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‘Awaken your incredible’:

Love your body discourses and postfeminist contradictions

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Paper prepared for the 10th Anniversary of International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics

Congratulations to the International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics on its 10th anniversary! The aim of this paper is to chart the emergence of ‘Love your body’ discourses in the media over a period that is coterminous with the journal's life. Love your body discourses are positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women, that exhort us to believe we are beautiful, to ‘remember’ that we are ‘incredible’ and that tell us that we have ‘the power’ to ‘redefine’ the ‘rules of beauty’.

Love your body (LYB) discourses have emerged over the last decade as a result of multiple factors, including the growth of social media (Messaris, 2012), and attempts by more established media to respond to feminist critiques of what have been characterised as both ‘unrealistic’ and ‘harmful’ body image ideals. They are part of moves towards what has been understood as ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz, 2007) and ‘cool capitalism’ (McGuigan, 2012). LYB discourses are important and powerful because of the way they appear to interrupt the almost entirely normalised hostile judgment and surveillance of women's bodies in contemporary media culture. As such, they may have a profound affective force for women more accustomed to being invited to relate to their own and other

women's bodies in terms of 'flaws' (spots, cellulite, dry skin) and 'battles', (with eating disorders, fat, self-esteem). Online discussions testify to many women's relief and joy at the positive message of LYB discourses, and the emotional power of being encouraged–for once– to feel okay about themselves (e.g. Lynch, 2011). We have experienced this too, being moved to tears by many of the LYB videos circulating virally -marking the perpetually under-explored affective dimensions of ideology (Gill, 2008).

Notwithstanding this, in this article we seek to reflect critically on these discourses. It has been argued that the shortage of literature addressing this discursive formation contrasts with its proliferation over recent years (Lynch, 2011). The latest advertising campaigns by Dove (2013), Special K (2013) and Weightwatchers (2013) – and we could add many others - testify to the sustained spiralling of these discourses in the space of just one year. In subjecting them to a critical analysis we build on and extend existing literature by arguing that they do not represent a straightforward liberation from tyrannical beauty standards, and may in fact instantiate new, more pernicious forms of power that engender a shift from bodily to psychic regulation. We will argue that they are much more ambivalent texts than they seem to be, are difficult to critique and perhaps impossible (in Judith Butler's sense) to live.

This critical project is important as an examination of the evolution of a particular kind of contemporary discourse seemingly aligned with the historical emergence of 'the state of esteem' as a technology of citizenship and self-governance (see Cruikshank, 1993).

It is also important because it draws our attention to the dynamics of sexism as an ongoing set of discourses and practices, highlighting the capacity of media discourses to change and mutate in response to critique. Situated in a broader understanding of new racism, new sexism and new homophobia (e.g. Barker, 1981; Billig, 1988; Gill, 1993; Hansen-Miller & Gill, 2011; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) this perspective insists upon seeing these ideological formations and discursive practices as fluid and malleable practices of power rather than fixed or static sets of ideas, images or discourses. Indeed our examination of love your body discourses highlights what we regard as a distinctively postfeminist articulation of sexism that is quite distinct from earlier modalities. We start our discussion with a brief summary of the key motifs of LYB discourses, then look at their emergence genealogically before moving on to their critical interrogation.

Motifs of love your body discourse

"*You refused to give up trying; you survived school; you did not run from your first kiss; you sought out adventure; you fell out of love, bravely back into it; you said yes to always being there; you stood up for what you believed in; you conquered the impossible daily; you won unwinnable battles… these are your stories. Never forget how incredible you are*" Advert for Weightwatchers, 2013

At the heart of LYB discourses is the production of positive affect. If many media discourses about women's bodies (for example in magazines or advertising) are characterised by a focus on what is wrong ('dry, lumpy, orange peel skin') or how it can be improved ('get smoother-looking, softer skin'), then LYB discourses constitute a

dramatic – apparently counter-hegemonic – interruption. They tell women that they are 'sexy at any size', 'beautiful just the way you are', and should feel appreciative and confident about their bodies. An early example or forerunner of LYB came in a series of Nike adverts placed in women's magazines in the 1990s which asserted that Nike shared feminist anger about the ways in which women are set up to follow 'impossible goals', that are not 'real', but 'synthetic illusions' created by photographic retouching. These adverts 'kicked off' (Williamson, 1978) against ideals of bodily perfection and featured the (now obligatory) reassurance that 'you're beautiful just the way you are'. Some years later Dove's famous advertising campaign announced that 'beauty comes in many shapes and ages and sizes' and used putatively 'ordinary' women in its poster and magazine campaigns. As one slogan put it: 'firming the thighs of a size 8 model wouldn't be much of a challenge'. Other ads in the series invited us to choose between various preferred and dispreferred check-box options, for example 'fat' or 'fit' and 'wrinkled' or 'wonderful'. Accompanying text exhorted viewers to join the 'campaign for real beauty' set up by Dove (for a detailed discussion see Gill, 2007; Johnson & Taylor, 2008; Murray, 2012). Today the company/campaign has produced a steady stream of virally circulated messages and promotional videos, which target 'unhealthy' body image messages and call on women to believe in their own beauty.

A common theme in these communications is of a relationship to the self that has gone bad or been broken, for some – mostly unspecified – reasons. Another advert by Nike showed a cute white toddler with a pink ribbon in her hair. The slogan asked: 'when was the last time

you felt comfortable with your body?' The implied answer is that it was sometime between your first and second birthday- after which being a female embodied subject became difficult and painful. In Dove's 2013 film 'Selfie', girls' negative feelings about their bodies are attributed to their mothers, whilst the film stops just short of all-out mother-blaming by showing that they too are suffering from similarly low self-esteem and body self-hatred. Other communications indict vague targets such as 'TV' or 'magazines'.

It is interesting to note that social media are presented by contrast as a tool for subversion rather than part of the problem (the widespread hate speech and trolling of women going apparently unnoticed). In what we have elsewhere explored as 'selfie esteem' (Elias & Gill, forthcoming), LYB discourses suggest that self-photography and the related posting to sites such as Instagram or snapchat is a tool for building rather than undermining body confidence. 'You have the power to change and redefine what beauty is' says Dove's educator in the same film. 'The power is in your hands because now more than ever it is right at our fingertips: we can take selfies!' This captures both the celebratory tone of much of this discourse, as well as its focus upon self-empowerment- another key motif. It resonates with Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2013) discussion of 'the market for self-esteem' and its role in 'neoliberal brand culture'. Shrugging off negative body image and low self-esteem are presented as simple tasks: merely a matter of 'remembering' how incredible you are (as in the Weightwatchers advert above) or 'realising' (perhaps through a good selfie or some nice comments from other women) that 'I'm beautiful'. A powerful example of the engineering of this 'realisation' is to be found in another recent campaign, Dove Real Beauty Sketches,

in which a forensic artist draws two pictures of the same woman- one based on her self-description, the other (consistently more attractive) based upon what another woman says about her. The film tells us 'you are more beautiful than you think', and features the tearful epiphanies of women as they suddenly experience the mismatch between their own self-perceptions and how they may be seen by (in this film) kindly and generous others.

The rise and rise of LYB discourse

LYB discourse in advertising picked up on feminist critiques of the body-image pressures to which women are subjected (see Gill, 2007), and it also resonates with a wider movement towards the depiction of more accessible forms of 'cool' (Frank, 1998; Heath & Potter, 2004; Johnson & Taylor, 2008). The exponential growth of social media has amplified this trend, as advertisers look for ways to get people to circulate their promotional messages for them. Warm, funny or touching films with 'feel good' factor are much more likely to be shared online than straightforward promotional films. For example, Dove's Real Beauty Sketches has, at the time of writing, been viewed 62 million times on YouTube[i]; this represents far greater exposure than the company could hope to achieve on television, in cinemas or in print media. What's more, the link is shared with a select demographic, and the fact of receiving it from a friend with a message such as 'You must watch this- it made me cry' is believed by advertisers to heighten viewers' receptiveness as compared with traditional forms of advertising. (We discuss LYB advertising in more detail in Gill & Elias, 2015).

However, if commercially-motivated love your body discourse started in advertising, it quickly spread out across a range of media. Women's magazines are a key site of such ideas, materialised both as a predictable, stable visual regime of apparently 'natural' women's bodies, and a set of discourses that report on 'real women' talking about 'real problems' in intimate and confessional language (Murphy, 2013; Murphy & Jackson, 2011). They enjoin women to 'celebrate your curves', 'feel kick-ass sexy' and 'get body confident for the summer'. The content reflects women's magazines' attempts to distance themselves from widespread accusations of 'promoting' eating disorders, and their move into the territory of self esteem and well-being, alongside appearance. Here, then, confidence becomes a 'technology of sexiness' (Radner, 1993) that is more important than the look or size or shape of the body. This is reinforced through interviews with heterosexual men who extol the sexiness of body confidence, and advice from psychologists and lifestyle coaches who warn that neediness and insecurity are unattractive (see Gill, 2009; see also Lynch, 2011; Murphy, 2013; Murphy & Jackson, 2011).

Reality TV shows, too, have begun to adopt LYB discourse. 'Makeover' shows from the early 2000s –such as '*What Not To Wear'* and '*10 Years Younger'* often featured judgemental, even vicious, commentaries on their participants' appearance, part of what Angela McRobbie (2004) labelled the 'new nastiness' of television. More recent body-focused series, however, are characterised by a gentler, kinder ethos–best exemplified by the warmth of presenter Gok Wan in '*How To Look Good Naked'*, consistently encouraging women to 'make the most of your assets' and 'feel good' about themselves (see

also Peck, 2008 on Oprah). With a steady popularity in the UK since its debut in 2006 (Rodrigues, 2012), the show's narrative arc leads to a regular money shot in which the (previously insecure, shy, body-hating)woman must 'bare all' in a public space–for example walk in only her underwear along a catwalk set up in a shopping mall. As in magazines, the representation of the undressed, 'authentic' woman with nowhere to hide constitutes a defining visual trope of the show. But the makeover is arguably less about the body itself than about the attitude to the body. Couched in 'quasi-feminist terms of empowerment and antibeauty' it 'deemphasizes the sartorial makeover' and aims instead to 'engender intangible, long-term, internal change.' (Rodrigues, 2012:48). Indeed the body only becomes available to be celebrated and to be read as beautiful and desirable precisely because of the participant's new confidence and appreciation of her body–a body love, then, that is both demonstrated and constituted by the ability to put herself on display.

LYB discourse: a critical assessment

In a culture that tells women to hate their bodies, and subjects female celebrities and women in the public eye to 'nano-surveillance' (Elias, 2014) and excoriating critique for the most minimal of aesthetic 'misdemeanours' (having a stray undepilated hair, a blocked pore, lined hands), LYB discourses may seem a Good Thing, a welcome intervention into a landscape of hostile scrutiny. We want to suggest, however, that they are more ambivalent than they may at first appear.

The first and most obvious point of critique concerns what many have pointed out as the 'fakeness' of the visual regime of LYB (e.g. Murphy & Jackson, 2011; Murray, 2012). Many of the companies adopting the iconography of 'natural', 'real' women, and passing it off as 'authentic' use precisely the techniques that they claim to reject: make up and Photoshop. For instance, there has been discussion of the realness of/ 'visual fraud' of Dove Pro-Age texts (Murray, 2012:15) which revealed the company's espousal of the very same battery of visual effects (cosmetic and technological) of which it has been critical - for instance, in the 'Evolution' film which exposes the transformation of a 'real' woman into a billboard supermodel (see Murray, 2012:12).Real bodies – un-made up, naturally lit, and shot without the benefits of filters, skin tone retouching or resizing are just not lovable enough, it seems. Indeed, there is a marked disjuncture between the verbal and visual texts: while linguistic texts reject 'beauty pressures' and highlight the artifice and toxicity of perfect model ideals, the visual texts seem strikingly to resemble just these.

Linked to this 'paradox of realness', secondly, we would note that the apparent 'democratisation' of beauty and 'diversification' of body types, sizes and ages represents only a tiny shift from the normative ideal of female attractiveness seen in most adverts – what has been referred to as the 'diversity paradox' (Rodrigues, 2012) or 'a mediated ritual of rebellion' (Kadir & Tidy, 2011) (see also Gill, 2015, on race and class in modelling). In 2010 Dove was exposed placing an advert in New York City *Craigslist* searching for 'flawless' non-models for the next commercial. The Craigslist ad stated: 'Beautiful arms and legs and face… naturally fit, not too curvy or athletic… Beautiful hair

and skin is a must'. An article in *The Week*, commenting upon this, noted that Dove's 'come as you are' campaign has an 'if you're flawless, that is' clause attached. (To say nothing of the assumptions about age, cis gender and able-bodiedness involved)

Thirdly, it is striking to note that many of the companies at the forefront of promoting LYB are precisely those invested in maintaining female body dissatisfaction in order to sell their products (Gill, 2007; Johnson & Taylor, 2008; Lynch, 2011; Markula, 2001; Murphy & Jackson, 2011). A 2013 virally circulated advert for the diet cereal brand Special K is a good example. Entitled 'Let's shut down fat talk', it claims that 93% of women 'fat talk', that is, make negative comments about their own (and others) weight and attractiveness. It dramatises this powerfully by creating a shopping environment in which so-called 'actual fat talk' (such as 'I'm feeling so disgusted about my figure at the moment' or 'cellulite is in my DNA') is reproduced on labels and posters around the store. The unwitting female customers respond with horror: 'what <u>is</u> this?!' before acknowledging 'I've said those things about myself'. The advert concludes that we are doing this to ourselves and must all stop – a response that paradoxically involves <u>silencing</u> women: 'ssshhh' say the women together, 'let's shut down fat talk'. Again, this is an affectively powerful piece–much viewed on YouTube–but what might be overlooked in this call to arms is special K's own problematic role in decades of aggressive advertising that suggests that being lovable is contingent upon being thin. 'Stay special', the brand's byline, has often been used subtly (and in our view chillingly) to imply that bad things will happen to women who do not attend to their weight vigilantly (for example their partners will no longer love

them). Special K women are uniformly slim but curvy, and appear in a variety of red clothing (to match the brand colour) from swimsuits to slinky dresses. Meanwhile the Special K website features diet, 'slimming' and exercise plans and a BMI counter – somewhat at odds with its critique of 'fat talk' (though astute observers will note that this form of hate speech is not condemned in its own right, but only because it is a 'barrier' to 'weight loss'). Their 2014 slogan–in tune with the LYB and 'confidence movement' zeitgeist –promises that special K will help you 'Discover a more confident you'.

Not only do these current LYB advertisements obscure their own investment in the 'fat talk' they claim to oppose, but they also–seemingly paradoxically–rely upon repeatedly making visible what we might call 'hate your body' talk–reinforcing the very ideas they purport to challenge – and relocating them as individual women's problems (as if they were entirely disconnected from an injurious culture). This leads to a fourth point of critique, then, namely the way in which LYB discourses rely upon and reinforce the cultural intelligibility of the female body as inherently 'difficult to love'(see, for instance, Lynch, 2011; Murphy, 2013) In doing so they 're-cite' (Butler, 1997) hateful discourse about the female body that depends upon its normalised cultural pathologisation (McRobbie, 2009). As we discuss elsewhere (Elias & Gill, forthcoming), this is figured contradictorily as a profound and enduring broken relationship with the self, and yet, simultaneously, as superficial, self-generated and relatively easy for any individual woman to slough off. LYB discourse repeatedly suggests that women 'do this to themselves' (ie the blame

and responsibility lies with them) and can therefore simply 'stop' 'because the power is in your hands' (all quotes come from current advertising campaigns). As one woman in the special K advert discussed above put it 'fat talk… is like bullying yourself'. Once she realised this, another woman commented 'I can't speak that way about myself[anymore]'. In this way women's difficult relationships to their own embodied selves are both dislocated from their structural determinants in patriarchal capitalism and shorn of their psychosocial complexity (see also Lynch, 2011; Murphy, 2013). There is a sharp disjuncture, we contend, between the levels of pain and distress portrayed in LYB discourses we have considered, and the apparently 'simple' solutions on offer: 'all you need is a pen and a piece of paper' asserts 'Operation Beautiful', whilst other texts suggest a digital upgrade – 'selfie esteem' (Elias & Gill, forthcoming) or a 'camo confession' (Dermablend).

Finally, we would argue that above all LYB discourse is problematic for the way it is implicated in a new cultural scaffolding for the regulation of women. No longer is it enough to work on and discipline the body, but in today's society the beautiful body must be accompanied by a beautiful mind, with suitably upgraded and modernised postfeminist attitudes to the self. Women must makeover not simply their bodies but now–thanks to LYB discourse–their subjectivity as well, embracing an affirmative confident disposition, no matter how they actually feel. The psychosocial costs of this have barely begun to be studied. But as one student of ours vividly put it after hearing us discuss this material, if in the old regime you watched your weight and went to the gym, in the era of LYB you now go straight from the gym to the therapist's couch to

work on instilling the proper compulsory 'body love'. Far from representing a liberation, then, it would seem that LYB discourse is implicated in an ever deeper and more pernicious regulation of women, that has shifted from body as image/project to psychic life. Beauty becomes 'a state of mind', not in a feminist sense that involves a rejection of and liberation from patriarchal appearance standards, but in a way that represents an intensification of pressure and its extensification from body work to psychic labour. In line with other critics (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Murray, 2012; Rodrigues, 2012) we suggest that this move to the arena of subjectivity needs to be understood vis-a-vis a new historical articulation of power-knowledge in Western societies which highlights the interplay between neoliberal and postfeminist governmentality, emotional capitalism and the labour of self-confidence. Crucially then love your body discourses 'may be shaping subjectivities by enlisting audiences' labor in the service of institutional power (Murray, 2012:13) 'in a way that confounds any neat separation of the 'empowered' from the powerful'(Cruikshank, 1993:341) It is this entangled, multi-layering of oppression- and its penetration into psychic life – that our work aims to critique.

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[i] Whilst, at the time of writing, Dove's Patches has been viewed 20 million times on YouTube since its release three weeks earlier on April 9th 2014