especially consumer choice) and individual fulfillment” (Sender, 2006, p. 135) are pitted against a “dependency on and obligation to the state” (Sender, 2006, p. 135).

While participating in all the sites examined for this dissertation is free, these grassroots projects are all entangled, to varying degrees, with a consumer culture predicated upon an ethos of personal choice. In the aforementioned *Indiegogo* campaign for *The Body is Not an Apology*'s website, Taylor announces the project has been endorsed in the press by mainstream media outlets like *The Today Show*, *The Huffington Post*, and most interestingly, the magazine *Shape* (Taylor, 2014), who's website includes sections dedicated to not only fitness, but “weight loss,” and who's Google tagline indicates it is a publication focused on “diet, fitness and beauty.”

*My Body Gallery*, a project initially conceptualized as a coffee table book (Orsini, 2012), today has a small online store, accessible from every page via the site's top navigation. It sells items ranging from tee shirts to stickers to water bottles, emblazoned with slogans like “Start a Revolution, Love your Body” and “I Decided to be Happy Because it's Good for my Health,” ranging from \$3.99 to \$29.99 (Store, n.d.). The site is also riddled with click-through and pop-up ads. On *The Body is Not an Apology*, in a dedicated “Shop” section, also consistently accessible via a link on the top navigation, anyone can purchase various webinars such as “10 Tools on Radical Self Love” for \$4.99, or the more expansive “Raising Your Ruhcus: Getting Free from Body Shame Webinar” for \$34.99 (RUHCUS stands for Radical Unapologetic Health Challenge 4 Us). “10 Tools intensive e-course” is priced at \$199, but the most expensive products on the site are a series of courses that build on each other and ultimately lead toward

certification to run your own workshops under the RUHCUS banner. The comprehensive package, priced at \$1,995 is titled “Radical Community Cohort + Radical Possibility Fellow”. It is described, in part, as a:

Unique training program [that] guides you through development and completion of two of your own RUHCUS projects and an eight-week RUHCUS and The Body is Not an Apology Radical Possibility training course. Upon completion of this 24-week engagement, individuals will be certified to conduct Radical Community Cohorts and eligible to serve as a Radical Community Cohort Leader consultant with The Body is Not An Apology. (RUHCUS, 2015)

The seemingly high cost of this training program is predicated upon another factor in a neoliberal body positivity- the visibility these online projects lend to the public figures that are often at their helm. Sonya Renee Taylor, founder of *The Body is Not an Apology*, publicly speaks on a body positive platform. In the *Indiegogo* campaign, she is described as a:

National and International poetry slam champion, author and educator who has mesmerized audiences across the US, New Zealand, Australia, England, Scotland, Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands as well as in prisons, mental health treatment facilities, homeless shelters, universities, festivals and public schools across the globe (Taylor, 2014).

The launch of Lady Gaga’s *Body Revolution*, which in its original iteration was a section of her larger, official website, was covered in outlets like *Rolling Stone* (2012) and MTV (Garibaldi, 2012). Caitlin Stasey is currently working as a supporting actress (billed 7<sup>th</sup> on a cast list from IMDB) on the CW program *Reign*, whose third season premiere in October 2015 drew less than 1 million viewers (Mitovich, 2015). But the launch of *Herself* in January 2015 was covered by *Gawker* media subsidiary *Jezebel*,

which has since invited Stasey back both for an exclusive interview (Davies, 2015) and as a guest blogger (Stasey, 2015). The launch of *Herself* was also covered in *Time*, *The Telegraph*, *E! Online* and *The Daily Beast* among others.

In their article addressing the increasingly visible and powerful intersection of digital activism and “girl culture”- focused on and produced by young women- Koffman Orgad and Gill (2015) coined the term “selfie humanitarianism” to describe a contemporary phenomenon “in which helping others is intimately connected to entrepreneurial projects of the self, and is increasingly figured less in terms of redistribution of justice than in terms of a makeover of subjectivity for all concerned (p. 157). This is a useful term to conceptualize the neoliberal work done by and through digital body positive initiatives, especially those crafted around a celebrity or public persona. The discourses fomented in these spaces can be problematically reduced to what Koffman, Orgad and Gill (2015) frame as a narrative of “I matter and so does she” (p. 157), one that collapses critical differences in power and status, even in the name of an intersectional feminism that purports to be inclusive across racial, gender, sexuality, class and other lines. This works to depoliticize practices made in the name of social justice, as visibility becomes a privileged metric for the already nebulous concepts of “impact” and “change.” Put another way, body positivity might be said to “work” because it is increasingly in the public eye, but the most tangible measure of its success has thus far been the visibility obtained for its celebrity proponents, and the insight gained by brands like Dove into the appeal of using relatively more diverse, “real” people in their advertisements (Persis Murray, 2013).

This is not to dismiss the sense of community and support provided by these digital spaces, which I acknowledge further in this dissertation's final chapter. But if the movement is not undergirded by tangible social and institutional demands, body positivity remains, ideologically and tactically, in service of a status quo that asserts we are (solely) responsible for fixing our own problems.

### **“I Dedicated Myself to Be the Best Self I Could Be...”**

On April 2, 2015, a quote from American musician Beth Ditto was posted to the blog *Stop Hating Your Body*. Presented simply in white text on a gray background, the entire post is dedicated to Ditto's quote, pulled from a longer interview published in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in 2012. Ditto is not only a successful musician but also established in the world of fashion and beauty, having collaborated with cosmetics giant MAC “on a limited edition collection” of makeup (Clark, 2012). In the interview, she is outspoken about her music, her feminism, her queerness and her “larger” body.

Reflecting on her “point blank refusal to be inhibited” (Clark, 2012), Ditto asserts:

I have no control over what people think of me, but I have 100% control of what I think of myself and that is so important. And not just about your body, but so many ways of confidence. You're constantly learning how to be confident, aren't you? You're constantly reprogramming yourself. *[sic]* (shakethecobwebs, 2015)

Ditto's words exemplify an ethos captured across a diversity of social media spaces dedicated to body positivity. Notably, she channels her personal agency *not* towards challenging the individuals or institutional forces over which marginalized bodies have “no control,” but towards controlling “what [she] thinks of [herself].” This

turn inwards is framed as constant, perhaps vigilant labor, an ongoing process of “learning how to be confident” through an active “reprogramming” of the narrow messages about beauty, identity and worth one has internalized after years of exposure.

The quote resonated with *Stop Hating Your Body* readers, showing 3,868 notes (indicating how many times it was reblogged, or, in essence, “liked” by users on Tumblr, the blogging platform that hosts *Stop Hating Your Body*) as of July 2015, less than four months after being posted. Ditto’s call for self-control as the most viable approach to the goal of achieving a “reprogrammed” mindset reflects a persistent theme of “responsibilization” across body positive narratives. This persistently “belabored self” (p. 11) is in keeping with an ethos that McGee (2005) characterizes as symptomatic of a culture of individualism in times of economic and social precarity. “The promise of self-help” she writes, “can lead workers to a new sort of enslavement: into a cycle where the self is not improved, but endlessly belabored” (2005, p. 12).

In the first long-form interview published on *Herself*, founder Caitlin Stasey similarly situated the notion of control as central to her relationship with her body “I’m still struggling to gain control over my body, over my vagina” (Stasey, 2015b) she noted, responding to the question of what “obstacles [she’s] overcome on [her] path to womanhood” (Stasey, 2015b). This sentiment is in keeping with the values of self-discipline privileged in the bulimic culture Bordo (1989) identified nearly three decades ago. It proliferates today within a broad self-help narrative where “wresting some control over one’s life...is the background *raison d’être* of self-help literature’s admonitions to relentlessly work on the self” (McGee 2005, p. 150).

This control requires dedicated and consistent effort. As one user posted in February 2015 on *Stop Hating Your Body* “I dedicated myself to being the best me I could be” (The past year, 2015). While she was in part speaking to the work of overcoming an eating disorder, the easy slippage between the therapeutic labor required to deal with a medical condition and issues of negative self-image is notable. “I will always want to look different. That doesn't matter, because I need to work on how I feel” (I do not need, 2015) said a user posting on *My Body Gallery* stories in October 2015. “Shout out to the girls who hate their bodies but are trying really really hard to find beauty and comfort in them” it says in a post from February 2015 on *Stop Hating Your Body*, “...that shit is hard and takes a lot of time and is emotionally exhausting” (bl-ossomed, 2015). It goes without saying that this is labor *in addition* to the work of taking and uploading selfies to online body positive spaces, creating user profiles, typing out hundreds of words in comments or blog posts or, as in the case of *Herself*, participating in a formal photo shoot and long interview. These tasks are the invisible work on which digital body positive practice is based, on top of which any discourse about emotional labor rests.

“What I have to deal with is the mirror every day. I have to struggle and learn to accept it” a *Stop Hating Your Body* user posted in March 2015 (It's the second time I submit, 2015). “Self-acceptance has always been a struggle” another posted in February, “but struggles are struggles until you overcome them” (My stomach is riddled, 2015). There is a decisiveness to these messages of arduous labor. A sticker- for sale through *My Body Gallery*'s digital store- proclaims “I decided to be happy because it's good for my health” (Store, n.d.). The synthesis of messages about control and body positive practice

leaves little if any opportunity to linger on bad, or even unstable, feelings. As Annie Segarra, founder of *Stop Hating Your Body*, writes in the caption to a series of images of her posted to the site in April of 2015:

Even the creator of Stop Hating Your Body has some bad days; my BDD will attack from time to time (SO much less than when I was younger) and it affects my self esteem and triggers my depression. When this happens, I remedy accordingly; if I need to be alone, I find a way to do so, if I need some reassurance, I reach out (annieelaine, 2015)

As exemplified by Segarra's situating of the individual "struggle" for control over one's relationship to one's body as labor, these discourses sometimes take shape as directive for a body positive practice. On *Stop Hating Your Body*, a graphic titled "10 Steps to Positive Body Image" was posted in May 2015 (fyeahwomen, 2015). In bright pink text on a background of faded blue florals, a few of these steps are somewhat abstract, like "appreciate all that your body can do" (step 1) and "surround yourself with positive people" (step 5). Most however, are markedly more concrete, including tasks like "keep a top-10 list of things you like about yourself" (step 2), "wear clothes that are comfortable and make you feel good about your body" (step 7) and "become a critical viewer of social and media messages" (step 8). All are positioned as useful strategies for "[shutting] down the voices in your head that tell you that your body is not 'right'..." (step 6), but the implication embedded in the very notion of self-care as a series of actionable steps is also that there is little excuse *not* to undertake this kind of work on the self.

The list format of this graphic is in keeping with *Stop Hating Your Body*'s central "Body Peace Revolution Oath," (2011) the text around which the site is galvanized. The

oath, also in list form, includes eight bulleted items intended to guide how users engage with and on the site. The oath reads more as a directive than a guide, warning users that “by following this blog, [they] are making a promise to” adopt various behaviors. These behaviors ranging from the broad- “loving myself, all of myself” and “look up [and] think positively” to the specific - “stop denying I am beautiful and start saying ‘thank you, you are beautiful as well’ and “[don’t] be influenced by weight loss ads, the media, my relatives...ANYONE into thinking there is a right way for me to look” (The Body Peace Revolution Oath, 2011). The notion of adopting “critical” views on media messages, captured in both the “Oath” and the “10 Steps” graphic, nods to the potential function of body positivity as a site of institutional critique. But the onus remains on the individual to educate and shape themselves into body positive subject. As one user posted to *My Body Gallery Stories*, “YOU find your happy weight, YOU tell yourself why you're doing it, YOU give yourself a goal and most importantly, YOU decide that you're gorgeous and who gives a crap if your best friend is 100 pounds” (You Find your Happy Weigh, 2014).

On sites like *Body Revolution* and *My Body Gallery*, sometimes these discourses of personal labor as personal responsibility even become the very narratives of weight-loss that sustain mainstream diet culture. One of the earliest images Lady Gaga posted to *Body Revolution* was an image of a middle-aged man’s torso, his shirt lifted and distended belly visible. In the caption, Gaga identifies the individual as her father “Papa Joe,” and goes on to explain the image is of his “tummy from Italian food. He’s proud but has lost ten lbs and is working out too feel better, be healthy” [*sic*] (A Body Revolution 2013, 2012c). Gaga’s statement strives to tenuously reconcile the *Body Revolution*



campaign's body positive proclamation that one should be "proud to be born this way" (Your Bravery, 2012) with body modification through diet and exercise in the name of health. While seemingly paradoxical, such a reconciliation highlights, on the one hand, how the digital performance of body positivity falls comfortably within a fourth-wave feminist moment where self-determination is valued above the specificity of any choice (Yu, 2011). Yet on the other hand, the easy slippage between diet culture and its ostensible challenger emphasizes how easily ideological contradictions are reconciled when praxis is reductively framed as an individual matter.

*My Body Gallery's* "News" section is used infrequently, only hosting eight posts since the first entry was published in July of 2014. In the latest News post, titled "Obesity Shaming Disguised as Activism" and published in October 2015, the site's anonymous editor- likely founder and photographer Odessa Cozzolini, but she doesn't identify herself directly on the site (Orsini, 2012) - makes an impassioned plea against "obesity shaming" on *My Body Gallery*. According to the editor "40 community members' images [were] flagged as inappropriate...because, according [an] 'activist,' each image 'promotes morbid obesity'" [sic] (Obesity Shaming Disguised as Activism, 2015). Emphasizing the site's body positive goals, the site editor wrote "this type of shaming goes against everything we are working for: that ALL bodies of ALL weights can be represented in a positive manner, without shame and with transparency" (Obesity Shaming Disguised as Activism, 2015). As the editor chastises these anti-obesity actions for shaming and dismissing the women that "bravely [put] their bodies out there," she goes on to explain that:

For all our unknown ‘activist’ knows, some of these women were uploading these images as personal reference for weight loss goals. (We know from some of the body stories submitted by users that many people use the site for this purpose—to track their weight loss progress and offer comparative images for others to find) (Obesity Shaming Disguised as Activism, 2015).

Certainly, the use of social media spaces to build communities and undertake practices that challenge or subvert its dominant or intended norms is not unprecedented (Renninger, 2014). But it is telling that there seems to be little friction between the goals of body love and body modification through dieting on an ostensibly body positive space. The distance narrows with examples like the user who frames their feelings about their body quantitatively, noting they are “about 70% secure with my body” (70 percent, 2014) to the user who’s “long hard journey towards being a happy heathier me!” [*sic*] involves both “[making] time in your life for the things that matter to you” and “[hiring] a trainer” (I am Important Too, 2014). The language of control also sits comfortably within this diet discourse. One *My Body Gallery* user writes:

I don’t want anyone looking at me and thinking I’m lazy and that I lack dicipline. I’m frustrated that people cannot see the work I put into maintaining even 180 lbs. I’m able to control and sacrifice and challenge myself to succeed in every other area or my life except my weigh...[*sic*] (People Cannot See the Work, 2015).

In a particularly telling example, one user reframes *My Body Gallery*’s central project of depicting “real” bodies into a tool for weight loss: “this website shows me healthy examples of what a normal woman is like” they write, “and I’m really happy that I can see what I will look like when I succeed in my weight-loss journey!!!” (Family Pressure, 2014).

While, as I will explore in Chapter 4, there is room for the inchoate and the messy within a radical body positivity, the emphasis on control implicitly distances the movement from some of the original, radical goals of the fat positive activism at its roots. While what is “worked on” today is not the “unruly” fat body, but the unruly mind, contemporary body positivity inches, intentionally or not, away from a politics of fat that “gives unruliness an implicit oppositional power, [situating] woman as defiant, wild rebellious, undisciplined, trouble” (Stukator, 2001, p. 199). In her essay on “Comedy and Body Politics”, Angela Stukator (2001) stresses that the unruly fat body is neither “intrinsically radical nor conservative”, yet it is consistently exploited for its “otherness” (p. 199). Yet body positivity seems to miss an opportunity to embrace the radical instability of the unruly in favor of a disciplined, learned practice of self-love that slips too comfortably into the realm of “training for a lifetime of fulfilling self-surveillance” (Sender, 2006, p. 148).

### **Self-Love**

Narratives of body positive “responsibilization” tend to culminate in the assertion of a definitive- if tenuous- achievement. “Took me 30 years, therapy, and online encouragement to get to this point! I still have an unhealthy amount of fat on me, but I am happy with the way nature made me” (Optimistic About My Future, 2014) writes one user in their *My Body Gallery* story. Another asserts, “since I changed my mindset, things have gotten better. I am finally proud of myself” (6 Feet Tall and Rising, 2014). In an interview on *Herself*, participant Nik succinctly captures this sentiment, one that aligns comfortably with an American Horatio Alger myth: “good things come to those who

work hard for it” (MacWilliam, 2015a). The object of achievement, as will be explored in the following section, is, broadly, body positivity. More specifically though, it boils down to self-love channeled through a recognition of personal beauty. “Beauty is really in the eyes of the beholder” writes one user of *Stop Hating Your Body*. “Once you realize that...your whole world will change. It took a long time for me to get to this point, but I made it. And so can you” (myqween, 2015).

The framing of body positivity as the achievement of a state of self-love is another dominant theme of body positive narratives. If responsibility narratives situate body positivity as a rigorous and regular emotional (and sometimes physical) practice, narratives of self-love situate body positivity as a state to be reached. *The Body is Not an Apology* is described as “A platform that expands and bridges the way we talk about self-love and justice” (Taylor, 2014). One of the 75 questions regularly asked of *Herself* interview participants is “What is something you deeply love about yourself? (Herself, 2016). In a brief paragraph embedded within a left hand column visible on every page, *Stop Hating Your Body* describes itself as “a place of encouragement, a place to discuss body image, insecurities, self-esteem, and everything under the umbrella of fighting self-hate and finding self-love” (Stop Hating Your Body, n.d.).

The clarion-call to self-love is echoed in many personal narratives of body positivity found across these five sites. One poster on *My Body Gallery* stories writes “recently I decided to accept my body. I love it. It is the best instrument I own” (6 Feet Tall and Rising, 2014). Another “I am no longer embarrassed by my body--I love my curves” (My Shape, 2014). Self-love sometimes comes as a revelation, as one *My Body Gallery* participant reflects “I’m realizing more and more that I need to love myself for

who I am, at whatever size I am” (Going to Love Myself, 2015). “For the first time in my life,” that same participant concludes, “I’m going to love myself” (Going to Love Myself, 2015).

In an interview on *Herself*, participant Laura’s response to the question of what she considers her “greatest accomplishment” is “probably letting myself love myself enough to get into modeling” (Terry-Whyte, 2015c). *Herself* participant Serenity cites her sister as “her biggest motivator” because “I love having talks with her about body image and self-love, because she demands acceptance from others without even realizing it” (MacWilliam, 2015b). One of the questions regularly asked of interviewees participating in *Herself* is “What is the image you would like to project [of yourself]?” Participant Nik’s response highlights the primacy of self-love to contemporary body positivity. “I would like to project self-love” she responded, “[as] I’m truly in love with myself – my flaws, my rights/wrongs, and my journey (MacWilliam, 2015a).

In her work on reality television weight-loss programs, Helene Shugart (2010) details how, on these shows, psychologists “help patients to ‘confront’ and ‘work through’ their issues in order to ‘make more rational choices’ and ‘act consciously’” (p. 118). This type of intervention is echoed in body positive narratives that position the treatment of the deviant self- in this case, a self-lacking body love- achievable through a regimen of targeted work. “Love yourself, and do what you can do to make that happen” writes one user on *My Body Gallery Stories* (One Pound Short, 2014). These efforts at self-love sometimes even slip into the realm of the intimate and romantic, echoing the body-part personification captured in the visual practice of body positivity. A *My Body Gallery Stories* user wrote “My Valentine this year is my body. We have had many ups

and downs and are finally beginning to reach common ground. I love my body, and I love what I'm turning it into." She continues "I bought myself a lingerie set for Valentines Day and decided to take pictures for my own enjoyment" (My Valetine, 2014). "...I write myself love notes and remind myself that I am a beautifully blooming work-in-progress" Nik answered when she was asked in her *Herself* interview how she "maintains a sense of self" (MacWilliam, 2015a).

Ultimately, many of these declarations of self-love link the effort highlighted in the theme of "responsibilization" with triumphant achievement. In the caption to a series of images of *Stop Hating Your Body* founder Annie Segarra posted in April 2015, she writes, "our bodies are our shells, what's important is who we are. I love my shell. I love my body. Most importantly I love myself. Sometimes I just need a reminder. I found my self love. You can find yours too!" (annieelainey, 2015). One *Stop Hating Your Body* user posted the hopeful message, "one of these days I will be proud to say 'I LOVE MY BODY'!" (I Don't Normally Post, 2015) the very same month. In May 2015, another user asserted more definitively, "I've finally been able to accept my soft tummy, my muscular legs, my chubby arms, my double chin. I've realized I love these parts of myself (I've never been told, 2015). In July 2015, a user credited *Stop Hating Your Body* with realizing her body positive goals, writing simply "this blog really helped me love myself" (those3socialboys, 2015). What is achieved is often framed as a fundamental recalibration of the relationship between interiority and exteriority, to the point where even the occasional wavering of bodily feelings is not posited as a threat to an overall stable sense of self-love. As one user explained on *My Body Gallery Stories*:

Once I accepted and came to love my body my mind was freed from constantly worrying about my weight and food intake. I simply read my body and eat what feels good. I am so happy to say that I LOVE my body! Not every day is a good one full of self love, but the majority are. I will take steps backward and forward, but I will not lose track of understanding and wisdom I have gained on my path to self acceptance and love [*sic*] (The Depth of Beauty, 2015).

This mode of body positivity as self-love is frequently channeled through discourse on the recognition of one's individual beauty. Self-love, in other words, is achieved when one comes to see themselves as beautiful. *My Body Gallery's* "About Us" page describes the "project's goal is to help women objectively see what we look like and come to some acceptance that we are all beautiful." (About Us, n.d.). In a *My Body Gallery* story aptly titled "The Reality of Body Love," the author writes "at age 28, I first discovered the reality of body-love, and the fact that years of believing that no one liked fat bodies was just flat out wrong. I've come to appreciate my body and the fact that I am a beautiful woman" (The Reality of Body Love, 2014). Another poster to the site reflects on her weight gain during pregnancy, writing "being pregnant, I think about my weight much less than usual. For the first time ever, I can accept my body as useful and beautiful regardless of its shape and weight" (Useful and Beautiful, 2014). *The Body is Not an Apology's* "Bad Picture Monday" campaign, which urges users to post images of themselves they think are ugly onto the photo-sharing site Instagram, encourages participation by exclaiming "Shame is ugly! YOU are GORGEOUS" (Bad Picture Monday, n.d.).

Body positive narratives about the reclamation of beauty link these moments of recognition to the practices of visibility highlighted in the first chapter of this dissertation. There are frequent mentions of "mirror-work" - "I've always hated my body because I

didn't look like the other girls, and it wasn't until I got older I realized that I'm just as beautiful as those other girls” writes one poster to *My Body Gallery Stories*, “...it took stepping back and looking at myself completely in the mirror to realize I was beautiful” (Naturally Super Skinny, 2014). There are even more frequent exaltations on the value of producing regular images of one’s body. A series of images of a slim young woman in a backless dress posted on *Stop Hating Your Body* are captioned “these photos were [taken] to show me I’m as beautiful as anyone else” (aloha-salty-pineapple, 2015). On *Herself*, participant Laura stresses the importance of selfies to the project of self-love “I’m a photographer and love to model – we should all be completely vain in some way each day. Take that time for yourself. Take those selfies and love on yourself” she comments, later repeating a condensed version of this message “take selfies, love yourself entirely” (Terry-Whyte, 2015c). *Herself* participant Samantha shared her perspective as a photographer on bringing out beauty through images of women’s bodies, noting that

through photography, I discovered a way to make women feel beautiful and see themselves in a way they never thought they could...I look at all women and see their beauty, and to be able to translate that to them by way of photo is incredible (Terry-Whyte, 2015d).

And sometimes, as seen in the visual tropes outlined in Chapter 1, the notion of self love through visibility is emphasized, or perhaps reduced, to an endorsement of nudity. “I love my body” says *Herself* participant Demi; “I expose it all the time, no shame at all. I am a soul living in a body and I am here to show it off” (Stasey, 2015d).

There is also an aspect of gender essentialism to the centrality of beauty within narratives of body positivity, even within spaces like *Herself* that work to highlight the



voices and experiences of gender non-conforming people. The question “What does the word ‘woman’ mean to you?” is regularly asked of interviewees, to which a participant named Alexis responded that “The first two words that come to mind are ‘beautiful’ and ‘mother’” (Stasey, 2015a). “We are beautiful creatures that were created to create and there is nothing more powerful than that. Girls run the world. Without us there is no future. Remember that ladies. You have the power” responded participant Demi (Stasey, 2015d). In keeping with the naturalistic, romanticized aesthetic that is a prominent visual trope of body positivity, beauty, even when applied holistically and beyond those bodies that fit the slim, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered ideal, here remains firmly entrenched in the traditionally feminine realm. What body positivity highlights in its attempts to destabilize the association between beauty and a limited body type is a contemporary allegiance between “beauty” and “power” as nebulous concepts that take shape when read through a feminist lens.

## **Empowerment**

The synthesis of feminist aims and feminized sensibility resonates with an understanding of body positivity as a third-or even fourth- wave endeavor. Understanding feminism as moving in “waves” is itself a debatable parsing of complex and varied social movements. But if a popular history of Western feminism sees its first wave associated with activism around suffrage and gaining women the vote, second wave feminism, emergent in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century during a moment of broad social and political upheaval, is remembered as a time a feminist cause began to intersect with other social justice movements like the fight for civil rights (Rampton, 2008). The personal became political,

as a first wave seen to be dominated by the voices- and interests- of white, middle and upper-class, heterosexual women gave way to a greater diversity of perspectives and agendas, particularly those of working-class women (Rampton, 2008). This is not to say that women of color, queer women, working-class women and others were not heavily involved in earlier feminist causes, but second-wave uprisings began to bring to light both their oppression and their frequently marginalized contributions to gender equity.

Third wave feminism, which emerged in North America during the mid-1990s, and some scholars argue, still reflects the present landscape of gender politics, challenges the notion of “women” as a monolithic group. Shaped by a post-modern impetus to destabilize norms (Rampton, 2008; Yu, 2011), it addresses the idea that personal experience is uniquely shaped, as Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) famously metaphorized, by the particular intersections of identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, class and ability. In practice, third wave feminism locates the personal narrative (Yu, 2011) as the mechanism through which to address the reality that different women have differing experiences and needs. Yet in spirit, contemporary feminism, whether conceptualized as a third, fourth or “post” wave, has been contrasted with the second wave for its recuperation of the maligned feminine in feminism. If, in the popular imagination, second-wavers burned bras and protested beauty pageants, contemporary feminists do not necessarily see the performance of traditional femininity as a simple reflection of patriarchal values. As Elana Levine writes in the introduction to her recent anthology on “feminine” cultural products in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn* (2015), the last few decades have seen a “hegemonic negotiation between the demands of patriarchy and the needs and desires of women” (p. 3). Levine stresses that femme

cultures need to be approached with greater nuance, and taken seriously by those within and outside feminist movements. While the trappings of femininity may emerge out of patriarchy, they still can be deployed in meaningful and agential ways by women critically shaping their own identities within male-dominated cultures.

In a moment when personal experience is privileged, both within feminist discourse and within the space of social media, agency and individual choice become the framework through which femininity is understood. An ethos of choice-driven feminism has in fact been characterized by some scholars as endemic of a post-feminist age, a moment galvanized by the presumption that gender parity has been achieved, “freeing” women from the need for an explicitly political agenda, ergo, from any use for feminism (Levine, 2015, p. 5). This postfeminist view problematically returns to an essentialized assumption about what defines womanhood, and who actually privileges from that definition- or rather, who no longer “needs” feminism to protect their rights. The various body positive spaces I examine here do not comfortably fit into such a postfeminist rubric, but deploy the terms feminist and feminism to varying degrees. Some, like *Herself* and *The Body is Not an Apology*, are explicitly situated as feminist projects, while others, like *My Body Gallery*, make no mention of any history of gendered politics. Still others, like *Stop Hating Your Body*, capture a diversity of narratives around feminism in user contributed content. But as this chapter shows, narratives of choice, personal responsibility, and empowerment are pervasive across all body positive spaces examined for this project.

Pam, one of *Herself*'s older participants, discusses the various forces entangled within her experience of the contemporary feminist politics that inform body positivity:

I grew up in the seventies and so have negotiated a path between militant feminism and third wave lipstick feminism, which has created some work in my mind with alleviating guilt for not being ‘enough’: powerful, feminine, or active. It was difficult to get away from the prescribed notions of a ‘proper woman’ and finally be able to settle into just being me. I’m still working on it after 54 years. (Terry-Whyte, 2015b)

Pam identifies how her age, which lands her somewhere in between distinct iterations of feminism, poses a challenge. But she also notes that each iteration of feminist cultures belies particular tensions between competing definitions of agency, authenticity and empowerment. The framing of empowerment within the feminist legacy that inevitably shapes contemporary body positivity is as a mechanism to move towards a positive sense of self (or more specifically, a positive orientation towards one’s embodied self). It is, as Lady Gaga put it in her rallying call for *Body Revolution*, a “triumph over insecurities” (A Body Revolution 2013, 2012b).

The definition of empowerment, according to Merriam-Webster, is two-fold: it means both to generally “give authority or legal power” to someone, and, much more specifically, “promote the self-actualization or influence of” someone, your own self pointedly included. A feminist history seems inextricable from the term, as the example notably used by Webster’s to illustrate this secondary meaning references how “the women’s movement has been inspiring and empowering women” (“Empower”, n.d). Yet in the context of a culture driven in large part by a notion that of self as a project with which we are required to grapple, empowerment has seemingly become synonymous with the “realizing of one’s potential” (“Empower”, n.d) rather than the obtainment of tangible power or legal rights. Such is the rallying-cry of what Anita Harris (2004) has called the “can-do girl,” shaped less by a legacy of a progressive-punk grrrlpower

channeled through anger and anarchy than by the figure of the “[idealized] late modern subject” who is “outspoken, not afraid to take power, believe in [herself] and run [her] own life” (p. 16-17). It is a subject-position best captured in Barbara Cruikshank’s pointed critique of Gloria Steinem’s aptly-titled 1992 book, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*. Writes Cruikshank (1993), “self-fulfillment is no longer a personal or private goal. According to advocates, taking up the goal of self-esteem is something we owe to society, something that will defray the costs of social problems, something that will create a true democracy” (p. 328). In what is perhaps the dystopian apex of the personal-as-political, “thousands of people now define their lack of power and control in the world as attributable to their lack of self-esteem” (Cruikshank, 1993, p. 340).

Narratives of empowerment within digital body positivity often reference a sense of power gained through actions coded as body positive, including making the body visible, and as explored in the previous section, cultivating a sense of self-love. *The Body is Not an Apology*, for example, is billed as “an international movement committed to cultivating global Radical Self Love and Body Empowerment...a movement...born [when] people across the country began posting their own pictures and stories of empowered, perfectly imperfect bodies” (Mission, Vision & History, 2015). Individual stories of body positive empowerment use the term to highlight a climactic moment of achievement. “I have bouts of insecurity but otherwise I feel beautiful. Last year, for the first time in my life, I donned a bikini and it was incredibly empowering” wrote one poster to *My Body Gallery Stories* (Built Huskier, 2014).

These narratives situate self-love as both an achievement, and as a liberatory bolstering of one's sense of self. As participant Samantha explained to *Herself* (emphasis hers):

...some sort of mental phenomenon happened to me at the age of 30 (probably maturity suddenly kicked in) and I didn't give two fucks anymore about what ANYONE thought about me. I enjoy keeping myself up for MYSELF. I am a beautiful, amazing goddamn woman and I'll cook you dinner if I FEEL LIKE IT and maybe I'll put on some lipstick and do my hair for our date if I FEEL LIKE IT, but if I don't, I'm still a beautiful, amazing goddamn woman (Terry-Whyte, 2015d).

Samantha's response shows how personal agency is, again, entangled within a notion of empowerment that maps free will onto even those choices that appear to conform to the very patriarchal standards of beauty and femininity that have been historically challenged by second-wave feminist movements. Like Samantha, Caitlin Stasey's own characterization of the empowered body, expressed on *Herself* in response to a question on her views on marriage, echo a third wave understanding of feminist agency as a project of heightened individualism (emphasis hers): "I'm an advocate of empowering women to do what THEY want & as long as they're getting married because they TRULY believe it's what THEY want & not what is expected OF them, then go for it" (Stasey, 2015b). In her own *Herself* interview, participant Casey makes a similar comment: "No one ever forces me to do anything I don't want to do" (Stasey, 2015c).

On a visceral level, Samantha, Caitlin and Casey's statements, peppered with capital letters that highlight the alliance between their sense of themselves and their actions, visually gesture towards the vocalization of an active, powerful stance. In another interview on *Herself*, participant Stephanie similarly channels an aggressive,

righteous energy when describing her perspective on mainstream representations of menstruating bodies: “When I’m bleeding for five days straight, I’d prefer products with bears and sharks on them to remind me how fucking indestructible I am. Take your goddamn frangipanis elsewhere” (Stasey, 2015n). Esther expresses similar sentiments on menstruation in her own *Herself* interview, noting that “your period is gnarly, you bleed for days on end, and there ain’t anything more bad-ass than that in my books” (Stasey, 2015h). *Herself* participant Crystine’s response perhaps best typifies the boldness of many body positive empowerment narratives. She counters mainstream Western representations of women as “as weak, submissive, and demanding” with her own pointedly bombastic description of herself as “the 8th Wonder of the World...come see me instead of the Taj Mahal because I am a very spectacular person who walks the Earth and I want to be remembered as that” (Terry-Whyte, 2015a).

As noted earlier in this chapter, *Herself* routinely asks its participants to respond to the question “what does the word ‘woman’ mean to you?” (Herself, 2016). Indicative of body positivity as a cultural practice aimed at and perpetuated in large part (though not exclusively) by women and women-identified people, this question also illuminates how stereotypes of both the passive *and* the powerful female body inform discourses of empowerment that circulate within body positive spaces. Echoing Crystine’s characterization of predominant stereotypes of women as meek and withdrawing, another *Herself* participant, Milly, reflects that “as soon as I could comprehend gender, I was faced with the finite prescription that to be girl was to be incompetent, submissive... just generally not that great” (Stasey, 2015m). It is interesting to note how within a space that generally privileges not just the female but the feminine, fragility and submissiveness are

still problematically equated- in an arguably Western-centric and ablest way- with weakness. I will return to fragility in the final chapter, and follow Sara Ahmed (2015) in an attempt to untangle its generative potential within the context of a radical body positivity. But within current body positive narratives, power is positioned repeatedly and somewhat reductively as the antidote to an undesirable fragility. “Because I’m quiet, people think I’m fragile, but in reality I am very strong when I need to be” *Herself* participant Melinda notes (Stasey, 2015l). “I hope people know that I am very vulnerable and fragile, but also a survivor, resilient” Kathryn comments (Stasey, 2015j). *Herself* participant Serenity reflects that “feeling vulnerable or exposed is just that, a feeling. I don’t embrace those moments for long, or simplify or give into them because I am a woman” (MacWilliam, 2015b).

Gendered empowerment, and in turn a body positive recuperation of a maligned sense of the bodily self, is expressed through a discourse of dominance. *Herself* participant Lily comments that “when I think of women, I think of power, like the power of Mother Nature; I think of a nurturing type of strength, and a glowing, internal beauty” (Stasey, 2015k), a statement that resonates with the relative fetishization of “the natural” within the visual tropes of body positivity explored in the previous chapter. LJ similarly concedes an understanding of womanhood that blends emotionality and strength: “when I hear the word ‘woman’” she reflects, “I think power, carer, and emotional” [*sic*] (Stasey, 2015i). Participant Aniela synthesizes these characterizations of empowerment when characterizing her relationship to her gendered body as one where she is “holding back- I think I am a little afraid of the POWER that is deep within me” (Stasey, 2015g).



In their often simplistic contrasting of submission and fragility against the possibility of empowerment, these narratives also recollect the problematic Western-centrism that struggles to conceptualize power outside a narrow mold of assertive dominance. Saba Mahmood (2001) proposes that “agency [is] not a synonym for the resistance of domination, but...a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (p. 203). Mahmood examines how Egyptian female religiosity is read in the West as submission, leading to the construction of a fragile female body that requires liberation (through, inevitably, forceful militaristic intervention). Her argument for recognizing agency within practices of ostensible submission points to a need for cultural context in recognizing female agency, particularly feminist agency. While some body positive projects, like *The Body is Not an Apology*, centrally locate an intersectional feminism that is attentive to difference within feminist praxis, many others replicate this Western-centrism in their framing of gendered power. Often visibility becomes the – problematic- metric through which liberation is measured, in a way that excludes everything from practices of modesty to the value of privacy for bodies that are uniquely vulnerable to state and social surveillance. While body positive spaces largely espouse an interest in recruiting diverse participants, the narrow alignment between tactics of visibility and gendered discourses of strength and empowerment can also work to delimit imaginings of agency that resist such a Western model.

## **Body Positivity as A Body Revolution**

*Herself* participant Aniela's assertive rendering of her inner power harkens another genre of body positive discourse. These narratives differ from those that broadly situate body positivity as a site of achievement (of self-actualization and more specifically self-love) and focus acutely on an empowerment challenged through discourses of bravery and even supremacy. Many then lapse into language that gestures towards the usurpation of dominant power structures. Here is the body "revolution"- these discursive formations reflect a climactic leveraging of conceptualizations of power as dominance to frame body positivity as a rebellious movement.

Lady Gaga's original call to a *Body Revolution* exemplifies the preponderance of bravery narratives within this discourse of empowered body positivity. In addition to the very name chosen for her body positive campaign, the captions accompanying a series of images of Gaga in a yellow bra and panties read as follows: "today I join the BODY REVOLUTION" anchors an image of the pop star with her arms outstretched. The caption on the following image, of Gaga with her arms raised overhead, continues "to inspire bravery." The caption on the final image in the series elaborates further: "my mother and I created the BORN THIS WAY FOUNDATION for one reason: "to inspire bravery" (Rolling Stone, 2012). Encouraging the participatory contribution of body positive images, Gaga wrote in another caption "now that the body revolution has begun, be brave and post a photo of you that celebrates your triumph over insecurities" (Garibaldi, 2012). In a subsequent post titled "Your Bravery," Gaga wrote a brief paragraph telling her fans and body revolution site visitors: "You are brave, strong and accepting not only of yourself, but of others through your experiences. You are proud to

be born this way, and brave in your vulnerability with this community” (Your Bravery, 2012).

*Stop Hating Your Body* requires participants to paste a link at the bottom of all submissions that says “Be Brave: Join the Body Peace Revolution.” “If you don’t do this” the site’s Submit page warns, “I will know you didn’t read the rules and your submission will be DELETED” (Submit, 2014). A rhetoric of bravery is thus permanently written into the site’s very archive. Beyond this requirement, references to bravery abound on *Stop Hating Your Body*. “I’m finally brave enough to share my story with you guys” wrote one poster on February 2015 (Hi My Name Is Nini, 2015). “All the gorgeous and brave people who submit here...inspire me so much” wrote another in March 2015 (Hi My Name is Sadie, 2015). Conversely, that same month another poster captioned an image of their body visible only from the torso up, with the following explanation: “I would never post a full body photo because honestly I don’t have the courage...” (aloha-salty-pinapple, 2015).

The interviews on *Herself* also contain multiple references to bravery. When asked what image she thinks she projects to the world, participant Serenity responded “confidence, maybe bravery” (MacWilliam, 2015b). Crystine’s own reflections are similar: “I am 22 and have accomplished much in my life. I am very brave to have pulled through tough situations and I am very unique” she says (Terry-Whyte, 2015a). Nik’s origin story included female role models whose bravery inspired her. “I was surrounded by really strong and successful women” she tells *Herself*, “I always admired their courage and I couldn’t wait to grow up and emulate that fearless, career-driven, loving woman

(MacWilliam, 2015a). But Samantha's comments on the changes she perceives body positivity to have wrought on mainstream media are particularly telling (emphasis hers):

I see the media taking to the revolution (probably in shock at first) and more BuzzFeed articles are posted on things like 'this mom isn't ashamed to post selfie in bikini with sagging stomach and the reaction is amazing!' or hashtags like #loveyourmarks. I believe we are making progress and finally taking control over the media's ideas of perfect women, and now the media has no choice but to jump on the 'go fuck yourself if you don't like my plus-sized ass' bandwagon. Finally, F I N A L L Y, we have an outlet. Thank you social media and all of those beautiful brave women! (Terry-Whyte, 2015d)

Samantha's comments capture how indelibly narratives of bravery are intertwined with popular conceptualizations of body positivity. As she points out, media outlets covering body positivity frame the circulation of body-images as triumphant acts of courage, echoing the way participants in body positive spaces conceptualize their own practices. In fact, in recent years body positivity has become so indelibly linked in American popular consciousness with photos of exposed bodies and narratives of revolutionary bravery that one body positive blogger recently made news for trying to *unlink* the two. In April 2015, Jessica Kane, "the creative director for the plus-size fashion line Cool Gal Blue" (Olya 2015), captioned a Facebook image of herself standing on the beach in a black bikini with the following words:

THIS WAS NOT BRAVE. I've been told how brave I am for not having a coverup, but going with out a wrap would only take bravery if I cared what others thought of me, but I don't. I spend my time worrying about things I CAN control and this day, I was only thinking about how fab I felt and how much sun I was catching. Things that DO take bravery? A family battling tragic illness, a mother trying to beat addiction, a person trying to break free of domestic violence, reaching out for help when you have already planned your suicide and feel like you can't breath one more day. THAT is brave. Not wearing a swimsuit at the beach. LIVE life and only worry about what really matters [*sic*] (Olya, 2015).

In an interview with *People* magazine, Kane describes herself as having “been in the body positive movement for over 10 years now,” going on to note that because of her long-time participation in body positive activism, she’s “done a lot of these kind of posts” (Olya, 2015). As an insider to body positivity and its attendant practices, it is telling that Kane points to both the centrality of bravery narratives and their intersection with narratives of control. In asserting her bikini image posting as *not* brave, Kane is not criticizing body positivity per se, but exemplifying how narratives of bravery work to structure its central polemic. Body positivity argues that, since bodies that do not fit mainstream standards of beauty are often shamed into invisibility, the act of making such bodies visible is brave and revolutionary. It is worth noting however, that Kane’s call to move away from labeling these acts as extraordinary is not just a critique of a status quo that requires body positivity in the first place, and but also a problematic bolstering of another central body positive narrative discussed earlier- self- control. Kane’s message, though seemingly a “revolutionary” stance within body positivity, reinforces a body positive rhetoric that asserts individual bodies as the responsibility of individuals in a landscape that grants them so little control in how their bodies are read, perceived and treated.

Body positive narratives of power also transcend discourses of bravery to leverage a specific language of rebellion and revolution. Gaga of course named her body positive campaign “Body Revolution,” a term which also circulated on merchandise from *My Body Gallery*. “Rebelling against society by being proud of myself is so empowering...I’m truly untouchable” wrote one user on *Stop Hating Your Body*

(chelseaisworkinonit, 2015). In her interview for *Herself*, participant Melinda declares “I consider myself a champion for women” (Stasey, 2015). In her own interview on the site, participant Crystine similarly asserts that to her, “a woman is a warrior who stands tall, strong, fierce and loving, and dares to be independent and beautiful” (Terry-Whyte, 2015a). While these discourses have a certain ebullience to them, there is also an undeniable anger at the edges. Revolutions, after all, often rely on violence as a key tactic. In her long form piece, *The Revolution is Inside: Radical Self Love by Any Means Necessary*, originally published on *The Body is Not an Apology* and circulated on *Stop Hating Your Body*, Sonya Renee Taylor writes frankly: “My nakedness is the gun. It is the weapon I am holding at the window of a world who would endlessly rob me of my right to exist without body shame if it were not for my unwillingness to hide” (Taylor, 2015).

This body positive revolution, pointedly, is a revolution of sentiment. As the title of Taylor’s essay signals, this “revolution is inside.” While the forces to be intervened with- violently or otherwise- are implicitly understood to be the social privileges granted to the few bodies that conform to the raced, gendered, ableist ideals of beauty, the actual coup is over the affective response those marginalized by these ideals feel towards their alienation. In other words, the focus of the body positive revolution is largely on a realignment of feeling towards oppressive forces- be they individual or institutional- rather than a channeling of force toward these aggressors. “In the last year, I decided to stop waging war against myself and my body” posts a user to *My Body Gallery* stories (EveryBODY, 2014). In April 2015, an illustration of a cartoon lion was posted to *Stop Hating Your Body*. In a text bubble next to the animal’s head are written the words

“struggling with suicidal thoughts doesn’t make you weak or selfish. Every day that you keep fighting is a victory. You are strong and you can beat this” (positivedoodles, 2015). *Stop Hating Your Body*’s foundational entreaty is for users to “be brave [and] join the body peace revolution!” Time and again, participants like the one who in July 2015 shared her struggles with an eating disorder and mental illness on *Stop Hating Your Body* respond by “making a commitment to keep fighting” (Hello everyone!, 2015). Whether metaphors of revolution are deployed in service of body positive aims, or, as in the aforementioned sub-culture of *My Body Gallery*, weight-loss, the point of reference is continually the individual relationship to one’s body. “(Mostly) clean eating and regular exercise make me feel better than any three-hour nap or extra fries ever could” writes another poster on *My Body Gallery* Stories. “I’m working to overcome my battles and each day gets easier” (Fake it ‘til you make it, 2014). The climax of Taylor’s essay reflects the intersection of ideology and practice in a body positivity that filters a broad-based social critique through a prism of personal responsibility for an individualized revolution. Referencing the image that accompanies the essay, a black and white shot of Taylor leaning naked beside an open window, “cupping her large breasts” she writes:

The answer to what this body activist should do when I feel too fat, too ugly, too old, too queer, too black, too anything... is to stand naked in the open window of an often hateful world and to state without apology, “I declare my right on this earth...to be seen as a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the right of a human being, in this society, on this earth, in this day, **IN THIS BODY**, which I intend to bring into existence by any means necessary! I implore us all to do the same (Taylor, 2015).

Immediately below the image of Taylor is an image of Malcolm X, also perched near a window, gun in hand.

## **From A Perfect Body to A Perfect Self-love**

Textual narratives of body positivity resoundingly function as a call to arms to body positive practice. They situate body positivity as a means to happiness, self-esteem and self-love. Its dominant rhetorical themes place it uncomfortably close to those that sustain the mainstream diet culture with which American women are acutely familiar, yet body positivity positions self-love, rather than weight-loss, as its central objective. There is a call to invest emotional and physical labor, and sometimes literal funds, into the project of self-care. These discourses unmistakably reflect the neoliberal Western culture in which the body positive practices examined in this dissertation are enacted. And yet discourses of rebellion and revolution also abound, arguing that the very shift in objective, from a perfected figure to a perfected relationship to one's physicality, is a radical challenge to the gendered cultural expectations that place undue demands on female-identified bodies to conform to narrow ideals of beauty.

Body positive narratives, be they in the form of the celebrity stories like Lady Gaga's that galvanize the various online communities analyzed here, or in the thousands of posts and captions contributed by individual participants who have taken up the body positive mantle, make up what might best be categorized as an archive of feeling. This is an archive that, intentionally or otherwise, articulates most vividly not a stable truth but a critical tension between embodiment and body-practice within the capitalist hegemonies that inevitably shape both. Some of these body positive spaces, like *Herself*, are explicitly situated as feminist projects. Others, like *My Body Gallery*, make scant mention of any political framework. Yet digital body positivity's investment in an ethos of personal responsibility, even with self-love positioned as its end, reflects a contemporary gendered



politic that sees, as Nancy Fraser put it recently in a piece for the *Guardian*, “feminism [become] capitalism’s handmaiden” (Fraser, 2013).

Body positive narratives generate and sustain important conversations around the repressive expectations increasingly placed on all bodies to conform to unattainable ideals. But they also impose a new set of practical and ideological expectations that reiterate a longstanding cultural focus on individual responsibility at the expense of a politicized solidarity that would mark resistance to hegemonic norms through a sustained political economic critique that understands the possibilities of the body within a complex matrix of individual and, critically, institutional forces. Fraser’s critique of contemporary feminism alleges that its:

turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality. In effect, we absolutised the critique of cultural sexism at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy (Fraser, 2013).

In other words, the nexus of feminist politics and neoliberalism results in a myopic focus on the personal as political that elides potential modes of resistance that see communal energies directed towards challenging institutional forces of oppression instead of dismissing them as “haters” and directing that energy on an individual quest for “self-love.” As will be examined more deeply in Chapter 4, body positive communities are galvanized by “positivity” as a core affective gesture. Not only, as this and the previous chapter catalog, do participants in digital body positive spaces share their stories through words and images, but they do so with the expectation that the community will respond positively. Some sites go so far as to police these affective

exchanges by moderating comments and deleting what are deemed to be negative contributions. This circulation of positivity – generated by the personal story and sustained by encouraging comments- is the axis around which body positive spaces spin. And yet by positioning this often rote exchange as its core aim, body positivity arguably misses the opportunity for a call to action that radically de-centers an individualistic frame that, as the next chapter shows, is deeply embedded with the very racist, patriarchal histories body positivity aims to contend with.

We see then that a contemporary body positive ideology and practice is reflective of a complex feminist history that, as Fraser (2013) and Berlant (2008) note, highlights the tension between gendered cultures and political praxis. Third wave feminism’s focus on the personal narrative has been critiqued for “not [being] directly connected to calls for action” beyond the circulation of individual stories (Yu, p. 887); like body positivity itself, it is questionable whether the “third wave [can be conceived] as a social movement” (Yu, p. 887) at all. As body positive digital spaces bring a feminist legacy of the personal narrative into a contemporary landscape that increasingly frames the individual self- body and soul- as a product in which to invest, it is especially important to interrogate the expectations surrounding discourses of selfhood and embodiment.

### Chapter 3

#### The Archival Body: Visibility, Visuality and the Image's Role in the Making of Body Positive Subjectivity

In early 2014, feminist pop culture website *Jezebel* culminated its years-long crusade to expose the use of photo-editing technology in mainstream American media images of women. In a post dated January 16<sup>th</sup> of that year, site editors offered \$10,000 to whoever could locate un-retouched photos of actress Lena Dunham's photo-shoot for *Vogue* magazine's February issue. *Jezebel* intended to publish the images in a shot-by-shot comparison, highlighting how the magazine had used Photoshop to alter the actress' body (Coen, 2014). Dunham's images, site editors noted, were of particular interest to *Jezebel* given the actress' "body positive" public persona. As the initial call, written by former site editor Jessica Coen, explained:

Lena Dunham is a woman who trumpets body positivity, who's unabashedly feminist, who has said that her naked body is "a realistic expression of what it's like to be alive" ...Her body is *real*. She is *real*. And for as lovely as the *Vogue* pictures are, they're probably not terribly real. So *Jezebel* is offering \$10,000 for pre-Photoshop images from Lena's *Vogue* shoot (Coen, 2014).

Since 2007, *Jezebel* has regularly run posts featuring pre- and post-Photoshop comparison images of other celebrity and advertising photo-shoots. However, this particular call drew immediate negative attention. *Jezebel*'s previous excavations of the uses of photo-editing technology reflected alterations made to images of models and celebrities who comfortably fit a normative model of Western beauty; the heavily edited *Redbook* magazine cover of slim, blonde country singer Faith Hill, for example, had won

the site's inaugural "Photoshop of Horrors" competition in July of 2007 (Moe, 2007).

While these earlier initiatives were generally well received, the search to uncover Dunham's unaltered form was read by both the *Jezebel* community and the actress herself as a uniquely egregious invasion. Here, the narrative went, was a "real" woman who regularly chose to bare her imperfect body publicly on television. Why would an ostensibly feminist publication choose to bare it again, on their terms? It seemed that two key objectives of body positivity now found themselves at odds: Dunham's agency in her own self-representation was positioned against an institutional attack on manipulative media images of women. Crucially, both factions laid claim to the fight for "authentic" representation.

Shortly after *Jezebel's* monetary reward was announced, Dunham responded that she was both perplexed by and against the preoccupation with uncovering her unretouched images. "*Vogue* isn't the place we go to look for real women," she explained, "if [people] want to see what I really look like go watch the show I make every single week" (Waldman, 2014). Dunham's response referenced the frequent display of her nude body on her HBO show *Girls*, a choice for which she has received significant attention. From her perspective, her body, both lauded and critiqued for its ample, fleshy "realness," is regularly made available for public consumption. Given this context, a single *Vogue* shoot should be ineffectual at distorting our perception of what Dunham "really" looks like.

While Dunham is a controversial figure in her own right (who has been frequently critiqued for the lack of diversity on her Brooklyn-based show) she has still been praised as one of the most visible body positive public figures in American media. Since her first

film, *Tiny Furniture*, debuted in 2010 (Dunham, 2010), Dunham has written and played women who treat their body as a non-issue. Dunham is frequently shown nude or in revealing clothing on her program, and several times has been shown having explicit sex with her love interest Adam. She is, fundamentally, portrayed as being comfortable with her body, and weight concerns do not factor into the depiction of her *Girls* character, Hannah. Dunham's body has, however, been the frequent target of media commentary. While tabloids have criticized her weight, more reputable publications have noticed the comfort she displays with her body. At the 2012 *New Yorker* festival, Dunham spoke with Emily Nussbaum and addressed the attention regularly placed on her weight. In a pointed reference to those who criticized *Girls* for its lack of racial diversity, she leveraged her starring role on the show as itself a revolutionary move, commenting, "isn't enough that I'm kind of fat and I'm naked on TV? Can't you leave me alone?" (Gray, 2012)

Dunham's body is, as Coen noted, "everywhere," and by design. Visibility is positioned as a critical tool for Dunham to get forth her body positive message. In her conversation with Nussbaum, she framed the frequent visibility of her nude body on *Girls* as a statement on representation, reflecting that "what was missing in movies for me was the presence of bodies I understood" (Gray, 2012). Her projects are thus positioned as an opportunity to make visible women who do not embody normative standards of Western beauty, whose bodies didn't fit "into a traditional Hollywood idea of the female body" (Barton, 2013). As Dunham commented to *Time* magazine's television critic, James Poniewozik, "I'm clearly inviting commentary on seeing a nontraditional body in a sexual situation on TV" (Poniewozik 2012). She positions the open display of her body

as a political move to counter the lack of representation of fatness in contemporary media. Regularly making her body visible becomes a strategy for subjectivity and recognition; “look at us...” she explained to Nussbaum “...until you see us” (Gray, 2012).

The contentious debate surrounding *Jezebel*'s call to expose Dunham's Photoshopped body highlights the entanglement of gender, visibility, authenticity and technology within body positive practice. These concerns reflect an ongoing struggle within contemporary digital body positivity: between a desire to expose the power dynamics at play in the construction of our narrow definition of acceptable bodies, and a critique of the mechanisms of compulsory visibility that reflect both our contemporary fixation on technology as a means to intimate access and a history of the image's use in framing the boundaries Western subjectivity. Dunham's public persona clearly showcases the importance of visibility to body positive aims. Inevitably, the fight for recognition and subjectivity in Western cultures becomes the fight to be seen and heard. Tactically, visibility is critically important in a landscape where we understand oppression to work by explicitly hiding and silencing the bodies deemed unworthy of or unfit for attention. But as Foucault argues, visibility is a complex force that is not inherently a tool for oppression or for liberation.

As I have shown in Chapters 1 and 2, the discourse and practice of digital body positivity conjoins visibility, and the project of public recognition, to the project of “authentic” self-representation. Yet beyond hyper-visible celebrity bodies like Dunham's, the question of “authentic representation” implicates more than just an understanding of the relationship between bodily autonomy and visibility. Public body-practices are now

largely facilitated by myriad digital technologies that work to sustain an aura of accessibility. Body positivity, as defined in this dissertation, is expressly operationalized within a contemporary digital media landscape. In this schema, the question of authenticity's relationship to the visuality of embodiment becomes necessarily entangled with our expectations of technology, expectations that require an excavation of how we imagine technology, and specifically photographic technology, relates to and relays material reality. These are, I argue here, expectations that inform a technological imaginary that maps an analog history seamlessly- and problematically- onto our digital present. Photographic technology is perceived to have the capacity to both expose and distort the truth of our bodies, depending on context. This perception justified the weight given to the photographic archive as a tool for state institutions (from schools to hospitals to police forces) to determine the worth of bodies in relation to one another. Understanding the photograph as a technology that represents, captures and *projects* reality requires excavating the myriad processes that shaped perceptions of "the model and the monster" (Brighenti, 2007), the ideal social and political subject alongside the aberrant, pathologized, criminalized body of its "other."

Addressing a digitized body positive practice requires, then, a reframing of its central object, from the body itself to the body-image. In simpler terms, performing body positivity online is not simply a question of embodiment, but one of the display of its digital record. An examination of the practice of body positivity is, inherently, an examination of its *record*, and therefore imbricates the questions of truth and authenticity that have long encircled the photograph. Only through examining the expectations placed on the photograph as medium, conduit and agent can we begin to understand the current

and future work body positivity as practice and ideology can do in reframing the gendered, raced, classed and ableist weight placed on bodies in the West.

By now, we have come to understand body positivity as a series of processes that together constitute a loose ideology in practice. The sites examined in this dissertation reflect the physical and emotional labor of body positivity, and in so doing, help shape its attendant expectations. In this chapter, I will highlight the ways in which the visuality of body positivity calls to a history of body archives whose main object was not the body, but the analog photograph of the body. Then and now, these photographs are considered the most accurate record of said body, capturing its “truth” more readily than not only the mirror, but also one’s personal- and, presumably, unstable- sense of embodiment. Importantly, the body-image’s veracity relies on the presumption of both the body and the image as stable, bounded entities that, in coming together, impart definitive knowledge. In other words, the body and the analog image are, in this framework, ontologically akin to one another.

This chapter understands digital body positivity as itself an archive, excavating how the multiple sites examined frame the digital photograph in the practice of body positivity. In so doing, it uncovers how expectations of the body- particularly the “real,” authentic body- are informed by the expectations that have long surround photography in the West. These expectations, of the body and the image alike, both begin with the ableist presumption that the body-image is visually accessible to everyone, and elide a complex history of race, gender and embodiment that challenges conceptions of the photograph as a neutral conduit of reality. In order to better understand body positive discourse and practice, this chapter engages with the following questions: What work do we imagine



the photograph does in relation to the representation of reality, of real bodies? In what histories are these imaginings rooted? How do these expectations show up in the digital body positive spaces examined for this dissertation, and how do they inform conceptualizations of the “authentic” body- and body-image therein? And lastly, how might reconceptualizing the *digital* photograph as a tool of visibility aid in facilitating body positivity’s radical potentiality?

In this chapter, a visual lineage will be traced between police archives utilized to determine “criminality” through the photographic chronicle of deviant bodies (Sekula, 1986), pseudo-medical academic archives utilizing photography to map out the parameters of a healthy body (Rosenbaum, 1995) and various archives of body positive participation that emerge out of the various digital communities studied here. This chapter lays the foundation for understanding the implications of how online body positivity, despite its digital form, replicates a logic of photographic veracity that imbued analog photography with the expectation of honestly rendering the body’s presumably stable materiality. It is also attentive to how an object-history of the photograph must consider the photographic archive as a historical object unto itself (Tucker, 2006). Examining how the body-image archive specifically leverages the evidential ideologies that have historically encircled the analog photograph allows for a deeper understanding of how digital body positivity builds and considers its own body-archives. It also brings to light key questions, addressed at the end of this chapter and in Chapter 4, about how the digital photograph as a distinctly new medium is considered- or elided- within a body positive rubric.

## Photographic Truth-Telling

The question of whether the photograph can accurately- and truthfully- represent the material world has followed the medium since its inception. Upon the advent of early photographic techniques, determining the proximity between the image and the material reality it ostensibly represented quickly became an acute concern. From 1839 when the daguerreotype entered the marketplace and quickly replaced the handmade image as the medium of choice for portraiture, “the ideological conception of the photograph as a direct and natural cast of reality was present” (Tagg, 1993, p. 41). These early images were physically painstaking to create, requiring a certain level of technical expertise. From the onset, they were also dependent upon the intervention of the human hand to provide them with a “delicate stippled coloring” (Tagg, 1993, p. 42), arguably making photo-editing inextricable from photo-making. Never the less, the photograph captured the public’s imagination as a means through which to capture and record the intimate, and to categorize bodies more acutely in relation to one another.

By the late Victorian era, photography had become a tool adopted by institutions whose functionality was contingent on public trust, from the press to the police to the academy. As the medium entered these public realms, determining the proximity between reality and its photographic representation became a question of objectivity and process. Manuals and guidelines on topics ranging from the establishment of ethical standards for photojournalism to retouching techniques (Tucker, 2012; Daston & Galison, 2010) indicated that photography was understood to straddle the line between art and science. Implicit in that balancing act however, was the medium’s *potential* for objectivity (Daston & Galison, 2010). In a moment when scientific advancement- entangled with

imperialist projects invested in shaping racial and ethnic differences to the advantage of White colonial powers- took off, photography's accuracy when compared to freehand drawing, painting and other earlier techniques of representation allowed Daguerre to claim that it "gave nature the ability to reproduce herself" (Tagg, 1993, 41).

While photography was dependent on the human hand from the start, the framing of "scientific photography" as methodologically and aesthetically distinct from "artistic photography" (Daston & Galison, 2010) facilitated the perception that the photograph *could* break free of human subjectivity and seamlessly transmit natural truths. This distinction rendered photography a medium dependent on increasingly rote and meticulous standards of production. Folded into these standards was a recognition of the medium as "a potentially...perhaps even a dangerously powerful tool" (Mnookin, 1998, p. 4) for its ability to serve as a verificatory mechanism in the lab, courtroom and newspaper. In the context of these institutionalized spaces, the photograph became, in aggregate, an archive with the augmented ability to "prove" (or, framed differently, create) truths about objects and bodies in relation to one another.

More than a century and a half later, the photographic image's power to capture reality remained a central concern both within the realm of cultural studies, and within the context of a daily life increasingly encroached upon by mediated images. Barthes, who analyzed images ranging from the intimate to the commercial, noted the photograph "[possessed] an evidentiary force...[wherein] the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (Barthes, 1981, p. 89). The significance of the photograph, in other words, lay in its ability to capture, across time, the ephemeral moment. In doing so, it operates as definitive proof of a life and a body we can only ever know fleetingly.

Photography, for Barthes, is a triumph over temporality, a technology that, when it appeared, “divided history” (1981, p. 88) like nothing before it. In *The Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes famously asserted that the photograph is “a message without code,” (1977, p. 157), by which he meant that, unlike the hand-drawn image, the camera “cannot intervene in the object (except by trick effects)” (1977, p. 158). On a semiotic level, Barthes argues that the photograph is a more denotative object than the drawing, which ultimately cannot get around the always-subjective question of “style” (1977, p. 158) imbued by the hands and eyes responsible for its creation.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes nuanced his previous statements by asserting that the photograph is not an analog for reality as we are living it, but a record of “past reality” (1981, p. 88). However, his understanding of the photograph as distinguishable by its ability to authenticate acutely reflects popular understandings of the medium, and of what in turn constitute the “trick effects” singularly able to intervene with its capacity for objectivity. In other words, we understand the photograph as an object that records history unlike any other, but are less willing to see it as something that both makes history *and* has a history of its own.

“Every photograph is a result of specific and...significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic, and raise questions of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place” (1993, p. 2) John Tagg writes. Understanding the photograph as a subjective object that structures our understanding of objectivity requires then, historic contextualization of its production and circulation within spaces of authority. In the West, these have traditionally been (and continue to be) institutions—from law and law

enforcement to medicine and education-that shape both our daily lives and our ideas about what constitutes a subject. Illuminating the work the photograph does in these contexts necessarily emphasizes its status as a tool for “the production of a new and specific reality” (Tagg, 1993, p. 4). It also highlights the often insidious work that the prevailing *ideology* of the photograph as a truth-telling object does to mold real and ideal bodies, and the stakes for both.

### **The Body-Image’s Archival Histories**

The history of the photographic archive implicates not only questions of the veracity of the medium (Tucker, 2006), but also of the use of media to construct and sustain categorical differences grounded in the body’s physiognomy. The body’s image record, in other words, shapes our very ideas about what physically constitutes “the model” and “the monster” (Brighenti, 2007). Allan Sekula (1986) discusses how catalogs of body-photographs were used by legal and medical institutions to define types of bodies in relation to one another, from the healthy body in contrast to the unhealthy one, to the more insidious “criminal body,” positioned as a threat to the “social body” (p. 6). The camera, in this way, worked not only to fix but to conjure the self and the other through visual means.

Critically, these categorizations implicated and helped create differences demarcated along the lines of race, gender, class and ability, allying perceptions of the criminal body with perceptions of the bodies of Jews, Blacks and other minorities condemned as criminally inclined. Sekula (1986) explained how the photograph blurred the boundary between public and private identity, as “the private moment of sentimental

individuation...was shadowed by two other more public looks: a look up, at one's 'betters', and a look down, at one's 'inferiors'" (p. 10).

Within a history of Western modernity, photography was situated as a tool of objectivity tasked with not only producing an archive of the body, but also and perhaps more insidiously, framing categorical body "types" through the manipulation of the aggregate into the singular. As Sekula (1986) argued, in the Victorian era, Sir Francis Galton developed techniques of composite photography to aid in the development of an archive of criminality. Consistently and conveniently, the "face" of deviance produced by these technological methods phenotypically recalled (only) non-Whiteness. This visuality indelibly strengthened the links between Blackness and criminality fostered in the West since the age of imperialism (Hall, 1997), links that continue to inform modern practices of racial profiling and police violence.

The practice of the corporeal archive continues well beyond the time-frame captured in Sekula's early 20<sup>th</sup> century history. It also extends beyond the purview of law enforcement and into the educational and medical realms. The revelation of the controversial practice of "nude posture photographs" taken and archived at Ivy League and Seven Sisters schools in the 1940s-1960s usefully demonstrates how the kinds of body-images that are aesthetically mirrored (pun intended) by some digital body positive practices reflect an insidious legacy. In an investigation for the *New York Times Magazine*, Ron Rosenbaum (1995) wrote of "The Great Ivy League Nude Posture Photo Scandal." These images, taken of young coeds at Ivy League and Seven Sisters schools throughout the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century, captured "full length views of nude freshmen men, front, back and rear" and were accompanied by measurement data including subject's

“weight, height, previous or maximum weight...age, name, or initials.” (Rosenbaum, 1995). Universities built the taking of these so-called “posture” photographs into their health curriculum, framing the process as little more than “a routine feature of freshman orientation week.” But, as Yale Art Historian George Hersey alleged in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, these institutionally sanctioned images “were [actually] made for anthropological research” (Hersey, 1992). These body-archives, reliant on photographic technology to capture the body’s inherent physical (and by extension, physiological) truth, were in fact fodder for a eugenicist campaign directly influenced by Galtonian Social Darwinism. In Hersey’s own words:

The reigning school of the time, presided over by E. A. Hooton of Harvard and W. H. Sheldon of Yale, held that a person's body, measured and analyzed, could tell much about intelligence, temperament, moral worth and probable future achievement. The inspiration came from the founder of social Darwinism, Francis Galton, who proposed such a photo archive for the British population (1992).

Sheldon’s most immediate goal was to create sibling “coffee table books,” the *Atlas of Man* and the *Atlas of Women* (Chong, 1995). As the titles imply, these would consist of posture photographs, with all identifying information from faces to hair obscured, classified into body “types” of the author’s own derivation. Sheldon acutely exploited his unwitting subjects’ trust in the academic institution to covertly gather data.

The *Harvard Crimson* reported that Sheldon’s right-hand man, “Roland D. Elderkin... investigated the histories of the subjects photographed” by cross-referencing the portrait photographs with other archives, including “hospital and court records and looking up the medical and social backgrounds of the people we were working with.” (Chong, 1995).

Moreover, the Colleges and Universities in which the subjects were enrolled were often complicit in the building of these archives. *Vassar's Encyclopedia* captures a telling portion of a letter the researcher wrote to Vassar College's "head physician, a sociology professor, and the Chairman of the Phys. Ed. Department" to try and solicit support for his project. Sheldon wrote:

A good Atlas for Somatotyping Women is both important and possible... Minimally, we need between 10,000 and 20,000 photographs to determine satisfactorily the somatotype distributions...Wherever possible, the photographing should be done as part of the routine medical examination. It is particularly important to have an "unloaded" sample. That is to say, when the matter is put on a voluntary or semivoluntary basis the validity of the sample is destroyed (for of course some somatotypes are less eager to be photographed than others.) (Posture and Photographs, n.d.)

As Sheldon did photograph Vassar students, it appears the terms of his project were not met with significant resistance from the College.

Although Sheldon's, *Atlas of Man*, elicited relatively little fanfare, its sister publication was plagued by accusations of pornography, which ultimately did both it and Sheldon in. Unsurprisingly, the nude display of female bodies, particularly the bodies of "blue-blood" coeds, was considered at best, distasteful, and at worst, salacious; the eugenicist aims sustained by this corporeal display, considerably less so (Rosenbaum, 1995).

Historic taxonomies of race, gender, class, and ability were solidified at the intersection of the image, the body and the archive, reifying the construction of the photograph as a technological tool able to uncover (or, more accurately, craft) the truth both a particular body and its place among other bodies. The history of the archive



functions as one of the most literal examples of how technology's intersection with the body is not only mutually constitutive, but also foundational to modern subjectivity.

While Sheldon's eugenicist project has since been widely discredited, it is telling that his language of "somatypes": ectomorphs, endomorphs and mesomorphs, still circulates within the very discourses of popular health and weight-loss culture body positivity ostensibly positions itself against. This is evidenced by a simple Google search of the terms "endomorph ectomorph mesomorph" which brings up over 60,000 results, leading with an article on the website *Bodybuilding* about finding your body type for better training results (Becker, 2015).

Together, these archival processes serve a tactical function within what Foucault termed the "anatomy-politics of the human body" (Foucault, 1990, p. 139). This is the body disciplined by the state, onto which its power is often visibly rendered through institutional means. This body can be the singular object of the state's attention, but more typically, as in the various photographic archives explored here, it consists of a collection of bodies that are visibly and demonstrably regulated. This latter manifestation is related to what Foucault terms "a biopolitics of the population" (Foucault, 1990, p. 139), wherein the body is contained as an object of the state not through harsh disciplinary measures that but through biologically-based mechanisms of population control.

While the "social body" (Foucault, 1990, p. 140), or the aggregate of many bodies, functions as the main subject of Foucault's work, it is the physical body that serves as the literal embodiment of institutional power. The body or bodies in question do not explicitly intend to be communicative, or to relay the messages with which they are imbued, but are most often the vehicles through which these forms of soft power are

expressed. Yet while the messages may not be intentional, and are, according to Foucault (1990), indeed, the “encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures” (p. 48). Their very insidiousness is what marks the body with essentialized messages of its identity and relationship to society at large, communicated regardless of individual subjectivity. The body-archive then, is far from a benign repository of data, but instead a mechanism for shaping the significance of the “modern” body itself.

### **Body Positivity as Body-Archive**

The residue of this sort of institutional intervention into the body is strikingly apparent in certain body positive websites. In the realm of digitized body positivity, it is not just a singular bodily performance, but the aggregate record of many performances that creates the movement’s archive. Recognizing the archival logics that factor into many iterations of digital body positivity illuminates the ways in which the hypervisible, hyper-recorded body we too readily situate as an anomaly of the present moment in fact carries within it a deep-seated historical trace.

Linkages between digital body positivity and the aforementioned historical body-archives are perhaps most notable on the site *My Body Gallery*. Designed to be “a collection of photos that will help more women see themselves more clearly” (My Body Gallery, 2016), the site relies on participants diligently recording- and freely submitting- images of their bodies. In this archive of body types, no state-sanctioned institution directly compels the bodily record, but rather, citizens willingly contribute their own body images and data. The site’s stated purpose, captured on its About Us page, is brief but telling. It explains that:

In a world full of images of how we ‘should’ look it can get difficult to tell how we DO look. Our hope is to build a site where women can see what real women look like. What we really look like. Most women have spent so many years looking at themselves in the mirror that we can no longer see what’s really there. The *My Body Gallery* project’s goal is to help women objectively see what we look like and come to some acceptance that we are all beautiful (About Us, 2016).

While the first chapter addressed the rhetoric of realness that pervades the *My Body Gallery* project, what is relevant here is the alignment of that discourse and an understanding of the photograph as a conduit of bodily “authenticity.” Critically, it is not the singular photograph, but the photographic archive, that is positioned as the tool through which to access an (almost scientific) objectivity, able to tell a truer truth than even the mirror.

As I detail in my earlier work on the site, *My Body Gallery* is functionally unique among the sites explored in this dissertation, as on it the image is of fundamental importance, and photographs comprise almost the entirety of the site’s content...the site’s primary content is [made up of] a growing collection of images of women and men, some fully dressed but many in undergarments only, displaying their bodies. The structure of these self-submitted photographs is strikingly reminiscent of legal and medical images. Bodies are presented square to the camera, hands mostly down at the subject’s sides. Many participants in the project submit multiple images of themselves, the front, left and right sides (and less often, the back) of the body presented in sequence. Images are most often anonymized, either by having heads cropped out, or by a black bar covering the

eyes or full face; an anonymization tool is even made available to participants upon uploading of their photographs<sup>4</sup>.

Although started by photographer Odessa Cozzolino, the *My Body Gallery* archive is made up of participant-contributed images. While anyone can volunteer their images to the project, those that are included on the site must conform to a rigid set of formal, aesthetic guidelines. The stated purpose of these instructions is to make the body appear as clearly as possible, with a mathematical attention placed on framing. On the site's Image Upload Guidelines page, they are explained at length:

We request that all uploads show at least 2/3 of the body. Images that stop at the waist will not qualify. A good rule of thumb is that your shoulders and hips should be visible in the photo. So either have someone else take a picture for you; take a picture of yourself in a full-length or similarly large mirror; use a camera with a remote timer that you can put on a tripod; prop your mobile device up and use a camera-timer app; or otherwise get creative with your picture taking process!...sometimes less than 2/3 of the body is shown because pictures often need to be cropped to fit the square format; in these cases they are always indicated as cropped with a link to the full image on the *My Body Gallery* website... If your body takes up less than 1/9 of the frame of the picture (using the standard photographic "rule of thirds"), it is probably too small to be approved as it becomes very difficult for someone to discern the person (Image Upload Guidelines, 2014).

On one level, we can understand *My Body Gallery*'s objective as simply to encourage their participants to make their body "the central focus of the image" (Image Upload Guidelines) they contribute. An investment in this kind of body visibility notably references a more immediate history of the body-image's veracity. Crystallized by Lauren Sessions (2009) in her analysis of the debates surrounding what she terms "MySpace

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<sup>4</sup> This description is influenced by an earlier version of this work published in *Feminist Media Studies* (Sastre, 2014)

angles,” it points to a lingering preoccupation with the potential for digital deception, one that continues to haunt the public imagination through shows like MTV’s *Catfish*. The term, derived from the early social networking site MySpace, describes the practice of photographing oneself in order to appear more conventionally attractive (Sessions, 2009). A photograph is taken with “the camera...at arm’s length [so] the subject fills the entire frame, though it is the face that is featured most prominently. Due to foreshortening, the subject’s body appears small” (Sessions, 2009). With the camera positioned above the subject’s face, features like the eyes appear more prominent, in conformity with classical standards of facial beauty (Fink & Neave, 2005). More importantly perhaps, the body is largely hidden from the camera’s gaze- with its totality merely hinted at, its potential “flaws,” most notably its size, are largely obscured.

“MySpace angles” is largely a derogatory term. It not only reflects anxieties surrounding the potential for digital deception and links inauthenticity to particular practices of bodily concealment, but also prejudices against fat female bodies that presumably require manipulative tactics to hide. If we look the performance of self online through a short-range lens, it follows that to represent the body (and the self) authentically is to expose it openly, and to reveal, as the body positive movement espouses, its purported flaws. Though the case of “MySpace angles” is far from the first to emerge from anxieties concerning the representation of one’s true identity online (Donath, 1999), its specific focus on the body and its occlusion is notably in contrast with the hyper-visible body that frequently appears on body positive websites like *My Body Gallery*. Body positivity, in other words, situates its project as a corrective to these more recent debates about visibility that work to hide and shame non-normative bodies.

Regardless of its immediate intent, when considering *My Body Gallery* as a visual archive of embodiment, it is impossible to ignore how it takes the familiar shape of the scientific archive. Not unlike the scholastic “posture photos,” the rigidly formulaic images visible on *My Body Gallery* are intended to render a set of body-images that are easily categorized by type, according to participant-input data. The site’s Gallery Search tool (Figure 1) allows site visitors to search for images of bodies through categories of height, weight, pant size, shirt size, photo size and shape (meaning body shape): pear, banana, apple and hourglass- all notably reminiscent of the categories through which the images comprising Sheldon’s doomed project were sorted. The representation of these body shape types is a feature that has changed since the start of this research. While the four types listed used to conform to the popular convention of fruit names that loosely mimic certain body shapes, now abstract graphical renderings of four limbless bodies are used instead- one a teardrop, another the same teardrop upside-down, the third a rectangle and the last an hourglass, all topped with a dot for a head.

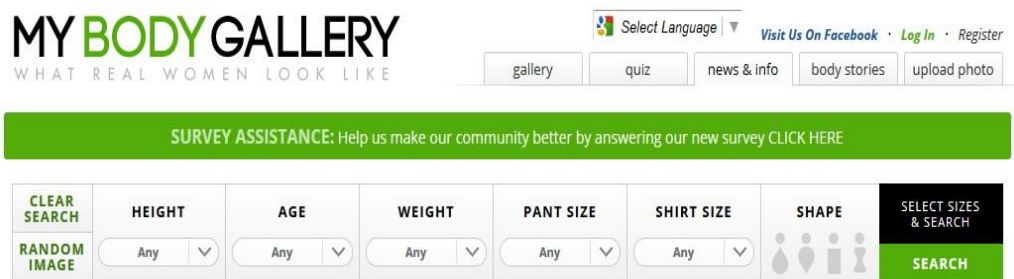


Figure 1: My Body Gallery Search Tool (My Body Gallery, 2016)

On *My Body Gallery*, the Gallery Search tool is omnipresent, appearing in the banner that tops every page, even those without photographic content. It is the most

immediate way visitors can interact with the site. Though its design is in keeping with the site's overall aesthetic, on the popular browser Firefox it appears twice as wide as the main content area of any given page. Crucially, this device facilitates the site's mission to display "what real women look like;" uniting form and function, it lets "see themselves more clearly" by granting them the ability to wade strategically through a dense archive of bodies and pull up those that mirror their own measurements. While the motivations are certainly different, the structural similarities- and underlying presumptions about the body-image- shared by both *My Body Gallery* and archives like Sheldon's link the digital performance of body positivity to a longer history of the photograph's use to catalog (and pathologize) bodies.

While it is presented as a cohesive project, *My Body Gallery* is actually comprised of two parallel sites, the original *My Body Gallery* and *My Body Gallery for Men*. It is unclear when the *My Body Gallery for Men* site was launched, because its *About Us* page consists almost entirely of the same text as that which introduces the original, women-only site. There is not a clear justification provided for the site's division by gender, although notably the sole difference among the twin sites' missions is that, while *My Body Gallery* is a project who's "goal is to help women objectively see what we look like and come to some acceptance that we are all beautiful" (About Us, 2016), the goal of *My Body Gallery for Men* is instead to "help men objectively see what we look like and come to some acceptance of our bodies" (About Us, 2016). Not unlike the normative gender expectations captured in Sheldon's project half a century ago, photography is positioned as a tool for an imagined objectivity in relation to the male body. However, in relation to the female body, the photographic image holds the paradoxical burden of both objectivity

and beautification. As mentioned in Chapter 1, though partially nude images are encouraged on *My Body Gallery*, distinctions are made between male and female toplessness that follow normative social mores around gender. While images of topless male bodies are allowed on the site, “female nipple exposure is still taboo in many places (especially in America) and so [*My Body Gallery*] will reject photos that show female nipples (this applies to nipples showing through sheer lingerie as well)” (Image Guidelines, 2014). Unlike other body positive sites like *The Body is Not an Apology*, *Stop Hating Your Body*, *Herself* and *My Body Gallery* doesn’t grapple with how men in female-identified bodies might participate in their archival project- gender identity is here presumed to be just as stable and knowable as the body and the photograph.

While *My Body Gallery* regulates the kinds of images it publishes more heavily than other body positive sites, images that chronicle the body in a rote fashion are present across body positive content. Lady Gaga’s yellow underwear images, and the many copy-cat pictures they spawned, did not just ascribe to the norms of (near) nudity. They also show the body from all angles- front, side and back, presented next to each other as a discrete record of its contours.

These images were emphatically aligned with sentiments of bravery that frame exposure itself as a radical act. But, perhaps unintentionally, they also call to the very histories of difference and differentiation that, as Sekula (1986) reminds us, were partially built by the analog image. As this manner of photographic capture becomes the way in which “perceived flaws” are “redefined” (Rolling Stone, 2012), we are reminded of how very similar images were used to construct the normative body- and the imagined flaws in relation to it- in the first place.



Caitlin Stasey's site, *Herself*, brings a distinct but related set of issues to the forefront. More so than any of the other body positive sites I examined, extensive (interview) text informs how the site's images are interpreted. However as outlined in Chapter 1, the site also operationalizes a distinct, naturalistic aesthetic that is closely allied with broader body positive depictions of realness and authenticity. The visuality of *Herself* is a reflection of the site's small roster of photographers, and not a central focus of the project as originally conceived. As Stasey explained in an interview with the Australian publication *Daily Life*:

My prerogative was to share the stories and plight of women just like you or me...I wanted these women to be subjects not objects - but then I met photographers Jennifer Toole and Georgia Smedley, and [they have] such an incredible eye and manner that the photography element really took on a life of its own (Bastow, 2015).

Following Stasey's statement, it would seem that images take a backseat on *Herself*. But instead, the site's visual content makes evident continuing challenges in the realization of the creators' body positive, feminist vision. As the project is not centered on submitted images, but on pictures and stories gathered through scheduled photoshoots and interviews, site editors play an enormous role in creating and shaping content. On a practical level, Stasey explained to *Jezebel*'s Madeline Davies that "the most difficult thing to overcome [in continuing to create *Herself*] is that it is a reflection of the people who want to take part in it" (Davis, 2015). In other words, there is no site if women do not volunteer to share their bodies in the particular ways *Herself* stipulates. Yet ideologically, Stasey's vision is to showcase a diverse range of bodies in order that the site successfully challenge how "society very cleverly and insidiously compartmentalizes

and pigeonholes women” (Bastow, 2015), allowing instead for women to “find themselves... scattered throughout the stories and bodies of others” (Bastow, 2015). The site’s heavily visual content necessarily complicates its vision. In the same interview with Davies, Stasey also admits that the biggest challenge to date has not been recruiting participants, as she claims to have received “3,000 emails” from interested women (Davies, 2015). Rather, it has been to access women who embody “the diversity that we so sorely need” (Davies, 2015). Setting aside the question of why the project’s vision might make it appealing to a particular demographic over another, Stasey is ultimately forthright about how the image’s centrality within *Herself* inevitably shapes the project of its diversity, noting that “to put out a call, like ‘Hey, we’re looking for women of this particular physicality or this particular look’...looks like it’s tokenism, doesn’t it?” (Davies, 2015).

What Stasey rightly points to is a recognition of how the image as a representational object both stands-for and *conjures* bodies. This is the lineage of Sheldon’s “types,” and of the composite-photograph model/monster. It is what we have come to expect of the photograph as an object that operates analogously to the body. When viewed through the long lens of history, we not only understand how it has become naturalized, but also recognize the dangers of this truth-telling expectation. But divorced from this framework, our affinity for the image as arbiter of bodily truth becomes little more than a curious, if relatable, attachment. In an age of digital accessibility characterized by the selfie, it seems inevitable that we’d impart authority onto both an image of ourselves, and an image of someone who’s merely *like* us, our “type.” This

sentiment is perhaps most meaningfully captured in another brief anecdote Stasey shared with Davies:

I've had emails from women that are like 'I really love Herself. I just want to know why there aren't more women like me on it.' And I respond with 'Well, if you'd like to take part, we'd be more than happy to have you.' And they respond with "No, no, not me. Women like me" (Davies, 2015).

### **An Analog Imaginary in a Digital Present**

The analog photograph and its attendant mythology of objectivity has played a pivotal role in the enactment of biopower under modernity, shaping conceptions of the normal and deviant body that implicate identity categories including race, gender, sexuality and ability. The digital photograph figures centrally in contemporary modes of surveillance, but in critically different ways than its technological predecessor. When attempting to understand the significance of self-representation in the context of digital body-positivity, recognizing not only these differences, but also how an analog imaginary informs lay thinking around the digital image is of critical importance.

Today's photographic technologies are rapidly evolving and intersecting with the digital in ways that augment and contest historic concerns about its ability to portray truth and catalog bodies. Yet not only do photographic practices produce and perpetuate a racial and gendered imaginary, but that imaginary is in turn built into the very architecture of the camera. Lorna Roth (2009) writes an astute history of the so called "Shirley cards," used to regulate color in photographic printing. Roth explains that:

Skin-colour balance” in still photography printing refers historically to a process in which a norm reference card showing a ‘Caucasian’ woman wearing a colourful, high-contrast dress is used as a basis for measuring and calibrating the skin tones on the photograph being printed. The light skin tones of these women—named ‘Shirley’ by male industry users after the name of the first colour test-strip-card model—have been the recognized skin ideal standard for most North American analogue photo labs since the early part of the twentieth century and they continue to function as the dominant norm (Roth, 2009).

This approach to color-balancing the camera literally white-washes, as dark skin is consistently flattened and distorted on film. The raced and gendered mechanics of the image thus echo a broader social context that casts Whiteness as the referent for the “real” body, and non-white bodies as merely its derivations. The positioning of whiteness-as-neutrality can be traced back even further- white powder was dusted onto sitters’ faces as they sat patiently for hours at a time, waiting for their likeness to be captured in a daguerreotype (Tagg, 1993, p. 41).

Even in the discussion of digital (rather than analog) photography, it is this spectrum that goes unchallenged in accounts of representation that imagine unedited photos as a neutral starting point. We can see then, in both the image itself and the mechanics of its production, the central tensions that surround the question of authenticity and authentic representation. Authenticity, here, is presumed equitable to objectivity. This collapse occludes a history of inequality that reveals authenticity to be a valuation in the service of a raced and gendered status quo.

In her work chronicling the ethical debates surrounding the use of filters and other digital editing technologies in photojournalism, Susan Keith notes that central to discussions of the ways Photoshop and other editing tools can deceive and manipulate viewers is the presumption that “photographs that had not been digitally altered were

faithful depictions of reality” (Keith, 2014, p. 64). Anti-Photoshop discourse has, in recent years, become so colloquial that even when the term is not used specifically in reference to Adobe’s proprietary tool, it connotes “the removal of photographic imperfections” (Chandler & Livingston, 2012, p. 4). With the image presumed a metonym for the material world, its “imperfections” signal it as a sincere depiction of a materiality that, supposedly, only further technological intervention corrupts. The core mythology around this debate involves photo-editing tools distorting not an already-processed, fallible, subjective representation of reality, but its exact and objective capture.

Making unedited images widely visible is construed as an investment in recuperating a singular relationship between the body and its image, one that has been corrupted by a particular set of technological interventions. The immediate problem is, certainly, that these interventions have been wielded by and for corporate interests with the objective of selling women a litany of products and services to obtain an intentionally limited, distant ideal body. Yet it is also that only one aspect of the body’s technological intervention- the editorial layer- is recognized as such, without any disruption of a historical logic that positions the analog photograph as a truth-telling agent. A post published on *Jezebel* by then-editor Jessica Coen in late 2010 reflects how ingrained this logic is within a contemporary feminist politics of representation. Titled *Why You Must See Unretouched Images, and Why You Must See Them Repeatedly*, Coen’s statement reads, in part:

For those of you who have seen, time and time again, these manipulated images...and are aware of the reality behind them, you're maybe able to look at ads and mags and keep your head straight. Not necessarily, but that's the hope. But remember that every day, a young woman somewhere sees one of these overly polished pictures for the first time and has no idea that they're not real...what the girl does know is that the pictures show What Is Beautiful. She thinks they are reality. And maybe she doesn't have someone in her life to point out that this is complete and utter bullshit. So we'll do that, and we'll do it over and over again just to make sure that everyone knows what's up [*sic*] (Coen, 2010).

*Jezebel's* call to arms against the dangerous fiction of digitally manipulated images notably follows a history of feminist critique against the hegemony of such practices (Bordo, 1995; Kilbourne, 1999; Jhally, 2007). However, what is arguably most interesting about the site's stance against the pervasive use of doctored photos in contemporary media is its proclamation of the truth of images themselves, at least in their raw, unedited state. If "overly polished pictures" are decidedly "not real," then it stands that photographs that have not been digitally altered are an accurate representation of reality. There is no mention made of any intermediate layer between objective "reality," and edited manipulation. Nor is there a substantive conversation generated around how digital photography is a technology that is distinct from analog photography in critical ways, producing a very different kind of object and complicating our conception of its circulation and objectivity. Instead, unedited images and glossy Photoshop images are pitted against one another in a myopic, ahistorical battle of reality versus artifice.

In sum, within the context of digital body positivity, concerns around photo-editing technologies are almost exclusively related to its aforementioned role within the representation of idealized femininity in mass media. While the Photoshop "witch-hunt" has exposed practices that certainly perpetuate unrealistic and damaging constructions of

normative femininity (Bordo, 1995; Kilbourne, 1999), the underlying concern consistently regards the truth and authenticity of the bodies portrayed. It is this truth which is concurrently heralded as a liberator of our social preoccupations with perfection and also, paradoxically, as something which is owed to the world. Put another way, the debates surrounding the making of body-images show that subjectivity is intimately linked to corporeal exposure and attest that the only body whose authentic form can be verified (through an unedited captured), whose transformations, if any, are disclosed, is deemed a “real” body.

A compelling example of this logic is a feature of *My Body Gallery* (and *My Body Gallery for Men*) called the *My Body Gallery Quiz*. This feature, linked to from both sites’ homepages, draws from site archives to essentially prove their purpose. Through the quiz, users can test the validity of their own body-perceptions against the supposed validity of the body-photograph. The tool is presented with very minimal explanation- its tagline is “Think you know what a person's weight looks like? Welcome to the My Body Gallery Quiz! Test yourself and share your results” (Welcome to the My Body Gallery Quiz!, n.d.). In small print toward the bottom of the quiz’s landing page a brief blurb further elaborates its purpose. “Sometimes we don't realize what certain weights really look like on other people” begins the response to the question of “Why a Quiz?” It continues: “this quiz is aimed to test your skill identifying what people with specific weights really look like” (Welcome to the My Body Gallery Quiz!, n.d.). The body-photograph here becomes evidentiary of the body’s “realness,” showing what the body “really looks like” beyond what the eye can see or the mirror can reflect.

When taking the quiz, you are first prompted to “select a weight to begin” from a small drop-down menu at the center of the page. Once a weight has been selected from options between 100-500 lbs in 10 lb increments (options for weights “below 100 lbs” and “above 500 lbs” are also available for selection), players are taken to a subsequent page where five images from *My Body Gallery*’s archive are presented alongside one another. Above the images appears the quiz’s central question: “One of these [women or men] is approximately [weight selected] lbs. Which one?” Once the player clicks on a selected image, the quiz pulls five more images from the archive, and so forth for three total rounds. The final results do not tell the player the recorded weight of the various bodies they saw, but instead how many times out of three they correctly identified the image of the person corresponding to the weight in question.

The “success” of this quiz is, on an immediate level, contingent on the archive’s streamlined form, which is to say the images the quiz generates need to catalog the body in comparable ways for any comparison to be made among them. But perhaps more importantly, the quiz relies on the photograph as a stable and authoritative object, even more so than the body it records. In spite of its digital context, the photograph here is indecipherable from its analog roots, an arbiter of both singular and collective truths about a body that is presumed to be more knowable through its flattened captured than its lived complexity.

While *My Body Gallery* and the particularities of its site offerings is just one among myriad body-positive digital spaces, it is not unique in its treatment and fetishization of the photograph- and its fickle analog, the mirror- as a tool of corporeal objectivity. A tenuous but tangible line might be drawn from the pervasive emphasis on



nudity, to the mirror selfie, to the photograph as authoritative body-text in a way that parallels and perpetuates a historical investment in situating the photograph as evidence. As I will address more deeply in Chapter 4, excavating and fomenting a radical body positive requires a recalibration of the formal qualities of digital body positive practice. Images, like bodies, are not wholly objective, but firmly entrenched within the bounds of the culture and context from which they emerge. Furthermore, recognizing them not only as unstable entities, but as *processes* allows for deeper and more resonant parallels and tensions between the body and the image to be explored. Recognizing and cultivating a radical body positive requires a rethinking of how an analog framework shapes its current practices and their interpretation, and a move towards resituating it within a digital frame.

### **Digital (In)Visibilities**

Unique contemporary concerns emerge when the digital image is held to reflect the body (and by extension, the self) within the space of social media. Digital images are both instantaneous captures of the world around us, and objects readily shared and circulated as communicative devices. There is an immediacy to the digital image that renders it distinct from the analog photograph, a temporal shift that- in contrast to Barthes' notion of the photograph as memory capture- builds a certain intimacy directly into the medium. Yet concerns about manipulation and distortion of what the digital image shows are more than a legacy inherited from analogue thinking. As Mark Hansen (2004) notes, "following its digitization, the image can no longer be understood as a fixed and objective viewpoint on 'reality' ...since it is now defined precisely through its almost complete flexibility...and its constitutive virtuality'" (p. 8); the digital image functions

not as a finite entity, but as an assemblage of parts always understood in relation to one another. The bodies implicated within its construction are multiple, augmented beyond the body we see visually represented on the screen before us. They are the (infinite) bodies that hold the camera as well as stand before it, the bodies that upload the image onto a body positive website, the bodies that look at the image and use it to, consciously or unconsciously, inform their perception of themselves. They are also the bodies that designed the camera phone, the bodies that wrote the code that allowed bits of data to be visualized in the shape of flesh we recognize as human. “The digital image demarcates an embodied processing of information” (p. 10) Hansen (2004) writes; it allows us to better see and recognize our shifting roles within the architecture of its making.

Repositioning the project of body positivity within a digital frame facilitates precisely what the analog cannot- mobility. The body-image here is, materially and ideologically, antithetical to what it is within an analog framework, precisely because it can take many forms. The digital image might best be understood as inchoate potentiality that allows for the given relations of power within which it is constituted- into an image or a body- to be *productively* reflected. In other words, it allows for an understanding of both the body and the image as necessarily divorced from prevailing discourses of the truth and authority of both. Instead, what enters the picture (pun intended) is the privileging of movement, instability and becoming, in the Deleuzian sense. The image and the body become more fully co-constitutive of each other in a manner that illuminates not only the representational work images do in relation to bodies- the schema in which current modes of body positivity operate- but also, as discussed in the following chapter, the affective labor sparked in bodies by images.

Ironically, embracing what might initially feel like the abstraction of the digital can be read as a fundamentally body positive gesture. Early on in this work, I briefly situated a lineage of fat, queer, feminist activism as the loose ideological foundation on which contemporary body positivity rests. These fights, for the subjectivation of what Braziel and LeBesco (2001) term “bodies out of bounds,” inform an understanding of the boundless body as a site of resistance to a neoliberal modernity contingent upon commoditized practices of self-regulation that attach moral value to disciplined corporeality. In contrast, body positivity at its simplest challenges the message that bodies-in-excess, bodies defined as non-normative within a raced, gendered, ableist system that fetishizes visibility, are “bad” bodies; it works to humanize those shunned within these systems of power. The spirit of this mission can, in turn, be found in the very language Hansen (2004) uses to illuminate how the interaction between the digital image and the body that perceives it is constitutive of the *virtual*, as a “quality of human (and, more generally, organic) life and can only erroneously be equated with technology” (p. 50). He continues, “the virtual must be understood as that capacity, so fundamental to human existence, to be in excess of one’s actual state” (Hansen, 2004, p. 50).

Centering the notion of excess as sensory and somatic flood, we can see how the project of body positivity and process of the digital image are ontologically similar. In the final chapter, I explore how a digital framework attentive to the image as process and assemblage can productively echo the messy, chaotic, unpleasant, and unresolved body to shape what I term a radical body positive. My call for such a radical body positivity is, at its simplest, intended to better align form with function. If the body positive movement is to strive for more than inclusivity, there needs to be a critical interrogation of the

presumptions that surround its central political tool, the body-image, and the narratives of authenticity, empowerment, beauty and identity that accompany it. Just as feminist scholarship continues to push for an intersectional approach to the body that understands it as cross-cut by not only gender but also race, sexuality, class and ability, digital body positivity should engage the body's relationship to its technological means of representation. Hansen (2004) pushes us to understand the virtual as excess, to see beyond "the image as a technical frame" and come to recognize instead "the problematic of framing formless information increasingly central to contemporary media culture" (p. 52). I see this impetus as analogous with the representational problems I highlight within body positivity. I push for a radical body positive to acknowledge, through a critical engagement with form, the ways in which the body, like the digital image, is never fully stable, knowable or representable. This, it seems to me, is a necessary release valve to body positivity's representational- and, as discussed in Chapter 2- psycho-emotional expectations.

## Chapter 4

### **Towards a Radical Body Positive: Envisioning a New Visual Politics of the Body**

Body positivity has gone mainstream. In early 2016, the time of this chapter's writing, it is not uncommon to see brands like lingerie company Aerie, a subsidiary of American Eagle Outfitters, disavowing Photoshop and pledging their allegiance to "real" bodies (Docktorman, 2014). The words "Love Your Body" dominate *InStyle* Magazine's February 2016 cover, promoting a 7-page spread featuring "real talk from real editors on...[how] to adore [your body], stop stressing and start flaunting" (Penn, Shanahan & Synnott, 2016). Across those pages are fictional letters beginning "dear ample chest," and "dear cankles," addressed to images of disembodied abdomens, legs and torsos documented in soft-focus monochrome. Ashley Graham became the first plus-sized model to be featured – in a bikini- on the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* infamous swimsuit edition. *Dove* skincare, who's "Campaign for Real Beauty" was launched more than a decade ago in 2004, has become the gold standard for corporatized body positivity.

The increased visibility of the call for diverse bodies to be represented in mainstream media has also prompted a parallel conversation encouraging a critical engagement with body positivity and its aims. While scholars of feminist media studies have consistently produced thoughtful work interrogating the stakes at the intersection of "female empowerment" narratives and consumer culture (Persis Murray, 2013; Gill, 2007; Gill & Elias, 2014), what is notable as of late is the popular conversation emerging around the mainstreaming of body positivity as a cause- and tactic.

In late 2015, Toronto-based advertising agency *John St* launched *Jane St*, a sarcastic send-up of the increasingly pervasive “femvertising” trend in advertising (Nudd, 2015). The fictional *Jane St* agency is presented as a sister agency to *John St*, specializing in “creating unique, authentic female empowerment messaging for any brand” (Jane St, n.d.). Jane St’s tagline, “powering empowerment through the power of brands” is emblazoned on the homepage of the agency’s surprisingly convincing website (Jane St, n.d.). The heart of the parody is a short video introducing to *Jane St* and what it can offer companies looking to “empower women through advertising.” The video (John St, 2015), which has nearly 300,000 views on YouTube as of March 2016, is a mockumentary, featuring interviews with *Jane St*’s executives and representatives from their various brand clients. Its most memorable segment features an interview with the company’s “Planning Director,” who outlines *Jane St*’s core strategy for reaching a “female target” immediately after we see a model with heavy underarm and public hair being photographed for a fictional “Sylk Haircare” campaign. “The first thing we need to do is identify an insecurity” the director explains “they might not even know they have these insecurities, so it’s really important that we dig them up” (John St, 2015). This approach, according to *Jane St*, allows any brand to access a female audience, regardless of what product they’re selling. As the agency’s “Confidence Director” notes:

A lot of marketers think that in order for their brand to really benefit from a female empowerment message they somehow have to tie back to females or even equality, but that’s actually not the case. We’ve seen the Jane St model work for a number of business segments. We’ve even empowered women with yogurt (John St, 2015).

The parody is not without problems- in lampooning an increasingly guileless corporate commandeering of feminism, it also mocks and dismisses any presumably feminine alternative to corporate culture, like “empathy training.” But *Jane St* works as a comedic gesture precisely because of the mainstreaming of feminist, and more specifically body positive, messages.

*The Establishment*, a “multimedia site run and funded by women” (About Us, n.d.) launched in October 2015. Founded by Nikki Gloudeman, who formerly worked for feminist publication *Mother Jones*, “denizen of the foreign policy think-tank world” Kelley Calkins and journalist Katie Tandy, *The Establishment* positions itself as a “space for writers and creators of all shapes, sizes, and creeds to work their magic” (About Us, n.d.). Publishing mostly long-form content written by women, one of the site’s first pieces took on the question of *How ‘Love Your Body’ Became a Marketing Slogan* (Weiss, 2015). In the piece, author Suzannah Weiss immediately points to the mythology that drives contemporary body positivity. “We have to feel beautiful to be happy,” she writes, “and at the heart of this myth is a ubiquitous and affirming mantra that’s been bastardized by the advertising industry: ‘Love your body’” (Weiss, 2015). Weiss’ critique centers on various *Dove* Beauty campaigns, and echoes the same reality the *Jane St* video parodies. Advertisers have for some time been aware of the money-making potential of “empowerment” narratives (Gill & Elias, 2014; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006), but today they are increasingly attuned to a public desire to see “real,” “natural” beauty. Most importantly, they are invested in eliding any contradiction between a message of self-acceptance and a consumer culture driven by the creation of needs intended to be met by a relentless stream of available products.

Weiss's message about the easily exploitable allegiance of beauty and happiness in body positive narratives, echoed by Lisa Wade, Ph.D., on her popular blog *Sociological Images*, easily extends across body positive media and practices. While a valuable corrective to a mainstream media long obsessed with a singular body type, the call for diverse representation continues to be uncritically centered on beauty. Body positivity, as the narratives cataloged in the Chapter 2 attest, "[reinforces] the belief that women should care about beauty in the first place" (Weiss, 2015). The focus on beauty is implicated in both the centrality of the visual record to body positive practice, and the emphasis on narratives of triumphant self-love. The alignment between beauty and appearance is perhaps easiest to critique. Body positivity intervenes with current limitations on who has access to beauty and its associated privilege, but in so doing also comfortably reinscribes beauty as accessible only through a performative exchange centered on the body chronicle. In other words, you must still be seen- even in a body positive light- to be beautiful.

And yet, body positivity is on to something. Beauty has, and will undoubtedly always maintain, tremendous affective power. Regardless of what (or whom) we may consider beautiful at any given moment or in any given epoch, beauty can encompass and trigger a depth and range of feeling. It is at this node, the meeting of beauty and feeling, that I want to linger, here where body positivity seems to be on the precipice of a radical transformation from the will to beauty to the recognition of its affective potentiality. Rather than merely stretch conventional beauty practices across a larger audience, rethinking the current visual and rhetorical practices that drive body positivity might



allow it to become a radical lens through which to illuminate the affects that animate the intersection of beauty, representation and embodiment.

In May 2015, a Chicago high school student named Shea Glover produced a short video project based on a simple premise: capturing her fellow students' reactions before and after she told them they were beautiful (Chicago Student's Viral Video, 2015). She uploaded the video to YouTube, and it soon became a viral hit, viewed nearly 10 million times by March 2016 (Glover, 2015). Titled simply *People React to Being Called Beautiful*, the project is aesthetically stark and startlingly intimate. Just under 5 minutes long, the film mostly consists of close-up reaction shots of her subjects. Glover appears only as an unseen friendly voice, explaining over and over again to each person she films that she is "taking pictures of things I find beautiful." The lighting is dim and slightly hazy. The video seems to have been shot in a school stairwell. There is a steady, undulating rhythm to the hand-held camera, an extension of Glover's own body as she leans almost imperceptibly towards the faces she captures. Again and again, we see a diversity of faces, but what we witness is the raw, palpable feeling the term "beautiful" engenders. There is not only joy here- we see what can be recognized as surprise, bashfulness, glee, awkwardness. We also see what one might call discomfort, disbelief, sadness. At the level of feeling, of that which can be named, we recognize the complex personal and relational discourses implicated in beauty as an idea. But we also see beauty as a gesture, an act- something, in essence, to which "people react." Some subjects respond verbally to Glover, mapping the encounter by thanking her, or announcing, in the words of one young man, that "this is so awkward." But even if the smallest of flinches is

all the camera records, all subjects take a beat, suspended in time, then move, viscerally processing her intimate declaration.

Beauty here, does work, but a different sort of work than it does within a current rubric of body positivity. It is not an affirmation, or rather, not only- beauty, as a gesture from the unseen Glover, is an opening that brings myriad realities to life. The repetitive nature of Glover's video is particularly, intentionally resonant- again and again, the same phrase wills forth disparate chains of events. Beauty does not operate here as it does within body positivity, as the end game and armor against violence, degradation, invisibility. Beauty is here a starting point, disentangled from the expectation of wholeness, resolution, or happiness.

Brian Massumi, in his work on affect, has used the term "intensity" to describe an unconscious, pre-cognitive state of feeling. Intensity situates affect as distinct from emotion; "embodied in purely autonomic reactions," intensity allows us to recognize the body as both "surface" and interface" (Massumi, 1995, p. 85). While it falls outside the purview of the linear narrative, it is precisely its temporal stasis that gives intensity its name. "It is not exactly passivity," explains Massumi (1995), "because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed...toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims" (p. 86). Intensity is defined less by its force than by its potentiality, an inchoate register of possible futures.

In his call for cultural theory to be attentive to affect, Massumi explores the complex and contradictory relationship between affect and representation, particularly the representation of embodiment. Because intensity falls outside the realm of cognition and

narrative processing, an affective frame is useful in rethinking the relationship between body and image. Echoing Mark Hansen (2004), it allows us to recognize the body as virtual, “a pressing crown of incipencies and tendencies...a realm of potential” (Massumi, 1995, p. 91). To recognize affect as inherently embodied, as “virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in the actually existing, particular things that embody them” (Massumi, 1995, p. 96) is to recognize the potential of the body-image as generative, to dislocate a regime of visibility-representation-recognition in favor of diversity not only in *which* bodies are represented, but *how*. A radical body positive could better recognize, in other words, that images spark feelings. In so doing, it can subvert historic expectations that the body-image conjure subjects and instead express a felt sense of embodiment that promotes different modes of connectivity.

This chapter responds to the formations of digital body positivity laid out in the previous three chapters and proposes various ways by which a more radical body positivity might be both recognized and fostered. To this end, it attends less to the dominant visual, discursive and rhetorical models of digital body positivity already examined, and more to the fringes and exceptions, those works of photography, modes self-representation and body-practices that might not immediately be recognized as body positive but that, I argue, usefully illuminate a more transformative set of goals for a term that has gained tremendous traction in a relatively short period of time. This chapter turns to theories of affect, disability and digital media to examines various case studies, both from within and outside the body positive archive this project has kept to thus far. These examples help illuminate the ways in which current digital body positive practices sometimes calcify the relationship between the body and its representation, visibility,

authenticity, diversity and feeling when they might instead challenge the singular ways in which we are encouraged to see, record, respond, share and relate to our bodies.

It is worth noting that, unlike many of the images produced for and circulated on body positive websites, the images explored in this chapter are produced and recognized as works of art. My interest in them is not because they are classified in this way, and in fact the attention photographer Amalia Ulman's work received as the first selfie included in a museum exhibition problematically reinscribes the imagined boundaries between high and low culture so often applied to discussions of art. Rather, I analyze the potential of a radical body positive through these works- some of which circulated on social media spaces alongside body positive content- because I see art (unlike a digital body positive practice defined by site guidelines and norms) as defined by a *lack* of productive constraint and thus imbued with the potential to imagine new subjectivities. As such, within the realm of art (not the realm of an Art world driven by the forces of capital, but art as a creative endeavor) both the image and the body can be pried loose from the rigidity of their current epistemological entanglements. As Guattari writes in his work *Chaosmosis*:

This is not about making artists the new heroes of the revolution, the new levers of History! Art is not just the activity of established artists but of a whole subjective creativity which traverses the generations and oppressed peoples...the aesthetic paradigm- the creation and composition of mutant percepts and affects - has become the paradigm for every possible form of liberation, expropriating...old scientific paradigms (1995, p. 90)

### **Towards A Radical Body Positive**

The first part of this chapter responds to the construction, explored in Chapter 3, of the body as an authentic/atable entity within a body positive frame, verifiable by a

mechanics of visibility reliant on the presumed objectivity of the photograph. I take this on by examining the works of various photographers grappling with the implications of portraiture in the age of the selfie: photographer Amalia Ulman, who's recent project "Excellences & Perfections" (2014) unpacks the selfie as a product. Undertaken entirely on Instagram, Ulman's work embraces multiple levels of artifice and performance, laying bare any presumptions of naturalness imbued in the photographic record. Now slated to be a part of the Tate Modern's upcoming exhibit, *Performing for the Camera*, Ulman's project stretches the boundaries between photographer and subject, as well as those between social and traditional media (Neuendorf, 2016). In rendering visible the architecture of contemporary self-making, Ulman's work allows for a rethinking of body positivity's fetishization of "the real."

I also look at photographer and Assistant Professor at Memphis College of Art Haley Morris-Cafiero's project "Wait Watchers" (2013) The project was originally intended as series of self-portraits in public spaces. Instead, Morris-Cafiero began to notice her film had recorded not only her body, but also the varied looks of strangers watching her. She soon "set up [her] camera for the purpose of capturing the expressions of passersby" (the watchers book) and her work became focused on the public looks her fat body received.

Following Sara Ahmed's impassioned call to "make walls visible," (Ahmed, 2015) both Ulman and Morris-Cafiero's works attend to how the photograph might be recognized not as an arbiter of truth, but as a channel for a dense flow of affective relations that are either felt but unrecognized, or willfully ignored. To this end, while these images have specific representational significance, they also allow for a rethinking

of the body and image alike as mobile, flexible and relational. In keeping with Rosemary Garland-Thomson's (2009) seminal work in disability studies, they interrogate the look as a complex and politicized site of agency. They are also readable against newer work in the area of selfie studies that problematizes a reductive take on selfies as merely agential acts of self-presentation and instead calls for their rethinking as nodes in affective networks. As Daniel Rubenstein (2015) writes in his recent piece *The Gift of the Selfie*, "it is both an image of something or someone and it is an embodiment of a relationship that is impossible to represent but possible to experience...the selfie does not get rid of the subject and the object, but it destroys the notion of fixed and stable identity, and the opposition between it and the world" (p. 167). I would argue that this is the mode of visual representation that drives body positivity, and that conventional selfies in general do not *yet* fully destabilize subjectivity in the way Rubenstein suggests. But by calling out relationality, affect and instability as aims, we can both interrogate the limits of a current body positive frame, and begin to see what it might be otherwise.

The next section in this chapter attends specifically to "positivity" as an organizing principle of contemporary body positivity. With a focus not only on self-love but also on *showing* love through positive comments and messages, positivity underlies the practice and ethos of digital body positivity. I am not making an argument against positivity or pleasure, and acknowledge the power of what is undoubtedly the movement's dominant body-feeling. But I propose that a radical body positive make room for other feelings and affects that are, quite literally, more difficult to stomach: messiness, disgust, pain and repulsion among them. Currently, these feelings- actually better understood as visceral and intrinsically embodied affects- are coded as "negative,"

likely because, as Heather Love (2007) has noted, they are difficult to organize around and can in fact be seen as an anathema to political action and change.

Here I turn to the work of poet and artist Rupi Kaur, examining her image series on menstruation. These images, which lit a spark on social media, only indirectly feature a visible body. But in lingering on its detritus, they channel a necessarily complex entanglement of responses that implicate the body within a web of innate and social forces. Working at the intersection of disability studies and art history, Tobin Siebers (2001) called for a “new realism of the body,” arguing that what is radical about this new chronicles of the disabled body is its raw expression of the baser dimensions of corporeality. Here, the notion of pain, often anesthetized through over-theorization, is expressed through detailing a body that eats, shits and convulses. In the context of the body positivity, this “new realism” works as a challenge to expectations of bodily wholeness. It also functions as a conduit of the very affects often elided within body positivity. Bodies are messy, unruly, uncomfortable. Body positive images should not just relay, but also sometimes trigger those feelings in their viewer, building a bridge between bodies.

Lastly, this chapter considers how a politics of refusal might nuance body positive narratives centered on “resolving” embodiment through empowerment. Here I turn to both Sara Ahmed (2015) and Alison Kafer (2013), whose works at the intersection of queer theory and disability studies address how a “queer crip politics might involve a refusal to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole, for there can be nothing more willful than the refusal to be aspirational” (Ahmed, 2015). This final section considers by an essay by Emily McCombes on resisting the predominance of

body-love messages, but is largely without a central case study. This move is intentional; in practice of the proposed “refusal to be aspirational,” I consciously resist setting up any particular gesture of resistance as a model. Instead I sit with the tensions that a non-inspirational, non-aspirational body politics brings up, considering the potential implications of a transition from body positivity’s current “warrior” discourse to Ahmed’s “queer crip army” (2015) as a practice of community and solidarity.

This is not to say that community and solidarity do not already exist within body positivity. Digital body positive practice, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, is based not only on taking and circulating body images, but also on giving and receiving positive affirmations. This affective exchange is less evident on the sites examined here, largely because I chose to look at sites built intentionally for body positive purposes, rather than at body positive communities formed within existing social networking sites. Future scholarship might do well to focus on the distinctions and reciprocities between these differently structured digital body positive platforms. So while it is less apparent within the confines of this project, value is certainly placed on positive acts as gestures towards community building through solidarity with those who publicly share their image and story. Yet it is also worth noting that almost all of the sites examined (with the exception of *Body Revolution*) here do not have built-in commenting features.

My intention is not to conceptualize radical body positivity as something wholly outside of body positivity’s current instantiation, but rather, after having established the central practices and tenets that undergird it, to localize the radical within its fissures. There is, inherently, a sense of contradiction present in the proposal for a radical body



positive: body positivity might be seen as a movement for inclusivity, not transformation; attention to the messy, the unfinished, and “ugly” feelings (to borrow from Ngai, 2005) works against the objective of fighting prejudice and marginalization through positivity; a call to step outside a set of visual and rhetorical practices that mirror mainstream presentations of the body might be inaccessible, or worse, politically static. But as Massumi writes, “the feedback of higher functions can take such forms as the deployment of narrative in essays about the breakdown of narrative” (1995, p. 100). To this end, I ask here questions about what body positivity might do, not perfectly, but differently, and to what end, not as a corrective, but as a provocation.

### **Rethinking The “Body-Image” As Form**

For six months in 2014, Amalia Ulman’s Instagram feed was awash in tones of blush, beige and white. Beginning in April of that year, with a black and white image of the words “Part I,” Ulman launched *Excellences & Perfections* publicly and in stealth. A work of digitized performance art in the mold of photographer Cindy Sherman, Ulman took on the life of the social media “hot babe” (Connor, 2014), at least in front of the camera. In the 185 images that made up the Instagram portion of the project, Ulman preens in front of the mirror in glamorous outfits; takes softly-lit images of her face resting on pillows while in full makeup; lounges in lavender lingerie; fragments her body in close-ups of her collarbone, feet, and legs in silk stockings. She even documents a purported visit to the plastic surgeon for a breast augmentation with several images of her bound breasts (Ulman, 2014).

In an interview for *The Telegraph* with critic Alistair Sooke, Ulman outlines the objectives of *Excellences & Perfections*. The project saw Ulman taking on the role of what is now commonly called the “Instagram model,” women whose bodies, belongings, breakfasts and generally glamorous lives of leisure are incessantly displayed on social media. As Ulman explained to Sooke, “Everything was scripted...I spent a month researching the whole thing. There was a beginning, a climax and an end. I dyed my hair. I changed my wardrobe. I was acting: it wasn’t me” (Sooke, 2016). In performing new digital archetype, Ulman was not simply making a concerted play on the practices of conspicuous consumption that dominate among this stratus of young Internet elite. She was also modeling an increasingly familiar relationship to her gendered body- “empowered” self-love.

In her piece on the “microcelebrity” cultivated on platforms like Instagram, Alice Marwick (2015) observes that “those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture” (p. 138). To this end, Ulman’s work points to the artifice behind both the lifestyle and the *representation* of an “aspirational” life. Most striking in the context of this work on body positivity are the images of Ulman on her bed, in lingerie. In one video clip posted on July 11, 2014, Ulman is seated on the edge of a bed, her body visible from her jawline to her knees (Ulman, 2014). She is clad in black panties and a white crop top emblazoned with the word “Love” in cursive. The clip consists of Ulman sitting still for a moment before taking down her ponytail, flipping her hair over her head, and then tying it up again. As her eyes cross the screen in the middle of that motion, her eyes look coyly at

the camera. The caption reads “look wat god made #skinnythickhour #luv #ladies.”

Between its posting on July 11, 2014 and the project’s end on September 19, 2014, the post garnered 225 likes and 19 comments.

As a white, blonde, slim, fine-featured and apparently able-bodied cis gendered woman, no one would argue that Ulman differs from the conventional beauty standards with which her project engages. Her appearance lends itself well to the intentions of her project, yet the formal qualities of her images are what most directly signal the digital practices she is referencing. This short video recalls body positive photographs- like the one posted to *Stop Hating Your Body* in March 2015, of a young woman in a black thong, perched at the edge of a bed, belly bared and joyfully smiling- as much as those of countless other taut bodies the Internet has on display (lemon-infused-feminist, 2015). Both images are aspirational, formally equivalent despite the critically different goals to which they aspire. The aspiration underlying the Instagram archetype Ulman plays with is a body that conforms to dominant beauty norms. The aspiration of the kind of body positive image it parallels is a sense of self that conforms to the emotional norms of self-love and happiness that dominate body positivity’s digital performance. This difference in orientation matters, of course. But that intimate self-representation is continually limited to the selfie, which Elizabeth Losh (2015) defines as an image that imparts “close distance” between the subject and the viewer through scenic devices such as “an unmade bed...a luxury car...or a bathroom stall, [places] in which an individual can be correlated with a background that can communicate co-presence” (p. 8) is worth troubling.

Ulman’s project is not a work of body positivity by a definition that sees the movement’s sole objective as expanding and diversifying our definitions of beauty. But it

productively opens up a critique of the limited visual formations body positivity privileges, and, as situated in Chapter 3, treats as objective and authoritative. Through a staging of an array of bodily interventions, from makeup clothing to post-surgical pain, Ulman shows us that the “aspirational” body a construction. Yet her work also points to how the *process* of sharing and circulating the body image across social media spaces is inherently performative. Reframing body positivity in such a way as to include- or at least converse with- the provocations in Ulman’s work would open up a discussion on the very meaning of the exclusionary spaces and practices body positivity demands access to. It would also help address how “authenticity,” “realness” and “objectivity” in the context of the photographic image do not provide a solid conceptual foundation on which body positivity can rest.

As Funk, Gross and Huber (2012) remind us in the introduction to their volume on the *Aesthetics of Authenticity*, “while definitions of authenticity routinely refer to its immanence and naturalness, its being found not created...[deeper] engagements with authenticity highlight that it is necessarily the result of careful aesthetic construction that depends on the use of identifiable techniques” (p. 10). To this end, the narrative arc of Ulman’s project, beginning with her “character’s” move to Los Angeles, moving through her descent into a life of partying and plastic surgery and closing with a “recovery” stage documented by images of juice cleanses and yoga, also provides a (intentionally) neat conclusion to her stereotypical “journey” (Cook, 2016). We might then recognize artifice not only within Ulman’s images, but in the very life she constructs, and most certainly in its pat ending. Understanding body positivity in this light also encourages a radical shift

away from a culturally saturated “before and after” schematic and toward a more perpetually unstable “during.”

Reflexivity about the photographic medium itself can therefore push body positivity towards practices that acknowledge image-making as an intentional intervention into the corporeal record. As Peggy Phelan (1993) notes, Cindy Sherman’s photography “purposefully distorts her self-image in order to see the sociality of that image’s construction” (p. 64). Without situating Sherman as a literal model, Phelan’s interpretation of her work nevertheless highlights medium’s potential to disrupt and subvert historical expectations of photographic transparency. It also points to the image’s ability to express and examine- rather than collapse- the complexities of embodiment.

Haley Morris-Cafiero’s project *Wait Watchers* situates image-making as an opportunity to reflect on the self as relational, a reflection of aggregate personal and structural forces. A photographer and Assistant Professor at the Memphis College of Art, Morris-Cafiero’s work focuses largely on her relationship to her body. Having struggled with an eating disorder in her teens and twenties, she decided to produce work that examined the gendered expectations on appearance that, in the West, frequently revolve around weight (Schwiegershausen, 2014). Launched in 2010 and shot over 4 years, *Wait Watchers* began as both a fortuitous and painful accident. In a February 2013 interview with the *Memphis Flyer*, Morris-Cafiero describes the context out of which her best-known work emerged:

It started when I was shooting for another series, ‘Something to Weigh,’ which was me realizing that the only time I really feel uncomfortable about my body is in social situations, going out to eat and things like that. I would carry my camera around while I was on vacation, and if I saw a beautifully lit, composed scene that engaged a social context, I would take a self-portrait. They were really meant to be about me, but when I was setting one up on the steps in Times Square, I got the film back and I noticed a guy behind me looking at me mockingly. I had occasionally heard people making comments about me, and I never thought I’d be able to photograph that. Then it happened again four images later on the roll, and I made it my mission to try to set up the camera for that purpose (Sayle, 2013).

The moment Morris-Cafiero had unintentionally captured opened up the possibility of producing work that not only reflected on the significance of her body in public spaces, but actually captured the reactions it spurred.

The images in the series are striking, in both their individual dynamism and sequential monotony. Again and again, Morris-Cafiero’s camera captures the overwhelming response her body- blonde, fat, and plainly dressed- generated in passersby that she encountered in parks and on street-corners. Even in spaces packed densely with a diversity of bodies, Morris-Cafiero is stared at. In her work *Staring: How We Look*, feminist and disability theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2009) observes that “an encounter between a starter and a staree sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences” (p. 3). The images in *Wait Watchers* capture the reality of looking as active and relational, an “intense visual engagement [that] creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making” (Garland Thomson, 2009, p. 3). But they also point to the image itself as a critical node in this layered exchange.

Morris-Cafiero’s image-making process relies on both procedure and happenstance. To her observers, it appears she is taking a selfie with a tripod. “With the

help of an assistant or tripod, she photographs herself in highly trafficked areas...She shoots for about five minutes...and then, later, reviews the images, selecting moments where the people around her are observing her body and, often, visually reacting to her appearance” (Schwiegershausen, 2014). “I don’t want to become a spectacle,” she noted in an interview with *New York Magazine* (Schwiegershausen, 2014). But her images articulate, often very explicitly, that as a fat woman in the West she already is.

Each picture carries a simple, one-word title. In *Cops*, Morris-Cafiero is on her cellphone on a busy sidewalk, slouching, her legs slightly askew. Her gaze is cast downward, unfocused, and she appears lost in conversation (Morris-Cafiero, 2013). A Macy’s bag dangles loosely from her fingers. Beside her to her left are two policemen. They are mid-gate, and in close proximity to her, but she does not appear to sense their presence. Both have their heads fully turned as they stare at her. The cop closest to her has taken off his police hat, revealing his bald head. He dangles the hat a few inches above Morris-Cafiero’s head, as the corners of his mouth pull downward in an exaggerated smirk. His partner observes the scene, his mouth slightly agape.

The first cop’s mocking smirk is echoed in another of Morris-Cafiero’s photographs, *Anonymity Isn’t for Everyone* (Morris-Cafiero, 2013), the image she described to the *Memphis Flyer* as the one that triggered the launch of the project. In it, she sits slumped on the red bleachers at the heart of Times Square, a large horizontal screen behind her flashing the words “Anonymity Isn’t for Everyone.” The bleachers overtake most of the photo, their steps peppered with tourists and their shopping bags. Several hold cameras. Morris-Cafiero sits alone, cross-legged, at the center of the image, a small bag resting at her feet. She looks out into the distance; her gaze, as in many of her

photographs, is out of focus. She finds herself, intentionally or otherwise, caught at the center of another image, as a few steps below her a woman stands with a camera in hand, pointed towards a man perched behind Morris-Cafiero. It is this young man, captured by two cameras at once, that appears to snicker at her, his eyebrows raised quizzically as his gaze falls on her.

Time and again, the images in *Wait Watchers* capture the many ways Morris-Cafiero is stared, glanced or gawked at. Only rarely does her own gaze latch onto any discernible object, the camera included. Her body is often off-center, but always the centripetal force drawing eyes to her. In her recent keynote on “Feminism and Fragility” for the *National Women’s Studies Association’s* annual meeting, Sara Ahmed gave a moving reflection on the need to make invisible institutional walls- those seemingly well-intentioned, bureaucratic sand-traps that so often block meaningful progress towards diversity and inclusivity- visible. Reflecting on the metaphoric brick wall on which many of us in the academy have all banged our head in frustration, she notes “that [it] is not an actual wall makes the wall even harder” (Ahmed, 2015). Its invisibility makes it easy to deny, despite the very real impediment it presents for so many. “Coming up against [such] a wall is to come up against what others do not notice...what others are often invested in not noticing” (Ahmed, 2015).

While *Wait Watchers* does not directly engage with the kinds of institutional walls Ahmed elucidates, it still provides powerful evidence of other kinds of invisible walls- sexism, fat phobia, ableism, classism. In exposing herself in this way- not through revealing the contours of her physicality, but through chronicling how her body generates public looks- Morris-Cafiero makes visible the walls of hostility, ridicule and dismissal



fat bodies crash into in even the most quotidian encounters. In this way, we can understand *Wait Watchers* as Morris-Cafiero's attempt, to use Garland-Thomson's (2009) words, at "staring back." This is not the straightforward gaze of the selfie, gesturing directly to a look at an audience, or a look in the mirror. It is not "a pose of outstaring one's starrer" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 85) through a direct, confident gaze. It is a gesture that uses the image as a tool to both affirm personhood, and, importantly, "manage staring exchanges" (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p. 87). It reaffirms the political import of acknowledging that our bodies are never wholly discrete entities, but always-already relational. A recognition of how the body, especially the "othered" body, causes ripples in public space is crucial additive to a body positive focused on the singular body and the body-image as its unproblematic analog.

In his long-form piece for *Vulture*, an entertainment website produced by *New York Magazine*, Jerry Saltz examines the history of the selfie *At An Arms Length* (2014). Saltz strives to both trace a history of the selfie as a form with roots in portraiture, and to situate it as a new and distinct genre of image-making. At the outset, Saltz (2014) defines the selfie as "a fast self-portrait made with a smartphone's camera and immediately distributed and inscribed into a network." The selfie, he continues "is an instant visual communication of where we are, what we're doing, who we think we are and who we think is watching" (Saltz, 2014). In other words, a selfie is defined concurrently by its form and its function, and is attentive to the image as evidential record, generative force and network node.

And yet, since the first recorded use of the hashtag "selfie" to label an image on Instagram – by user Jennifer Lee on January 16, 2011 (Testa, 2013), who tagged a close-

up image of herself smiling- the popular imagining of what a selfie looks like has calcified. Saltz narrows his opening definition with a detailed set of expectations for both the selfie's formal qualities and manner of production. "Selfies are nearly always taken from within an arms-length of the subject...bad camera angles predominate...as the wide-angle lens on most cell-phone cameras exaggerates the depth of noses and chins" (Saltz, 2014). In sum, according to Saltz (2014), "if both your hands are in the picture and it's not a mirror shot, technically it's not a selfie- it's a portrait."

Distinguishing the selfie only by its formal qualities raises the question of whether the majority of body positive images chronicled here can even be defined as such. But I would argue (and newer work in the area of selfie studies echoes this emphasis) that a selfie is more usefully distinguished by what it can *do* than by how and what it records. In his piece, *The Gift of the Selfie*, Daniel Rubenstein (2015) boldly declares that the selfie's power "lies in its claim to be the first art form in the age of networks" (p. 165).

Rubenstein reflects on the selfie's distinct power to communicate both a singular experience and a set of relations unique in time and space. "While the selfie can of course represent and describe, it is also doing something entirely different...it is both an image of something or someone and it is an embodiment of a relationship that is impossible to represent but possible to experience" (2015, p. 167). Rubenstein's emphasis on the materiality of the selfie is in keeping with a recent call in selfie scholarship to attend to the form as both a reflection of the set of particular conditions within which it is produced, and a generative force in building a new set of relations. In *The Skin of the Selfie*, Theresa Senft (2015) argues that we need ask of selfies the kind of questions affect theory asks of embodied relations- "what potential exists here?" Through the metaphor of

skin, she positions the selfie as itself a porous body, one in which, while “the surface dominates” (Senft, 2015, p. 10) it is still merely the residue of a shifting set of forces churning beneath the skin. Her argument positions the selfie within a decidedly feminist frame, but do so without a reliance on the tenuous narratives of empowerment that sustain so much of the discourse of body positivity today. The notion of selfie-as-skin instead recalls the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1994), who proposes we move beyond a history of subjectivity grounded in a gendered dualism of mind and body to instead understand the body as a threshold that is malleable, transformative, adhesive and transgressive.

Rubenstein argues that the selfie destabilizes the traditional subject-object relationship within photography. While “it does not get rid of the subject and the object...it destroys the notion of fixed and stable identity and the opposition between it and the world” (Rubenstein, 2015, p. 167). In other words, understanding the body-image through the frame of this definition of the selfie moves it away from body positivity’s fixation on authenticity and objectivity and instead acknowledges the body as dynamic and mutable. To return to Ahmed’s poignant reflections on the potentiality of fragility, this understanding of the body-image asks if there is “a way of relating to breaking that does not aim for restoration” (Ahmed, 2015). “The fragile and puerile self rides in the multiplicity of selfies” (p. 165) Rubenstein (2015) notes, though the objective is not wholeness and restoration at the site of the subject but rather illumination of the very relations out of which it is produced and which it itself contributes to.

Senft identifies this as a shift from a set of “epistemological and representational” questions to a set of “phenomenological [ones] about what images do as emotional,

technological and political objects circulating through networked bodies” (2015, p. 12). It is at once a focus on what images do, and what real set of material conditions they reflect. Alise Tifentale (2014) usefully expands upon limited formal definitions of the selfie by it as a self-portrait that is taken on a cellphone and instantly posted to social media. This definition of the selfie transcends the limits of the objects to understand it in the context of a new practice of “hybrid image-making and simultaneously image-sharing” (Tifentale, 2014, p. 3). While we may dismiss many of the body positive images cataloged here - and also Morris-Cafiero’s work, as it shot with a tripod rather than a hand-held device connected to the Internet- as outside any comprehensive definition of the selfie’s formal and structural qualities, I argue that the contemporary conversation around the selfie could productively inform a shift from current modes of body positive self-representation to a more radical body positive. In this way, we can consider how images like Morris-Cafiero’s might actually better reflect not the “self” in the selfie, but what Rubenstein terms its “ethics.”

The turn in selfie studies towards recognizing the body-image as reflective of a networked set of relations can help deepen discourses of the “authentic” body image as a site of empowerment through the individual authorship of self by recognizing that neither the body nor the image can be authored outside the complex matrix of social, cultural and economic relations in which it is being produced. We can operationalize this insight in multiple ways. It can be taken as scholarly call for further study into body positive communities that respond to and emerge *around* the body-image (which I see as a worthy expansion of this dissertation, though beyond its current scope). More broadly, I also see it as a call for a popular shift away from “empowerment” narratives grounded in a

postfeminist, neoliberal fixation on the “real” body (and its implied analog, the “objective image”) and towards greater visibility of the conditions that produce a fixation on these narratives in the first place. I recognize that part of the call to understand selfies as networked object is a call to move away from a representational analysis of the image, but I also think we need not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Images like Morris-Cafiero and Ulman’s show that, by revealing the social and structural architecture of the self-portrait, the image can still reflect, represent and generate profound messages about the networked self. To this end, the body-positive image can function as a site of witnessing to the forces that produce marginalized bodies as such. Both artists remind us that while the image is imagined as a site of personal authority, in the digital age neither identity nor embodiment are stable and entirely within our control.

### **Beyond Positivity: Images and “Ugly Feelings”**

Proposing a shift towards a radical body positive thus constitutes an attentiveness to the relationship between what the image represents, how it circulates and what new relations it generates within the context of body positivity. The image within a radical body positive is recognized as both reflective and productive of embodied networks, in a way that destabilizes its presumed objectivity as well as its expectation of positivity. In March 2015, Instagram removed an image, created by young poet and artist Rupi Kaur in collaboration with her sister Prabh, that depicted both the menstruating body and the detritus it sheds each month in the process. The image, one in a series of six originally produced for a course in visual rhetoric at the University of Waterloo (Kaur, 2015), made news because it was banned from the photo-sharing platform, not once but twice (Kaur,

2015). It is notable for its depiction of menstruation, but even more notable for the banality of its subject matter. But in the context of a radical body positive, Kaur's entire series is noteworthy for its depiction of the body through the parts it sheds, and the sometimes literal imprint it leaves behind.

The image Kaur originally posted to Instagram on March 23, 2015 is part of her six-image series *Period*, which appears in full on her personal website (Kaur & Kaur, 2015) (Kaur's entire series also appeared on *Stop Hating Your Body* that same month, where the post received 563,227 notes. However, it was reblogged by the site moderator and not posted by Kaur herself). In the image, a woman lies on her side in an unmade bed, her back to the camera. She wears a simple outfit consisting of a white tee-shirt and a pair of grey sweatpants, her hair pulled up in a messy bun. A dark red stain seeps between her legs, and a mirror imprint in blood soaks the sheet behind her. Their deep crimson punctuates the center of an image otherwise awash in muted tones of beige and grey. At the same time, the smallness of the stain seems inconsequential in a calm scene of rest and repose.

On Instagram, Kaur's image was flagged for violating "community guidelines," and she received a simple message urging her to "learn what kind of posts are allowed" on the photo-sharing platform. While "digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks...[and] some photos of female nipples" (Community Guidelines, n.d.) are all prohibited on the site, nowhere in its community guidelines is there any indication that images depicting menstruation are explicitly prohibited. In a response posted to Facebook, Kaur captioned the image in question with a lengthy exposition on the misogynistic irony of a Western culture

concurrently disgusted with organic bodily functions and fascinated with the nude female body as a sexual object. “When I first got my period my mother was sad and worried,” she writes, “and they want to censor all that pain. Experience. Learning. No. Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is leaking. We will not be censored” (Kaur, 2015).

In rebuking Instagram’s decision to ban her image, Kaur powerfully points to the sexism inherent to a Western body politic that severely limits the realm of self-expression for all bodies, but particularly female, queer, fat, trans\* and gender-non-normative bodies. But her image series and the response it generated also tap into a complex affective register that is taboo to perhaps a less evident but deeper degree: pain, repulsion and disgust. It is a testament to the visceral as Holland, Ochoa and Tomkins (2014) define it, “a phenomenological index for the logics of desire, consumption, disgust, health, disease, belonging, and displacement that are implicit in colonial and postcolonial relations” (p. 395).

Kaur’s *Period* series is all about bodies, but only four of the six images actually include a living body in them. There is the image that has circulated most publicly, that of the woman bleeding in bed. There is an image of what appears to be the same woman, in the same white tee-shirt and grey sweats, lying on her back amongst the same tangled sheets, clutching a pink rubber hot water bottle to her stomach; her face is cropped out of the image. There is an image of someone who appears to be the same woman seated on the toilet, her pants bunched at her ankles. Only her bent legs are visible, pressed firmly together at the knees. Her hand hovers above a white trash can that sits beside her, a used pad folded neatly between her fingers. An orange panty liner shield lies unfurled on the floor, front and center. There is also an image taken from inside a shower stall, the

camera pointed downwards. Two brown feet frame the drain, dark against a floor of gleaming white tiles. A thin trail of blood runs down her right leg and a puddle is splashed at her feet (Kaur & Kaur, 2015).

Feet, knees and sheltered stomachs- these are the images that show the body, but their focus is on what it expels. The other two images show only the detritus it leaves behind. In one, the toilet is shot from above, almost overwhelming the frame (Kaur & Kaur, 2015). Its white porcelain is punctuated by the blood that remains unflushed, a dark red pool at the center, splattered and diluting at the edges. In the other, the sheets have now been stripped from the bed and hang limply out of the round door of an open washing machine. The bloodstains have dried and deepened. The front-facing washer's metallic interior glows pink, the vulvar symbolism evident.

The *Period* series depict perhaps the most pedestrian aspects of monthly bleeding. There are no climactic moments here, no scenes of public embarrassment. Kaur does not contextualize the act of shedding the uterine lining, just presents its simple reality. But folded into this reality are unflinching indicators of the pain, mess and disorder it implicates. In chronicling the body as it splits, spits and sheds parts of itself, often onto surfaces and into spaces where it is unwanted and must be washed away, Kaur's images destabilize presumptions of the whole, coherent body. They reflect what disability theorist Tobin Siebers' (2001) has termed the "new realism of the body." Siebers argues that what is radical about such depictions of the disabled body are their raw expression of the baser dimensions of corporeality. While the palpable dimension of pain often gets written-out of theoretical accounts on the politics of disability, here it is addressed directly through an unfettered look at bodies doing the things our Western social mores



dictate we turn away from: bleeding and shitting, eating and retching. It prompts us to look directly at the vulnerable body and to attend to the viscerality it both experiences and conjures in us as we perceive its struggles. Moreover, this “new realism” stresses the instability that often accompanies disability, the shifting realities of embodiment day to day.

For a radical body positive, it serves as a powerful counter-point to both the notion of a stable body and the construction of self-love as a fixed, accessible state. Such an approach presents a potential ideological alternative to the body positive movement’s current focus on the body and the image as similarly (and ideally) resolute. This “new realism” is twofold- on the one hand, it recognizes representation as a mechanism that produces the body as a site of social and institutional forces. To this end, it is in kinship with what Robert McRuer (2006) has termed “crip theory,” which questions the entanglements of an identity politics that includes disability with a politics of visibility itself. “Visibility and invisibility as not, after all, fixed attributes that somehow permanently attach to any identity” (p. 2) McRuer (2006) writes, but rather are co-productive of those identities our culture projects onto the body. Moving away from practices of visibility that require the compulsory showing of a body that has “found itself” (in ways that arguably *produce* it as locatable entity) and toward a recognition of the political power in destabilizing expectations of both body and the image, Siebers’ “new realism” resists the notion that visibility is an end in and of itself, that bringing something to light is a sort of resolution. It is not about creating a disabled subjectivity as much as it is about not flinching from the complicated and often unstable realities of living with a body in pain.

On the other hand, Sieber's call to make visible the vulnerable body is a call also attends to the affective relations within the image. Both capturing and seeing the shitting or convulsing body- as well as the aching and bleeding one Kaur's series demands we look at- are inevitably affecting, embodied actions. Using the image to make visible the visceral also acknowledges the image itself is a triggering force. More than three decades ago, Barthes (1981) wrote in *Camera Lucida* of "a photograph's punctum...that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (p. 27). As "the element which rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces" (Barthes, 1981, p. 26) the "punctum" attends to the immediate, carnal effect a photograph has on its viewer, beyond the "studium" as the reasoned (and reasonable) inclination one has towards photographs of one genre or another. There is historically some slippage between the terms affect and emotion, even within affect studies- the terms are often used interchangeably. But in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi (2005) reminds us that unlike emotion, affect does not "denote a personal feeling" but is rather "an ability to affect and be affected" (p. xvi). In a sense, the studium is to emotion what the punctum is to affect- Barthes discusses how cultural, ethical and political context inevitably shape the studium, much like emotion can be understood as affect filtered through a set of cognitive processes shaped by our memories and experiences. The punctum, while certainly personal and perhaps not purely affective, still attends to the image's ability to incite, to animate, to change.

Arguably, Kaur's photographs were twice removed from Instagram not because they directly violated the site's participatory guidelines, but because they triggered an intense response- of disgust, discomfort, revulsion or any kindred jolt or gag- in viewers

who then interpreted that impulse as an indicator of the image's inappropriateness, and subsequently reported it via a quick tap on their phones. Her images hit at once within and outside the body, the gut, precisely because they "emerge from the carnal language of (colonial) excess...signifying to the incursion of violent intentionality into the rhythms of everyday life" (Holland, Ochoa & Tompkins, 2014, p. 395).

Kaur has been vocal about her desire to "demystify all the taboos that are around menstruation" (Holden, 2015) through sharing the image, but claims that her intent was not explicitly to be provocative. And yet, she sparked a conversation *because* it provoked strong reactions, because it functioned not only as a representation, but also as a catalyst. As such, it transcended itself- through an affective frame, we can recognize the singular image (or series of images) as instead an "encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include 'mental' or ideal bodies)" (Massumi, 2005, p. xvi). This is the generative impulse Alison Kafer (2013) identifies in crip theory and its centering of the word cripple- a "desire to make people wince...an urge to shake things up, to jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance" (p. 15).

In her April 2015 interview with Steve Holden of *BBC News*, Kaur dismisses critics that have likened the circulation of her images of menstruation on a social networking site to the sharing of images of other bodily function, like semen or feces. She emphasizes that her work is best understood as a challenge to the gender norms, both in the West and in the Indian culture she was born into, that shame the bleeding female body. While this is a worthy political and artistic objective, it is also valuable to recognize that all these fluids conjure disgust. All mark the anxieties triggered by the

unbounded, unruly body, the body which, time and again, is cast out in favor of its imagine opposite, the smiling, the healthy, the sane. Kaur leverages the language of “beauty” to describe how she perceives- and hopes the world will perceive- her images, indicating a kinship with body positivity; “when I see the picture it looks completely beautiful to my eyes” she tells the *BBC* (Holden, 2015). But before any meaningful engagement with the definition of beauty must come the affective jolt of unseated expectation.

Body positive discourse revels aggressively in the realm of the positive- anything but is policed and curtailed to varying degrees. This tactic is partially in place to sustain the movement as a haven from normalizing forces that malign, reject and even abuse many of those drawn to body positivity. Yet the emphasis on positive feelings is also built on the false presumption that what Sianne Ngai has called “ugly feelings” (2005)- shame, anxiety, disgust among them- are also politically ineffectual, isolating rather than uniting. Examining the recent turn in queer and affect studies towards these kinds of feelings in the introduction to her book *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love (2007) contests the presumed disparity between what are simplistically understood as negative affects and political action. She writes:

I do not think it would be right to read [an] interest in intentionally weak feelings or this refusal to directly link affect and action as a disinterest in action. Rather, I would venture that this persistent attention to ‘useless’ feelings is all about action: about how and why it is blocked, and about how to locate motives for political action when none is visible (2007, p. 13)

I would push further even, and claim that shame, anxiety, disgust, the very kinds of affects galvanized by Kaur’s photos, can be a mobilizing force for political action.

This is not an argument for the power of bigotry to create an “other” by which we are

repulsed, but rather for harnessing the power of collective bodily reactions we may otherwise recoil from. Before sanitizing the bleeding body by calling it beautiful, let us ask *why* we recoil at its depiction. Acknowledging what the body and the body-image incite might serve as a productive reminder of the power in not only the feelings we will forth (happiness and positivity at any cost) but the affects we simply experience.

### **A Politics of Refusal**

Emily McCombs is the executive editor of the site *xoJane*, which publishes content targeted towards women. Started by Jane Pratt, the former editor of *Sassy* and *Jane* magazines, the site is in large part built on the confessional narrative, often submitted by readers; it “is written and created by an entirely devoted community of women (and some token males) who have strong ideas, identities and opinions, who are living what they are writing about” (About, 2016). Body positive content appears regularly on *xoJane*- while the site does not take a singular position on the subject, an internal search of the term “body positivity” brings up well over 200 articles written since 2012. Tags like “body image” and “loving your body” are also frequently used to describe content the site publishes.

For the site, McCombes writes on a diversity of topics ranging from beauty to internet trolling to mental health, and on November 12, 2015 she published a piece titled *Why I'm Done Learning to Love My Body* (McCombes, 2015). She begins the piece by immediately identifying the centrality of body positivity to contemporary Western popular culture targeted towards women. “Every day in my role as Executive Editor at a women’s website, I receive pitches about ‘learning to love’ various parts of one’s body”

(McCombes, 2015) she explains. She outlines the impetus that drives much of this content, explaining that “because we are conditioned to hate our bodies, our quest to become actualized healthy adult women naturally involves years of deprogramming ourselves of the messages we've internalized” (McCombes, 2015). This work of “deporgramming” is identified as the driving force behind body positivity. It is necessary, a corrective to a corrosive patriarchal culture that insists none of us are good enough as we are. And yet, McCombes (2015) proclaims, “here's the thing — I don't love my body, and I don't think I should have to.”

In the piece, McCombes recalls her childhood; the taunts, alienation and distress she experienced as a fat child, a preoccupation with her body ingrained from an early age. She describes her exhaustion with “the incessant internal narrative of self-loathing that accompanies so many adolescences and young adulthoods” (McCombes, 2015). She also describes the “extremely hostile environment” that she is uniquely exposed to as an editor PR firms promoting the newest diet or plastic surgery fad designed to correct sagging back skin or “chubby toes.” But McCombes’ main point, like the one I make across this dissertation, is that even in the corrective discourse is an advocacy of a single mindset, and to labor towards achieving it. This is, in fact, not an achievable or necessary goal for everyone. “For many of us,” she writes, “the best we can hope for is to forget about our bodies,” (McCombes, 2015) rather than undertake any more concerted work in relation to it. “Sometimes I wonder,” McCombes (2015) reflects “how much more women would accomplish if we didn't spend a decade ‘learning to love’ ourselves.”

This is in part, a gesture against wholeness, against the expectation that feminist work must be aspirational. Turning to the language of “a queer crip politics,” Sara

Ahmed (2015) similarly asserts the value- and radicality- of “a refusal to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole.” “There can be nothing more willful,” she declares, “than the refusal to be aspirational” (Ahmed, 2015). In stark contrast to a body positive discourse built on an allegiance between narratives of “self-love” and “empowerment” that are repeatedly stressed as vital achievements, a radical body positive might instead advocate for a willful indifference toward our bodies. Importantly, indifference is itself not to be seen as a replacement for “empowerment,” because it is not a goal at all. Instead, it is an absence of effort, thought, and labor directed at the body.

McCombes thoughtfully points to the privilege of such indifference, of being allowed to walk through the world without your body as an impediment. There are few bodies that can move about in our ableist, sexist, racist and heteronormative culture without- to return to Garland-Thomson’s language- being stared down. As Morris-Cafiero’s images demonstrate, “if you’re a certain size and can’t or don’t want to change that size...you are constantly reminded that your fatness is an affront to others” (McCombes, 2015). We can understand a body positivity based on willful self-love as a tactic of survival for those bodies that are aggressively marginalized. Here, it is a necessary fight for access, visibility and inclusivity. This is also the logic that informs why depictions of the exposed body, and of the act of exposure, are so central to the digital performance of body positivity. In a Western culture that privileges visibility and positions it as a tool to enforce imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, empowerment seemingly is only accessible – and subjectivity attainable- through the act of showing yourself.

Yet a radical body positivity should also be about imaging future possibilities beyond inclusion into existing structures. It can also present an alternative set of embodied relations and help us differently imagine their relationship to the mediated image. Addressing the relationship between image-making as a process and the affective impact of looking opens up new “feminist, queer crip” (Kafer, 2013) modes of resistance towards the stable, uniformly visible subject- it does not separate form and feeling. If the notion of making visible different bodies is central to body positivity, then a radical body positive is galvanized by the recognition (or even unrecognizability) of differing *embodiments*, some of which are even coproduced by the technologies they encounter. It refuses to elide the unstable, uncomfortable or unruly- after all, “rather than equality being about smoothing a relation, perhaps equality is a bumpy ride” (Ahmed, 2015).



## Conclusion

This dissertation's call to radical body positivity involves an understanding of body positivity's current form as both a particular ideological formation, and perhaps more importantly a set of visual and rhetorical practices. In this dissertation I examined five different body positive websites to chronicle the visual and textual components of digital body positive practice, asking: What sorts of visual and rhetorical practices do these websites facilitate? How are these practices captured and documented in the digital realm? How might we theorize the relationships between these practices and constructions of identity and subjectivity in the West?

In the last chapter of this dissertation, I turn to the possibility of what I term a radical body positive, shifting my inquiry away from *what* a digital body positive practice is to what it *might* be. I ask: do these sites actually provide new or alternative models for thinking through the nexus of body and self? And if so, what might they tell us about what a radical representation of embodiment looks (and could look) like?

Chapter 1 detailed the dominant visual tropes of digital body positive practice. These included depictions of the nude or partially nude body on display as openly as possible, often with indications that a specific body part being shown had long been hidden in shame. I traced these visual practices through examining artworks and illustrations created about body positivity, site submission guidelines, and what I termed "seed" images of site founders and celebrities that I argued informed the kinds of images subsequently submitted and shared by site participants. I also traced the ideological foundations that undergird these practices through examining how these visual tropes are

aligned with narratives of the authentic, natural, unaltered or unedited body and image. Reading this content through work in feminist media studies on makeover culture, I argued that together, these images and their underlying investment in revealing an authentic- and, as I discussed further in Chapter 3, authenticatable- body showcase visual and rhetorical similarities between digital body positive practice and the makeover show “reveal” of the (new and improved) “true” self.

Chapter 2 built on the visual tropes detailed in the first chapter by mapping the textual narratives of digital body positivity. Thematically coding submitted stories, interviews and image captions, I traced four dominant themes: empowerment, self-love, “responsibilization” and revolution, across these varied body positive narratives. These themes were shown to be distinct but interrelated, together speaking to the emotional register of body positivity. I argued these narratives are practices themselves, not (only) in the sense that digital body positive spaces encourage the contribution of written accounts of by participants, but also in that body positivity requires a particular, narrow emotional orientation as a requisite *for* appropriate participation.

In Chapter 3 I returned to body positive images, building on Chapter 1’s articulation of the performative tropes they capture to examine how body positivity considers the role of the body-image. I mapped the expectations digital body positivity has of the unedited image as a conduit of bodily truths, tracing them back to historical debates on the photograph’s potential for objectivity. I argued that in light of this history, we should consider digital body positivity beyond the site of the individual photograph and through the lens of the body and body-image archive. Taking an archival view, I traced similarities in how earlier body image archives, like the mid-century posture

photographs taken at many Ivy League schools, were problematically and sometimes deviously used as a technology of exclusion and normalization, the very things contemporary body positivity rallies against. I also began the call, delineated in full in Chapter 4, for body positivity to step away from a fetishizing of objectivity that delimits both the image and the body.

Lastly, in Chapter 4 I culminated my analysis of digital body positivity by looking outside of this project's primary archive and to the work of contemporary photographers Amalia Ulman, Haley Morris-Cafiero and Rupri Kaur, to tease out what a radical body positivity might look like. While the works produced by Ulman, Morris-Cafiero and Kaur are visually distinct from one another, all circulate between and think conscientiously about, the space of social media and the space of the fine-art gallery. More important to the questions of this dissertation however, are the ways in which each of these photographers engage with the body, as a social construction that embraces artifice rather than authenticity, unstable and unbounded by the individual "skin envelope" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). I analyzed these compelling works through affect theory and burgeoning work in selfie studies that turns to affect to consider the form, like the body, as a node in a network of seen and unseen, material and immaterial forces.

While each chapter presents a distinct examination of various aspects of the digital practice of body positivity, together they trace a detailed map of what body positivity looks like, what its significance is, and what it might develop into. Chapter 1 lays out the visual formations of digital body positivity alongside the ideologies that inform why its practice looks, largely, as it does. Chapter 2, in turn, analyzes the many written records of body positivity also shared on these sites. The shift from mapping body

positivity's visual patterns to tracing its rhetorical ones allows thematic similarities to emerge, but also acknowledges that the relationship between visual and written content ebbs and flows across the five sites studied in this dissertation.

Chapter 3, builds on the foundation laid out in the first two chapters by historicizing the practice of body positivity. It traces similarities between the body images and narratives produced on the five sites examined, the principles and assumptions that guide their production, and the historic discourses on the relationship between the photograph, the archive and the possibility of the body's objective record. Finally, Chapter 4 builds on work the first three Chapters did to lay out what digital body positivity practice currently is to address, instead, what it might be.

In deconstructing what body positivity looks like, and what it means to perform it in the digital sphere, I have shown that these practices largely mirror conventional forms of expressing embodied subjectivity. This similarity is in keeping with body positivity's objective of making Western cultural formations more inclusive of the bodies it has long marginalized. But by uncritically reproducing these representational modes, contemporary digital body positivity tends to elide the vital connection between form and function, missing the myriad ways in which the very kinds of body-images it encourages users to produce are themselves productive of the model of limited and exclusive subjectivity it attempts to resist.

There is more work to be done in the study of digital body positivity, both in understanding it as a practice and in untangling the potential of a radical body positive. Most importantly, I would argue, is the search for radical body positive engagements already happening in these and other body positive communities online. These entries,

submissions, stories and images are there, and worth chronicling further. Future projects should also look at body positive digital spaces through the lens of community, building on the work I have done to link body positivity to affect theory by tracing the affective exchanges happening already in image comments, notes and shares. Such an approach might strategically move from conceptualizing body positivity as a practice to understanding it as a shifting series of collectivities and assemblages.

For now, the radical body positive I propose encourages us to think of its aims as moving beyond inclusivity, and engaging with the ways the body and the image are co-productive of one another. It suggests that a recognition of this mutuality can open up new ways of concurrently resisting the privileging of few bodies and the very visual and discursive regimes that produce these valuations. Radical body positivity might then be understood, as I suggested in the opening of Chapter 4, as a provocation, a call to trouble the very notion of a regulated engagement with the body's physical and ideological construction. It would explore the image and the body as sites of affective and relational self-making, even through the ugliness acknowledging both as fluid, ongoing, vibrant and alive.

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