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# What's Feminism Got to Do with It? Examination of Feminism in Women's Everyday Lives

Claire Carter, University of Regina

**Abstract:** In recent decades there has been considerable debate about the role and meaning of feminism in younger women's lives. Feminism can be understood as an empowering discourse, fostering critical awareness and resistance to dominant social norms. However, it can also be experienced as regulatory and disciplinary, clearly defining who and what constitutes a "good" feminist. Utilizing Michel Foucault's principle of care of the self, this paper analyzes women's body practices in relation both to women's interpretation of feminism and to dominant feminist discourses. The complexities of negotiating diverse social identities, as well as women's desire for a happier life and greater self-worth, provide some important nuances to contemporary debates about feminism.

**Keywords:** feminism, gender, third-wave feminism, care of the self, Foucault (Michel), subjectivity, body

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Since the early 1990s there has been considerable attention and debate about the meaning and role of feminism in the lives of women who came of age after the heyday of second-wave feminism. Often, this debate is divided into two extremes: on the one hand, there are claims that gender equality has been achieved and women no longer have need of feminism; on the other hand, there is the sense that women of this generation are overly individualistic and consumerist, and thus only draw on feminism when they stand to benefit from it.<sup>1</sup> There have been numerous reactions to both positions, often with the insistence that changing social dynamics and the multiple ways women are engaging with feminism are left out of the discussion.<sup>2</sup> Something is obviously missing as the debate continues twenty years on, with, for example, the broadcast in 2011 of the CBC documentary *The F Word* (which poignantly asks, "Who Wants to Be a Feminist?") and the ongoing publication of books on the topic, such as *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (2010) by Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune.

Against this backdrop, I theorize younger women's relationship to feminism in terms of what it means to different women and how it informs their sense of self.<sup>3</sup> This article developed out of my PhD dissertation on the relationship between women's everyday body practices and the construction of gendered subjectivity, based on interviews with fourteen diversely identified women aged 30–45 from Toronto and Ottawa, Canada. My research targets this age group because existing feminist literature on subjectivity and aging focuses primarily on youth and young women or on women in midlife or menopause. Popular culture, however, has granted women in their 30s and 40s center stage through television shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, alongside the heightened marketing of anti-aging products to increasingly younger women. This age group represents a time in women's lives when they are potentially going through life transitions related to decisions about having a family, career or job changes, long-term relationships, and caring for their parents. Yet contemporary Western culture portrays these women as already having it all—they are vibrant and sexy, youthful yet experienced, independent but desiring relationships, and often successful in life and work.

I focus on three women's stories about body practices and self-care from my doctoral research because they specifically address the contradictions and complexities of embodying feminism. Michel Foucault's concept of "care of the self" frames my analysis because it offers a way to imagine the interaction between practice, discourse, and the self. Feminism is central to each of the women's stories, which reveal different meanings and negotiations in their subjects' relationship to feminism.<sup>4</sup> Feminism can be characterized as a movement that empowers women to recognize and challenge intersecting forms of societal oppression through making connections to their everyday lives. It could thus be thought of as compatible with care of the self, given that it promotes critical awareness of the functioning of power and of the subject's engagement in the world. However, feminism can also function as a normalizing discourse by defining "woman" and offering prescriptions for how women can free themselves from oppression. This paper explores the tension between the empowering and the disciplinary effects of feminism on women's attempts to practice care of the self. My purpose is not to judge women's body practices as either empowering or disciplinary but rather to highlight the complex ways feminism is understood and engaged with by women in the ongoing construction of subjectivity. I examine practices central to ideal femininity and the female body, those of clothing, beauty (for example, makeup), and exercise (Bartky 1990). Referring to feminist theorists' application of care of the self to body practices (Heyes 2006; Markula 2003, 2004), I consider how feminist discourse informs women's engagement of said body practices in order to highlight the complexities—not simply good or bad aspects—of embodying feminism. Before turning to the women's stories, I introduce the concept of care of the self and provide some background discussion on recent debates about third-wave feminism.

### **Care of the Self**

In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault examines the relationship between domination and the self. He defines technologies of the self as those "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, 18). Foucault frames the concept in relation to theoretical ideas and practices from late antiquity, which focused on the need to take care of oneself. He argues that the principle of care of the self was central to personal conduct and social life for elite Greeks and Romans and led to the attainment of self-knowledge. Over time, Foucault claims, care of the self came to be replaced by the principle of "know thy self," which meant, "do not suppose yourself to be a God" (Foucault 1988, 18). This transition was important because the different principles led to different forms of care and different forms of self. In the former era, self-knowledge was obtained through critical self-examination and reflection, whereas in the latter it was acquired by obedience and renunciation to church and later the state (Foucault 1988, 19).

Within early Greek and Roman texts, care of the self was theorized not simply as an attitude towards oneself but as an activity that prescribed a particular relation between body and soul. Referring to the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades*, Foucault suggests that caring for the body does not translate into care of the self, as "[the] self is not clothing, tools, or possessions. It is to be found in the principle which uses these tools, a principle not of the body but of the soul" (Foucault 1988, 25). In order to develop this theme in the context of feminist analysis, I will now briefly discuss research by Pirkko Markula and Cressida Heyes, who have both studied care of the self in relation to women's body practices of exercise and weight loss, respectively.

In her article "The Technologies of Sport," Markula critiques sport sociology studies that apply the

theoretical framework of technologies of the self to women's sport practice. In her analysis, she finds that certain practices of self-care function as a coping mechanism in the face of normative pressures rather than freeing women from these pressures. For example, controlling their food intake helped female elite athletes cope with the pressures of competition and sport more generally but did not foster "self-transformation" (Markula 2003, 89). Markula suggests that the studies she surveys may have misinterpreted the meaning of care of the self, and she turns to feminist theorists to consider whether (and how) Foucault's ideas can be applied in analyses of "women's ability to resist power relations" (2003, 95). She refers to Moira Lloyd's argument that Foucault's notion of care of the self "promotes the dimension of critical awareness to distinguish practices of freedom from the ones that perpetuate the dominant discursive construction of gender" (Markula 2003, 102). Lloyd brings together Foucault's theorizing on technologies of domination and technologies of the self to argue that critical awareness is necessary to the practice of care of the self and to suggest that "self-fashioning, *when allied to critique*, can produce sites of contestation over the meanings and contours of identity, and over the ways in which certain practices are mobilized" (Lloyd 1996, 250; original emphasis). Markula applies this notion of critical awareness to women's sport practices and argues that to consider actions as practices of freedom, athletes need to demonstrate an awareness of, rather than just an ability to cope with, their position in sport (2003, 103).

In another article, Markula analyses normative fitness practice, specifically applying the concept of care of the self to an examination of the exercise practice called "hybrid" as part of a broader inquiry into possibilities for changing dominant discourses on the ideal feminine body (2004, 302). Critical reflection and resistance to the normative exercise-equals-weight-loss paradigm is fundamental to the design of hybrid exercise practice, but fitness-center owners, personal trainers, and instructors do not necessarily embrace these ideals. Markula argues that without critical awareness "hybrid" cannot be construed as a practice of care of the self, and, further, that "any fitness form through which the participants can problematize the dominant discursive construction of gender and actively reconstruct their selves can transgress the limitations of the natural (feminine) identity" (2004, 319). Therefore, the characterization of "hybrid" as a practice of care of the self is dependent on whether it is used to challenge normative bodily ideals or to reinforce them. However, Markula found that for the most part participants, trainers, and managers maintain and reproduce gender norms through their fitness practices.

Heyes's article, "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers" (2006), examines the discursive power of weight-loss centers in their construction of weight-loss subjects by appropriating principles of care of the self. Situating herself within feminist literature on body practices and subjectivity, she refers to the work of Susan Bordo (1993) and Sandra Bartky (1990) to argue that, because their theories focus on "macro-practices" of power rather than "micro-practices" of day-to-day experiences, these authors do not help us understand why women continue to take up dieting and weight loss despite continual failure (2006, 136). Further, she finds that Bordo and Bartky "stress the repressive moments in the construction of the slender body, contra the enabling functions of the dieting process" (2006, 136).<sup>5</sup> Heyes extends their work by considering how self-care practices are built into diet and weight-loss centers, in that they provide not only a context within which to achieve the culturally desired body but also a "sense of self-development, mastery, expertise, and skill that dieting can offer" (2006, 137). Evoking Bordo's critique of the individualism and commercialism inherent in exercise slogans such as "Just Do It," Heyes examines the language and discourse of empowerment of weight-loss centers. She applies Foucault's theorizing of *hypomnemata* as a practice of care of the self to Weight Watchers programs and discursive materials (2006, 139).<sup>6</sup> She finds that diet centers provide a powerful discursive and physical space for reflection on the self. They represent (and are often experienced

as) a forum in which to “change your life” with the assistance of staff and co-practitioners and through actions prescribed by the program, such as daily reflection. Heyes makes four points of connection between weight-loss discourses and principles of care of the self (2006, 140–44); I will return to these points further on, as they pertain to practices Ashley, Ava and Ruby engage in. In demonstrating how weight-loss centers “appropriate and exploit language of care of the self,” Heyes seeks “to demonstrate [how they] function as *both* disciplinary and enabling, in ways feminists have largely ignored” (2006, 145). Her findings reinforce Foucault’s conception of care of the self as practicing freedom from within one’s societal and disciplinary context, with the goal of subverting and transforming normative power relations. Heyes’s essay corresponds with third-wave feminism’s assertion that we must recognize our contradictory and complex identities and desires. Indeed, the author herself identifies her research position in this project as “contradictory”: she is an academic studying weight-loss centers and also a former participant in one such center (2006, 127).

Of central relevance to my discussion are Heyes’s points of connection between emancipatory and disciplinary discourses and Markula’s application of Lloyd’s articulation of care of the self as necessarily involving critical awareness. Within the context of women’s everyday lives, the concept of care of the self is useful in analyzing women’s body practices in terms of what they symbolize, what purpose they serve, and their relation to women’s multiple identities.

### **Feminism and Subjectivity**

Feminism can be a critical discourse for both social and self-examination, and can thus be thought of as fostering or encouraging care of the self; but it can also function as a normalizing discourse dictating what a good feminist is and how s/he should appear and behave. How feminism is understood and the relation of this understanding to women’s efforts to practice care of the self are central to my analysis. I draw on Susanne Luhmann’s definition of feminism because of its emphasis on notions of reflection and critique:

I think of feminism as a practice of radical (self-)questioning that is sceptical of any kind of truth claims made concerning gender, sexuality, and other kinds of social identities. My kind of feminism tries to understand (and hopefully intervene in) how gender, sexuality, race, class—singularly and collectively—are mobilized. (2001, 37)

Central to feminism, as alluded to in Luhmann’s definition, is recognizing the intersectionality of various forms of oppression and consequently acknowledging that women cannot be identified by only one category of social identity. Third-wave feminism emerged in part out of activism and theorizing by feminists of color and queer feminists who were attempting to stretch the movement’s boundaries and definitions of feminist subjectivity to include their experiences and issues confronting different groups of women (Kinsler 2004; Heywood and Drake 1997). Feminism is a complex concept, involving multiple forms of theorizing and numerous threads of activism and movement. I use Luhmann’s definition as a frame for my analysis because it recognizes the necessity of radical self-questioning around intersectionality of social identities (of gender, class, race and sexuality, among others) and because her focus on critical self-awareness also correlates with Foucault’s concept of care of the self. Care of the self involves reflecting on one’s actions and beliefs in order to live a happier and more ethical life, rather than simply adhering to what society, the state, or a particular institution deem as the standard. Feminism, as defined by Luhmann, promotes this form of personal engagement and critique of social norms.

Critical to understanding younger women’s relationship to feminism is recognition of how social change has impacted the context and meaning of both feminist movement and discourses of and about feminism. Third-wave feminists argue that many young women grow up with an ambivalent relationship to feminism:

on the one hand, they are grateful for the opportunities available to them as a result of the feminist movement, but on the other hand they are hesitant to identify as feminist because of the social perception that being a feminist stands in opposition to being feminine or embracing femininity. Third-wave feminists seek to reclaim the experiences of pleasure and creativity in women's beauty and body practices and, to this end, they extend the "critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures" offered by second-wave feminism (Heywood and Drake 1997, 3). At the same time, they recognize the ways women "are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine [them]" (Heywood and Drake 1997, 3). These efforts to negotiate the legacy of feminism within a different (and constantly changing) social context have been presented as a response to restricting and/or limiting effects of feminist discourse. In the introduction to a third-wave anthology, *To Be Real*, Rebecca Walker states: "For many of us it seems that to be a feminist ... is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories" (1995, xxiii). Third-wave feminists are challenging the notion that there is "one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment" and acknowledging the complex and contradictory social relations women experience (Walker 1995, xxiv). Heywood and Drake name "lived messiness" as a defining characteristic of the third wave, arguing that it acknowledges the ways people are negotiating and disrupting dominant binaries of female/male, black/white, and gay/straight, along with the dichotomy between a focus on communities and coalitions, on the one hand, and successful individualism on the other (1997, 8).

The practice of narration has been instrumental to third-wave feminism, resulting in several edited collections in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Barbara Findlen's *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995), Walker's *To Be Real* (1995), Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman's *Colonize This!* (2002), and Ophira Edut's *Body Outlaws* (2003). These collections sketch out women's individual struggles with their identities, as well as the contradictory nature of what each of them finds empowering. As Edut states, "in a world that still tries to assume our identities, we rebel with an outward expression of self ... in all its messy complexity" (2003, xxi). Furthermore, she argues that these collections enact a dialogue amongst feminists; they are a forum "where women of diverse cultures and identities could gather to chronicle (and share) their experiences" (Edut 2003, xix). The narratives vividly portray the negotiations that women embody on a regular basis with respect to their femininity, sexuality, ethnicity, and all other factors contributing to their sense of self. Amber Kinser suggests that narration provides a critical space for third-wave feminists to negotiate their positioning between a "discourse that emerged in the wake of generational unrest and protest [second-wave feminism] and a discourse that claims that time for protest has past [postfeminism]" (2004, 137). These feminist narratives can function as a form of care of the self—as hypomnemata discussed by Heyes—offering a space of reflection and critical awareness of the intersection between everyday practices of individuals and broader social power relations. Notably, Kinser identifies narration as a primary means for "exploring how it feels to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates one's sense of identity and how one stabilizes that identity" (2004, 137). I continue this trend of narration by focusing on three women's stories about their relationship to feminism, their bodies, their professional lives, and their family upbringings.

Third-wave feminism has emerged out of a specific sociocultural context, defined by the continuation of feminist movement, changing political, technological, and economic landscape of neoliberalism and globalization, and the emergence of postfeminism. Three key characteristics have been identified by several theorists as central to third-wave feminist movement: first, it is driven by the first generation that has grown up with feminism, that is, with the language of feminism and with material realities achieved

as a result of feminist action; second, the positioning of the movement alongside postfeminism and its simultaneous continuation of and distinction from second-wave feminism; and third, as already noted, the centrality of narration in much of third-wave writing and activism (Kinser 2004; Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Braithwaite 2002; Steenbergen 2001). The importance of the era in which it has developed has led some theorists to suggest that third-wave feminism is less representative of a “neat generational divide than [of] a cultural context” (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 14).

Steenbergen argues that postfeminists emerged at an opportune time “feeding off of the backlash of the 1980s and utilizing the public fixation with and consumption of sexuality to their advantage” (2001, 11). The predominant characteristic of postfeminist discourse is the distinction it makes between “victim feminism” and “power feminism.” Victim feminism is often associated with second-wave feminists and more generally with “anyone who speaks of oppression or is woman-centered” (Heywood and Drake 1997, 3). Naomi Wolf, who is credited with coining the two terms, states that victim feminism “casts women as sexually pure and mystically nurturing, and stresses the evil done to these ‘good’ women as a way to petition for their rights,” whereas power feminism “sees women as human beings—sexual, individual, no better or worse than their male counterparts—and lays claim to equality simply because women are entitled to it” (Wolf 1993 quoted in Siegel 1997, 68). Sexuality is central to the distinction between victim and power feminism. Victim feminism is associated with women who adopt the roles of passivity and victimhood to try and gain power, and are said to cry rape or sexual harassment when they don’t get what they want, while independent women who claim responsibility for their sexuality, and are open to it as opposed to denying it, are associated with power feminism (Soriso 1997). The theorizing behind this distinction is that postfeminists “assume that the women’s movement took care of oppressive institutions, and now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental societal changes” (Orr 1997, 34). Important to note here is the strong connection between the postfeminist language of “victimization” and the liberal ideology of individualism. Postfeminists state that women, just like anyone else, “can overcome obstacles and succeed in American society,” which has the greater effect of “(obscuring) the true dynamics of power and (absolving) responsibility” for inequality and oppression (Soriso 1997, 141). Kinser argues that third-wave feminists need to be cautious because their efforts to be inclusive and celebratory of messiness could be too easily co-opted by the media-savvy and well-positioned (in terms of relations and accessibility to mainstream media outlets) postfeminist movement (2004, 142). In particular, the third wave’s focus on the individual acts of style as empowering and its celebration of contradiction can readily lend themselves to acts or beliefs that have nothing or little to do with systemic or concrete progressive change (Kinser 2004, 144).

With reference to the concept of care of the self, I argue that discourses of feminism provide an ideology of ethical self-care that challenges patriarchal constructions of female beauty and identity but can also have normalizing and disciplining effects, and I consider how contradictory notions of and relations with feminism inform women’s self-knowledge and the construction of gendered subjectivity. The following three stories reveal processes of self-examination and negotiation: about the relationship between clothing style, class and family history, and feminism; the balancing act of career choice, family and financial independence, and class and race politics; and the body politics of fat phobia, lesbian aesthetics, and feminism. Ashley, Ava and Ruby all draw on feminism in their efforts to negotiate intersecting social identities and politics, and they reveal complex relations that contribute to debates about the meaning and role of feminism for women of their generation.

At the start of every interview for my larger study, I asked each woman to tell me about herself, and

asked specifically how she would like to be identified within the research. This more personal option was chosen, as opposed to asking participants to state particular identity descriptors more generically, with the intent of allowing each woman to focus on aspects of their identity that were paramount to how they know themselves and how they engage in the world. As a result, women chose to identify in varying ways, with some opting for identifiers particular to body size (e.g., fat), race, or sociopolitical outlook, such as being socially conscious. Each section that follows opens with a brief introduction to each of the women to provide some context for their stories.

### **Ashley: Fashioning Identity**

*Ashley is a 32-year-old Caucasian woman who responded to my call for participants because she felt her thoughts on identity and body practices might bring a different flavor to what she assumed I would be hearing from others. Her work experiences have been diverse, but it is her time with women's health organizations that crystallized her ideas on feminism and self-representation: women can dress however they feel like and should not be read as catering to men. Ashley grew up on a co-operative farm where she learnt and was expected to participate in daily life requirements, instilling in her the ability to look after herself. Growing up, her parents were not financially stable and as a result her life choices are framed by the need to be financially secure and independent. Her upbringing sheds light on two central aspects of Ashley's story: first, her familiarity with and understanding of feminism as lived among the cooperative farm community and, second, her need to stand out and be independent.*

A thread woven throughout Ashley's interview is her defence of the right to self-express through clothing and not be read as catering to men or patriarchy. Ashley's fashioning of herself through her sense of style combines her family and class background, perceptions of feminism, need for financial stability, and desire to stand out in a crowd. Analyzing Ashley's story through the lenses of feminism and care of the self draws attention to competing influences on the construction of her subjectivity—her engagement with dominant femininity, resistance to the normalizing discourse of feminism as anti-fashion and anti-femininity, and her need of financial security and self-expression.

Ashley's comments about her experience working for a women's health organization reflect her concern for how her self-presentation would be read by her colleagues: "I never seem to quite fit the mold... I was the only person who showed up in the office that was wearing high heels or a dress." Her comments are reminiscent of the well-documented stereotypes of second- and third-wave feminists, which position second wavers as serious political activists opposed to popular culture and feminine expression and third wavers as self-absorbed, pop-culture junkies (see, for example, Heywood and Drake 1997). While feminists of both generations challenge these stereotypes, they continue to inform popular ideas about feminism. The centrality of clothing to Ashley's sense of self is evident in her declaration; as she puts it, it is "an expression of who I am, it's almost integral to how I present myself to the world." She asserts that her knowledge of fashion is informed by a range of factors and is continually changing. Fashion is fun and pleasurable, but Ashley also takes pride in her knowledge of how the fashion industry works, commenting that fashion models are "supposed to be communicating an idea, they're not supposed to look pretty." Ashley makes a case for clothing to be taken seriously as a venue for communication, not as merely frivolous. In her analysis of the disciplinary discourses of femininity, Bartky argues that while femininity is required of women, it does not grant them much social power. Despite the skill and knowledge required and the "unrelenting pressure" to be feminine, "women are ridiculed and dismissed for the triviality of their interest in such 'trivial' things as clothes and make-up" (Bartky 1990, 75). In demonstrating her fashion knowledge, Ashley



seeks to challenge the notion of clothing as trivial and to validate her practice and passion.

Leaving home and moving to Toronto for university influenced her to make changes in her self-presentation as she went from being a self-defined “jeans and ponytail kind of person,” which she felt made her anonymous, to her current preference for skirt suits. To Ashley, this gradual change has been a marked and intentional adaptation: “I wanted to define myself a little bit more distinctly ... after a certain point I was like I’ve blended in for too long and I don’t want to anymore.” The need to stand out is ongoing, providing a critical thread in Ashley’s story and her analysis of feminism, which is strongly informed by her colleagues at a women’s health organization:

Walking into the [work] project [small laugh] that was interesting, not to denigrate anybody in any shape or form, but it felt like I was walking into an office of women in comfortable shoes and that’s not how I self-express... I think I was definitely a little bit concerned about the gelling factor.

The sense that she needs to defend herself, shown in the above comment, reveals the degree to which Ashley expects her choice of clothing not to cohere with feminism or with feminists, but also the extent of its centrality to her sense of self. Ashley suggests that her family life is comparable to the feminist community of her new workplace and, therefore, “it was not something I wasn’t familiar with.” Her effort to negotiate feminism with her love of fashion involves critical reflection on the meaning of clothing in relation to her gendered identity. While she never mentions a concrete example of anyone at work commenting on her appearance, on several occasions she expresses feeling different from the workplace norm; for example, being concerned about the “gelling” factor and not fitting the mold. Her uncertainty about whether she will be accepted by her colleagues leads to a critical discussion about her perception of feminism and feminists’ misinterpretation of the relationship between women’s clothing, male gaze, and women’s self-expression:

Well, we [work colleagues] started to talk about what self-expression is to feminists and how in some ways that conversation can’t even come up, right? Because if you’re going to declare yourself as a feminist, you have to dress and act in a certain way ... to be perceived as not catering to men. It makes a lot of assumptions, we were talking with some of the other people that were working on the project ... and they were like, if you walk into some of the meetings with the feminists and you’re wearing a strapless dress, they are going to look at you and make assumptions as to why you’re there, what your feelings are on feminism, whereas it really could just be an expression of your own self.

This excerpt moves from a general workplace discussion to a more personal commentary by Ashley about her sense that there is a dress code for feminists; women cannot wear certain clothes without being perceived as conforming to dominant notions of femininity and heterosexual men’s desires. This speaks to the sentiment expressed by some third wavers that they are “failed feminists” because they don’t dress or act the part (Walker 1995, xxiii). Many third wavers feel that acceptable feminist practice has rules or boundaries, and they must follow suit or jump ship. Gina Dent sees this as a type of “missionary feminism”: “a feminism that puts forward its program so stridently, guards its borders so closely, and legislates its behaviours so fervently that many are afraid to declare its name” (1995, 64). Third-wave feminists challenge the notion that there is “one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment” (Walker 1995, xxxiv), and this resonates in Ashley’s struggle to assert her sense of style. Her conception of feminism draws on feminist discourse that suggests a narrowly defined notion of what being a feminist looks like and means. In her clothing practice, however, she negotiates two seemingly incompatible notions of feminism: the empowered confident woman and the anti-patriarchy, liberated feminist. Third-wave feminists have critiqued this distinction, which, as outlined earlier, is characterized by postfeminists as opposing “power

feminism” and “victim feminism” (for example, Braithwaite 2002; Steenbergen 2001; Orr 1997; Siegel 1997; and Heywood and Drake 1997). Victim feminism speaks to radical feminism’s position that societal structures are patriarchal and oppressive, and therefore need to be dismantled before equality can be achieved, whereas power feminism is more in line with liberal feminism’s efforts to enable women’s access to current societal structures without addressing their inherent oppressive nature. White women who have privileged access to social structures may be caught between these two poles; for example, they have access to education and corresponding employment and thus may not see—as they are socialized not to see—social relations of inequality intersecting with their experiences. Ashley’s story shows an attempt to balance women’s rights to be equal and free from discrimination with a sense of a woman’s entitlement to individual choices and forms of expression, which in her case are informed by class.

Ashley’s desire to separate her clothing choices from either feminist or men’s ideals corresponds to efforts by third-wave feminists to reclaim forms of self-expression from being read and dismissed as conforming to sexist ideals, arguing instead that these practices can have a diversity of meanings, which include being perceived as pleasurable and empowering. Ashley’s childhood experience and the clothing style of her work colleagues symbolize a rejection of fashion and beauty culture, thus informing her conception of feminism. Critically, the rejection of fashion and beauty dismisses a cultural toolkit she uses to navigate social and professional arenas; her clothing style is a strategy to negotiate various social dynamics. In analyzing Ashley’s passion for fashion and her defensive positioning in relation to “feminists in comfortable shoes,” I am reminded of Kathy Davis’s desire to understand women’s decisions to have cosmetic surgery as something more than just false consciousness. Davis argues that feminist body politics, influenced by poststructuralism, has attempted to deconstruct the simplistic analysis of women’s engagement in beauty practices as either good or bad, enlightened or “cultural dope,” recognizing the “complexity and ambivalence of their involvement in beauty practices” (Davis 1995, 9). For me, the complexity and ambivalence of Ashley’s story involve the intersection of her upbringing, her need for self-expression through clothing, and her desire for her performance of femininity to be respectfully accepted:

I think my sense of style has changed.... I’d describe my style for the last few years as a classy broad, certainly try to have an air of refinement at all times, but never in the kind of way that would be simpering or passive.

Although Ashley is trying to disassociate herself from passive or dependent constructions of femininity (which would cast her in the role of “victim”), she draws upon notions of class to construct herself as possessing the knowledge of how to perform femininity correctly. Her efforts at self-expression stem from feeling that she is unnoticed and unheard; she is anonymous and blends into a crowd. In her study on the relationship between fashion and feminine identity, Joanne Hollows argues that “feminist criticism has moved from thinking about the possibility of getting outside of fashion and throwing off a feminine ‘mask’ to thinking about fashion as a site of struggle over the meaning of gendered identities” (2000, 159). Clothing becomes a means for Ashley to negotiate the intersection of her various identities—including her desire to be noticed as feminine and cultured—as it demonstrates that she is “in the know” on fashion and can balance style with skill.

In her analysis of Weight Watchers discourses, Heyes argues that a point of connection with care of the self is the principle that reflection on everyday practices can lead to the development of new capacities and forms of care of the self. For example, dieting discourse advises the dieter to “replace negative messages with positive ones” (Heyes 2006, 141), encouraging a focus on the new activities they will be able to do and the person they will be able to become rather than on how hard their road to weight loss will be. Ashley’s negotiation with self-expression and refashioning of her sense of self illustrates Heyes’s point about

everyday practices leading to new possibilities and self-transformation. For Ashley, clothing is symbolic of her negotiation between the values and beliefs she was raised with and her newfound independence and developing identity. Through critical self-reflection, she gradually changes her self-presentation to reflect who she was becoming rather than deferring to what she had grown up with.

When Ashley was growing up, neither of her parents were financially stable, and this had implications on her educational and personal decisions. A critical point in Ashley's story is her admission that her career decisions, while not always ideal to herself or her family, have been based upon her need for security. This conversation about financial stability comes at the end of the interview and proves central to her performance of femininity and perspective on feminism. Ashley's form of self-expression is a way for her to negotiate the need for financial security and desire to appear feminine, stylish, and competent within various social networks and contexts. Ashley's defensiveness against the perceived judgment of her work colleagues could be interpreted as a response to a threat to her strategy for social security and as a reflection of her perhaps unconscious understanding that for many women with "restricted access to small amounts of capital, the use of femininity may be better than nothing at all" (Skeggs 1997, 101–2).

Ashley feels there is no place for self-expression within feminism unless one is willing to be judged as dressing for men; she therefore places herself at a distance from feminism. In fact, Beverly Skeggs found that working-class women are often more sceptical of and resistant to feminism than middle-class women. Because working-class women's daily lives involve actively "resisting being an object of surveillance," and because they "feel the constant pressure of judgments of others," they can experience feminism as merely another form of "moral authoritarianism" (Skeggs 1997, 152). Simply stated, "They do not want to be judged by other women" (Skeggs 1997, 152). In many ways, Ashley's class position "was the omnipresent underpinning which informed and circumscribed [her] ability to *be*" (Skeggs 1997, 76).

Ashley's story demonstrates a complex negotiation with feminism through her struggle to assert her form of self-expression and independence. However, her choices with respect to fashion need to be contextualized within the dynamic of class and gender, which inform her relationship to feminism. Davis suggests that "it is difficult for most of us to see structures of inequality based on sexism or racism, when they are constantly being obscured by discourses of individualism" (1995, 11). I propose that Ashley's efforts to practice care of the self are situated along the continuum between structures of inequality and discourses of individualism. Ashley actively resists conforming to normative discourses of femininity and feminism; she rejects dressing to please men but does not critically analyze her choice of clothing in relation to structures of sexism and capitalism. While this is reflective of Kinser's warning about the co-option of third-wave messaging by postfeminists (by valuing personal success over social change), I do not believe this is Ashley's intent. She endeavors to care for herself, understand her place in the world, and put into place a life philosophy informed by her experiences, but she struggles with the seeming incompatibility of feminism and the need for financial stability. Walker states that "constantly measuring up to some cohesive fully down-for-the-feminist-cause identity without contradictions and messiness and lusts for power and luxury items is not a fun or easy task" (1995, xxxi). I think Ashley would agree, as her body practices—as practices of care—have led to greater self-knowledge and are intertwined with normative discourses of individualism, class, and gender. Drawing on Markula's analysis of care of the self, discussed earlier in this paper, I argue that Ashley's clothing practice functions to help her cope with, and at times challenge, dominant discourses of class, gender, and feminism without necessarily freeing her from their pressure. Feminism may not be experienced as emancipatory for Ashley, but nonetheless it fosters care of the self by encouraging greater self-reflection and critical awareness.

### **Ava: Advertising, Community, and Feminism**

*Ava is a 32-year-old Muslim woman whose parents are new immigrants; her father is from Pakistan and her mother from Trinidad. Her childhood was difficult because her father was abusive, so she decided to cut off contact with her family shortly after leaving home at nineteen. She found a new family and community working with immigrant women's centers. Her personal, educational, and professional experiences inform her identity as a feminist and socially conscious woman. Recently, she began working in advertising, which has involved significant life transitions, from how she presents herself to the people she interacts with to the life choices and financial stability that have become open to her. These changes involve complex negotiations with and reflections on her political identity and her need to care for herself and build a happy life.*

Ava left an abusive home at nineteen and several years later made the difficult decision to cut herself off from her family and move forward with her life. Taking women's studies courses at university, undergoing years of therapy, and working in feminist immigrant organizations gave her critical tools for healing and provided a supportive community. But Ava's story, similar to Ashley's, reveals contradictory experiences with feminism, as empowering and ethical on the one hand and seemingly incompatible with her efforts to be financially independent on the other. Her relationship to feminism was challenged when she was offered a job in advertising due to her background in feminist and social justice. The job and its corresponding lifestyle required a new presentation of self:

Ava: It's advertising, you have to be very stylish because it's very much about the beauty industry and what you look like really matters, so I'm always touching up makeup.... Just presenting yourself to clients, it's very important to fit the image of the company they are trying to uphold, so looks matter quite a bit.

Claire: Has anyone ever spoken to you about that or was it just kind of unwritten?

Ava: Well, I was very lefty and am very socially conscious, I did a lot of stuff with immigrant women centers and stuff like that, so if I wanted a job in advertising I had to look the part and so I got my hair styled and I bought a new wardrobe ... it's been quite an adaptation ... basically, just more perfume, more makeup, more high-end stuff.... It's just a part of the industry and it's a different lifestyle.

The need to resemble the images and ideas Ava is selling requires her to adopt a new body consciousness and disciplinary regime. Revamping herself to "look the part" has not been easy because it contradicts her background experiences and beliefs. When I ask her about other ways the shift to advertising has affected her, Ava talks about the social dynamics at work:

The people I'm hanging out with, they're different and it's very different, I guess you just have to be careful, there are a lot of people stabbing you in the back.... Some people don't really know me or anything and I feel kind of lefty, like I'm sticking out ... and just my mentality and I'm still very socially conscious and I think I stick out a little bit, so I'm trying to blend in and just be very conscious of what I'm saying and what I'm doing, so I'm still adapting.

While both Ashley and Ava actively negotiate their relation to feminism and femininity within their workplaces, Ashley adopts body practices in order to stick out, whereas Ava does so to blend in. While there are undoubtedly many factors informing this difference—the desire to blend in versus the desire to stand out—a race/class analysis offers a critical lens with which to understand Ashley's and Ava's preferences. Their differing race and class positions inform both available options and the expectations on how they can and should present themselves. Dominant constructions of femininity center around being White, middle class, and heterosexual, and thus to be recognized as feminine women must make considerable investments in the hopes of approximating what for many is impossible. As discussed above, Ashley's strong desire to

stand out reflects her efforts to distance herself from her working-class upbringing. Through her clothing choices, she endeavors to present herself as an educated, cultured and stylish woman; in effect, to secure herself as a member of the middle class. Clothing is significant for working-class women because they have to learn “the distinctions between style and fashion, between looking good and looking ‘tarty,’ between looking feminine and looking sexy” (Skeggs 1997, 103) that are necessary for navigating everyday life. This knowledge of femininity is drawn from popular culture, such as magazines and television, in combination with local knowledge obtained from family and community (Skeggs 1997). While acknowledging where she came from, Ashley seeks to stand out—through her fashion—and to visually represent her distance from her working-class roots. Ava, on the other hand, seeks to blend in, specifically within her new work context where looks are paramount, but also it could be argued that her strategy applies within the broader context of wanting to be read as “Canadian.” Dominant constructions of the “ideal immigrant,” as I elaborate further on, center on notions of financial independence. Having left home at a young age, Ava seeks to build a new home for herself and establish her independence; her job in advertising is key in this pursuit. She is a first-generation Canadian and, as Canadianness is intimately tied to Whiteness (Bannerji 2000), engaging in practices such as the use of makeup and beauty creams may be a way to emulate normative femininity that is itself constructed as White. Ava did tell me that she continues to wear dark eyeliner to create “dramatic eyes” like her grandmother, demonstrating that there are limitations on her desire to fit in. Arlene McLaren and Isabel Dyck critique models of assimilation or multiculturalism because they tend to focus on a “one-way direction of ‘acculturation’” (2002, 12). They argue that there needs to be more acknowledgement of the “fluidity, nuances and the conditioning effects of local, material conditions and social relations” (2002, 12), which are significant in Ava’s case, from her family history to her current negotiations with her new life. Similar to Ashley, though for quite different reasons, Ava seeks to distance herself from her family, and in forging a new life for herself she endeavors to embody attributes that will help her blend in and become “one of the team” and ostensibly of the nation. It is impossible to generalize about the influence of race and class on all women’s body practices, but my analysis of Ava’s and Ashley’s contradictory desires (respectively, to blend in and to stand out) suggests that the primacy of financial independence is informed by dominant constructions of femininity and Canadianness.

Feminism and social justice inform Ava’s sense of self but are increasingly in tension with her new career. Her efforts to practice care of the self through critical reflection and awareness involve negotiation of her personal beliefs with the social and political dynamics at work. Ava’s transition to advertising reveals the complexity and ongoing construction of subjectivity as she negotiates self-knowledge by performing normative, disciplinary practices. I asked Ava why she made the move to advertising, given the appearance requirements and her feelings of guilt, personal censure, and being out of place:

It was different, I was called for a two-week contract, and it just kept getting extended and extended, it’s a very exciting field, my lifestyle has changed quite a bit, I had a roommate, and it was just different, I can do whatever I want now, going to Montréal was such a big deal, now I can travel more, my lifestyle, I can just buy whatever I want, do whatever I want.

Financial independence and security are significant components in Ava’s willingness to pursue her new career, despite the emotional and political challenges. Her experiences since leaving home inform her current position, as she has gone through pursuing education, ending an abusive relationship, cutting herself off from her family, working with immigrant women’s centers, becoming socially active, and reaching out for support through therapy and meditation. These experiences have involved care of the self through reflection on her values and beliefs, assertion of her sense of self-worth and dignity, and her effort to live a

happier life. Her background in women's studies and feminist work created a space of healing, community, and activism, which, in turn, led to greater self-knowledge:

I made a lot more friends when I was doing things, like socially active, in immigrant centers, I guess I have more in common with them, I felt, than in advertising, you have to be really careful about who, people are one thing to your face and then, so I've been more selective about the friends I make in my career right now, but I do have a good staple of friends.

In her new social and political environment, Ava seems to mourn the loss of comfort and companionship of her past, but this loss is offset by her newfound independent lifestyle and the excitement of learning a new trade. In addition, Ava's story needs to be analyzed in relation to dominant, racialized discourses of "the ideal immigrant," which are strongly tied to financial independence and stand in contrast to the image of "deficient immigrant," constructed as socially or state-dependent (McLaren and Dyck 2004, 42). McLaren and Dyck argue that central to constructions of the ideal immigrant is the theory of human capital, which postulates that higher levels of training and education will equate to greater productivity and higher wages (2004, 42). Ava has been moving along this continuum, attaining postsecondary education and workplace training to become a member of the advertising profession and reap associated financial benefits. Her transition from working for and being a part of the immigrant women's community to becoming more financially independent in her advertising career is illustrative of the influence of neoliberalism on discourses of the ideal immigrant (McLaren and Dyck 2004). It is expected that immigrants should be responsible for supporting themselves—for becoming self-sufficient—irrespective of their background or context, or social barriers or discrimination they face (McLaren and Dyck 2004, 42–43). While Ava has her own reasons for giving primacy to financial independence, her story must also be read against the racialized discourses of the ideal immigrant. Her efforts to forge a new and happier life are reflected in the complex intersections of race, gender, and family history that inform her body practices and, specifically, her desire to "dress the part."

Ava is critically aware of the social context she now inhabits; both of what it offers and what it lacks. It is also evident that her shift to advertising—and all that it entails—involves struggle in terms of her self-knowledge, her beliefs and priorities, and how she identifies. She negotiates the social and political challenges of work by taking on more campaigns that better suit her beliefs:

They called me in because of my whole feminist background but you are just conscious that you are selling products, at the end of the day that's all it is about, I have to earn a living and it's a good living, it's a duplicity and it's a struggle I have to go through all the time.... I've been doing a little bit more socially conscious advertising, for the past year I've been able to choose which campaigns and just to balance it that way.

Ava characterizes her advertising context as a "duplicity," a balance between her feminist background and the financial and career opportunities now on offer. While she acknowledges that her job is ultimately about selling products, not making social change, feminism still informs her work and fosters a sense of critical engagement in the industry, such as choosing more socially conscious campaigns. Her career in advertising has given her a sense of purpose and achievement in line with Heyes's argument about the self-transformative effects of weight-loss discourses: "Yeah I've accomplished something, I've learned something along the way to be who I am." The self-knowledge obtained through work in advertising produces tangible results in terms of personal accomplishments, such as successful campaigns and financial independence, as opposed to complex, lengthy, and often ongoing processes of self-acceptance that were previously her focus.

Through her education, activism, therapy, and work with immigrant women's centers, Ava engages in

care of herself, in a process of healing and reflection geared towards a happier life. Her pursuit of a career in advertising has led her in new directions, many of which contradict and thus challenge her sense of self. Aware of these tensions, Ava states that she will see how things unfold, but in the meantime, “It’s about me, taking care of myself and just becoming the person that I was meant to be.” She has endeavored to broaden and extend her moral guidelines to allow for new contexts and experiences, in particular financial independence, and to live more truthfully. Interestingly, Ashley and Ava struggle to care for themselves through negotiations with feminism and yet, at the same time, they feel the need to distance themselves from it to secure financial stability. Engaging in particular body practices has enabled Ava to “blend into” dominant culture and be more accepted in the advertising world. While she is conscious and critical of these changes, she also asserts their necessity in order for her to achieve greater independence and security, and ultimately to enable her to cope with normative demands of the ideal woman and ideal immigrant.

### **Ruby: Feminism, Fat Phobia, and Exercise**

*Ruby is a 30-year-old Caucasian lesbian fat middle-class woman, though she tells me fat is more of a “torn” identity for her. Moving from a small town to a big city for university marked the beginning of a series of transitions for Ruby’s self-representation and identities. Exposure to feminism and more diverse embodiments of gender allowed her to embrace her sexuality and different forms of gender expression, such as androgynous clothing and shaving her head. Coming to accept her fat body challenged not only her more butch identity but also a thread of connection with her mother, for whom dieting was a mainstay of life. Bodily negotiations are an ongoing process for Ruby, but she is grateful for feminism for opening up to her new ways of thinking and doing gender.*

Ruby’s story reflects a familiar and positive discourse of feminism as validating and empowering women’s sense of self. Women’s studies courses introduced her to alternative expressions of gender and sexuality, and provided her with critical frameworks to analyse the fat-phobic, diet-centric world she grew up in and still negotiates. Ruby’s relationship with feminism has led her to reflect on her relationship with her body and to seek out new ways of being in her body and practicing self-care. These negotiations inform primary relationships in her life, such as with her mother, as well as more generic interactions with, for example, fitness instructors. Further, feminism has provided her with an understanding of the intersection of discourses of health, fat, femininity, and sexuality to which others may lack access.

Ruby has often felt alienated from discourses of femininity because of her body size and struggles to be recognized as feminine. Even though feminism inspires her awareness of and resistance to feminine beauty practices, these practices also provide a means to negotiate gendered body-size norms:

I started shaving my legs again after a really long break from it, because of feminism, and then last year something happened, I think it was on the subway with the usual hair stuff, summer for me is so difficult anyways because of the revealing clothing stuff that I’m like, I’m just going to make myself as normal as possible this summer, so I shaved my legs.

In Ruby’s case, shaving is a way to cope with normalizing discourses of gender, sex, and fat phobia. She begins shaving again as a way to manage the heightened bodily awareness she experiences in the summer; thus, shaving is a practice of care to lessen the discomfort and pain associated with a body that does not conform to normative femininity.

Being fat and feminine are opposing identities for Ruby, but her exposure to feminism and her experience of coming out have created a space within which she can reflect on and craft alternative expressions of femininity. When Ruby first came out, she appeared more butch than she does now, as she actively rejected

mainstream beauty practices; she stopped wearing makeup, started cutting her own hair, and dressed in more androgynous clothing.

I decided at some point that I was, oh that's another ritual that's changed, okay, so I used to go on crazy diets all the time and at some point I decided that I wasn't going to ever be skinny, really, I kind of knew it in a way that I didn't know before, so then I think I sort of panicked around the butchness and I was like, oh my god, I'm going to be fat and butch, I just can't handle that even though I know people do all the time, and often the two seem to go together for people really nicely but for me it didn't, so I think that's why I was more femme because I couldn't handle the two things at one time, so then I, pretty dramatically, I [went and got] makeup.

In her analysis of Weight Watchers discourses, Heyes cites an example suggesting that changes in daily thinking can lead to a new self. By reflecting on how a woman thinks about herself on a daily or hourly basis and making an effort to challenge negative thoughts, in effect by "believing that [she] can become a thin person," she can arrive at a new sense of capability and possibility (Heyes 2006, 141). By trying out new everyday practices—in her exploration of both butch and femme personas—Ruby confronts the impossibility of the beauty myth, namely of the claim that every woman can (and should) obtain the ideal body. This critical self-reflection informs an acceptance of her body in relation to her sexual identity through a differently gendered expression; accepting her feeling that butch and fat do not work for her leads to adoption and celebration of her femme-ininity.

While Ruby was growing up, her body was constantly monitored, limiting her ability to engage with femininity and be recognized as feminine. Leaving her small town for university provided a different and larger geographical space and access to alternative discourses and embodiments of gender:

I remember going into women's studies and learning that you could do things differently, that was a big deal, just seeing people in classes and also moving to [city] to take women's studies.... I would go to class and be like, oh my god, these girls have short spiky hair, they wear clothes they make themselves or they wear army pants, I'm like, oh my god, that's so cool, so then I started, I think because it was an option ... you didn't have to wear makeup, I had profs that didn't ... so learning about alternatives and also having the space in which to be that, because I had this feeling all through high school that I wanted to dress... I wanted to dress like Courtney Love because I thought she was so awesome, but I just couldn't do it because it's a small town where you're made fun of already for being different, just a small difference makes you a total outcast, and I just couldn't bring myself to be different more than I was, but then in university it was like, I can do that.

The curriculum and geo-social setting of women's studies at university provided not only political awareness but also an emotional space within which Ruby could reflect on her body history, ultimately leading to greater self-knowledge. Changing her personal context and engaging in feminist practice, Ruby realized the extent to which place and social space had impacted her self-expression, not to mention her desire to be different. Luhmann's (2001) definition of feminism involves radical self-questioning of truth claims, which has a strong connection to principles of care of the self. In the above passage, Ruby talks about practicing radical self-questioning and her development of a critical awareness of how societal and discursive limitations affected her sense of self and her ability to care for herself.

The ongoing embodiment of her femme identity is complicated and, as Ruby admits, her sense of self is now deeply embedded in her particular body practices:

I always get made fun of because, and these are the moments where I feel the most femme, whenever I go anywhere to stay, for example camping or whatever, I take some sort of hair straightening or curling implement and all my makeup and clothes that I'll feel comfortable in, which almost always means dresses or skirts, and



then I get made fun of because I'll be at the cottage and need to have a hair dryer and do my hair and do my makeup and stuff, but it's because I feel, I don't know, my self-esteem has become caught up in those rituals, I think, so if I can't do them then I feel less attractive but also less like myself almost, like it's less me.

This statement is a powerful reflection on the significance of body practices to the sense of identity; without doing particular practices, Ruby feels less herself. This reveals the social construction of her identities and the intertwining of Ruby's sense of self with normative practices. In determining whether a practice constitutes care of the self, Markula states that we need to examine how it is used because "no practice in itself is good or bad" (2004, 307). Rather, its purpose and effect are important. Does it comply with dominant discourses or does the presence of self-reflection indicate "ethical self-care?" (Markula 2004, 318). In applying this insight to Ruby's body practices, I want to discuss two brief examples that show how a queer reading might shift the meaning and/or effect of these practices.

First, in her essay "Lesbians in Space," Elspeth Probyn questions whether the expression of desire between two femme women in a straight bar may rearticulate the male homosocial space into a "sexed space," and whether in this way the lesbian bodies and their mutual desire can be thought of as producing "alternative conceptions of space" (1995, 81). She argues that, "while their kiss cannot undo the historicity of the ways in which men produce their space as the site of production of a gender (Woman) for another (men), the fact that a woman materializes another woman as her object of desire does go some way in rearticulating that space" (Probyn 1995, 81). The object of desire, then, has impact on the performance of gender, but also on the context and space in which it is enacted and expressed.

Second, Kathleen Slevin's research on the intersection of ageism and sexism in aging lesbians' body practices finds that normative gender has a more significant impact on the women's experience and negotiation of their aging bodies than does sexual orientation. While the women in her study are "generally committed to challenging hegemonic gender norms" (Slevin 2006, 265), they also experience the harsh reality of ageism pressing on their identity. Identifying as lesbians and/or being a part of a queer community does not protect the women from heterosexual body norms and the corresponding pressure to adopt anti-aging practices.

Thinking about these two possibilities, practices that rearticulate sexed and gendered meanings of a particular space and practices that reinforce or reproduce sex and gender norms, how might we approach Ruby's case? Are her practices done for sexual attention or in service of heterosexual male desire? No. Does the object of her desire (another woman) inform the spaces wherein she engages in her practices, shifting their meaning and interpretation? Based on Probyn, it would seem that this is possible. Are they done to facilitate a reading of a body that is perceived as other than ideal—similarly to how an aging body might be perceived—as feminine? Maybe. And if so, does this dismiss or outweigh the self-care inherent in these practices? Of course, I can't necessarily answer these questions and, in many ways, that is not the point. Rather, I bring these two examples into a discussion of Ruby's story to illustrate the complexity of the relationship between body practices and identity, in which there are numerous, constantly changing factors at play. Ruby's story reveals her critical awareness of her practices and a deep understanding of her investment in and dependency on them. By constantly reflecting on and questioning her performance of particular practices, Ruby demonstrates care of the self and an intimate knowledge of herself and her situation in the world.

Social context is critical in determining how practices are experienced and used by women; this, in turn, has implications for how they negotiate their sense of self in different spaces. In her interview, Ruby recounts two experiences of exercising, one in a university aerobics class and the other in a queer-positive boxing

gym. While she is not surprised by the fat phobia and sexism enforced by the male aerobics instructor at the university gym, she struggles to balance the beneficial elements of boxing in a queer-positive space with the fact that the boxing gym also draws upon fat-phobic discourses:

The instructor, who is generally really cool, I like her a lot, but sometimes she'll say something like, you know you move, in a way that she is trying to be nice in that sports way, she's like, you move your weight really well, you move like you're 100 pounds, and I'm supposed to be like, thanks! But instead it's like, oh you're talking about my weight, that is so unacceptable.

Space is critical to the negotiation of social identities, and for Ruby there are increasingly fewer places where she feels her body and fat bodies in general are accepted and socially visible:

At first it was being a lesbian and going to the lesbian bars and stuff, but I would say that I feel way less like that now, way less.... I don't know if it's me just getting older, but I feel in the last two years it's just like, wow, where have all the fat lesbians gone? It's like, wow, you're all so very small, I don't know, but also that's what's become beautiful... so it used to be the lesbian bars and stuff, and it's at pride now, that is still [a place where] I feel less gazed at.

Ruby's awareness of the limitations imposed on her subjectivity and bodily form by discursive constructions of the healthy body and the feminine body is evident in her recognition of their functioning in various social spaces (even those that are counter-discursive in other ways). As noted above, Slevin finds that within experiences of aging lesbian women body practices reinforce gender norms and that even in queer contexts the ideal heteronormative female body may be exhibiting more discursive power than queer alternatives.

I think another reason why I'm even more femme now is just, in terms of my profession or professionally, is to be taken more seriously as a fat person.

To negotiate her multiple selves, such as identifying as femme and fat, within different social spaces, Ruby engages in care of the self. She is aware of the normative and gendered power of fat phobia, and many of her practices (and reflections on her practices) can be read as challenging that power with the hopes of diminishing it. Her expression of femininity also involves critical self-care that informs how practices are mobilized within the everyday negotiation of power in particular contexts, such as professional spaces.

At the end of the interview, Ruby reflects on the role feminism has in her life in comparison to her mother and on its consequent effects on the two women's respective relationships with their bodies:

I am kind of hard on my mum, I think, because I have had opportunities to access counter-discourse, I guess that she's never, just doing my own research and looking into the 1950s and 60s and 70s and what people were saying and the diets people were going on, doctors handing out diet pills like candy to teenagers and pregnant women, it's no wonder she is so fucked up, so I think feminism itself, I think it must have, I mean it makes us necessarily interact with our bodies in a very different way, even if you're not a feminist I think there is this understanding that you should love yourself for who you are because beauty is on the inside ... there is an alternative thing I guess ... so I think in some ways I'm a bit hard on my mum because she didn't have access to that stuff and I think it's such a big deal to be able to have discovered that when I was younger.

By learning and embodying feminist discourses Ruby develops a different relationship with her body and a critical understanding of the social construction of the feminine ideal through norms of health and gender. Ruby's story reflects feminism as a forum for practicing care of the self; her reflection and awareness of the limitations placed on her body have enabled her to negotiate being healthy, femme, and fat, as well as to

recognize when she is practicing care of herself to cope with the everyday reality of discursive constructs. Her story also reflects third-wave feminism through her celebration and recognition of the contradictory meanings inherent in body practices, as well as her acknowledgement of the impact growing up with feminism has had on her life.

## **Conclusion**

In her article on women's identification with feminism, Pamela Aronson found that "attitudes toward feminism are shaped by racial and class background, and also by life experience" (2003, 918). Ashley's, Ava's and Ruby's stories reveal that women's relationships to feminism are highly complex, affected as they are by their social location, different spaces they navigate, and personal interests and struggles. The nuances of these relationships are often ignored or suppressed within popular culture in favor of more simplistic characterizations of younger women as either dismissive of the need for feminism or utilizing it for personal gain. Employing the concept of care of the self and the insights of third-wave feminism to theorize women's body practices enables recognition of the dynamics of social space and discursive influences as affecting the embodiment of subjectivity. Care of the self involves critical awareness of one's situation and actions in relation to disciplinary discourses, and third-wave feminism encourages acceptance and recognition of the complexity and contradictions inherent in women's lives. The women's stories illustrate engagement with feminism in their efforts to negotiate dominant and intersecting discourses of femininity, sexuality, race, and class. Their resistance to normative femininity does not involve conscious or deliberate acts. Rather, through their continual self-questioning and awareness of social norms, they attempt to achieve a positive relationship with their bodies and a critical engagement with the world. Ashley and Ava experience a tense negotiation with feminism in relation to the perceived judgment they are subjected to at work, which serves as a threat to their financial independence, while for Ruby feminism provides a language and visible alternatives to limitations of gender and sexuality. Their stories do not reveal a lack of engagement with feminism. In fact, it is quite the contrary: feminism critically informs their decisions to take up particular body practices and influences how they negotiate their various subject positions. Each of them struggles with feminism—with what they believe it means, with how it informs their lives, and with the perceived or experienced limitations of its applicability. The findings of this paper demonstrate the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding women's relationships with feminism and the need to reject simplistic readings of what feminism means to women. For feminist movement to continue to grow and thrive there needs to be increased recognition of ways feminism is experienced: both as empowering and as restricting or disciplining, and many other things besides and in between.

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## **Notes**

1. See, for example, the 1990 *Time* magazine cover, "Is Feminism Dead?"; Phyllis Chesler, *Letters to a Young Feminist* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards's essay in response to Chesler, "Letter to an Older Feminist," in their *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000); and numerous journal articles, including Orr 1997, Pinterics 2000, and Steenbergen 2001.

2. See Heywood and Drake 1997; Ophira Edut's introduction to *Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and*

*Body Image* (2003); and Steenbergen 2001.

3. There are debates about the age boundaries defining the category of third-wave feminists; for example, Heywood and Drake suggest it applies to women born between 1963 and 1974 (1997, 4). Rather than agree or disagree with any particular set of dates, I rely instead on the characteristic cited by numerous third-wave feminists: namely, third-wavers are women who grew up with feminism, in an environment where, as Amber Kinser states, “the social fabric was already interwoven with feminist ideals” (2004, 131). In addition, this generation takes up the feminist movement in a time of social and political backlash, as well as in an era of media-savvy postfeminism. The backlash began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but had implications well into the 1990s and early 2000s. It involved neoliberal government policy shifts (resulting from the election of Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and Brian Mulroney in Canada), leading to cutbacks on social programs—including funding for women’s organizations—increasing privatization, and support for market capitalism. This shift was also associated with a return to conservative social ideology in the West, particularly on issues such as civil, women’s, and gay and lesbian rights, affirmative action, and abortion. A group of individual women (with Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf, and Camille Paglia as the main protagonists) gained cultural attention during this time of backlash as they argued against feminist demands for structural change to address ongoing women’s oppression, becoming known as “postfeminists.” Roiphe, Wolf and Paglia were all White, well-educated women who had access to and were well received by mainstream media because of their social position and their comforting claims that gender equality had already been achieved. The postfeminists not only lent support to the conservative ideology of the time but also made it nearly impossible for third-wave feminists to incite mainstream media to cover their activism against structural oppression. These historical and political coordinates prove more useful to me than dates and age categories in defining the boundaries of third-wave feminism.

4. The interviews with fourteen women aged 30–45 were conducted in 2008 in Ottawa and Toronto, Canada. The interviewees were recruited through various means, including e-mail listserves used by community organizations, flyers in community centers, such as the Bay Birth Control Centre and the 519 Community Centre, and word of mouth through colleagues and participants. These women do not (and cannot) represent all women; rather, their stories are intended to contribute to the discussion about the meaning and role of feminism in the lives of women of their generation. The three women this paper focuses on are diversely identified: Ashley is Caucasian Canadian, working class, and straight; Ava is Trinidadian/Pakistani Muslim Canadian and straight; and Ruby is Caucasian Canadian, middle class, and lesbian.

5. I am not completely convinced that this is true for Bordo, as her theory of the double bind inherent in the pursuit of the slender body includes recognition of the (limited) power women experience through self-mastery and control over their bodies.

6. Foucault’s *hypomnemata* were “account books, public registers, individual notebooks” that compiled “quotations, fragments of works, examples and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read the account, reflections or reasons one had heard or had come to mind” (Foucault quoted in Heyes 2006, 139).

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