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Elements of a Sensibility: Fitness Blogs and Postfeminist Media Culture

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Elements of a Sensibility: Fitness Blogs and Postfeminist Media Culture

by

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Abstract

Elements of a Sensibility: Fitness Blogs and Postfeminist Media Culture

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This thesis applies a feminist theoretical perspective to interrogate discourses of postfeminism, as well as the position of the female body, fitness, and resistance within contemporary American culture. I argue that women's fitness blogs are a vehicle for the production of Rosalind Gill's "postfeminist sensibility," focusing specifically on fitness bloggers' use of self-surveillance and monitoring, personal transformation or "makeovers", and intensified consumerism. Using ideological textual analysis of several fitness blogs as case studies, I examine the ways in which women publicly negotiate their relationships with their body through the documentation and disclosure of their food and exercise lifestyles. This thesis also acknowledges the feminist potential of fitness blogs as spaces in which women may strive towards body positivity and recovery from eating disorders, as well as challenge cultural expectations regarding female body and appetite.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> Now more than ever, it's easy to find an accountability buddy, a new treadmill routine, or just someone like you who is taking their health into their own hands. From mommies to college grads, from burpees to Body Pump, there is someone and something in the fitness blogging world for everyone.
>
> Katie Horwitch
> *The Chalkboard*

> My sister in law suggested more exercise but I wasn't ready to admit that's what I needed to do. That's when I discovered the rabbit hole of healthy living blogs and literally spent the next few weeks glued to the computer reading as many as I could find, emerging myself in other people's lives who had similar stories. These were real people, eating real food, loving exercise and loving their lives. Something about these blogs opened my eyes and my lifestyle began to change.
>
> Gina Matsoukas
> "About," *Running to the Kitchen*

Fitness blogging is defined by blogger Gina Harney as a way to "share some daily happenings, as well as quick, effective workouts and healthy recipes" ("About"). Fitness bloggers themselves are defined by the founders of the FitBloggin' conference as "anyone who blogs about fitness, wellness, good food and a healthy lifestyle, regardless of where they are in their journey…We may all be in different stages of fitness, but we all share one passion: To live a happy, healthy balanced life."[1] While a variety of individuals participate in fitness blogging, the public sharing of personal diet and exercise routines has different implications for women bloggers. Among the myriad ways women may use the Internet to express their passions and concerns, fitness blogs emerge as a particularly salient text through which to observe postfeminist female subjects as they navigate the

[1] The national FitBloggin' conference began in 2010, and is an annual two-day gathering for individuals who write fitness blogs ("About," *FitBloggin' '14*).

pressures of femininity, eating, and appearing, in a hyper-visual, body-obsessed, food-obsessed American culture. While women undertake fitness blogging as an ostensibly fun, carefree endeavor, their entrepreneurial efforts have crucial implications for the social visibility of women, the public expertise available to women, and the radical possibilities of the female voice. In a culture where many women still feel pressure to appear and act "perfect," there is much at stake in the foregrounding of women's bodies and eating habits. Fitness blogs allow women to not only participate in and profit from conventional body-policing practices of self-surveillance and monitoring, but also enable dialogue and generate supportive communities among women who have struggled with eating and exercise disorders.

This thesis interrogates the practice of women's fitness blogging and argues that the public display of expertise and the presentation of a perfected "private" self have become the new means to demonstrate the performance of an ideal postfeminist subjectivity, or "having it all." Rosalind Gill's definition of postfeminism as a "sensibility" frames much of my argument, which examines fitness blogs as "critical objects" of a postfeminist media culture (254). The postfeminist sensibility is marked by (among other elements) a focus on the body, specifically the transformation and monitoring of the body, as well as personal empowerment through intensified consumption (Gill 255). Several women's fitness blogs demonstrate the ways in which women may internalize specific practices of postfeminism such as self-surveillance (weighing oneself, counting calories, and measuring portions) and hyper-consumption (purchasing expensive foods and fitness accessories), and use their blogs to publicize

their adherence to culturally intelligible forms of eating and appearing. In many ways, fitness blogs reflect the popular discourse of women's magazines in their framing of the body as a "project of the self" (Banet-Weiser 281), endlessly maintained through exercise and attention to diet, and ostensibly motivated by the desire not to please others, but to empower oneself. However, while fitness blogs contribute to the proliferation of the postfeminist sensibility through their enthusiastic adherence to dieting and exercise, they can also function as much-needed support communities for women of all shapes and sizes as they navigate the day-to-day pressures of living in a female body. Therefore, this thesis ends with the acknowledgment that many fitness bloggers are in fact aware of the burden of postfeminism, while they do not call it by name, and are rather ambivalent about the project of postfeminist perfection.

The intention of this thesis is not to determine whether fitness blogs are "good" or "bad," nor to label them as positive or harmful spaces for women; rather, this thesis elucidates some of the ways in which fitness blogs reflect the concerns of American women as they engage with cultural discourses of postfeminism. Similarly, while I am critical of postfeminism I do not suggest that conforming to a healthy lifestyle is inherently negative or detrimental; rather fitness blogs demonstrate the ways in which the postfeminist elements of self-surveillance and transformation reward the women who participate in fitness blogging. Through these online "body projects," women create a space in which they may communicate the pleasures and fears associated with food and fitness, and engage in dialogue with other women who share common concerns. This

thesis attempts to understand the spaces and behaviors that allow women to be not only culturally visible, but also culturally valuable.

My research questions include: How are the postfeminist practices of self-surveillance and consumption articulated or reconfigured through the current food and fitness online blogging culture? How does a woman enact public postfeminist subjectivity through her blogging practices? More broadly, how are women responding to current discourses of health and body image? What role does knowledge and expertise play? And finally, what kind of cultural agency is available to the authors of these projects? Specifically, do they have the ability to subvert cultural expectations of female consumption and bodily comportment?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

This thesis applies a feminist theoretical perspective to interrogate discourses of postfeminism, as well as the position of the female body, health, food, fitness, and resistance in contemporary culture. Using ideological textual analysis of several fitness blogs as case studies, I examine the ways in which women publicly negotiate their relationships with their body through documentation and disclosure of their food and exercise lifestyles. While contemporary feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo (1993) and Rosalind Gill (2007) have expressed a preoccupation with the female body, especially the intensification in practices of self-surveillance among young American women since the early 1990s (Bartky 1990, McRobbie 2009), the significance of fitness

blogging for the modern American female remains largely overlooked in postfeminist scholarship.

Current research examines only the general trend of food blogging, and does not differentiate between the different genres and varying intentions of the authors. Some scholars are suspicious of these female-authored culinary projects, such as Paula Salvio's "Dishing It Out: Food Blogs and Postfeminist Diversity," which views them as a return to retrograde domestic femininity, while Emily Matchar's *Homeward Bound* takes a celebratory approach, claiming that these women participate in a valuable reskilling movement. But there remains no literature addressing the gendered and cultural implications of fitness blogs, on which many women post pictures of daily meals and demonstrate an ongoing monitoring of and engagement with their physical condition. These differences in content and intention suggest that the experiences documented on fitness blogs cannot be compounded with the experiences of women food bloggers. As a result, this research brings together several disparate fields to study a previously unaddressed topic. These texts can be broadly categorized into three fields: Theories of Postfeminism and Neoliberalism; Feminist Theory; and Discourses of Food, Fitness, and Nutrition. My work seeks to fill in the gaps in many of the contemporary texts, where authors have ignored or disagreed about the impact of online food and fitness blogging, as well as the implications of this postfeminist online subjectivity as public performance.

Theories of Postfeminism and Neoliberalism

This thesis utilizes feminist academic writings on postfeminism, but also seeks to incorporate discussion of fitness blogging into the critical landscape of postfeminist media culture. In "Postfeminist Media Culture?" Rosalind Gill argues for several elements of a "postfeminist sensibility," which provides the principal framing theory for the first two chapters. Fitness blogs specifically draw their logic from the postfeminist reasoning that surveillance of the female body and consumption are naturalized female behaviors. Fitness blogs also enable the display of the ideal postfeminist subject through their emphasis on individualism, choice, and empowerment (Gill 255). Gill's framework also provides an understanding of the race and class implications of fitness blogging, which overwhelmingly reflect postfeminist media culture's privileging and targeting of white, middle-to-upper class, able-bodied women.

Angela McRobbie's postfeminist lens frames the second chapter's central argument that fitness bloggers display neoliberal, consumerist attitudes in their daily posts. Fitness blogs provide young women with an avenue to become recognized as culturally valuable citizens through their consumption decisions; they also showcase the normalized "self-monitoring practices" typical of a postfeminist subject, which McRobbie identifies as "the diary, the life-plan, the career pathway" (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 19). Fitness blogs fulfill each of these functions, but differ in one important way; unlike diaries, fitness blogs are completely public. The public aspect of fitness blogs makes the narratives and images women choose to display even more crucial to understanding the ways in which women are valued in postfeminist society, and the ways

in which they may present themselves in a successful, profitable manner through a transformation narrative.

Neoliberal rhetoric is integral to the transformation component of postfeminism, so an understanding of neoliberalism is an essential foundation for discussion of fitness blogging. Henry Giroux describes neoliberalism as a cultural framework that masks social differences by encouraging lifestyles that assume with enough effort all people, regardless of race, class, gender, or ability, have the means to achieve this desired lifestyle (11). As a pervasive social force, neoliberalism embodies the rhetoric of the American Dream by encouraging upward mobility through specific consumption behaviors. Fitness blogs certainly reflect this capitalist logic in their display of food and fitness products, all designed to improve one's body and overall lifestyle. And when considering fitness blogs as a mobilization of the postfeminist sensibility, the effect of one's race and social class upon access to such resources (and thus the ability to participate in fitness culture and/or fitness blogging) is especially significant. Neoliberalism's focus on individual responsibility is fundamental to discourses of postfeminism, as well as the rhetoric surrounding weight loss in America. Lisa Duggan argues that personal responsibility is one of the key tenets of neoliberalism (12), which shifts the burden of failure from oppressive institutions and places all accountability upon the individual. In this framework, it appears to be a matter of choice whether or not one succeeds at the project of fitness.

Discourses of neoliberal responsibility are deeply entangled with discourses of eating and exercise; Carole Counihan's "Food Rules in the United States: Individualism,

Control, and Hierarchy" argues that "food rules" (i.e., "proper" consumption behaviors) are completely aligned with one's social status in America (114). Counihan also effectively demonstrates the ways in which these behaviors of weight loss and "responsible" consumption are rewarded (118). Alice Julier's "The Political Economy of Obesity: The Fat Pay All" addresses the problematic rhetoric of "responsibility" surrounding body size in America, in the context of the media's "moral panic" surrounding obesity (*Food and Culture: A Reader* 482). This demonization of obesity and subsequent valuing of fitness is integral to the logic of the transformation narrative enacted on many women's fitness blogs.

On fitness blogs, both the purchase and consumption of food is "a strategy for the production of the self" (Tasker and Negra 2), a strategy which Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra recognize as fundamental to the formation of the postfeminist subject. Fitness bloggers who engage in acceptable consumption behaviors place themselves in a position of considerable expertise. However, the ability to access resources that enable this production of the self considerably affects one's ability to follow these food rules, demonstrating the importance of addressing the kinds of bodies that are privileged to participate in crafting an identity through food. This is overlooked by many food studies texts, however Counihan and Julier's observations of slenderness/fitness as cultural capital acknowledge the identity that enables a postfeminist transformation and self-surveillance, and the subsequent positioning of oneself as a "proper" subject through fitness blogs.

Feminist Theory

Fitness blogs enable a spectrum of behaviors related to eating and the female body; while many of these behaviors adhere to the logic of the "postfeminist makeover," there are just as many that resist. Importantly, these dueling sentiments often exist within the same blog. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* provides a lens through which to engage in a more complex discussion of power, especially the ways in which personal decisions about one's body are shaped by larger cultural contexts. Bordo examines the ways in which men and women have traditionally been expected to manage their relationships with food and appetite, and the consequences of such practices for women. While Bordo's argument draws from case studies that are over twenty years old, it nonetheless provides a very effective frame for the contemporary treatment of female appetite on fitness blogs.

Fitness blogs offer a solution to Bordo's lamentation that the public act of a woman eating is depicted as one of "despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation" (126). Rather, the conversations among authors and readers on highly visible fitness blogs have the potential to reclaim space and appetite for women by turning the sinful and secretive act of eating food into a pleasurable activity, thereby transforming the "rhetoric of indulgence," which has historically restricted women's hungers (Bordo 129). However, fitness blogs also represent the contradictions inherent in postfeminism; while claiming to disavow "restriction and denial of hunger," which Bordo argues are "central features of the construction of femininity" (130), these emotions and disorders remain complexly woven into the structure of the fitness blog, and often appear reframed as

enjoyable activities or personal challenges to be overcome through one's successful determination.

While contemporary feminist research reveals that body dissatisfaction and diet anxiety are common experiences among Western women, the recent intensification of display in postfeminist media culture has left women under powerful scrutiny, and even compelled to turn the inspecting lens upon themselves. The extensive devotion to diet and exercise celebrated on fitness blogs reflects the American woman's internalization of this bodily discipline. To theorize the postfeminist female subject's adherence to these potentially harmful disciplines of self-policing and surveillance, I utilize Sandra Lee Bartky's "The Modernization of Patriarchal Power," which interrogates larger issues of power and internalization, as well as the questions of agency and choice so central to postfeminist media culture. Bartky's use of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* also allows this thesis to imagine the Internet as a panopticon in which the invisible, ever-policing gaze of culture is normalized to the point of enthusiastic incorporation, and used by women bloggers to generate a sense of personal empowerment and even commercial benefit.

Discourses of Food, Fitness, and Nutrition

Women's fitness blogs exist within the framework of American food and fitness lifestyle media; because such cultural discourses are prevalent in fitness blogging, the following literature is necessary to comprehend the current cultural context of fitness blogs. Among the Western middle and upper classes, culinary knowledge has acquired

such cultural resonance that its deployment in fitness blogs validates women's engagement with certain lifestyles; practices previously viewed as frivolous or unhealthy now have an aura of expertise and social responsibility. By choosing to consume "correctly," these women fitness bloggers position themselves in a place of considerable power. In "Oliver's Twist: Leisure, Labor, and Domestic Masculinity in The Naked Chef," Joanne Hollows argues that contemporary television has helped instill cooking with considerable cultural capital, shaping the formerly degraded "feminine" chore of cooking into a much-lauded pursuit of expertise. Similarly, in "Caring About Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen," Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann conduct interviews to explore the position of men and women within "foodie discourse,"[2] which is a central component of fitness blogs. This work also draws crucial attention to the complex emotions that women may feel when they engage with food, as they often occupy a space between personal pleasure and responsibility for others.

Research on fitness blogging is incredibly limited; there are only a few academic articles about *food* blogging, and still fewer that interrogate the postfeminist implications of this practice. In "Dishing It Out: Food Blogs and Post-Feminist Domesticity," scholar Paula Salvio investigates several food blogs through a lens of postfeminism, but remains solely concerned with narratives of postwar domesticity and the reassertion of "natural sexual difference" in these blog narratives (34). While natural sexual difference is an important component of many food blogs, the demonstrations of consumption and self-

[2] The American Heritage Dictionary describes a foodie as "one who has an ardent or refined interest in food; a gourmet." ("American Heritage Dictionary Entry: "Foodie")

surveillance on fitness blogs also require this rigorous analysis. This thesis enriches Salvio's argument and contributes to a larger picture of women's food and fitness blogging. Similarly Renee Powers' "Postfeminist Social Networks: Traditional Femininity in Life-Coaching Blogs and Image-Aggregating Websites" explores the reproduction of the postfeminist sensibility on women's domesticity blogs and the image-based online cultures of *Pinterest* and *Etsy* (10). Her analysis of online postfeminist practices provides a useful model for studying the contemporary female experience in fitness blogging cultures, as well as the potential for feminist consciousness-raising on these sites (Powers 5).

Most feminist analyses of food blogs are concerned with the cheerful depictions of domestic labor, ignoring the ways in which women engage emotionally with the food itself. Carole Counihan's "What Does It Mean to Be Fat, Thin, and Female?: A Review Essay" argues that food is a site of struggle where women "deal with their lack of power" (83); similarly, the fitness blogger's textual and visual documentation of daily work-outs and meals is a public record of this struggle for power, and is presented as a performance of empowerment. In "The Appetite as Voice," Joan Brumberg analyzes anorexia as a product of social conditions in the Victorian period, observing the ways in which engagement with food was seen as self-expression, as well as a display of one's morals. She addresses the kind of privileged and gendered subject produced by this performance of consumption and self-surveillance: a white middle-class female, one very similar to that produced by the activities of fitness blogging. In fitness blogs, the potentially

"guilty" act of eating is similarly excused or displaced, couched in terms that frame consumption as something purposeful and beneficial to the self.

Throughout the thesis I occasionally refer to fitness blogs as "body projects," borrowing the term from Joan Brumberg's book entitled *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. The use of this term to describe fitness blogs reflects a shift in the formerly private practice of self-surveillance; due to the increasing commonplaceness of disclosure on the Internet, for many women monitoring one's eating habits and body fat need no longer be an entirely secretive endeavor, restricted to a personal journal. As public, widely circulated "body projects," fitness blogs are significant cultural texts that enable a range of engagements across their authorship and readership. Participants may seek workout inspiration, fuel for harmful behaviors, tips for eating disorder recovery, or simply new recipes. Whether a woman loves to eat and exercise, or is trying to improve her relationship with food and fitness, fitness blogs demonstrate the logic of postfeminism that inspires many women to continue to see their body as an ongoing project, to be forever updated and maintained.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN AND METHODOLOGY

Due to the scope of this project and the overwhelming volume of fitness lifestyle blogs, I chose to focus on a select few fitness blogs that I felt demonstrated a productive engagement with the postfeminist subjectivity. Gina Harney's *The Fitnessista* is the case study for the first chapter, which introduces the fitness blog as a site of the postfeminist practices of self-surveillance and monitoring of one's appetite and body. Brittany

Mullins's *Eating Bird Food* is central to the second chapter's examination of the display of neoliberalism and postfeminist consumerism on fitness blogs. The final chapter draws from several fitness blogs, including *Peanut Butter Fingers, Sweet Tooth Sweet Life,* and *Live Laugh Eat,* to examine the ways in which women use fitness blogs as a forum for recovery, and may create a sympathetic community of women.

I begin by defining the term "fitness blogs," which needs clarification and distinction from the similar term "food blogs." Fitness blogs (also referred to by some bloggers as "healthy lifestyle" blogs) differ from food blogs in several ways. Food blogs build on the conventions of the cookbook, which features pages of recipes with occasional pictures, and perhaps some details of the author's life to give the meal context. Food blogs elaborate on the context of the meal and often result in an ongoing narrative of the author's life. Fitness blogs similarly celebrate food and eating, but typically engage in stricter self-surveillance, as well as a more personal narrative because the focus is specifically upon the author's body and the food that goes into it. While the focus on food and eating occasionally addresses topics like eating disorders and negative body image, fitness bloggers make an effort to frame the engagement with food as "fun," reflecting Rosalind Gill's observation that in the postfeminist moment, engagement with these disciplinary practices is meant to be a matter of enjoyable choice (Gill 262).

One of the main challenges of this project is the diversity of the sample. Like most postfeminist texts, fitness blogs typically attract a white, able-bodied, middle-to-upper class subject, and this demographic was reflected in the blogs surveyed for this

project.[3] Through snowball sampling[4] I initially sifted through hundreds of blogs, focusing on those that drew a large readership and demonstrated a productive engagement with the topics of eating and exercise. I eventually performed a content analysis of fourteen fitness blogs. Using codes that included body, exercise, eating, eating disorder, food, health, healthy food, I analyzed the content of each blog's biographical "About Me" section as well as the most popular posts, which I determined by the number of comments following the post, or through the "popularity" feature on the blog if it was available. From this sample, I chose to analyze several blogs that focus heavily on exercise, healthy eating, and the writer's relationship with her body. To measure popularity I examined *Facebook* and *Twitter* followers, and the amount of comments on food and fitness posts. I assumed most readers are lurkers, so the numbers of followers on *Facebook* and *Twitter* were an effective way to measure reader interest.

The first chapter, "'Divulging the Eat Deets': Self-Surveillance and Monitoring in Women's Fitness Blogs," establishes the place of contemporary fitness discourses within postfeminism, and examines the role of fitness blogging as a new vehicle for the production of this sensibility. Blogger Gina Harney of *The Fitnessista* enacts postfeminist practices of self-surveying through her respective relationships with exercise and diet, featuring daily posts of meals and changes in her muscle tone. Harney exhibits characteristics of an average middle-class twenty-something white American female

[3] Only one of the bloggers featured here is not white; Allie Mak of *Live Laugh Eat* is Asian American.
[4] This was achieved by examining every single blog in the blog roll of an author, and then all of the blogs in the blog rolls of each of those authors, etc. This could represent a limitation to the sampling method, as white bloggers might be more likely to engage with and recommend blogs of other white women.

fitness blogger. She has struggled with her weight; in the "About" section of her blog, she mentions losing forty pounds prior to the start of the blog, following by ongoing revelations about eating healthy foods and generally taking care of her body. As the abundance of reader comments and *Facebook* followers demonstrate, Harney is one of the most popular in a network of female "fitbloggers" who promote healthy foods and fitness products, and attend conventions that celebrate this lifestyle. To determine which posts are the most relevant and important to Harney and her readers, I began my analysis with the links she provides on her main page and followed the recommended posts at the bottom of each post. Harney's performance of self-surveillance through her chronicling of highly regimented fitness routines and healthy recipes is a postfeminist "project of the self" that reflects Gill's postfeminist sensibility. Like most fitness bloggers, Harney frames the surveillance and maintenance of her body as "fun," while simultaneously criticizing and enabling certain dieting and exercise behaviors. This chapter also addresses the ways in which fitness blogs encourage practices that build upon a culture of eating and exercise disorder. The comments on the blog, and the collective self-surveying practices that exist in the dialogue between women demonstrate both the ways in which disorder is understood on fitness blogs, and the ways in which policing is a shared responsibility, rather than imposed by some women upon others.

The second chapter, "'Striving for 'Balance': Transformation Narratives and Neoliberal Expertise" demonstrates the ways in which fitness blogs function as a fundamental text of postfeminist neoliberal subjectivity, a "makeover" narrative in which bloggers transform themselves from unhealthy, unhappy women into educated experts,

and receive substantial economic incentives for their participation. Blogger Brittany Mullins's *Eating Bird Food* exemplifies the ways in which a contemporary American female constructs a public presence of postfeminist expertise using this surveillance of her private life, specifically her transformative weight loss and current fitness lifestyle. In particular, the "About Me" section of her blog functions as an introductory narrative, providing weight loss details that set Mullins up for considerable expertise, and the rewards that Western culture bestows upon a certain amount of personal transformation. The use of "before and after" images in "About Me" and throughout the blog establish her evolving body as a marker of expertise. Lastly, the placement and prominence of advertisements on the site, as well as her frequent product endorsements both result from and serve as markers of her authority and expertise in this space. Mullins's endorsed posts about foods like Nature Made® VitaMelts™ and fitness routines like Body for Life Training show the ways in which she benefits from her adherence to this lifestyle. This chapter addresses postfeminist practices of self-surveillance, but concentrates more on the ways in which these behaviors generate substantial expertise, and allow women to achieve cultural value and visibility.

The third chapter, "Embracing 'IMperfection': Fitness Blogs as Feminist Therapy" examines the ways in which fitness blogs may function as supportive communities for women struggling with eating and exercise disorders. Fitness blogs like *Oh She Glows, Carrots 'N' Cake, Nutritionella,* and *Sweet Food Sweet Life* use personal narratives and stories of recovery to form community, ultimately suggesting that for women, eating need no longer be a shameful, secretive act as Susan Bordo has argued

(129). This chapter also addresses the relationship between fitness blogs and online pro-anorexic (pro-ana) communities, observing that fitness blogs position themselves as a culturally acceptable way to engage with disorder, and demonstrate the fine line between making "responsible" consumption decisions, and restricting one's calorie intake to lose weight. Lastly, this chapter addresses the ways in which fitness blogs may provide, intentionally or not, a feminist community. The dialogue among women within the comments section of fitness blogs not only generates evaluative feedback for the author's recipes and workouts, but also supports a community in which women may discuss their experiences and the cultural treatment of women, and feel that their voices are heard.

CONCLUSION

As authors of fitness blogs, women may engage in the production of an identity that demonstrates an internalization of cultural messages regarding consumption, exercise, and healthy lifestyle. However, through weekly recipes, workouts, and insights women also express their own responses and resistances to the pressures of postfeminism and healthy living. In this way, their actions reconfigure the traditional sensibilities of postfeminism identified by Rosalind Gill, and demonstrate the ways in which internalized structures of power can become adapted to the current "foodie" cultural environment. A close reading of these online posts and the bloggers' interactions with food and other women demonstrates that the cultural implications of women's food and fitness blogs need to be addressed within the larger framework of postfeminism, to explore how

women are consciously or unconsciously enacting and negotiating these postfeminist subjectivities in the current cultural context.

As spaces for conversation, women's fitness blogs also have the potential to start important dialogues about female body image and personal relationships with eating. Feminist studies lack serious attention to fitness blogs, even though these online body projects consolidate many topics common to feminist literature. The new media environment, heavily marked by a celebration of eating and cooking and the popularity of food and fitness blogs, begs a reexamination of the practices of self-surveillance, individualism, and choice that are so central to discourses of postfeminism in the early twenty-first century (Gill 2007). This thesis seeks to broaden the scope of postfeminist media culture by examining the Internet as a technology of this sensibility. While this thesis is at times critical of the practice of fitness blogging, it also strives to respect the struggles of these women as authors of their stories, as they publicly navigate the expectations of being a postfeminist woman. More extensive work needs to be done with fitness blogs to determine the larger implications of this phenomenon, especially the benefits of this online engagement for the community of women formed around food and fitness; by taking on the role of lifestyle advisor and food expert, fitness bloggers may regain control of the body that for many women has been a site of struggle, and by sharing their stories may encourage others to live in ways that benefit them, rather than strive towards an unattainable ideal.

Chapter 2: *"Divulging the Eat Deets": Postfeminist Self-Surveillance on Women's Fitness Blogs*

> But preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness are not abnormal. Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of these norms.
>
> Susan Bordo
> *Unbearable Weight*

This chapter seeks to examine the ways in which women experience and reproduce the sensibility of postfeminist self-surveillance by documenting their eating and exercise routines on their fitness blogs. This is not to say that all fitness blogs incorporate these same practices to this degree; rather, the blogs are a product of this environment, and authors participate to varying degrees. There are many ways to read this incredibly complex behavior, as there are different ways in which various women with different goals enact their practices of surveillance. Susan Bordo (1993) and Sandra Lee Bartky (1990), among other feminist theorists (Counihan 1999, Gill 2007, Negra 2009), have argued that the maintenance of one's weight through dieting and exercise is a practice of disciplinary social control. This chapter acknowledges that fitness blogs frequently celebrate women's obedience to such discipline, but also recognizes the blogs as spaces in which women may display an ongoing negotiation and critical engagement with postfeminist discourses.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the conventions of fitness blogging culture, which builds on the postfeminist practice of framing the labor of the self as "fun," and draws heavily on the online culture of female eating and body

disorders in its use of images. The second section examines the ways in which *The Fitnessista* author Gina Harney monitors and displays her eating habits through textual narrative and images. The third section examines the ways in which Harney documents her exercise routines and the display of her fit body. The fourth and final section examines the power dynamics between bloggers and commenters as they interact around this surveillance on the fitness blog.

Because fitness blogs so align with mainstream discourses of health and fitness, it is tempting to dismiss them as a form of obedience or complete internalization of "patriarchal standards of acceptability" (Bartky 77). On the surface, fitness blogs appear to be textbook demonstrations of the self-monitoring postfeminist female subject, adhering to remarkably white middle-class standards and culturally valued definitions of "healthy." However, my research has demonstrated that no two fitness blogs are alike, and many women encourage body positivity and fight cultural standards of female body size and shape while at the same time adhering to such standards through their fitness regimes and surveillance of eating. The women in my sample occasionally express dissatisfaction with the treatment and representation of females in Western media culture, but this sentiment is buried beneath posts of workouts and documentation of food choices that inevitably undermine their objections.

To examine the significance of women's fitness blogs, one must start with an overview of contemporary American popular culture, and the ways in which it intersects with the postfeminist sensibility. From the government's "Let's Move" campaign to films like *Food Inc*. and *Supersize Me* there is heightened social awareness of fitness and

nutrition, and a hierarchy of bodies and foodways in which some people consume "correctly" and some do not (Counihan, "Food Rules" 114). The target demographic of mainstream foodie and fitness culture is typically a white and middle-to-upper class person, with disposable income to support a "healthy lifestyle." While the incitement to eat properly and maintain the body has plagued white Western women for generations (Brumberg 2008), food advertising and "foodtainment"[5] (Villarreal) have reached pervasively into middle-to-upper class American media culture. As media outlets simultaneously encourage and discourage practices of consumption and self-surveillance by bombarding viewers with contradictory images of people eating and purchasing food, it is even more difficult to negotiate what Susan Bordo calls the "regulation of desire" (199). Along with the mainstreaming of foodie culture, the medical framing of obesity (Julier) and subsequent health initiatives has led to an increase in diagnoses of obsessive healthy eating and phobias related to food (Schildhause). There are even smartphone apps to track workout miles, and not only calories burned, but also calories consumed (Cohen). As men and women attempt to navigate this culture of consumerism, maintaining the "perfect body" has become a more difficult and thus a more respected endeavor (Bordo 202).

While men and women may participate equally in dieting and exercise, women have more at stake because they still face more media shaming for their physical appearance. A glance at popular magazines and beauty advertisements suggests that

[5] This is defined as food media, usually food reality television shows and cooking competitions but also including food blogs, *Instagram*, etc.

dominant cultural notions of a "perfect body" are consistently presented as central to a Western woman's identity. While television programs like ABC's *Extreme Weight Loss* and NBC's *The Biggest Loser* glorify the project of personal transformation for men and women, the ideal is taken further with photoshopped images of celebrities in magazines and clothing advertisements, all suggesting the necessity of slenderness for a better life. This "perfect body" is not a reality for many women, and it is indeed either difficult or impossible to attain; this encourages a culture of ongoing labor upon the body through dieting and exercise (Bartky 66). Rosalind Gill argues that body policing is a central component of the postfeminist sensibility, noting a "dramatically increased intensity of self-surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation)" (261). Most typically, media encourage women to view this labor as "'fun' or 'pampering' or 'self-indulgence,'" and importantly, it "*must never* be disclosed" (Gill 262). This health and fitness discourse addresses and produces a very specific middle-class white femininity (Negra 127),[6] and as a result hyper-surveillance is second nature to these women, and has been "incorporated into the structure of the self" (Bartky 77), much like other more traditional expectations of femininity. The rise in eating disorders over the past decade can be attributed in part to the intensification of this poisonous culture (Brumberg *The Body Project* 124).

[6] This is not to say that all participants are necessarily white and middle-class. While the bloggers overwhelmingly fit this profile, there were some exceptions, such as Allie Mak of *Live Laugh Eat*, who is a young Asian American woman.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEILLANCE CULTURE: THE INTERNET AS PANOPTICON

Fitness blogs are dependent on the postfeminist cultural context, and enable the intensification of personal surveillance. As "body projects" (Brumberg 1997), fitness blogs are a culturally intelligible form of self-expression because many women have not only internalized hegemonic notions of beauty to the point of a unhealthy relationship with their bodies, but also because many women regularly participate in the normalized practices of monitoring their own behavior, their physical shape, and their eating habits (Bordo 203). While fitness blogs demonstrate that regulation is increasingly more routine for white middle-class women, the Internet has dramatically changed the opportunities and modalities available to these women for self-scrutiny, and for the scrutiny of others. Women who participate in this online discourse, either as bloggers, commenters, or lurkers (Nonnecke), occupy a space much like Foucault's panopticon, in which one has the potential to be "totally seen, without ever seeing" and to be one who "sees everything without ever being seen" (Foucault 201). Fitness blogs are public, image-heavy texts in which communal policing is an implicit facet of participation; because the goal is to share healthy lifestyle information, women post their "eats" and exercise routines with the expectation of receiving feedback from readers. Thus as a tool of surveillance, these fitness blogs also complicate Gill's description of "regulatory labor" (261);[7] rather than a

[7] Gill defines regulatory labor as any maintenance of the body that contributes to the postfeminist project of "upper-class white ideal" femininity, including exercise, dieting, makeup, and plastic surgery (261). This labor is meant to be a secret, and in public spaces women should appear "unconcerned" about her appearance (262).

"disavowal" of regulation, this content is a public celebration of disclosure, and the casualness of sharing information has become very commonplace.

Personal trainer Gina Harney's *The Fitnessista* demonstrates the ways in which a woman enacts the postfeminist practice of self-surveillance on her fitness blog, and serves as the main case study for this chapter. Like most fitness blogs, *The Fitnessista* documents many aspects of Harney's life such as marriage, work, and motherhood, but the display of her eating and exercising habits are most relevant for the chapter. *The Fitnessista* has a large reach, with over 18,000 *Facebook* likes and 20,000 *Twitter* followers. Harney's blog is representative of the majority of fitness blogs in many ways, such as her motivation to start the blog after losing forty pounds, and her focus on sharing her personal relationships with eating and exercise. Harney's description of the blog is typical of fitness blogs; she calls it a place to describe "some daily happenings, as well as quick, effective workouts and healthy recipes," and explains her "eating style," which has evolved significantly since she began writing in 2008 ("About"). However, her departures and criticisms from the typical fitness blog (such as refusing to post typical "before and after" pictures of herself) demonstrate the diversity of expression possible in these online projects.

Like most fitness bloggers, Harney performs public self-surveillance in two areas: the first is in the detailed "About" section typical of fitness blogs, in which she explains her healthy habits and summarizes her progression towards a healthy lifestyle. This section describes the initial transformation of her self; on other fitness blogs it can also lay the groundwork for transformation if the blog itself is the transformation project. The

second area in which Harney displays self-surveillance is the daily blog posts themselves, which serve as an ongoing record of her eating and exercise habits. The format of these image-heavy, point-by-point chronicles is similar to what McRobbie recognizes as the "diary" or "life-plan" central to the monitoring practices of the postfeminist subject (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 19). The remainder of this chapter will examine Harney's daily blog and specifically evaluate the various strategies she utilizes to present her meals and her body to a public community of women. Because self-surveillance is integral to fitness blogs, this chapter will also address the issues that surface within the fitness blogging community as a result of widespread policing and pressure for disclosure.

"DIVULGING THE EAT DEETS": IMAGES OF FOOD AS SELF-SURVEILLANCE

Fitness bloggers place great significance on images of food, not only to demonstrate their devotion to healthy eating, but also to frame the act of self-surveillance as a normal social practice, rather than a restrictive behavior. Images of food have become commonplace in American culture; in any restaurant one can see men and women taking pictures of their meal for the sake of posting on *Instagram* (Kingkade), and many food blogs are famous for their use of hyper-aestheticized pictures of meals; popular website *Buzzfeed* even had a list of "50 Best Food Blog Photos Of 2012" (Sanders). Food blogs build on this normalization of "food porn;"[8] in addition to featuring pictures of meals that would be found in traditional cookbooks, they often

[8] Elspeth Probyn describes the culture of food pornography as one in which increased media coverage allows viewers to consume sensationalized cooking shows and images of food, often with no intention of cooking the food themselves (107).

feature photos of restaurant meals, or even packaged food products. Fitness blogs draw on a similar tradition, building on the celebratory energy of food blogs in their use of food images and graphics. However, as a tool of self-surveillance, images of food take on additional significance and serve as evidence of adherence to one's life-plan or public diary. Therefore, fitness blogs often take this visual documentation further and provide images of each breakfast, lunch, dinner, and the snacks in between. Recipe or no recipe, women fitness bloggers present a sizable portion of their daily eats, whatever they want the reader to see.

This practice is illustrated in a popular posting trend called "What I Ate Wednesday,"[9] in which women post colorful graphics, photos of food, and enthusiastic comments about each photo. This practice has roots in pro-ana behaviors;[10] a Google search for "What I Ate Wednesday" also suggests searches for "What I Ate Wednesday anorexic" and "What I ate when I was anorexic." In spite of these associations with pathological restriction, the use of "What I Ate Wednesday" posts on women's fitness blogs exemplifies the ways in which these women frame their surveillance of food habits as "fun." By participating in "What I Ate Wednesday," women also perform proper consumption behaviors, and model these behaviors for their readers. Blogger Jenn L. of *Peas and Crayons* explains the appeal of "What I Ate Wednesday" posts:

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[9] This practice is also popular on *Instagram* and *Twitter*, where the post is often accompanied by the hashtag #WIAW, denoting that "people post what they ate in one day" ("Definition of #wiaw"). This definition suggests that the practice is gender-neutral, that men and women have the opportunity to participate equally in this practice of surveillance.

[10] Polak defines online pro-ana communities as spaces in which members refer to their disordered eating as a "lifestyle choice" and post personal reflections, diet advice and recipes, and images of emaciated female bodies (81-82).

> ----What WIAW isn't about----
>
> Comparison - Judgement (sic) - Restriction – Guilt
>
> ----What WIAW is about----
>
> Celebrating one of the glorious things we all have in common: We all eat!
> WIAW is about food and fun! It's about making new friends, breaking out of a food rut, noting changes in your diet/lifestyle, inspiring yourself & others, embracing fruit & vegetables, nourishing your body with the foods that work for you, finding new ways to eat your favorite foods, and so. much. more. <3
>
> Celebrate Food. Celebrate blogging. Celebrate Individuality.

This passage begins with an obvious rejection of "What I Ate Wednesday's" pro-ana heritage, as well as associations with women's traditional experiences of dieting; negative feelings of "restriction" and "guilt" are removed, thus positioning this practice as an act of "correct" monitoring, and as a socially acceptable behavior for woman. She replaces negative words with positive: "inspiring," "nourishing," "friends," and most importantly, "food and fun!" Self-surveillance in the fitness blog is similarly framed as togetherness, rather than a chore; it is a fun opportunity to bond with other women in a way that makes cultural sense, working on the assumption that all woman are naturally curious about what other women are eating and will benefit from sharing this information. The notion that sharing pictures of personal meals with other women is a "fun food diary party" (Jenn L.) effectively frames the labor of documenting every meal as a game, in keeping with the sensibility of postfeminism.

While this treatment of dieting is problematic, the bloggers' engagement with food in a public forum is significant because until recently, women rarely engaged with food in public. According to Susan Bordo, popular media rarely represents women with

such appetite; rather, women's eating has historically been a "private, transgressive act," and restrictive behaviors and dieting remain fundamental aspects of femininity (130). The explosion of food and fitness blogging in the current postfeminist moment demonstrates what Angela McRobbie calls the "double entanglement" of postfeminism, in which feminist challenges to popular representations of women have been incorporated into mainstream discourse, while feminism itself is made to appear irrelevant ("Beyond post-feminism" 179). This sensibility is apparent when fitness bloggers claim to reject dieting in favor of eating to please themselves, but do so in a way that adheres suspiciously to the conventions of traditional dieting. Like many fitness bloggers, Gina Harney's posts reflect this concurrent enjoyment and disavowal of certain kinds of food. Her narrative of surveillance on *The Fitnessista* demonstrates a detailed enthusiasm for eating, and in the early years of her blog Harney monitored her meals in an almost obsessive way. This excerpt from a typical post called "You know it's summer when…" demonstrates Harney's process:

> I came home and made dinner (in the process I munched on 2 tbs of peanut butter; I was pretty ravenous): grilled tilapia with green beans and mashed potatoes (for the hubby).
>
> The tilapia was seasoned with lime zest and juice, Montreal low sodium steak seasoning and cayenne pepper. It came out flaky and delicious. Suprisingly [sic], I had hardly any of my wine- like 3 sips, max. I gave it to [my husband] and decided not to waste my calories on something I wasn't really enjoying. Anyway, I needed those calories for my MARBLE SLAB!!! yes yes yes yes yes
>
> I got a taste of the chocolate peanut butter ice cream –I always get a taster of a fatty ice cream and then the non-fat as my main dessert– and got a small chocolate frozen yogurt (fat free, no sugar added) with chocolate chips. It was like summer in a cup. I enjoyed every bite and it was so much more fufilling [sic] than the wine would have been. It sqaushed [sic] my craving in an instant.

Harney's excitement and energy is apparent; her word choice, her use of capital letters to emphasize importance, multiple explanation points, and repetition of words all suggest an enthusiasm for eating. While Harney's engagement with food in this passage is far from the "private, secretive, illicit" feminine activity (Bordo 129) that Bordo describes as commonplace in advertisements of the early 1990s, her words reveal an obvious monitoring and containment of desire, positioning herself in the traditional feminine role of "restriction and restraint" (60). She mentions feelings such as "ravenous" and "craving," which are resolved (she "decided not to waste calories" and "squashed her cravings") by the end of the blog post. Harney's diet management complicates the conventional "rhetoric of indulgence" (Bordo 129); she does not frame her cravings as "dirty" or "shameful," but rather as something she engages with properly in her posts. Her emphasis on choice and agency in this passage, knowing when to eat what, demonstrates her "correct" management of desire (Bordo 187).

However, Harney has recently become more critical of the practice of posting narratives of food on her blog. In a post called "Eating Everything," Harney admits she thinks it is "weird" to post everything she eats, and explains:

> When I first started blogging, I really got into food, which I think came from the trend of taking photos of every single morsel that went into my mouth. Since I stopped posting all of my meals a few years ago, it's been freeing to not think about food all the time.

By addressing the attitude she displayed in the previous paragraph, she again aligns herself with proper consumption behaviors, and continues the process of disclosure for her readers. She continues, "my eating habits have changed so much since I started the

blog, and I've changed a lot too […] With all of the things I learned about health, I started removing more and more from my daily life" ("Eating Everything"). She goes on to explain that while she used to be very restrictive in her diet, she has recently started "eating everything" and "It's been pretty awesome" ("Eating Everything"). She monitors the change in her feelings, thus while her comments criticize popular practices of self-surveillance, she continues to monitor her feelings for her readers because it is important for the blog project. She admits, "it's silly that I think anyone should care about how I choose to feed myself, but at the same time, I feel like it's important to be transparent with my readers, especially when things change" ("Eating Everything"). Harney's feelings demonstrate the complex variety of experiences possible in fitness blogging, from women who engage in self-monitoring in order to help other women and generate a community around food, to women who want to keep themselves "on track," or hope to present themselves as a "proper" consumer in postfeminist culture.

"GET FIT. HAVE FUN": FITNESS SELFIES AND BODY PROJECTS

The logic of women's public self-surveillance on fitness blogs is a result of the intensification of online feedback culture. In a study of girls' YouTube videos, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that feedback culture has become a normalized part of Internet self-branding, noting that practices of discipline and surveillance are increasingly common and often central to the construction of online subjects, especially among female participants (288). Concerned journalists have recently attacked the Internet phenomenon of "selfies," arguing that these staged self-portraits encourage self-objectification among

girls and women. Psychologist Kellie Hodder warns that fitness selfies especially contribute to "the mentality that our bodies are objects that are on display and exist to be judged," and foster a culture of eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder (Heinrich). When girls and women post pictures of themselves online, their self-esteem often remains tied to their appearance, and the feedback received based on that appearance. The use of images on fitness blogs invites this surveillance discourse, with the intent of motivating readers through images of toned, slender women. Urban dictionary defines such images as "fitspo," or "Images of active, strong, and fit women that promote proper exercise and diet. May also include images of healthy foods much like thinspo (images of dangerously thin women used by people with eating disorders to motivate) but healthier" (Omg-theykilledrory.tumblr).

However, Hodder suggests that these "fitspiration" pictures are a new kind of "thinspiration" (Heinrich),[11] implying that the locker-room selfies typical of many fitness bloggers can be triggering material for women experiencing eating and/or exercise disorders, and may encourage dangerous monitoring behaviors. Fitness blogger Charlotte Hilton Anderson of *The Great Fitness Experiment* directly accuses fitspo of being "thinspo in a sports bra," explaining:

> The problem with thinspo is that the images represent a mostly unattainable ideal that requires great sacrifices (both physical and mental) to achieve and I daresay that most of those "perfect" female bodies, albeit muscular instead of bony, are equally as problematic ("Is 'Fitspiration' Really Any Better Than 'Thinsperation'?").

[11] Polak identifies two kinds of thinsperation; text with "posed pictures of well-known celebrity icons, and 'bone pictures,' photos that depict female bodies in various forms of emaciation" (86).

While images of extremely fit women are arguably just as harmful as "thinsperation," the images posted on fitness blogs appear more culturally acceptable because the achievement of fitness remains highly celebrated in not only postfeminist media culture, but in mainstream American society. Additionally, fitness bloggers incorporate images of women's bodies within the context of a personal narrative, which can shape the effect of the image, and serve to counteract potential criticism. However, in spite of culture's relative tolerance for such images on fitness blogs, they are just as dangerous as "fitspiration" because the combination of text and image in the day-to-day, narrative-based surveillance of the female body generates a timeline of eating and exercise, in which women readers may place themselves, or compare themselves, to achieve their desired level of fitness.

Exercise is typically discussed on a fitness blog either as an entire post including images devoted to a new workout or technique, or as one aspect of an entire day of documentation interspersed with pictures of meals. Like images of food, images of fitness play a significant role in the labor of self-surveillance. For example, *Eating Bird Food* author Brittany Mullins's ongoing attempts to maintain a fit body are part of her ongoing narrative. For this reason, her posts occasionally include mirror "selfies" juxtaposed with bikini shots in a "before and after" dyad reminiscent of weight loss advertisements, demonstrating the benefits of her hard work. In a post called "Tone It Up Bikini Challenge Recap" Mullins posts a comparison picture of herself in this archetype, showing the new abs she achieved during a "Tone It Up" challenge. While ostensibly posted to inspire others, these images invite comparison and surveillance; of the 53

comments on the post, the majority express sentiments such as "Brittany, you look AMAZING!!! Look at those abs!!" and "What a difference!" ("Tone It Up Bikini Challenge Recap").

Gina Harney's *The Fitnessista* differs from typical fitness blogs in her use of the mirror selfie. Harney makes a conscious effort to deny the reader access to her body as an object, saying "not once on this blog will you see a pic of me in a sports bra/bikini, weight, measurements or clothing size- that info doesn't help anyone!" ("My Kinda Triathlon"). Harney restricts fitness pictures to those in the gym, always fully clothed. She also incorporates photos of herself in action, lifting weights or doing Pilates, rather than posed in front of the mirror, as is common on many fitness blogs. Harney's blog contains frequent depictions of exercise because she is a fitness instructor, and thus has an explicit intention to show others how to do what she does. Rather than partake in postfeminist subjectification (Gill 258) by displaying the resulting shape of her body as evidence of her autonomy and power, Harney uses fitness selfies to display the capabilities of the female body, and rarely the passive, final result.

However, at the same time Harney encourages practices of surveillance in her readers. Her "Summer Shape Up 2013" workout and eating plan explains how to monitor the body using "before and after" measurements, and demonstrates how to frame photos of yourself: "snap a few pictures facing forwards, sideways, and to the back, wearing a swimsuit or sports bra and tight-fitting shorts. This way, you'll have a clear method to track your progress over the four weeks. Check your measurements again halfway through the challenge and again at the end." This double entanglement (McRobbie,

"Beyond post-feminism" 179) reflects the ways in which women often make sense of their bodies when steeped in the contradictory messages of postfeminist media culture. While Harney professes clear appreciation for the abilities of her body and encourages her readers to do the same, she also simultaneously promotes activities that monitor the body for changes, and frames these changes as beneficial enhancements.

"I Don't Post Everything I Eat": Policing the Self-policing Subjects

While fitness blogs function much like Foucault's panopticon, in which power is "anonymous" and replaced with "isolated and self-policing subjects" (Bartky 79), they also complicate this notion of isolation because they enable "isolated" self-policing subjects to engage in dialogue with each other, and practice communal policing. As sites of public performance and surveillance, fitness blogs are not immune to demonstrations of body comparison and/or criticism, and often provide spaces in which women may fuel practices of disorder and police each other's bodies. As a result, fitness bloggers are in a position not only to disseminate information, but also to face criticism from their readership. Many readers recognize fitness blogs and bloggers as reproducing harmful eating behaviors, and triggering potentially painful associations for women who visit the blog. The comments section allows for evaluative feedback on the author's body and on her eating habits, and thus encourages surveillance of the perceived "healthiness" of her lifestyle and whether or not she is a positive influence on others trying to live a healthy lifestyle. While for the most part these women express admiration for the author's

strength and dedication to her workouts, this component of the space opens up potential for criticism.

This feedback component especially separates fitness blogs from the private diaries that many women keep to maintain their weight. While diaries are by nature a private endeavor, fitness bloggers write with a responsive audience in mind, and as a result they are careful to be clear about what they depict with regard to exercise and eating, as it can be a point of contention on blogs. In a post called "I Don't Post Everything I Eat," *Peanut Butter Fingers* author Julie Fagan admits that she writes with the expectation that she will be policed by others, simply because she has made her eating habits publicly available. In this post, Fagan addresses an upsetting trend she noticed on her blog, namely that women were anxiously comparing her daily pictures of food to their own definitions of a "normal" calorie intake. She notes, "one person may say 'I don't understand how you can eat so much!' while another person will say 'Girl, go eat a bagel, that meal is tiny!' This happens all the time… in the *exact same post*." In these comments women express their own concerns about food and eating by projecting onto the self-surveillance of other women. Fagan found this discussion to be so important she permanently placed a link to it as a disclaimer in her "About" section so women could be directed to it immediately upon discovering the blog. Fagan's remark that her eating habits are "not something I've ever had to defend in my day-to-day life and not something I ever predicted I would feel the need to defend in my life" demonstrates that the Internet makes possible a form of hyper-surveillance, in which women must be vigilant about what they reveal and clear about what they are keeping private.

Posts that accuse the author of too much honesty can also lead to important conversations. In another example, several concerned readers criticized Harney for a post called "My Kinda Triathlon" about her three-workout day, claiming she was eating too little and exercising too much. Commenter Jeanine said the post made her "uncomfortable" and acknowledged feeling conflicted:

> On one hand, I know you genuinely enjoy working out and the mental and physical benefits it gives you and on the other, I often find myself cringing at the way you describe your work outs.
>
> It's a fine line, I think, between writing about food and exercise and being obsessive about food and exercise. Lately, I've felt more and more like you've started treading on the "obsessive" side when it comes to the latter.

This "fine line" Jeanine mentions reflects the contradictions of postfeminism, and the seemingly arbitrary distinctions made between those behaviors that are "responsible" and those that are "disordered." These online interactions between women about their eating habits and body projects demonstrate the ways in which the scrutiny of women's bodies has become decentralized, and disciplinary power is "everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky 74). Agency over one's body is diffused; the discipline operates from within the woman as author, but also from within each of the women participating in the discussion, posed by the act of posting text and visuals of one's body and eating in a public forum.

Readers have the opportunity to police not only the visible behaviors of the authors, but also the health advice presented in the posts. This is a complication that comes into the open on Mullins's *Eating Bird Food*, in a post called "Ten Healthy Foods That Aren't Always So Healthy," in which Mullins speculates upon her recent weight-

gain by problematizing foods like avocados and butternut squash, explaining they can "sabotage your diet." While most commenters enthusiastically agreed with this list, the post received several comments that suggested this was a harmful way to frame food on a healthy living blog, a space which many woman visit in recovery from restrictive eating behaviors. Commenter Beth accused Mullins of having an eating disorder and called her a bad influence on women, observing "Sad your life revolves around controlling what you eat (or more importantly, what you don't) and I don't think it's appropriate for you to spread this nonsense with other women." Another commenter Kaila more thoughtfully posed:

> I think lists like this can be a bit dangerous. While I agree it's important to not go overboard on any foods, I don't think it's necessary to 'call out' healthy foods. There is enough restriction and worry about what we're putting in our mouths as it is. Lists like these can contribute to more obsessiveness and more labeling of foods as good or bad. I think we should just focus on fueling ourselves with real whole foods according to our appetites. I think there are a lot more important things to be worrying about than how much squash we're eating ("Ten Healthy Foods That Aren't Always So Healthy").

Many readers jumped to the author's defense, and Mullins herself took part in the discussion. Many women in recovery offered their opinion; a commenter named Emily admitted that when she struggled with an eating disorder she found Mullins's "discipline/wariness with food" to be triggering and often used it "to fuel ED thoughts" but also recognizes:

> a) it isn't right to scrutinize her relationship with food to the degree of speculating whether she has an ED just because she writes about her diet- it is her job after all! and b) her blog is mostly positive, and I have enjoyed using her recipes as inspiration for meals during my recovery ("Ten Healthy Foods That Aren't Always So Healthy").

In this case, the use of surveillance and policing on fitness blogs allows readers to criticize behaviors they see as "going too far."

This dialogue is important because it occurs in the public space of the blog, rather than in a private message between the commenter and Mullins. By choosing to post their criticisms publicly, these women opened up the blog space as a forum to discuss issues specific to healthy lifestyle femininity. These situations demonstrate that the women who engage in fitness blogging are not only in blind subservience to cultural ideals of femininity, and that authority of the blog does not belong to the blogger alone, but is rather spread among the women (and men) who constitute its readership. All members of the blog share the responsibility of surveillance and health equally, and take part in defining a healthy lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

Postfeminist media culture encourages all women, especially white middle-class women, to engage in some form of self-surveillance. Fitness blogs emerge as culturally acceptable avenues for this necessary self-surveillance, by focusing on "fun" rather than restriction, by promoting "health" rather than diets. However, the purpose of this chapter was not to devalue the contributions of the women who engage in this cultural labor, nor to deny the personal benefits they reap from their participation. Bartky encourages us to look at these disciplined women as "skilled individuals;" in other words, regardless of the larger cultural implications, fitness blogs provide women with an important "sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity" (Bartky 77). As the next chapter will

demonstrate, these women profit considerably from their adherence to the project of postfeminism and the visibility of their transformative labor. Mullins, Harney, and other bloggers benefit from the perpetuation of their skills through product promotions, cookbooks, workout DVDs, and even advertisements, implying that adherence to postfeminist ideals is a strategy that generates considerable cultural capital and expertise.

Chapter 3: *Striving for "Balance": Transformation Narratives and Neoliberal Expertise*

> The firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct *attitude*; it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life.'
>
> Susan Bordo
> *Unbearable Weight*

> Today, massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman's body is met with distaste. The current body of fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation; it is a silhouette that seems more appropriate to an adolescent boy or a newly pubescent girl than to an adult woman. Since ordinary woman have normally quite different dimensions, they must of course diet.
>
> Sandra Lee Barkty
> "The Modernization of Patriarchal Power"

The previous chapter drew on Rosalind Gill's "Elements of a Sensibility" to establish the ways in which postfeminist practices of self-surveillance are reproduced and normalized on women's fitness blogs. This chapter uses fitness blogs to examine another significant element of Gill's postfeminist sensibility: the transformation narrative, or the "makeover paradigm" (262). The makeover paradigm implies that any woman can improve her entire life by changing her body to align with culturally acceptable standards of beauty. While practices of self-surveillance are central to the project of transformation, this chapter focuses on the ways in which adherence to this labor and its disclosure positions women as culturally responsible individuals. Through fitness blogging, women demonstrate "proper" management of their appetites and desires, and profit from their public adherence to a socially acceptable relationship with food. The blogger establishes and develops her relationship by foregrounding her experiences as a transformation narrative. On Brittany Mullins's *Eating Bird Food,* the transformation narrative takes two

forms: the first is the makeover paradigm, which foregrounds the changes in Mullins's appearance and her consumption habits as central factors in her happiness; the second is the responsible purchase and consumption of food. More broadly, Mullins's project demonstrates the ways in which women may profit from the display of adherence to these behaviors, and the expertise generated by this engagement.

In order to examine the transformation narrative and the positioning of subjects as experts, this chapter utilizes Mullins's blog posts and her "About Me" section (henceforth called an "introductory narrative") to demonstrate the ways in which women may frame their struggles as a journey towards "balance" rather than perfection, and position themselves as a "proper subject" through the gathering of expertise. Mullins is the ideal postfeminist subject, one who makes the "right choices" and embraces the "regime of personal responsibility" so integral to postfeminist discourse, and to the rhetoric of neoliberalism (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 19). Mullins's body is a strategic site of potential, and of personal responsibility, compounded by her awareness of and reflection upon her weight-loss journey. Mullins's extensive use of images to visually represent the transformation of her body serve as proof of her "expert" status, while the images of healthy, often expensive food she purchases demonstrate her "adherence to properly constrained eating behaviors" which establish and maintain hierarchies of race, class, and gender in America (Counihan, "Food Rules" 123). Mullins profits from this lifestyle through her use of advertisement space and endorsement of healthy products and fitness routines, demonstrating the benefits and stakes of a woman fitness blogger's personal brand.

Fitness bloggers gain significant expertise from their "successful" devotion to dieting and exercise, but the knowledge they demonstrate is most often that which postfeminist media culture is comfortable allowing a woman to display publicly. By engaging in this neoliberal "project of the self," Mullins uses her ongoing narrative of transformation to brand herself as an expert (Banet-Weiser 281). However, Banet-Weiser argues that women may profit enormously from an online narrative as long as it "makes sense within a cultural and economic context of recognizable and predetermined images, texts, beliefs, and values" (284). The narratives of femininity that gain recognition online are indeed those that align with expected behaviors of women; a glance at a handful of fitness blogs reveals conventionally attractive images of the slender white female body that Kim Cherin argues has become a "socially acceptable product" (72) and promotes acceptable forms of fitness (i.e., not too bulky or muscular, nor too thin). Thus at times, Mullins's blog fulfills a function similar to women's magazines that profit from their adherence to fitness and dieting advice. In spite of its occasionally contradictory intentions, *Eating Bird Food* demonstrates the ways in which fitness blogging women may craft their postfeminist self-brand.

"(Re)achieving Stability" Through Fitness Makeovers

In postfeminist media culture, the white female body is the ultimate site of potential achievement. This body is the place where transformation is proven and displayed, where power is claimed (Cherin 1981, Bartky 1990, Bordo 1993). Most importantly, the transformed body, or the "achieved self" is a marker of one's status and

abilities, as it reflects one's access to resources and leisure time (Negra 119). While postfeminist media culture celebrates public representations of transformation, everything from trendy diets to plastic surgery, as acts of choice and empowerment (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 492), labor on the female body in the form of exercise and diet remains the most culturally acceptable and often the most accessible option for the women who choose to engage in this practice. Like weight loss reality television and women's magazines, fitness blogs draw on the logic of the postfeminist "makeover" by suggesting "a revelation of the self that has 'been there all along'" (Negra 124). The contemporary narrative of transformation enacted on fitness blogs warrants attention here, because these attempts at personal transformation often result in what Diane Negra calls "one of the most distinctive features of the postfeminist era […] the underfed, overexercised female body" (119). Like many fitness bloggers, Mullins positions herself in a transformative trajectory, in which her devotion to healthy eating and exercise improved her life.

Negra notes that this "makeover" is key to "(re)achieving stability" for the postfeminist female subject, who is endlessly "represented as having lost herself," either through weight gain, lack of fashion sense, or appearing generally "unattractive" by beauty industry standards (5). If we understand the transformation narrative as movement towards gaining control, fitness blogs are thus in part an attempt by the postfeminist woman to re-achieve stability of her public image. On fitness blogs, "losing oneself" is most noticeably showcased in the introductory narrative, where the author describes being overweight, making "poor choices" in college, or even eating unhealthily as a

child. Mullins's narrative is typical of many fitness bloggers, and her "About Me" post begins with a familiar refrain: "I didn't always eat healthy…" These words position her as a woman who lacked education about a fashionably healthy lifestyle, and in this introductory narrative Mullins makes it clear that over the years she has transformed not just her physical appearance, but also her eating habits. As "About Me" reveals, Mullins grew up eating Chic-fil-a ("my all time favorite") and took up exercise in college as a way to regain control of her life ("I knew I couldn't gain the infamous 'freshman 15' so I began working out every day and eating healthier"). She also uses this post to position herself against popular but unhealthy foods, and makes clear distinctions between her old behaviors and her current understanding of healthy eating:

> I also think back to my eating habits and thoughts on eating healthy and realize I was a little confused. For one, I thought tortilla chips were more nutritious than regular chips so I would pack those in my lunch, I thought bagels were the healthiest thing you could eat for breakfast, and my favorite snack was Little Debbie Nutty Buddy bars (the ones with the peanut butter and crispy wafers) or oatmeal cream pies, or Easy Mac, sugary cereals, chips or Chex Mix. I ate fast food often- I loved french fries and would order BIG MACS from McDonald's and think nothing of it.

This passage is significant because in it Mullins describes a transformation in not just her eating and her body, but more deeply in her ways of *thinking* about food. By thinking "back" and reflecting on feelings she now perceives as "confused," she distances herself from the food choices frequently associated with a lower economic class, from behaviors that are frequently disparaged and blamed for the current "obesity crisis" in America (Julier 494). Thus Mullins's engagement with food secures not only her autonomy but also her place in the social hierarchy; Counihan argues that the American ideal of choice

is embodied in decisions about "what foods are acceptable and consuming them or abstaining from them" ("Food Rules" 114). Thus Mullins's ability to overcome these cravings is a valuable mark of character, in a society where desirable visibility is characterized by the "economic elitism" of Michael Pollan and the slow food, locavore movement, frequently criticized for its assumption that the resources necessary for making "good choices" are universally available (Miller).

This rhetoric of personal responsibility is deeply woven throughout both postfeminist paradigms and current discourses of food and eating in America, and as such the postfeminist subject engages with food and exercise from a unique perspective. Undertaken in the pretense of health, Mullins's deeply personal project is a more culturally acceptable form of the postfeminist project of transformation, an achievement that confers considerable capital upon the author. While her transformation narrative is ostensibly a journey towards shaping her body "correctly," on Mullins's blog, as on most fitness blogs, weight loss is positioned as a positive endeavor.[12] This objective makes sense because in American culture fat is "a clear symbol of loss of control," while slenderness suggests "power over others, the power that comes with self-righteousness and moral rectitude" (Counihan, "Food Rules" 123). Mullins frames her epiphany as a personal triumph, as she shares "I finally came to the realization that the foods I was eating before were weighing me down" and "I lost a considerable amount of weight my freshman year of college without dieting- just eating healthier and working out. It was a

[12] There are fitness blogs (*Oh She Glows*) in which "weight gain" serves as a similarly beneficial transformation narrative for women suffering from eating and exercise disorders.

slow and healthy loss, but after losing the 20 pounds I felt much more confident, happier with myself and most of all healthier" ("About Me"). By describing her experience as a "realization," and drawing attention to her abilities, Mullins claims responsibility for the successful transformation of her body.

However, the transformation narrative is not as simple as the introductory narrative suggests, nor is it confined to the "About Me" section alone. While Mullins's introductory narrative is useful for setting up the purpose of the blog and the status of the author, these issues of transformation resurface throughout the blog, manifesting as a project of ongoing maintenance in which the makeover is an everlasting reality and necessity. Therefore, the fitness blog itself is a transformation narrative. This need to prove the self again and again is facilitated by the practices of self-surveillance and monitoring that established the fitness bloggers as a personally responsible postfeminist subject in the previous chapter. This ongoing transformation project is reflected in the remarkable difference between Mullins's use of the blog when she began it in 2008 and in 2014. In "The first post," she explains that the blog began as a food journal:

> I don't count every calorie but writing it down has become more of a habit now than a tool to lose weight. I plan to use this blog in place of writing down in my food journal. […] I will record what I eat, try to remember to take photos of everything and post recipes to share.

This enterprise reflects the postfeminist ideology that "bodily shape, size, muscle tone…are rendered into 'problems' that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labor" (Gill 262). Mullins blog has evolved considerably over the years as she changed jobs, married, and sought out more educated opinions about eating healthy foods. While

she appears to have "succeeded" at the project of femininity, she returns to these same issues again and again.

The problems she presents reflect an ongoing concern with eating and her weight. For example, in a post called "Staying FitFluential," Mullins admits "I haven't come out and said anything on the blog before now, but I've definitely gained weight over the past couple years and I'm now at my heaviest weight since college." She goes on to confess:

> I've gained around 6-7 pounds (depending on the day), but the more important issue is that I'm not happy with my body. It's been this way for about a year and at the start of each month / week I tell myself I'm going to do something about it, but despite all the talk, I've not really made any progress because I keeping falling back into old habits.

In this passage Mullins indeed appears to be "losing herself," and uses familiar language ("I'm not happy," "I've not really made any progress") that sets her up for a makeover. She describes herself as "falling back into old habits," as though the narrative of transformation she displays on the blog is not only stalled but in full reverse. In the remainder of the post she identifies the issues in her life that need fixing: sitting at work and "snacking," and lays out a plan to fix them, reflecting McRobbie's argument for the centrality of the "life-plan" or "diary" (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 19) to the self-monitoring and subsequent transformation of the successful postfeminist woman.

In another post called "Reaching My Goals in 2013" Mullins expresses concern about her arms and her stomach, and wants to "look and feel" her best. She adds she does not want to lose weight but "wouldn't mind losing body fat." By framing her desire for transformation as a methodical, almost professional endeavor ("I want to make sure I'm doing the correct amount of training — both cardio and strength wise for my goals")

Mullins confers a sense of importance upon this project, one that elevates it from "dieting" and to an undertaking requiring expertise. Similarly, while the intention of the blog is ostensibly to promote health and wellness, Mullins frequently undermines her focus on "healthy" by achieving her goal of "feeling great" through adherence to conventional dieting behaviors like weighing herself and portion control. In a post called "10 Healthy Foods That Aren't Always Healthy," she implies that personal weight is unimportant ("I don't get wrapped up in the number") but makes a point to explain the changes in her weight, which is "around 6-7 pounds (depending on the day)." Her reliance on images to document these changes suggests that postfeminist logic both enables these narratives and supplies practices that allow women make sense of their transformation for themselves and for readers, under the pretense of "feeling" great rather than "looking" great.

"YOU LOOK GREAT!": IMAGES AS PROOF OF TRANSFORMATION

Mullins's use of images demonstrates the ways in which women may rationalize their position within this ongoing transformation narrative, and also set themselves up as experts. Postfeminism requires a great deal of visual attention on the part of the female subject; likewise fitness blogs are a highly visual medium. In a postfeminist context, a woman must not only profess her results, she must also demonstrate them visually. While Mullins and other fitness bloggers sincerely profess that the goal of their project is to achieve "balance" and to *feel* great, there is an undeniable, persistent emphasis on physical appearance. The previous chapter argued that these images function as proof of

adherence to a lifestyle, and a mark of the self-monitoring postfeminist subject. But images can also be used to justify one's narrative, to prove oneself as an "expert." The pictures Mullins uses in her introductory narrative reflect this; she mentions she "didn't feel" fat but "looking back" she sees it, and provides images to invite the reader to make the same comparison. Such images are the most effectual means to claiming identity in postfeminist media culture; Gill notes that the female body is "constructed as a window to the individual's interior life" and "a sleek, toned, controlled figure is today normatively essential for portraying success" (256). The use of these images, especially in the introductory narrative, is necessary to establish the authority of Mullins's postfeminist transformation narrative. Her visuals imply that this is what *feeling* great *looks* like. Just as images of meals and gym "selfies" facilitate ongoing self-surveillance as "proof" of adherence to a highly valued lifestyle and a body under control, these "before and after" images function as "proof" that Mullins is "qualified" to present her success story.

As "proof" of her transformation, these images place Mullins in a position of expertise. Alongside her narrative, these images illustrate her achievements and serve as motivation for her readers. For example, after the 2012 Tone It Up Bikini Challenge Mullins posted "before and after" pictures of herself and professed "I'm overall happier with my body and more self confident, which is way more important to me than a number on the scale" ("Tone It Up"). This post received 53 comments, many of which reflect Mullins's acknowledgment of both inner and outer transformation ("You're looking fab! But like you say it's more about how you feel, so glad your also feeling more positive

about your body!"). However, the majority expressed simple sentiments such as "You look fantastic congrats!!" and "you look absolutely amazing!!!" Specifically, comments like "Wow, great progress!" and "huge change!" recognize the significance of her achievement of the transformation narrative. Many commenters ask questions about her experience with the program and aspire to achieve her results. However, the commenters never tell her, "Looks don't matter, as long as you're happy." Regardless of the focus upon "feeling great," the use of these pictures inevitably implies that her happiness is due in large part to her newly defined abs.

Mullins channels this dedication to transforming the shape and size of her body into blog posts giving advice and expertise, devoting much content to experimentation with "reasonable" diets and health foods. By positioning herself as an expert through her images and narrative, Mullins has established an authority that allows her to provide trusted product reviews, and ensures that readers will value her opinion. As Carole Counihan notes, "people who lose weight are granted expert status generated from their own experiences" (*Food and Culture Reader* 492). Mullins uses her weight loss-derived expert status in blog posts about everything food and fitness related, including diets, workouts, restaurants, grocery shopping.

"Transformative Consumerism" and Postfeminist Authority

Neoliberalism encourages the framing of one's choices as personal responsibility, and as a result, those who eat "correctly" are held in high esteem (Counihan, "Food Rules" 121). Because fitness blogs engage with such a specific form of eating and

purchasing of food, they facilitate the postfeminist female subject's display of what McRobbie recognizes as proper "consumer citizenship" ("Beyond post-feminism" 182). Fitness blogs also celebrate postfeminism's "transformative consumerism" (Negra 123) in their reviews of products and explanations of purchases that have improved the life of the author. Mullins often provides detailed descriptions of her shopping trips and pantry-stocking tips; in a post called "Meal Planning and Food Shopping," per reader's request she photographs all of the groceries she purchased from Trader Joe's and Whole Foods, as well as the whiteboard she uses to plan her meals and her weekly shopping lists. These images function similarly to those of day-to-day self-surveillance but rather than solely proving adherence to diet, they provide a healthy outline for readers to follow, in order to enact their own narrative of transformation.

In addition to promoting her own behaviors, Mullins also participates in product reviews and giveaways. These reviews may be compensated or uncompensated; the uncompensated reviews typically feature either a simple recipe endorsement for another blogger's cookbook, or raving about a packaged product she purchased at Trader Joe's or Whole Foods. Additionally, she often informs readers of a new healthy restaurant discovery, usually specific to the Richmond, Virginia area in which she writes her blog. The advice generated in these posts both builds upon and further establishes her authority as a fitness blogger and a successful postfeminist subject. She displays her ability to make "smart" decisions, and shows other women how to do the same. By exhibiting her consumption behaviors in this way she performs what Negra calls an "expressive lifestyle," a postfeminist subject who displays her status and propriety through the

purchase and display of the "right commodities" (4). Thus while Mullins is not compensated monetarily for these reviews, her participation in discourse with the products generates considerable cultural capital and expertise.

However, Mullins does receive compensation for occasional reviews of diets and health products, as well as advertisement space, a benefit that suggests women may be invested in perpetuating their skills not only to demonstrate their adherence to a feminine identity (Bartky 77), but also for financial gain. Mullins's experience is representative of many fitness bloggers who generate income from ads and endorsements; *Marie Claire* magazine calls fitness bloggers "national brands," and recognizes:

> [Tina] Haupert and [Jenna] Weber have book deals with Sterling Publishing; [Caitlin] Boyle's body image guide, for Gotham Books, came out in August. Haupert writes for health.com and Weber and [Meghann] Anderson offer "slimspiration" tips in magazines. Between book advances, sponsorships, and royalty checks from online aggregators (netting Anderson around $10,000 a year), the women are cashing in on mainstream success (Drummond).

Mullins's sponsors include brands such as the Institute for Integrative Nutrition, Relay Foods, Aereo, and ShopatHome.com. Mullins is also an ambassador for *Nature Made® VitaMelts™*, and occasional endorsement posts feature text such as: "Disclosure: Compensation was provided by Nature Made via Glam Media." Many of her sponsors are food companies, and indeed these corporations have taken notice of the power of fitness bloggers to influence their readers' purchase decisions. In a post called "Don't be Fooled: Top 8 Fitness Myths Debunked," Mullins admits:

> Each day I get at least a handful of press releases sent to me — new products, recent studies, contests, requests for me to share info… you name it, I've probably gotten an email announcement or press release about it. I usually open and at least scan over each one, unless of course, they are totally insane like the Ice Cube Diet

> one that I deleted immediately (and then tweeted about because it was so ridiculous).

She is careful to establish a line between her practices of healthy eating and ridiculous "Ice Cube Diets." By deciding which practices are "totally insane" and which are "healthy," she demonstrates an ability to choose that positions her as an educated and culturally acceptable fitness blogger. She investigates various workout plans and detoxes, and blogs about her results: disappointing weight gain during Body For Life training ("Body For Life training update"), expensive Whole Foods wheatgrass shots ("Taking Shots"), holistic book-based The Conscious Cleanse ("The Conscious Cleanse: My Review"). Other posts like "What I'm Loving: Tone It Up," "Body for Life Training," "Staying FitFluential," and "Tips to Stay on Track over the weekend" similarly allow her to use her body to position herself as an expert, take responsibility for herself, and make decisions that profess her cultural knowledge while allowing her to help others.

However, Mullins's experimentation with diets is also significant because it discloses and deconstructs the labor behind the body of the postfeminist woman. For example, in her reviews she lists the "pros" and "cons" of her experimentation. The cons frequently address the inconvenience of such regimens: "At times I felt a little restricted" and "Avoiding alcohol made social situations a little less fun" ("The Conscious Cleanse"). Pros include being more aware of her body, and feeling more in control: "It helped me realize how much I tend to get stuck in a rut by eating the same foods and the fact that sugar (even natural sources like dried fruit) tends to make me overeat and crave more sugar" ("The Conscious Cleanse"). However, the "pros" sprinkled throughout her

diet reviews also include: “Magazine worthy abs are definitely worth a few gains on the scale” (“Scale Trouble and Yoga”). Thus while Mullins is occasionally critical of postfeminist strategies of transformation, her simultaneous emphasis upon physical shape reinforces the importance of appearance for a woman.

Lastly, by promoting certain foods and products, Mullins performs a status that places her in the middle-to-upper class of white female consumers heavily valued by postfeminist discourse. This consumer status is complex, because in order to maintain a large readership, fitness bloggers must also remain relatable to women from a variety of backgrounds. Mullins certainly addresses her posts to the typical postfeminist audience, and assumes any lack of resources required for the project is merely a starting point on the journey to transformation. For example, in a post called “The Best Protein Powder,” she praises expensive purchases from farmer’s markets and Whole Foods, but also acknowledges the disparity in resources and the expensive supplements that often accompany weight loss journeys:

> When it comes down to it, you don’t have to have fancy products to be healthy and lose weight. In college, when I lost over 20 lbs, I didn’t know about any of these things (much less have the money to buy them) – I just ate healthy foods and guess what, it worked! So, if you can’t afford/don’t have access to protein powder, chia seeds, cacao powder, goji berries and the like, please know that it’s okay!

While Mullins assures her readers that they need not have wealth to achieve her results, she nonetheless respects the neoliberal assumptions regarding access and resources: simply eat healthy foods like she did to become fit and healthy. This narrative is the postfeminist equivalent of the neoliberal adage “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”;

although Mullins implies money is not required for weight loss, she nevertheless addresses a woman to whom "just eating healthy foods" is a realistic possibility. And by claiming she "didn't know about any of these things," she again not only positions herself as a successfully transformed expert, but also lays the groundwork for other women to transform themselves, ostensibly through hard work alone, glossing over the privilege that makes such work possible. These contradictions allow fitness bloggers to remain relatable to their widespread readership while blogging about activities that often require access to specific, expensive resources.

STRIVING FOR "BALANCE" RATHER THAN PERFECTION

Among the complex cultural and personal forces operating within the transformation address of a woman's fitness blog, the overall strategy to remain relatable to readers is to promote "balance." This effectively flattens potential fitness hierarchies, giving all women the same goal. Indeed, the meaning of "balance" varies slightly from blog to blog; for many women it means finding a point between too much exercise and not enough exercise; for others it means enjoying "unhealthy" foods from time to time, while living by a healthy diet; sometimes it is expressed as "finding what works for you" or "doing what makes you happy" but each expresses the same sentiments. By framing the maintenance of transformation as a lifestyle of "balance," fitness blogs envision an ideal postfeminist subject that does not excessively diet nor perform labor upon the self, but rather one that practices "balance" in every aspect of her life. It is significant that the rhetoric throughout fitness blogs is that of "balance" rather than perfection; "balance"

means the project of the self is ongoing, never completed, which aligns with the postfeminist culture of consumption that necessitates an endless cycle of product purchasing. Balance is usually emphasized because the author's engagement with food comes from a place of overindulgence (overweight) or of restriction (eating disorder), and/or the author is trying to model appropriate behavior for other women struggling with their relationship to food. Most fitness bloggers share a common awareness that the lifestyle of surveillance they enact on their blog walks a fine line between disorder and responsibility, and thus through narratives of "balance" they strive to remain relatable to their readers, and position themselves in a process of eternal transformation.

This chapter has demonstrated that in spite of her expertise and skills, Mullins does not profess to be perfect. Rather, she retains solidarity with her readers by appearing constantly in a state of change herself. While Mullins's successful transformation and expertise positions her as an inspirational role model for women trying to lose weight, she is just as much in pursuit of "balance" as her readers, a sentiment that is reflected in the comments on her posts. In a post called "Staying Fitfluential" when Mullins expresses doubt and disappointment about her own fitness, Janelle is one of 66 commenters that demonstrates how women revere her as not only an inspiration but also an equal:

> Like you, I keep telling myself at the start of each week or month that I will start anew, but unhealthy habits keep creeping up. My clothes fit much tighter, and there are some summer shorts I haven't been able to wear at all! It is my goal to be able to fit back into some of my favorite items – skirts, dress pants, and dresses – comfortably! But it's amazing how overwhelming and intimidating it can be.
>
> You looked beautiful in your wedding/honeymoon pictures, and I could see your skin was glowing from all the nutritious foods you fed your body (and from love,

> of course!). I wish you all the best and just wanted you to know it is inspiring to see your progress since this post. It encourages me! You look great!

This quote exemplifies the real value of the transformation narrative, and the effect that Mullins's project has upon other women. For a variety of personal and cultural reasons, weight loss is a highly coveted achievement, and Mullins's project is successful because she accomplished this dream of transformation and balance. But because there is no tangible goal to be realized, the vagueness of "balance" allows her to remain in a position of expertise, trying out new diets and an engaging in dialogue with other women. However, the need for balance is a compromise that reflects Counihan's observation that while some women do make efforts to resist cultural imperatives of slenderness and diet, "their resistance is individual and partial. They do not challenge the basic meaning system that oppresses them" ("Food Rules" 126). Thus, although these women push back on oppressive practices of "perfection," their adherence to a lifestyle of "balance" leaves this unchallenged. Janelle's sentiments also express the ways in which women's common experiences of overindulgence and disorder can form community as they strive together towards balance, or "imperfection," which will be discussed at length in the final chapter.

CONCLUSION

Blogger Brittany Mullins uses *Eating Bird Food* to frame her struggles with eating and weight loss as a transformation narrative, and extends her claims to agency by actively shaping her body through these culturally acceptable avenues of exercise and diet. She frames this lifestyle as an empowering way in which she took control and improved her life. Like many fitness bloggers, Mullins touts weight loss as a means "to

be happy" but the content of her posts often aligns with dieting and disordered behavior. The transformation narrative is important because its success validates Mullins's project of losing weight as more than stigmatized "dieting," and frames her participation within larger cultural processes of food discourse. In this way, her knowledge of food is empowering. The mobilization of this sensibility on fitness blogs is significant because in an online space, higher visibility means higher stakes, as well as more participation and feedback.

Fitness blogs have important implications for the women who participate in the crafting of this transformed identity. Bloggers experience autonomy and expertise that women of all professions continue to seek in the public sphere, where they remain relatively underappreciated and unsatisfied. Even in the mainstreaming of foodie culture, male chefs achieve more public celebrity while women remain domestic; their knowledge remains in the home and tied to family and entertaining, while men's expertise remains in the public sphere of restaurants and cooking competitions. Thus many women engage in these practices not only to "feel great," but also to be recognized as responsible citizens, who take accountability for their eating and weight loss. While overtly rejecting these rules leads to loss of status, women reap considerably benefits from their public adherence to these lifestyles (Counihan, "Food Rules" 128).

Lastly, it is important to recognize that the "expertise" claimed by many fitness bloggers exists alongside a claim of "imperfection." There is a considerable burden placed upon the female subject when it comes to eating and maintaining the body. Since much of expertise around weight loss and gaining is based on the imperfection of a

woman's lived experience, women have only this imperfect expertise from which to draw. Additionally, the framing of one's life as "imperfect" is a strategy that removes pressure from women who have struggled to the point of illness to achieve cultural definitions of "perfection." The final chapter moves farther into discussion of imperfection as expertise, and the online fitness community formed around celebrations of imperfection.

Chapter 4: *Embracing "IMperfection": Fitness Blogs Feminist Therapy*

> Being healthy is not about being perfect, which is something I only recently realized thanks to blogs!
>
> Chelsea (commenter)
> *The Fitnessista*

> You need to realize that living a healthy lifestyle is not about being thin. I have read that so many times, but it means so much more when you make the realization for yourself. It is about balance, happiness, the relationship you have with yourself and others, and aiming to be your best everyday, while loving and accepting yourself through all of it. You have to try your hardest to realize that food, body size, and the choices you make around either will not make you any less worthy.
>
> Lee Hersh
> *Fit Foodie Finds*

> food blogs and the reach their authors attain far outweighs a magazine circulation
>
> Pam (commenter)
> *The Fitnessista*

This chapter takes a more optimistic approach to investigate the pleasures and benefits of fitness blogs for the women privileged to engage in these critical dialogues. While these texts are postfeminist in many ways, they also have potentially feminist underpinnings in their approach to eating disorder and recovery. Many bloggers speak out against "thinsperation" and photoshopping practices, and share their own stories to raise awareness and help other women overcome similar struggles. In "What Does It Mean to Be Fat, Thin, and Female?" Carole Counihan argues that any text is feminist if it links "women's obsession with eating to broader social, political, and economic forces" affecting American women (76). Building on Counihan's argument, I argue that fitness blogs take a similarly beneficial feminist stance by providing a space in which women may recognize "that others share the obsession and [may link] the obsession to women's

oppression" ("What Does It Mean" 89). These women do not label themselves as feminists; indeed the word rarely surfaces in their discussions. But within the context of American popular culture, women's public enjoyment of food is itself a feminist act. This chapter frames the practices of eating displayed here as a feminist practice, and argues that many women, intentionally or unintentionally, engage in feminist work by promoting dialogue about female body positivity. Thus while the previous two chapters were concerned with the treatment and presentation of the female body to signal ideal postfeminist subjecthood, this chapter examines the women who experience their body as a site of healing and recovery, and even praise fitness blogs for teaching them to enjoy eating again.

For many women, fitness blogs are a source of community and camaraderie; the comments section especially facilitates important dialogues. Many comments contain exchanges where women delve beneath the surface of the performance of ideal femininity to address the pleasures, fears, contradictions, and emotions experienced within the literal processes of consumption and embodiment. Beneath a cloak of pseudo-anonymity, many women respond to fitness blog posts by expressing a deep fear of eating, and have the opportunity to explain how they have come to terms with their experiences. Viewed through this lens, fitness blogs therefore also provide a space in which woman may share their stories not solely to "prove themselves" as enviable postfeminist subjects, nor to position themselves strategically for monetary gain; rather, in this space women may also admit vulnerability, and find solidarity with each other. Because all women bring slightly different experiences to their fitness blogs, this chapter draws from the voices of multiple

fitness bloggers. This multifaceted approach demonstrates the range of engagements possible within fitness blogs, no matter how the interests and backgrounds of the women involved may vary. And while these issues certainly surface on fitness blogs with overt feminist opinions regarding diet and fitness, this sample continues to focus on those blogs that strongly embrace the conventional postfeminist aspects of the fitness lifestyle alongside occasional critique, to illustrate how these women negotiate the inherent contradictory sensibilities of postfeminist media culture.

In spite of their passionate appeals for body-positivity, these woman-centered dialogues nonetheless exist alongside the practices described in the previous two chapters. This final chapter completes my argument for fitness blogs as a site of postfeminism's "double entanglement" (McRobbie, "Beyond post-feminism" 179). These projects are postfeminist to their core; women engage with food and bodies in ways that question postfeminist constraints of the mainstream discourse they occupy, yet often adhere to these same practices of their own volition. Thus rather than celebrating fitness blogs as utterly progressive projects, this chapter evaluates them alongside the reality that they also promote the harmful, often criticized yet normalized practices of self-surveillance that so often accompany the postfeminist female experience. This chapter examines the posts of the authors but also the comments of the readers, as they communicate with the author and with each other. These exchanges reveal the ways in which women may use fitness blogs to critique society, and provide a forum for women to share their stories. No matter how problematic these blogs may appear from a critical feminist position, they also reclaim important space and appetite for women, turning the

traditional depiction of the hungry female in "despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation" into an image of "pleasure and independence" (Bordo 126). As the comments will demonstrate, fitness blogs are important because they provide women with spaces to engage in conversation.

RETHINKING THE "RHETORIC OF INDULGENCE"

Fitness blogs are a space in which women can use their words to challenge cultural assumptions and encourage others to do the same. While women's fitness blogs chiefly provide health advice and promote body positivity, many also celebrate eating, which is itself revolutionary. Even though American culture visibly celebrates food, the experience and expertise of the "foodie" is still heavily coded as male (Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann), and eating remains an act more commonly associated with men rather than women (Counihan, "Food Rules" 124). This has been the case in Western society since the Victorian era; Joan Brumberg's research found that in the late 1890s women were not supposed to enjoy eating, or even to be seen eating in public (*Fasting Girls* 175). And Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* demonstrates that even in the early 1990s, advertisements encouraged women to enjoy very specific foods such as yogurt, cereal, and small pieces of chocolate (129). In this way mainstream American culture restricts what women are permitted to publicly enjoy without explanation, or need for clarification. Any evidence of eating is still subject to public critique, and as fitness blogger Allie Mak notes, women are bombarded every day with this unsolicited health and weight loss advice from advertisements, friends and family, and even strangers ("The

Weight Post"). Through posts about eating, dieting, and body image, fitness blogs are a forum in which authors may address issues that trouble them, their readers, and American women.

Like many online spaces, fitness blogs are designed for conversation. Bloggers speak in an informal tone, and many authors conclude their posts by posing a question to their readers. This occurs regardless of the content of the post; as Brittany Mullins's *Eating Bird Food* demonstrates, it can be something as simple as brainstorming uses for new ingredients: "*Have you tried chia seeds? What are your thoughts?*" ("Why Eat Chia Seeds?"), or lifestyle advice: "*Do you have trouble sticking with your goals during the weekend? What are some of your favorite tips to stay on track?*" ("Tips to Stay on Track Over the Weekend"). Questions establish the blog as a space for casual, friendly dialogue, and demonstrate to new readers that comments are welcome and appreciated, in a shared space in which opinions can be made public. Because the fitness blog is by necessity a space of policing and surveillance, topics of dialogue usually include feedback on the authors' decisions, or a comparison of commenters' experiences to hers.

However, fitness blogs also provide space in which women may acknowledge and challenge the mainstream "rhetoric of indulgence," in which a woman's appetite is restricted to moments of occasional satisfaction, and hunger is characteristic of her experience (Bordo 129). Fitness blogs are founded upon postfeminist practices of policing and surveillance, but they can also be extremely beneficial for women who have struggled with eating and exercise disorders. As public forums, fitness blogs allow women to view the ways in which other women eat, and to demonstrate their own steps

toward recovery. A glance at the comments on more serious blog posts reveals that many women read these blogs as a motivating tool to view food as a positive part of life, or even as motivation to eat, period. Many of the women who read these blogs consciously negotiate their position with food by reading the blog, and participating in the comments. As examples will demonstrate, women often express the way in which blogs have changed their life.

While fitness bloggers may engage in disordered behaviors similar to those of pro-ana blogs and websites, many also display a critical engagement with food that creates a feminist space. By intentionally or not facilitating a dialogue about disordered eating, fitness blogs hold a feminist potential that closely resembles Michele Polak's argument for pro-ana online communities, which "create identity, form community, and even encourage recovery among users" (83). Fitness blogs behave as a similarly valuable "unrestricted space" (Polak 83), enabling powerful dialogue and a more flexible format of engagement. Many women like Angela Liddon (*Oh She Glows*), Allie Mak (*Live Laugh Eat*) and Courtney Horan (*Sweet Food Sweet Life*) write fitness blogs from a point of view of recovery or the borderline of disorder, either from a clinical eating disorder that filled them with constant anxiety about consumption (Liddon), or from excessive dieting and/or exercising to prevent "slipping back" into their former weight (Horan). All of these women write from a point of defiance, publicly resisting the cultures of disorder fostered by popular media and perpetuated through women's own internalized expectations. However, while such pictures of food and bodies draw strongly on

subcultures of disorder, the pretense of "health" makes these blogs a culturally validated practice, resting comfortably between the margins of binging and starving.

As a result, fitness blogs are arguably more successful in their execution of the online space as a forum for dialogue. While the self-identified, openly pro-ana communities on *Tumblr* and *Pinterest* fight criticism and censorship (Polak 82), the women authors of fitness blogs express their social criticisms and talk of disorder beneath a safe veil of acceptably feminine behaviors, specifically the aforementioned images of conventional exercise and diet, as well as images of "food porn" common to mainstream, relatively uncontroversial food blogs. Due to this veneer of normalcy, fitness blogs remain for the most part unchallenged by postfeminist media and even by feminist theory, which more often takes women's magazines as its target, even though the content is at times identical. Fitness blogs are therefore a "culturally correct" avenue to breach the topic of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. By not framing themselves as overtly feminist nor explicitly promoting "disorder," these blogs facilitate a safe space for women to come together and discuss issues that are just as prevalent in pro-ana communities. The relative lack of policing of fitness blogs demonstrates that these are the way in which people are comfortable with such conversations occurring.

However, fitness blogs are not immune to criticism. In a 2010 *Marie Claire* article entitled "The Hunger Diaries," developmental psychologist Dr. Robyn Silverman criticizes fitness blogs, saying, "The sheer number of food images and intense exercise descriptions can be particularly triggering to eating-disorder-prone followers" (Drummond). Silverman worries that fitness blogs encourage readers to "push their

bodies to the extreme to match the workouts or eating habits of their idols, when it may be inappropriate." While there is certainly truth to this statement, the fact that this criticism comes from *Marie Claire*, the same magazine that foregrounds content such as "Your Body Makeover: Virtual Weight Loss Tool," uncritical descriptions of fad diets like "Forkers" (women who only eat food that can be speared by a fork), and advice for "staying thin in social situations" ("The Dieter's Dilemma") begs more analysis. This stream of contradictory advice is typical of a postfeminist media outlet, but the policing performed by *Marie Claire* displays the arbitrary distinctions made between which practices are socially acceptable and which are problematic. This is especially apparent when the author of this article addresses the participation of women readers, referring to them disdainfully as "copycats," rather than as devoted weightwatchers at the level of "Forkers." Drummond says, "When [a fitness blogger] announced a two-part fitness challenge—tackling Jillian Michaels' 'No More Trouble Zones' program and training to beat her 5K record—116 commenters responded, many pledging to join her" (Drummond). With this statement the article problematizes the women responding to and engaging with culture, rather than recognizing the culture itself as destructive.

Brittany Mullins was one of many bloggers who used this *Marie Claire* article as an opportunity to take a stance on the treatment of female bodies in Western culture, while acknowledging the problematic potential of fitness blogging:

> First and foremost, some of the points that author made are true – I've definitely witnessed unhealthy or disordered eating activities while reading health blogs. And, for some people, reading blogs could possibly fuel their disorder, even if the author is perfectly healthy, however, this is also true of any mainstream women's magazine!!

By recognizing mainstream women's magazines as "fuel" for disorder, Mullins calls attention to the plight of millions of women. She takes a feminist stance, and while it is not overtly so, it is nonetheless a cry of recognition for the reality that American women face every time they choose to engage with postfeminist media culture. She addresses that these are problematic spaces for the women who choose to venture into them, but does not hold them above women's magazines; rather she appears to hold them at the same standard. She does not defend the blogs but rather the bloggers, admitting that disorder is a natural component of this practice by virtue of a female engagement with food and eating. This demonstrates an awareness of the cultural implications of these practices, and it is an issue that surfaces throughout fitness blogging. Robyn Coale of *The Real Life RD* openly calls ours a "culture flooded with diet fads, unrealistic beauty expectations and irrational ideals of healthy," where "food has more commonly become the enemy and something to control. When really, we should be finding joy in food as a way to celebrate, love others, and nourish our bodies" ("WIAW: less is not more"). This is a sentiment shared among most fitness blogs, especially those that address topics such as eating disorder recovery.

FORGING FEMALE COMMUNITIES

Fitness blogs that deal with recovery create a community in which women may reclaim a love of eating. More so than other fitness blogs, these deal with personal topics and contain trigger warnings, which may be as simple as Allie Mak's from "The Weight Post" on *Live Laugh Eat*:

> **Disclaimer:** Please read responsibly. One reason I don't write about weight is because I do not want to trigger anybody. If you are battling an eating disorder and/or easily fall into the comparison trap, please do not continue to read this post. You know what's best for you.

The "comparison trap" is a common hazard of reading fitness blogs, and demonstrates an awareness of the potentially harmful potential of the postfeminist practices of self-surveillance and monitoring. Caitlin Boyle of *The Healthy Tipping Point* offers a lengthier disclaimer in her "About" section:

> Please note: My blog is intended to be read in a way that inspires YOU to live YOUR best life. I do not want you to try live my life. What works for me might not work for you. Everyone has different emotional and physical needs. I try to blog responsibly and in a way that considers other people's feelings and situations. I realize that, as a fitness and food blogger, a variety of people read my blog. I strive to make an effort to be considerate of these people in my writing, but there is a point where I cannot be held responsible for the actions of others. I write about food and fitness because these things interest me. If this blog motivates and helps you to be healthier, than I hope you continue reading! If it is not a good fit for you, there are many other blogs out there that might help you. I encourage comments of different opinions, but comments that are rude, mean-spirited, or attacking of me or my family will be moderated, and the user may be moderated as well.

With this statement, she opens up the space for dialogue, and a space for women to experience healing. The participation of women as readers of these fitness blogs is the focus of the remainder of this chapter, specifically their relationship with their bodies and their relationship with the author of the blog. Chiefly, these blogs differ from the one-way address of women's magazines and weight-loss advertisements because of this disclaimer, and because they encourage dialogue and conversation.

On fitness blogs, dialogue begins with the author, much like any other online forum. However, unlike pro-ana spaces, fitness blogs are culturally acceptable places for

many women to air not only their fears and anxieties about eating and fatness, but also their stories of recovery from anorexia, bulimia, and exercise bulimia. Regardless of their struggles or intentions, authors that foreground their experience with recovery utilize the postfeminist introductory narrative, sharing their stories to position themselves as experts on a journey to appearing "culturally correct." For example, in a post called "Everyone Has a Story to Tell," *Fit Foodie Finds* author Leanne Hersh opens up about a lifetime of struggle with her body image, and her ultimate realization that "muscle is sexy." The author of *Nutritionella* claims that food and fitness blogs saved her from counting and diet foods. In a post called "Opening Up," *Sweet Tooth Sweet Life's* Courtney Horan explains her struggles with eating during college, and says that food blogs became her inspiration for eating again:

> At first, I looked at these meals and would think, 'Geez, there's no way I could eat all that without getting fat!' But slowly, as my mental and physical health started to improve, I realized that I was really just *begging* to be able to enjoy food again the way that these girls were, and the way that I used to.

Horan's post addresses the therapeutic aspect of communal sharing, which is a common benefit of online community membership. Polak recognizes that due to the stigma of eating disorders, online spaces are ideal for marginalized groups like the pro-ana community to "create identity, form community, and even encourage recovery among users" (83). Fitness blogs contain the same potential for communal support, and the emphasis on sharing and dialogue makes them similarly significant spaces of development for women, both as authors and as readers (Polak 91).

The comments from readers also establish the collaborative nature of this space and contribute immensely to the dialogue initiated by the author. When authors express discomfort with negotiating the current health climate, they place themselves in a very personal dialogue with their readers. Thus fitness blogs provide a casual forum in which women can visit, lurk if they wish, or take part in discussion.[13] This discussion is crucial and often life-changing for many women, a place where they can publicly and even anonymously share their feelings about women's bodies, and their relationship with food. Authority is diffuse in the comments section, where the author participates in discussion with her readers, but also responds to reader's criticisms as well as their expressions of heartfelt gratitude. Feminist pedagogy has historically strived to be communal, rather than top-down; in these spaces women may come together and share knowledge, critically examining their place in culture together. While the blogger has the dominant voice in initiating the conversation, her words once posted are open for interpretation and challenging by her readers.

"CONFESSION: SOMETIMES I CHOOSE NOT TO BE HEALTHY"

Within the fitness blogging community, there are a variety of opinions of what constitutes a "healthy lifestyle." Women fitness bloggers who proclaim a love of eating may restrict themselves to meals that resemble more conventional calorie-counting; or they may adhere to local, organic, gluten free, and/or vegan diets; still others express

[13] This is not to say that this dialogue does not happen in other spaces of the Internet, feminist or otherwise; rather this is example of the way in which these sensibilities are mobilized in the context of personal, engagement with food and the body.

their love by eating everything, regardless of how acceptable it may be in the more traditional healthy lifestyle blogging community. Indeed, many authors are frustrated with the project of self-surveillance and the public image they are expected to project as author of a fitness blog. In a post called "Are 'Bad' Choices Part of Healthy Living?" Tina Haupert of *Carrots 'N' Cake* begins by addressing the theme of "balance," and launches a discussion by admitting that she sometimes eats foods because they are "fun to eat and [make] me happy!" She ends her post by returning to the question, "Are 'bad' choices part of healthy living?" and receives a total of 173 comments on her post, all of which are entirely positive, such as "it is okay to make a 'bad' choice sometimes!" and "Thank you for being a voice of moderation in a world suddenly full of self-righteous nutritional asceticism!" A commenter named Rachel gives the most in-depth analysis, noting:

> Honestly, I think we all know it's fine/healthy to eat nachos or other less-than-nutritious stuff once in a while because otherwise, we'd all become guilt-ridden, way-too-stressed-out biatches who can't enjoy our lives or a treat when we want it. That said, I feel like a lot of women say things like this repeatedly out loud (or on the internet) to convince THEMSELVES it's okay. And it is. You can post a picture of your nachos or ice cream or beer any time you want and you don't have to share your reasoning behind eating it. I just wish more women would just embrace their cravings and choices and let that be the end of the story!

While enthusiastic images of food are practically banal in the era of *Instagram* "food porn," there is something revolutionary about women posting pictures of food and raving about a relationship with eating that is apparently guilt-free. And while this sensibility does not characterize all fitness blogs, the fact that it is circulating in public, visible online discourse is incredibly important for women suffering from unhealthy

relationships to food and exercise. Fitness blogs differ from traditional cookbooks and many food blogs because they fully engage with the practice of eating the food that has been prepared, and sometimes the meals featured on fitness blogs are not even recipes; they are simply a celebration of something delicious eaten by the author. For example, in the above post Haupert mentions "I ate a crap-ton of ice cream for dinner for no reason other than I wanted to. I didn't feel like cooking dinner and ice cream just sounded like a tasty option" ("Are 'bad' choices part of healthy living?"). While many practices on fitness blogs can be taken to extremes (ironically, Haupert is one of the bloggers criticized by the *Marie Claire* article), the fact that a woman publicly and proudly celebrates eating ice cream holds tremendous benefit for women desperate for a positive engagement with food and exercise.

Allie Mak of *Live Laugh Eat* similarly proclaimed her love of exercise, which is equally important for women who face constant policing and speculation about whether or not their practices are disordered. In "The Weight Post," which drew 82 comments, Mak divulges details about her weight per reader request, but expresses annoyance and frustration that readers are so invested in her body. She justifies her hesitance to address weight by criticizing the harmful ways these practices circulate in our culture:

> If you've read this blog for any length of time, you know I don't talk about weight, body size/shape, measurements, calories, dieting, etc. I think our culture is already hyper-focused on these topics as it is. We are bombarded by weight-related advertisements and articles in the media and frankly, we don't need any more of it.

She goes on to explain, **"**I enjoy exercising. Truly enjoy it. Not for the calorie burn, but for the way it makes me feel both mentally and physically…I work with my body, not

against it. Most importantly, I feel good and I'm happy." By expressing distain at the obligation that women often feel to explain their behaviors or justify fluctuations in their appearance, Mak contributes to online feminist discourse and makes space for women who want to reject cultural expectations of disorder and restriction.

I have argued thus far that women in contemporary Western society are faced with a variety of conflicting messages regarding exercise and nutrition, and many of them use fitness blogs as a space to navigate these discourses and perform the postfeminist "project of the self." But there is more to this project than simple adherence to cultural pressures of perfection. While bloggers may intensely scrutinize their daily routine, many also consciously negotiate the effect of this confessional, surveillance-oriented discourse upon the reader. Because fitness blogs are a product of culture, the blogosphere is a unique opportunity for readers to engage in dialogue with and respond to a product of culture. These women have the ability to respond to the ways in which food and eating has touched their lives in a significant way. In a post called "Everyone Has a Story to Tell," blogger Lee Hersh of *Fit Foodie Finds* starts a forum in which 53 women offer their own views on what "healthy" means:

> […] living a healthy lifestyle is not about being thin. I have read that so many times, but it means so much more when you make the realization for yourself. It is about balance, happiness, the relationship you have with yourself and others, and aiming to be your best everyday, while loving and accepting yourself through all of it. You have to try your hardest to realize that food, body size, and the choices you make around either will not make you any less worthy.

Another commenter says:

> My favorite part about this post was realizing that you're not perfect! I've been reading your blog for a few years and have had my own struggles with food and

> feel like eating intuitively like a "normal" person is as elusive as the "perfect" body I've given up on. I've always appreciated your posts, but now knowing that your healthy lifestyle was something you had to work towards will bring new light to your blog.

This realization that the blogger is "not perfect" reflects the claim of "imperfection" so fundamental to many fitness blogs. Such conversations further establish the fitness blog as a space in which women may not only learn to set reasonable fitness goals, but also find solidarity with other women who are similarly in the process of negotiating the diet and fitness expectations of postfeminist media culture.

With their focus on body positivity, fitness blogs also critically engage with the ways in which women are encouraged to eat and to see each other's bodies in a postfeminist context. In a post called "What the Heck is 'Healthy'" author Gina Harney of *The Fitnessista* says:

> **"Healthy" is such a subjective term and what is considered healthy and normal for one person, may be not-so-healthy to someone else.** In the beginning of my weight loss journey and even into maintenance mode, I thought *healthy* was about perfection. While I never had an official eating disorder, I definitely participated in disordered eating, which I'm sure many women unintentionally do when they're flooded with so much information and trying to find a balance.
>
> **[…] I tried so hard to be what I thought was *perfect*, almost all of the time, which I now know isn't a fun or healthy way to live. […]**
>
> I eventually realized that <u>"healthy" is IMperfection.</u> Not being afraid to skip a day at the gym, eat indulgent desserts without regard to calories or fat, and cutting yourself some slack… not just with fitness and eating, but with life. Taking time for a nap, a pedicure, a snuggle sesh, or a glass of vino and great chat with a friend.

The 18 comments in response to this post demonstrate the body positivity common on her site, and the attitude of many fitness bloggers and blog readers in general. By consciously

positioning themselves as "IMperfect," women take back their bodies from postfeminist cultural processes. The attitudes of commenters expressed below demonstrate women's awareness of these larger structural issues at play:

> Laura: Being healthy is all about maintaining balance and fueling your body with the nutrients it needs. Let's face it, sometimes our bodies need a piece of pie and some red wine! It's the ability to turn around and make a veggie omelet for breakfast that gives you that healthy balance!
>
> Shelby: Accepting yourself, whatever size you are, and taking care of your body!
>
> Chelsea: Being healthy is not about being perfect, which is something I only recently realized thanks to blogs! I think the most important aspect of health is happiness though. You could eat clean almost every day and work out 4 times a week, but if you're not happy then you're not going to be healthy.
>
> Pam: don't sweat the haters…food blogs and the reach their authors attain far outweighs a magazine circulation

Pam's observation that food and fitness blogs could conceivably overtake mainstream postfeminist media culture with their dissemination of positive body image and fitness experiences suggests the ultimate potential of these projects. By serving as public records of women's eating and exercising practices, fitness blogs provide images and stories that can change individual women's lives, either by helping them realize their own disorder, or exposing them to dialogue that recognizes postfeminist culture itself as harmful. While postfeminist practices both enable and sustain fitness blogs, many have the potential to counteract the harmful rhetoric of postfeminist women's magazines through a balance of compliance and critique. As a growing subculture, fitness bloggers and their readership can benefit women by forming a new culture, one that helps women lead healthier lives not only physically, but also mentally.

CONCLUSION

From food porn, to food blogs, to food television; rather than a sinful and secretive act, eating is seemingly celebrated all over Western visual media. However, women still have a far from uncomplicated engagement with food on many levels. On the surface these fitness blogs appear to be merely textual and visual diaries of women adhering to dieting and exercise, but beneath the surface women engage with the same demons of appetite and body image that feminist theorists have grappled with for decades. The circulation of postfeminist messages allows fitness blogs to function on the surface of our culture, and allows bodies to be discussed as both a site of change, and as a site of triumph. The fact that these messages exist alongside each other in fitness blogs shows the complex depth of women's engagement with food. Yet these spaces empower women to start important, feminist conversations, and provide a safe space that conforms to the requirements of postfeminist media culture. As authors, women may use their blog posts to speak back to power, and as commenters, women may voice their concerns about society and their personal experiences. While many fitness blogs address the social pressures placed on women to be thin, some blogs are more upfront about their experience of internalizing messages to the point of unhappiness and disorder.

That being said, it is important to remember that these remain overwhelmingly white, middle-class spaces. These narratives are created for a social class of woman with the access to the medium, and as a result fitness blog communities assume a certain amount of resources and leisure time. Further research needs to examine the entirety of these projects, to understand the limitations of fitness blogs as Internet forums with

typically white, middle-to-upper class authors. Specifically, more research must examine the possible avenues for people of different socio-economic backgrounds to access similar dialogues and safe spaces. The question of homogeneity is also important considering not only the whiteness of the space, and how people of color may respond to this postfeminist discourse, but also the role of men in fitness blogging.

Conclusion: *Limitations and Looking Forward*

Fitness blogs have transformed the ways in which women may interact with the topics of eating and exercise. The range of experiences possible on fitness blogs is enabled by mainstream American culture, which has foregrounded cooking entertainment alongside celebratory weight loss media. The culture of the Internet has also contributed to the formation of fitness blogs, as it provides a space in which food-related content makes up a considerable portion of interactions, from image-based sharing sites like *Pinterest, Foodgawker,* and *Tastespotting*[14] to personal food and fitness blogs. Before the Internet, keeping a personal cookbook or sharing recipes with a circle of friends was very different from having a lifestyle column published in the newspaper, and few women had this opportunity. Similarly, a woman who adhered to cultural standards of beauty undertook her project as a private endeavor, shared perhaps only with her family and friends. Her labor gained her confidence and validation from those closest to her, but rarely profit or public validation. However, the emergence of technology and the Internet has allowed women to publicize their personal body projects and gain recognition and advertising revenue. In many ways the fitness blogs are coopting the rhetoric of women's magazines, with their discussions of meal plans and personal transformation. Fitness blogs are especially significant in this postfeminist moment when achievement of a fit body is not only a "sign of virtue," but also "a marker of middle-class white femininity" (Negra 127).

[14] These sites allow users to post and view pictures of food.

This thesis has demonstrated the ways in which fitness blogs adhere to postfeminist sensibilities in their content and methods, but also provide potentially feminist spaces for women to engage in dialogue. In the second chapter, Gina Harney's practices of self-surveillance reflected Rosalind Gill's postfeminist sensibilities, and also demonstrated the tendency of fitness blogging to reproduce behaviors common within online eating disorder communities. In the third chapter, Brittany Mullins's online narrative showed that fitness blogs are a site of transformation that allow women to demonstrate and accumulate valuable cultural expertise, with the ultimate goal of profiting from their experiences. In the fourth chapter, several blogs demonstrated that women use these spaces to recover from disorder, and generate a supportive community around eating and exercise. Women fitness bloggers also voice their concerns about the treatment of women in postfeminist media culture, thus complicating the view that fitness blogs are simply negative adherence to harmful practices of self-surveillance and body policing.

Whether viewed as harmful postfeminist projects or potentially valuable feminist communities, fitness blogs demonstrate the ways in which culture is produced, circulated, and operated through individuals. It is no longer realistic to accuse only the media and hegemonic cultural messages for the ways in which women experience their bodies. Women re-create and enact these behaviors through their online interactions, but this re-creation is not necessarily a form of unquestioning subservience; the women that create this media also interpret cultural messages in ways that both question and follow expectations of normative postfeminist femininity. Fitness blogs also give readers the

ability to observe the habits of real women, which has the potential to foster progressive dialogue and community around these issues. The blogs are a valuable product of postfeminist media culture for women with access to such online communities, and for women that feel addressed by the concerns voiced on the blogs, which is not always the case when considering readers outside of the typical white, female, middle-to-upper class postfeminist demographic.

This thesis has presented one of many approaches to the topic of fitness blogging, and provides a start for more thorough research. Of all the limitations of this thesis, the largest limitation concerns the diversity of the sample. Further research needs to address the ways in which bloggers' class and race identities affect their participation in fitness blogging. White middle-class women are hailed most directly by these discourse of responsibility and personal transformation (Gill and Scharff 4), and this lack of diversity is certainly reflected in the types of women who take up the "project of the self" through these fitness blogs, which require considerable access to resources and leisure time; based on my review of fitness blogs, the demographics appear overwhelming young, white, middle-class, and female. Although the majority of case studies here reflect the typical "white and middle class by default" (Tasker and Negra 2) postfeminist subject, this is not to imply that there are no fitness bloggers outside the white middle-class; rather, my sample demonstrated the ways in which typical postfeminist subjects use fitness blogs to document their engagement with the discourses that affect their lives most directly.

Further research also needs to address the other participants in fitness blogging; contrary to what this thesis presents, there are many fitness bloggers who do not fit the

mold of young, white, slender women. Some are overweight, some are men, and some are as old as grandmothers and as young as high school students. Feminist scholarship must examine the practices, as well as the benefits of participation, for these bloggers. Are the spaces similar to those of the women bloggers in this study? How are other participants shaping this space, and even affecting the ways in which women participate? These questions are integral to understanding the reach of postfeminist media culture more broadly, as well as the ways in which the sensibility of postfeminism is experienced by a variety of subjects outside the typical demographic. Body image and eating disorders affect a much larger population than the women sampled in this thesis, and the current wealth of fitness blogs provides an opportunity to measure the ways in which all people are navigating the current cultural discourses of fitness, neoliberalism, and postfeminism.

Appendix

List of blogs surveyed:

Carrots 'N' Cake – Tina Haupert (2010-2014)

Eating Bird Food – Brittany Mullins (2009- 2014)

Fit Foodie Finds – Lee Hersh (2013 -2014)

Live Laugh Eat – Allie Mak (2008-2014)

Oh She Glows – Angela Liddon (2008-2014)

Peanut Butter Fingers – Julie Fagan (2009-2014)

Peas and Crayons – Jenn L. (n.d.-2014)

Purely Twins – Lori and Michelle (2009-2014)

Running to the Kitchen – Gina Matsoukas (2011-2014)

Shine or Set – Brianna Sky (2011-2014)

Sweet Food Sweet Life – Courtney Horan (2010-2014)

The Fitnessista – Gina Harney (2008-2014)

The Real Life RD – Robyn Coale (2012-2014)

Young Married Chic – Kris Schoels (2011-2014)

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