“Skinny Me is the Real Me”: The Neoliberal, Postfeminist Discourse of “Pro-Anorexia” and Fitness Bloggers

by

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Introduction

Relations to Media Necessitating Relations to the Body: A Personal Reflection

Memoirist Maya Hornbacher on recovering from an eating disorder:

I have learned to understand the emptiness rather than fear it and fight it and continue the futile attempt to fill it up...I have days, at least, when I see properly, when I look in the mirror and see myself as I am- a woman- instead of as a piece of unwanted flesh, forever verging on excess. ¹

Over multiple college breaks this year, I frequented the same coffee shop to work on my thesis. I was usually there for hours, surrounded by books on beauty, the body, and media. Over the course of my time in the coffee shop, multiple women noticed my books asked questions about what I was working on. I explained that I am a Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies major at Wesleyan University, researching modern body practices and discourse through the lens of feminist theory. I went on to explain that my analysis centers around online blogging communities, specifically the “pro-anorexia” community based within the picture-based social media site, Tumblr. On this platform, thousands of online bloggers post pictures of emaciated women and encourage others to engage in extreme dieting and anorexic practices. Similarly, I analyze the social media giant Instagram, which has been flooded with “Instagram famous” fitness models and trainers who post workouts and sponsor diet programs as well as fitness products (largely over the past five to eight years). The second I mentioned Tumblr and Instagram, the women I encountered began speaking passionately about their opinions on how the ‘ideal’ body has shifted during their teenage years and through their young adulthood. It was as if my mentioning of these

online platforms finally allowed these women to launch into a lecture about their own experiences with body disciplining, media influence, and recent shifts in feminist politics.

Many of these women spoke emotionally about how they fell into the “Tumblr sinkhole,” spending hours scrolling through aestheticized pictures of extremely skinny girls in baggy jeans and tiny shirts. Some women would allude to a lack of confidence, a pattern of disordered eating, or even a full-blown eating disorder that emerged during their “Tumblr” phase. Many of the women that I spoke to who were my age joked that Tumblr’s heyday tragically coincided with their middle school “emo years,” or years in which they were consumed by radical and damaging emotions. One woman even referred to her middle school Tumblr experience as a “dark time spent in isolation” where she constantly worked on her “messed up Tumblr blog.” Even though these women were aware that this Tumblr obsession was surely not just their own, there was still a silence that accompanied the practice of Tumblr blogging, especially if bloggers were following people who were promoting thinness and/or depressive thoughts.

Even though these women were strangers, the mutual acknowledgement of the pain and labor of scrutinizing/managing our bodies as well as recognition of the problematic media’s dominance allowed us to feel like close friends. One of the overarching commonalities in my conversations with these women was the feeling of isolation and shame that accompanied our journeys within the body-centric communities of Tumblr and Instagram. I expressed to these women that I too had taken part in the Tumblr trend at the time and felt incredibly isolated in my pain. I was ashamed of my overwhelming and strange need to embody the skinny, fragile
women I saw daily on my screens. Some of these women responded by speaking empathetically about the general sadness that permeated through these “pro-ana” Tumblr blogs. With pictures of pale collarbones, jutting hip bones, and impossibly small wrists interspersed with quotes about death, extreme loneliness, and personal failure, “pro-ana” Tumblr is full of tragic thoughts that encourage even more tragic actions.

I learned through my experience using Tumblr that even if you do not initially set out on a quest for the “pro-ana” community, it is far too easy to stumble upon it. Although my personal journey into Tumblr began by “reblogging” (re-posting other blogger’s photos onto my blog) photography I found inspiring or beautiful, the fact that many of these pictures included slim female bodies and fashion caused my feed to quickly fill with aestheticized pictures of skinnier and skinnier young women in fashionable clothing. It did not take long for me to find a picture with the hashtag “pro-ana.” With one simple click, I entered the “pro-anorexia” online world and was ushered into an accumulation of knowledge, communal pain, and constant disciplining (or “encouragement”) that would fuel my long battle with food and my body. I am not claiming that the “pro-ana” community gave me an eating disorder. I am, however, acknowledging that the discourse present in both traditional media and, more recently, Tumblr, has informed the thinking and actions of myself and many women my age, thereby largely contributing to the construction of problematic bodily subjectivities amongst my generation.

Thankfully, other women I spoke with expressed how lucky they were to have somehow missed the Tumblr wave, thereby saving themselves from this specific, relentless, and daily reminder of our society’s media fueled obsession with thinness.
Many of these women explained that “it’s not really about the skinny Tumblr girls as much anymore. Nowadays, it’s all about Instagram fitness models with big asses, perfect waists, and tanned abs.” Without my asking for examples, the women I spoke with would immediately pull out their phones to show me their favorite fitness blogger on Instagram. Some of the bloggers they pulled up were already familiar to me from my year of researching for this thesis, but some of the bloggers were ‘up and coming’ and not yet on my radar.

As we scrolled through these fitness models’ blogs, these women spoke about them as if they were long-time friends, explaining how these Instagram famous bloggers got into the online fitness industry, how extreme or ‘successful’ their bodily transformation has been, and whether or not their platform was ‘authentic’ or if it was a clearly manufactured pawn of big fitness and diet companies. The level of relatability seemed to make or break these fitness bloggers in the eyes of their followers regardless of whether or not they catered extensively to corporate sponsorship. The women I spoke to praised their favorite bloggers for being so open and honest about their struggles with “body confidence” and “self-love.” This acknowledgement of the pressures of conforming to body ideals allowed these fitness bloggers to remain relatable and authentic while participating in extreme body disciplining (often in line with the very same ideals against which they claimed to be fighting).

One of the women I spoke to adamantly pointed out that one of the bloggers she followed used to have a “perfectly beautiful and thin body” before she began her now well-known fitness journey. She seemed to think that such a long term and time-consuming commitment to fitness was unnecessary and extreme. Others described
such pursuits as inspirational and admitted that they carefully follow the fitness journeys of their favorite fitness bloggers even though they themselves do not follow a fitness regime. Arguably, the focus within bodily politics is now on toned muscle, general fitness and ‘health,’ instead of extreme thinness for its own sake. This cultural shift has led to many women shifting their focus from long bouts of extreme food restriction and very low carb diets to daily exercise and high protein diets. Many of the women I spoke to about my project, and about body politics in general, recognized or had personally experienced the shift from extreme body disciplining for the sake of maximal thinness and extreme body disciplining for the sake of “toned curves, low fat profiles and slight musculature.”

‘Viral’ trends concerned with extreme thinness, such as the popular challenge involving stacking as many coins as possible in the hollow of your collarbones, still continue, but they are now accompanied (or overshadowed) by a public visual proclamation of ‘fitness goals’ such as ‘booty gains’ (maximized and shapely glutes from strength training). Arguments have been made for this new trend towards fitness being ‘emancipatory.’ I would argue it must be understood as another means of body disciplining and regulation, one that is less pathologized than extreme food restriction. There is a long history of medical men pathologizing food refusal as being an innately female disease and women have only been able to engage in rigorous exercise and strength training publicly within the past century. Regardless of the body ideal in question, the striking commonality within each of my interactions with these women was the mutual recognition of the extent to which these social media based ‘body projects’ and body disciplining narratives have permeated the lives of young women in widespread ways.
While I personally found aspects of this research to be emotionally challenging, I also found them to be illuminating and, in some ways, personally emancipatory. By further engaging in the “pro-ana” community, I was able to discover Tumblr content that actively promoted recovery, inclusive community building, and even arguments for the eradication of the “pro-ana” community itself. As I read the history of the pathologization/medicalization of eating disorders, and theory on the disciplined, ‘beautified’ body, I began to better understand and recognize the socio-historical constructions that inform my own reductive understanding of my body. This understanding worked to strip some elusive power from my more damaging thoughts and confusions, allowing me to more critically examine my own complex bodily subjectivity.

The Modern Neoliberal Body Subject

Critical feminist scholarship on embodiment and women’s lived experiences of their bodies has resituated and reframed the way that social scientists understand the discipline, control, and regulation of bodies (Foucault 1995). As a malleable site of cultural anxieties (Bordo 2003), personal distress and self-objectification (Johnston-Robledo et al. 2007), pleasure and satisfaction (Fahs 2011b), cultural rebellion (Bobel and Kwan 2011), frank oppression (Owen 2012), or affiliation to various social identities (Hill Collins 2000), the body and its role as a social entity cannot be overstated.  

For some time, feminists and theorists have considered the body the most important site for the workings of social control. Theorist Susan Bordo calls the body a ‘site of struggle’ and a ‘locus of control.’ Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz understands the body as a site of Foucauldian ‘knowledge-power’ and as the strategic target of

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systems of ‘codification,’ ‘supervision,’ and ‘constraint.’” Most notably, Foucault theorized about the subject formation of ‘docile bodies’ as being constructed by the workings of external power, self-surveillance, and bodily practice. My first chapter provides a broad overview of such body and beauty theory that will later work to ground my analysis. I begin by outlining the influential theory of classic social contractarians who centralized the importance of property and ‘property rights’ within the liberal state. Some feminist theorists such as Carole Pateman have critiqued this fundamental basis of liberalism, arguing that patriarchal marriage or job contracts work to alienate women from their labor power, leading to their subjugation within these supposed ‘neutral’ exchanges. The labor power that exists within these contracts cannot be separated from the body and must be understood as ‘property in the person.’

Today, the now flourishing ethos of neoliberalism is still fully entrenched in property and has further implicated the body as an important form of such property as well as a site of continual labor power and production. The modern neoliberal body subject is now understood by many theorists as property that must be maintained and utilized in a manner that is in keeping with the institutions and discursive regimes of modernity. In order for modern body subjects to regulate their body as property, they must engage in reflexive projects of the self, aided by the ever-increasing self-actualizing technologies of the neoliberal era. Furthermore, the modern proliferation and expansion of economies of beauty further enforce the construction of the body as a form of property and capital that must be increased through continuous bodily labor and disciplining. The body-centric Tumblr and Instagram communities exist within

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(and because of) beauty economies that capitalize on the increasingly commodified neoliberal body.

In the first chapter I further outline the recent beauty theory that has explored the ways in which the disciplinary regime of ‘beauty’ is used as a form of governmentality at home and abroad. Furthermore, the regulation of the ‘work of femininity’ is enforced by a new individualist ‘responsibility ethic.’ Neoliberal consumer culture simultaneously works to apply this ethic to the bodily labor of self-surveillance and manipulation by means of disciplinary technologies. Finally, I theoretically explore how modern discourse on the body is informed and complicated by the recently emergent logic of postfeminism and its influence as a neoliberal media ‘sensibility.’ I conclude the chapter by highlighting the long-held ideology of mind/body dualism that has worked to construct the ‘feminine’ body as inferior to the ‘masculinist’ mind.

I hope to further illuminate the ways in which the body is rendered property and capital within our current neoliberal climate and its expanding beauty economies through my research into online body disciplining communities. The female bloggers I am researching have countless reasons for entering into these communities and engaging in these forms of bodily labor. Although these many motivations are of interest, the subject of my analysis is the discursive strategies employed by these women to render their bodily labor normalized, naturalized and (often) beneficial. Employing a discursive analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which these specific forms of body disciplining (extreme food restriction and extreme fitness regimes) are socially constructed, either as pathologies or as healthy behaviors. My analysis centers on the ways in which the body ideal is constructed in
the modern era and on how this construction influences the discourses present within the new media I am discussing. I am interested in the many contradictions within these online communities’ constructions of the body as well as the discourse utilized in such constructions. For example, how is the thin body rendered simultaneously weak and powerful? How is the muscular body considered to be ‘built’ and to be ‘natural’ at the same time? These questions can only effectively be answered through the lens of a Foucauldian framework, recognizing the power and complexity of such discourses.

Foucauldian theory understands modern power as “non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and non-orchestrated,” yet it nonetheless “produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination.”5 In Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality, Foucault uncovers the many ways in which discursive regimes construct the ‘useful,’ mailable body, or the ‘docile body’ as he defines it. This docile body is constituted within a modern form of power, which he calls ‘biopower,’ that operates through the body, establishing bodily subjectivities. Foucault argues that the rise of biopower largely allowed for the rise of modern democracy and capitalism and that it takes control of life by changing norms through ‘expert’ discourses and vies for stability through constant ‘policing.’ Feminist critic Susan Bordo has taken up the Foucauldian framework of the processes of surveillance in creating the postmodern body subject, her work similarly informs my analysis. Poststructuralist feminists such as Bordo argue that current discursive regimes are deeply implicated in “constituting a set of normativities toward which bodies intend, – like diet regimes, fashion, and health care procedures – disciplinary controls which

literally produce the bodies that are their concern.”6 The body can thus be understood as a site upon which historical changes and tensions can be observed. In this way, the body must be recognized as constituting a “text of culture.”7

My work ultimately centers around the body as a site of social control, subject formation, and resistance. Utilizing a Foucauldian framework, I will attempt to better understand the constitutive, discursive regimes in the neoliberal era by focusing on the modern body-subject as the site to view modern forms of power. In order to recognize the many ways in which the capitalist or ‘consumer self’ is constituted within our society, it is useful to turn to the disciplining of body-subjects, and the various ‘truths’ of the ‘self’ that are inscribed upon the body. Feminists have long recognized the ways in which the body has been given significance as a site of value and self-expression. The body is now understood as centralized within the neoliberal responsibility ethic and its demands for continual self-actualization, thereby allowing for the expansion of ‘body projects’ within postmodernity. ‘Body projects’ have been valorized as a means of discipling the body in order to render the self ‘visible,’ ‘normalized’ or ‘privileged.’ My discussion will focus on two widespread body projects that have been popularized and expanded within new media since the early 2000s as a means of investigating the postmodern discursive regimes working to shape the body subjectivities of the neoliberal era.

Body Projects Explored Through the Lens of New Media

6 Ibid., p. 8.
One of the body projects I researched, and the focus of my second chapter, is extreme food restriction. In order to ultimately analyze the modern “pro-anorexia” Tumblr community, I engage in an in depth, historical review of food refusal in order to track its discursive construction as a method of achieving spiritual purity and transcendence through attaining physical purity. This deeper historical understanding is necessary to make sense of the culturally situated construction of ‘bodily purity’ and the powerful fasted body, which both strongly inform the modern discourse within “pro-ana” Tumblr blogs.

Food refusal is not simply an extreme form of bodily discipline. In some cases, it becomes a biosocial mental illness, and the social construction of this particular illness has shifted in important ways since its discovery. Utilizing Joan Brumberg’s work on the history of anorexia nervosa, I outline the ways in which this particular disease must be understood as socially constructed and historically/culturally situated. Before food refusal was pathologized, it was recognized as a pursuit of ‘higher goals,’ some medieval fasting girls even achieved fame as such practices signaled a superior morality and spiritual beauty at the time. Sanctifying food refusal through discursive regimes is still ongoing and particularly visible within the “pro-ana” community. “Pro-ana” bloggers often equate food refusal with pursuits of their ‘higher goals.’ While medieval fasting girls were said to have ‘transcended’ the mortal realm for the spiritual realm through fasting, the ‘higher goals’ for “pro-ana” bloggers are often associated with ‘transcending’ social exclusion and attaining social privilege or power.

Food refusal for moral reclamation was termed “anorexia mirabilis,” as it was unique within its time period. More recently, similar diseases such as hysteria and
eating disorders have emerged within ‘advanced’ industrial societies during (roughly) the past century and they must be recognized as distinct ‘cultural artifacts.’ I will argue that “pro-ana” Tumblr discourse is shaped by historically constructed discursive ‘truths’ about the fasted body. This long history of first sanctifying and then pathologizing starving bodies has greatly contributed to the modern discursive ‘truth’ of the thin body as ‘pure,’ ‘successful,’ ‘intelligent,’ ‘disciplined,’ and ‘feminine.’ These bodily constructions ground “pro-ana” discourse and inform other discursive ‘truths,’ such as anorexia being a means of becoming powerful and emancipated from the female body. Furthermore, although many in the “pro-ana” community recognize anorexia as a destructive illness, it is still often sanctified or valorized as being the only, or the best, ‘solution’ for achieving ‘higher goals.’ These logics cannot be divorced from their historical precursors and must be centralized within a discursive analysis of modern constructions of eating disorders and the fasting or thin body. The discursive power of the “pro-ana” community continues to embolden the ‘fasting girl’ as a modern day ‘skinny legend,’ constructing her as a supreme being who is moral, divinely pure, and all-powerful. This sanctified construction is given further power and influence within the neoliberal ethos and postfeminist media sensibilities which encourage the commodification of the thin female body.

I further explore the neoliberal body subject in my chapter on the recently emerging fitness community within the social media photography site Instagram. Within our increasingly consumerist society advertising has taken up far more space with new media. In my final chapter, I highlight how Instagram, as a blogger centered media platform, has allowed for the considerable success of a new advertising method that relies upon the fame and influence of the peer/celebrity
hybrid bloggers and the capital of their commodified bodies. These Instagram famous bloggers tend to attain a considerable following within interest specific communities in particular; especially the fitness and ‘health’ communities. Fitness, diet, and ‘health’ companies are now searching out Instagram influencers and signing them on to promote their products and brands. Since the beginning of the consumer era, the female body has been used most often in for-profit media imagery, and although actresses’ and influencers’ bodies were often centralized, they were still largely promoted and produced by independent companies. Within the past ten or so years the social media advertising shift has allowed for women themselves to become the brand, instead of just being the body for the brand.

Thousands of women are now actively participating in media-based fitness, health, and beauty economies. This development is complicating the neoliberal ‘property of the self’ by allowing the women greater agency and influence in the control and exchange of their own property. In many ways, these online fitness models and trainers can be viewed as ideal neoliberal body subjects in that they individually engage in ‘projects of the self.’ By using disciplinary technologies to increase their bodily capital these bloggers are able to increase their financial and social capital through new media and the economies it supports. Within these famous fitness blogs, the body is rendered valuable property, and the discursive regimes employed to ‘sell’ the ideal body are informed by neoliberal and postfeminist logics. The discourse ultimately centers around healthism and commodity feminism. ‘Health,’ as it is constructed within the online fitness community, is “a prescribed state and an ideological position.”

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largely ‘read’ on the body and interpreted through ‘lifestyle’ (largely influenced by class and race). Ideal ‘health’ is associated with excellent moral behavior and the individualized responsibility ethic.

‘Health’ is also aestheticized through the lens of beauty and is depicted as a means of attaining normative corporeality and citizenship. Attaining this ideal of ‘health’ is closely tied to superior emotional and psychological wellbeing. This logic expands the realm of self-improvement, allowing for technologies of the self, such as fitness regimes or diet products, to be presented as necessary therapeutic, healing technologies. Furthermore, the discursive influence of commodity feminism, which works to “transform feminism into a marketing tool,”9 renders these ideal neoliberal body subjects on a quest for bodily transformation ‘emancipated’ women, or feminist influencers. Just as the ideal body is rendered the key to ‘success’ and ‘health,’ the pursuit of such a body (through consumption and self-surveillance) is rendered the key to emancipation, empowerment and independence. A formative site for self-commodification, the discursive strategies employed within the Instagram fitness community construct bodies as forms of capital, which can (and should) be expanded upon through body projects (in this case termed ‘fitness journeys’). Most importantly, these body projects must be aided by continuous consumption of technologies of the self, such as online fitness programs or nutrition products.

These two kinds of social media are crucially formative in the development of bodily subjectivities and the development of global beauty economies. With women's bodies and voices at the center, these communities are working to shape future bodily discourse in ways that more often center female experiences. As feminist writer Susie

Orbach rightly argues, “eating problems are charged with bearing the burden of political exclusion and contain within them protest, accommodation, and despair.” These struggles can be most clearly seen within the discourse of “pro-ana” bloggers. As they navigate modern corporeal politics, these bloggers engage with neoliberal logics and relay their attempts to manage these nearly impossible expectations. Within these “pro-ana” and fitness communities, the body is discursively rendered a prison, a tool, an asset, a protest, and/or a source of power.

We must think through these tensions, and such online platforms provide us with thousands of personal statements that speak to the lived experience of female embodiment as well as continue to construct discursive ‘truths’ that influence bodily disciplining. Increasingly, the ideal neoliberal body subject is made to not only engage in body projects but to publicly engage with them on commercialized platforms. This new expectation requires the additional labor of discursive strategy in order to ‘prove’ the validity of such body projects. Therefore, not only is there a modern proliferation of body projects, there is also an expansion of the discursive regimes used to justify and promote them. Modern day eating disorders and body projects can be understood as cultural artifacts, distinct in that they often accompany public engagement with bodily discourse and politics.

The Instagram fitness community is different from the “pro-ana” community largely because the means of body disciplining (fitness regimes) are not similarly pathologized as distinctively ‘disordered’ behavior. Instead, fitness regimes are somewhat medicalized and often valorized within the modern ethos of healthism, in which the attainment of ‘health’ is seen as a moral imperative. The fitness community is similar to the “pro-ana” community in that the discourse present is informed by the
intersection between postfeminism, neoliberalism, and subject formation. The
*Instagram* fitness community represents an important modern development: ‘aesthetic entrepreneurship.’ The female fitness bloggers I research are able to successfully pursue this particular kind of entrepreneurship because of the modern climate of neoliberalism, postfeminist media sensibilities, and the globally expanding beauty economy. In many ways, this emerging form of ‘aesthetic entrepreneurship’ within online platforms can be understood as a new institution of modernity within the post-industrial economy engaged with reflexive projects of the self.¹⁰

Within this online community, the “market-political rationality of neoliberalism has entered into social discourse and begun to structure subjectivities. This rationality now “governs the ‘sayable, intelligible, and truth criteria of western culture.”¹¹ This market-political rationality is deeply constituted within the logics of commodity feminism, thereby positioning these fitness blogs as a key to female empowerment. Furthermore, within these communities, beauty (largely intersecting with healthism) is “instrumentalized as a pathway to feminine solidarity.”¹² In this way, the modern-day reality and near future of feminism is becoming further entrenched in the politics of the body and the market fueled expansion of body projects as a means of constructing an ideal womanhood through the ideal body.

**Notes on Methodology**

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.
My work hopes to contribute to the field of beauty and body studies by addressing theoretical concerns about the neoliberal body subject through the lens of new media. The body centric platforms of Tumblr and Instagram hold an endless amount of important narrative content that must be contextualized and analyzed. Although there has been some work on these forms of new media, theoretically driven analysis is seriously lacking. Specifically, my research consists of content analysis of hundreds of Tumblr and Instagram blogs conducted over the course of a year and a half. Specifically, my research on Tumblr consisted of following as many “pro-ana” blogs as I could find and compiling the content from these blogs into different categories for comparison and analysis. On Instagram, my research similarly consisted of following as many fitness model and trainer blogs as possible and conducting more in depth, long term research of five different fitness bloggers themselves.

The scope of my research is broad in order to encompass an analysis of both types of media. This breadth limits my subjects of analysis, some important issues within the fitness industry and within the medicalization and constructions of eating disorders have not been addressed. For example, I do not address the racialization of ‘fit’ bodies within health, fitness, and beauty industries. The modern ‘ideal body’ in popular media and within the fitness industry is informed by racialized, Orientalized, and exoticized constructions of the black female body (this can be seen in the valorization of large rear ends and the widespread tanning within the fitness industry). Furthermore, I only speak to female identifying “pro-ana” and fitness bloggers as they represent the majority of these types of bloggers. There are certainly many male identifying bloggers and consumers who also engage in body disciplining and are
similarly encouraged to do so. Mens perspectives must be highlighted and the uniquely gendered aspects of (male) body politics must also be addressed. The discussion and analysis of the discursive regimes utilized in these two specific forms of new media is by no means sufficiently broad or conclusive. Instead, I hope to provide a theoretically grounded analysis of the new media that has yet to be explored to the extent necessary to understand the ways in which young women publicly present their navigation within the landscape of modern corporeal politics.

**Chapter One: Influential Body and Beauty Theory**

**Corporeal Politics: Modern Tensions Between Alienation and Commodification**

Since the late 1980s, neoliberalism has been growing in both power and influence within the United States and the rest of the world. This development necessitates new feminist critiques of the ways in which neoliberal and patriarchal power has created distinct bodily subjectivities and necessitated self-realized bodily commodification. Liberal social contractarians such as Locke developed social theory that was grounded in the central importance of property, ultimately also rendering the body as property. The body as property has been explored in feminist studies through the lens of female sexual reproduction and marriage/labor contracts. I wish to apply this critique into a modern understanding of the commodified body as property and capital and its importance within the neoliberal bodily subjectivity. This chapter attempts to centralize the modern role of ‘beauty’ (in economies and modes of governmentality) in disciplining bodies and subjects. I ground my inquiry in *The
Beauty Myth by Naomi Wolf, one of the first major accounts of ‘beauty’ as a postmodern disciplinary force that helped to bring the issue of ‘beauty’ and beauty studies to the spotlight. I see The Beauty Myth and other discussions about beauty as implicated in an emerging discursive regime of postfeminism that can be seen in popular media and works to depoliticize and individualize problematic gendered self-surveillance and body disciplining as well as the effects of major gender inequalities.

I will construct my understanding of the discursive power of beauty within the Foucauldian framework of biopower, specifically as it relates to constructions of bodily subjectivities, the consumer self, and postfeminist aestheticized/commodity feminism. Finally, I focus on the destructive legacies of the historical construction of the Westernized mind/body dualism within modern culture as it is situated within the feminist understanding of the connections between the body and the body politic, in which the body and some of its ills can be understood as a ‘microcosm’ of some aspects of society. This theoretical discussion unearths many complex questions as particularly pressing within our late-capitalist society as the body is becomes increasingly centralized as the site of production and value. In this chapter I undertake a broad overview of social contractarian, poststructuralist, beauty, and body theory, which provides the framework for my analysis of the online body disciplining communities that are the subject of this discussion.

Legacies of Locke’s ‘Property in the Person’ within Liberal Constructions of the Body:

Influential social contractarians, such as John Locke, worked to put property at the center of the liberal state and its social organization, allowing for the further
indoctrination of the political distinction between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’.

Locke argued that people form a society for the chief ends of preserving their property and, by extension, their freedom and self-ownership. This liberal foundation of the social contract works to protect property owners while disenfranchising those without property, thereby necessitating the political categorization, otherization, exclusion, and subordination of property-less peoples. Marxist theory has since problematized the centrality of property by acknowledging that within the employment contract, what is being exchanged is money for ‘labor power.’ Labor power cannot be separated from the body, as it is commodified within contractarian logics of ‘property in the person.’ Critics of contractarianism, such as Carole Pateman, argue that such logics allow for the use of the contract as a modern mechanism for subordination, as with the marriage contract (and labor contract) which are (mis)understood as ‘neutral’ exchange. Pateman explains that within the marriage contract women are not made to exchange their labor power for money but for ‘protection.’13 Building upon Pateman’s work in “Feminism, Property in the Person and Concepts of Self,” Janice Richardson notes that the false conflation of ‘property in the person’ allows for subjugating contracts that “allow workers and women to appear to give their consent” and be framed as ‘free’ citizens, in situations in which “they have had little choice but to enter into the contracts.”14 Furthermore, it creates economic and social relationships that ignore the needs and desires of the worker.

Carole Pateman has argued that this fictional relationship of self-ownership and property in the person involves treating aspects of a person as if they were property that could be alienated and, in doing so, places more stress on ownership than on self-ownership.\(^\text{15}\) Pateman has since acknowledged that modern contractarian critiques must evolve alongside the liberal ‘self’ and the ways individualism is contracted within social and economic relations. Importantly for this discussion, Richardson does so by drawing attention to the concept of the ‘boundedness’ of the self, where the self is defined by the “characteristics that we lack” and is therefore “bounded” against the outside.” She argues that the modern bounded liberal self, “with private property featuring as an extension of oneself, denoting an area of (negative) freedom around oneself,” is rooted in Locke’s construction of a “public/private distinction based upon private property.”\(^\text{16}\) Concern about bodily ‘lack’ is prevalent throughout the “pro-ana” and fitness communities, the body is considered inherently lacking before bodily disciplining and inherently more valuable after. Furthermore, as the body is becoming a crucial form of property within neoliberalism it is beginning to exist more predominately within the public sphere and global marketplace.

The centrality of property has not diminished within Western neoliberalism, but within our post-industrial, service-based, consumer economy, the fiction of ‘property as self’ has taken on new cultural logics and economic realities. Today, political constructions of ‘freedom’ must be understood in relation to the ‘normative’


\(^{16}\) Richardson, Janice. Page 68.
consumerist ‘self,’ who is understood as acting within the social contract and the rules of ‘citizenship.’ Within what Judith Butler calls the ‘exclusionary matrix,’ ‘normative’ subjects are continually constructed and reconstructed against ‘abject’ beings. ‘Abject beings’ form the ‘constitutive outside,’ and are therefore not considered ‘free.’ In this way, the modern neoliberal subject is intimately connected with the politics of the body and concerned with achieving freedom through normativity. As normative bodies are increasingly being deemed normative subjects, body projects have significantly more power to ‘protect’ neoliberal subjects from the ‘constitutive outside.’

The Body as Women’s’ Asset

Within the dominant Western intellectual tradition there has been a continuous “dismissal of the body” and a reverence for masculinist notions of the supremacy of mind over matter, which has led to an ‘otherization’ of non-white, male bodies. Therefore, feminism has “long seen its own project as intimately connected to the body” as it is socially constructed within patriarchal culture, and by the conflicting political ideologies conflating physical property and freedom. As theorist Alison Winch writes, in today’s “hyper-visible landscape of popular culture, the body is recognized as the object of women’s labor: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy.” In liberal society, the body is rendered property, just as it is rendered as the site of

19 Ibid.
production, which must operate within “individualized institutions of modernity.” Within these institutions, neoliberal subjects are disciplined to engage in “reflexive projects of the self, characterized by introspection, evaluation, and alteration, within narratives of actualization and mastery.” Accordingly, my research centers around two ways in which modern women and girls engage with their bodies as sites of production through reflective projects of the ‘self’ aided by new online technologies that act as individualized institutions of knowledge production.

Within economies of ‘beauty,’ bodies are constructed as having “value that can either be enhanced and maintained through expenditure, or else exchanged for other kinds of capital.” The means of bodily ‘enhancement’ that I am most concerned with in my research is extreme food restriction (within the online “pro-ana” community) and extreme ‘fitness’ regimes (within the online “fitspo” community). The exchange that I am most concerned with is the exchange of bodily labor through extreme body projects with the ability to construct a marketable type of corporeality for financial gain and increased social capital. The new economies that are emerging within the modern era of globalization are often heavily implicated in corporeal politics and invested in the production of normative, consumable bodies. ‘Beauty’ as a discursive regime (and the economies it proliferates/fuels) has been present throughout modern history, but its postmodern relationship with neoliberal and postfeminism must be recognized as distinctive and powerful.

The aim of my research is to identify some of the ways in which the fast-growing beauty economies that have emerged since the late 1980s can be understood.

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as increasingly fundamental to the construction of normative citizenship and corporeality in the modern neoliberal body subject. Modern beauty and ‘health’ industries are not only increasing in scale but also in scope, as they are now able to infiltrate previously ‘private’ domains through new technologies like social media. As I will discuss in my final chapter, these modern economies of beauty are increasingly shaped by women themselves, as the barriers to entry into these profitable economies are diminishing due to the introduction of social media technologies. Such technologies provide women with a fairly inexpensive public platform that they can produce themselves in relation to other such platforms or companies. The emergent online beauty and health economies, which are largely produced by women, thrive on the discursive power of neoliberalism and its centralization of body projects for self-actualization. These economies thereby discipline neoliberal body subjects to engage in more extreme self-surveillance and self-discipline. The gendered elements of this self-surveillance and discipline are of particular concern for my analysis and are best situated within a Foucauldian framework of discursive power.

The Body as a Locus of Social Control: Foucault, Biopower and Self Surveillance

Michel Foucault argues that, in modernity, the body is discursively constructed as a “practical, direct locus of social control.”\textsuperscript{23} This theory informs postmodern feminist arguments that the body constitutes a “text of culture.”\textsuperscript{24} Within works such as \textit{Discipline and Punish} and \textit{The History of Sexuality}, Foucault has uncovered the many discursive operations, broadly understood as biopower, that construct the useful, malleable body, or the ‘docile body.’ In the first volume of his

\textsuperscript{23} Bordo, Susan. Page 165.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
1978 *History of Sexuality*, Foucault theorizes the modern production of various “perverse” bodies, such as the masturbating child, hysterical woman, and the homosexual. Fundamentally, Foucault’s analysis begins at the level of discourses instead of systems or institutions, though he maintains that discourses must be grounded in institutional power over time. Foucault argues that the rise of ‘biopower’ allowed for the rise of modern democracy and capitalism, and it maintains influence by establishing norms through ‘expert’ discourses and achieving stability through constant ‘policing.’ Discursive power within society is ‘constitutive,’ non-centralized, and concerned with ‘techniques for maximizing life.’ Foucault explains the primacy of surveillance within discursive systems of power,

> there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over and against himself.25

This surveillance and self-surveillance is a critical aspect of biopower and governmentality, which “bridges the micropolitics of disciplining the body and mind, and the macropolitics of governing the nation-state, via management of populations by various institutions, such as education and health care.”26 The aim of Foucault’s work on clinics, asylums, prisons, and sexuality was to “delineate a particular mode of governing people’s bodies and minds or souls typical of the modern period.”27

Through these studies, Foucault was able to show the many ways in which particular micro and macro politics merged to continuously construct multiple ‘perverse’ bodies and produce normative subjectivities.

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27 Reed, Lori and Saukko, Paula. Page 5.
The mode of governing outlined by Foucault relies upon the countless, complex and even contradictory discourses that work to construct beliefs that are rendered ‘truths’ by the legitimizing and disseminating power of institutions. As Foucault explains, a discourse is a “dispersed system whose hypothesized unity is always provisional.”\(^\text{28}\) We must “conceive of discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable.”\(^\text{29}\) Discourses thereby produce various complex ‘identities’ and ‘subject positions.’ According to some post structural theorists ‘identity’ can be further conceptualized as a multiplicity of different shifting and often contradictory subject positions.\(^\text{30}\) Building off of Foucault's work, other theorists have argue that subjectivity does not come from within but is ‘constituted in texts and talk.’\(^\text{31}\) Subjectivity, therefore, is not simply a subject position in discourse, it is always “multiple and dispersed.”\(^\text{32}\) According to Foucault, discourses are active and constitutive and must be considered a ‘social practice,’ one that “systematically forms the objects of which they speak.”\(^\text{33}\)

Foucault centralizes the importance of ‘power/knowledge’ in his works. He argues that there is “no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, power relations.”\(^\text{34}\) In this way, power produces knowledge, thereby producing

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\(^\text{29}\) Ibid.


‘reality,’ as well as “domains of objects and rituals of truth.”

Foucault articulates the ways in which the body itself is inscribed through power knowledge. Discursive regimes of power knowledge “discipline the body through a multiplicity of minor processes of domination...exercising upon the body a subtle coercion...obtaining holds upon it at the level of mechanism itself - movements gestures attitudes rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body.” Therefore, the social construction of the body is contextually specific and ever changing.

Foucault maintains that the multiplicity, complexity, and contradiction of discourse allows for discourses themselves to “produce their own of plurality of resistance to power.” In the same way that ‘power’ is everywhere, ‘resistance’ is everywhere. This theory is particularly productive for my research on the discourses that are present in online communities concerned with body discipline. The discourse used by the young women I have studied is often complex, contradictory, subversive, and otherizing (sometimes all at once). Foucauldian frameworks are helpful for analysis of gender and corporeal discursive regimes as they allow for robust theoretical conclusions that give rise to the possibility for resistance within problematic and discriminatory systems of power knowledge. Foucauldian analysis centralizes the corporeality of the body as a historically and socially informed entity, thereby granting a recognition of corporeal politics that does not necessitate a (biologically) essentialist view of the body itself.

Feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo and Sandra Bartky have taken up the Foucauldian framework of discursive regimes and governmentality to explore

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36 Ibid., p. 137.
gendered body politics. Bordo and Bartky argue that discursive regimes are deeply implicated in “constituting a set of normativities toward which bodies intend.”\footnote{Price, Janet, and Margrit Shildrick. Page 8.} In \textit{Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression}, Sandra Bartky argues women are “not marched off to electrolysis at the end of a rifle, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed… in an attempt to master…beauty. Insofar as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a ‘subjected and practiced,’ an inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of far larger discipline, an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination.”\footnote{Bartky, Sandra L. \textit{Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression}. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print. Page 75.} My research concerns the ways in which modern day women navigate the terrain of beauty politics and normativities within our patriarchal structures and, in so doing, attempt to constitute themselves as neoliberal subjects.

Globally, feminist theorists have taken up Foucault’s theory of biopower and applied it to beauty as a disciplinary regime. For example, in “The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror,” Mimi Thi Nguyen asks, “What is happening when the promise of beauty to educate and to liberate is elicited simultaneously with the urge to go to war and to destroy?”\footnote{Mimi Thi Nguyen. Page 360.} Nguyen argues that beauty is being utilized as a form of imperialist governmentality and, specifically, as a technique for “maximizing life” through biopower. Firstly, Nguyen maintains that the ideological constructions of ‘beauty,’ as they are “aligned with truth, justice, freedom, and empowerment,” must be interrogated as “transactional categories… which exist in relation to national and transnational
This analysis of the transnational aspects of ‘beauty’ is necessary for an informed understanding of new social media platforms as ‘transnational’ spaces. I have researched multiple fitness bloggers from different corners of the globe, and I have found that there exists a striking continuity in the ‘beauty’ discourse and practices employed by these bloggers. It seems that ‘beauty’ does transcend global boundaries just as the neoliberal body subject is disciplined to transcend the boundaries of the body.

Nguyen uses the American/European NGO “Beauty without Borders,” which opened a beauty school in Kabul in 2003, as a case study to identify the ways in which beauty is constructed to act as a “salve to the soul.” The project director described the school as not simply being about “providing lipstick” but being about “restoring self-esteem and independence.” The constructions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘freedom’ within neoliberal discourse, when they are entangled within the ethical, moralized, and biopolitical nature of beauty, are emboldened as forces of democratization. Such entanglement facilitates “imperial statecraft” through the “distribution of beauty” as a means of constructing new subjectivities of “normative citizenship.”

Neoliberal subjects are produced in relation to “re-articulations of feminism and civil society, as well as articulations of empire, through an assemblage of new strategies and technologies that are deeply embedded notions of beauty and virtue, and democratic linkages of self to world.” As Didier Fassin’s explains, humanitarianism “takes as its object the saving of individuals” and “making a

41 Ibid.
42 Mimi Thi Nguyen. Page 360.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p. 365.
selection of which existences it is possible or legitimate to save.”

Thereby, Nguyen unearths how “beauty is instrumentalized” within the project of humanitarianism in order to create a “pathway to feminine solidarity within the essentialist framework of ‘women’s rights as human rights.’” The ultimate aim of such developmentalist intervention through NGOs is the construction of a modernized subject who reflects imperialist subjectivity, especially within their bodily labor, performativity, and politics. This example shows the potential power of ‘beauty’ as a transnational disciplining force.

Recently, other feminist theorists have attempted to analyze the many ways governmentality functions within the United States. *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power* (2010), edited by Lori Reed and Paula Saukko, also builds upon Foucauldian analysis of modern governmentality and argues that we now exist within a “new world of continuous economic and psychological restructuring.” This logic of constant restructuring is rooted in neoliberalism and consumer capitalism. Reed and Saukko argue that many theorists consider “self-help” to be the emergent “cultural logic,” which has “extended across almost all aspects of our public and private lives.” They identify magazine culture as a key “contemporary site where self-help practices have multiplied, framing problems of everyday life through what Ferguson (1983) has termed the ‘responsibility ethic.’” This ethic is one that presupposes that the resolution to women’s problems is to be

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46 Fassin, D. Page 370.
48 Ibid., p. 19.
found through their own hard work, effort, and labor.” The particular work that women are expected to perform tends to align with the “work of femininity,” as Franklin refers to it, which involves “consumption, bodywork, emotional and psychological work.” Reed and Saukko maintain that this “labor of femininity” extends to women’s magazine culture where women are encouraged to engage in practices of “self-monitoring, evaluation, scrutiny, and bodily, emotional, and/or psychological transformation to achieve certain desired ends.”

Consumer culture informs this expected labor of femininity by advertising and promoting fitness or beauty products that are “valorized through a vocabulary of choice that addressed the (female) reader as being able to achieve success and happiness through her choice among a range of options and preferences.” Neoliberal logics operating through women’s media outlets construct female ‘problems’ that must be solved by the products or methods outlined in their pages, namely through consumptive bodily labor and “self-care.” The rhetoric of self-care, as I will show later on, is evident throughout “pro-ana” and “thinspo” discursive regimes. The logic of self-care discourse is that any woman can empower herself or solve her problems by investing in certain technologies, products, or services to ‘care’ for and ‘improve’ herself. This discourse is very often fueled by another modern neoliberal discursive regime: postfeminism.

The Postfeminist, Neoliberal Discursive Regime of Feminine Empowerment

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50 Ferguson, Marjorie. Page 125.
51 Reed, Lori and Saukko, Paula. Page 25.
52 Ibid., p. 25.
53 Ibid., p. 36.
Postfeminism has been understood by many feminist theorists as constituting a ‘backlash against feminism,’ in that it works to enforce the “deliberate re-privatization”54 of women, gender and feminist issues that were politicized during the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s. “Post” feminism espouses the ideology that feminism is a thing of the past, and that women now have all the tools they need to empower themselves. Feminist theorists such as Jane Authors and Rosalind Gill have rightfully argued that postfeminism must be understood as a postmodern “sensibility” that relies on consumerism, and individualism, and exists mainly within the world of media. Postfeminism as a ‘sensibility’, or a media-centric ‘popular idiom,’ must be more broadly understood as working to “incorporate, assume, commodify or naturalize aspects of feminism.”55 within its discourse. As an idiom, “postfeminism popularizes (as much as it caricatures) a feminism it simultaneously evokes and rejects.”56 Postfeminist discourses thereby work to “create a new female subject” that is “disassociated from the “burdens” of feminism.”57 Critically, this ‘new female subject’ is solely afforded a ‘normative subjectivity’ to the extent that she is “willing and able to participate in consumer culture,”58 especially ‘beauty’ culture and it’s industries. This consumerist de-politicization and individualization is central to the neoliberal logics of the postfeminist sensibility. In this way, postfeminism is complex, and does not simply constitute a backlash against second

57 Ibid., p. 3.
58 Ibid.
wave feminism. Instead, it must be understood as a ‘sensibility’ that incorporates feminism into its logics as much as it ignores it.

Postfeminism appeared in popular media “as far back as the early 1980s, but it was during the 1990s that the term became concretized.”\textsuperscript{59} At the time, postfeminism ushered in a new feminist politics that continues to exist mainly within the context of media and celebrity culture. Within celebrity media culture, “youthful new femininities” are being celebrated; such femininities are “centered around energy, vitality, capacity, entrepreneurial spirit, public visibility and self-exposure.”\textsuperscript{60} There is a recent shift towards re-embracing a commodified femininity and feminism that is present within the self-branding work of celebrities such as Taylor Swift and Beyoncé, who have publicly declared a feminist identity. Public female figures have largely abandoned the conservative tactic of “expressing their concerns over what being a ‘feminist’ entails, whilst simultaneously extolling the virtues of ‘girl power,’ or women’s economic success and independence. Today female celebrities often align themselves with a distinctly postfeminist sentiment, and publicly embrace and promote a (post)feminist cause.\textsuperscript{61} This shift has the effect of elevating postfeminist concerns while also continuing to tie feminism to branding, which threatens to reduce feminism to an “identity badge” that is tied to consumer postfeminist culture. Feminist theorist Angela McRobbie asks; ‘is the cost of feminism’s rehabilitation…the attempt to attach something of feminism to an ethos of

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 8.
competitive individualism?" Not only does postfeminism work to regulate women’s bodies and enforce self-surveillance, it also constructs a popular representation of “feminism” that is fueled by a consumerist subjectivity.

Postfeminism rejects second wave feminism’s dismissal of femininity as being largely incompatible with feminism, instead postfeminist sensibilities embrace femininity’s power to allow for female self-expression and agency. Postfeminism therefore works to “rehabilitate femininity as a ‘bodily property’ in order to render it a tool for women’s own self-actualization on their own terms.” This rehabilitation constrains a problematic femininity that is “contingent - requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance.” Rosalind Gill explains how the postfeminist culture is marked by an extreme intensity on self-surveillance, and the requirement to transform oneself and remodel one’s interior life. Furthermore, this extreme self-disciplined work “must be understand as fun pampering, or self-indulgence, and must never be disclosed.” This increased demand for constant, vigilant self-monitoring and ‘improvement’ is then presented as emancipatory instead of oppressive.

Gill links this problematic logic to the postfeminist shift in female representation in the media from sexualized representations of women as “passive mute objects assumed by the male gaze” to “active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.” This shift intensifies an internalization of the male gaze, into a narcissistic, self-policing gaze, allowing for a culture of endless

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64 Ibid., p. 155.
65 Ibid.
consumerism and female competition to thrive. In this way, objectification is able to live on within the postfeminist media sensibilities, re-framed as “chosen and agentic.”66 Gill understands this as a shift from objectification to subjectification. In this way, as Rosalind Gill explains, postfeminism is able to unapologetically construct female bodies as “sites for continual manipulation in order to fuel continual consumption,”67 or what Rosalind Gill has termed the ‘makeover paradigm.’

Postfeminist rhetoric centers around the ‘consumer self.’ Importantly, a women’s notion of self is predicated on her inclusion or exclusion from the idolized target consumer demographic, and a specific ‘ideal’ bodily construction is necessary for inclusion. Additionally, though “difference is commodified rather than politicized within mainstream postfeminist culture,”68 it still must be negotiated within a fundamentally exclusionary framework that constructs normativity as white, middle or upper class, educated, heterosexual, able bodied and thin. The depoliticized logics of postfeminism and neoliberalism, a politic of “personal responsibility,”69 exist within a productive and reciprocal relationship; allowing for both ideologies to exert significant power over bodily discourse and disciplining.

Neoliberalism and postfeminism both espouse individualism and self-actualization, and they thrive in our current climate of consumer culture. Neoliberalism “operates with an individualized model of the self”70 and has become a “normative framework, based on the idea of citizens as rational and self-interested

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70 Ibid., p. 11.
economic actors with agency and control over their own lives.”71 The “autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism.”72 In this way, neoliberalism is able to utilize the logics of postfeminism in order to constitute a “mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing autonomous and enterprising.”73 This ethos of minimal intervention and maximal individualized self-realization allows exclusionary discursive frameworks to flourish, especially within the realm of the politics of self-construction, namely, beauty and body politics.

The ‘Beauty Myth’ as a Tool of Patriarchal Oppression:

Postfeminism as a sensibility in media is largely concerned with beauty and body work, often regulating adherence to the “beauty myth” or the attempt to achieve an impossible standard of beauty. Postfeminist logics work to re-frame body and beauty labor as ‘opportunities’ for women to achieve agency through self-actualization and personal improvement. For some time, feminist theorists have debated “whether an elusive ideal of beauty is a menacing male fabricated myth that victimizes women, or an avenue of self-realization by which women become empowered agents.”74 While this remains a point of contention, most feminist theorists agree that the “meaning of ‘beauty’ has gained complexity amid the rhetoric

71 Ibid., p. 12.
73 Gill, Rosalind and Scharff, Christina (Eds). 2013. Page 5.
of a ‘postfeminist’ age,“75 and, as a result, the feminist issue of the 1990’s was ‘beauty’ and the body itself (these issues are still poignant today).

One feminist writer that took up the issue of beauty in late capitalism was Naomi Wolf with her 1990 book, The Beauty Myth, which theorizes the recently increasing ‘beauty’ pressures in relation to a feminist backlash. At the time, The Beauty Myth presented and spread radical (outside of feminist academia) and potentially emancipatory claims. Naomi Wolf explains, “As women released themselves from the ‘feminine mystique’ of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control.”76 Wolf argues that as women claimed more power in society (namely by working outside the home), the ideals of womanhood and femininity intensified as well, in order to counteract women’s progress. According to Wolf, the ‘beauty myth’ has taken over the work of social coercion that “myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity can no longer manage.”77 In this way, the “gaunt youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood“78 and the “attainment of virtuous domesticity, was redefined as the attainment of virtuous beauty.”79 Wolf maintains that a ‘pluralism’ of ‘beauty myths’ has emerged and intensified, and they continually ‘mutate’ in order to maintain social control; thereby prescribing behavior, more than appearance.

75 Ibid., p. 3.
77 Ibid., p. 11.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., p. 18.
Most importantly, Wolf argues that within liberal capitalism, ‘beauty,’ is a “currency system,” and that after the second wave, “women took on all at once the roles of professional housewife, professional careerist and professional beauty,” as was necessitated by the emergent economy of ‘beauty.’ What she terms the ‘professional beauty quotient’ works to justify unequal pay and other gendered double standards in the workplace, such as seniority meaning prestige for men but erasure for women, especially within the more public professions. Wolf claims that “young women may indeed do better economically by investing her sexuality at its optimum exchange rate than she does by working hard for a lifetime.” Certainly, the ‘professionalization of beauty’ has proven to be extremely lucrative for the privileged few, and a pathway to further economic mobility for others. The labor market at large continues to exclude women, but Wolf’s contention that beauty or bodily labor is not ‘real’ (legitimate) or ‘hard’ (respectable) work is somewhat reductive. Wolf’s vague reference to ‘female sexuality’ here and throughout the book fails to recognize the complex ways in which female bodily subjectivity and construction is influenced by race, class and ability. The commodification of female corporeality (and sexuality) is often more accessible to ‘normative’ bodies who meet the beauty standards of whiteness, thinness and youthfulness. Wolfe ignores the lived realities of women of color (or those whose bodies are deemed ‘non-normative’) and the ways in which they navigate ‘beauty’ labor within their institutions of power in order to achieve economic or social mobility.

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80 Ibid., p. 12.
81 Ibid., p. 24.
82 Ibid., p. 35.
83 Ibid., p. 54.
As feminist theorists Elias, Gill and Scharff argue, “Neoliberalism makes us all ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’—not simply those who are models or working in fashion or design.” Wolf recognizes this as reality, but not within a framework of ‘entrepreneurship.’ Instead, she centralizes the reality of ‘beauty’ labor as necessitating a ‘third shift’ (in addition to the already ‘unpaid second shift’), as women are increasingly disciplined to conform to ever-shifting beauty ideals in order to construct themselves as economically and socially viable ‘subjects’ of the neoliberal state. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf updates Friedan’s central question, “Why is it never said that the reason women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house?” by asking, “Why is it never said that the crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is to buy more things for the body?” Wolf argues that the ‘democratization of beauty’ began in the late nineteenth century, as a means of limiting the sudden proliferation of female advancement, with the establishment of the mass production of beauty images, particularly in the form of *Harper’s Bazaar* and then *Vogue Magazine*. Wolf fails to recognize that women simultaneously began to play more of a role in the creation and marketing of these beauty images and, in so doing, she denies some women their agency and subjectivity within the neoliberal beauty marketplace. Today, it is arguably even more important to recognize the influence of women within the beauty industry, as commercialized social media platforms such as *Tumblr* and *Instagram* are largely made up of female for-profit bloggers. These female bloggers are implicated in the problematic construction and promotion of beauty images, but they must also be recognized as personally

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85 Ibid., p. 66.
86 Ibid., p 67.
navigating body and beauty politics, as well as often subverting exclusionary discourse or imagery on these sites.

Wolf outlines recent changes towards the media’s centralization of the body by highlighting *Vogue*’s marketing shift in 1969. *Vogue* lunched their ‘nude look,’ through which they began to focus on the body as much as (or more so than) the clothes. Wolf analyzed the different body-image driven advertising strategies aimed at women through the narratives of ‘beautification’ as ‘betterment,’ and situated them within her framework of the beauty myth backlash. Wolf argued that the efficacy of these narratives partly led to the average model in 1990 weighing twenty percent less than the American woman (compared to just eight percent less in the previous generation).87 Furthermore, Wolf notes, that between 1985 and 1990, consumer spending doubled and thirty three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal.88 In order to expand consumption, the modern form of beauty myth, centralizing the body as malleable and imperfect, was created; fueling the thirty three billion dollar thinness industry and its twenty billion dollar youth industry.89

Wolf ultimately argues that women’s magazines and other forms of ‘beauty’ representation and advertising provide a “dream language for meritocracy and the entrepreneurial spirit” within a doctrine of ‘personal responsibility’ that claimed to provide the promise of “total personal transformation in status that the consumer society offers men in the form of money”90 *The Beauty Myth* mostly preceded the recent, rapid expansion of ‘beauty studies;’ and nuanced theoretical understandings of

87 Ibid., p 181.
88 Ibid., p 10.
89 Ibid., p 66.
90 Ibid., p 31.
postfeminism as a ‘sensibility.’ Still Wolfes overarching theory of the effects of the ‘beauty myth’ illuminates how beauty acts as a disciplinary regime that regulates bodies through technologies of ‘self-hood’ (which are most readily institutionalized within the individualizing politics of neoliberalism and postfeminism.) In other words, the beauty myth allows for endless commodification of political, and social issues, and the construction of ‘individualized problems’ (which are often created by advertisers) as having ‘consumption-based solutions.’

While Wolfs work was illuminating and pre-emptive, it must still be critiqued for failing to provide an intersectional analysis of feminist issues. Wolf’s work largely came before the developed understanding of the discursive regime of postfeminism, and therefore its influence was not addressed. The Beauty Myth must be understood as being informed or influenced by postfeminist ‘sensibilities’ and logics. For example, in Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue, “Postfeminist cultures centralize an affluent, white elite” which leads to the accompanying centralization of “an individualism that elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents.”91 This postfeminist, elite centralization can be seen within Wolfe’s sole focus on the beauty myth as existing amongst “affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, but do not feel as free as they want to…”92 because of the tyranny of beauty.

Wolf is operating under an elitist assumption that all women are able and willing to drastically change the ways in which they function within the market

92 Ibid., p. 9.
economy that only grants full economic mobility to privileged economic actors.
Furthermore, such logic is underpinned by the neoliberal logic of free market rhetoric, which attempts to “incentivize citizens towards the ‘right’ choices”\textsuperscript{93} while ignoring the need to dismantle institutionalized structures of power. Instead neoliberal rhetoric champions the ‘emancipatory’ potential of institutionalized individualism. Wolf’s argument that all women must band together under their collective burden of ‘beauty,’ and fight back by engaging in individualized market-based strategies, is arguably similar to Western imperialist rhetoric. This rhetoric calls for the formation of a ‘globalized sisterhood,’ which too often results in the reinforcement or expansion of white structures of dominance.

While critiquing ‘beauty’ as a disciplinary regime, it is important to resist utilizing the frameworks and logics that inform and power the regime itself, such as postfeminism and neoliberalism. In order to understand the ways in which the modern ‘beauty myth’ functions as an exclusionary and depoliticized regime, the underlying disciplinary ideologies of ‘beauty’ and the body must be brought to light and problematized. Certainly, ‘beauty’ can, and does, work to limit women’s ability to prosper and succeed within neoliberal culture, but this is not all it does. ‘Beauty’ is a productive force, and as much as it creates unresolvable tensions that subjugate body subjects, it similarly produces endless contradictions/ambiguities within its various discourses, allowing for opportunities for active resistance, or subversion of exclusionary frameworks. In order to understand the more extreme or disordered ways in which the beauty myth can manifest in body disciplining, the problematic

\textsuperscript{93} Phipps (2016). Page 11.
ideologies that have fundamentally problematized the body for centuries must be uncovered.

Mind/Body Dualism and the Tensions Between Debilitating Disciplines and Emancipatory Practices:

Modern ‘beauty’ is a discursive regime that regulates bodily comportment and discipline, underpinning it is mind/body dualism. Constructed in large part by classical philosophers, the dualism informs our modern understanding of the body as problematic, uncontrollable, or in need of disciplining. This tension is particularly salient throughout “pro-ana” and “fitspo” discourse (as will be discussed in the following chapter), as it informs the centralization of control, and an assumption of the inherent danger of the female body. An understanding of this dualism is necessary to explain why the body holds such significance in our late capitalist society, while it is simultaneously an object of derision and a perceived source of instability.

Classical philosophers such as Plato and Socrates considered the body to be completely separate from the mind, and the body itself to be a destructive force. According to Plato, the body “keeps us from real knowledge” and “tempts us away from the virtuous life.”

Socrates wrote, “I have spent all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.” Socrates constructed a conflict between the body and soul, holding the soul in higher esteem. Plato further constructed the lives of noble men as exemplifying the proper

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95 Ibid., p. 112.
‘soul/body’ relationship, and the lives of women as exemplify a problematic relationship between the two. As the untamed body keeps us from real knowledge and reality, Plato considered women to be incapable of grasping either. Other philosophers such as Aristotle and Descartes similarly centralized this “enduring philosophical postulation of nature” that produced the hierarchy between the physical (material) and the mind (idea). The Western philosopher Augustine, claimed “the body is the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control” in that it is the “home of the ‘slimy desires of the flesh’ and therefore it is the impediment to our reason.” Classical philosophers ultimately warned of bodily desires as distractions at best, and at worst, as potentially destructive and unravelling forces. A successful and good life, therefore, required mental triumph over bodily desires.

This mind/body dualism is reflected in the work of significant feminist theorists. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, women's demand is "not that they be exalted in their femininity; they wish that in themselves, as in humanity in general, transcendence may prevail over immanence." Feminist theorists such as Elizabeth Spellman have called attention to de Beauvoir's use of "transcendence" and "immanence," which suggests that the spirit or mind must prevail over matter or body. Explicitly, de Beauvoir tells us “not to be the people men have dreamt us up to be; but implicitly, she tells us to be the people men have dreamt themselves up to be.” Additionally, Betty Friedan associates "mental activity" with the "professions of highest value to society." She believed that women have been relegated in the

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96 Ibid., p.115.
98 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., p. 115.
past to the less important bodily tasks, and they would be able to achieve far more
equality and power if they were able to do more tasks associated with the mind. This
tension continues to haunt feminist discourse, and thereby further reify the socially
constructed binary between body and mind, and ‘male’ and ‘female.’

More recently, in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo brilliantly problematizes the ‘mind-body dualism,’ locating it
within the social constructions of the female body as ‘abject,’ or ‘otherized.’ Bordo
outlines the long history of Western thinkers constructing the body as “the locus” of
chaos and danger.”¹⁰² Bordo further explains that Western thinkers have conceived of
the body as antithetical to the “true self,” within the binary of the ‘flesh versus the
spirit,’ and have largely associated this conception of the body with women.
Women’s bodies have been associated with the ‘primitive,’ and therefore with the
sinful, evil and self-indulgent, thus ultimately ‘requiring’ their disciplining. Bordo
explains, “an identification of the self with control,” and particularly within the
female subjectivity “lies at the center of Christianity’s ethic of anti-sexuality.”¹⁰³
Critically, Bordo notes, “the attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body in the
interests of control only succeeds in constituting them as more alien and more power,
and thus more needful of control.”¹⁰⁴ This paradox of control “haunts” the mind-body
dualism’ and creates a constant dread of being “overcome” by the sexual, carnal, or
primitive desires of the flesh. This problematic dualism requires women to
continually labor to control, discipline and restrain their bodies, as well as their
potentially ‘carnal’ or ‘animalistic’ appetites, and desires.

¹⁰² Bordo, Susan. Page 145.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 150.
Bordo’s theory (which utilizes a Foucauldian framework) explains that within postmodern subjectivities, there exists a desire for a strict separation from the body, which can be understood as a symptom of mind/body dualism. This dualism ultimately leads to the construction of the body as alien or as an enemy, thereby regulating women to battle the opposing constructions of bodily confinement and malleability. Bordo maintains that such bodily obsessions extend beyond the pathologies of anorexia and bulimia, into the constructions of the female body as perpetually problematic. Body fetishism within our contemporary culture expresses “more than just a fantasy of self-mastering in an increasingly unmanageable culture,” it may be that in “cultures characterized by gross excesses in consumption, the ‘will to conquer and subdue the body’ expresses an aesthetic or moral rebellion.”

Furthermore, Bordo expands upon the prevailing commonality of anorexics maintaining a deep fear of “having a womanly body, round and fully developed” and a desire to maintain a thin, boyish body, as arising from a particular “disdain for traditional female roles and social limitations… as well as a deeper fear of “the Female” with all its more nightmarish archetypal associations of voracious hungers and sexual insatiability.” Although these theories represent only two possible etiologies of eating disorders, they have been supported by many personal accountants of women suffering from anorexia within the “pro-ana” community.

Bordo deems the rise of hysteria within the Victorian era to be anorexia’s sister phenomenon and notes how both psychopathologies arose within periods where women were “confronting conflicting demands, such as the opening up of new possibilities versus the continuing grip of the old expectation.” Additionally, Bordo

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106 Ibid., p. 156.
notes how the “symptomatology of these disorders reveals itself as textuality – loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, whittling down the space one's body takes up – all have symbolic meaning – all have political meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender.”\textsuperscript{107} Bordo ultimately argues, “The anorectics protest, like that of the classical hysterical symptom, is written on the bodies of anorexic women, not embraced as a conscious politics.”\textsuperscript{108}

Wolf concurs, and claims that “female hunger is prized, not thinness,”\textsuperscript{109} because hunger render’s women’s bodies ‘docile,’ weak, and incapable. Although Wolf never goes as far as to explicitly frame anorexia as a feminist protest, she does claim, “self-defense is the right plea when it comes to eating disasters, not insanity”\textsuperscript{110} and she cites the personal example of her own adolescent development of anorexia as her method of “prolonging the maturation into womanhood.”\textsuperscript{111} She knew that entering womanhood meant “assuming a station of beauty,”\textsuperscript{112} that necessitated continual laboring to maintain or improve her station. Although Wolf illuminates the ways in which ‘anorexia’ may be initially idealized as an escapist practice, she maintains that “anorexia is a prison camp” and “to be anorexic or bulimic is to be a political prisoner.”\textsuperscript{113} Wolf’s theories represent the more extreme end of the ‘anorexia as backlash’ argument. Still, it is important to remember that anorexia as a biosocial illness is political as well as politicized. This politicization is evident in anorexia’s

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 171.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 199.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., p. 208.
long history of medicalization and pathologization, which will be further explored in chapter two.

Outside the realm of the extreme behavior of anorexics, Bordo warns that this new "power over our bodies may," (as it is constituted within our current ethos of neoliberal postfeminism) “be our ultimate undoing: We are more in touch with our bodies than ever before, but they have simultaneously become alienated products; texts of our own creative making, from which we maintain a strange and ironic detachment.”¹¹⁴ The problematic relationship with the female body was never truly resolved. Instead, it has been amplified within the ethos of neoliberalism, which codes the corporeal form as the key signifier of subjectivity and individual ‘success.’ This new bodily ‘ethic’ is implicated in our emerging ‘beauty and body’ economies and the social technologies that power them. The (social media) technologies of the self that are the focus of my research illuminate how this powerful bodily ‘ethic’ allows for the proliferation and expansion of bodily disciplines as a means of ‘success’ within modern corporeal politics. An influential technology of ‘self’ that has aided in the proliferation of eating disorders as a biosocial (or socially constructed) illnesses is the Tumblr “pro-ana” community, which works to produce knowledge-power and bodily subjectivities that align with the commitment to food refusal as a pathologized form of body disciplining.

Chapter Two: Anorexia as the Only Solution: From Fasting Girls to Skinny

Legends

In the 19th century, the control of sexual instincts was the acme of virtue, and sexual behavior was the yardstick. This focus on sexuality was linked to the psychopathology of hysteria. Today, eating habits and body weights have become the signifier of virtue, and food rules have become as inhibitory as the sex rules of the 19th century. This, in part, has allowed for the emergence of anorexia and bulimia as a far more endemic concern, particularly for young women. In this chapter, I describe the longstanding ethic of control that characterizes anorexia, situating it in a broader history of the regulation and pathologization of women’s bodies. I later analyze Tumblr “pro-ana” blogs, in order to determine the ways in which some young girls struggling with disordered eating and anorexia use discursive strategies to make their illness appear as a solution to their problems. “Pro-ana” bloggers largely do so through rhetorics of individualism, empowerment, agency and self-improvement, all of which are implicated in the postfeminist discursive regimes I discussed in Chapter One. These rhetorics illuminate some of the ways in which the modern body-subject is disciplined in contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist body politics.

I deeply engage with the history of the pathologization and medicalization of anorexia in order to show the ways in which it is a socially constructed illness that is historically and temporally situated. Significant amounts of disordered eating, and increased attention to it, occurred during particular historical periods in which women’s bodies were being defined and controlled in new ways (largely through biopower). Not only did extreme food restriction arise during periods of increased bodily disciplining, it also appeared during destabilizing cultural shifts that followed

major advancements in thought or technology. This discussion focuses on the periods of considerable documentation, medicalization and pathologization of food refusal: the medieval ages, and the Victorian Era.

This historical review illuminates the many ways in which (mostly) men attempted to find an etiology for what they considered to be a ‘female’ disease. In this process, these ‘medical men’ created many influential discursive constructions of what anorexia entails, why it emerges and who it effects. I have chosen the “pro-ana” Tumblr community as my subject for analysis because it provides us with the most current, and the most extensive, accounts of anorexia and disordered eating from those who have been personally affected. The medieval and Victorian medical men often failed to arrive at accurate analyses of anorexia because they did not utilize or analyze the personal accounts of affected women. Feminist theorists have since attempted to rectify these patriarchal medical conclusions by analyzing eating disorders as socially constructed illnesses. Such feminist analyses have been vital in the advancement of eating disorder treatment and prevention. What remains to be as deeply explored is the millions of personal accounts of anorexic young girls that exist within online social media communities such as (and most notably) Tumblr. My research illuminates the ways in which “pro-ana” bloggers attempt to discursively justify, idealize, problematize or explain their eating behaviors. The discursive strategies employed are informed by the social constructions of anorexia that have been created through its long history as a contested and ‘mysterious’ illness.

The Medicalization of the Female Body and the Psychopathology of Hysteria
Beginning in the eighteenth century, an emergent biopower, informed by the evolving ‘understanding’ of human biology, constructed female bodies in opposition to male bodies, rendering female bodies lesser, abject, excessive and prone to illness. These social constructions of sexual difference (a stark biological opposition between men and women) proliferated, and worked to render female biology, and by extension, womankind, ‘other.’ This biological construction allowed for the further medicalization and pathologization of female bodies and sexualities, as requiring significant medical and social disciplining. This early problematizing of women’s bodies informs the pathologization of food refusal as an innately female problem, tied to women’s biological weaknesses and resultant propensity for hysterical, ‘extreme’ behaviors. This predominant biopower further normalized and naturalized patriarchal ideologies and practices by tying them to the female body itself, thereby rendering it problematic.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* speaks to the impacts of biological determinism (gender difference as determined by biological difference), she explains, “Woman” according to “the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is female - this word is sufficient to define her.” Cultural historians such as Thomas Laqueur have analyzed the role of biology in the historical construction of patriarchal systems and norms. Laqueur describes the history of patriarchal theories of sexual difference as belonging to either one sex or two sex models. As Lacquer explained, the 2nd century A.D. Greek physician Galen created the most influential one sex theory, which proposed that women were ‘imperfect’ men. Specifically, “he

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considered women to be “variations of the male form, the same but lower on the scale of being and perfection”.\textsuperscript{119} According to this theory, women had penises and other male sex organs that were internal. By the 18th century, the two sex model had begun to develop and the “truths of biology replaced divinely ordained hierarchies or immemorial customs as the basis for the creation and distribution of power in relations between men and women.”\textsuperscript{120} Whereas before, sex and gender were determined solely by visible differences in genitalia, the ‘two sex’ theory considered sexual difference to “penetrate the entire organism,”\textsuperscript{121} thereby rendering such difference more significant.

Through this medicalization of the female body as ‘other,’ the gender binary was clearly defined, and the female reproductive system was further pathologized as distinct and problematic. Whereas the ovaries were once regarded as male testicles, women soon came to be understood as “existing only through her ovaries.”\textsuperscript{122} Furthermore, menstruation was likened to estrus in animals and menstruating women were said to embody an ‘animalistic madness.’ Women were viewed as innately primitive, sexually excessive, and emotionally irrational. The ovaries and clitoris were considered potentially destructive to female health, and doctors often called for psychoanalysis or ovariectomies to correct this ‘problem’ and ensure that women ‘succeed’ in their roles.\textsuperscript{123} The medicalization of women’s bodies, therefore, largely allowed for the future proliferation of the psychoanalytic disciplining of female behavior.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 29
The increased institutionalized disciplining of women’s sexualities was informed by this biologically determined construction of women’s reproductive systems being prone to causing ‘animalistic madness.’ Especially in the Victorian era, women were disciplined to ensure their behaviors were non-excessive, and indicative of strong moral character. At the time, the disciplining of female sexuality was of the utmost importance in both social and medical spheres. Controlling female sexuality was understood as a means of ensuring female purity. Histories of increased control of female sexuality often occur during periods of increased food restriction amongst women. This is because controlling female appetite and sexuality are both socially constructed as a means of attaining, and publicly demonstrating, ‘purity,’ as well as protecting against the dangers of ‘bodily excess.’

**Fasting Girls and the Pursuit of Holiness**

Body and diet management practices have long been present in societies in many gendered ways. Susan Bordo argues that the more ‘extreme’ of these practices have transformed over the centuries, from being projects for the ‘soul’ to being projects for the ‘body,’ as they largely are today. Historically, female purity has been valued, and fasting practices have been historically constituted as a means of attaining both spiritual, and bodily purity. In medieval Europe, particularly in the years between 1200 and 1500, many women refused their food as a project for the soul, and prolonged fasting was considered a female miracle. Historian Caroline Walker Bynum, for example, demonstrates that in the high middle ages women such as Catherine of Siena exercised “extensive fasting” in pursuit of holiness and

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“passionate devotion to the eucharist.”\textsuperscript{125} Although fasting and restrictive eating was a “widely noted characteristic of medieval spirituality,”\textsuperscript{126} the practice engaged women to a greater degree, and such women often spoke of their “hunger” for God.\textsuperscript{127} By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, physicians termed such behavior ‘anorexia mirabilis.’\textsuperscript{128} Feminist scholars since have characterized anorexia mirabilis as a culture- and time-bound syndrome centered on a quest for spiritual perfection.\textsuperscript{129}

In the early modern period, the “symbolic diet of maidens underscored her purity.”\textsuperscript{130} These young fasting women, deemed the ‘miraculous fasting maids,' often claimed to only eat “delicate things,”\textsuperscript{131} such as roses and tulips. Fasting and dieting practices must be understood as culturally and historically specific, as well as connected to changing institutions of power and surveillance. In medieval Europe, institutional power was mostly invested in the Church, and as such, restricted eating and fasting were coded as pertaining to spiritual practices. Beginning in the seventeenth century, science began to “own the study of the body and its disorders,”\textsuperscript{132} therefore, restricted eating and fasting was pathologized, and the female body was further medicalized during this process. As I will discuss later on, by the dawn of the Victorian era, restricted eating and fasting were coded as pertaining to sexuality. Certain foods held symbolic meaning in relation to sexuality, as they previously had in relation to spiritual purity. Overall, this pathologizing of eating disorders, that began in the seventeenth century, has continued into the twenty first

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{129} Bordo, Susan (1993). Page 68
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Brumberg (1989) Page 49.
century, as medical institutions still hold significant power. Within the past century, fasting and restricted eating have been normalized through the media, and institutions of ‘health,’ as fat has been simultaneously demonized. The female body has taken center stage since the late 1980s. Today, restricted eating and fasting are coded as largely pertaining to body politics instead of sexual politics, namely with regards to ‘beauty,’ perceived health, and bodily consumption.

An increase in secularization and medicalization took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and facilitated the shift from ‘sainthood’ to ‘patienthood’ in the social construction of ‘fasting girls.’ In eighteenth century Europe, female abstinence from food began to be seen as a medical problem, to be “resolved by a set of predictable empirical validation techniques, around the clock watches, calculations of food intake, and observation and weighing of the body.” Even during this historical transition, certain fasting women were deemed ‘wonders of the world,’ and many people still believed in their divine powers. In 1807, one such woman, by the name of Anne Moore, achieved fame in the United States and Europe for her “anorexy.” She claimed that her food refusal was a “symbol of her moral reclamation,” and, in doing so, she managed to collect money from those who came to witness the ‘miracle’ of her years-long fasting. By 1813, local secular and religious authorities “called for stricter scrutiny” of such a ‘miracle.’ After watching Moore closely for a month, it was clear to ‘authorities’ that she occasionally ate small amounts. She was forced to declare publicly that she had no divine powers, and for the rest of the nineteenth century, Ann Moore stood as a “symbol of female

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
cunning and deceit.” Moore was the last famous medieval ‘fasting girl,’ as prolonged fasting and food refusal was, as Joan Brumberg argues, “transformed from a religious act to a pathological state.” This shift was aided by the medicalization of sexuality, and the continual pathologizing of the female body as particularly susceptible to physical and psychological illness.

Both the anorexia mirabilis of fasting saints, and our modern anorexia nervosa, are culture- and time-bound diseases, and therefore must not be equated with each other. Joan Brumberg warned in 1988 against conflating anorexia mirabilis with the modern day anorexia nervosa, because “the modern anorectic strives for perfection in terms of society’s ideal of physical rather than spiritual beauty.” As Bordo argues, in order to fully understand modern anorexia nervosa, it is important to understand the different ways in which ‘self-induced’ starvation has manifested in the past. Bordo rightfully resists Bromberg's strict distinction between ‘projects of the soul’ and ‘projects of the body.’ As I will argue later in this chapter, themes of bodily transcendence as spiritual transcendence, and food refusal as proof of a strong moral will or spiritual purity, can be seen in the writings of modern-day “pro-ana” bloggers. While the medieval fasting maidens were concerned with proving their spiritual purity, and modern-day anorexics concerned with their physical purity (as fat is coded as un-pure and animalistic), the latter’s actions must still be similarly understood as giving specific symbolic value to food refusal in specific contexts. In both instances, the socially coded body is still being transformed by the women themselves, largely in the pursuit of ‘higher goals.’ The ‘higher goals’ of starvation have largely been the

139 Ibid., p. 61
140 Ibid., 7.
141 Ibid., 46.
attainment of spiritual transcendence, or godly devotion, in the medieval ages, and the attainment of a slender frame, as a means of signaling sexual purity, in the Victorian age. Today, the ‘higher goals’ of starvation are more closely tied to the neoliberal body politics of ‘self-realization,’ and bodily consumption. Still, the discursive renderings of such ‘higher goals’ remain haunted by the medieval and Victorian symbolic constructions of food refusal.

Feminist Perspectives on Eating Disorder Treatments

Anorexia nervosa recently became the object of feminist scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s because the illness was implicated in the “politics of appearance,” and ‘beauty’ as a disciplinary force, which were in many ways “foundational to the feminisms that emerged in the West”¹⁴² (largely after the late 1960’s Second Wave feminist movement). This feminist ‘turn to beauty’ in social theory,¹⁴³ was largely a response to the slender body becoming the major focus and obsession in media and culture, as the acceptable female body size was whittled down by one third, from around 1970 to 1990.¹⁴⁴ By 1978, the Foucauldian theory of biopower had emerged, and greatly influenced later feminist body and beauty theory. Theorists such as Susan Bordo (1993) and Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) built upon this understanding of modern biopower as concerned with “the intensification of the body, and a problematization of health and its operational terms,”¹⁴⁵ largely through the means of ‘beauty’ as disciplinary technology.

During this feminist ‘turn to beauty,’ there was a widespread recognition of this modern biopower within feminist academia as especially influential to the lives of women, especially as the high rates of anorexia and bulimia continued to be reported in the 1980s and 1990s. Still, as the feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach argued in 1993, “The public consciousness about anorexia (as socially constructed) is still low, and the resultant budgetary decisions have put negligible amounts of money into appropriate preventative programs or treatment settings.” Orbach argued that this was largely because the ‘tyranny of slenderness’ ensured a “widespread acceptance of eating problems as just a part of women’s experiences.” Since the 1990’s, many feminist theorists have attempted to shine a light on high rates of anorexia nervosa/bulimia by studying the ways in which it is a socially constructed illness that has arisen in our neoliberal era of bodily intensification. Unfortunately, the current medical eating disorder literature, often focused on individual psychopathology, “has found neither a consistent etiological profile, nor a universally accepted explanation for why eating disorders have recently swelled into a social disease. Nor does it explain why millions of women without clinical eating disorders mimic the behavior and mindset of affected women.”

Some psychologists, such as Patricia Fallon, Melanie Katzman and Susan Wooley have called for more feminist perspectives on the etiologies of eating disorders as well as on the potential treatment methods. Fallon et. al argue, “of the three theoretical models of eating disorders: biomedical, psychological, and feminist, the feminist model has most effectively shown how eating problems are rooted in

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147 Ibid.
systemic and persuasive attempts to control women's appetite and body sizes."\textsuperscript{149} The feminist model has emerged as a promising approach to the development of effective long terms treatments for anorexia nervosa. Unfortunately, medical experts have recently found that although “several treatments have been tried to treat anorexia nervosa specifically, few favorable results have emerged.”\textsuperscript{150} From around 1994 until 2004, “hospital-based and residential programs focused exclusively on the treatment of eating disorders have emerged” and they have largely have been focused on “weight gain and the normalization of eating behaviors as primary treatment methods.”\textsuperscript{151} These inpatient methods have proven largely unsuccessful, and recently, Orbach and others have called for the development of more culturally informed, widespread educational programs, such as eating disorder prevention programs in schools. As well as further feminist organization against the problematic aspects of the diet, food, beauty, and fashion industries, which largely contribute to bodily insecurities and widespread dieting.\textsuperscript{152} An informed feminist perspective on eating disorders requires a deep knowledge of the emergence of disordered eating in specific socio-cultural contexts. As I will show towards the end of this chapter, an informed feminist perspective also requires analysis of modern discursive strategies utilized by women suffering from disordered eating in online communities. Such analysis should be focused on the Tumblr “pro-ana” community specifically, as it is a major source of

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., p. 358.
\textsuperscript{151} Fallon, Patricia, Melanie Katzman, and Susan Wooley. Page 253.
knowledge power for the younger generations, and a highly conducive environment for subject formation.

Hysteria and Anorexia as Backlash against Women’s Progress

In order to better understand the ways in which extreme food restriction is a socially constructed illness, scholars such as Bordo and Wolf have investigated the relationship between anorexia nervosa of the modern age, and another predominately ‘female’ psychopathology, the hysteria of the Victorian Age. Feminist scholars such as Bordo and Wolf have drawn a connection between another predominantly female psychopathology, the hysteria of the Victorian age, and anorexia nervosa of the modern age. One of the factors that these theorists highlight as accounting for this connection, is that hysteria and anorexia nervosa can both be situated within advancing industrial societies, roughly within the past century, during which women’s roles were in a state of major upheaval. Bordo and Wolfe argue, both hysteria and anorexia must be understood as socially constructed illnesses. The historical force that persists across the time span of both illnesses is an extreme increase in female bodily control. As Bordo explains, “It is only as hysteria has shed its symbolic, emotional, and professional freight, as it has become a historical phenomenon, that it has become possible to see it, in some ways, for the first time.”

Today, very few feminist theorists would argue that hysteria was not culturally defined and constituted, and anorexia must be seen in a similar light. Naomi Wolf argues in *The Beauty Myth*, “Modern culture represses female oral appetite, as Victorian culture, through doctors, repressed female sexual appetite, from the top of

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the power structure downward, for a political purpose.”¹⁵⁴ In both cases, bodily disciplining was utilized as a force for the social disciplining of women.

Bordo argues, both hysteria and anorexia, as “psychopathologies,” arose within periods where women were “confronting conflicting demands, such as the opening up of new possibilities versus the continuing grip of the old expectation.”¹⁵⁵ As I will later expand upon, hysteria was pathologized as an illness during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution and market expansion opened up new opportunities for women outside the home, while also rending some forms of female domestic labor unnecessary. Meanwhile, the first wave of feminism was emerging, and the boundaries of womanhood were being pushed. Similarly, rates of anorexia nervosa increased in the early 1980s, when women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. This increased followed the second wave feminist movement of the sixties and seventies. Another important connection between hysteria and anorexia nervosa is that the illnesses most predominantly affect young women, and more often than not, affluent, educated white women (medical attention is paid mostly to this category of women). Psychoanalysts, psychologists and feminists have presented many explanations for this particularity. Both illnesses involve concerns over a lack of control or power. Some feminist theorists argue that educated, privileged women are faced with the ‘double bind’ of increased power and opportunities alongside remaining gendered limitations and oppressions. This tension leads to an increased obsession with control, one that manifests in more extreme relationships to food and the body.

¹⁵⁵ Bordo (1993)
This ‘double bind’ leads to disordered eating among women, and according to feminist theorists such as Wolf and Orbach, constitutes a backlash against women’s progress. While feminist theorists such as Naomi Wolf call hysteria and anorexia ‘sister phenomenons,’ in the nineteenth century, medical professionals considered anorexia, or disordered eating, to be an undifferentiated aspect of hysteria. Before the late nineteenth century, anorexia was considered a “general medical symptom, a sign of disease, but not a disease in its own right.” Though hysterical symptoms such as paralysis and muteness more clearly reflected the social disciplining of Victorian society, the self-starvation that often was recognized within a general hysteria diagnosis was similarly reflective of the ‘strict codes of femininity.’ While it is now understood that hysteria and anorexia are distinct, feminist theorists such as Wolf and Orbach have argued that these similar symptomologies are evidence of anorexia and hysteria being socially constructed illness that act as a ‘backlash’ against women’s progress. In 1993, Orbach wrote on the ‘backlash,’ “If anorexia exemplifies through the language of the body the woman’s attempt to enter, and at the same time, disappear from a culture that derogates and deifies her, then by speaking of the backlash…we diminish its power to hurt and harm. We render our protest visible and collective.” Such theorists consider ‘protest’ to be written on the starving body. The discursive strategies of “pro-ana” bloggers do not often center around the starving body as protest against patriarchal culture. Still, protest itself does play a large role in much of the “pro-ana” commentary, but the protest is often framed as

against bodily “insecurities” and perceived exclusion from consumer trends or social situations.

**Food Refusal, Headaches and Depression Presenting in Young Women: Assertions of a Universal Syndrome**

Over many centuries, medical professionals identified ‘diseases’ that had similar symptoms and largely affected young women. The discovery and study of anorexia nervosa came out of this long history of medical discover, one that was also largely implicated in the slow emergence of hysteria as a diagnosis. The first documentation of diseases deemed to mainly afflict young women’s bodies appeared in the 4th century B.C. in Greek Hippocratic texts. The disease of this time caused “amenorrhea, wasting away, great hunger, vomiting, depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, aches and pains and breathing difficulties.”\(^{159}\) Chlorosis was another disease that largely affected young girls in the 17th through 19th century; it caused “amenorrhea, appetite disturbance, depression, anxiety, headache, breathing difficulties, insomnia and disturbed body image.”\(^{160}\) By the 19th century, young girls were most often diagnosed with a similar disorder called “neurasthenia,” which caused, “food refusal, vomiting, nervous depression, headache and insomnia.”\(^{161}\) The diagnosis of hysteria in the 19th century and 20th centuries included symptoms such as “anorexia, bulimia, menstrual irregularity, chronic vomiting, depression, anxiety, headache, difficulty breathing, and insomnia,”\(^{162}\) and was similarly seen in young women.

\(^{159}\) Fallon, Patricia, Katzman, Melanie and Wooley, Susan. Page 77.
\(^{160}\) Ibid.
\(^{161}\) Ibid. Page 78
\(^{162}\) Ibid.
While this long history of disorders affecting predominately young women has raised important questions about the potential for a universal ‘syndrome,’ far more research supports the contention that such syndromes are distinctive, culturally constituted illnesses. Deborah Perlick and Brett Silverstein have argued for such a syndrome, with similar symptoms that “continue to afflict women into modern times to an extent that has not been fully recognized, because the syndrome has been subdivided into multiple diagnoses.”¹⁶³ Not unlike Bordo and Wolfe, Perlick and Silverstein claim that this recurring syndrome is a manifestation of gender bias, and the stresses of the double bind women face during periods of ‘emancipation.’¹⁶⁴ While this is certainly the case, research is lacking, and as of yet, it cannot be proven that there is one specific ‘starvation syndrome’ that has effected all girls throughout history, and still exists today. Instead, it is more productive, and accurate, to argue, as Joan Brumberg does, that extreme food related illnesses such as anorexia nervosa should be recognized as distinctive “cultural artifacts, defined and redefined over time. For example, “the anorexia nervosa that emerged during the throes of industrial capitalist development was nurtured by central aspects of bourgeois life.”¹⁶⁵ It is important to understand anorexia nervosa as shifting from a “isolated and idiosyncratic disorder, (before the late nineteenth century) to a more familiar and more formulaic disorder with physical symptoms that are more acute.”¹⁶⁶ Constructions of anorexia as a more familiar and formulaic disorder were formulated in the mid and late nineteenth century by male psychiatrists and medical professionals. These men were largely concerned with the ‘woman question,’ and the

¹⁶³ Ibid. Page 79.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Page 90.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 6.
ways in which a potential for the development of anorexia justified keeping women in the home and outside of institutions of power.

**Anorexia Nervosa as a New Disease and Answer to the Woman Question**

By the mid-nineteenth century, as the ‘woman question’ was being debated, early British psychiatrists and American asylum superintendents began to create the first documented classifications of what we now understand as eating disorders. Many blamed such disorders on women’s attempts to act ‘seek attention’ or gain an education. Anorexia still largely existed within the broad category of hysteria as a symptom, but it was beginning to be recognized as a major symptom of more specific syndromes, such as acute melancholia, combined with aphonia (lack of voice). In 1859, William Stout Chipley identified a mental disorder called sitomania, creating an “intense dread of food.” After observing patients in an American asylum he wrote of cases in which “…a morbid desire for notoriety leads to protracted abstinence from food, in spite of the pangs of hunger, until all sustenance is refused. I have never witnessed a case of this kind except in females predisposed to hysteria.” Not unlike other physicians who blamed hysteria on overly ambitious intellectual pursuits, Chipley partly blamed sitomania on the afflicted girls’ desire for attention. The formal classifications of anorexia as an illness were tied to the dangers of women entering into the ‘public sphere.’

In the 1800’s, medical professionals attempted to isolate anorexia as its own disease, requiring specific ‘moral therapies’ suited to the social disciplining of
middle- and upper-class white women. In 1873, a French psychiatrist Charles Lasègue’s attempted to isolate ‘l’anorexie hystérique’ from the broad category of hysterical disorders. He defined it as a disorder causing “digestive disturbances, curious appetite, and mutism,”¹⁷⁷ but it was still explicitly linked to hysteria and its traditional symptoms. It was not until the late 1870s that anorexia itself was fully recognized as an isolated disease, when an elite medical consultant by the name of Sir William Withey Gull declared it to be a full-blown disease and not a symptom of a specific kind of insanity.¹⁷⁸ Desiring to differentiate his work from Lasègue’s broader l’anorexie hystérique, Gull associated anorexia specifically with young women, declaring it to be rooted in the nervous system and distinct from poor digestion. Like hysteria, anorexia as a new disease was understood as predominantly affecting the middle and upper classes. Gull inspired a new generation of medical men who sought to understand anorexia as a “perversion of the will,”¹⁷⁹ which must accordingly be treated with ‘moral therapies.’ Gull’s ultimate goal was to construct anorexia as a distinct disease, one that cannot be deemed the result of pure insanity or hysteria, and which must be treated outside of the asylum. Gull’s medical opinions were welcomed by the wealthy families who would not consider sending their daughters to the asylum, except as a last resort.

Other well-known physicians of the time resisted Gull’s ‘new disease,’ instead arguing that it must remain as part of broader diagnosis, as it is caused by industrialized advancements, and advancements in women’s education. William Smoult Playfair believed anorexia nervosa to be “a variant of neurasthenia, a

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.125.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p.110.
¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p.119.
functional nervous disorder first named in 1869.\textsuperscript{180} Neurasthenia was considered to be generated by “industrialization, and a mode of life associated with advanced technology, scientific progress, and the emancipation of women.”\textsuperscript{181} Playfair believed that ‘lack of appetite’ should be added to the symptoms of neurasthenia, which were the same as many hysterical symptoms. Echoing the medical theories of hysteria, Playfair believed that the onset of a disease such as Neurasthenia was a result of the young women’s home environment and the ‘new social pressures.’\textsuperscript{182} Playfair was writing between 1860 and 1880, when postsecondary schools in the United States and Britain were first beginning to admit women. He was staunchly opposed to such changes and argued that “intellectual work and advanced schooling precipitated anorexia nervosa.”\textsuperscript{183}

While the ‘woman question’ was being posed publicly in Victorian societies, Playfair was not alone in arguing for the individual and social benefits of ‘traditional womanhood.’ A Harvard medical professor by the name of Edward H. Clarke, one of the many “ovarian determinists,”\textsuperscript{184} insisted that adolescent girls should remain in the home, under the tutelage of their mothers, and refrain from engaging in any strenuous intellectual or physical activity. This notion of health was also prevalent in theories of hysteria at large, and responsible for the ‘rest cure’ being the most prescribed remedy. In his 1873 book, Sex in Education, Clarke further medicalized the dominant ideal of femininity by arguing that by pursuing education young women would “deplete the nerve energy required for reproduction.”\textsuperscript{185} Anorexia nervosa was further implicated

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., p.147.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., p.148.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., p.149.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
in this theory by those who argued that amenorrhea constituted the kind ‘morbid physica’ that resulted from intellectual activity and negatively affected fertility.

According to Victorian era medical theorists, if young girls failed to maintain the quiet adolescence necessary for their health and subsequently developed hysteria of some sort, the only solution was isolation. Isolation was necessary because such theorists often blamed a faulty family environment for the illness and also because many believed hysterical girls to be ‘vampires’ who would spread their disease to other girls. The ultimate goal was to create the ideal “moral environment” in which hysterical or anorexic girls could recover. This method of treatment often proven unsuccessful, as anorexic girls in particular would be released from the isolated, medical ‘moral environment’ after gaining weight and proceed to starve themselves to death once at home. The low success rate associated with inpatient treatments for eating disorders persists today. This is partly because the medical community often fails to develop a more nuanced understanding of the widespread social factors that lead to the development of anorexia. This neglect of social factors and ‘reasons’ for starvation can also be seen in the history of the medicalization of anorexia. It wasn’t until 1859 that Freud attempted to determine why young women engaged in self-starvation.

Freud’s Work on Intelligence, Drive and the “Inevitable Sickness”

While today, Freud’s theories about anorexia are considered to be incorrect, or lacking, his work rightly attempts to identify some of the reasons why anorexics are often disgusted by food or their bodies. This disgust or aversion is present through the “pro-ana” communities, and many bloggers similarly ask themselves, or eachother,
why long for (or experience) decreased appetites. Freud introduced a new focus: finally identifying the reason for an anorexia lack of appetite. ¹⁸⁶ Freud drew a connection between appetite and sexuality and wrote in 1859 that the anorexia nervosa “of... young girls seems to me... to be a melancholia where sexuality is underdeveloped.”¹⁸⁷ According to Freud, anorexia was but another instance of “chronic emotional conflicts being transformed into physical symptoms,”¹⁸⁸ what he called ‘conversion hysteria.’ As appetites were simply reflections of the libido, food’s symbolic significance was linked to sex. Therefore, underdeveloped sexualities resulted in underdeveloped appetites, or a disgust for food. Freud was one of the first to suggest food refusal to be a conscious strategy, one that could result from certain bodily anxieties for example.

Freud, unlike many other psychoanalysts of the time, provided us with many detailed case studies of the hysterical and anorexic girls. In his 1895 book *Studies on Hysteria*, co-authored by Joseph Breuer, and *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud describes the young women he studied as all being “exceptional.” He described the hysterics he worked with as having the “clearest intellect and highest critical power.”¹⁹¹ One patient, Anna O., whose symptoms included anorexia, depression and headache, was described as “markedly intelligent and possessing a powerful intellect and bubbling over with intellectual vitality.”¹⁹² Anorexic such as Emmy von N. were often described as having “unusual” intelligence or academic ability and prowess. The famous Dora, who suffered from depression and anorexia,

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¹⁸⁶ Brumberg. Page 212.
¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p.213
¹⁸⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹² Ibid.
had “intellectual precocity.” Freud believed that intellectual stimulation and ability was tied to anorexia, depression and hysteria in women. The more intellectual, therefore, the higher the risk of hysteria and its many symptoms. Breuer and Freud wrote, “Features which one meets with so frequently in hysterical people,” including “giftedness,” “ambition,” and “the independence of...nature which went beyond the feminine ideal.” This feminine ideal was of the utmost concern to Freud and others of the time; maintaining this norm was considered the only way to maintain a woman’s health.

From 1973 onwards, some of the most influential case study research on anorexia was produced by Hilde Bruch, who, far more than Freud, considered the role of sexism and gender expectations in the development of eating disorders. Her writings sound remarkably similar to Freud and Breuer, largely focusing on intellect and internal drive as major factors in the development of such disorders. In 1978, Bruch described anorexics as “outstanding students,” arguing, “It is significant that the fathers value their daughter for their intellectual brilliance.” Bruch explained that quite often this valuing of intelligence was a result of fathers wishing for sons, and expecting their daughters to fill a similar role. Importantly, Bruch noted that the majority of the anorexic women that she studied felt throughout their lives that “being female was an unjust disadvantage, and they dreamed of doing well in areas considered more respectful and worthwhile because they were ‘masculine.’” Freud had similarly noted that young anorexic or hysterical girls such Elisabeth von R. were

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193 Ibid.
194 Ibid., p.85.
196 Ibid. Page 55.
“greatly discontented being a girl” as they were “full of ambitious plans.”¹⁹⁷ The overwhelming trend in Freud and Bruch’s case studies is descriptions of anorexic and hysterical women as being known for their intelligence and drive, while also being hampered by it emotionally and physically.

In “Faces of Female Discontent: Depression, Disordered Eating and Changing Gender Roles,” psychologists Deborah Perlick and Brett Silverstein analyzed Freud and Bruch’s work in relation to the studies on anorexic women they conducted in the late 1980’s. Their results yielded many striking similarities, leading them to hypothesize that a cluster of symptoms (depression, disordered eating and headache) seem to have predominantly affected young women in particular cultural moments in history. This cluster, they argued, must be further analyzed instead of continuing to be studied as multiple diagnoses. While there is not enough evidence to prove their far-reaching hypothesis of their being a “forgotten syndrome,” as they call it, their results are nevertheless illuminating.

Perlick and Silverstein found several “converging lines of evidence indicating that the “Forgotten Syndrome” is particularly likely to affect women who strive to achieve in areas traditionally dominated by men, and who come to feel limited by being female particularly if their mothers weren't able to achieve in these areas.”¹⁹⁸ Not unlike many feminist theorists, Perlick and Silverstein assert that over the past century the “Forgotten Syndrome” has become more prevalent amongst women during “periods of changing female roles when a larger proportion of women graduated from college than had done so during their mothers’ generations.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.
Women born during the 1910s and 1920s and after the 1930s seemed to have higher rates of eating disorders and depression than women born at different times, as they reach adolescence during periods when females graduated from college at a higher rate than had the females of their mothers’ generation.

Perlick and Silverstein conducted a study on hundreds of female college students and found that women who reported symptoms of disordered eating were “more likely than other women to report that their father did not think that their mothers’ were intelligent, and that their mothers were not satisfied with their own career choices.”200 Their studies, and the “Forgotten Syndrome” hypothesis were partly corroborated by the Perdue, Pizzolo and Norman study in 1991. They found that college females who reported being ill at ease with their mother’s lack of success were found to be “over twenty times as likely as other women to exhibit combined symptoms of depressed mood and disordered eating, but no more likely than other women to report just one of these two symptoms.”201 This research on anorexia amongst educated women can in some ways be seen reflected in “pro-ana” content. A majority of the “pro-ana” blogs I researched that gave advice on “how to be a pretty girl,” (meaning how to be slender and discipline) encouraged mental disciplining just as much as it encouraged bodily discipline. Being a ‘good’ (slender and beautiful) girl meant dedicating yourself to your studies along with your dedication to food restriction. Purity or superiority of the body can only be coded as successful within “pro-ana” discourse if the mind is similarly disciplined.

Perlick and Silverstein also looked into the medical histories of women with incredibly high achieving fathers such as the daughters of Freud, Marx, Darwin and Einstein. They found that Margot Einstein and Indira Gandhi had often been described as emaciated and sickly and were treated for such symptoms. Eleanor Marx was described as emaciated and depressed before she committed suicide, and her biographer theorized that she must have been anorexic. Eleanor Marx’s mother wrote in a letter, “While the men are invigorated by the fight in the world outside, strengthened by the coming face-to-face with the enemy, we sit at home and darn stockings. It does not banish care and the little day-to-day worries slowly but surely app one’s vitality.”202 It seems these women were burdened by their proximity to high-achieving people and their inability to gain access to the necessary institutions and spaces to achieve at such levels. Still, many of the women with eminent fathers that Perlick and Silverstein studied became eminent and successful in their own right later in life. This sampling of case studies cannot provide us with a universal etiology of anorexia, but it can expose some similarities in symptomatology and experience, which largely uphold feminist theories of anorexia as socially constituted.

**Anorexia Redefined: Control and Self-denial as “Solutions”**

Before the early mid-twentieth century, medical professionals attempted to understand anorexia and eating disorders through the lens of sexuality, morality, family, and ‘natural’ femininity. After WWII, thanks largely to the work of Hilde Bruch, a new psychiatric view of eating disorders emerged that focused far more on the “significance of food behavior and its relation to the developmental history of the

individual.”203 Medical professionals finally recognized anorexia as a disease that results in the control of appetite rather than the total loss of it. (The word anorexia itself, as Susie Orbach points out, means “loss of appetite,” and therefore its continued use is not appropriate.) As Bruch wrote in her 1973 book *Eating Disorders*, we must understand eating disorders as “individuals who misuse the eating function in their efforts to solve or camouflage problems of living that to them appear otherwise insoluble. Food lends itself to such usage, because eating...is always closely intermingled with interpersonal experiences...Food is endowed with complex values and elaborate ideologies, religious beliefs and prestige systems.”204 In the latter half of the twentieth century the focus shifted towards the body and the “more attention was paid to the desire for thinness.”205 The “extreme renunciation and self-denial that was expressed through the familiar activity of dieting”206 was understood as largely being in the pursuit of thinness, or as a reaction to fat as a problem.

Drawing upon empirical research and personal interviews, Susan Bordo built upon Bruch’s contention that starvation is considered the only solution for anorexics. She argues, “The goal for many anorexics is to kill off the appetite completely. In this way, anorexic women are as obsessed with hunger as they are with being slim.”207 This desire to kill off the appetite and triumph over bodily needs is informed by the social construction of the mind body dualism, as discussed in chapter one. Bordo argues that this dualism rendered the feminine body alien, and in need of control by the masculinist mind. The anorectic hopes to control, or even emancipate themselves

205 Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. Page 228.
206 Ibid.
from the body; and as the appetite is the most demanding signal of the body’s continual existence and needs, it is the most pressing bodily function to eliminate. Constant starvation can be understood as a possibly unconscious attempt to emancipate oneself from the relentlessly conflicting demands of the physical body, and the societal disciplining of the body. Such desire for bodily emancipation was illuminated in Maya Hornbacher’s memoir, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, in which she writes, “We turn skeletons into goddesses and look to them as if they might teach us how not to need… The anorectic operates under the astounding illusion that she can escape the flesh, and, by association, the realm of emotions.”208 This theory of escapism is fostered by dualism of mind body separation that is still so prevalent. The dualism ultimately works as the dominant discourse, disciplining women’s relationship to themselves, and to society, as well as shaping the ways in which they attempt to free themselves from subjugation.

**Historically Grounded Discursive Analysis of “pro-ana” Tumblr**

Now that the historical frameworks of anorexia have been outlined and situated within my discussion, it is time to shift focus to the modern “pro-ana” community on Tumblr. *Tumblr* was founded in 2007, and the “pro-ana” community began to form shortly thereafter. The community is made up of thousands of blogs that are connected by their use of the identifying tag “#pro-ana” or “#thinspo.” “Pro-ana” bloggers create and post pictures they own as well as personally written content, or they can ‘re-blog’ a post or picture created by another blogger. This re-blogging system allows us to identify common discursive trends within the community. For

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example, within this social media database, we can see how many times posts encouraging starvation were ‘re-posted’ compared to posts encouraging recovery. “Pro-ana” bloggers largely identify as female and white, and the content that is associated with the #pro-ana largely depicts emaciated, fashionable young white women. Tumblr has made limited attempts to ‘crack-down’ on the “pro-ana” community only after being “put on blast” for publicized deaths due to anorexia among its users. These attempts have barely curtailed the proliferation of “pro-ana” content on Tumblr, and largely resulted in “pro-ana” bloggers declaring that they ‘do not support eating disorders’ in their blog’s biographies. Still, there is an ever-growing ‘pro-recovery’ community within “pro-ana,” full of bloggers who attempt to more explicitly engage with anorexia as a socially constructed illness.

The rendering of anorexia as the ‘only solution’ to women’s problems is a common theme within the “pro-ana” Tumblr community. Anorexia is often discursively rendered the only way to ease emotional and psychological upset. For example, “vanishing-b” wrote, “brain: starving is bad for you!! Your metabolism will slow down! Your digestion and hormones will get fucked up! Your grades will drop! You’ll lose the little friends you have! Stop doing it! – Me: ok. What healthy coping mechanism will make me feel better? – brain:……uhh…… - my brain: fuck never mind just starve.”

Attaining a slender body is often also considered the only way to fix major personal problems. This logic was put in explicit terms by “iwannteandsleep” (deactivated) who wrote “Reaching my ug (ultimate goal weight) will suddenly make all of my problems go away. You can’t change my mind,” (most “pro-ana” blogs include their sw (start weight), gw (goal weight), and

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209 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 1,212 times by December of 2018
210 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 4,056 times by December of 2018
ugw in their bio, as a means of tracking their progress.) Another blogger, “pretty-skinny-flower-girl” similarly wrote, “I swear I wouldn’t have 90% of my current problems if I hadn’t eaten so fucking much in my preteen years.” More specifically “studywith-thinspo” wrote “*gets less than an A on a test* - me: if I were skinny this wouldn't have happened.” These bloggers are explicitly commenting upon the social power of thinness as a perceived and actualized means ‘making up’ for perceived failures and problems.

As I have outlined in this chapter, many attempts have been made to identify the one ‘true’ etiology of anorexia, and such an etiology has yet to be found or agreed upon. The discourse within the “pro-ana” community often uses humor and irony in an attempt to reconcile, or address, the many ‘mysteries’ of anorexia as a constructed illness and lived experience. For example, the blogger “xmoonchildx” changed a well-known meme to say “me (pointing to) “a minor inconvenience” (asking) “Is this a reason to starve myself?” This confusion, and often, communal introspection on the etiology of anorexia reflects a broader trend that Susie Orbach identified as accompanying the rise of anorexia diagnosis: “the spawning of numerous fictions about what it is whom it affects and how to treat the sufferer.” The spawning of fictions is not a new trend, as is evidenced by anorexia’s long and faulty history of medical theory and discovery. What is new, as Naomi Wolf points out, is the recent trend of the “gaunt youthful model supplanting the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood” As “lolitadolie” succinctly put it, “The problem is: society

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211 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 8,490 times by December of 2018
212 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 1,715 times by December of 2018
214 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 614 times by December of 2018
said no to anorexia but yes to the anorexic bodies.” This attainment of the idealized body is therefore is seen by many as an ‘understandable’ or even ‘commendable’ reasoning for extreme dieting.

Within the “pro-ana” community, countless attempts have been made to unconvener the ‘truth’ of anorexia, as it is constructed within individual subjectivities. “Pro-ana” bloggers often speak to their own reasoning for their ‘self-induced’ starvation. As I will expand upon, bloggers discursively render their starvation as a pursuit of ‘higher goals,’ which often can be attained by means of a slender body.

Many other bloggers recognize the social constructions behind their biosocial illness. For example, the “pro-ana” blogger “smspoetry” beautifully wrote,

I take hair ties off of my wrist before I weigh myself - nature or nurture? I wonder how many calories are in toothpaste and I only feel beautiful when my stomach growls. There’s a zoo in my belly and everyone just marvels at my self-control - ignoring the captivity. You see, as a young girl, the women in my family would oftentimes tell me that they wished to be my size, forgetting that, one day, I would grow up to be theirs. What a catastrophic family tradition. I drink diet coke and smoke cigarettes for dinner. I make the meals I do eat like a mad scientist - measuring everything that dares to enter this body. But, I don’t look sick.. you can’t quite see my bones and i’d like to think that means I have it under control. You see, I’m just on a “diet” I’m just “intermittent fasting” I just “want my clothes to fit better” I just want to be vegan - I need the restrictions - i’m just in the “beginning stages.” I promise, if I just lose 50 more pounds, i’ll stop. I’m not shrinking - I’m being molded – I am a sculpture made from countless creators so blame them if you don’t like the art.

This “pro-ana” blogger illuminated the many ways in which disordered eating is naturalized and normalized through discursive strategies that employ commercialized notions of ‘health’ and beauty practices. “Smspoetry” is also implicitly acknowledging the postfeminist logics that present bodily “molding” as productive

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217 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 854 times by December of 2018
218 “smspoetry” posted on Tumblr before December of 2018.
and beneficial. Finally, “smspoetry” is depicting her eating disorder as a socially constructed illness, informed by the “countless creators” (or discursive regimes) who work to render anorexia visible only in the ‘slender body.’ The lack of visibility that anorexics with non-normative bodies experience is commonly addressed and explored in the “pro-ana” community. Even as “pro-ana” bloggers continue to prop up normative bodies, they simultaneously resist common body-centric misunderstandings and stereotypes of the anorexic as extremely skinny or extremely ‘sick.’

The ‘tyranny of slenderness’ that permeates our media and society has significant documented effects on many young women’s relationships to food and their bodies. The effect of this media obsession with slenderness on women’s lives must not be conflated with the effect of eating disorders on women’s lives. The “pro-ana” Tumblr community, in some ways, serves as a space where eating disordered individuals can address common misunderstandings and/or falsities about the realities of living with or developing an eating disorder. For example, the blogger “lady-thunderthighs” wrote “Person: but you’re not fat!!! Stop starving yourself!!! - me, wanting to tell them that it’s my coping mechanism for the overwhelming suicidal thoughts I have on a daily basis but gonna let them think it’s something that shallow - me *screams internally.” As Susie Orbach argues, eating disorders must be understood as “charged with bearing the burden of a political exclusion.”

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219 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 671 times by December of 2018

general public, and Tumblr can serve as a place of solace and understanding for the many young women suffering with the burdens of disordered eating.

**Becoming Anorexic as Becoming Powerful and Pure**

In her memoir Maya Hornbacher describes anorexia as being “at the most basic level, a bundle of contradictions: a desire for power that strips you of all power. A gesture of strength that divests you of all strength.” This association of anorexia with power is one of the most prevalent themes in pro-ana blogs. As “pleasepasstheskinny” wrote, “Restricting feels like home. Skinny me feels like the real me. The sicker I get, the more alive I become.” This post speaks to a phenomenology of eating disorders: the euphoria that accompanies restriction. This euphoria can be explained both within multiple biological and by social contexts. While the attainment of thin privilege often plays a role, the more deep-rooted source of this euphoria lies in the legacy of mind-body dualism. The rendering of the (female) body as problematic has led to a social obsession with the body that has been intensified in the neoliberal era. Anorexics represent the most extreme relationship to modern societies’ haunted, tortured obsession with the body and its relation to things such as food, hunger, desire, and control.

Within the mind-body dualism, the mind is deemed powerful largely because it is considered devoid of needs and desires. The mind is deemed productive while the body is deemed consumptive. This understanding of a ‘less consumptive’ body allowing for a more powerful mind is reflected in the following post: “When I don’t eat: I feel better. I feel cleaner. I can study more and harder. School is easier. I feel

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221 As discussed in Chapter One.
more confident. I can walk lighter. I smile wider. I think clearer. I sleep better. I laugh more. I breathe easier.”

While “pro-ana” bloggers certainly comment upon their increased confidence after reaching their goal weight, the focus is more commonly on their productivity and new-found power in it. As “cuuriou” wrote, “Restricting makes you feel so confident and unstoppable. And that’s why once you start, it’s hard to stop.” Anorexia is commonly rendered an addiction within the “pro-ana” community, and specifically an addiction to this discursive understand of anorexic power.

“Pro-ana” bloggers often engage in a discursive ‘sanctification’ of anorexia and the starving body, not unlike the ‘fasting saints’ of the medieval Ages. While ‘fasting saints’ discursively worked towards ‘spiritual purity’ through ‘bodily purity,’ “pro-ana” bloggers discursively work towards ‘emotional purity’ through ‘bodily purity.’ For example, “donteatnoexcuses” wrote, “Honestly, the weight of all the emotional pain I have trapped inside me is pushing me to the breaking point. I feel like I just need to starve it all out of me, ya know? Once I become nothing but skin and bones, I will be light as a feather. I can finally be happy.”

The discursive centralization of physical lightness as emotional lightness is present throughout the community. Instead of discursively rendering their fasting practices an expression of their ‘hunger for god’ as the ‘fasting saints’ had done, “pro-ana” bloggers speak of their hunger for bodily, social and (personal) control, as well as their hunger to be free from social exclusion and bodily discrimination.

Instead of fasting being an assertion of a moral reclamation, as it had been in the medieval Ages, fasting is now an assertion of an emotional or mental reclamation. “Pro-ana” blogger “coffeehalo” explains that the “best feelings” include, “Emptiness,

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222 This Tumblr blog no longer exists. This post was uploaded in December of 2018.
223 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 2,186 times by December of 2018
being able to tell you have gone without eating for a long time, knowing you are one step closer to your goal…looking in the mirror and seeing your body getting smaller.” This “pro-ana” post exemplifies the ways in which modern “pro-ana” discourse is still influenced by medieval discursive regimes, which associated fasting with the accomplishment of ‘higher goals’ that ‘extend beyond the body.’ While these “pro-ana” bloggers are acting in the interest of an endless amount of ‘higher goals,’ these goals are now being shaped by modern institutions of power such as medical institutions, modern social technologies, and beauty/body industries instead of the medieval doctrinal Church.

Anorexia and the Body Project

Outside the realm of the extreme behavior of anorexics, Bordo warns that this new "power over our bodies may," as it is constituted within our current ethos of neoliberal postfeminism may “be our ultimate undoing.” Bordo argues, “we are more in touch with our bodies than ever before, but they have simultaneously become alienated products; texts of our own creative making, from which we maintain a strange and ironic detachment.” Discourses centered around the body as a product are prevalent on “pro-ana” blogs, and shaping the perfect product is presented as the key to success and happiness. The blogger “just-a-little- prettier” wrote, “I better be cute by the time I get skinny cuz lemme tell you this has been quite the risky investment.” The power of the modern day body project has the potential to render even an illness such as anorexia an investment in the ‘ultimate’ body project.

224 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 577 times by December of 2018
226 Ibid.
227 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 8,143 times by December of 2018
Many bloggers such as “big-eyes-small-waist” write detailed how-to “pretty girl routines” in which they lay out the beauty, body, domestic, and academic work that makes up the ultimate anorexia body project. Such work includes: “wake up early, stretch and meditate, drink water, do your makeup, wear a cute outfit, make your bed, study during free time, go to the gym or do some at home exercises, have a daily skincare routine.” As Elias, Gill and Scharff argue, “Neoliberalism makes us all ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’—not simply those who are models or working in fashion or design.” Instead of thinking of this work within the lens of entrepreneurship, Wolfe instead recognizes ‘beauty’ labor as necessitating a ‘third shift,’ (in addition to the already unpaid ‘second shift’). This third shift has emerged as women are increasingly disciplined to conform to ever-changing beauty ideals in order to construct themselves as economically and socially viable ‘subjects’ in the neoliberal state. The third shift is made visible in the “pretty girl routine” and plays a large role in the general rhetoric of “thinspo” as centralizing the importance of work in the construction of identity.

Within postfeminist culture, the body has been integrated into the modern ‘consumer ethic’ and the ethos of individualized self-actualization in such a way that encourages the ever-expanding practice of ‘body projects’ within postmodernity. As theorist Alison Winch writes, in today’s “hyper-visible landscape of popular culture, the body is recognized as the object of women’s labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy.” Winch’s argument is expressed in a post by “neurodivergentaf:”

“therapist: so how do you feel about your body - me: I don’t know, I just work here.”

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This discourse renders the body a site for a ‘necessary’ third shift of beauty labor, as Wolfe refers to it, and nothing more. Furthermore, this post speaks to the power of the mind body dualism to completely alienate oneself from the body and render it a neoliberal body project (and capital asset) in the most calculating way possible.

The postmodern body makes visible an individual's inner-most self. This notion of the body as a space for self-expression was exemplified by the blogger “thincorpse,” who wrote, “Someone: How are you? - Me: I've been skinnier but I’m okay.” Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues that this centralization of the body as the key means of self-disciplining is a fairly recent development. This development can best be understood in comparison to young women’s identity formation in the nineteenth century. Brumberg argues that in the nineteenth century, beauty disciplining largely worked to ensure young women’s moral virtue, mainly as expressed through social control and the repression of ‘excessive’ behaviors. Therefore, the focus for self-improvement and identity building was on “internal character” and how it was “reflected in outward behavior.” Brumberg notes that a century later, young American women were focused on their bodies when it came to issues of self-expression. The modern ethos of postfeminism constructs female bodies, instead of their minds, as “sites for continual manipulation in order to fuel continual consumption.”

Feminist theorist Rosalind Gill termed the postfeminist disciplining of continual bodily manipulation the ‘makeover paradigm.’ According to Gill, the makeover paradigm is an important aspect of the postfeminist sensibility, which can

232 Ibid. Page xxi.
be understood as the “intersection of individualism, choice, feminine self-surveillance, and body management, and a shift from sexual objectification to ‘subjectification.’”²³⁴ Often, “pro-ana” bloggers’ discourses are informed by this makeover paradigm. For example, one blogger wrote, “I basically want to be unrecognizable by the time I lose all the weight. I want to be completely different. I’ve always been this way and now is the time to transform.”²³⁵ This desire to transform is similar to the medieval era discursive construction of ‘spiritual transcendence through bodily transcendence.’ This modern understanding of bodily is informed by capitalist institutions instead of religious institutions.

In our individualized neoliberal culture, a women’s own subjectivity and identity within society is constructed in large part by her ability to be a consumer or a late capitalist subject. She is rendered visible if she is able to conform to the identities or categories that are being marketed to her as superior. In other words, a women’s notion of self is predicated on her inclusion or exclusion from the idolized target consumer demographic; and maintaining a specific body type is also necessary for inclusion. Bloggers such as “daintyfawnnice” continually stress that ‘thin people look beautiful in every kind of clothing.’ Within the “pro-ana” community, the anorexia ‘body project’ is often discursively constructed as a means of rendering the self-capable of participating in consumer culture in a normalized way. Furthermore, the pictures and dialogue on Tumblr seem to operate within a fundamentally exclusionary framework that constructs normativity as white, middle or upper class, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied and thin. Throughout my year of research, I did not see one image of an emaciated women on Tumblr who was not white and wearing

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 147.
²³⁵ Posted by a now inactive Tumblr blogger.
‘fashionable’ clothing. This exclusionary framework is largely fueled by market-place logics, which centralize the most privileged consumers within their marketing and production strategies. These market-place logics are often reflected in the consumerist discourse within the “pro-ana” community. While anorexia must not be simply understood as an ‘extreme body project’ of the consumer self, a complete understanding of the modern illness must recognize the ways in which it manifests within the postfeminist, neoliberal body subject.

Food as the Ultimate Danger

In order to further understand the “pro-ana” community’s relationship to food we must look back to Hilde Bruch’s argument in her 1973 book Eating Disorders. Brunch explains that because the practice of eating is a deeply ‘social practice,’ it has long been historically constructed as endowed with “complex values and elaborate ideologies, religious beliefs and prestige systems.” While this is certainly the case today it is helpful to situate our understanding in the past, in order to overcome our modern normalization of food culture. The most informative comparison would be to the Victorian Era, when food culture amongst women was incredibly strict. As Brumberg explains, “Appetite was regarded as a barometer of sexuality, both mothers and daughters were concerned about its expression and its control. It was incumbent upon the mother to train the appetite of the daughter so that it represented only the highest moral and aesthetic sensibilities.”

Certain foods such as meat were gendered. Meat was associated with manliness and was deemed inappropriate for women as it was considered to “stimulate production of blood and fat as well as

sexual development and activity." Furthermore, meat eating in excess was “linked to adolescent insanity and to nymphomania.” Beyond meat, foods such as coffee, tea, chocolate, warm bread and pastry, confectionary, nuts, raisins, alcohol were said to “stimulate the sensual, rather than the moral, nature of the girl.” Eating for girls was considered a moral activity and, as Brumberg argues, “denial of attractive foods became a form of moral certitude an... a means for advancing in the moral hierarchy.” This denial remains a means of asserting moral superiority in the neoliberal era, and can be seen in the writings of modern “pro-ana” bloggers.

Today, appetite is no longer regarded as a barometer of sexuality. Instead, it is regarded as a barometer of social standing and self-discipline. Certain foods are no longer regarded as ‘immoral,’ but instead are considered intrinsically ‘dangerous’ and overly indulgent. As “starvationtrainstation” wrote, “pasta: *exists* - me: wow I came out here to have a good time and I’m honestly feeling so attacked right now.” Certain foods are considered off limits to “the skinny girl,” by nature of them containing certain macronutrients that have been deemed dangerous by diet culture, such as fat and carbs. The blogger “introverted-writerfield” explained “Food is no longer, texture, smell, warmth, energy, taste, food becomes calories. 1500. 1000. 800. 600. 200. Until calories, become chemicals. Sugar free jelly. Pepsi Max. Diet coke … Nothing.” Pleasure is simply denied, or it is incorporated into the disciplined bodily ethic and re-presented as an acceptable indulgence if its occurrence is infrequent.

239 Ibid., p. 173.
240 Ibid.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid., p. 179.
243 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 951 times by December of 2018
244 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 60,613 times by December of 2018
This ‘consumer ethic’ is neoliberal in essence and is further described in Bordo’s work on modern corporeal politics. Bordo identifies a structural contradiction within advanced capitalism that grew out of the mind-body dualism. This dualism simultaneously contrasts bodies as “producer-selves,” who operate within a ‘Protestant work ethic,’ and bodies as “consumer selves,” which conform for a ‘playful ethic’ predicated on the pursuit of pleasure. This competing dualism renders the capitalist subject as continually laboring to navigate the tensions between the extreme of the “performance principle” and the extreme of “letting go.”

The blogger “skinny-ache” describes this duality in the following post: “Having an ed (eating disorder) during the holidays means going back and forth between “come on, it’s just one day. you’ll be fine. you deserve to eat good food with your family” and “if you eat one fucking green bean, you’re gonna die.” Within this contradiction, female bodies must engage in a balancing act of control that manages to remain within the boundaries of normative, ‘good’ bodily comportment. A good woman’s body should never be marked by excess, thinness is the ultimate ideal. This balancing act is extreme and creates more contractions than guidelines for healthy living. Those in the “pro-ana” community seem to be operating on the performance principle, doing everything they can to mitigate their fear of “letting go.”

In the “pro-ana” community, bloggers discursively redefine denial as a disciplined pursuit of ‘higher goals.’ For example, “yepstarving” provided her followers with her list of reminders: “Don’t eat that—you’ll gain water weight. Don’t eat that—you’ll be bloated. Don’t eat that—it’s too much calories. Don’t eat that—you won’t feel hungry, and that’s not addicting as hunger pains are. Don’t eat that—

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246 This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 2,343 times by December of 2018
it’ll ruin your goal to be skinnier than your friend. Don’t eat that—you’ll look like a pig at the table.\textsuperscript{247} Denial, in this view, is representative of hard work because it is the most visible signal of individual determination and success. By the last decades of the nineteenth century a thin body was discursively rendered (largely through media) a “sign of social status.”\textsuperscript{248} The thin body not only implied asexuality and an elevated social address, it was also an expression of intelligence, sensitivity, and morality.”\textsuperscript{249} The thin body remains a sign of status and an expression of intelligence, however instead of being a sign of morality it is a sign of superior consumer and self-disciplining ethic. In my final chapter, I will explore the ways in which the ethic of the consumer self continues to be coded on the visible body, even when the ‘ideal’ corporeality shifts with societal progression.

\textbf{Chapter Three: Healthism and Commodity Feminism in the \textit{Instagram} Fitness Community}

\textbf{Introduction}

The online social media platform \textit{Instagram} is proving itself to be an incredibly powerful and increasingly popular community platform and marketing tool. Because \textit{Instagram} is largely a platform for pictures, fitness and beauty communities are thriving on the app. My research is focused on the recent and growing phenomena of \textit{Instagram} celebrities within the fitness community, who can often make a living from social media marketing and sponsorship. These celebrities, some of whom have millions of followers, are considered by many to be

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\textsuperscript{247} This post was re-blogged or liked on Tumblr a total of 1,104 times by December of 2018
\textsuperscript{248} Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. Page 182.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., p.184.
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experts on health, fitness, and the individual pursuit of happiness and success. In order to better understand the ways in which the online fitness industry is informed by neoliberal, postfeminist ethics and logics, I researched the work of five different famous fitness bloggers. I found that although ‘fitness’ is often presented as empowering and healthy for women, their notion of ‘health’ is determined by an elite or class-based lifestyle, a carefully monitored diet, a daily commitment to exercise and strength training, and the attainment of a normative body type.

My research shows that the rhetoric that these fitness bloggers employ to sell products/programs or encourage followers is often informed by the ideology of healthism, a new morality akin to the protestant ethic, commodity feminism, and aesthetic health and citizenship. This more recent centralization of fitness follows a period from the 1980’s onward during which the tyranny of slenderness reigned supreme. The media and general public are now centralizing and privileging more muscular female bodies, which generally require a higher caloric intake to maintain, and to many this is put forward as a sign of female emancipation and progress from the extreme body disciplining and scrutiny of the recent past. I argue, however, that although this newer discursive regime of ‘fitness’ allows some women to more easily stop restricting calories, openly engage in physical exercise, or put on muscle, it must still be recognized as a modified method of extreme body disciplining that just adheres to an evolved corporeal politic. Fitness as a discursive regime is legitimized and powered by healthism. This thesis argues that ‘fitness’ thereby works to enforce increased bodily surveillance and discipline through the consumption of technologies of the self, which work to render neoliberal subjects’ aesthetic citizens.

*Instagram Overshadowing Tumblr: Similarities and Differences within the*
“thinspo” and “fitspo” Communities

*Instagram*, a photography centric social media platform, boasted 600 million active users sharing over 95 million photos per day in 2016. Especially for the younger generations, *Instagram* has become an influential and pervasive social network, ad distributer, and online community organizer. Social networking services like *Instagram* are now more popular than conventional media formats among young women (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012), with 90% of 18–29 year old women reported to be active users of social media (Perrin et al., 2015).

Some members of the *Instagram* community have modified the “thinspo” or “thinspiration” tag to create the “fitspo” or “fitspiration” tag and community. As of March 2019, there are 63,772,391 posts that have been tagged as “fitspo”. Instead of thinness inspiration, this emergent trend of fitness inspiration has taken off and has become even more widespread and publicly endorsed. “Fitspo” bloggers and posts are presented as centering around empowerment and encouragement, often between women. Such posts often depict a fitness journey (before and after pictures), a posing, muscular and lean body, a gym or home exercise or workout, a ‘healthy’ meal, or a motivational quote. More often than not these posts aim to idealize, regulate, and promote a ‘healthy’ ‘fitness’ lifestyle.

The major difference between the “thinspo” posts on *Tumblr* and the “fitspo” posts on *Instagram* is that “fitspo” more often centralizes the importance of ‘health,’ ‘strength,’ ‘lifestyle,’ and ‘empowerment.’ Still, these two tags are similar in that they promote a remarkably similar body type, a shape that is very lean and toned. Although there are certainly some “fitspo” bloggers that promote far more

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muscular female bodies, the norm within the fitness community is still the very lean woman with slight musculature, mostly in the legs and glutes. This ‘updated’ body ideal is equally, or perhaps, even more challenging, to attain and maintain because it is very challenging to build muscle while engaging in restricted dieting.

“Thinspo” and “fitspo” often stigmatize body weight and body fat and encourage dieting and extreme exercising.

Insta-celebrities: Peer Knowledge and Parasocial Bonds

_Instagram_ influencers, or “celebrities”, are _Instagram_ users who have considerable followings (thousands to millions of followers). They have been called celebrity-peer hybrids by marketers because they possess “visibility and popularity similar to traditional celebrities, but also appear more relatable to consumers because they typically live normal lives offline.” The recent insta-celebrity phenomena that has coincided with _Instagram_’s major success among the younger generations is most prominent within specific, purpose driven communities such as the “fitspo” community. A large percentage of insta celebrities gain notoriety and following for their body modeling within the platform.

Before they gain their thousands of followers, many of these users begin a “fitness journey.” Their success in this journey often allows them to become full time fitness bloggers and earn a living through becoming product and brand endorsers. Recently, marketing experts have recognized the value of the celebrity-peer, ‘Insta- celebrity’ hybrids as “influencers.” ‘Insta-celebrities’ are the perfect

marketing tool, as they provide both expertise and trustworthiness. They have
become one of the “hottest marketing trends with the Instagram influencer market
alone projected to reach $2 billion by 2019 (Hershman, 2017).” Many companies
will seek out emergent ‘Insta-celebrities’ who have already developed a self-brand
and a major following. The ‘authenticity’ and appeal of this self-brand is
particularly important for the credibility of ‘Insta-celebrities’ endorsements.

Many Instafamous users implement techniques to position themselves
“between a celebrity and an everyday person and to assert themselves as credible
sources to their followers” (Eagar and Dann 2016). They often post
‘autobiography’ selfies or pictures that depict them doing everyday activities like
cooking or lounging. Alongside these more ‘relatable’ photos, they post
‘propaganda’ selfies, in which they are often airbrushed, or edited and are
positioned in a flattering manner with good lighting and a fashionable outfit. They
also post ‘self-help’ selfies, highlighting their “mastery of a skill,” often after a
long and arduous journey of ‘self-improvement’ and ‘confidence building.’ These
posts allow ‘Insta-celebrities’ to create a self-brand that highlights their
‘relatability’, unique star power, and ‘expertise.’ ‘Insta-celebrities’ report spending
hours crafting an Instagram profile that allows for the creation of what experts call
para-social bonds. Of interest, Bonds built by the “particular media’s ability to
create the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a personality and a viewer
(Horton and Wohl 1956).” Within the Instagram fitness community, arguably
more so than other Instagram communities, Instagram celebrities often refer to

252 Ibid., p. 16.
253 Ibid., p. 18.
254 Ibid.
255 Ibid., p. 17. The study I refer is the 2012 study conducted by Ettel, Nathanson, Ettel, Wilson, & Meola.
their followers as their ‘community,’ ‘family,’ ‘friends,’ or ‘squad,’ rather than simply their ‘followers.’ Many recognize the monetary value of these para-social bonds and the importance of ensuring their self-brand is as authentic and relatable as possible.

Studies have shown that the information found online is highly trusted, with young people in particular modifying their behavior on the basis of the information gathered.\(^{256}\) This is particularly observable within the online fitness and “pro-ana” communities, as many of the people who follow “Instagram famous” bloggers consider them to be their main source for fitness education. While there are some important differences between the Tumblr and Instagram, they are both spaces where many girls go for motivation, advice and self-comparison. It is important to note that Tumblr and “pro-ana” blogs had their peak in the early 2000’s while Instagram has become far more popular in the past decade. Arguably, the Instagram fitness community has taken over where the Tumblr “thinspo” community left off. This evolution has very much echoed the broader recent cultural shift within body ideals. General requirements for the ‘normative’ body have changed: lean for the sake of lean has been replaced with toned limbs and lean curves.

The early 2000’s rhetoric that was popularized within “pro-ana” communities was simply, “don’t eat.” Of course, that is by no means a simple task and there were multitudes of physical and mental strategies and products created to help with this impossible goal. Being healthy meant looking skinny. There was generally less concern within these online platforms about the kind of food one

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eats; the stress was moreso put on the number of calories one consumed in a day. Diet coke, gum, and rice cakes were considered the ideal diet within these communities. More recently, the rhetoric has broadened to include more regulation on the ideal diet and the ideal exercise routine. Today the rhetoric is “be strong and healthy” and the method is “exercise and clean eating.” Since the mid 2000’s, these two online communities have played a very large role in constructing and then significantly morphing what ‘health’ looks like for young women. Both platforms have allowed for the proliferation of body disciplining methods and moral/social body discourses. Within their respective discourses, restriction, control, denial, personal power, perfection, confidence, and mental health are of the utmost concern for the Tumblr “pro-ana”/ “thinspo” community, while health, fitness, lifestyle, strength, happiness and confidence are of the utmost concern to the Instagram fitness community. While a very particular rhetoric of ‘morality’ fuels online “pro-ana” discourse, a similarly distinctive rhetoric of ‘health’ fuels the online fitness discourse.

**Introductions to 5 Instagram Fitness Celebrities:**

We can better understand how this discourse has formed and proliferated in social media if we explore healthicization, specifically the phenomena of aesthetic health and consumerist health. In order to better engage with these concepts, I have researched five different Instagram celebrities within the online fitness community. Each particular Instagram blog was chosen for its popularity and the fact that it represented a different subset of the online fitness industry.

Some of the Instagram celebrities are more famous than others, and some are involved with fitness offline, more interested in the fitness industry itself. What
they have in common is their ability to form thousands of para-social bonds with their followers, as well as their ability to make so many people want to follow their work and engage with their fitness journey. Each blogger defines health in their own way; still, their discourse is largely influenced by healthism, the new morality, commodity feminism, and postfeminist fitness culture. These concepts will be discussed at length below, but first, each blogger must be introduced.

Brittany Dawn is a twenty-six-year-old fitness model based in Texas and Hawaii. Her fitness blog began in 2014, and she currently has 513,000 followers. Her bio reads, “Public Figure. Plant based Youtuber. Beauty + food + travel.” She was recently featured on the cover of Fitness magazine (US) and in a Cosmopolitan article titled, “30 Fit Women to Follow on Instagram.” Brittany, arguably, was able to capture such a following by centralizing her “transformation” throughout her blog. Her page includes multiple “before and after” photos with captions explaining how she lost weight and gained confidence. For example, one “before” (she’s in a tank top and jeans) and “after” (she’s in a bodycon dress and heels) post reads, “Nearly 50 pounds and 7 years later. The best part is that in 2009, I didn’t even own a bodycon dress...much less have the confidence to wear one. #Transformation #WeightLoss #Fitness #TeamBrittanyDawn.”

Her blog is the most similar to “pro-ana” blogs, in that she centralizes the importance of transformation through weight loss, specifically tying her newfound confidence to her ability to make different fashion choices.

Brittany’s blog is in many ways representative of a ‘classic’ fitness and health model blog. Her introduction in the Cosmo article reads, “For

257 @brittany_dawn_fitness. Posted January, 2017.17,330 likes.
seriously gorge Insta aesthetic and gym style inspo, tap follow on Brittany's grid. She'll share tips from her own workout routine, like her fave abs and booty moves, so you can steal 'em for yourself.” While she encourages people to start their “fitness journey,” the majority of her posts are pictures of herself with self-help like captions instead of instructional workout videos. There is a clear and consistent aesthetic that informs all of her pictures and captions. Her photos adhere to a similar color and lighting scheme that results in all of her full body and face photos looking fairly uniform. A good portion of her posts feature her fashion, her meals, and her travel photos. Most, if not all, Instagram fitness bloggers create their own content, as the photography is largely of themselves and the captions feature their own words of encouragement or advice. Although some Tumblr bloggers post their own photography or pictures of themselves, the photo content is largely outsourced, or shared from other blogs; the written content, on the other hand is more often their own. Brittany’s blog is similar to many “pro-ana” blogs in that there is a predominance of full body, non-active (posed) pictures accompanied by inspirational/encouraging body project captions, a strict adherence to a photo/blog aesthetic, a centralization of fashion, and a celebration of an aestheticized lifestyle.

Most of the full body photos of Brittany posing are accompanied by an inspirational or supportive caption about “loving yourself” and “never giving up.” Her many before and after photos describe how her “journey to health” has

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provided her with “confidence,” “happiness,” and “emotional and physical strength.” She is made up and posed with good lighting in almost all of her photos, but she includes some side by side shots captioned “perfect” vs. “normal” with encouraging captions about embracing “imperfections.” In these posts, she is enhanced as much as possible in the left picture, with makeup, lighting, angling, and editing. On the right, she is not posed and is without professional lighting. Her captions encourage women not to feel the need to be “perfect” and to recognize that blogs such as hers mostly feature full body photos made to be “perfect” through lighting and posing. Overall, Brittany’s blog is a “lifestyle” blog that promotes “health” by centralizing the aesthetics of a particular diet, fashion sense, and fitness regime.

Active on Instagram since 2014, Tanya Poppett is a twenty-four-year-old Sydney based fitness trainer and sponsored fitness model. She has 415,000 followers and 1,245 posts. She is an Adidas trainer for Australia, a major trainer for @ActiveEscapesRetreats, and a representative of @Bulknutrients Team. She also has a fitness app. Unlike Brittany’s, Tanya’s blog @tanyapoppett reads as less of a fitness model blog and more of a fitness trainer blog; her focus is more geared toward providing exercise tutorials and fitness advice. Full body pictures make up a minority of her content and the pictures are most often “active.” She does not use professional lighting or editing on her pictures. Beyond simply posting a video of herself doing the movements with basic instructions (as many other fitness bloggers do), she elaborates on details like muscle group activation and isolation as well as mobility work. She describes her fitness goals as mastering certain exercises, recreational sports, or muscle groups instead of more bodily presentation goals, like strengthening her glutes.
Tanya’s blog differs from many other celebrity fitness blogs in that it features fitness content that extends beyond at home or gym exercises. She has posts about running, yoga, hiking, and swimming. Compared to the other blogs studied, Tanya’s blog is the most unlike “pro-ana” or “thinspo” blogs. Tanya’s blog does not rely as heavily on aestheticized, non-active, fashion centric, full body photos. The discursive strategies she employs are not as informed by postfeminist logics that centralize bodily presentation or render femininity a form of commodified feminism. Her discourse emphasizes the importance of movement for movement's sake, as well as balancing physical and mental needs. This is fairly uncommon within the Instagram fitness community. Tanya makes a point to critique the fitness industry; for example, one post from January 2019 stated, “Dear Fitness Industry...let’s stop using movement to preach aesthetic ‘ideals.’ Exercise should empower us and help us appreciate our body, not ridicule and punish it.”

Although Tanya’s blog is certainly a fitness blog and not a sports blog, it differs from many fitness blogs in its emphasis on fitness for the sake of sport or physical activities instead of fitness for the sake of building muscle or transforming bodies.

The third fitness model and trainer I studied, Danielle Robertson, is also based in Australia and maintains an online and sometimes in person working relationship with Tanya Poppett. Danielle has 752,000 followers and 2007 posts. Her bio reads, “Law Student and Personal Trainer. Justice Criminology Graduate. Owner and founder of @dannibelle_active. Women’s Best Ambassador.” Danielle’s blog reads as a fairly equal balance between fitness model and fitness trainer. Around half of her posts feature a non-active, full

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259 @tanyapoppett. Posted January 22, 2019.
body picture, generally featuring and highlighting fitness clothing that she is advertising. She also includes more “beauty shots” of her face or of her full body in a gown. The other half of her content is educational and instructional exercise videos, mainly of at home workouts. Danielle is very entrepreneurial and engaged with the fitness industry. She’s had many sponsors, namely diet, nutrition, and sportswear companies. Once she gained a major following, she founded her sportswear business, Dannibelle activewear. After more than two years of preparation, her products launched in 2019. Much of her blog has been dedicated to this journey of founding and growing a small company and product line.

All the fitness trainers and models I have studied have been able to make a living off of their social media platform, mainly because they have accumulated enough followers who will pay for their special programs or products. Danielle Robertson is the only one who has created her own clothing line that is based upon her work as an Instagram celebrity in the fitness community. A lot of her blog’s content pertains to the challenges of balancing work and studies with ‘fitness.’ It must be noted that her entrepreneurial work is very closely tied to her unpaid fitness ‘work,’ which is not the case for many of the people following her ‘journey.’ Still, Danielle speaks to the work/fitness balance more than the other bloggers mentioned, recognizing the ‘fitness lifestyle’ is demanding and often incompatible with women’s career labor. For example, on December 14, 2018, she wrote, “I’ve found that a lot of fitness motivation is very strict and assertive. The approach of ‘No excuses, get it done’ is great for a temporary push but the reality is, there’s so much more to it than that. It’s very unlikely that your one job is to be fit or achieve your ‘dream body’ so let’s be real here. We have work,
responsibilities, obligations and a whole range of other things that affect our day-to-day life.” The acknowledgment that fitness is a job is uncommon within the fitness community, and so too is the recognition that it is not possible for every woman to commit to fitness if she has paying job or domestic labor that requires her full attention. Danielle’s commentary helps to unravel this neoliberal, postfeminist logic that maintains that body projects are of the utmost importance, regardless of circumstance such as socioeconomic status or ability.

The fourth fitness model and trainer I studied is Denice Moberg, a new mother based in Sweden. Her blog @denicemoberg contains 2,585 posts and is followed by 874,000 people. She is a Gymshark Athlete as well as a sponsor for two nutrition companies. Outside of Instagram, she also has a website. She recently won the 2018 Swedish Lifestyle awards for her training profile. Denice’s blog is similar to Danielle’s in that it is balanced between fitness modeling and fitness training. Denice’s full body, non-active photos most commonly feature Gymshark athlete clothing, and her food photos feature Nocco or Barebell food products. In this way, her blog is clearly shaped by her corporate sponsorship. The majority of her blog features her pregnancy and her newborn. She blogs continuously about what it was like for her to train while pregnant, as well as the changes her body went through before and after her pregnancy. Her postpartum content is focused on her getting back her strength and losing some of the weight she gained during the pregnancy. The majority of her instructional fitness videos either feature her newborn or utilize him has a weight or balancing point. Most of her recent content focuses on the ways in which she balances fitness with being a new mom.

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260 @dannibelle. Posted December 14, 2018.
Finally, the fifth fitness model and trainer I studied is Anita Herbert based in Miami, Florida. Her blog @anita_herbert has 1.7 million followers and 1,712 posts. Her bio reads, “IFBB (International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness) Pro. Fit Queen. 2017 Bikini Champion.” She has an instructional fitness and diet app and she is sponsored by two companies. Unlike any of the other fitness bloggers I studied, Anita is a professional bodybuilder. Her blog balances fitness modelling and fitness training and is heavily influenced by product sponsorship. Her non-active, full body photos are enhanced by lighting and bodily angling to emphasize her musculature. Anita includes a lot of inspirational and motivational captions, centralizing the importance of hard work and dedication. Not unlike the other fitness bloggers, she posts multiple before and after photos and speaks about ways in which her fitness journey allowed her to become the strong, confident, successful woman she is today. Anita emphasizes her recent immigration to the United States from a small town in Hungary as well as the fact that she had no knowledge of fitness prior to arriving in Miami. For example, one of her “before and after” posts is captioned, “I never had anything handed to me...I put in the hard work every single day to get the body I have now and to be the person I am today.”261 She credits her fitness lifestyle to her success as an American immigrant, and she uses her transformation story to encourage others to start their fitness regimen and achieve strength. She often speaks to the stigma against muscular woman and encourages her followers to continue to increase their muscle mass regardless of this particular bias.

261 @anita_herbert. Posted March 20, 2019. Liked by 45,875 people.
The Current Age of Health as Moral and Consumerist Imperative

In many ways, the discursive strategies and logics used by the online fitness and health industries is informed by the modern ideology and discursive regime of healthism and the new morality that fuels it. In their 2010 book *Against Health*, editors Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland investigate the ways in which ‘health’ is a “desired state but also a prescribed state and an ideological position.” Our modern society is particularly focused on health as a necessary ‘aim’ and as the best state of being. Metzl and Kirkland maintain that there must be an increased scrutiny of society’s broad understandings of ‘health,’ which is increasingly defining and regulating our daily lives. Modern day notions of health must be understood within the Foucauldian framework of biopower (as discussed in Chapter one of this thesis), ever present in discourse and rooted in institutions. Metzl and Kirkland explain, “American society’s incessant talk about health produces and regulates itself and its subjects, while making it increasingly difficult to get outside of health. Such biopower subjugates utterances that we do not agree with and utterances that we do, both of which serve to remove us ever more from the possibility of real resistance.” Within our consumerist, media fueled society, health discourse is at the center of our subjectivities. As a legitimimized and naturalized biopower, most problematic discourse or consumerist discourse can be justified in the name of ‘health.’

In the age of biomedicalization, they argue, “biomedicine and technoscience conspire to define health as a moral obligation, a commodity, and a mark of status and self-worth. The focus is no longer on illness, disability, and disease as matters

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263 Ibid., p. 5.
of fate, but on health as a matter of ongoing moral self-transformation.”\textsuperscript{264} In this way, the growing medical-industrial complex is able to seek and attract patients whether or not they are actually sick, as health is presented as an impossibly ‘perfect’ state that requires constant and continual work and self-scrutiny to attain. The promotion of this nearly impossible ideal of health renders such a pursuit an endless preoccupation, and even a “destructive addiction,”\textsuperscript{265} according to Metzl and Kirkland. The United States spends far more than any other country on health care yet performs poorly in measures of public health compared to other industrialized countries.\textsuperscript{266} Our healthcare system is broken and low-functioning. Meanwhile, we spend so much of our money and attention on individualized quests for health through popular products and programs. \textit{Against Health} notes that in 2006, Americans “spend about $35 billion on diets and diet services.”\textsuperscript{267} Health must be recognized an ideology, with multiple dominant discourses being channeled through media and advertisers, propping up a normative corporeality.

Over the past three or four decades, the obesity “epidemic” is presented as the biggest threat to American health. The media has drawn a strict line between obesity and morality and our social climate is generally anti-fat. For the past half-century or more there have been many instances of false or over-exaggerated claims concerning weights impact on overall health. The reality is that despite strong pronouncements about weight and health, sociologist Kathryn Ratcliff argues, “over eighty years of actuarial and scientific concern with weight shows little if any evidence that weight is a health problem for most people.”\textsuperscript{268} Studies

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid.
have shown that only among the extremely obese does weight increase the chance of early death\textsuperscript{269}, still media outlets like the \textit{New York Times} respond with the proclamation, “The evidence continues to accumulate: for health and longevity, it pays to be thin!”\textsuperscript{270} Such proclamations have fueled the ever-growing diet industry for many years. Epidemiological evidence suggests that “yo-yo dieting” (repeatedly losing and regaining weight over a period of several years) actively “damages the immune system (and is generally bad for overall health),”\textsuperscript{271} Still, at any given time it is estimated that fifty to seventy five percent of all women are on diets, even though an estimated ninety five percent of all diets fail.”\textsuperscript{271}

Studies have found that “twenty five percent of female adolescents and twenty percent of adult women who consider themselves to be the “right weight” continue to actively diet.”\textsuperscript{272} The media’s obsession with thinness certainly leads to kinds of behaviors but the changes in medial standards over the years have also contributed. For example, the Body Mass Index, although heavily debated, has been used readily as a reliable guide for monitoring your weight. Prior to the 1990s, a BMI greater than or equal to 27 was considered overweight, meaning that 25 to 33 percent of the population was considered overweight. A 1998 government report now deems anything above 25 to be overweight, thereby making over fifty percent of Americans overweight.\textsuperscript{273} This gradual slimming of the ideal has serious effects on the dieting population and is readily used by corporations claiming to be aiding in the overall increase of public health. Science has yet to find the “perfect” weight, but the media has found it in the “fat-free” body. The

\textsuperscript{269} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{271} Kirkland, Anna (2010). Page 16.  
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., p. 131.  
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., p. 137.
output of the medical-industrial complex is being used or misused to normalize and legitimize this specific type of corporeality.

The New Morality within the Ideology of Health

Metzl and Kirkland call for a movement against ‘health,’ necessitating an increased skepticism of problematic health ideologies and denouncement of social policy that is based upon the misuse of science or health myths. They also encourage an expansion of our conception of disease, or ill health, to include the “moral and physical harm that is done to the public by particular nostrums of public health, particularly those that impose constraints and privations ‘for your own good.’” Of particular concern is the modern denial of pleasure. Metzl and Kirkland warn, “if you inhibit the body’s pleasure, you provoke disease.” Our current ideology of health relies heavily on the denial of pleasure, and regulation of the many things that can give us a moment of peace or satisfaction to the realm of immorality. Encouraging followers to prioritize fitness goals over “momentary indulgences” is a common theme in the fitness community. Many of the fitness bloggers tell their followers that if they embrace a “fitness lifestyle” they no longer have to diet or restrict the foods they eat. Instead, many of them encourage followers to make “flexible dieting” a central part of their lifestyle, meaning that eating “fitness friendly foods” the vast majority of the time should become a consistent and unending practice. While many bloggers insist it is ok to “indulge” every once in a while, they still consider it a “cheat day,” “set back” or “rare occurrence” that is only acceptable if their fitness regime is maintained. For example, Brittany Dawn prioritizes “goals” over pleasures. She captioned a before

274 Ibid., p. 17.
275 Ibid., p. 19.
and after picture, “I’m human, and I too have days where I’d rather take a spoon to a jar of peanut butter or a tub of ice cream. But in those moments, you have to dig deep and remember your goals (and I’m not talking about digging deeper in that tub of Ben and Jerry’s).”

To many of the bloggers, a “healthy” relationship with food means eating in accordance with their fitness goals.

Metzl and Kirkland argue that an old strain of American puritanism has morphed into a “new morality” within our neoliberal society. A constant drive for peak performance and need for extreme control informs our health discourse and effects our consumerist choices. Today, modern subjects are made to engage in self-surveillance and self-regulation based on definitions of health that “represent specific moral imperatives.” A major moral imperative is not to overindulge.

Mind body dualist thinking has also led to the supremacy of mind over body, where a corporeal goal should trump the physical pleasure food provides. As consumers, we are regulated to calculate our choices and calculate the effects they will have on our bodily health, and paramount to this health is attaining and maintaining a particular body type. The gendered element of this modern morality renders women as “deviant, and as persons who are held accountable for their wrongs, who must display their imperfections...expected to testify openly to deficiencies or ‘sins.’” For women today, self-disciplining means self-accountability, and an accompanying ritual of confession. The confessional seems to play a large role in the Instagram fitness community (as will be discussed below). The confession has a panoptic power, in that it “forces one to see the ‘truth’ about oneself through self-surveillance and self-regulation.”

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276 @brittany_dawn_fitness. Posted on Instagram, September 14, 2016. 10,253 likes.
278 Ibid., p.19.
continuous self-inspection, accepting with humility and graciousness absolution from those who legislate the ‘truth.’”\textsuperscript{280} Once the confession has been made, technologies of self must be employed to rectify this health immorality, such as starting a fitness program or diet.\textsuperscript{281}

Many of the Instagram fitness blogs I studied engaged in confessional rituals. For example, Danielle Robertson discloses ‘unhealthy’ behaviors on her blog. For example, a post put up December 13th of 2019 reads, “The thicker your thighs are the more snacks you can lay on your lap @freddyausnz have the perfect amount of stretch to accommodate my Christmas indulgence and those snack supporting thighs... picnic table thighs if you will.”\textsuperscript{282} Again, Danielle is acknowledging her ‘indulgences’ with the accompanying ‘excuse’ (the holiday season). Not unlike many of the other fitness blogs I studied, Danielle attempts to make light of her ‘setbacks,’ for example, by calling her thighs ‘picnic table thighs.’ The discursive strategies fitness bloggers employ often seem to balance ‘relatability’ and an adherence to the new ethic and morality of healthism. In another post, @dannibelle captioned a picture of herself holding a nutritional product from her sponsor with the following: “Been such a busy week following the launch of DBA, packing orders and working late. Full disclosure, most of my work/packing sessions were fueled by lollies and other delicious (but unhealthy) food. Keen to get back on track with my training and diet. Sippin’ on my @womensbest BCAAs in watermelon #womensbest.”\textsuperscript{283} Danielle always has an excuse for her ‘indulgences,’ (such as a heavy workload). They are rarely simply for pleasure, and once they occur, future correction fitness plans are immediately

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\textsuperscript{280} Ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{282} @danninelle. Posted on Instagram December 13, 2019.
\textsuperscript{283} @danninelle. Posted on Instagram March 25, 2019.
\end{flushright}
declared. While many of the fitness bloggers I studied encouraged their followers to quit dieting, they still maintained that self-discipline and bodily maintenance is required for health through fitness. For example, Brittany Down wrote, “Shoutout to the girls who know how to enjoy holiday treats and make the most of leg day,” under a picture of herself in a bodycon dress. These bloggers continuously present themselves as confessional subjects, and use concepts like ‘cheat days,’ or ‘seasonal indulgences’ to prove their commitment to their continual bodily disciplining.

Healthism and Commodity Feminism

A commitment to the neoliberal ideology of health (or healthism) is individually demonstrated by engaging in continuous and successful ‘self-projects.’ In order to attain this elusive status of ‘health,’ one must continue to engage in self-regulation and discipline, largely based upon knowledge gleaned from the fitness/health marketplace. As fitness blogger @brittnebabe wrote under a before and after photo, “Many people think that once you get where you want to be you're done: never. Everything you’ve worked so hard for can be gone just like that…” The new moralism maintains that illness is the result of a failure to continuously regulate ‘lifestyle.’ As celebrity fitness blogger @brittenbabe writes, “Your body is a reflection of your lifestyle.” The neoliberal logic constructs health as an individual choice, one that can be made regardless of socioeconomic status, or any other circumstances that often hinder a person's ability to access these moralizing technologies of self. For example, @brittenbabe wrote, “Six

years ago, I was broke, didn’t have a car, couldn't afford a gym membership or
trainer, and wasn’t comfortable working out on machines in front of people.
Although things weren’t in my favor, I made zero excuses and went after my
goals.” Success through health is rendered an individualized struggle, which
cannot truly be hindered or restricted by social or economic realities.

Corporeal politics are at the center of healthism. Within this logic, as
Anita Herbert explains, “Your body says a lot about you. It shows strength. It
shows dedication and discipline. It shows hard work and consistency. It
shows patience. It shows confidence. It shows self-love and self-respect. Stop
blaming genetics, slow metabolism and busy schedule...Lets take what we
have and make the most of it!” Health, therefore is deemed something that
can be ‘read’ on the body. As Danielle wrote, “Health is an outfit that looks
different on everyone.”285 Although she is calling for the visibility of and
respect for non-normative or corporeal types, Danielle is still rendering health
a bodily property, one that can be identified through bodily presentation.
Furthermore, healthism presents “health” as a choice. For example, Anita
Herbert wrote, “Most people complain about their body all the time, but they
do nothing about it. If you want to change your life and your body, you have
to change your habits and form a lifestyle.” Presenting as “healthy” therefore
requires “changing your body” by engaging in a lifelong body project.

Within the logic of neoliberalism, “public responsibility to the citizenry to
assist in the process of obtaining health has been largely abdicated as citizenship
has been replaced by individual consumerism.”286 This displacement of public

285 @dannibelle posted on Instagram.
286 Ibid., p.178.
responsibility takes on new dimensions within our current climate of commodity feminism, which refers to how “the culture industry appropriates concepts of feminism and femininity as a range of strategies for capturing market share.” As was discussed in the first chapter, late consumer culture and post-feminism conflate “a free market with ‘freedom,’ and individual success with the advancement of social equity.” Commodity feminism works to “transform feminism into a marketing tool rather than an identity grounded in praxis.” As the many discourses of healthism have intensified and proliferated over the last few decades, so have commodity feminism’s marketplace strategies.

Commodity feminism, as a version of postfeminism, works to ‘rehabilitate femininity as a bodily property’ in order to render it a feminist tool, thereby constructing the body as the site for emancipation or empowerment. For a long while, musculature has been deemed unfeminine, a stigma which has worked to exclude women from sports, physical labor, and so on. Women’s bodies are regulated and disciplined to adhere to a “feminine” corporeality of thinness and only slight (if any) musculature. Many women in the fitness community are pushing back against this form of body regulation and discrimination. For example, dannibelle wrote under a picture of herself in a form fitting skirt and bandeau, “Contrary to popular belief you don't have to choose between fitness and femininity. Femininity is the quality of being female: womanliness. Building muscle and strength doesn't make you less feminine. Build your strength and confidence, break the perception of femininity and let's teach our daughters to care

less about fitting into glass slippers and more about shattering glass ceilings. Wearing @prettylittlething.” While their actions and words are, in many ways, subversive, Danielle and others are still employing postfeminist discursive strategies within a marketplace fueled led by commodity feminism. By wearing and advertising traditionally feminine clothing, and posing in a way that highlights her curves, Danielle is centering her body, one very much in keeping with modern ideals, in her feminist message. Empowerment is presented as achievable through individual, consumerist body projects.

Body projects are rendered ‘feminist’ projects by coding them as signifying ‘empowerment’ and individual improvement. Examples of commodity feminism can be found throughout the Instagram fitness community. A March 2019 post by the fitness model Avital Cohen is an explicit example. The post includes four different ‘before and after’ photos of herself. The before pictures feature a leaner, less muscular body, and the after photos feature her ‘abs’ and “booty gains.” The caption reads, “You can find me somewhere in between INSPIRING others, WORKING on myself and SLAYING my goals. Let’s all of us BE empowered women and EMPOWER each other. Happy International women’s day. #girlspower.”290 According to the logics of commodity feminism and healthism, engaging in a challenging body project constitutes individual feminist action, and encouraging other women to do the same is in line with a vision for global feminism. This is not to say that fitness cannot be empowering for some women, but rather, to illuminate the power of commodity feminism to reconstitute bodily femininity as a form of feminist activism.

290 @avital. Posted on Instagram on March 8, 2019. 110,054 likes (including @dannibelle)
In *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness* (2009), Shari Dworkin and Faye Wachs show how even pregnancy and postpartum child rearing can be made into a postfeminist body project. Dworkin and Wachs mainly focus on the central role women’s magazines play in “disseminating notions of a fit pregnancy.” The magazines place emphasis on the “risks of not being physically active when pregnant or after giving birth construct the mother to be who is not able to exercise, perhaps due to a medical condition or lack of time or financial resources, as an unfit mother.”291 Again, the signifier for a healthy new mother or a healthy pregnancy is the maintenance of a normative slender body and a commitment to the continuance of individual body projects. Women’s magazines promote ‘fitness for new mothers,’ encouraging them to “get their body back.” To do so, these magazines mainly call upon women to continuously perform ‘at-home’ exercises while their baby is sleeping; or to perform exercises, like weight lifting with their babies.

Historically, exercise was considered harmful to women, but in the 1880s, doctors popularized the notion that the only beneficial exercise was the performance of domestic duties.292 Similarly, modern women’s magazines rationalize the promotion of products for body projects for new mothers by claiming that maintaining fitness in this way is the only way to maintain a mother’s health. This version of health is necessary to allow her to physically perform the domestic, mothering tasks that are now required of her. Dworkin and Wachs explain that the new mom at home fitness regime is coded as ‘benefitting the family structure.’293 Specifically, they claim this “third shift of fitness is

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292 Ibid., p. 119.
293 Ibid.
necessary to allow for the successful completion of the second shift of household labor and childcare.”²⁹⁴ This particular discourse allows for ideologies of healthism, commodity feminism and postfeminist ‘empowerment’ to all thrive within the sphere of “privatized domesticity.”²⁹⁵ Importantly, these magazines centralize corporeality as the most important signifier of health by “conflating a body that looks good with proper domestic roles in the household.”²⁹⁶ The magazine’s discourse works to merge the second and third shift while completely ignoring the many female readers who work outside the home, or who have spouses who are able to take an equal or dominant role in childcare and domestic duties. Such discursive strategies are fueled by an interest in selling products and services, but they rely on the framing of such body projects as a means of adhering to a “familial morality.”²⁹⁷

The promotion of ‘at home workouts,’ common in magazines, also makes up a considerable amount of the exercise content produced by Instagram fitness bloggers. On Instagram, ‘at home workouts’ are presented as technologies of the self that are easily accessible. For example, Denice Moberg has been running a sponsored fitness blog since late 2015. Most of her initial workouts took place in the gym, but after having a child, Denice shifted her platform to feature at home workouts. Like in the women’s magazines discussed by Dworkin and Wachs, many of Denice’s workouts utilize her baby as a weight, and the rest feature the baby playing beside her during her exercise demonstrations. In these posts she always includes a clip of her

²⁹⁴ Ibid.
²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 126.
²⁹⁶ Ibid.
²⁹⁷ Ibid., p.127.
playing with her baby in between or during exercises, thereby centralizing the role fitness can play in the relationship between mother and child. In her blogs she gives tips and tricks to ‘seamlessly’ intertwine fitness with taking care of a baby.

Denice visually chronicled her postpartum body project, specifically with before and after shots and posts declaring the amount of weight she had lost. Although Denice does not use explicit rhetoric like ‘get your body back,’ she encourages women to regain their strength after giving birth. Women can access a multitude of at home workouts online, and by this logic, this ‘helpful’ technology means that there is truly ‘nothing standing in the way’ of a woman's ability to maintain a normative body through self-surveillance and discipline. For example, in 2019 Denice Moberg posted a demonstration for a hip thrust exercise with the caption “A “NO EXCUSE” BOOTY WORKOUT that anyone can do. Use a heavy bag if you don’t have a baby as a weight…TAG A FRIEND AND SAY, “NO EXCUSES.”

Claiming that there is ‘no excuse’ not to do an exercise at home arguably makes its completion a moral imperative. This rhetoric works to privatize a ‘third shift’ of fitness, locating the new protestant ethic and morality within the home. Because it does not require training or a gym membership, many people can do this exercise. Yet is certainly not the case that ‘any’ new mother has the time or ability to engage in this kind of body work and self-surveillance, especially as it extends beyond other forms of labor that may be required of her. Though Denice’s caption makes light of the fact that she is using her baby as a weight, it still works to reinforce the discursive strategies employed by women's magazines to encourage women to incorporate every aspect of their lives into their quest for self-regulation.

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298 @denicemoberg. Posted on Instagram January 9, 2019. 36,024 likes as of March 2019.
Aesthetic Health for the Aesthetically Suffering

Within neoliberalism, healthism works to further legitimize and strengthen postfeminist discourse, resulting in the normative body being given even more value and importance. Another important way in which healthism has become conflated with postfeminism is through the powerful discourse of ‘aesthetic health.’ Aesthetic health is the “qualitative notion of well-being that merges aesthetic, psychological and sexual concerns, and often blurs distinctions between healing and enhancement,” which can allow for the therapeutic technologies to emerge as an adaptable mode of ‘neoliberal self-governance.’ Cosmetic surgery provides an example of the ideology of aesthetic health, as sociologist Alexander Edmonds argues in Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic, which outlines the rise of the practice in contemporary Brazil.

During Brazil’s growth of prosperity and consumer wealth in the 1990’s, demand for plastic surgery increased at an exponential rate. The rise in plastic surgery can also be explained by Brazil’s construction of the most “sophisticated media networks in the developing world in the 1980s… through which, “images of a populace moving toward glamour and modernity were reaching the remotest corners of the nation.” Historically, the construction of Brazilian national culture has been deeply intertwined with a particular beauty culture; such a focus has been recently intensified through media networks, which has led to a the proliferation of ‘beauty’ as it is seen as a promising ‘aestheticized capital.’ Within this new economy of beauty, plastic surgery is recognized by many as a means of escaping

300 Ibid.
301 Ibid., p. 25.
the entrenched socioeconomic, racial, and gendered inequalities that remain, even after such increases in prosperity. Edmonds writes of the many ‘impoverished women’ who go to many lengths to obtain such surgeries. Edmonds situates such attempts at “market participation” within the “neoliberal definition of citizenship as constituted through consumption rights,” which renders such participation as a possible “antidote to social exclusion.”\(^\text{302}\) Importantly, those who fall outside the lines of normative citizenship can attempt to render themselves “aesthetic citizens”\(^\text{303}\) through “normalizing” medical technologies, such as plastic surgery. Such technologies, Edmonds argues, have led to the partial “reclassifying the socially excluded” as the “aesthetically suffering.”\(^\text{304}\) Therefore, normative citizenship, as it is often grounded in “elusive notions of health,”\(^\text{305}\) must now be accessed through ‘beauty,’ thereby flipping the previous construction of beauty being accessible through health.

Ultimately, Edmonds reveals ‘beauty’ under neoliberalism as constructing a ‘new subjectivity,’ engendered by the “progressive commodification” of the self, and a utopian vision of transcendence over previous forms of capital, and their related hierarchies of power. For example, Edmonds quoted a young woman named Aline who worked in product promotions. She said, “Once I get liposuction and breast implants, I will earn more money. No one is going to hire someone who will ruin the image of the product. They contract the best they can. And in any case, it will boost my self-esteem.”\(^\text{306}\) Aline wants to use the extra money she believes she will earn to pay for school. Aline’s objective recognition of aesthetic

\(^\text{302}\) Ibid., p. 112.
\(^\text{303}\) Ibid., p. 114.
\(^\text{304}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{305}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{306}\) Ibid., p. 107.
commodification within the job economy and the implicit requirements for beauty labor within the employment contract, works to banalize plastic surgery as just an accessible means of attaining her ultimate aspirations of social mobility and self-transformation. Additionally, Edmonds points to the many work anxieties that reflect Brazil’s color hierarchies. For example, a black Brazilian man blamed “ugly wide nose” for being turned down for a job and subsequently wanted to obtain plastic surgery for his nose. Brazilian employers often call for ‘good appearance,’ which is generally understood as code for ‘whitish appearance.’ Edmonds concludes, “Beauty, then, can be seen as a kind of ‘double negative’: an unfair hierarchy that can disturb other unfair hierarchies.”

Re-centering Agency in the Pursuit of Aesthetic Citizenship

The Instagram Fitness Community, in many ways, adheres to an ideology of aesthetic health. Namely, the championing of this aesthetic health revolves around the notion of female fitness being an empowered lifestyle that allows women to gain confidence, happiness and physical/mental strength. The importance of bodily transformation fuels much of the discourse within the community through varied before and after photos with captions that almost always speak to the positive mental and emotional effects of becoming “healthy.” While promoting her workout program, Anita Herbert wrote, “Get started NOW to become a healthier, happier you.” Similarly, Denice Moberg wrote under a before and after picture featuring her ‘booty gains,’ “2.5 years and almost 12kg difference, it's amazing what food

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308 Ibid., p. 250.
309 @anitaherbert. Posted on Instagram on February 23, 2019. 21,537 Likes.
and heavy lifting can do with your body AND wellbeing.” Pairing happiness and health is common within the fitness community, as ‘fitness’ is almost never explained simply as increased strength, but also increasing the self-confidence, happiness, and mental discipline necessary for a ‘successful’ life. Brittany Dawn similarly encouraged her followers to make health and fitness their new year's resolution by writing, “What is worth fighting for? Your confidence. Your light. Your glow.” As Edmonds argues, the logic of healthism follows that ‘technologies of self’ have the power to “reclassify the socially excluded” as the “aesthetically suffering,” thereby rendering “normative citizenship” accessible through beauty and body work. This process of normalization can be seen within the fitness industry, as non-normative bodies are discriminated against and a central focus or concern within the fitness community. As mentioned above, Brittany Dawn explained that her “transformation” from “overweight” to “fit,” allowed her to be fully functioning and successful member of society, as well; as allowed her to no longer feel discriminated against for her weight. Commitment to neoliberal technologies of the self and body surveillance has the ability to normalize and privilege. This process of normalization was present in Anita Herbert’s story of her immigration to the US, and her eventual attainment of citizenship, in which emphasized that her body work enabled her to reach such levels of success in the US so quickly.

Many fitness bloggers depict their fitness journeys as journeys of healing. On July 30th of 2014, Brittany Dawn posted about the ways in which her fitness journey allowed her to change her relationship with her body. Under a before and

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310 @denicemoderb. Posted on Instagram on August 15, 2017. 32,564 likes.
311 @brittanny_dawn_fitness. Posted on Instagram on January 4, 2019. 20,254 likes.
after picture, Brittany writes,

I was overweight in high school, 169 pounds at my heaviest. I didn't know
how to diet, what to eat, or anything for that matter...so I fell into an eating
disorder. I dropped thirty pounds in about a month's time. My hair fell out in
clumps in the shower. I took at least two to three naps every day AFTER a
full night’s sleep, I was always dizzy/lethargic/exhausted, I was depressed,
addicted to liquid foods and would even limit my water intake to make sure
the scale kept going down. And I tried to cover up my pain with that smile.
Now: I've built my metabolic capacity, I got to the point of maintaining my
bodyweight on almost 2,800 calories and 360 grams of carbs per day. I’m
now cutting, 9 weeks out from my #ProDebut… but as soon as I walk off
the stage, I’ll begin #reversedieting again to build my metabolic capacity.
Food is not the enemy. And I wasted so many months thinking that it was...
when really, it’s the key to an amazing physique. The day I realized food is
fuel was the day everything changed for me. #EDsoldier
#TeamBrittanyDawn #Anorexia #InstagramFitness #Fitspiration
#FitnessMotivation #Bodybuilding.312

As I argued in the previous chapter, eating disorders are often based in a need for
control which is relieved by extreme body disciplining. Brittany Dawn used
‘fitness’ and bodybuilding to help overcome her eating disorder and her
problematic relationship with food, and she is certainly not alone within the fitness
community. Specifically, three out of the five fitness bloggers I studied had similar
stories of overcoming disordered eating or Anorexia/Bulimia.313 On September
2nd, 2014 Tanya Poppett wrote,

Let me take you back to early last year. My life was a constant battle
between binging and exercise, something I had struggled with since I was a
teenager. Obsessing about my weight, restricting calories and punishing
myself with exercise...All to achieve the “perfect” “healthy” body. Sounds
ridiculous doesn’t it… it is so easy to get caught up in the physical side of
health, but it is do important not to neglect the other truly important facets.
We all deserve to feel confident in our bodies. That is why being healthy is
as much about the emotional/mental journey as a physical one. Remember
to love, nourish, and respect your body and everything else will fall into
place.314

312 @brittanny_dawn_fitness. Posted on Instagram on July 30th, 2014. 1,713 Likes.
313 My very small sample size certainly does not prove that this is a common history for most fitness
bloggers, but it is certainly a recovery story that is present throughout the fitness community.
314 @tanyapoppett, posted to Instagram in 2014.
While Brittany Dawn centralizes her bodily changes in her story about her ability to transition from a disordered form of extreme body disciplining to a non-disordered form of bodily disciplining, Tanya centralizes her non-physical transition. Furthermore, Tanya recognizes the ways in which the discursive regime of healthism and postfeminist body politics affected her to the point of disordered eating.

The third fitness blogger with a similar story, Danielle, explained how the tyranny of thinness within the modeling industry drove her sickness and got in the way of her career goals. “I wasn't fueling my body right. We were measured daily at our castings and I felt the need to heavily restrict my diet to meet industry standards. Even if I wanted to be physically fit, my diet wouldn't allow me the energy and strength to do so. I was tired, my metabolism was sluggish, and I wasn’t happy. I remember being so excited to be confirmed for a fitness photoshoot and my frustration when I realized I was too weak to perform the exercises correctly.” She explained that through her fitness journey she learned that, “diet is such a huge factor in building strength, in having the energy and cognitive function to really take control of your fitness and build a body YOU want. To build self-love, self-confidence, and most importantly strength.”

Importantly, Danielle calls her ‘journey’ a “strength transformation” instead of a body transformation. The logics of aestheticized health are present within these discourses, as the lines between healing and enhancement from bodily disciplining through neoliberal technologies of self are blurred.

There are many important distinctions between the therapeutic technology

315 @dannbelle. Posted on Instagram November 8, 2018. 26, 842 likes.
Edmonds describes, plastic surgery, and the therapeutic technology at the center of my research, fitness regimens. Still, within the neoliberal logics of healthism, strength training, as a means of bodily transformation, is similarly presented as a therapeutic technology for the “suffering psyche.” Within the online industry, the suffering psyche is often presented as individuals who are tired of “dieting,” “working off the calories,” having low self-esteem, or having low energy. In many ways, the fitness industry utilizes neoliberal discourses of ‘aesthetic health’ and the ‘primacy of the desiring psyche as a political and economic entity,’ in order to normalize and legitimize extreme fitness regimes and calculated diet programs.

The beauty and fitness industry feed off each other in *Instagram’s* online marketplace of information. Both industries are thriving largely due to the efficacy of the celebrity-peer hybrids that market and promote their products. As I have shown, many of these fitness blogs are filled with same discursive logics of healthism and commodity feminism that for-profit companies have utilized for years. The parasocial bonds with the ability to greatly affect behaviors that are formed within social media, such as *Instagram*, are far stronger than the bonds formed by other forms of media, such as women’s magazines. Therefore, the discursive power of such logics may be increased. Surely, this shift in advertising ensured that the neoliberal politics of healthism are played out within the individual realms of subjectivities and corporealities. Still, the mere fact that these blogs are run by individuals, many of whom began their fitness journeys without any notion of it becoming their career, ensures that these discourses will be complicated or subverted by the many woman centralizing their own agency and subjectivities.

Edmonds’ case-study illuminates an ideal of a new utopianism, one in
which the constructed self, within an individualized, privatized, neoliberal society, can utilize medical technologies in order to increase social valuation and mobility that can rise above the bounds of past systems of social control. Edmonds and other scholars are working to “re-center agency and pleasure, embodiment, and intersectionality” within an understanding of “beauty as a disciplinary technology.” There is certainly more room for this kind of analysis within new media studies. The women that I studied all work within an industry that benefits from discriminatory corporeal politic that privileges certain bodies over others. They also work within an industry that utilizes the discourses of healthism and commodity feminism in order to increase profitability. While these women are complicit, they are also existing and working in a society that would render them aesthetically suffering and unhealthy if they didn’t engage in such self-disciplining. They all are working to financially benefit from an industry in which women are often underrepresented and underpaid. As Edmonds argues, ‘beauty is an unfair hierarchy that can disturb other unfair hierarchies;' and although these women are contributing to an industry and discourse that is in many ways problematic, they are also rendering themselves more powerful and privileged neoliberal body subjects in a sexist, body centrist society.

Conclusion

If neoliberalism makes us all ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs,’ then we must consider what such ‘entrepreneurship’ entails if the site for development is the body itself. This development warrants concern particularly in our late capitalist society as

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capitalist consumerism requires continual expansion, modification, and creation in order to function. The body is now the dominant site for expansion and production, and therefore, neoliberal body projects, aided by self-actualizing technologies, are expanding at staggering rates. This begs the questions: how much can we do to our bodies while still acknowledging and accommodating for the confines of bodily limits? How did this modern quest to ‘defy’ the materiality of our bodies\(^\text{318}\) come to be? What drives this defiance, and to what lengths must neoliberal body subjects go in order to truly ‘triumph’ over the body and all of the politics that accompany corporeality? Alongside an ever-growing interest in fitness and diet regimes, there is an expanding global market for bodily transformation in the form of plastic surgery and body modification. Globally, as people continue to push the boundaries of their bodies in such ways, we must continually re-examine our corporeal politics in order to determine how each new means of bodily disciplining is culturally constructed and positioned.

Crucially, feminist theorists researching forms of bodily disciplining must not further pathologize such disciplining nor attempt to make rigid distinctions between ‘pathologies’ and ‘normalized’ eating and exercising behaviors. Engaging in a productive critique of bodily disciplining requires a social constructivist framework that recognizes the formative power systems involved in such constructions. In so doing, the agentic and subversive power of the postmodern body as a site of transformation must not be denied. Emergent possibilities for bodily pleasure and embodiment within the realms of bodily disciplining must also be further examined within feminist academia.

I consider the fast-paced global expansion of bodily disciplining by means of social technologies to be a deeply impactful postmodern development. I am not interested in passing judgement on the individuals who chose to partake in ‘extreme’ or commercialized forms of body disciplining, as such a starting point is unproductive and largely problematic. Instead, I wish to better understand how the modern women discursively navigates the body as a political and increasingly public space and, in so doing, reacts and contributes to the ever-changing knowledge-power proliferated within such public communities. The political is always personal, but in this case, the ‘personal’ is the malleable body, with all of its potential and all of its vulnerabilities. With this in mind, we must engage in an analysis of body work that honors both the limitations and the demands of the physical body, as well as the endless possibilities for subject formation in the individual.

Both “pro-ana” and fitness blogs engage in a centralization of an ideal body type just as many forms of commercialized media have done over the past centuries and continue to do. Though somewhat different in the amount of musculature, the normative bodies present on both Tumblr and Instagram are largely the same in that they are ‘feminine’ in shape and without fat. This privileging of one body type is exclusionary and is a major driving force for continual body regulation and discipline. These online communities would be far less damaging if there was a more widespread acceptance of body diversity and the many ways of attaining or maintaining ‘health.’ Beyond the privileging of a single body type and beauty standard, there exists a postmodern shift towards an increased focus on ‘health’ and ‘lifestyle’ aesthetics. Feminist writer Virginia Postrel has termed this “aesthetic pluralism,” signaling a shift within the ideology of beauty that centralizes the
discursive “claims of pleasure and self-expression.”

The widespread use of photo-based social media has largely allowed for this ideological shift to take place. Not only do the “pro-ana” and fitness communities serve as a site for power-knowledge production, they also serve as a means of aesthetic subject formation, as women publicly display, and discursively reinforce their body disciplining as a means of attaining ‘health,’ ‘success,’ and ‘beauty.’

The postmodern body subject is not simply disciplined to ‘buy’ a particular kind of ‘beauty’ but rather to be a particular kind of ‘beauty’ by participating in a certain kind of consumption-based lifestyle and publicly broadcasting continual ‘transformations’ and bodily improvements. Not only is the disciplined body rendered cultural ‘capital,’ its ‘capital’ is best increased by public display, ideally for the purposes of ‘aesthetic entrepreneurship.’ The newfound ability for body-subjects to document and publicly display ‘lifestyle’ and their aestheticized bodies is largely allowing for the expansion and proliferation of ‘beauty’ as a disciplinary force. Online platforms like Tumblr and Instagram are increasingly allowing for habits and practices to be subsumed under the disciplinary forces of ‘healthism,’ postfeminism, and neoliberalism. Feminist theorists have recognized this shift as necessitating labor that goes beyond unpaid body and beauty labor. Increasingly, the postmodern body is disciplined to engage in what sociologist Elizabeth Wissinger termed “glamor labor,” or the “work on both body and image.”

The emergence of glamor labor complicates the third shift, making body and beauty labor that much more demanding and complex.

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On *Instagram* and *Tumblr*, where the body is the focus, glamor labor is incentivized and monetarily rewarded. Today, it is possible to achieve fame and fortune (more so on *Instagram* than on *Tumblr*) by means of a smartphone and an ‘ideally’ constructed body. What allows some young women with ideal bodies to succeed on social media (and others to falter) is the strength of the discursive strategies they employ. In other words, success is not simply reliant on displaying an ideal body, it is about what is said about the body that makes more of a difference. The bloggers I have researched continually spoke on current tensions in corporeal and feminist politics (though largely in more implicit terms). For example, Danielle Robertson, wrote the following caption under a full body ‘bikini picture,’ “I’m not actually posing, this is just how I have to stand whilst wearing this bikini top”\(^{321}\) (The bikini top is too small, and if she moved more, it may no longer cover her). In this post, Danielle is recognizing the negative political implications of posting a posed, full body picture on *Instagram*, especially as she has the ‘ideal body.’ In order to make her photo more ‘relatable,’ and more aligned with a feminist politic that attempts to de-centralized the normative body, Danielle is drawing attention away from her body and towards her consumerist choices. While not everyone can look like Danielle, people with the financial resources can purchase a similar top. It is important to consider who these discursive strategies are helping. In this case, (as is most often the case on *Instagram*) the discourse Danielle employed helped to maintain and attract followers. At the same time, it is important to recognize how such discourse benefits the fashion, beauty and diet industries. This complicated relationship must be further studied, as it represents a major trend in the burgeoning

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\(^{321}\) @dannibelle posted on *Instagram* on April 13, 2019. The post received 23,068 likes.
global body and beauty industries.

By working within neoliberal/postfeminist discursive frameworks, bloggers such as Danielle are able to present a narrative of bodily disciplining that could be read, and consumed, as ‘empowering,’ or ‘emancipatory.’ This individualized rhetoric of ‘empowerment’ holds a vast amount of normalizing and naturalizing power, largely due to its ability to neutralize tensions in feminist and bodily politics. Fitness bloggers on Instagram continually name the ‘empowering’ potential of the body projects they promote, as being capable of granting women success, happiness and self-confidence. Although these women continue to centralize their own ‘ideal’ bodies, they maintain that the body project itself will bring positive results, instead of the simply the attainment of this bodily ideal. While it can be considered encouraging that the discursive focus is on bodily action instead of bodily presentation, the overwhelming reality is that while action is being promoted by discourse, normative bodies are being promoted, more so, by imagery, which holds considerable power.

Within the “pro-ana” Tumblr community, this tension between a discursive focus on action, and an image-based centralization of normative corporeality, is not as uniformly widespread. The discursive strategies commonly utilized within “pro-ana” blogs are less informed by postfeminism/healthism, and more informed by neoliberal ‘ethics’ of morality and consumerism. The ‘ideal’ body is (commonly) unapologetically centralized through the means of both imagery and discourse. Instead of attempting to discursively normalize extreme body disciplining (and the attainment of the ‘ideal,’ thin body) with postfeminist logics of individual ‘empowerment,’ “pro-ana” bloggers (more often) attempt to do so by centralizing
notions of neoliberal ‘success.’

While postfeminism is still incredibly visible within the ‘pro-ana’ community, less discursive labor is performed to render extreme food restriction ‘feminist’ or ‘empowering’ (as ‘empowerment’ is understood within popular feminist politics). Instead, extreme food restriction is rendered a source of power, and is, in many ways, sanctified as a ‘righteous’ pursuit. As ‘sorrydondeserveit’ wrote, “I wish I was a skinny legend but I’m more like a flubber failure.”

Today the social constructions of ‘fasting saints’ haunts our modern-day social constructions of ‘skinny legends.’ A deep understanding of the ways in which anorexia is discursively ‘sanctified’ is necessary for an effective model of prevention and treatment.

As Bordo explains, “the psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations” must be recognized “as characteristic expressions of that culture, as the crystallization, indeed, of much that is wrong with it.” The discourse present within “pro-ana” and the actions of the bloggers themselves, partly can be understood as a crystallization of neoliberal ethics that idealize the slender body as ‘proof’ that the mind has triumphed over the body. Discourse within “pro-ana” can similarly be understood as the crystallization of the tensions between the incompatible “performance principle,” and the (advertiser driven) encouragement to “let go.” Maya Hornbacher spoke to this tension within her discussion of recovery in Wasted. Hornbacher writes,

It’s hard to understand… that “letting yourself go” could mean you have succeeded rather than failed. You eat your goddamn Cheerios and bicker with

322 “sorrydondeserveit” posted on Tumblr and received 593 notes before December 2018.
the bitch in your head who keeps telling you you’re fat and week: Shut up, you say, I’m busy...When she leaves you alone, there’s a silence and a solitude that will take some getting used to. You will miss her sometimes. Bear in mind she’s trying to kill you. Bear in mind you have a life to live.324

Modern bodily discourse has tied ‘success’ to extreme and consistent control. In order for there to be less disordered eating and body shame in our society, there needs to be more of a public embrace of this “letting go,” as well as a public acknowledgment of the dangers of internalized bodily discourses. Proliferation of more subversive content on social media platforms has the potential to inspire such a social embrace of “letting go.”

As Foucault argues, within discursive regimes, power is everywhere, and so too is potential for resistance. This potential for resistance is particularly strong within new media, photo-centric platforms. As bell hooks explains, “subversion of dominant cultural forms happens much more easily in the realm of text than in the world of human interaction,”325 and the pairing of images of individual body-subjects and their written reflections on their own subjectivities, is an incredibly powerful one. The potential for resistance through more inclusive representation and more inclusive discursive strategies is everywhere in Tumblr and Instagram. We must continually identify and name the problematic discursive strategies used to prop up exclusionary bodily imagery and ideologies, and, in doing so, encourage further proliferation of the subversive texts that already exist within these platforms.

With this discussion, I hope to contribute to the recently growing body and beauty studies theory by presenting an analysis of new media communities. These

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platforms allow us to better understand the intricacies of online bloggers' subjectivities as they navigate the body as a political space. Beauty and body studies are still fairly new, but so far, feminist theorists and scholars within the discipline have largely only focused on media as an important site within corporeal politics. New media platforms, such as social media, have been neglected in comparison. Arguably, new media narratives have been shunned within academia for more "developed," less fragmented narratives, thereby blocking out the voices of billions of people. Not only do these platforms give us access to information on people’s lived experiences as politized bodies within our patriarchal, neoliberal culture, they also exist as a space where people actively go to engage with politics of the body and the people concerned with shaping bodily disciplines. My research attempts to shine a light on the potential for new media to be a fruitful subject for the future development of body and beauty theory. Ultimately, this discussion has been fueled by my desire to present a more current analysis of a younger generation’s experience growing up in a culture in which their bodies are increasingly valued and disciplined in unique ways.
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