

A Mediated Me: An Autoethnographic Study of Self, Body and Media

By


Kristyll Jo-Ann Dellebuur
B.A. University of Victoria, 1997


A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS


In the Faculty of Human and Social Development

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard


Dr. M.L. Hoskins, Supervisor (School of Child and Youth Care)


Dr. D.G. Scott, Departmental Member (School of Child and Youth Care)


Dr. G. Hartrick, Outside Member (School of Nursing)


Dr. E.A. Marshall, External Examiner (Department of Educational Psychology and
Leadership Studies)

©Kristyll Jo-Ann Dellebuur, 2002
University of Victoria


All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, with the permission of the author.


ABSTRACT

Supervisor: Dr. Marie L. Hoskins

In this autoethnographic study, the metaphor of a river illustrates the media's impact on women's conceptions of their body/selves. Through documenting and analyzing her own experiences with media and academic discourses about body and self, the author illustrates the complexities inherent in these discourses. Stating that current language limits our abilities to conceptualize our bodies and selves in healthy ways, the author introduces the term body/self as a more encompassing descriptor of the experiences she explores in this text. The author's findings challenge her previously held belief that knowledge-based prevention programming for disordered eating can effectively protect adolescent girls and women from the patriarchal discourses of femininity that they are swimming in. She puts forth the idea that resistance to these discourses must be a community activity and encourages activities for adolescent girls and adult women that foster feelings of physical groundedness and embodied wholeness.

Examiners:


Dr. M.L. Hoskins, Supervisor (School of Child and Youth Care)


Dr. D.G. Scott, Departmental Member (School of Child and Youth Care)


Dr. G. Hartrick, Outside Member (School of Nursing)



Dr. E.A. Marshall, External Examiner (Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title page	i
Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Chapter One	
a) The Beginnings of a Question	1
i) Confessions of a Media Junkie	1
b) Research Journey	4
Chapter Two	
a) Drowning	17
i) A Map of the Journey	18
ii) Western Conceptions of Self: From Medieval Times to the 21 st Century	21
iii) The Scale	22
iv) The Embodied Self	28
v) Inviting the Terror to Live With Me	33
Chapter Three	
a) Floating	42
i) The Commodified Self	45
Chapter Four	
a) Swimming Upstream	49
i) That Body in the Mirror	49
ii) The Self as Multiple	55
iii) Choosing a Different Voice	61
iv) Self as an Active Meaning Making Process	64
v) Listening to the Noise	70
vi) What is Wrong With My Body the Way It Is (Part I)	76
vii) What is Wrong With My Body the Way It Is (Part II)	78
Chapter Five	
a) On Slippery Ground	83
i) Reminders	89
Bibliography	96
Appendix	101

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support provided by Dr. Marie Hoskins, Dr. Gwen Hartrick and Dr. Daniel Scott during the writing of this text. Their constructive and challenging feedback helped to make this document more relevant and personally meaningful than I ever imagined possible. Thank you.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the following people:

My parents, for their unending and unconditional support,
Gail Clement, for being my best friend and spiritual sister through all life's journeys,
and
Paul O'Connor, for his constructive feedback, his empathic understanding, and his
unconditional love offered during the writing of this thesis, and always.

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginnings of a Question

Confessions of a Media Junkie

I am a media junkie. Throughout the course of this research, the more I thought about how to study women's relationships to media, the more I became aware of how pervasive media is in my own life. I have realized how much I choose to bring media in, to consume it in great amounts, and consciously or not, to allow it to influence my life.

I get up in the morning and turn on the television news. I catch the visual images intermittently as I float in and out of the living room while I go through the motions of my morning routine. I hear the dialogue of the announcers, telling me of recent disasters, the denigration of our social programs, the traffic trouble spots and the hottest fashions for fall. It is part of the background noise of my morning. I start out my day jumping into the raging current of the media river without even really paying attention to being in the water. Sometimes when the river is swirling around me, I feel like I am drowning. At other times, when the river slows down, or when I surrender to the current, I am able to float in peace. Swimming upstream requires energy, persistence and a desire to move in a direction that differs from the flow of the river. And sometimes, when I can manage the strength, I can pull myself out of the water and find a place to rest on the embankment. Even from this place of safety though, I am cognizant that the river is never very far away, and that my experiences are still very much influenced by its flow.

I leave the house and get into my car. On goes the radio. Interspersed with the music, I hear the banter of popular culture: who married who over the weekend, what song will be number one this week, and which female singer has been voted best looking

in the most recent poll. Again, it is part of the background. I hear it, and yet I do not. It goes into my head, swims through my brain, distracts me from the situations I am anticipating at work, yet I do not give it a second thought as I pull into my parking spot and walk to my office. At some level though, I know that I carry it with me: I have internalized the messages I have heard. I hold them in my psyche, and in my body. Some of the messages, especially the ones about appropriate enactments of femininity, I wear visibly through my body without even thinking about it.

Generally, my days at work are media-free, at least in terms of direct contact with media. Sometimes, a child will come into the centre, carrying the latest toy from the most recent “must-see” movie for kids. I will talk with the child about why she wanted to have the toy, or whether she has seen the movie. For me, this is second hand media exposure. I believe that within the space of these conversations, I have the room to be more critical, more aware of how media is shaping our conversations, and thus our culture, than when I am listening to the radio in my car, unconscious of the media currents rushing over me.

I finish my workday and get back into my media-conveying car. The radio goes back on, and I submerge myself in more mindless chatter. I return to my house, and once again turn on the TV. Mid-afternoon programming is full of examples for my thesis, I tell myself self-righteously, not wanting to admit that I enjoy the “decompression” effect of staring mindlessly at the television. I watch for a while, again, not really watching, but absorbing, you can be sure. The TV generally remains on for at least four hours in the late afternoon and evening. I watch, I don’t watch but listen, or I leave the room completely, knowing that the presence is still there, and will still be there when I return.

It is a reassurance, and it is constancy. It is a dependable, stable presence. Media has become a constant for me in my ever-shifting post-modern world.

On a good day, I am critical of what I see and hear through media. I examine it through an analytic lens, trying to understand how what I am seeing and hearing is placing me in a dialogical relationship with media. I critically examine my media choices, and try to understand why I *cannot* watch certain representations of women because they offend me so deeply. If I were to be honest though, I would say that this critical consumption of media happens about thirty percent of the time. The other seventy percent involves the unconscious swallowing of media messages.

So how do I presume to study women's relationship to media, I ask myself. Who am I to try to understand how women engage in a relationship with media, and to learn more about why they (we) do it? How am I qualified to do this when a majority of my media consuming goes unnoticed, unrecognized and unexamined by myself?

I believe that my experience of media, and my ongoing media use is the precise reason that I am able to engage in this type of research on this topic. By studying my own experiences of media and gaining a deeper understanding of myself, I believe I am creating a research document that explores a cultural experience that is shared by many women. Through studying my own experiences of media I have been able to slow down the process of media consumption and examine it critically. By gaining a discerning understanding of how I engage in this relationship, and why I do it, I now have more conscious control over my choices to engage and disengage with media. I hope that I now have more power over how the engagement with media shapes my identities. I have become, at least, a media junkie with a conscious awareness.

Research Journey

My interest in the area of women's experiences of media developed through my personal and professional experiences within the disordered eating community. During the time I spent working as an outreach worker in the disordered eating community, I began to see many parallel experiences between my clients' and my own relationship to media. The adolescent women with whom I was working in the schools spoke candidly of the profound influence that media had on their developing senses of self. The adult women with whom I was working on an individual and group basis spoke of similar influences, citing the unrealistic images of women in the media as an ever-present pressure to be thin. These professional experiences encouraged me to reflect on the role that media played in the development and progression of my own experience of disordered eating and body image difficulties. I began to integrate these personal reflections and learnings from my clients into the workshops I was delivering on media literacy and eating disorders prevention. While I began to see immediate responses from the clients with whom I was using these personalized media literacy techniques, I wanted to pursue a more formal evaluation of the programs that the agency I worked for was offering. I wondered what it was about the programs, and the way we were working that clients were responding to. I also wondered what the long-term and short-term effects were of actively engaging with media messages in an attempt to deconstruct them and take their power away.

Most of the research on women's experience of media focuses on the relationship between media exposure and eating disorders symptomatology and body image dissatisfaction (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Jane, Hunter, & Lozzi, 1999; Lavine, Sweeney,

& Wagner, 1999; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Thornton & Maurice, 1997; Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999), the effects of teaching media literacy on attitudes and behaviours regarding body image/disordered eating and other risky behaviours (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Irving & Berel, 2001; McBrien, 1999; Rabak-Wagener, Eickhoff-Shemek, & Kelly-Vance, 1998) and the benefits of media literacy programs in general (Feuerstein, 1999; Luke, 1999; Singer & Singer, 1998). Further, research into the motivating factors for media consumption (Berel & Irving, 1998) and the mediating mechanisms between media exposure and disordered eating symptomatology (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999) has provided information on how different motivating factors for consuming media and individualized mediating factors can influence the effect of media consumption on disordered eating symptomatology.

Although this research has greatly increased the knowledge base about the effects of media on women's decisions in regard to body, and specifically on body image and disordered eating choices, little research has been conducted to investigate the process that women engage in their use of media, and the meaning that they make of media use in their lives. Further research is needed into how the internalization of media messages occurs and the effect this internalization has on vulnerability to disordered eating and body image disturbances. My research begins to explore this relationship between the internalization of media and vulnerability to disordered eating.

Over the years in my work, I began to develop two goals for my graduate research. First, I wanted to better understand my own experience of media and myself so that I could be a more reflective, self-aware practitioner and researcher. Second, I

wanted to better understand the process of engaging with media messages in order to create a research document that other women could see themselves in. I wanted to create a research document that spoke to readers' hearts, not just their heads (Bochner, 2000). My goal in writing an autoethnographic text is to produce a "story that moves (the reader), (her) heart and belly as well as (her) head; ... a story that doesn't just refer to subjective life, but instead acts it out in ways that show (the reader) what life feels like now and what it can mean" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271). I wanted to create a research document that engaged readers in their own process of self-reflection.

My journey through this research project has been cyclical. The process of coming to a question that was manageable and accurately reflected the focus on knowledge I wished to explore was a difficult one. During this period of researching, I spent much time journaling. I asked myself questions such as "What have I learned through my professional experiences?" "What is my current knowledge and understanding of the topic?" "What are my hunches about what the process of engaging with media involves?" and "What do I really want to learn through this process?" Once I decided that what I really wanted to understand was my own experience of interacting with media, I was more able to explore the types of methodologies that I might use to effectively explore my topic.

I continued reading about various methodologies and found myself drawn to narrative and ethnographic studies of cultural experiences. I was interested in reading studies that explored the participants' stories and placed them in a cultural context. I did not just want to know what the stories were, but what they meant to the participants and how they made sense of them in terms of the broader cultural context within which they

lived. I struggled to find a methodology that would allow me to meet both of my goals, allowing me to better understand myself and the cultural process with which I was engaging. I read a number of articles on autoethnography, and began to see the possibilities for exploring my topic in a manner that would allow me to actively engage in knowledge production both on a personal and theoretical level.

I believe that reality is socially constructed, and that we negotiate our meanings out of our experiences in culture. I also believe that language and images construct our experiences and environments and that social change is achieved through changes in the way we language our experiences.¹ For me, this means that culture is something that I take an active role in creating. I believe that the way in which I integrate and utilize cultural rules and symbols impacts how I think, feel and act. My research question “How does my experience of media influence my experience of body and my process of self-making?” explores the experience and meaning of living in a female body in a media-saturated culture that objectifies the female form. Autoethnography aims to explore what the experience being studied feels like and means within the culture that the researcher is living. Autoethnography provides an opportunity for researchers to explore their own significances and understandings of experience, and to situate them culturally. It allows the study of the specifics of one person’s meanings and experiences, and it explores the significance of those experiences within the larger culture.

¹ I use the term language to describe the ways in which I use verbal and written symbols to co-create my experiences. My ability to co-create an experience is limited by the language and vocabulary that is available to me in my culture.

Autoethnography is defined as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In autoethnographic research, the researcher focuses on her lived experience of culture. Through examining her behaviours, thoughts and beliefs about her self as she experiences them within the culture or cultural practice being studied, the researcher utilizes her self and self-reflective practices to present a cultural experience. She seeks to find resonance with readers in her description of this experience.

To gain a deeper understanding of the self-making process, I continually moved back and forth between the literature on self and identity, examining my own lived experiences of self-making, and critically reflecting on these experiences through the process of writing to further my understanding of my own process of self-making. Through immersing myself in the literature on self and identity, I gained a deeper understanding of the cultural discourses available to me about how selves are constructed, and how identities are negotiated. By critically reflecting on these academic discourses, I attempted to deconstruct the ideas and beliefs about self-making that dominate psychological and sociological discourses.

I examined my experiences of self-making in relation to the identity and self choices that are presented to women in the media against these academic discourses on self and identity. Through writing through these experiences, I attempted to uncover and explore the contradictions among and between these discourses, and gain a deeper appreciation for how the academic and popular discourses of self and identity shape my beliefs about my self. In order to gain a better understanding of the situated nature of my concept of self, I engaged in conversations with significant others in my life about my

experience of self-making in the middle of these discourses. These conversations provided me with another source of data in regard to my understanding of my self in relationship to others.

The analysis of autoethnographic texts occurs throughout the process of writing. It is not possible to separate the data collection from the application of method from the analysis of text: they occur simultaneously. My process of data collection involved exposing myself to media, and monitoring my thoughts, feelings and actions through writing field notes. I spent much of my time during this process writing through the experiences I was having during my interactions with media. I tried to stay grounded in the experience of reading magazines, watching television, and listening to the radio. I kept track of my feelings and thoughts during these interactions. I kept at the forefront my thoughts and feelings about my body, and my sense of myself as a woman. I questioned my own conceptions of femininity and female-ness against the scripted identities I was paying attention to in the media. I tried to live the contradictions presented to me in the media, to experience the confusion, and stay with the ambiguity.

For example, many of my narrative episodes involve my experiences of culture within the gym. To collect field notes which accurately captured my thoughts, actions and emotions within these experiences, I would mentally make note of what I was experiencing in the gym, and write field notes when I returned to my home. These field notes included descriptions of what I noticed about the environment that I was in, and how other people were behaving within the same environment. I compared my own reactions and experiences to the behaviours of others within the same environment.

From my field notes, I constructed narrative episodes that illustrate the dominant experiences of the media immersion process. Writing narrative episodes from my field notes involved shifting my relationship to the text. In my field notes, my experiences and emotions were the focus of my attention. In constructing narrative episodes, I shifted my position from that of participant of the culture to narrator of the cultural experience. I created texts that used my experiences as illustrations of the cultural rules that I was living within. I created texts that allow readers to enter into the experience being described, in order to understand it more fully. Essentially, the transformation of field notes to narrative episodes involved transforming notes about myself and my experiences into stories about culture.

These narrative episodes involve what Denzin (1989) terms thick descriptions in that they are “deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences” and “state the intentions and meanings that organize an action” (p. 83). This type of writing helps to uncover the meaning of the experiences of self-making in relation to the cultural discourses. It provides layers of understanding, encouraging readers to make sense of the text for themselves, and to find themselves reflected in the analysis presented by the researcher. Bochner (2000) states that the purpose of self-narratives is to “extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (p.270). He asserts that narratives are less theoretical and are more existential pieces, written in an attempt to understand the possibilities of meaning in the lived experience. My intent in the construction of the narrative episodes for this text was not to document the ‘facts’ of the experiences, but rather, through description, reflection and analysis, to

present ideas about what the experiences mean. My writing is greatly influenced by the belief that

(t)he study of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextual, constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another's life story, re-visioning their own, and arriving where they started, and knowing the place for the first time.

(Richardson, 2000, p. 158)

Any writing that I do is a partial representation of my self (selves). Nothing I write can represent me in my entirety because I believe that identity and self are transient, and transforming. This partiality reflects what other researchers have described as the challenge to the idea that any research can represent what in the positivist paradigm is understood as true reality:

as an interpretive disturbance to the promise of representation, post-structuralists read the absent against the present. Thus the ethnographic promise of a holistic account is betrayed by the slippage born from the partiality of language, of what cannot be said, and of the impossible difference within what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken and what remains. (Britzman, 2000, p. 27)

I have created a text that strives for verisimilitude² and voluptuous validity.³

Through staying present with my feelings and thoughts while engaged with media messages, I have been able to express my experience as it was felt in that moment. As an expression of lived experience and meaning, this text does not imply that the experience of another person, in a similar situation would be exactly the same; nor does it imply that my own experience in a similar situation would be exactly the same. It is an expression of an experience that must be contextualized, described thoroughly and descriptively so that readers may find it believable, authentic and possible (Ellis, 1999). My narratives explore one of the many possible responses to culture. Collectively, the stories in this text illustrate what is possible within the realm of our current existence in mediated cultures, and thus also illuminates more fully what feels impossible within our current experience. For example, when we are constantly exposed to images of women with unrealistically thin bodies and are told that these women represent female sexuality and sensuality, it becomes hard to imagine being female, sexual and sensual in a body that does not fit this prescribed ideal. My stories can help us, as women living in a mediated culture, to understand how we make the choices we make, and the meanings that we make of the

² Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that a text that seeks verisimilitude evokes in the reader a feeling that the experience is believable, possible and lifelike. Ellis (1999) identifies verisimilitude as a key measure of quality in autoethnographic research.

³ Lather (1993) uses the term voluptuous validity to describe a text that embodies a situated, partial, positioned, explicit tentativeness; constructs authority via practices of engagement and self-reflexivity, creates a questioning text that is bounded and unbounded, closed and opened; and brings ethics and epistemology together (p.686). Lather develops her criteria for voluptuous validity through an example of sociopoetic research. Sociopoetics, autoethnography and reflexive ethnography are considered alternate forms of qualitative inquiry and are often grouped together (i.e. Ellis and Bochner, 1996). Therefore, I assert that voluptuous validity may also be applied to autoethnographic research as a measure of quality.

experiences. These stories help us to understand how culture is created, lived and experienced. They help us to cope with the paradox of simultaneously living within the rules of and creating ourselves within culture:

We say that culture is humanly constructed and that there are many different cultures. We also say that we are constructed by culture; we express ourselves through the forms and conventions made available to us by our culture. Apparently, we construct cultures and we are constructed by them. We are the creators, and we are the victims. (Bochner, 2001, p. 136)

These stories provide us with full colour, multi-dimensional explorations of what life is and could be like. Through the narratives themselves, we can begin to engage with and understand the complexities of living in our current culture.

At times during the writing process, I would produce a text and then hope to be able to throw it out. I often felt the text would not be useful when I wrote it. I believed I merely needed to get it out on paper. I believed that those thoughts were blocking my ability to write. Despite my feelings to the contrary during the process of writing, each piece of text is an important part of the research journey. Some of these stories appear within the text of this thesis, and many do not. The narratives that do appear are narratives that are relevant to the topic of study and the themes that emerged. They each represent a sample of the stories that I live, tell and rewrite in my life. Realizing that each of these stories helps me come to a richer understanding of myself has helped me to see that one of the goals of my research is to narrate the stories that I tell about the many selves that make up my identities.

I believe that we live multiple self-stories simultaneously, and that we are constantly rewriting many of these stories at any moment in time. The stories we live and tell about our selves help us to create meaning for ourselves in our cultures, and are our attempts to make ourselves understood by others with whom we interact.

The story that I tell today creates the self I was in the past using today's language, today's biases, and today's ideas. It is no less valid than the story I told about myself one year ago, or ten years ago. It merely reflects my position now. The past and our recollection of it are always coloured by who we are right now, in this moment of telling, by what we are capable of remembering, and by what we want to remember.

The stories I tell in my research are just a sampling of the many stories that I tell and am told about my body and my self. They must be contextualized, placed within the larger narrative of this study, which aims to tell many stories. The weaving together of the stories attempts to show the relationships between the storylines. It is complex because it attempts to show the contradictions, the ambiguities and the difficulties inherent in choosing one-dimensional theories of body and self to understand women's relationships with their bodies.

In this study, I have told a story about my body and about myself. This story illuminates one of the most profound ruptures we can experience as women: the disconnection between our bodies and our selves. I have placed this story within the context of the multitudes of stories about body and self that surround me, both in academic literature and mass media. Writing my own story has created a path for me to have my own voice heard among the cacophony of other voices. Finding my voice within this story of my body and my self has been incredibly difficult, because it has

meant resisting the mass media's pressure to have my body speak for me. It has involved learning new ways to listen to my body and to put into words what in the past I have tried to say through bodily manipulation and re-creation. It has involved establishing a truthful reunion with my body and self, and a letting go of some of the desires to have my body be different. It has involved accepting that as long as I live in a culture that values women's bodies disproportionately to their minds and emotions, I am not going to resolve the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that I have with my body/self⁴.

It is my intent that the story in this text begins to shift that culture, even if only slightly. One of the most helpful supports I had in writing this text was finding other voices that spoke against the status quo and opened a small space to voice an alternate view. This text adds to the collection of voices that are trying to create a new culture through speaking new stories. Hearing the stories of experiences of culture allows us to engage in thinking about how we want culture to change. Hearing the stories as they are, in their raw painful reality, is the only way we can engage with them, let them go and

⁴ I use the term body/self as a temporary descriptor of my experiences of body and self. I continue to struggle to find words to describe this relationship of body and self in a way that accurately reflects my experiences. In previous drafts, I caught myself referring to my body as 'it', an object that could somehow be conceived of as separate from my self. At the same time, to write of my body as if it *is* my self negates the other aspects of self that contribute to my being. Even in this chapter, where I have attempted to describe the experience of body/self in an accurate and detailed manner, I have used language that objectifies my body/self. For example on page two, I describe how I have internalized media messages "in my psyche and my body," as if the two could be separated. Similarly, on page seven, I state that my research question helps me explore the experience of "living in a female body," as though my self has been placed inside the container of my body. On page thirteen, I discuss the stories I live about "my body and my self," as if I could separate the two and compartmentalize my experiences. As I write through this struggle, I find myself expressionless, searching to find the words that might allow me to think and feel differently about my body/self.

begin to write new stories about our body/selves. Stories that resonate. Stories that speak with new voices and challenge us to hear in new ways.

CHAPTER TWO

Drowning

The river rushes past me in a roaring torrent. I feel the grass, which is prickly and dry from the summer sun, on the back of my thighs. The ground that I am sitting on is hard, but it is solid. I feel somewhat safe here next to the river. When the summer breezes blow, I feel the spray of cool water that the river sprinkles over my body. It tempts me to move closer, to jump in and find solace from the heat in its cooling waters. This river compels me. I have walked the trail that runs alongside part of it many times. In some places it flows gently. In others, it rages ferociously. It trickles and it rushes. Through bringing water to communities of living things, it provides one of the necessities for life, and through drowning it has been known to take life away. It always shapes the landscape of which it is a part.

For the past few years, I have resisted the temptation to jump into the river. I kept myself near enough to the river to see how it was shaping the landscape, but far enough from its raging waters to protect myself from being swallowed up by it. I spent my time teaching others about the dangers of the river, and helping them to learn how to swim against its current. But that was in the past. This is my journey now.

Poised at the edge of the river, I feel my heart thumping in my chest. I feel the muscles in my legs begin to tremble, warning me of the danger that lies before me. “Where will the current take me?” I wonder. “How many rocks will my body smash against as I am propelled down the river?” I cross my arms over my chest and hug myself tightly, as if I am anticipating the pain. “Will I be able to swim at all, or will I succumb to

the power of the current?" As the question enters my consciousness, a shiver engulfs my body.

"This is my journey," I think to myself. "There is something to be learned from this river." Defiant, I strip off my tee shirt and shorts and leave my sandals by the shore. I walk to the rock ledge at my left and climb up to the edge. I take a deep breath, feeling my feet press deeply into the rock upon which I am standing. I savor my last moment of groundedness. Another deep breath, and with my left foot rising, I jump into the river. The journey begins.



A Map of the Journey

This process of examining self in relation to media explores only one aspect of self-making. Our experiences with media do not constitute our sense of self in its entirety. Our sense of self comes from a combination of influences such as peers, family, personal reflection, media and school among others. Media is so pervasive that it influences each of these other factors. It is important to understand the meaning of our interactions with media on the process of self-making.

I approach this topic of study with my multiple selves. I speak as a "woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experience, defined by overlapping variables" (Braidotti, 1993, p. 7). My selves, in their multiplicity, bring various voices to this text. As an academic, I yearn to create knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of media. As a professional, I bring similar motives to this research, although additionally in my professional life I am always looking for the practical approach, ideas and beliefs that I can utilize in my practice with

girls and women. As well, as a woman, I am deeply invested in this project. I spent many years struggling with disordered eating, and am driven to find a way to make sense of this relationship between selves, body and media. I bring these three selves to this text, and give voice to them here. Sometimes these voices agree with each other; many times they do not. This thesis is a sampling of these voices and their dance with each other through this research. It is through the harmonies and dissonances of these voices that I come to a greater understanding of my body, of my experience of media and of my self.

My narratives are presented under the headings of four thematic categories. To explain these categories and to illustrate the pervasiveness of media in our lives, I have used the metaphor of a river. The use of metaphors to explain concepts is powerful because metaphors make visual, through descriptive language, something that has formerly been conceived of in a theoretical manner. Following the initial construction of my narrative episodes, I participated in an art therapy workshop for graduate students who were in the process of writing a thesis. During this workshop, I was able to work with images instead of words, which helped me to think about my data and topic of study in new ways. The metaphor of a river emerged during this workshop. The river, with its powerful current, its force and its ability to be both enticing and dangerous, provided me with many ways to express my experiences with media. Within the river of media, I have discovered four possible experiences: drowning, floating, swimming upstream, and climbing out of the water and up the embankment. Each of these experiences is explored through the narratives I produced during my conscious immersion in media. Each explores some of the various possibilities available, and the contradictions inherent

within the ever-flowing current in the media river. Using the metaphor of a river as a framework for this text allowed me to further analyze and reconceptualize the episodes that I had constructed.

In using autoethnography to explore the process of self-making in a mediated culture, I found it important to understand how my previous exposure to ideas about the self impacted my research process. Recognizing that these historical discourses of self have been shaped and constructed within specific relations of power, they represent strong voices that have shaped our current ideas of self. Patriarchy, psychology and psychiatry, to name but three, have been and continue to be extremely forceful influences on our beliefs about the self in the twenty-first century. Thus, I begin my discussion with a brief overview of some of the historical discourses of self.

Being influenced by feminist poststructural theories, my analysis of self, body and media examines how “gendered identities and cultural forms are produced, reproduced and negotiated in specific historical contexts within specific and shifting forms of power relations” (Hollows, 2000, p. 27). In order to understand the discourses of self that are influencing my current experiences of self, I need to understand how the historical evolution of Western thought about the self is shaping the ideas that I am formulating about my own experience of self-making in our current culture. Most influential was the historical idea of the self as a unitary, cohesive entity. By understanding how this belief in the unitary, cohesive self shaped research and thinking about the process of self-making historically, I was able to more fully understand the importance of current self-theories that explore the multiple, ever shifting experience of self that characterizes post-modern experience.

Self-theories that are complementary to autoethnographic methods involve theories that explore the social situatedness of the self, self-making as a socially constituted process, and the cultural implications of power upon the self-making process. Autoethnographic methods recognize that one self is not representative of an entire culture, and thus part of the exploration is how the subjective experience of the author is reflective of a cultural meaning-making process. In order to understand theories of the self that explore the multi-vocal, shifting nature of the self, I believe it is useful to understand how thinking about the self has evolved historically.

Western Conceptions of Self: From Medieval Times to the 21st Century

While conceptions of self have shifted considerably over the past five centuries, the paramount changes in thinking have occurred during the past 150 years. In early Christian medieval times, the self was assumed to gain fulfillment through honor, love and religious faith, existing not outside one's role in society (Baumeister, 1987). From the Renaissance until the mid nineteenth century, the self was seen as an individual: a singular, well defined, unified and stable entity (Smith, 1993). At this time, it was presumed that the self came to know the world through reason (Smith, 1993), and secular images of self-fulfillment replaced religious ones (Baumeister, 1987).

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the growth of cities and an urban lifestyle, the increasing social interdependence of individuals came to be seen as a barrier to self-fulfillment. This gave rise to social movements such as transcendentalism, with an emphasis on removing oneself from society in the hopes of finding self-fulfillment (Baumeister, 1987). Simultaneously, the capitalist separation of

producer from product, and of producer from consumer led to a decrease in the self's fulfillment through work, and an increased emphasis on self-identification through leisure activities (Baumeister, 1987; Cushman, 1990).

Individuals living during the mid to late twentieth century and early twenty-first century experience daily life as characterized by an increasing number of self-defining processes; one's sense of self is no longer determined by church, state or class alone (Baumeister, 1987). This increase in self-defining choices, coupled with the increased use of self-made schemes of coherence to make sense of the ever increasing multiplicity of experience (Baumeister, 1987) makes self-making processes an ever present part of individual daily life.



The Scale

Location: The Weight Room at the University Gym

I roll from my back to my stomach and reach for my left foot behind me, as I bend my leg at the knee. As my hand grasps the top of my foot, I pull my toes toward the back of my thigh, feeling the stretch along the front of my leg. I take a deep breath and try to feel myself sink into my body. I relax the muscles in my neck and allow my forehead to rest on the large blue mat upon which I am laying. With my next breath, I become conscious of the odor of years of sweat that has been absorbed by this exercise mat. I release my left leg, and reach for my right. I repeat the stretch, and the deep breaths but this time I avoid putting my nose to the mat, in hopes of avoiding the stale smell of the other bodies that have gone before me.

I let go of my right leg and prop myself up on my elbows. I glance around the room, noticing how quiet it is for a Monday morning. Mondays are usually so busy at the

gym, with each of us promising to be healthier this week, and stick to our fitness routines. On the weight machines directly in front of me, there are a few people lifting weights. A couple of them are enrolled in a workshop that attracts mostly older people. I enjoy being at the gym during this workshop because most of the participants are not focusing on creating the perfect body. They are exercising for the joy of moving their bodies, and to maintain their good or improving health. One of the women in the workshop notices me on the mat and waves from a weight machine about thirty feet in front of me. I smile and wave back, remembering the conversation I had with her last week about her new puppy. I turn my attention to the bikes on my left, and see three women about my age peddling away and reading fashion magazines. It is almost an unspoken rule at this gym that you will read fashion magazines while you use the cardio machines. I look past the bikes to the row of stairclimbers and notice four women and two men, climbing away. They all have magazines in front of them. I shake my head, frustrated at the blind consumption of media messages that I am witness to and then remember that I too spent my thirty minutes on the bike this morning thumbing through an old issue of *Cosmopolitan*. Despite my disgust with the messages in these magazines, I find myself falling in line with the cultural rules of the gym, and am reading these magazines more and more. I shift my weight onto my elbows and pull my knees up under my stomach. I sit back on my heels, lifting my arms off the mat and move to a cross-legged posture. I lift my right arm across my body and push my forearm toward my body with my left hand. I feel the muscles in my shoulder warm and lengthen.

I look past all the cardio machines to the far corner of the gym. I see a woman, dressed in black spandex shorts and a long white t-shirt, standing by the scale. She walks

toward the scale. She steps on, and looks down at the digital display. She waits one or two seconds. She steps off, and walks toward the treadmill. She steps up on the treadmill and pushes the buttons to start the machine. She begins to jog.

I bring my attention back to my arm. I take a deep breath and stand up. Before I have time to really think about it, I decide to weigh myself. “What harm could it do?” I think to myself. I try to put out of my mind the memory of last night, of crying intensely while my partner held me, distraught over the current shape and size of my body. I try to forget my confession to him of wanting to find a way to sneak diet pills into my daily routine, in hopes of shedding this body that I did not feel was mine. I put aside the deep hurt I felt in recounting my experience of trying on wedding dresses the day before, and finding that nothing fit. “That was last night, this is today,” I assure myself, as I walk past the bikes, and then the stairclimbers and then the treadmills. I walk down the middle of the gym, down the space that separates the cardio and weight machines from the free weights. I also notice that at this moment, it is the line that separates the men from the women, as it is only men in the free weight section and only women on the cardio machines. I keep walking toward the scale, which is located in the free weight section. “It should be in the cardio area,” I think. “It is always the women using it anyway.” As I approach the scale, I feel my heart quickening in pace. My body seems to be getting physically bigger with each step closer to the scale. My palms feel clammy as I alternately squeeze and release my fists. I realize, when I am three steps away from the scale and breathing like I am beginning to choke, that it has been five years since I weighed myself. Five years. For five years I have not known the exact number of my weight. Of course, when I first stopped weighing myself, I still had a fairly good idea of

what that exact number was. I had fought very hard to keep that number the same for almost eight years (my fight was not successful, but I knew the range that I could stay within and still keep a semblance of sanity in my life – of course, at the time I was defining sanity within the parameters of my disordered eating behaviour.) As the years progressed, I became less and less conscious of that number, and it lost its importance in my life. What mattered was that I felt healthy. I even negotiated with my doctor to not know my weight when she did my annual physical. It was not something I wanted to focus on, I told her, and she agreed to my wishes. Now, after five years, I am going to have that number in my head again. Is this what I really want?

Two steps. One step. Oh my God, what am I doing? Here I am at the foot of the scale. I look to my right and notice two female staff behind the desk, talking and laughing. They are not looking at me. I turn my head further and look behind me. There are two men about twenty feet behind me. One is lying on a bench, lifting a heavy load above his chest, and the other is spotting him. They are not looking at me. I return my gaze to the scale and step up on the platform before I can change my mind. The black platform of the scale is about two feet by two feet. There is a rectangular shaped pole about six inches wide that rises from the platform, at the top of which is a digital display. Both of these are also black, with the numbers on the display being red. Someone, presumably a staff member has placed a white, computer-generated sign on the pole that reads “Weight in kilos. Multiply by 2.2 for pounds.”

It takes only a second or two for the scale to register my weight. (“My worth,” I think to myself and then try to shove that thought from my mind.) Suddenly, there in bright red digital display is the number I have had no conception of for years. Now, I

cannot not know it. My heart races as I step backwards off the scale. I turn to my right and walk past the desk where the staff members are standing. I smile, trying to hide the panic I am feeling about the number with which the scale has just provided me. I try to focus on walking, putting my left foot in front of my right as I walk back to the mat and sit down, cross-legged once again. The kilos seemed bad enough, and now as I convert the weight to pounds, I feel like I cannot take a breath. As I pull my left arm across the front of my body to stretch, I feel my breasts. Suddenly, they feel too large, too fatty, too much. I look down at my thighs and feel repulsed by their width and depth and how full they look in my red nylon shorts.

“I need to stop this!” I say aloud to myself, and quickly stand up. I realize what I have done to my psyche and to myself by weighing myself. I need to get out of the gym, and have a conversation with the healthier voice within me. It is the voice that helped me to change the patterns of my disordered eating into healthier lifestyle choices. It is the voice that accepts my body the way it is. (My body the way *it* is? In frustration, I realize that even when I am trying to reconnect to my body/self, I am limited by language that objectifies my body). I walk past the bikes, past the stairclimbers, past the treadmills, and the free weights. Past the desk, where the staff are still laughing. I smile and wave on my way past, hiding the pain of what just happened, because I feel that it is not safe to have this conversation here, in the culture that worships the fashion magazine and the scale. I walk up the stairs, through the turnstile and into the hallway. I turn left and follow the long cream-coloured tile floor through the sports complex, all the way to the front doors of the building, and step outside. Outside where I can breathe again.



For those of us without awareness of the power of the media, the opportunities to drown in its current are ever-present. Even with awareness, drowning in media messages is a common experience. Awareness of the power of the current can help us to avoid drowning some, but not all, of the time. During the process of data collection, when I found myself drowning in media messages, my writing was characterized by feelings expressed in words like swamped, immersed, hitting the breaking point, feeling crazy, feeling obsessed with my body, and snapping and cracking under the pressure. In these writings I saw myself being taken in by the media messages about self and body, and being swallowed up by them. I found that I was more likely to drown in the media messages when I was already feeling vulnerable. If I was tired or lethargic, or feeling like I was exhausted or out of shape, I was more likely to find myself being taken in by the messages, and feel unable to fight their influence.

This vulnerability is explored in the literature on disordered eating prevention as a discussion of the extent to which individuals internalize the messages promoted in the media about body, self and femininity. Citing various studies, Irving and Berel (2001) state “women with pre-existing body dissatisfaction or higher levels of internalization of socio-cultural attitudes, for example, are more likely to be negatively influenced by media” (p.110). Similarly, Thompson and Heinberg (1999) state that “a tendency to *internalize* media messages regarding ideals for attractiveness has been suggested as one potential mediator between exposure to the messages and the development of eating and shape-related disturbances” (p. 342, italics in original). When I am already feeling negatively about my body/self, media messages about who and what I should become have more impact. In order to successfully keep myself from drowning, I need to help

myself feel more positively about my body/self. The challenge becomes how to find the space to do this, outside of the influence of the ever-present media that relies on me to feel this way in order to sell products.



The Embodied Self

“A gendered self is a manifestation of the cultural construct that the self is located in a single, immutable physical referent that can be located in time and space” (O'Brien, 1999, p. 100).

Embodiment, and more specifically, gendered embodiment is a key aspect of the self-making process. While feminist poststructuralism focuses on the discourses which script appropriate enactments of gendered embodiment (Weedon, 1987), Rosalyn Diprose (1994) argues that

it is problematic... to hold that on the one hand sexed identity is embodied and socially constituted, but that on the other hand one can either abstract from this embodied identity to take the other's position or secure freedom by moving outside the social context of which one is an effect. (p. 20)

One does not choose the social consequence or perception of one's gendered embodiment. Even in the case of transgendered enactment, when a person is choosing to present a self that is the opposite gender from one's biological sex, the individual cannot control the social effect of that gender. As such, it is important to understand the role and impact of embodiment on self-concept and self-definition, specifically in regard to gendered interactions.

Given these ideas on gendered enactments and embodiment, I find myself curious about my usage of the terminology. Why do I use the term enactment in reference to

transgendered experience, and embodiment in reference to gendered experience? Is one acted while the other is bodied (lived in body)? Are not they both, to some extent, acts of the self within the body? Or is it on the body? Through the body? What paradigm does my language reflect? What am I saying here about gender and socially constructed enactment / embodiment of being? The dictionary definition of embody is “1. to invest or as with a body; put into visible or concrete form, 2. to collect into, or make part of an organized whole; incorporate” (Avis, 1989, p. 431), while the definition of enact is “2. to carry out in action; perform, 3. to represent in or as in a play, act the part of” (p. 434). In light of these definitions, I would argue that many women’s experiences of body are much more likely enactments as opposed to embodied actions. For many of us living in a media-saturated culture, our experiences of body are not part of the organized whole of our selves. Further, these bodily enactments become part of the gendered economy. When our own bodies become a tool that we use to enact gender-desirable behaviour we begin to think about our bodies as less integral to our holistic being and more as a tool that is used in the enactment of patriarchal discourse. This idea of body as a tool or object illustrates once again the difficulties in representing in our current language the complexity of the body/self relationship.

In a lecture given at the University of Victoria in 1995 entitled “The embodiment of gender: Why the non-verbal behaviours of men and women differ,” LaFrance explored the gender differences in facial expressions, particularly smiling behaviours. LaFrance states that girls who are assessed by authority figures as socially competent are more non-verbally expressive than girls who are not assessed as socially competent. In regard to boys, there was no relationship between assessment of social competence and non-verbal

expressivity (LaFrance, 1995). Further, jobs and careers that require high levels of expressivity, such as nursing, childcare, and service industry employment, have been predominantly staffed by females (LaFrance, 1995). Rules and practices of gendered embodiment reflect cultural discourses about power and status. Methodology that aims to understand the embodied self must be able to analyze and critique these enactments of cultural discourses because “the meanings ascribed to bodies are culturally produced, plural and ever changing. Moreover, these competing meanings are part of broader relations of power and have implications for both women and men” (Weedon, 1999, p. 102). Understanding the embodied self means understanding how the cultural rules about body are internalized, languaged and made visible through our bodily enactments of self.

In her article on the social construction of self and its implications for social change, Ferguson (1997) explores what she terms a social materialist theory of subjectivity. In regard to embodiment, she asserts “although human bodies have an individual existence, these bodies have self-understandings only as an effect of collective meanings commonly shared with others” (p.131). She argues that it is not possible to separate self-making and subjectivity from the body, and it is not possible to separate the body from its cultural meanings. This raises again the challenge to conceptualize one’s body/self in a healthy manner when the culture that one is immersed in constructs the body and self as separate, and in need of constant remaking.

In an article on gendered interactions in cyberspace, O’Brien (1999) explores the importance placed on embodied existence within interpersonal interaction, even in the absence of a physically present ‘Other’:

Whether someone is present or not, we conjure up and make sense of ourselves and others in terms of embodiment” and “even when the body is anchored elsewhere and unavailable as a source of symbolic cueing, central distinctions that reference the body as connected to self will still be evoked as the basis of meaningful communication. (p. 79 & 85)

We understand others and ourselves through embodied interaction and the rules that we use to understand our own and each other’s embodied selves are grounded in patriarchal discourse.

Finally, the embodied self must be explored through language that constitutes discourse to make explicit the links between the individual embodied self and the cultural meaning of gendered embodiment.

Writing her experiential history of the body, the autobiographical subject engages in a process of critical self-consciousness through which she comes to an awareness of the relationship of her specific body to the cultural “body” and to the body politic. That change in consciousness prompts cultural critique. (Smith, 1993, p. 131)

By using oneself as an access to cultural practices, autoethnography requires the researcher to explore the individual and communal meaning of embodied enactments of self.

My experience of my body/self is deeply tied to my experience of disordered eating. I have often felt more disconnected than connected to my body/self. It is almost paradoxical then to think about my body as a site of reconstruction and rebuilding of who I am, which is essentially what I spent years doing during my experience of disordered

eating. When I was experiencing disordered eating, my sense of my self was incredibly tied to my body. I don't think I had a sense of who I was without that being the integral component: the mental, spiritual, and relational dimensions of my self did not matter so much. It was my body that defined who I was for my self; the shape of my body, and the physical acceptability of my body as defined by cultural standards.

And yet, within this lies the paradox. In the literature on embodiment and disordered eating, researchers talk about the body being disconnected from the self, thus being the explanation as to how a person could do such damaging things to her body. While I believe that many women who have experienced disordered eating may find resonance in this literature and theory, this explanation makes less and less sense to me as I move further from my own experience of disordered eating. Disordered eating allowed me to disconnect from my body/self and to connect with my body in a way that left no room for anything else. Through disconnection from my body/self, I connected to my body by *becoming* my body. All that mattered was the physicality of my body and how it could be altered and presented. As I rewrite the story of my body/self, I reconnect to my body/self and learn to accept and appreciate my whole being and not objectified parts.

Again, the difficulty lies in the languaging of this experience. In previous drafts of this text, I experimented with phrases like "wearing my body" and "my body as part of the whole." Each of these phrases implicates me into dualistic thinking of body and self as separate, and of body as an objectified add-on. Being able to express my experiences of body/self as a harmonious joining of voices that cannot be separated helps me to conceptualize my body/self in a more accepting and healthful manner.

Understanding embodiment has become a key part of my study and exploring my own story of disordered eating as a means to understanding embodiment is a difficult and painful process. I find myself wanting to hide myself within the literature, behind the language and theories that explore embodiment in the abstract. Understanding my own embodiment feels like re-writing the story of my body upon my body. I am, through this process, wearing the story of my embodiment on the outside, in a way that publicly acknowledges the struggle and challenges me to rethink myself. It is terrifying.



Inviting the Terror to Live With Me

Location: Grassy Area Next to Outdoor Pool

I snap my bright red towel into the wind and place it gently on the grass about fifteen feet from the pool. The water sparkles in the sunshine, inviting me to take refuge from the warm air in its cool waters. I drop my textbooks to the ground on the left side of my towel, and put the fashion magazine I have been reading on the right. I lower myself to a sitting position. The bright sunshine forces me to squint my eyes, and I pull my sunglasses down from where they are resting in my hair to protect my eyes. Sitting on my towel, I look to my left and notice a woman laying on a lounge chair, relaxing in the sun. Her blue bikini contrasts against the deepening pigment of her exposed skin. Her face is turned away from me, leaving me to imagine the contented expression I assume she is wearing. She reminds me of the model on the cover of the fashion magazine that lies next to me on the grass. “What does that feel like?” I ask myself. “She is thin,” I notice. To me, she looks comfortable in her body. I do not ask her if she is. “She must be,” my inner critic tells me. “She must like her body, to lie there like that, in the sun, in a bikini.” What does that feel like? It is not how I feel now. I feel large. Heavy. Weighted down. I feel

unable to write, unable to produce anything from within this body. I feel too separate from the world, hidden behind these extra pounds. Too much flesh to be able to connect. I look down at my stomach, coloured and covered by the fabric of my one-piece bathing suit. I place my right hand on my stomach, and feel the roundness of my belly. I move my hand away, not wanting to touch the difference between my bikini-clad neighbour, the model in the magazine and myself.

I glance again at the magazine cover and fight the urge to pick it up. I know it will only make me feel worse. I pick up my textbook instead, and begin to read, but am soon distracted by my own thoughts. "I am lost in my own body," I think to myself. "My research question keeps slipping from my grasp." I feel stuck. Physically, mentally, and spiritually stuck.

For all I know this woman is stuck too. But she is thin. Not like me. I glance down at the whiteness of my thighs, which through the winter and spring have remained hidden from the sun until today. They look fleshy and loose. I wish they were small and tight. I glance to my left as I hear the woman stir. She is facing me now, but her eyes are shielded by her sunglasses. I cannot tell if she is looking at me. Suddenly, I become much more conscious of my size and how it differs from hers. I pull the towel up around me, as if to hide my body from her, or perhaps from myself.

I put down my book, and lift my water bottle to my lips. I take a sip of cool water. "My body, splayed here on this towel by the pool, must repulse her," I think to myself. She must wonder what kind of guts I have to put on a bathing suit (one piece, of course) and recline by the pool near to her perfect body. "It is not guts that I have," I tell myself. "It is that I pretend to live my life as though my body still exists the way it used to be.

The way I used to feel proud to wear a bathing suit, to relax on a towel, to not care who looked and who didn't. I feel it is what is expected of me, as 'recovered from disordered eating.' In truth, these days, there is not much about the way that I am feeling that feels recovered. I feel angry that the time that I felt happy in my body was such a short period in my life. Two years of feeling like that was not enough. I want it back. Now I feel desperate to get there." Without my conscious consent, my thoughts drift back to the old scripts, searching for ideas about how I can change my body.

"Slimfast." The thought jumps into my consciousness from the storylines of the past. "My partner is away next week. No one would know if I just did it for a week." I argue with myself about this almost constantly now. I know that I would know that I was doing it. Could I live with myself, or could I live the lie, only for a week? Just a few pounds. "Forget the Slimfast, I could just not eat while my partner is away." The old scripts are strong, and I have to fight to keep them down. I know myself. I know that after a few days of starving myself, inevitably there will be a midnight run to the corner store for three bags of chips and a bucket of ice cream and a chocolate cake, and what ever else I can think of to grab while I am there. I know that the clerk will know what I am doing. Who buys junk food for a party at midnight on a Tuesday? No, the clerk will know that it is for me. Perhaps she or he will feel sorry for me. Most likely the clerk will not care. I am sure those clerks see this sort of thing all the time from women like me.

I can play the whole scene out in my head. The euphoria, the power I feel from not eating for the first couple days. The lightheadedness. The forgetfulness. The numbness. And then, inevitably, the SNAP. The moment when I can take it no more, when I need to eat something, when I am damn sure it is not a carrot that I want. I am not

in myself at that moment. I am far away, lost in the fog of hungriness. I get lost in the crunchiness of the chips; the richness of the chocolate cake; the smoothness of the ice cream. I do not feel anything in that moment but the textures and flavours of the food.

In the end, all I feel is hurt. Like I have abused myself in the worst way I know how. And I know the only solution that I know how to use when I feel that broken will find me wandering to the bathroom to purge myself of my misery. I will reawaken from the fog, wipe the tears of exhaustion from my blood shot eyes, and stare long and hard at myself in the mirror. At that moment, in the depth of my eyes, I will see a glimmer of who I was. Who I am when I am not crazily obsessed with my body. That woman, that me, feels locked inside this crazy way of being in the world. She is small, and her voice is meek. But she is there. She knows what it is like to lay pool side in a bikini and not give a damn.

Drops of condensation from my water bottle fall onto my right thigh. The coolness of the water shocks me back to this moment, and I realize that I am slipping into the spiral of disordered eating. This immersion in media seems to be doing nothing but making me feel increasingly crazy by the moment. I realize just how close to the disordered eating behaviours I am coming again. I realize how much my thinking is being distorted, away from how I have structured my life in a healthy way, to a return to that thinking, almost obsessively about my body. Comparing my body to everyone else's. Believing that everyone is looking at my body in disgust, because it does not look like the bodies in the magazines. Wanting to do anything to change the body that I have into the body that I want, overnight. These things were not present before I started to read the

fashion magazines again. I was dealing with stress in different ways prior to immersing myself in the body-obsessed culture of the fashion magazine. Now I feel crazy again.

I find it difficult to stay in the space with the magazines and their messages because it goes against what I have taught myself in the past five years to stay healthy. I find I do not want to read them; I do not want to buy them because I know it is opening a Pandora's box for me. It has the potential to lead me into life choices I do not want to make anymore. And yet, I feel compelled to stay with the images, if only for a short time, to truly experience this immersion in media. This is what media does to me. It makes me obsessed about my body, obsessed with the size of my thighs, and the curve of my hips. It makes me loathe my body for what it is not: slim, petite, and disappearing. In these moment, I do not always feel that I have a choice. I do not feel like I am choosing to let media influence me. I feel powerless to resist. I place my right hand on top of the fashion magazine by my side. I cover the image of the model that taunts me. I want it to go away, to quit harassing me. I am scared about where I am headed.

I glance to my left once more. The woman is standing up and wrapping herself in a towel. She slips her left foot into her shoe, and then her right. She walks toward the door of the nearby building as she passes me. "I like your bathing suit," she comments. "Great colours." I smile. "Thanks." I pick up my textbook and begin again.



This study brought me to a place with my experience of disordered eating that I did not anticipate. Consciously immersing myself in media images, in the mass media discourse of body and dieting, I found myself living experiences from storylines from my past that I believed I had rewritten. I experienced being swept away by the current and

found myself too far out in the river of media messages: “not waving but drowning” (Smith, 1957, p.13) in the current that surrounded me.

I struggled with the decision to include the previous narrative. Within it, I engage with one of my voices and self-stories that I struggled for many years to hide. It is a voice that I still feel shame about. My self that wants to keep this secret private and hidden did not want to put this narrative in the text. However, I also believe that to omit it would be to remove an important piece of data from this study. It is a narrative that is still hard for me to read, but one that I believe illuminates the lived reality of struggling with self and body.

Despite feeling swamped and overwhelmed by the messages in the magazines, I found that writing helped me to work through some of these feelings. In most cases, by the end of a writing session, I found myself moving from being drowned by media messages to wanting to float for awhile. When I floated, I was not fighting the current, but was content to just flow along in the current. I believe this desire to float in the messages also came from a place of feeling exhausted. I have realized that it takes energy to resist the messages, and while I could often summon up the energy to prevent myself from drowning completely in the media messages, I could not always find the energy to actively resist what the media was telling me about my body. As such, I found myself writing through the exhaustion, and often coming to a place that found me content to keep my head above water, but not actively resisting the current.

The need to write through the experience of drowning is explored in the literature. Irving and Berel (2001) cite a study by Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo that found “viewers respond to controversial media with increased anger and hopelessness if not

given the opportunity to process the information afterwards” (p. 104). My experiences, coupled with this information from the literature, suggest that an important aspect of preventing disordered eating involves creating spaces (either public or private) for individuals to respond to and create meaning out of media messages and the process of internalization in which they are engaged.

When resistance is framed as an individual activity, the inability to resist the pressure of the media messages becomes equated by the drowning person as a personal failure. Conversely, if I view my ability (and inability) to resist the pull of media messages from within a systemic analysis of the patriarchal system within which I and the media exist, the inability to resist the current illustrates the struggle for one person to resist the institutionalized paradigm that continues to shape sexist culture. The media presents images of liberation, scripting women as strong and independent (as strength and independence are gained through the use of beauty and diet products). At the same time, these scripts of (quasi) liberation are juxtaposed alongside images of patriarchal femininity: the woman as passive, submissive and silent. It is through these contradictory images that women learn that when we are unable to resist the messages that the media presents to us about culturally desirable femininity, we are to blame ourselves for the lack of strength and independence we are told we should possess. Instead of reading the media messages as creations of the institutionalized sexism that holds as a basic principle that women are weak and passive, we blame ourselves.

Further, images of women that portray a sense of liberation, through creating pictures of strength and independence to counter the images of women as passive and silent can create a false sense of equality. When we, as consumers of these media images,

fail to experience this sense of liberation in our own lived experiences of sexism, self-blame is once again the result. As Hubler (2000) states in her discussion of the oversimplified stories of victory over sexism that are presented in literature aimed at adolescent girls, “while girls may be inspired by such novels, they may also be offered a false sense of optimism about how oppression might be overcome” (p. 86). The effectiveness of resistance as an individualized act, taken on in isolation comes into question. We need to look to further options for resistance.

In her article on educating toward resistance, Dorney (1995) identifies two types of resistance: “resistance for survival” and “resistance for liberation” (p.59). Resistance for survival involves individual action that has as its goal escape from a bad situation. For example, if I stop reading fashion magazines, I am engaging in resistance for survival, as I remove myself from an environment that puts my mental and physical health at risk. Resistance for liberation involves connecting with a larger community to find alternative ways to “critically interpret the larger world” and to counter the status quo (p. 59). If I quit reading fashion magazines, write letters to the publishers explaining why I am boycotting their products, and join a media literacy organization, I am engaging in resistance for liberation. Dinnerstein and Weitz (1994) also highlight the need for resistance to be a community activity:

Changing cultural standards of femininity will not be easy and we concur... that it would be a mistake to minimize the power that discourse on femininity has to regulate women’s lives” but the “history of women has taught us that, even in the face of seemingly implacable hegemonic discourses, women can make change when they join together. (p. 19)

In light of these ideas about resistance, and the importance of uniting with a community of peers to engage in healthy resistance that challenges the status quo, the experience of drowning in media (and feeling guilty for being unable to resist it) can be seen as a classic ‘blame the victim’ perspective. Without a community of support, resistance to media messages becomes a difficult, if not impossible task.



I flip my body over onto my back, and relax my neck muscles so that my head partially submerges. Water laps against my ears, causing a muffling of the sounds around me. The sun beats down onto my wet, exhausted body. “I have kept myself from drowning,” I think, victorious. “My journey must be coming to an end.” The current of the river is quiet here, but it continues to move my calmed body along its path. I am being pushed somewhere, a destination I have no knowledge of. I watch the clouds in the sky overhead. They are moving in one direction, and I am moving in the other. Staring at their movement across the sky gives me the illusion of speed. I feel my body warming in the afternoon sun. Soon, I will be ready to swim again. For now I am content to float.

CHAPTER THREE

Floating

Floating, as a thematic category, has emerged through the analysis of what I had not written. When I began to analyze my texts, I found that my field notes were sparse during the times I would characterize myself as floating in media messages. Instead of focusing on the individual voices of the mass media, I found myself so immersed in the discourses that the voices became indistinguishable. The chorus of voices surrounded me, shaped me, and pushed me along with the current, but I was not conscious of absorbing the individual messages. It felt harder to identify and critique any one voice within this cacophony because the chorus created such an overwhelmingly dense sound. When I was floating, I did not want to write. I did not want to acknowledge the power of the media, and how it was shaping my thinking. I wanted to be oblivious to the entire process. While I was drowning in media, I used writing about the experience as a lifeline, something that could hold me to the ground and keep me from being swamped completely. While I was floating in media messages (as I believe I do most of the time), I was not resisting the current, nor was I drowning in it. It felt like a normal state of being, neutral in a way. I found it most difficult to examine my experiences in these moments because they exemplified the everyday. There was little that made them stand out as worthy of examination. In the process of analysis, I have realized that this is a key finding in terms of prevention. Part of the argument we, as prevention workers, encounter in trying to do prevention of eating disorders by using media literacy education is that media in general is innocuous and is not perceived to be shaping our thinking. In the everyday lived experience of “floating,” it is difficult to appreciate the extent to

which these messages are shaping how we think about ourselves and who we are becoming.

There is an abundance of literature that highlights the influence of media messages on women's choices about their bodies. College women have reported greater pressure to be thin coming from media than from other socializing agents, such as parents or peers (Berel and Irving, 1998). Harrison and Cantor (1997) and Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw and Stein (1994) found that media consumption of images that promoted or depicted thinness significantly predicted women's eating disorder symptomatology. Thornton and Maurice (1997) found that female participants exposed to six minutes and forty seconds of images of fashion models experiences decreased self-esteem, heightened self-consciousness, physique anxiety and body dissatisfaction. Importantly, participants with low adherence to the thin ideal as attractive were not immune to the impact of images and Thornton and Maurice assert that extended or repeated comparisons with a thin ideal may result in the internalization of this ideal and increase the potential for disordered eating behaviours. Myers and Biocca (1992) found that as little as thirty minutes of exposure to media had an impact on women's feelings about their bodies. Surprisingly, participants in this study reported an increased acceptance of body and self immediately following exposure to the body image advertisements, leading authors to surmise that participants were identifying with the possibility of becoming the ideal. This finding reinforces the need for research into how the internalization of media messages occurs.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the influence of thinness-promoting media images on body image and health choices is cross-cultural. Prior to 1995 Fiji was a

country without television. By 1998, the impact of western media on women's beliefs about their bodies was evident. Researchers found that three times as many seventeen-year-old females reported vomiting to control their weight in 1998 than did in 1995. Additionally, "the proportion of schoolgirls who scored high on a test indicating risk for disordered eating was 29 percent in 1998 and 13 percent in 1995" (Harvard Medical School Office of Public Affairs, 1999, para. 5). These findings leave little room to question the profound impact that media images have on our body/selves.

Given the established relationship between thinness-promoting media and disordered eating and body image disturbances, the experience of floating in media must be examined critically. The exposure to media messages that occurs in the everyday experience of floating shapes how we think, feel about, and act toward our bodies.

The relationship between the commodified self and the embodied self is key to understanding the process of self-making in a mediated culture. The commodification of the self has fascinated me since I began my recovery process. I found comfort in the literature that explored my disordered eating as a response to the cultural process of selling and buying identities through product use and image creation. These theories helped me to feel less guilty, less crazy for living my life through disordered eating. While my years in recovery have helped me to explore the multiple meanings I made of my relationship to food and my body/self during my experience of disordered eating, the idea of a commodified self continues to be the strongest influence shaping my thoughts. In seeing the contradiction between my known commodified self and the psychological literature that suggests that an important aspect of recovery is healthy self-evaluation, and a lessened importance of outside evaluation, I find myself caught in the paradox of self-

hood. The media convinces us that the only way to find a self is to buy one, while the psychological literature assures us that all we need for healthy self-hood can already be found within our own skin. When my experience within my own skin is a disembodied one, how can I come to experience myself as anything but a commodified object?

The difference between embodied actions and bodily enactments is integral to this discussion. If we posit disordered eating as a bodily enactment of the cultural rules that are presented to us through the media about women's bodies, it becomes apparent that it is a difficult task for women to be truly embodied while living in a mediated culture. Further, I would argue that this distance that we are compelled to put between our bodies and our selves distinguishes bodily enactments from embodied action, and enables us to be commodified and to view ourselves as objects to be created and re-created, bought and sold. The literature on the commodification of self that is presented in the next section explores the complex relationship between bodies and selves that are marketed as and perceived of as objects and products.

The Commodified Self

In terms of media representations of selves and identities, it would seem that no longer are we assumed to be individual, coherent selves looking for products to fulfill certain material needs: rather, the selling of products has become secondary to the selling of identities in the marketplace. Self has become a hot commodity, and advertisers have learned that in today's market, to sell a product you must also sell a desirable identity which will be acquired through use of the product. As Altheide (2000) notes "the mass

media promote identity as a resource to satisfy individually oriented needs and interests to “be whomever you want” (p. 12).

Similarly, Cushman (1990) speaks of the empty self; empty in part because of lost familial ties, a weakened sense of community and a loss of cultural traditions, and waiting to be filled up through consumption of goods proffered by the media. According to the mass media and popular culture, he asserts, the answer to the emptiness is to be found in the consumption of food, goods, experiences and therapy (p. 600).

The gendered commodification of self is evidenced in the literature as well. As mentioned earlier, LaFrance (1995) noted the differences in levels of expressivity between men and women. Women occupying jobs in which facial and vocal expressivity and sensitivity are emphasized, such as nursing, childcare and retail sales engage in what Hochschild (1983) terms “emotional labour” (p.165). In the same way that the embodied self becomes commodified as a tool for labour, the emotional self becomes less of an entity for one’s own enjoyment and more a tool to satisfy the needs of others.

Likewise, Weedon (1987) notes the media construction of a gendered-self-for-sale when she writes

gendered subject positions are constituted in various ways by images of how one is expected to look and behave, by rules of behaviour to which one should conform, reinforced by approval or punishment, through particular definitions of pleasure which are offered as natural and imply ways of being a girl or woman and by the absence within particular discourses of any possibility of negotiating the nature of femininity and masculinity. (p. 99)

Indeed, the popular media presents us with possible selves predominantly within the discourse of patriarchy, which scripts femininity in such a way that women's choices are limited, and women's identities are constructed primarily for the pleasure and benefit of men.

Similarly, Ouellette (1999) explores the selling of the "Cosmo girl" identity through the mass media. In order to define her identity, the Cosmo girl was instructed to use sex to secure economic and social wealth and freedom, which could only be attained through entering into a heterosexual relationship with a man who already possessed these things. Purchasing the appropriate "props" (i.e. cosmetics, jewelry, clothing) that were advertised in the magazine was a necessary part of the self-making process:

"Expenditures on clothing, cosmetics and accessories were presented as necessary investments in the construction of a desirable (and thus saleable) self" (p. 366). The multiplicity of self was emphasized in Cosmo, but only for purposes of remaking oneself into a more desirable woman, for the sole purpose of meeting and securing relationships with men (p. 366). Thus multiplicity, a concept that could be used to help young women resist the hegemonic discourse of body and self, becomes commodified and used as a tool not only to support the discourses of body reconstruction, but to encourage consumption as well.

Because we know that adolescents often use media as a resource for identity options (Arnette, 1995), we must critically examine what options are presented to them. Much research indicates that while young women are aware that they are being sold a construction of femininity in order to sell products and the diet industry's messages, many feel that there is not another choice for them. In her qualitative study on the

meaning that young women make of images of beauty in magazines, Milkie (1999) found that a great majority of the white girls in the study compared themselves to the images in the magazines. Despite feeling negatively in relation to the perceived ideal, they felt “it difficult to opt out of such a comparison” (p.196). Conversely, because black girls Milkie interviewed did not view the most often white models as ideals for themselves, they more easily rejected the images as something to compare themselves with and strive for. They also stated that they found it easier to reject the images as ideal because they did not believe that those people with whom they would wish to be in relationships with (i.e. black males) valued this white ideal. White girls stated that they believed others valued the ideal, and thus felt compelled to strive toward it (Milkie, 1999).

Advertisers have commodified the tensions inherent in self-making as a way to market products. As multiplicity allows us to see the self as a site of constant re-creation, media creates a panacea for the uncertainty and instability we inevitably feel in the process of self-making. If we view our selves and our bodies as products to be created and re-created, fashion magazines and media scripts about women become instruction manuals for patriarchal femininity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Swimming Upstream

That Body in the Mirror

Location: The Living Room of an Urban Apartment

I flop down onto the big sage green couch that fills one side of the living room. Beside me on the couch is a stack of books about self and identity. In front of me, strewn across the coffee table are the fashion magazines that I have been reading during the process of data collection. I grimace at the magazines, hoping they can feel the anger and frustration toward my body that reading them has produced. I hate what this project is doing to my psyche. I feel like my entire life has become about my experience of body again. Except, because of my education and my experience with recovery, it feels very different. I feel guiltier. I feel more loathing toward myself when I utter comments like “I wish I were thinner.” I feel that loathing now, as I sit here trying to decide which voice I will engage with this morning: the voice that understands the world through academic literature, or the voice that reads fashion magazines. Sometimes, these voices are harmonious. Today, they feel very discordant.

I turn to my left and pick up Weedon’s (1987) book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. I flip to my bookmark and stare at the page. I am not sure I have made the right choice about which voice to pay attention to. The text seems too dense, too theoretical for me to take in this morning. I reach for my notebook, so that I can make notes as I read along. Hopefully that will help me take in the information. I continue reading from the paragraph I read last night.

We may embrace these ways of being, these subject positions wholeheartedly, we may reject them outright or we may offer resistance while complying to the letter with what is expected of us. Yet even when we resist a particular subject position and the mode of subjectivity which it brings with it, we do so from the position of an alternative social definition of femininity. In patriarchal societies we cannot escape the implications of femininity. Everything we do signifies compliance or resistance to dominant norms of what it is to be a woman. (Weedon, 1987, p. 86-87)

“Hmm” I murmur and rub my hand absent-mindedly up and down the thigh of my athletic pants. I move my hand to my notebook, pick up my pen and write: *Weedon’s discussion about the social negotiation of femininity reminds me of the different ways I define myself in different contexts. For example, at work I am conscious of presenting myself as an academic and a professional, and I act in a way that is congruent with my persona as a feminist, and as someone who fights against the objectification of women’s bodies.* I re-read what I have written and laugh, thinking about the new t-shirts that I bought for an up-coming camping trip. I bought them because they made me feel sexy and because I liked the way they made my breasts look. I bought them because I know my body will attract the male gaze when I am wearing them. The contradiction between my “t-shirt self” and my academic self glares out at me from the page of my notebook. I decide to ignore the contradiction for the moment and return to Weedon’s book.

Our sense of ourselves and of our femininity may be at times contradictory and precarious but only a conscious awareness of the contradictory nature of subjectivity can introduce the possibility of political choice between

modes of femininity in different situations and between the discourses in which they have their meaning. (Weedon, 1987, p. 87)

I put the textbook and my notebook down on the couch, and reach in front of me to the coffee table for my glass of water. My gaze lands on the headline of the magazine on the top of the pile. I take a sip of water and read the headline on the cover of Ladies Home Journal: "Are your friends making you fat?" (Kornreich, 2001). "Ugh," I mumble to myself and push the magazine aside. "Does your size matter to men?" screams out at me from the Marie Claire magazine (Miller, 2001a). I flip it open and begin thumbing through the pages as I sip my water. Page after page after page of what might as well be the same severely underweight woman bombards me. Page 102. "Would you rather lose 10 lbs or win \$10 000?" (Miller, 2001b) "Is that even a choice?" I ask aloud, and then wonder which one I would really choose if given the choice. I flip a few more pages. Suddenly, I am confronted with a two-page spread of a woman's panty-clad buttocks. The text written across her bottom reads "The bottom line on women's bodies now. If your bottom is bigger than this, you might not fit comfortably in an economy airline seat. Sit on this picture to find out" (Ives, 2001, p. 110-111). I resist the urge to plunk my behind on this magazine photo, and push down the fear that my bottom is bigger than the image shown. I close the magazine and toss it back on the coffee table. "What a load of garbage!" I think to myself and wander down the hall to the bedroom. I glance in the mirror and recognize the signs of too much researching: dirty hair, no make-up and glasses firmly planted on my nose. I pick up my jeans and t-shirt and head back down the hallway to the bathroom for a shower. I enter the bathroom and turn on the lights and the fan. I pull off my sweater over my head, and drop it on the floor. My pale skin

reflects back at me from the mirror. I remove my sweatpants and stop for a moment to examine my body in the mirror. My upper lip rises on the left side in disgust at what I see reflected back at me. I examine myself from the front, deciding my hips are still too wide. ("Too wide for what?" I wonder.) I turn to the left one-quarter turn and place my hand on the curve of my stomach, as if by covering it up, I can make it disappear. I turn another quarter turn and glance over my shoulder to see the reflection of my backside in the mirror. "Ugh," I mutter to myself once more, realizing just how far my body strays from the idealized bodies in the magazines that clutter my coffee table. I shrug my shoulders, trying to convince myself that I do not care about my body and how it betrays me, but I feel less confident and content with every glance in the mirror. Even my language in this moment reflects my objectification of my body: "it betrays me," as if by existing in this current physical form, my body is separated from who I believe myself to be. This reflection of my body/self is not as I wish it to be: in the moment the only way to cope with this disparity is by conceptualizing my body as an object.

I turn on the water in the shower and adjust the temperature. I pull back the curtain and step over the edge of the tub into the spray of the warm water. I try to make my body feel whole again, realizing how my examination of my body parts just moments ago has dampened my mood. "I am so much more affected by the images in the magazines these days," I think to myself. "Why can't I just hold it all at arm's length, and keep it from affecting me?" I know the images in the magazines are constructed, that they are there to make me want to change my body and yet, I still take it in. I still feel awful about my body. I still compare myself to those images. I still get up every morning, and look at myself naked in the mirror, first from the front, then from the back, and then

sideways, sucking in my stomach, looking for signs of shrinking, of becoming less, of taking up less space. I want so much to be smaller these days, to fit into the ideal proffered by the magazines, and to command the attention that these women are getting. This desire to be smaller also serves another purpose in that at the same time that I crave the gaze of others, I desire to fade into the background, to be like everyone else, so that my body does not make me feel like I am positioned outside of desirable femininity. It is one of the many contradictions that complicate my sense of self.

I lift the shampoo bottle from the edge of the tub, and pour the shampoo into my left hand. It smells sweet, like flowers and honey. I rub my hands together and then move my hands into my hair. I scrub my scalp hard, as if by scrubbing I could wash away the dirt that has been deposited on my brain from reading fashion magazines. The dirt that helps me to hate my body. This dirt makes me value my knowledge less and my body more. This dirt makes me want to spend more time at the gym, less time eating, and more time focused on finding lower-fat recipes than on academic pursuits. It is hard for me to tell whether this is a result of my current exposure to media messages, or a throwback to my methods of dealing with stress during my experience of disordered eating. I am finding this experience of thesis writing incredibly stressful, and in periods of high stress, I find myself reliving the stories of disordered eating from my past much more than when I am feeling competent and relaxed. Is my current obsession with body, food and weight loss a reaction to the stress that I am experiencing as a result of this thesis writing process? Is it a result of the topic that I have chosen to explore? My hunch is that it is a combination of the two. I believe that if I were exploring another topic for my thesis, that my disordered eating as a coping strategy may still have emerged but with

less intensity. Because I am stressed out by this process, and surrounded by images and texts that remind me that the way to feel in control of one's life is to exercise extreme regulation over one's body and food intake, I believe I am more compelled to return to disordered eating behaviours and mind-sets. Everything around me is telling me that disordered eating as a coping mechanism is normal. In fact, it is the female-thing to do!

During other periods of high stress, when I have found myself drawn back into disordered eating behaviours, I ensured that I was involved in a community of people who reminded me of other ways to manage the stress. I re-read books and my recovery journals which reminded me that this was a temporary, if difficult part of the journey, and that there were active methods I could engage in which would help me to emerge on the other side.

Now what I read is fashion magazines, which remind me that to be truly sexy to my partner, I must be thin. They remind me of the five most effective exercises to a sexy, toned back, for this season's backless tops and dresses. They remind me that it is okay to eat high calorie snacks like ice cream and chocolate, but only if I am prepared to go to extensive measures to ensure that I do not gain any weight as a result (extensive measures means excessive exercise, or other forms of purging that are not explicitly advocated by the magazines, but presented in such a way in articles on eating disorders that they might as well be a "how-to guide" to bulimia and anorexia). I need to find a way to make sense of this experience for myself in a way that honors my sense of my self and my embodied reality.

I rinse the shampoo from my hair. I turn off the water and pull back the curtain. The air feels cool against my wet skin after the warmth of the shower spray. I reach for

my towel and begin to dry myself off. I step out of the shower and in front of the mirror. I glance at the reflection, then look away and pick up my clothes. “Ignoring my body isn’t the answer either,” I think, but I do not know what else to do in this moment. I walk out of the bathroom, turning off the light as I go, and knowing the mirror will still be there when I return.



The Self as Multiple

The desire to retain traditional ideas of the self as unified, stable and coherent, even in the face of the everyday lived multiplicity of experience, is expressed by a number of authors (Arvay, Banister, Hoskins & Snell, 1999; Gergen, 2000; O'Brien, 1999). This desire to conceptualize the self as core, stable and univocal is deeply embedded in the empiricist roots of psychology: to begin to study the self as multi-vocal, shifting, and emergent requires new approaches in self-study, and methods and vocabularies which take into account the multiple discourses within which the self is constituted. It also requires us to language our experiences differently. In speaking of my experiences of body and self, I found myself caught in a double-bind: I could either speak of my body as an object, an add-on to my self, or I could speak of my body *as* my self. The latter option feels too close to the experiences of disordered eating wherein my body became my self at the exclusion of other aspects, while the former option reinforces the distanced, objectified relationship with body that media promotes to women. Without new languaging, I feel unable to conceptualize my experience of body/self without implicating myself into one of these two paradigms.

The self as multiple has often been pathologized as indicative of mental disease or dysfunction. To counter this thinking, O'Brien (1999) advocates viewing the self as the

“master consciousness that sorts and organizes our experiences, including various multiple self performances” (p. 82). I find this languaging appealing, yet still problematic in that it describes the self as capable of multiple self performances, but ultimately, still unitary. Weedon (1987) challenges the status quo of self theories by exploring the difficulties inherent in the cultural belief that “as rational individuals we should be non-contradictory and in control of the meaning of our lives” (p. 80). How do we begin to make sense of our lives when we come to the realization that we are contradictory, multiple and less in control of the meaning of our lives than we learned that we should be? Methodology that explores the self must explore how we experience these contradictions and multiplicities within ourselves without slipping into constant experiences of incoherence and instability.

Gergen (2000) explores how the self begins to make sense of multiplicity. In this discussion, Gergen utilizes the concept of stages / phases, but includes the caveat that this is for purposes of the discussion only, and does not imply a developmental progression. During the first stage, which he terms “strategic manipulator” (p.147), the individual believes the multiplicity she experiences in her life is essentially her ‘self’ playing roles, but that there is still a ‘true’ self to which the roles can be compared. “The sense of self as strategic manipulator derives then from the modernist context, in which real, authentic selves existed - or should exist - and to act in any other way was a form of forgery or deceit” (p. 150). As the self begins to explore the multiple nature of reality, the “pastiche personality” emerges: “The pastiche personality is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation” (p.150). As one accepts the

truly multiple nature of the self and reality, one experiences the stage that Gergen calls “the relational self” (p. 157). Living as the relational self, one realizes that “one has an identity only because it is permitted by the social rituals of which one is part; one is allowed to be a certain kind of person because this sort of person is essential to the broader games of society” (p. 157).

This concept of the self as socially constructed and permitted has vast implications for research on the self in relation to media. If media promotes identities and selves that benefit the broader games of society (i.e. patriarchy and capitalism), what self-choices do women have outside of these scripts written for them (upon them)? When our dominant self-choices are written by patriarchy and transmitted by media, where can we look for alternative ways of being that are valid and valued in our culture? I have struggled with what it means to be multiple. What does it feel like, and how it is negotiated? What spaces does it open up, in terms of self and identity possibilities, and what challenges does it bring? The tensions that exist within multiplicity are complex and many. Multiplicity allows us to be contradictory as well as congruous. It allows us to think of ourselves as emerging, changing beings. It allows us to speak, write and live with multiple voices, thereby opening up the possibilities for multiple life experiences. Multiplicity challenges us to remain in ambiguity, and resists our quests for clarity about who we truly are. It challenges us to continually re-create ourselves, and to spend time focused on the process of self-making. It allows us to be multiple and it challenges us to be so. This idea is made tangible in the following example.

I believe that my identity within the disordered eating community is as someone who recovered from disordered eating. I have taken stances that others see as very

political, anti-dieting and critical of media representations of women. I hold this contradiction against the more private version of my recovered self. This version still gets enticed by the diet ads, still watches the messages and wonders if perhaps, this diet would be the one that could work. Within this more private identity, my journey with disordered eating still feels like very slippery terrain.

The more private version of this identity feels very constrained by forces that are outside of me, and I do not feel I have many choices that would help alleviate the tension between the two. Part of what constrains me is the shame that continues to be attached to the experience of disordered eating in our culture. I have lived the meaning of 'recovered' and it feels very different than being scripted as someone who is actively 'struggling with disordered eating,' because disordered eating is still incredibly pathologized in our culture, instead of being seen as a logical expression of how most women feel about their bodies.

These two contradictions live side-by-side within my identity as someone who is 'recovered.' How do I know which one is the 'real me?' I do not believe there is a 'real me' to be uncovered. I do not feel any less 'real' when I am speaking publicly about the dangers of dieting than I do when I am reading a fashion magazine article on the latest fad diet. They are different voices of the same body/self. I do not feel any less authentic.

As I continue to struggle for meaning in the absence of popular media voices that nurture my self-stories I begin to see the parallels between this experience and the self-making process that adolescent girls engage in within our culture. Not finding options that would nurture their physical, mental and spiritual growth readily available to them through popular culture, they are forced to experiment and stumble blindly through,

taking up the unhealthy notion of femininity that are presented to them and thus making choices that are threatening to their physical and mental health. Similarly, I find that the academic and popular discourses do not speak with voices with which I resonate, and I am forced to slog it out myself, wade through the muck and mire of multiplicity, in an attempt to make meaning of the contradictions for myself.

Despite my frustration with this process, there is a freedom and agency available to me within this paradigm. By understanding self as multiple and shifting, I am able to examine the ways I am currently engaging with culture and am re-creating myself. All creating of the self allows for re-creating. However, this process is socially situated. Where the frustration arises is with the lack of adequate language to describe my experience as it is lived, and the lack of popular images that reflect my lived experiences. Without cultural symbols of language and image to describe a new reality, it becomes difficult to imagine ourselves having experiences of body/self that are healthful and nurturing. This text is an attempt to begin the process of creating a new language for myself that more accurately describes my experiences.



Writing that explored active resistance to media messages I have categorized as “swimming upstream.” In these pieces of text I found myself deconstructing media messages and questioning their intents and meanings. I often compared my own experience of body and self to the scripted experiences of body and self that are available to women through the media. When I experienced myself as being outside of these scripted identities, I explored the consequences and meanings of being positioned or taking a position outside the scripts of desirable femininity. When I experienced myself buying into the messages about body and self promoted by the media, I explored my

feelings of guilt and weakness of being sucked in by the media, when I believed I should be able to resist the pull because of the knowledge I possess.

Resistance to both the media messages and to disordered eating behaviour took various forms throughout the course of this research. Most times, resistance came in the form of taking on the media messages directly and questioning their meaning. At other times, I found myself completely disengaging from the study, if only to give myself an hour or two of breathing space.

I have struggled with the languaging of this experience of being in relation with media. At first, resistance seemed to be the most appropriate term to describe the process I felt myself engaging in with media. I felt like I was in opposition to the messages, and was trying to withstand their influence. Further in the analysis, I began to play with ideas of embeddedness, coupled with a feeling of detachment. Again, I found myself limited by our current language. To be embedded means to be fixed into a surrounding mass. This language does not reflect my desire for and experience of agency within my relationship to media. When one is detached from something, one is separated, uninvolved and dispassionate about it. Again, this does not reflect my experience. Thus, I have returned to the idea of resistance, despite the violent imagery it can evoke. In fact, the historical experiences of resistance (or The Resistance) give me hope and encourage agency in the face of hegemonic discourses: The term Resistance is used to describe an underground organization composed of groups of private individuals working as an opposition force in a conquered country to overthrow the occupying power (Avis, 1989, p. 1144). If patriarchy and its scripts of desirable femininity are viewed as the occupying power in mediated cultures, then Resistance not only seems possible, but necessary.



Choosing a Different Voice

Location: The Weight Room of the University Gym

The piles of magazines loom before me. I shift my weight from my left foot to my right. The pile of magazines on the left side of the table contains numerous fashion magazines, and a few copies of a men's health magazine. The pile on the right contains mostly fashion and women's fitness magazines, a few copies of a homemaking magazine and a ratty copy of a six-month old news magazine. I touch the pile on the left, and then the pile on the right. I lift my head and meet the glance of the staff person sitting behind the desk. I am sure she wonders what is taking me so long. I look to my left and notice the bulletin board that shields me from the rest of the patrons in the weight room. It gives me the illusion that my choice is a private one. Or is it a secret one? I continue to flip through the giant pile of magazines that shout cover stories that promise to help me to lose five pounds in two days, to find a better boyfriend, to fix my hair disasters, and other life changing strategies. Something in me snaps. I can't do it.

My mind flashes with the memory of last Friday morning when I argued with myself about not going to the gym. I was exhausted. I needed to get some writing done. I had strained a muscle at the gym the day before. I needed a day off. And yet, I felt guilty about not going. I kept thinking that if I didn't go, I couldn't eat that day. I felt like I had to go, and at the same time, knew that I shouldn't go. It scared me. I remember that thought process from years ago. Except years ago, I would not have been arguing with myself. I would have just gone to the gym, worked out despite the pain, and still felt guilty about eating anything at all that day.

Last Friday morning, I was morose. I kept walking between the kitchen and the bedroom, trying to convince myself that it was okay that I was not going to the gym. My partner went through his morning routine, aware that I was mulling something over, and giving me the space to come to him if I needed to. Finally, after 25 minutes of going back and forth about whether it was okay for me to skip the gym that morning, I approached my partner and said “It is okay for me not to go the gym this morning.” It was not a question. It was not a request for approval. It was a statement. “Yes, it is,” he said. “I’m proud of you for not going.” “Too many fashion magazines...” I muttered. “Yes,” he agreed quietly. And that was the end of it. I simply needed to get to a place where I realized what was happening. I needed to know that what I was feeling was not an indicator of a relapse, that what I was feeling was partially because of the amount of exposure to media that I was experiencing in my research. Knowing that was what was happening allowed me to let it go.

This morning at the gym, I still feel too vulnerable to expose myself to the messages in the fashion magazines. I do not want to experience a repeat performance of last Friday. I grab a news magazine instead and head to the stationary bikes at the other end of the gym. As I walk past the stair climbers, I notice a woman that I see often at the gym. She is here again today, climbing away on the staircase to nowhere. I smile as she looks my way. She smiles back, and returns her attention to the fashion magazine she has propped up in front of her. I select a bike, and begin my own ride to nowhere. I open the magazine I have chosen and flip to an editorial on the federal election that occurred last year. It does not matter that it is old news. I need something that can feed my brain, not torment my body.

I pedal half-heartedly, more interested in the article in front of me than on the number of calories that the digital display on the bike is informing me that I am burning. I pedal as I read, enjoying the movement of my legs, and the sweat that forms in droplets across my forehead and on my back. I feel good. I am having fun. This is an enjoyable activity. This is different than reading a fashion magazine while I ride the bike. I am not thinking about how riding this exercise bike today is going to help me lose weight for my wedding next summer. I am not thinking about how riding the stationary bike is helping me burn X number of calories, that I can then eat Y food later today, and it will still be okay. I am simply enjoying the movement of my body, and reflecting on the politics explored in the articles I am reading. It is a much more pleasant process that the one I have been engaging in for the past few weeks.

I ride for a while longer. The timer on the bike beeps at me, letting me know that I am now free to leave. I lift my right leg off the pedal and move it across the bike, in between the handlebars and the seat. I slide my left foot off the pedal and step down onto the ground. My legs feel fatigued, and I move to the mat to stretch my muscles. As I drop my body down onto the mat, I realize that I do not want to read any more fashion magazines for my research. Since Friday, I have felt myself coming out of the tailspin that I have been sliding into since I began reading magazines for this project. It feels good to be re-emerging. It feels good to be enjoying my body because it moves, can go fast or slow, hard or easy, fluid or jumpy. It feels good to enjoy my body because it allows me to participate in activities with my partner that we both enjoy, like biking and hiking. When we are doing those activities, I am not thinking about calories burned, or whether my thighs look too big in my shorts. It feels like living in my body instead of

examining the pieces of my body to see what fits and what doesn't. I feel more whole: the various voices within me seem to be more harmonious. There is less conflict about which voice to listen to. I feel at peace with my mental and physical selves.

I finish my stretches and push myself upright into a standing position. I glance around the gym and notice all of the machines designed to help us reshape our bodies. I take a deep breath. I am tired. Too tired to do the strength-training part of my workout. Too tired to fight the rules of the culture in here. Too tired to fight, period. I walk across the gym, climb the stairs and walk out the door, knowing that if I am too tired to fight, the gym is not the place to be.



My heart pounds against my chest, as my right arm rises out of the water and plunges in again, further ahead of my body. I kick my left foot, and then my right in an attempt to propel myself forward, against the current. The force of the water rushing against me hinders my struggle. Water splashes in my face, into my eyes, temporarily blinding me. I continue fighting against the current, unsure of how long I will be able to keep this up. I just know I cannot float anymore. I have to try to get out of the water. I have to take action. I am terrified by where the river is taking me.



Self as an Active Meaning Making Process

Many feminist researchers have explored the idea of the self as an active meaning making process. In their article entitled "Women's lived experience of conceptualizing the self: Implications for health care practice" Arvay, Banister, Hoskins and Snell (1999) articulate their adoption of a constructivist version of self, exploring the participants' struggles for authenticity, their inner knowing, the self's changing over time, and the

contextual self. Similarly, Weiss (1999) explores the process of self-making within the discourses which subject us to predetermined identities:

The refusal of identity is not an option either, since the refusal of identity is itself the taking up of an identity position, and, in either case, we will always find identities (and abject objects) projected upon us regardless of our wishes, needs or desires. (p. 96)

Indeed, it does not seem possible to refuse to engage in the self-making process, as to resist the discourse of self-making is to take up an identity position itself.

Smith (1993) explores the social negotiation of self-concept and subjectivity. In her critique of the concept of a universal self, she asserts that to know oneself, one defines who one is by identifying who or what one is not: "... the realms of the universal subject and the socially abject mutually constitute one another. To secure the universality of the self, cultural practices set various limits, and those limits are normative limits of race, gender, sexuality and class identifications" (p. 10). This idea can be particularly salient for women, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians who have historically been and, in some cases are still defined by what they are not: white, middle class, heterosexual men.

Weedon (1987) explores the notion of self and subjectivity as constituted within discourse. She asserts that for women, notions of self are constrained by the discourses of patriarchy. Mehta and Bondi (1999) agree with Weedon (1987) in stating that while multiple discourses exist and non-dominant discourses may offer alternative positions and modes of subjectivity through which to challenge or resist dominant discourses of gender and gender identity, these

alternatives always entail trade-offs in terms of such things as social power, social approval and material benefits. (p.70)

Self-making and the negotiation of subjectivity need to be understood within the social relations of power within which they occur.

Ferguson (1997) explores the social negotiation of subjectivity. She asserts that subjectivity is “formed and maintained through social relations of bodies to each other which create and sustain meaning”(p. 124). When these social relations are scripted by patriarchal discourse, the subject positions that are available to women through these negotiations tend to be to the benefit of men, and to the cost of women.

Outside of feminist research, explorations of self as a meaning making or social process are popular as well. In the mid-1980s, Sampson (1985) began exploring the idea of what he termed ‘personhood becoming’, utilizing ideas from non-equilibrium physics as a framework for his discussion. He asserts that viewing the self as stable and unitary is equivalent to seeing it as a closed system in nature, thus dooming itself to death. Viewing the self as an open system, which is multiple, interconnected and constantly evolving allows room for growth, development and survival.

Gubrium and Holstein (2000) assert that the multiplicity that is increasingly available to us in the process of self-making increases our options for self-fulfillment and engagement with culture. While their position emphasizes the positive possibilities of multiplicity and encourages thoughts of agency, their discussion lacks a critical analysis of power and the institutional barriers to these identity and self-making processes. A poststructural analysis of agency and choice in self-making posits agency as “up for grabs, continually reconfigured and renamed as is the subject itself. However, agency

seems to lie in the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). Poststructuralism acknowledges the agency of individuals in the self-making process, and situates it within the discourses of power within which the individual lives.

In his work on the social saturation of the self, Gergen (2000) explores the self as part of a relational process. He asserts that with our increasing exposure to communication technologies, we are less and less alone, and our sense of self is increasingly constituted by our relations with others. Similarly, in another work, Gergen (1996) explores what he terms "conditions for a credible self" and "technologies of self-expression" to illustrate the shift from a unitary sense of self to a more multiple, heterogeneous discourse of self (p. 129-135).

Gergen (1996) asserts that the four conditions for a credible self involve (a) homogeneous ontological configuration (cultural agreement about what the self is comprised of), (b) homogeneous modes of expression (whose enactment have universal meaning for members of the culture), (c) understood and stable context of expression, and (d) shared valued goals (homogeneity of cultural meanings about self and behaviour).

With the increase in communication technologies, and the heterogeneity of discourses available to us, Gergen asserts the self is now understood within technologies of self-expression. These involve (a) multiple ontologies (bringing an increased vocabulary for describing the self), (b) contested expressions (with multiple ways of being comes multiple ways of being understood), (c) appropriated usage of expression (expressions acquire new meaning as they are used in new contexts) and (d) controversial goals (there is much debate about what the self is, and Western psychology is one of

many ideologies of the self). The number of stories about the self that are available to an individual within Western culture has multiplied exponentially with the increase in communication technologies. Thus the idea of the unified, stable self is replaced with the idea of the self as multi-vocal, emergent and constantly slipping. The self, constituted within discourse, is thus open and constantly emerging: “Postmodern theory suggests that there is no singular true femininity which women should attempt to reclaim. It highlights the ways in which subjectivity is fractured, contradictory and produced within social practices” (Jordan & Weedon, 1995, p. 203).

Within the discourses of self as an active meaning making process, there emerges a discussion about how to live within the multiplicity. One of the ways to make sense of lived multiplicity, and the constantly emerging sense of self is to continually re-story one’s self and identities. In speaking about the storying of one’s self-identity, Benhabib (1999) states “it is not what the story is about that matters but one’s ability to keep telling a story that makes sense to oneself and to others about who one is” (p.227). The struggle then, especially for those who have historically been scripted as ‘Other,’ (i.e. other than white, middle-class, heterosexual men) lies in telling a story that makes sense to oneself *and* others (not either / or) when one finds oneself living in a reality that does not value one’s story or mode of storytelling. For young women to resist the media scripts of feminine identity, to embody themselves in a way that honors their subjectivity and their biology, is essentially to tell a story that is not valued by the patriarchy.

Understanding self as an active meaning making process, as opposed to thinking about self as a unitary, univocal entity that one possesses opened up the space for me to examine the ways in which we choose to create and re-create ourselves throughout our

lives. At times throughout this study, I was frustrated by the realization that in our current culture we are in a process of constant reflection about who we are, who we are becoming, and who we have been. We are challenged at every turn to engage in some re-making of our selves, our bodies and our minds. I wonder if this emphasis (dare I say obsession?) with self is leading us further into cultural decay. As we spend more time focused on self-making processes, what do we spend less time attending to? Each other? Our families? Our communities? Our interdependent existence?

As I struggled to make sense of the possibilities and difficulties that come with understanding self as an active meaning making process, I found myself drawn to the fantasy of a simpler time wherein multiplicity was not the norm. I tried to imagine what it would be like to live in a space in time when I could just accept reality as truth, accept my self as is, as it is given to me by my place in culture. I think it would be less exhausting and less infuriating to live during a time when the self was not under constant scrutiny, during a time when there were no clashes of paradigms because the culture that one lived within consisted of a univocal truth about the world and one's place in it. I am also aware, though, that in this fantasy of returning to a "simpler" time in regard to the self, I am ignoring many other complications that existed along side this simplicity of self, not the least of which is the ability and right for women to learn to read and write. This complication alone would make the kind of reflection I am engaged in with this study impossible for me if I were living in this more "simple" time. This example illustrates the false sense of security I believed I could find in theories about the self that focused on unitary, univocal subjectivity.

Because I could not find resonance with these theories of the unitary self, I explored theories of self that discussed multiplicity and fluidity. In my writing, I began to explore the idea of the emergent self. While the concept of identity becoming holds great appeal for me because of its fluidity and capability to incorporate change and contradiction, I find I struggle to apply it in my writing. I go back to the dichotomous thinking: I still have a great desire to capture a photo of my identity in one situation, and then another and then compare the two, as if the differences and similarities between the two would somehow allow me to better understand who I am. Living in the everyday experience of multiplicity, part of me still craves a unitary self, one that could be contained, captured and known.

Despite my increasing knowledge base and level of understanding, I still find myself looking for a clear-cut method for understanding self. I find fragments of understanding in different theories but I still feel unable to “see clearly” what the self is or could be. Living in the constantly slipping experience of self, I struggle to find something solid to hang on to. Perhaps though, the importance of self-definition does not lie in coherence or stability, but rather in the self’s ability to make sense of the multiple realities within which it exists.



Listening to the Noise

Location: Compact Car on Major City Street

I pull up behind the blue sedan that is stopped at the traffic light in front of me. The warmth of the sunshine radiates through my windshield, and I move to roll down my window in response to my rising body temperature. I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, humming along to the song on the radio. I recognize the singer as one of the “pop

divas” that monopolize the airways these days. Not my favourite type of music, but it provides a welcome accompaniment to the traffic I am working my way through en route to my apartment. The song ends, and a female announcer’s voice fills my car. “That was Bunny Sunshine, with her number one song Love, It Will Get You Everything⁵. Bunny has recently been awarded the title of second best hair in the music industry by her peers. Baby Moonlight took top honors in the hair department, but we congratulate them both on their fabulous hair!” The announcer continues to ramble as I accelerate down the road.

“Fascinating,” I think to myself, “how is this newsworthy?” Granted, this important information was not provided during the newsbreak that occurs on this particular radio station once an hour. It is part of the mindless banter of the radio announcer, the kind that fades into the background of our daily lives. And yet, the message was very strong: “Doesn’t matter how great you sing (or teach, or handle accounts, or run a country), ladies, make sure that your hair is the envy of all your fans and colleagues.”

I glance over at the magazines that I have tossed on the floor in front of the passenger seat. The covers abound with advice on losing weight, defying wrinkles and finding a boyfriend. These messages are so commonplace, are so normalized as part of our culture that it seems like they are everywhere. Critical consumers of media and certain academics have emphasized the need to teach young people about how to interpret and analyze media messages (Austin & Johnson, 1997; Irving & Berel, 2001; McBrien, 1999; Rabak-Wagener, Eickhoff-Shemek & Kelly-Vance, 1998; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999) I agree wholeheartedly. And yet, I also am beginning to realize that it is

⁵ Names of artists and song titles have been changed to avoid inadvertent endorsement of the singers

not enough. It is not enough to teach young people how to deconstruct advertising, when many of the most harmful messages are not passed on in ads, but are included in the everyday existence of noise that the mass media has come to create in our lives. This radio announcer, sharing her admiration of the artists' enviable hair, does not work for an advertising company. She is not trying to sell the shampoo that Bunny Sunshine or Baby Moonlight may or may not use. She is merely reinforcing what she has learned about the key aspects of being female in our culture. It is part of the noise. And it is being heard loud and clear by young women.

I turn off the radio as I pull into my parking spot at home, and shut off the car engine. I get out of the car and walk to the back door of the apartment building. Once inside, I head to the mailboxes by the front door. I open the mailbox to find a newsletter from the local eating disorders association. I am simultaneously glad and irritated that this newsletter has arrived. I am glad because it reminds me that there is a group of people in my community who are actively engaged in trying to change the culture of disordered eating. I am irritated because it reminds me that I am not feeling particularly healthy these days, and that I am not doing much to change that, despite the resources that are available to me. Despite my years of living and working in the area of disordered eating and health promotion, I am not immune to the subtle messages about body and femininity in our culture. I am highly aware that I have gained weight over the past few months. I am not happy about it. In fact, it occupies my thoughts most of the time. One could probably argue that my preoccupation with my current weight is due in part to my multi-year struggle with disordered eating. Possibly. But more, I wonder if it is not about the constant reminders in our culture that our bodies are something to be controlled,

something to be altered, and as women, something of which to be constantly ashamed.⁶ I am not sure. I just know that it feels different than the years I spent struggling with disordered eating. I do not feel “on the edge” of relapsing as I did even in my first two years of recovery. It is beyond that. It is about knowing at my core that my body is inherently flawed in our culture, that by definition of being female, it is not okay. How can I begin to feel okay in a body that is ipso facto unacceptable and yet at the same time objectified in our culture? How do I live in that contradiction?

I open the door to my apartment and walk inside. I head to the dining room, and drop my purse, and shoulder bag on the table. I tear open the envelope that holds the newsletter. I unfold the papers and scan through the pages. I stop at the page entitled “Claiming our Space.” It is a place for members to recount tales of how they have been able to have their voices heard against the hegemony of patriarchal discourse. It is a place to celebrate voice. It reminds me that I have a voice, and that I can use it to participate in the shaping of culture.

I turn the page and see an update on the school outreach program. This program utilizes media literacy techniques to try to prevent disordered eating behaviours. I smile, remembering the years I spent working in this program, facilitating discussions and teaching media literacy. I enjoyed that time immensely. I felt so sure then that media

⁶ I am not, in any way, stating that these factors were not involved in my experience of disordered eating: they were a huge part of my struggle. What I am exploring is that perhaps, even though my story of disordered eating is not one that I actively engage with anymore, it is not possible for me to live my life free from weight consciousness because being conscious of (and thus in a constant process of altering and feeling shameful about) one’s body is embedded in our culture as an integral part of identity for women.

literacy was the way to change the culture that fosters disordered eating. I wish I was still so sure.

I put down the newsletter on the table, and walk to the kitchen behind me to prepare a snack. I open the fridge and see my partner's lunch sitting on the shelf in front of me. I smile and shake my head at his absent-mindedness, and hope that he found something tasty to eat in absence of this package of leftovers. I close the fridge door and my thoughts return to a discussion my partner and I had last night about a men's magazine that he was reading. While marketed as a men's fashion and culture magazine, it featured photographs of many unreasonably figured women, scantily clad throughout the pages and, in fact, on the cover of the magazine. I questioned him about why he believed they put a half-naked woman on the cover of a men's magazine. "To sell magazines. Most guys would not want to buy a magazine with a half naked man on the cover." Simple enough, and yet perversely exemplifying the objectification of the female form, as well as the deep conditioning of homophobia. "Well, what about women's magazines then? Why do they have pictures of half-naked women on the cover, if the target audience is women?" I asked him. "Because the publishers think that women want to see what other women look like, to be more like them." Disturbed as I was by my partner's bluntness, I believe he is correct. What disturbs me more is that women buy these magazines. We are conditioned to believe that we can and should want to look like the women in these magazines. We are convinced that these women represent what is happy, successful, and fulfilled in our culture for women. As intelligent women we must engage in a suspension of disbelief about the lifestyle that these models lead. What I mean is that, at some level, we must put aside the knowledge that we have about image

manipulation and the unhealthy lifestyles that models need to engage in to maintain such low body weights in order to be sucked in to the messages of these magazines. We know that there is a high incidence of eating disorders among models, of dangerous drug abuse, and other high-risk behaviours. We know that the pictures we compare ourselves to have been airbrushed, to remove any “imperfections,” to make what we are striving for, what we are comparing ourselves to IMPOSSIBLE to attain. We know this. And yet we continue to buy the magazines. We continue to believe that this is the road to success. I wonder if it is because we are presented with few other options to success. I wonder if it is because at our deepest core level, having lived, swam (and sometimes drowned) in this culture for the years of our existence, we know that it “doesn’t mean a thing how well you can sing, honey, you gotta have great hair!”



Prior to this study, my predominant experience of the media river was one of floating. Through engaging in this research, I have been actively paying attention to the messages I exposed myself to, and how I reacted to them. However, there are texts, like the previous one, that I produced prior to this active engagement with media messages that this study involved. This text is an example of how I have used critical reflection to make meaning of the messages in the media. It illustrates how my experiences are situated in culture, and how our everyday interactions are situated in the patriarchal discourses of femininity. The ability to critically reflect on the meanings and contradictions within these media messages allows us to take the abstract idea of the message and make it tangible so that we can hold it in our hands, examine it from all sides and decide what to do with it. While learning this skill is integral to the teaching and learning of media literacy, I want to emphasize that sometimes the knowledge of how

media messages are constructed is not enough to prevent disordered eating behaviours. In fact, sometimes the knowledge of this process of the production of intentional, constructed messages complicates the experience of media exposure. The effect of believing one has the knowledge to resist media messages and does not resist them is feelings of guilt and shame. Encouraging women to resist the power of media is not enough: we must look beyond individualized strategies of resistance to more collective strategies of cultural change.



What Is Wrong With My Body the Way It Is? (Part One)

Location: The Weight Room at the University Gym

I contract the muscles in my right leg and exert force on the pedal beneath my foot. The right pedal moves down, causing the left pedal to rise and push my left leg into a raised, bent position. I repeat this exertion of force with my left leg, and my right leg rises in response. I continue this cycle, slowly at first and then with increasing speed and intensity. The stationary bike begins to hum in a steady rhythm.

I flip open the fitness magazine I have chosen to read today. I look at the index and find articles on weight loss, strength training and how to change who you are to please your boyfriend. I shake my head, frustrated that the discourse of fitness for women is nothing more than the discourse of patriarchy disguised as health information. I flip the pages and I continue pedaling. My legs feel strong today, and I begin to pedal harder in response. I want to push myself today, to see what my body can do. I flip to an article on summer cross-training. It has suggestions on how to move from indoor workouts to outdoor workouts for summer. If you love the treadmill, try water jogging in an outdoor pool. If you like the stationary bike, get into trail riding. I see these types of

articles as mostly positive. They focus on getting the proper equipment, and building and stretching the proper muscles to avoid injury. They are generally helpful articles about how to stay physically active. I flip a few pages further and find an article on women who had lost weight by severely restricting their diets, and exercising large amounts. These women are being held up as role models, as people who had beat their genetic predisposition to be fat. Within this article, the encouragement toward unhealthy eating and exercise attitudes is subtle. Nowhere in the article does it encourage the reader to exercise to the point of dizziness, and to limit food intake to under X number of calories. But the implied message is that these women were not happy as “fatties” (most of them began their dieting regime when they were wearing size 12 clothing – not exactly morbidly obese women), and that now that they have lost weight, their lives are perfect. They married wonderful men, they have great jobs, and they live in cities they love. And most importantly, the before and after photographs of the women attempt to illustrate how much happier they are in their smaller bodies.

I close the magazine. Its messages do not hit me the way messages in fashion magazines do. Perhaps it is because I never read fitness magazines as a teen. Fashion magazines have the ability to open up that insecure, self-conscious part of me that believes my body is inherently wrong. The fitness magazine just bugs me. It does not hold my attention.

I focus my energy back on my legs, back on pedaling. I increase the resistance on the bike by pushing a button on the digital display in front of me. My legs immediately sense the increased resistance and work harder to move the pedals under my feet. My breathing quickens and I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. I pedal. Pedal. Pedal.

Pedal. The timer on the bike beeps my reward and I slow the motion of my legs. I reach for my water bottle and gulp back three big mouthfuls of cool water. The temperature of the water shocks my throat and feels hard in my chest. I step off the bike and walk back and forth down the length of the gym until my breathing slows to its usual rhythm. I feel grounded in my body. I feel content. I glance toward the free weight area and watch two men lifting huge stacks of weight. It is funny that my current exercise regime involves goals of both shrinking and growing my body. I want to shrink the parts of me that I see as too big, layered with fat, and to grow the parts of me that I believe should be sculpted and shapely. It strikes me as odd to be trying to simultaneously create a body that will be both bigger and smaller. “What is wrong with my body the way it is right now?” I wonder.

What Is Wrong With My Body the Way It Is? (Part Two)

Time: 45 Minutes Later

Location: Living Room of an Urban Apartment

I pick up the package of photographs and open them for the second time. “I can’t stand this!” I think to myself and look at the television instead of the pictures in my lap. I force myself to look down, to see the photographed images of myself that I have just picked up from the developer. They are photos of me in my thesis workspace that I was having developed for a workshop I am doing on self-image. I got my partner to photograph me as I usually am in this space; no make-up, loose, comfortable clothing, and little attention paid to my hairstyle. When I picked up the pictures and had the first glance in the store, I was shocked. When had I become so heavy? When did I get that double chin? Why do I not see these things when I look in the mirror each day? Why do I

look so pale? I panicked and stuffed the photos back into the envelope, and drove home. Upon arriving home I strongly resisted the urge to crawl back into bed and hide myself from the world. I flopped down on the couch and forced myself to take the second look that I am now struggling to make sense of. I am drowning in my own images.

I cannot face the discrepancy between how positively about my body I had felt, and the image I was projecting this morning. Moreover, I don't want to come face to face with the photographic reminder that my body does not match the bodies of the models in the fashion and fitness magazines. Instead of feeling positive about the healthy, whole feeling I experienced while working out this morning, now I think I should have worked out for longer, tried to burn more calories, and that I should skip lunch. "I need to fix this now," I think, my many years of training in the cult of instant gratification consumerism shining through. "I cannot put in the year it will take me to get back into shape, to lose this weight I am carrying. I need to start taking immediate steps, starting with skipping lunch, and running instead. I need to throw out all the food that we have in the house that has fat in it. I can't believe I ate those cashews last night. I know how high fat they are. Damn it, why did I do that? Why can't I keep the long-term goal in sight, why must I always go for short-term satisfaction when it comes to food?" That dark, desperate thought surfaces from the back of my brain. "I could start purging again." I hate that thought. I hate that it hides in my brain, to return in the moments when I feel weakest to fight it.

Years ago, I would have immediately given in to that voice. Now, I feel too far gone into my recovery to even entertain the thought. Sometimes that really angers me. Sometimes all I want is a good binge and purge, something that will take the edge off for

a while, something that will lull me into a sense of doing something with my body that will reduce its size. Something that makes me feel like I am in control.

I know that that feeling of control is false. That it isn't real control. That real control cannot possibly exist. Reading fashion magazine after fashion magazine, I have started to buy the lie again. "Get control of your life by controlling your hair!" "Don't like who you are? Shed those pounds, and the ugly parts of you will disappear!" I know that rhetoric is false too, but it is powerful rhetoric, funded by millions of dollars worth of ad campaigns and editorial copy that has been bought and controlled by the makers of diet products. Today the contradictions make me want to scream. I feel like I am living outside of the culture, that I am not truly a woman if I do not buy into this lifestyle, and its lies. I am outside. Because I am fat. Because I don't believe the lies. Because I refuse to conform to the narrow vision of ideal beauty that is created by a culture to hold women back from accessing their true power.



Within the previous narrative I live both the experience of drowning and wanting to swim upstream. I have placed it in the thematic category of swimming upstream because I wanted to disrupt the idea that active resistance always leads to a place of safety. I often experience myself resisting the messages in the mass media, and still find myself being swamped. I believe this text and the idea that it illustrates forces us to feel uncomfortable with resting on our laurels when we have taught critical media literacy to children and youth. Teaching women to actively resist media messages does not necessarily prevent any of us from drowning.

Resistance from within the everyday experience of media exposure involves energy and desire. It involves holding at the center something that is stronger than the

current that is rushing around and over us, trying to shape who we are becoming. For me, the strength of that center primarily involves my desire to stay healthy. It also involves my need to see change within the culture within which adolescent girls and adult women live. I have lived what it feels like to abhor something so central to my being as my body. I want to actively participate in cultural acts that aim to change the experience of culture and body for young women. A key aspect of generating and maintaining the energy necessary for resistance involves finding a community of peers who are engaged in similar work. Many authors have pointed to the benefits of community and mentoring relationships in countering the powerful discourse of patriarchy (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994; Dorney, 1995; Lybeck & Neal, 1995). It is through community action and open, honest relationships with our body/selves and with the adolescent women with whom we work that we can find the energy to actively resist the everyday experience of media exposure, and collectively can find ways to climb up the rocks at the river's edge and find a place on the embankment from where we can see how the river is shaping our landscape.



I have swum as far as I can on this journey. I lift my left hand out of the water, level with my hip, and flop it into the water in front of me. My heart thumps erratically in my chest. Defeat begins to sink in, as I feel myself being pushed once again in the direction of the current. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a small pile of boulders along the right edge of the river. Renewed with hope, I kick my feet to propel myself in the direction of the resting place I have just spotted. Crawling through the water, sideways to the current, I am finally able to grasp at one of the boulders. I slap both my hands on the rock, but quickly lose my grip. My body, caught once again in the current, slams into the

next boulder. The water rushes over and around me, but my movement has been halted by the boulder that I am wedged against. Through the pain that I feel in my whole being, I find happiness in escaping the current. I rest awhile here, amidst these boulders, and regain my strength. Once my body feels strong enough, I begin to climb over the slippery boulders and mud, up and away from the river. Each step is precarious. I know that with one false move, I could fall back into the raging current. Painstakingly slowly, I climb my way up the embankment. Beyond this small ledge looms a steep and slippery path, and I realize that, at least for the moment, I cannot get as far from the river as I would like. With a final reach, I pull myself up to the ledge and collapse face first into the dry grass. My toes dangle over the edge of the embankment, still touched by the spray of the river. I breathe, thankful that I am once again, if only temporarily, out of the rush of the current.

CHAPTER FIVE

On Slippery Ground

When I am up on the embankment, watching the river from the slippery ground of the shore, I am able to see the scripts that media create for women. These scripts are put forward as paths to validity and authenticity for females and often focus on body as the source of self-definition. If one's body is culturally acceptable, exemplifying the ideal (thin, young, white, large breasts, attractive features) one's opportunities for occupying a role with a culturally desirable self increases. We are implored by cultural discourses to work hard, get thinner, and take up less physical space in the world. We are urged to believe that bodily reconstruction is the path to a better life. We are encouraged to see it is not systematic sexism that is blocking our success in our fields; it is that extra 10 pounds we have been carrying since last Thanksgiving! If we are just able to lose weight: perhaps then we will be happy. What we forget to acknowledge and are discouraged from seeing is that the infamous carrot of happiness is always dangled just beyond our natural reach. If we want to reach it, we cannot possibly be who we already are. We must want to change something, to reach further toward the carrot, which is continually being pulled further and further out of reach. What does it mean to choose to ignore the carrot? To quit reaching for the unreachable? To finally say I am happy without the carrot, with my own body, with my own selves? What does it mean in our culture, and what are the consequences and benefits? What would media representations of women look like if we began defining ourselves as women on our own terms?

It is important to find a community of support to gain the strength necessary to climb up the embankment in order to view how the river is shaping the landscape. Being

on the relative height of the embankment allows us to see the broader implications of the messages that we are exposed to everyday through the media. It also keeps us close enough to the river to still feel its spray, and to still be in danger of falling into its current. Against the landscape of patriarchy, these media messages and their meanings illustrate the continued devaluation and objectification of women and their bodies. Being up on the embankment, out of the raging current, I have discovered, is not a quiet, peaceful place to rest. The contradictions and confusions I experienced in the midst of drowning, floating and swimming upstream have not been resolved. In fact, when placed against the landscape of patriarchy, they have become even more problematic because they can be seen as only one part of the cultural system that keeps women in an ambivalent relationship with their body/selves.

I wanted so desperately to come to an ending with this research. Throughout the process, I have struggled to stay with the ambiguities, to live within the contradictions that have been the focus of this study. I believe it was important to remain in that unstable space, to illustrate what it is like to live among the discourses of femininity and body in our culture. And I still desired to come to a safe, coherent ending. I wanted to write a chapter within which I could tie up all those loose ends, and formulate a grand theory of body/self that I had previously espoused to be impossible to create. I believe that part of this desire has arisen from my years of indoctrination into traditional research writing methods wherein a question is posed, the research is conducted and explained, and an answer is formulated. When I least expect, this deeply ingrained conditioning resurfaces and tries to shape this text.

I believe another part of my desire to come to a place of stability at the closure of this text comes from my own exhaustion from living within the contradictions. As a result of my immersion in this research, the safe space that I had previously negotiated for myself no longer satisfies me and I crave a new temporary resting place, one where I can catch my breath, regain my strength and from which I can continue my swim against the current.

At the same time that I desire to find a new resting place, I have begun to doubt the stability of any solid ground upon which I could situate myself. Perhaps the idea of finding a safe place to rest for a while is itself an illusion. Perhaps all I can be looking forward to is a lull in the current. Perhaps it is within the river itself, living within the contradictions that I will find the most strength to continue to fight my way upstream.

By understanding the potential of nonunitary subjectivity, feminists can read it not as a weakness, but as a strength and as an alternative feminist discourse. It is a strength because giving up the myth of unified subjectivity allows respect for the complexity of subjectivity and the validation of conflict as a source through which women become strong and learn to speak their own experiences. (Bloom, 1998, p. 93)

I did not anticipate how I would be changed by this project. At times, I have been extremely frustrated, feeling like this research has caused old disordered eating behaviours to surface, to disrupt the space I had negotiated for myself between obsession with my body and complete denial of my physicality. I had been living in a space I was happy with; where I could enjoy my body/self in a respectful and peaceful way. This research has disrupted that. I no longer feel peace in that space because of the ambiguity

and ambivalence that I have unearthed in this research. I no longer feel peace in that space because I have poked holes in its foundation, and it feels like a shaky, risky place to stand. Realizing that I am standing on and practicing from shaky ground, I have begun to ask some difficult questions about the implications of my findings in regard to prevention strategies for disordered eating.

Because of what I am learning through the process of this study, I have begun to question the usefulness of teaching media literacy to children as a preventative measure against disordered eating behaviour. I have been engaged in the media literacy community for five years. Relatively speaking, I have quite a high level of knowledge about how images are constructed, and about the psychology behind advertising images and text. I am conscious of deconstructing the images and texts, to uncover the ways in which I am meant to feel badly about myself, and to identify myself with the problem that can be solved through the purchase of the product being advertised. I took this protective force with me into my media immersion. I held it up, tried to use it as a shield against the messages I was trying to study. And it was not enough. I still felt the effects of the media. I still began to feel negatively about myself. I still bought the lies. However, the additional layer that I did not expect was the level of guilt that I felt about knowing that I should not be buying these messages, and feeling powerless to resist them. I believe this experience placed me in a double bind. I had a belief that knowledge should protect me from the influence of the media messages. When it did not, I felt guilty and blamed myself instead of questioning my belief about the protective force of knowledge. Instead of being drawn into the ads because I did not know any better, now I was supposed to be able to resist them and could not. I questioned what this meant for my

work in the area of disordered eating prevention. Were the programs we were delivering adding to the experience of guilt that young girls feel about their bodies? Did the girls too believe that they should know better than to be sucked in by media messages, but feel powerless to resist? I struggled to understand the implications for programs which were built upon the belief that knowledge can be a preventative force against media messages and disordered eating behaviours.

If I were to quantify my knowledge as a preventative force as a shield of a certain depth, I would characterize my own shield as four feet thick. I have spent many years fortifying it, and it crumbled under the pressure from the immersion in media messages that I engaged in. I want to be clear that the amount of media that I exposed myself to was not an unusually great amount. I read a fashion magazine everyday. I watched three to four hours of television (two hours during the day, and two hours in the evening). I listened to the radio, and other recorded music. I read the newspaper. These are all media that most of us engage with everyday (perhaps except the fashion magazine). I wanted to immerse myself in an experience of media that typified what I believed a typical adolescent female would engage in. It is not much different than the amount of media I exposed myself to during my own adolescence.

If I were to quantify the shield that an adolescent girl carries with her into these media experiences, after a prevention workshop or intervention of media literacy, I would create an image of a paper-thin shield. Compared to the four foot wall I went into this research with, I would argue that we are not equipping young women with the protective skills they require to adequately negotiate their way through media messages presented to them everyday. Do I think that we should stop delivering media literacy programs as a

protective measure against the harmful messages in the media that contribute to the culture that fosters disordered eating? No. But I believe that we need to realize that these programs are not enough. I believe it compels us to find alternative ways to support young women living, breathing and swimming in this toxic culture.

One of these possibilities has emerged in my writing. I found that when I was engaged in activities that honored the movements of my body, and encouraged me to feel whole, I was more easily able to resist the messages that media promotes about the “perfect body.” I have found physical activities that help me to achieve this feeling of wholeness, but it has been a long and complicated journey. As such, I would argue that a key aspect of preventing disordered eating among young women involves creating and supporting environments that foster this sense of physical groundedness and embodied wholeness. Be it yoga, meditation, soccer or martial arts, activities that engage young women with their bodies, minds and spirits can help them to feel more strongly about who they already are, and less vulnerable to the media messages that pressure them to desire to become something different.

Despite the uncomfortable feelings that have accompanied this disruption of my beliefs about prevention and media literacy, I realize that this process has opened up the fundamental questions of this project. It has allowed me to see cracks in the foundation of theories upon which I have built my practice in disordered eating prevention. It feels like it opens up the possibility for growth and new thinking. As practitioners we know that prevention is not working to change behaviours but we continue to plug along, changing one ingredient at a time in the prevention program recipes, hoping that each new change will be the one that helps us prevent disordered eating. This study has

helped me to find the courage to think differently about prevention, and about my practice and my self. It has helped me to begin to negotiate a new safe space for myself, among the contradictory discourses, a space that embraces the ambivalence and the need to make public the struggle to live in the ambiguity, in order that young women see that there is a possible response to the culture outside of disordered eating behaviours. Within the constantly re-negotiated shifting space lies the possibility to do and be something different than I ever imagined.

Self-theories that explore the multiple, embodied, commodified and meaning making experiences of women living in a media-saturated culture help us to understand more fully the experience of creating a self within the contradictory discourses that are presented to women. To gain a better understanding of how adolescent girls engage in the process of self-making, we need to understand what their experiences of media are like and what they mean to them. Understanding the experiences of disordered eating and body image disturbances as indicators of an unhealthy culture, rather than as pathologized self-making exercises can help us to create more effective prevention programs for young women. This knowledge helps us recognize that individualized treatment may make the symptoms of disordered eating go away, but that to eliminate disordered eating as a self-making option for adolescent and adult women, we need to re-language and re-create the culture within which we are living.



Reminders

Location: Hotel Lobby, in a Major Canadian City

Arriving late at the hotel where the conference is being held, I rush through the lobby and head straight for the elevators that would take me to the conference level. I

glance at my watch, impatiently shifting from one foot to the other in front of the elevator doors. 9:54 am. I wonder if I will be able to sneak into the session that I am ten minutes late for, unnoticed. I take a deep breath as the elevator door opens and I walk in. The doors close, and I am alone for the few seconds it takes to ascend to the conference level of the hotel. As the doors open, I am greeted by the conference information table, which is conveniently situated straight ahead of the elevator doors. I approach the table to ask a conference volunteer a question about audio-visual equipment for my own conference session that will be occurring the next morning. As the volunteer begins to respond to my question, the conference organizer, Mary⁷, appears from the open foyer area on my right. She calls my name, and I turn toward her. I notice the great table of croissants, fruit, and coffee and tea behind her, and am silently grateful that I am not too late to grab a bit of breakfast before the day's sessions begin.

“Great, you are here right on time, Kristy!” Mary greets me joyfully. I wonder if she is being sarcastic, as I am all too aware that almost all of the other conference participants are in the plenary session that I was hoping to attend. I can hear the speakers' amplified voices through the doors to my left. “Oh?” I respond ambiguously. “Yes,” she confirms, “you are up next for the video interviews.” Obviously, I have misheard her, I think. I have had no information about being interviewed on video for the conference. Clearly, she has me confused with someone else. “Pardon?” Again I am noncommittal. “Yes, yes, 10am!” she says, glancing at the scheduling sheet she holds in her hands. I get a quick glance over her shoulder and note the following entry on the schedule: “Friday 10:00am – 10:30am – Kristy Dellebuur, University of Victoria”

⁷ Name has been changed to protect anonymity.

“Could you please remind me again about the process for the interview?” I question, hoping that she will not realize that I have no idea what she is talking about, and consequently, am not prepared.

Mary explains briefly as we walk toward the video room that the conference committee decided to interview the presenters individually instead of trying to tape each of the conference sessions. It is their intention to create a video from these interviews about the conference. “Excellent,” I say quietly, feeling far from “excellent” myself and quickly trying to compose what I might talk about for the next half hour.

We enter the video room, and as quickly as she appeared five minutes earlier, Mary is gone. I introduce myself to the female interviewer and the male sound and camera technicians. I joke with the interviewer when she informs me that I am the only speaker so far to show up as scheduled. “Dumb luck,” I respond, not wanting to admit that I did not even know the interviews were happening. The sound technician asks me to run the microphone up the inside of my shirt, and attach it to the collar. It is at that moment I realize what I am wearing. With my intention to attend a number of the sessions during the day, and in an attempt to feel comfortable despite the warm weather the city was experiencing, I decided to wear a white t-shirt and my Capri jeans. I am suddenly ashamed at the casual nature of my attire. “I hate how I look with white against my face in photographs,” I think to myself. I haven’t paid much attention to my make-up, and am all too conscious that my hair is looking flat from the heat. I try to suppress my panic at the idea of being videotaped for posterity looking less than I would ideally like. My thoughts slip away from my anxiety over not knowing what I am going to say in

the next half hour to thoughts about whether I have lipstick in my purse that I could quickly apply.

It is in that moment that I am once again struck by the multiplicity and contradictions of my existence. I sit down, and the interviewer explains how she is going to structure the interview. I am half-heartedly listening, more absorbed with the contradictions swirling in my head about how I propose to talk about body image and media scripts for women when I am obsessing about my own looks. The interview begins, and I hear myself recounting the focus on my thesis work, discussing the struggles that women experience when they rub up against the contradictions inherent in representations of women in the media. Perhaps if I just stay in the abstract, talking about theory, I can avoid any mention of my current lived experience of ambiguity, I think to myself. I have barely finished this thought when the interviewer asks her next question. “So, how does this experience impact your own lived reality?” Damn, I think to myself. Nowhere to go but through. I hesitate for a moment, and then decide to dive right into the muck. “Well, for instance, I am sitting here this morning, as we are doing this interview, being videotaped, thinking about how much I am going to be disappointed with how I will appear. Not academically, but physically. I am aware of how my own appearance does not match the appearances of women that we are constantly exposed to in our everyday lives through media. I know these representations of women are created, that they are false, and yet I carry them with me in my psyche. They are there, ready to pop up unexpectedly, like in this moment, when what I should be thinking about is the most effective way to convey the important parts of my thesis research, and instead what I am thinking about is the current appearance of my hair, and the fact that I am not wearing

lipstick or eye shadow.” The interviewer’s face glows. I believe she is enjoying this conversation, but I fear that the two male technicians are thinking about how vain and flighty I must be to be so obsessed about my appearance. I do not believe they share the same experience of culture, so I do not have the faith that they will understand. “So how do you deal with that?” the interviewer prompts, and my thoughts return to our discussion. “Like I am doing right now, I bring it into consciousness. I wear it, instead of trying to hide it. I admit it, at least to myself if not to others in my company. I try to tease apart the aspects of it that I can identify. For instance, I ask what would make me worry about not wearing lipstick during this interview? Most salient is the idea that we are offered in the media that no matter how intelligent we are as women, we are disregarded if we do not appear to fit the scripted ideals of femininity. Second, this worry arises from the idea that the way to feel control of our lives is to control our appearance, to create a façade that mimics the ideal feminine scripts. Not being prepared for this interview, I was feeling a little out of control. That conditioning that encourages me to gain control over myself through controlling my bodily appearance is so deep that I don’t even have to think about it at a conscious level. It just appears.

Those are the parts I can identify. There are other parts that remain ambiguous. The voice that says as a professional, as an academic I should be beyond worrying about my external appearance argues with my voice that enjoys playing with my appearance, trying new hair colours and buying new make-up. These two voices often do not get along. But they both exist, and at different times I listen to one or the other, or both. I think that struggle illustrates the part of the psyche that advertisers and the media have tapped into so well. They know that presentation of selves and creations of identity are a

large focus for both men and women. They create marketing campaigns and media scripts that speak to that part of us. They encourage us to play with those identities, to re-create who we think we are, and who others believe us to be. That idea in itself is not inherently problematic. Where the problems arise is when the varieties of scripts that are presented to us as options are so constrained, and are representative of a paradigm that reflects a dishonoring of women's bodies and selves. It is problematic when the encouragement is not to experiment with identities and selves within a broad range where there are no limitations, but rather the encouragement is to be this one particular kind of woman, who is thin, who is white, who is eternally young, who is unrealistically beautiful, who is a sex object, and who is silent."

The interview continues for a few more moments, and then comes to a close. Once the camera is turned off, the interviewer commends me for my honesty and ability to be present in the moment. I laugh, and state that my whole research project involved being present with myself in the moment, and that at times, it would be nice to be completely ignorant. She laughs, relating to my struggle, and thanks me for my time. The sound technician approaches me on the way out the door, and says quietly so that only I can hear him "Thanks, I learned a lot." I feel the heat rise in my face. With this simple statement, he has challenged my fears that I have been perceived as vain and unintelligent. He has encouraged me to believe that I have explained my experience in a way that not only women who share similar experiences can understand, but men as well. He has understood. "You're welcome," I say looking him straight in the eye. I walk back into the main foyer, looking at my watch once again. 10:32 am. I head for the coffee

table, and chuckle to myself realizing that sometimes, it just takes a scheduling mishap to remind me of the power of autoethnographic research that is done from the body/self.



I lie face down on the grass, my body racked with exhaustion. My body emits one final shudder as I inhale deeply, and exhale slowly. My hair, plastered to my head in dampness, is beginning to dry. I pull my arms underneath my chest, and lift myself up to my elbows. I glance around, trying to figure out where I have ended up. “Where has the river taken me?” I wonder silently, noticing that my surroundings seem vaguely familiar, yet seem somewhat different than I remember. It is as if I am looking at a familiar landscape from a new vantage point, of which I previously had no knowledge. From a distance, I hear my name being called. I look to my left, and see my two friends approaching on the path that runs alongside the river. I struggle to lift my left arm and wave. They pause and both begin to wave at once. I lower my arm, content that they have seen me, and are on their way to help me find my way home. I lower myself flat to the ground again and breathe deeply. I relish the new resting place, and the temporary safety I have found here. In time, when I regain my strength, I will return to the river anew, determined to learn all I can from it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altheide, D. L. (2000). Identity and the definition of the situation in a mass-mediated context. *Symbolic Interaction*, 23(1), 1-27.
- Arnette, J. J. (1995). Adolescents' use of media for self-socialization. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24(5), 519-533.
- Arvay, M., Banister, E., Hoskins, M., & Snell, A. (1999). Women's lived experience of conceptualizing the self: Implications for health care practice. *Health Care for Women International*, 20, 363-380.
- Austin, E. W., & Johnson, K. K. (1997). Effects of general and alcohol-specific media literacy training on children's decision making. *Journal of Health Communication*, 2(1), 17-43.
- Avis, W. S. (Ed.). (1989). *Funk & Wagnalls Canadian College Dictionary*. Toronto, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1987). How the self became a problem: A psychological review of historical research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(1), 163-176.
- Benhabib, S. (1999). Sexual difference and collective identities: The new constellation. In M. A. O'Farrell & L. Vallone (Eds.), *Virtual gender: Fantasies of subjectivity and embodiment* (pp. 217-243). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Berel, S. R., & Irving, L. M. (1998). Media and disturbed eating: an analysis of media influence and implications for prevention. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 18(4), 415-430.
- Bloom, L. R. (1998). *Under the sign of hope: Feminist methodology and narrative interpretation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266 - 273.
- Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(2), 131-157.
- Braidotti, R. (1993). Embodiment, sexual difference and the nomadic subject. *Hypatia*, 8(1), 1-13.
- Britzman, D. P. (2000). "The question of belief:" Writing poststructural ethnography. In E. A. St. Pierre & W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 27-40). New York: Routledge.

- Cushman, P. (1990). Why the self is empty: Toward a historically situated psychology. *American Psychologist*, 45(5), 599-611.
- Denzin, N. (1989). *Interpretive Interactionism* (Vol. 16). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dinnerstein, M., & Weitz, R. (1994). Jane Fonda, Barbara Bush and other aging bodies: Femininity and the limits of resistance. *Feminist Issues*, 14(2), 3-24.
- Diprose, R. (1994). *The bodies of women: Ethics, embodiment and sexual difference*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Dorney, J., A. (1995). Educating toward resistance: A task for women teaching girls. *Youth and Society*, 27(1), 55-72.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669-683.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (Eds.). (1996). *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Vol. 1). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ferguson, A. (1997). Moral responsibility and social change: A new theory of self. *Hypatia*, 12(3), 116-141.
- Feuerstein, M. (1999). Media literacy in support of critical thinking. *Journal of Educational Media*, 24(1), 43-55.
- Gergen, K. J. (1996). Technology and the self: From the essential to the sublime. In D. Grodin & T. R. Lindlof (Eds.), *Constructing the Self in a Mediated World* (pp. 127-140). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J. (2000). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life* (2000 ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2000). The self in a world of going concern. *Symbolic Interaction*, 23(2), 95-115.
- Harrison, K., & Cantor, J. (1997). The relationship between media consumption and eating disorders. *Journal of Communication*, 47(1), 40-67.
- Harvard Medical School Office of Public Affairs (1999). Sharp rise in eating disorders in Fiji follows arrival of TV (News Release). Retrieved November 3, 2001 from <http://www.hms.harvard.edu/news/releases/599bodyimage.htm>

- Henderson-King, E., & Henderson-King, D. (1997). Media effects on women's body esteem: Social and individual difference factors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 27(5), 399-417.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hollows, J. (2000). *Feminism, femininity and popular culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hubler, A. E. (2000). Beyond the image: Adolescent girls, reading and social reality. *NWSA Journal*, 12(1), 84-99.
- Irving, L. M., & Berel, S. R. (2001). Comparison of media-literacy programs to strengthen college women's resistance to media. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 103-111.
- Ives, L. (2001, April). The bottom line on women's bodies now. *Marie Claire*, 110-111.
- Jane, D. M., Hunter, G. C., & Lozzi, B. M. (1999). Do Cuban American women suffer from eating disorders? Effect of media exposure and acculturation. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 21(2), 212-219.
- Jordan, G., & Weedon, C. (1995). *Cultural politics: Class, gender, race and the postmodern world*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kornreich, J. (2001). Do friends make you fat? *Ladies Home Journal*, 48-51.
- LaFrance, M. (1995). The embodiment of gender: Why the non-verbal behaviours of men and women differ, *University of Victoria Women's Scholars Series*. Victoria BC.
- Lather, P. (1993). Fertile obsession: Validity after poststructuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 673-693.
- Lavine, H., Sweeney, D., & Wagner, S. H. (1999). Depicting women as sex objects in television advertising: Effects on body dissatisfaction. *Personality and Social Psychology*, 25(8), 1049-1059.
- Luke, C. (1999). Media and cultural studies in Australia. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42(8), 622-626.
- Lybeck, J., & Neal, C. J. (1995). Do religious institutions resist or support women's "lost voice?". *Youth and Society*, 27(1), 4-28.
- McBrien, J. L. (1999). New texts, new tools: An argument for media literacy. *Educational Leadership*, 57(2), 76-80.

- Mehta, A., & Bondi, L. (1999). Embodied discourse: On gender and fear of violence. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 6(1), 67-85.
- Milkie, M. A. (1999). Social comparisons, reflected appraisals, and mass media: The impact of pervasive beauty images on black and white girls' self-concepts. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62(2), 190-210.
- Miller, A. (2001a, April). Does your size matter to men? *Marie Claire*, 106.
- Miller, A. (2001b, April). Would you rather lose 10 lbs. or win \$10,000? *Marie Claire*, 102-106.
- Myers, P. N., & Biocca, F. A. (1992). The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women. *Journal of Communication*, 42(3), 108-133.
- O'Brien, J. (1999). Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction. In M. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace* (pp. 76-106). London: Routledge.
- Ouellette, L. (1999). Inventing the Comso girl: Class identity and girl-style American dreams. *Media, Culture and Society*, 21, 359-383.
- Rabak-Wagener, J., Eickhoff-Shemek, J., & Kelly-Vance, L. (1998). The effect of media analysis on attitudes and behaviors regarding body image among college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 47(1), 29-36.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Skirting a pleated text: De-disciplining an academic life. In E. A. St. Pierre & W. S. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 153-163). New York: Routledge.
- Sampson, E. E. (1985). The decentralization of identity: toward a revised concept of personal and social order. *American Psychologist*, 40(11), 1203-1211.
- Singer, D. G., & Singer, J. L. (1998). Developing critical viewing skills and media literacy in children. *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, 557, 164-180.
- Smith, S. (1993). *Subjectivity, identity and the body: Women's autobiographical practices in the 20th century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- St. Pierre, E., A. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 477-515.

- Stice, E., Schupak-Neuberg, E., Shaw, H. E., & Stein, R. I. (1994). Relation of media exposure to eating disorder symptomatology: An examination of mediating mechanisms. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 103*(4), 836-840.
- Thompson, J. K., & Heinberg, L. J. (1999). The media's influence on body image disturbance and eating disorders: We've reviled them, now can we rehabilitate them? *Journal of Social Issues, 55*(2), 339-353.
- Thornton, B., & Maurice, J. (1997). Physique contrast effect: Adverse impact of idealized body images for women. *Sex Roles, 37*(5/6), 433-439.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory and the politics of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Weiss, G. (1999). *Body images: Embodiment as intercorporeality*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wilson, N. L., & Blackhurst, A. E. (1999). Food advertising and eating disorders: Marketing body dissatisfaction, the drive for thinness, and dieting in women's magazines. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling Education and Development, 38*(2), 111-123.

APPENDIX

Consent to be Identified in Research Study

This document serves to obtain your informed consent regarding your involvement with the study entitled *A Mediated Me: An autoethnographic study of self, body and media* that is being conducted by Kristy Dellebuur. Kristy Dellebuur is a graduate student in the department of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by calling 995 0171.

You are being asked to consent to participate in this research because information about you and your relationship with the researcher may be included in the research. This information will be presented in a way that will reveal your identity. The purpose of this form is to certify that you have read and agreed to have published all portions of the text produced by Kristy Dellebuur that pertain to your relationship with her, or identify you in any way.

As a graduate student, this research is part of the requirements for a degree in Master of Arts and it is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marie Hoskins. You may contact the supervisor at 721-7982.

The purpose of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the process of identity formation in relation to media and academic discourse, to produce a research document which explores the complexities of identity formation, and to increase the knowledge base about the relationship between identity formation and media in regard to disordered eating, for use in designing prevention programs and policy.

Research of this type is important for the areas of prevention programs and policy development, knowledge of identity and knowledge of qualitative methodology. Research into the area of identity formation and media provides important insights into how to work with women and adolescent girls in the area of body image. Research on this topic also informs program and policy development in the area of disordered eating. This research will expand the current knowledge base about self-theories, self in relation to media, and identity formation. This research will produce an autoethnographic text, thereby increasing the use of an innovative qualitative methodology. Writing an autoethnographic thesis that explores the complexities of the methodology increases the knowledge base about method, in addition to increasing knowledge about the topic of study.

Your agreement to be identified in this research document must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to consent to be identified in this document, you may withdraw this consent at any time (prior to publication) without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw your consent to be identified in the study, any text containing your name or identifying characteristics will be removed from the document.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, as the researcher is using herself as a source of data, those mentioned that are in relationship with the researcher (i.e. Researcher's mother or partner) cannot be guaranteed anonymity. Therefore, anyone in relationship to the researcher who is included in the text will have the authority to remove any or all sections of the text that identify and include them.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. In addition to being published as a public document, parts or all of this document will be presented at scholarly meetings and published in academic journals.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice President Research at the University of Victoria (250-721-7968).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Participant Signature

Date

A COPY OF THIS CONSENT WILL BE LEFT WITH YOU, AND A COPY WILL BE TAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER

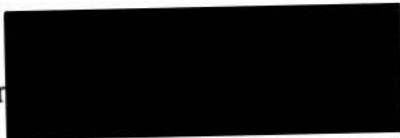
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENSE

I hereby grant the right to lend my thesis to users of the University of Victoria Library, and to make single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the Library of any other university, or similar institution, on its behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or a member of the University designated by me. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain by the University of Victoria shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis:

A Mediated Me: An Autoethnographic Study on Self, Body and Media

Author



Kristyll Jo-Ann Dellebuur

February 14, 2002

VITA

Surname: Dellebuur

Given Names: Kristyll Jo-Ann

Place of Birth: Yorkton, Saskatchewan, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1992 to 1997
University of Victoria	1999 to 2002

Degrees Awarded:

B.A.	University of Victoria	1997
------	------------------------	------

Honors and Awards:

University of Victoria Entrance Scholarship	1992
University of Victoria Fellowship	1999 to 2001

Publications:

Dellebuur, K. (1996). Child and youth care practice and eating disorders. *Journal of Child and Youth Care, 11*(2), 61-69

Hoskins, M.L. & Dellebuur, K. (2000). *Consuming identities: Young women, eating disorders and the media*. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health.