

My Beauty's More Real Than Yours! Consequences of "Real Women" Discourse

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WRITER'S COMMENT: In American Studies 139, "Feminist and Queer Cultural Studies," we learned that attempts to reform oppressive systems can sometimes give way to hierarchies and binaries that create new systems of oppression even as they transform others. Additionally, we learned to question the idea that an idea (e.g. feminism) carries the same meaning or force in every culture. A comment from another author at last year's Prized Writing reading made me realize that in the essay I'd just read, I had unwittingly reinforced a new type of elitism. In this paper, I use Dove's "Real Beauty Campaign" as a site for investigating whether terms like "beautiful" and "real" necessitate exclusion and what consequences result from this exclusion. If in criticizing hierarchy and binaries I have falsely assumed that they are universal, I hope fellow feminists will understand my larger critical impulse. Vanita, thank you.



—Natalie Yahr

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Natalie wrote this essay for my Women's Studies/American Studies course: "Feminist and Queer Cultural Studies," in which we examined what different genealogies of feminist and queer studies bring to bear on a variety of cultural texts—a graphic novel, zines, cartoons, ads, documentary and popular film—and how, in turn, these texts might allow us to re-imagine disciplinary formations such as "feminist" and "queer." Given Natalie's ability to distill the core elements of complex arguments, I wasn't surprised when she ambitiously chose to engage a longstanding debate between feminism and femininity (particularly feminine beauty) that, in the U.S. context, dates back to at least second wave feminism of the 1960s. By examining the language of "realness" in Dove's Real Beauty campaign and responses to it, Natalie not only offers us a refreshing way in which to

approach these debates, but also radically suggests that feminine beauty may be a “false object” of feminism in the first place.

—Vanita Reddy, English Department



The Dove website declares, “For too long, beauty has been defined by narrow, stifling stereotypes. Women have told us it’s time to change all that. Dove agrees. We believe real beauty comes in many shapes, sizes and ages. That is why Dove is launching the Campaign for Real Beauty.” The campaign promises to “change the status quo and offer in its place a broader, healthier, more democratic view of beauty. A view of beauty that all women can own and enjoy everyday” (The Campaign for Real Beauty). While this goal is admirable, the responses to the campaign, both positive and negative, suggest that it limits its progressive potential by creating new exclusive categories that parallel those to which it reacts. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam states that “femininity reeks of the artificial” (Halberstam 234). Supporting Dove’s claims to offer an alternative to “artificial” femininity, discourse from and around the campaign invokes the notion of “real women.” In this paper, I investigate the ramifications of the “real women” category by examining the campaign in conversation with the responses it has generated. I consider the boundaries of the term “real,” the disciplinary regimes it may create, and its potential effects on social interactions among women.

On the campaign website, large blue text states, “Real women have curves.” That, as the site says, “Dove wants to celebrate those curves,” has pleased many, as blog responses to the campaign indicate. One blog-reader commented, “It’s refreshing to see women in real shapes and sizes.” One man proclaimed that he prefers “real women” like those Dove depicts to “14 year old girls” and “plasticity, Auschwitz-diet types” while another elevated “real women” over “rail-thin scarecrows” (Liu; Kristine). But many have taken offense at this use of the phrase “real women.” One “petite woman from a petite family” wrote, “I don’t have curves. . . . Real women come in all types” (AnyBody). Another frustrated woman complained, “Enough with the ‘real women’ B.S.! I’m 5’7” and 110 lbs and last time I checked I was real. I am living and breathing. I don’t have an eating disorder either . . . Just because I’m female doesn’t mean I have to have curves” (Liu). And like those who derided the idealized

model body-types, some of the women who felt excluded from Dove's campaign insulted the women who didn't look like them, demonstrating animosity fed by the feel-good campaign purportedly intended to benefit women.

At the risk of stating the obvious, many women and girls in the United States suffer from poor self-esteem, in large part induced by the barrage of images that celebrate only a narrow subset of female bodies—typically young, thin, white women—whom they depict only in certain states (*e.g.*, highly made-up) or in ways that they can't appear in person (*e.g.*, airbrushed). In response, women whose bodies don't resemble these images have long proclaimed that the women depicted are not “real women” and in 2004, Dove launched the Campaign for Real Beauty. In order to make the product it peddled seem original, it had to imply that other versions of beauty were not real. Doubtless those structuring traditional photo shoots have taken significant liberties with the truth, and those misrepresentations have very real psychological, emotional, and in turn physical consequences for the women who view these images as canons of beauty. But the language of reality used in both Dove's campaign and the responding discourse also has real consequences.

When Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty emerged in 2004, some criticized that while it claimed to include all women—as they are—in its definition of beauty, it didn't succeed. Notably, Rebecca Traister's “Real beauty—or really smart marketing?” in *Salon* pointed out that one of the most widely-viewed ads in Dove's campaign sold skin-firming cream. Traister illuminated the inconsistency of using a campaign supposedly intended to disempower rigid beauty regimes to sell a cellulite-fixing product. M.L. Liu, a journalist blogger for *Stay Free! Daily* complained about the lack of diversity:

Despite the ad copy about “real beauty” coming “in many shapes, sizes and ages,” the women in the ad look fairly homogenous. Their heights are within a few inches of each other, they have similar body types (curvy but not overweight) and all seem to be in their 20s or 30s. I realize most companies probably don't want an unattractive person associated with their product. But I wish Dove wouldn't couch their advertising in this touchy-feely sense of inclusion or female empowerment, not when they're just going to show us more images of attractive young women.

Others have questioned whether the Dove campaign can possibly be sincere in its attempt to make women confident in their bodies when its parent company Unilever has funded ad campaigns that undermine this message. These critics point to the fact that Unilever owns Axe—which sells the belief that scantily-clad beautiful women will immediately lust after any man wearing Axe body sprays—and Fair & Lovely—which in Asia sells economic and social possibility with its skin whitening creams (Adbusters.org, Adpulp.com).

Ironically, while some bemoaned the sameness of the ads and the relative rarity of the appearances they showed, others found the ads too revolutionary and the women too pedestrian to be acceptable models. Richard Roper, columnist for *Chicago Sun Times*, flaunted his sexist attitudes:

I find these Dove ads a little unsettling. If I want to see plump gals baring too much skin, I'll go to Taste of Chicago, OK? When we're talking women in their underwear on billboards outside my living room windows, give me the fantasy babes, please. If that makes me sound superficial, shallow and sexist —well yes, I'm a man. (Pozner, "Dove's 'Real Beauty' Backlash")

Roper's statement is sexist not only because it is misogynistic, but also because it unfairly indicts all men for harboring these misogynistic attitudes. However, it might help us understand the sort of attitudes that have led to oppressive disciplinary regimes about beauty. As the story goes, men deserve to see only what they like and women must earn the privilege to display their bodies. Combine this belief with a narrow view of which bodies are attractive and soon only a small set of women may permissibly take pride in their bodies. This can be a lose-lose situation as these disciplinary regimes both demand that women comply and mock them for working too hard at costuming or rehearsing. No wonder some women will sacrifice each other to save themselves.

While Dove's campaign seems to have helped large numbers of individual women, especially women who had never seen images similar to their own celebrated in the media, the responses to the campaign reveal that this win has come at a cost. Though perhaps biased by the campaign's title, the majority of women's responses centered on the phrase "real women," as an (implied or stated) dismissal of the conventionally-portrayed body as fake. Some physical traits are less common or require more disciplining and costuming than others and some are entirely imag-

ined by the photo's editor, but we might ask why we don't call the photographs, rather than the women, false. The distinction may be only a matter of semantics, but until the age (perhaps not so far away) when the majority of the popular media's female images are computer-generated or composites, they still represent individual women who do exist. According to model Linda Evangelista, "the whole thing about models . . . [is] we are genetic freaks." Evangelista would probably not contest, however, that models are real "freaks."

Maybe when we pronounce verdicts on the reality of bodies, we mean something more complex than that those bodies exist. We may expect bodies to bear the signs of their personal lived experiences. If so, we may call the conventional models unreal because we receive their images apart from their stories and thus their bodies seem un-lived-in, unalive, and hence unreal. But that we don't hear the story doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Perhaps we dismiss lives that center on constructing and maintaining the body as too performance-like to be real. But those livelihoods should solidify, not negate, that those individuals have lived in those bodies: their specific careers have exacted tolls that have shaped their physical attributes. By either conception of reality, the thinnest, most made-up runway model is still a real woman.

That's not to say that the current catalog of images is not intensely problematic. For one, the fact that the women's bodies are real doesn't mean that the photographs are true, in the sense that the images may not reveal to the viewer the full story behind the woman's appearance. All forms of costume and image-alteration that camouflage themselves mislead the viewer. Magazine staff may retouch photos for numerous reasons, not the least of which are sponsor and reader preferences. Although many of those exposed to retouched images realize that the images have been altered, the sellers avoid disclosing this fact. In *Discipline & Punish*, Michel Foucault claims that power sustains itself by becoming invisible. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler interprets this statement to mean that truth depends on hiding its means of production (Butler 178-180). Thus, those with a vested interest in modifying these images avoid making their actions explicit, because doing so would reveal that the images lie, which in turn would undermine their seductive power. If we didn't believe that airbrushed photographs precisely visualize the physical realities of the women they depict, we might think of them as the corporeal version of "based on a true story." The danger results less from suggesting

that some women may look like these images than from disguising the work and technology that looking like that requires, thus implying that looking like a supermodel is common, necessary, and effortless.

So why, if frequently viewing these images threatens women's self-esteem, do women purchase magazines filled with them? Naomi Wolf offers an explanation, describing in *The Beauty Myth* the complex relationships women have with their magazines. On the one hand, she says, women's magazines provide "prowomen content" within "the only serious mass-market women's journalism available" (Wolf 75); on the other, they often rely for financial support on advertisements that often induce dissatisfaction and insecurity in order to sell products. She explains the attraction that keeps women returning to magazines, despite their mixed and often deleterious messages, as a longing for a specific type of social interaction: solidarity. I argue not that a universal female solidarity can exist, but that many women desire that it would in order to partake in it. Women's magazines seem to offer their readers the chance to belong to a group and women try to seize the rare opportunity.

Historically, Wolf argues, such a sense of solidarity has been less accessible to women than to men (Wolf 75). As Wolf explains, most women in Western societies don't know "how to identify with unknown other women in a way that is not personal" because the beauty myth "encourages women's wariness of one another on the basis of appearance . . . [and thus] tries to isolate them from all women they don't know and like personally" (Wolf 75). The articles may unite women around common interests or anxieties, but often the editors—and always the advertisers—fill the pages with images of its magazine's intended readership, conveying the message that in order to participate in this female mass culture, one must resemble the pictures they present. Paradoxically, what most of the women viewing these pictures do share is that they don't look like the women in these images, at least not without working very hard at it.

Some women have recognized this fact and joined in solidarity by rejecting these images as unreal and the women they depict as unhealthy. To the extent that doing so has helped women to find the camaraderie historically much more available to men, it has helped women. But the camaraderie they've found is by its origin exclusive. It's easy to unite people around a common enemy and this alliance takes the model figure as its enemy. She is both a source of their poor self-esteem and a

reason for their solidarity. The united women have every reason to wish her gone and every reason to wish her permanent. She and those who resemble her may never join the alliance and those who exclude her may feel no guilt about doing so, for they may think that the mainstream culture caters to and idolizes her. They may forget that even she fails to be profitable if she is completely satisfied with herself. As Wolf says, “the ‘beautiful’ woman does not win under the myth” (Wolf 290). The women allied against her have saved themselves, but they have closed her out, so that if she finds herself in need of help, she may receive it only if she disavows her former values. Yet again, women find themselves to be created unequal, this time by their own doing.

Wolf advises, “You do not win by struggling to the top of a caste system, you win by refusing to be trapped within one at all” (Wolf 290). The Dove campaign, no matter its intentions, appears to have prompted women to conceive of a new caste system, one in which “real” beauty is superior to the types of beauty traditionally seen in contemporary advertisements and women’s magazines. Just as women who rise to the top of the old hierarchy don’t win, neither do those who rise to the top of the newly-inverted hierarchy. And certainly the women now forced to the bottom lose as well.

Even if the campaign encompassed all of the appearances not usually celebrated in mainstream media, it would still create divisions. The Dove campaign purports to dismantle the attractive/unattractive binary by generating “a view of beauty that all women can own and enjoy everyday,” but by naming its product’s effects “real beauty,” it has implied that other beauty is fake. Thus, it has only replaced the old binary with the new binary “real beauty/fake beauty,” establishing yet another “caste system” of appearance. I argue that this outcome of the campaign results from catering to a trait common to most human psyches: we don’t know how to see value except by comparison to something less valuable.

In “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women,” Homa Hoodfar argues that we needn’t use racism to fight sexism (Hoodfar 273). Borrowing Hoodfar’s approach, I ask whether we must make other bodies unreal to assign realness to our own. Such an approach is inherently limited because it hinges on the falsity of the bodies to which it reacts and thus can’t explain why the seldom-shown women would remain just as valuable if the common models were indeed real. Why assume that only one type of woman is real?

Wolf criticizes uses of beauty that make women enemies instead of allies. Indeed, when women feel that they are threatened or must compete, they tend to devalue other women in order to gain value for themselves. That the women responding to Dove's campaign resort to this sort of self-defense of self-esteem reveals that women remain threatened. Is there not enough beauty, realness, value to go around? To the extent that beauty's value depends on its scarcity, the battle may be necessary. But if we can convince ourselves and others that our value doesn't require others to be less valuable, we might shift from disdaining models for hurting us to affirming them and asking whether the same norms that have hurt us have hurt them as well.

Indeed these norms can hurt the models, as shown by the intriguing cases of women who have publicly objected to editors altering their images in ways they consider excessive. After some *GQ* staff member worked a bit too creatively on Kate Winslet's 2003 covershot, the actress stated,

The retouching is excessive. I do not look like that and more importantly, I don't desire to look like that . . . I can tell you they've reduced the size of my legs by about a third. For my money, it looks pretty good the way it was [originally] taken. (from *Hello! Online*)

Winslet's experience reveals that even some women being photographed sometimes struggle to be represented as they appear. While media images have failed to represent a huge segment of the population, they have falsely represented others. In these cases, the deception proves doubly harmful as the altered image may both offend the depicted individual and create unreasonable standards in its viewers. The photo modifications reveal that the mainstream media perpetuates a disciplinary regime that women must follow in order to be acceptable.

While the campaign addresses some aspects of this regime, it ignores others. For example, none of the campaign's ads or films mentions the taboo subject of female body hair, but if the uproar generated indicates the extent of the trespass, the response to Paula Cole's appearance at the 1998 Grammy Awards reveals that unshaven underarms constitute an egregious offense. When *Entertainment Weekly* airbrushed over her unacceptable hair, she responded with a blunt letter to the editor. In an interview she commented on the consequences for those who don't conform, saying, "The only thing I don't understand is the negativity, and that seems to come more from women" (Yurkiw). But Dove's reluctance to

address this nearly unspeakable body characteristic is predictable: how revolutionary can one expect a campaign by a for-profit brand to be?

Indeed, while Dove has shown many images we might not have seen published otherwise, what, despite its no-women-barred premise, it has chosen not to depict is telling. I believe that the Dove campaign does not challenge some of the body norms most ingrained in our society either because those individuals behind the campaign took them for granted (*i.e.*, the norm is so endemic to Western culture that they never thought to question it) or because the risks that would accompany challenging that norm make the move unprofitable (*i.e.*, the norm is so endemic that questioning it would raise more hackles than a business cares to raise). Thus I will read the norms that the Dove campaign accepts as some of the female body norms most permanent and essential in Western society. The ads pay at least brief service to curvy women, freckled women, wrinkled women, plus-sized women, curly-haired women, and women from diverse cultures. But absent from the ads are obese women. Perhaps we may attribute the sidestepping exclusion of the norm relegating obese women from beauty to medical disciplinary regimes, a topic which I will discuss more later.

Also absent are women who have chosen not to partake in certain self-alteration practices, such as body hair removal. Interestingly, the Campaign for Real Beauty, which might seem to center around truth, does not bring out of secrecy the rituals women regularly perform to become presentable in our society. In *Beauty Secrets*, Wendy Chapkis notes that this secrecy implies that the woman's "transformation . . . should be effortless. . . . To the uninitiated—men—the image must maintain its mystery, hence the tools of transformation are to be hidden away as carefully as the 'flaws' they are used to remedy" (Chapkis 6). By failing to make visible these practices, much less call them into question, the Dove campaign reifies the illusion that women's bodies are hairless without help. But that Dove has accepted this norm would not surprise Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, who states in *The Last Taboo: Women and Body Hair*, "women's body hair is truly configured as a taboo: something not seen or mentioned; prohibited and circumscribed by rules of avoidance; surrounded by shame, disgust, and censure" (Lesnik-Oberstein 2). The fact that the Dove campaign takes for granted that women will remove unseemly hair may seem trivial, but Lesnik-Oberstein would argue this is precisely because we view female body hair as too silly to talk about but

too horrifying to allow. That Dove neglected to interrogate this assumption is especially unfortunate because of the special power of this myth. The fact that women must cover up or privately remove this unacceptable growth means that other women can't see it either. Unlike fat or wrinkles, body hair is easily (and, in America, almost always) hidden, leaving young women at times unclear as to what is normal or healthy in their own bodies. As Naomi Wolf reminds *Beauty Myth* readers, the images we see inevitably construct what we believe is and ought to be true about our world and our bodies. Systematically falsifying the record by requiring changes and silence around those changes can lead to unhealthy attitudes.

Beliefs about health have been used by every camp to rationalize their beauty standards and create disciplinary regimes. Proponents of the Dove campaign tend to assert that being as thin as the average model tends to require adopting an eating disorder and hence is unhealthy. Critics of the campaign, on the other hand, might denounce the bodily evils of a high body mass index. Stated Chicago CBS anchor Bill Zwecker, "In this day and age, when we are facing a huge obesity problem in this country, we don't need to encourage anyone—women OR men—to think it's okay to be out of shape" (Pozner). While the two camps differ in their beauty standards, they share the assumption that some types of beauty are better than others. Both instruct people to behave a certain way because to do so is to be healthy and to be healthy is to be beautiful.

The primary failing of both the conventional beauty camp and the "real beauty" camp is that they fail to understand beauty as merely that to which one is attracted and attraction as merely a personal preference. Wolf suggests that our attractions are truly a matter of individual taste but that dubbing only a single small category of individuals attractive is, in essence, better for business. Make everyone want the same thing and everyone who wants to be desirable will do everything possible to become that thing. Anyone who sells the means of becoming the coveted thing will make money for life. Wolf is appropriately cynical of this beauty conception: "Why should beauty be exclusive? Why is rareness impressive? The high value of rareness . . . [has] more to do with capitalism than with lust," she asserts (Wolf 290). Perhaps if we could only remove our attraction for each other from this framework that clearly opposes our individual interests, we could learn how to name ourselves beautiful without declaring others less beautiful. And then, just maybe, we could

finally realize that every living, breathing person is real, whether or not an advertising campaign legitimizes her beauty.



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