The Feminine Subject in Mass Media: Empowerment and Individualism as Oppressor

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The ads and articles in *Self* magazine set up against the pretense of feminine self-actualization provide examples of places in society where the sign `female' is contested. These discourses enforce cultural identities onto the female that are inseparable from that sign, creating the mutable ideology that is embedded within the language surrounding the sign. This is an essay about the ways that different discourses used in both advertisements and articles in the mass media construct women's perceptions of themselves, resulting in specific ways that they organize their concerns, actions, and priorities.

In spite of the advancements achieved by women's rights activists over the last century, many magazines geared toward women (and the ads within them) persist in applying stereotypical gender constructions to women, effectively carving out social identities that limit the possibilities of womanhood in Western society. They represent women as sophisticated ladies and humble housewives, beautiful bombshells and girls-next-door, firm-bodied athletes and waif-like fashionistas, sinful temptresses and moral mothers. In what has become a common tactic across the board in mass media, these women are frequently depicted as caricatures, drawing on widespread, generalized narratives that resonate in society as almost instinctive indicators of cultural identity. Nevertheless, these magazines continue to make huge profits off of the very women that they characterize in such negative lights.

Much of this implicit identity-generating material is glossed over under the auspices of feminine empowerment. Women's magazines take up such subjects as female health, women's professional lives, personal development, and news stories on women's rights issues in an effort to revise and expand conventional definitions of ideal womanhood. True, most twenty-first century magazines may no longer encourage the pre-Second Wave Feminism domestic model of ideal femininity, but today's camouflaged prescriptions of ideal womanhood are no less burdensome. *Self* is one popular magazine that can be evaluated in this context.

Editor-in-Chief Lucy S. Danziger addresses *Self*'s readers in the April 2006 issue, claiming that "this magazine is all about you: your needs, your habits, and your personal goals as you strive to live a healthy, happy, balanced life."[1] This functions as the mission statement of the magazine: it is the `self' that is intended to be represented. This particular vision of womanhood is about health, balance and happiness - a vision which seems to stress women's control over their own lot in life, about accepting womanhood itself as a form of empowerment. However**,** it is this mythic notion of `empowerment' itself that constrains not just the woman reading *Self* magazine, but the subject acting in society, by means of its constant requirement of self-awareness, and more importantly, self-regulation.

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[1] Danziger, Lucy S. "Editor's Letter." *Self* Magazine. Conde Nast Publications: April 2006, 46.

By emphasizing individual action (which is often represented as tantamount to individual *discipline*) as a means toward individual fulfillment, the magazine embraces and reestablishes a conception of selfhood that finds its origins in the Cartesian and Rousseauian doctrines of the Enlightenment.[2] It is one that exists naturally in the world, self-contained and unfettered by cultural construction. Even the name of the magazine, *Self*, is derived from this pervasive Western ideology of autonomous individualism, free of the social forces *around* the individual. This is a self that is not necessarily acted upon by the society that it occupies, but one that acts upon it. This is a self whose desires, emotions and values are inherent to the unique person who carries them. It is this conception of self that is intrinsically linked to the American Dream by reason of its sovereign rationality that empowers it with the perennial possibility of improving itself or creating for itself a better lot in life. It is also through this doctrine that the `self-help' genre has risen to popularity in our society - from TV talk shows like *Dr. Phil* to books like *Women Who Love Too Much*, our culture is permeated with hope "to discover how to achieve a balance between self and other, and to develop self-identity they feel they lack."[3] Women's magazines, like *Self*, partake in this trend of offering their readers the chance to both understand their desires and see them come to fruition through the advice they present. In doing so however, these magazines implicitly reinforce the social identities that have been constructed for their readers by encouraging specific desires (like emulating the `bombshell' or the `sophisticated lady' or the `firm-bodied athlete') and setting them up as a means to individual empowerment.

This form follows a long tradition of self-help in American culture. Wendy Simonds traces the origins of the impulse toward this genre to the "seventeenth century Puritan notions about self-improvement, Christian goodness, and otherworldly rewards"[4] in *Women and Self-Help Culture*. From the moment Europeans arrived on North American soil, one of their most profound cultural truisms has been that of the hard-working self that is innate to the condition of humanity (preceding language or socialization). Our intensely self-reliant society has been a bastion for the self-help genre since Alexis de Tocqueville's days:

> The inhabitant of the United States experiences all the wants and all the desires to which a high civilization can give rise, but…he does not find himself part of a society expertly organized to satisfy them; consequently he often has to provide for himself the various things that education and habit have made necessary for him…In his mind the idea of newness is closely linked with that of improvement. Nowhere does he see any limit placed by nature to human endeavor.[5]

Self-help has been a particularly appealing genre for women, as Simonds contends, because of the development of American society after the Industrial Revolution. As families grew smaller and "the division of labor has become more

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[2] Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York University Press: New York, 2000, 15-18.
[3] Simonds, Wendy. *Women and Self-Help Culture.* Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 1992, 6.
[4] Ibid 4.
[5] Ibid.

specialized,"[6] women who once had large networks of friends and relatives found themselves more and more isolated. Along with industrialization came the professionalization of many services, including therapy. In the absence of those close-knit networks, and in the face of the unrelenting obligation of domesticity for women (particularly for middle and upper-middle class women) self-help became attractive to females as a way of dealing with their problems. Hence, self-help has been an historically feminine discourse and women's magazines are continuing in the same vein.

According to Danziger's mission statement, the articles within the magazine intend to represent it as a modern vision of American womanhood, where the female is as free as any to improve her fate via the tools put forth in *Self*. Nevertheless, they frequently wind up perpetuating limitations veiled under a euphemistic illusion of empowerment for the feminine subject. The self-actualization that Danziger claims to be the message of her magazine becomes based on a particular framework of gender roles as a result of the content presented in *Self*. Control over one's appearance is, in this context, the woman's key to success because what she is worth is based on her ability to conform to a specific vision of womanly beauty. The emphasis on the fitness of the feminine physique fully saturates the magazine from cover to cover. Three of the nine headlines on the cover of the magazine are expressly devoted to weight loss and dieting: "Burn 750 Extra Calories a Week," "A Slimmer, Sexier You in One Month: Moves Guaranteed to Erase Fat - Fast!" and "Guilt-Free Chocolate! Six Dessert Recipes That Only Taste Fattening" each establish an ideal toward which the reader should strive. Juxtaposed against a beautiful, smiling, tight-bodied blonde singer (a winner on the television show "American Idol"), the message is quite clear to any female consumer: if you want to be this woman (and you should - it's for your own good!), we have the means of getting you there. Interspersed amongst the calls to regulate the woman's body are other self-help devices: "Be Bold in Bed And Have the Best Sex of Your Life," "Live Rich on Any Paycheck: Shop, Eat, and Travel for Less," "Clear, Healthy Skin: Your Complete Guide Inside." The consumer is being sold an entire makeover of her life in relation to the self-discipline of conforming to the ideal physical form. With a cover model like Carrie Underwood, a singer who has risen to fame from working "the cash register at Albert's One Stop gas station near her hometown of Checotah, Oklahoma,"[7] the American narrative of rising from rags to riches is actualized, reinforcing the dream of sensational success for the ordinary woman who buys this magazine. She is not just another freakishly flawless supermodel; she is a real woman, just like anyone else. The discourse of the magazine sets up her success as the reward of arduous self-discipline: not a long, uphill struggle working on her singing career (this was handed to her as a prize for winning on a televised contest), but by the labor it takes to embody the prescriptions that surround her figure. She is the woman modeling the achievement of burning 750 extra calories a week, or eating guilt-free chocolate, or performing the moves guaranteed to erase fat fast, or adhering to the guide for clear, healthy skin. She is offering the real-life success story of the realization of the goals put forth by the discourse surrounding the feminine body in Western society.

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[6] Ibid 48.
[7] Bried, Erin. "Carrie On!" *Self* Magazine. Conde Nast Publications: April 2006, 64.

According to Danziger's account, which proclaims the intentions of *Self* to be geared towards self-help and learning to achieve a better lifestyle, the magazine is meant to be a tool to provide this happy, balanced, healthy self with the ability to achieve whatever goals a woman may have. However, if the main idea is to be a happy, balanced, healthy self, then the path toward this brand of self-actualization in the text that ensues is one of control over the female physical form, conformity to a particular vision of womanly beauty, and acceptance of a social construction that dictates that the success of a woman is contained within the bounds of her potential as sexualized being. In the context of *Self* (and similar magazines), the various mutations of womanhood that are represented all seem to be grounded in the valorization of feminine beauty, seen as the primary vehicle toward self-help.

In modern American society, it is this tension between the linguistic discourse of self-help and empowerment, the purported means (established *through* self-help) to that illusory end that enables the perpetuation of these social constructions. Michel Foucault argues that:

> The dream of individuality denies power, and encourages the individual to become preoccupied with itself - in short to monitor its own behavior…these images of human self-consciousness end up as the modern individual endlessly turned in on itself, supposedly discovering its unique truth, but really making itself prey to a power that asks it to be forever aware of and assessing its desires and inclinations.[8]

Thus, the common American individualistic notion of selfhood facilitates the myth of empowerment achieved within the framework of our current models of cultural identity. In this case, the female is encouraged to believe that whatever dissatisfaction she may have in her life can be eliminated if she conforms to the ideal construction of the ideal feminine form. Though she has encountered this time and time again, she is inevitably seduced by it once more when she purchases another *Self* magazine, vainly hoping that this time she will finally be able to discipline herself enough to achieve the impossible standard set before her.

Feminine Self 1: The Post-Feminist Movement Tension between Liberation and Constraint in a Persistently Gendered Society

Since Second Wave Feminism secured equal access to higher education, the prohibition of sex-based discrimination in employment, and reproductive freedoms in the 1960s and 70s, it is no longer politically correct for women to be openly consigned to the sphere of the home by social pressures, or denied access to educational opportunities, or judged more harshly than males for their sexuality (though in practice, they undeniably still are). And so it is appropriate for a magazine directed towards women published in

[8] Mansfield 55.

the first decade of the twenty-first century to identify itself as a resource to help them achieve "healthy, happy, balanced" lives.

Thus, the magazine identifies itself as a participant in the genre of self-help, which is already culturally located in the feminine domain. Since the self-help genre has gained so much popularity in American culture, and the audience of this genre is predominantly feminine, it makes good business sense for women's magazines to classify themselves in this way. Central to the genre is the notion of the self that is improvable through individual action. Simonds argues that self-help advances a strategy that emphasizes individual action and adaptation to realize personal change.

> So even though this reading does not necessarily lead to any radical change in women's lives, it does provide its readers with…a chance to be self-reflective and evaluative. These are opportunities that women, who are often cast as providers of such nurturance and counsel for men and children, have difficulty finding and receiving from other people. In this sense…self-help reading can be said to enable women to express dissatisfactions with gendered interactions, while it also represses a definitive challenge to the ways in which the social construction of gender works against women.[9]

In looking to quell the dissatisfaction of modern womanhood that has arisen from the socially constructed paradigms of feminine perfection and the absence of a viable social network in which to voice these concerns together, women turn to self-help for a chance to analyze themselves through the oft-conceived `private' act of reading, and for advice on the appropriate personal action they can take to alleviate these situations. In the absence of a straightforward acknowledgement of the social and institutional forces that produce much of this dissatisfaction, self-help ends up reproducing the values and norms that generate their affliction in the first place.

Upon looking further at the articles that follow Danziger's `Editor's Letter,' which make up the official word of *Self*, it becomes blatantly evident that among the various meanings attached to the sign `woman,' the most predominant one in this genre of women's entertainment is one that casts modern feminine empowerment under the framework of control over the female physical form. Much of the `help' offered within the text of the magazine centers on guiding readers toward achieving the (often impossible) dream of the perfect body or the perfect makeup or the perfect hair as a means of achieving the perfect life. It is as if they were so inherently linked that the liberated woman, leading the "healthy, happy, balanced life," has realized it through conformity to an idealized and often impossible vision of womanhood. Hence, for the female in Western capitalist societies, the disciplined body is fundamentally attached to success and she has only to rely upon her God-given self to reach the pinnacle of feminine achievement.

Though examining the social implications of positioning womanhood this way may seem trivial to some, it becomes evident, upon a closer look, that the myriad

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[9] Simonds 48.

locations of the sign `woman' creates a discourse in the minds of western women and their male counterparts that becomes a trap of unhealthy self-awareness. As pervasive as the naturalized, individualistic conception of selfhood is in our culture, it implies an unrealistic condition of immutability to be intrinsic to the self that precedes society (and language). It insists that the constant scrutiny of the subject acting in society has no effect on the performance of that subject, thus negating the impact that social forces might have in constructing the individual's identity and desires. In Foucaultian theory, this measurability of the subject in society establishes a healthy, legal, acceptable form of behavior. With the application of norms, certain behaviors, and thus certain subjects, can be compared with one another, setting up a hierarchical set of cultural identities and imposing values and norms onto the subject. Under a capitalist system of institutions acting to reinforce and recreate these social constructions (in this case, the institution of mass media), society can continue to advantage some over others under the veil of individualism if inequality is seen to be either a product of disconnected inadequate selves or masked behind some intangible, monolithic, mythological oppressor known as the Man. This becomes clear through the critique of texts and images that act as both entertainment and guidance for women, like *Self* magazine, concealing veiled impediments to liberation that, if possible, could only come to pass through a systematic revision of the institutionalized oppressive social constructions that exist today.

Nevertheless, it is this ubiquitous beacon of light represented by the idea of liberation that appeals to Americans in many different facets of life. When viewed in the context of self-help, liberation becomes the embodiment, the ultimate goal for the individual in western society whether it takes the form of achieving the ideal figure, making peace with one's parents, finding a true love, or landing a dream job. It is that one big hurdle standing in the way of contented bliss, the sole restriction being one's own individual inadequacies. But it does not come without cost. The attainment of liberation is often seen as an incredibly laborious process, closely linked to the American maxims of the spirit of hard work, limitless upward mobility, and of course, `the land of the free'. American capitalism wants to identify itself as a blank canvass upon which a person makes his/her own opportunity to succeed. Self-help offers the guidebook (sometimes quite literally) on how to achieve these successes, drawing on the narratives of sacrifice and toil as the backbones of valiant effort. Simultaneously, self-help (along with countless other cultural institutions) reinforces what constitutes success and thus liberation by normalizing certain behaviors and values over others. Therefore, in order for a person to be liberated in this sense, they must desire what is presented to them as included within the culturally authorized set of desires. This is one way that the status quo is disseminated and reinforced, maintaining a system of power that cannot be altered until cultural subjectivity is critically evaluated.

Feminine Self 2: Women Silenced via Emphasis on the Feminine Exterior

The headlines on the cover of the magazine are advertising the articles which act as the official word of *Self*. This is the material that they endorse as consistent with the

messages that they aim to put forth. Much of the text enables images of womanhood that seem more consistent with the overtly sexist images set forth in the advertisements that surround them than with the self-acceptance that is implied in the mission statement. For example, an article called "Make Us Cute Again!" details the adjustments that two female Peace Corps volunteers make in returning to the US from two years in Burkina Faso. Instead of emphasizing the work that Rachel Hill (the author) and Jamie McDonald did during their experience in Africa, the article centers around the women's concerns about their physical appearances upon their return. Thus, the labor that they performed as members of the Peace Corps - outside of conventionally authorized feminine activity - is effectively discounted as they reclaim their Western feminine identities through makeup and hair styles and new clothes. Most interesting is that Hill herself wrote the report, indicating the agency that women take on in perpetuating these gender constructions.

Throughout the entire article, there was a single sentence indicating the services they rendered during the two years they spent in Africa: "We were there to educate villagers about health issues such as AIDS and malnutrition."[10] Immediately, this short sentence is followed by: "The experience was rewarding but took a toll on our looks." The article then proceeds to detail Jamie and Rachel's "lower-than-low maintenance look"[11] and the steps that they took to remedy it for their return to the US. There are two photos on the first page of the article. The first, a "Before"-shot, where both women are dressed practically for the boiling sun and the "dusting of red earth" that was constantly "blown up by gusty winds"[12] and feigning half-hearted smiles in front of a stack of wood and bricks among thatch-roof huts of Africa. In the second, both women are on the street in New York City after their makeover, hair done and clothing westernized, stretching out their arms in celebration and smiles beaming across their faces.

These women are represented to be much more content in the comfort of spa pampering and behind the mask of a face full of makeup. Although, arguably, they are much more physically comfortable once they are clean than they had been in "handfuls of shea butter to protect their hair from the frying sun…and a layer of sticky sun block,"[13] the article still functions to locate womanhood within the context of physical attractiveness. The identity `female' is such that action outside of this particular gender construction is silenced and overpowered because it is active. The agency that these women had while performing their services must be left in that other world. It must remain outside of the western culture where femininity sits uneasily with such independent activity that normally resides within the realm of masculinity. Jane Ussher writes about this commonly reinforced notion:

> We see little of the `serious' side of women's lives and achievements…We rarely see `woman' in the traditional `masculine' position of serious, speaking subject. When we do, the woman is notable because of this `reversal of roles', as it is termed (as if woman usurps man by her very presence in a moving, speaking

[10] Hill, Rachel. "Make Us Cute Again!" Conde Nast Publications: April 2006, 78.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

> role)…To reduce a woman to her appearance is an effective means of ignoring what she has to say.[14]

In this way, the two women here relinquish their experience and the good that they have done to reclaim their identities as women, as dictated by this particular mutation of the female sign in American culture. In the context of this magazine, these women give up their subject positions as actors in a domain beyond that of the traditionally sexist view of women's worth being based primarily on the close management of their appearances so that they will fit into "the world they had left just two years earlier"[15] However, though it is a choice that they each make under the pretense of autonomy ("We needed help, so we wrote to *Self* requesting a makeover - not an extreme version, just some primping to prep us for our return to America"[16]), it is a decision informed by a discourse of femininity that *intends* to shut out these experiences that have the potential to transform womanhood into a subject position that could transgress the boundaries between `maleness' and `femaleness' by emphasizing the feminine ideal of beauty over talent or action. It denies the labor that they put into the Peace Corps because it is labor performed to achieve a goal that lies outside of this construction of femininity. The article locates them squarely in a subject position of passive objects of beauty. It is like Trinh Minh-ha's "triple bind theory", where the woman "is driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among…conflicting identities."[17] In this instance, it is evident that Hill and McDonald's experiences during the two years that they lived in Africa cannot be fused with their Western cultural identities as females - it is simply incompatible and therefore they are forced to choose. They can be women who perform these actions, but they would lose their potential to fulfill the ideal of physical beauty presented here as the ultimate source of feminine worth in doing so. Under such terms, it is easy to understand Hill's renunciation of the labor she performed in the Peace Corps as an attempt to assert herself as a valuable member of the community under the terms prescribed for her in *Self*. In this particular discourse, it is not the woman who spends two years teaching villagers about health issues who is esteemed, but the woman who maintains control over her appearance. This is the feminine form of cultural capital, and without it she is little more than an anomaly of gender, a woman trying to contort herself into a masculine role that she can never truly appropriate as her own.

The fact that the story is placed under the heading "Beauty: True Story" highlights that these are real women seeking help from *Self* in satisfying their duty to become ideal women, perhaps in an attempt to live out that "healthy, happy, balanced life" that Danziger mentions in her mission statement. Conformity to the gender norms established in the magazine's discourse becomes obligatory if Hill and McDonald want to readjust to American culture. The magazine is living up to its' self-proclaimed identity as a "tool…to make it happen for you"[18] albeit in a way that manipulates the words "healthy, happy, and balanced" to fit into gender constructions that continue to exist into

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[14] Ussher, Jane. "Fantasies of Femininity." 70.
[15] Hill 78.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Minh-ha, Trinh. *Woman, Native, Other.* Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1989, 6.
[18] Danziger 46.

the modern era. For women, it founds the struggle to live the good life and to love oneself in the notion that one must first conform to a particular ideal of feminine attractiveness.

The content of the article follows this pattern throughout, until the very last sentence - a sentence which seems to contradict the message of the entire preceding article. Hill concludes by quoting Jamie, "If you enhance your self-esteem through success and friendship, you can feel fantastic wearing a ponytail and flip-flops."[19] The entire point of the article to this point has been to express how these two women reintegrated themselves into American society with a makeover. However, with a final sentence that shifts the tone away from the emphasis on self-acceptance through beauty to self-acceptance through a less gender-biased method (because, let's face it, men's magazines are not publishing articles on how to re-enter the US from two years with the Peace Corps by getting a makeover), the author expects the take-home message to become one of a different form of empowerment. This last attempt to re-attach the meaning of this article to Danziger's mission statement falls short of succeeding because it is out of place with the theme of the rest of the text.

Feminine Selves 3 and 4: Beauty as Power and Acceptance of Beauty as a Measure of Worth

Advertisements are material included in the magazine, but do not represent the official word of it. However, they still work in myriad ways to reinforce, contradict, or present polysemous interpretations of the text in the articles, as they surround the official messages approved by *Self*. They converse with the text that is around them in this way; they are taken in and digested in the same movement as the text by *Self*'s readers. The magazine is a specific cultural object in a capitalist society: it is a commodity, a business venture to generate profits. It is also part of the larger institution of mass media, appealing to readers by reason of its understandability and the relative ease that its way of representing the world can be categorized into widespread cultural narratives. The advertisements interspersed amongst the text exploit social constructions in existence and, in reusing them, perpetuate them further. This is true of a Nike advertisement that shows competing constructions of the feminine self. It puts forth an image of power and self-assertion, but the self-actualization of the woman in the ad is based on a gender construction that dictates that women are to be `hot'.

The model in the picture is striking an active pose, mid-dance. She is toned, tight, and beautiful. Her unblemished, toffee-colored skin does not glisten with the slightest sweat from her workout. A rounded belly does not jiggle out from under her shirt from all those "cool moves" and "pelvic thrusts," nor does she sweat profusely with all that activity. She does not *need* to correct anything because she already *is* flawless. The image set up next to the empowered words in the text suggests that only once you have reached that perfect female form can you let loose and be satisfied with yourself. The confidence that this powerful woman has attained comes from two sources (as far as we can tell from

[19] Hill 78.

the text): her talent as a dancer and the status of `hot chick' that all that working out has created. The dancer says, "I can't believe that hot chick is me/She gives me a sexy smile and I'm flattered…."[20] In this context, she can be read as having bought into the metaphorical prison of looks. She has not only given into the conceptualization of appearance as a measure of worth but has embraced it. Through this reading, Danziger's mission statement seems like it is attained, but in a warped way. This woman is striving to live a happy, healthy, balanced life, but her balance comes from accepting the role that has been constructed around her, rather than achieving it through listening to her own needs, habits, and personal goals.

The text of the ad says nothing about correction of flaws and it *encourages* satisfaction with the self. There is a dialogue going on between the dancer and the image she recognizes to be herself in the mirror, which functions as another way of self-measurement. The model in the picture has surpassed the necessary requirements of ideal physical femininity and in doing so, has surpassed the notion of self-love to move into the realm of self-obsession. She is intensely conscious of her body and the control that she has managed to exert over it. The athletic company's slogan "Just Do It" becomes about labor in this context. She has helped herself through all of the means that have been presented so far in *Self* (whether it has been through the official text or through the ads that surround it). Her empowerment is based on the idea that her labor has earned her self-love (or obsession). She is taken aback by the realization that she has achieved the status of `hot chick,' of which she is proud. It is this labor that sets her free from what is rejected in our society as the `uncool' woman. But it is not only someone else's approval she has won; she declares herself to be a hot chick, under her own terms. In appropriating the term by having the dancer apply it to herself, the ad takes the act of seeking the approval of others out of the notion of `hot chick.' This is an alteration of the term's social context in this situation. The dancer is talented at what she does: "she knows the coolest moves/her pelvic thrusts are the stuff of legend."[21] This woman in the text can be read as a vision of empowerment; someone who does not hold back with modesty, someone who gives it her all, someone who has not been restricted by any outdated ideological gender construction where womanhood is equated with etiquette or restraint: as the ad says, "even her earrings have attitude."[22] This reading supports the original mission statement. This is a woman who *has* achieved her goals. She is living up to Danziger's model of a "happy, healthy, balanced life."

It begs the question: if she weren't the `hot chick,' and she were looking in the mirror, would she accept herself? As the mirror becomes a method of measurement, the woman will know what there is to love and what there is to hate - it is all laid out for her. If she is tight and toned, she can love herself - in the case of the Nike ad it becomes a sort of vanity and self-obsession because she *is* what she is supposed to be - if not, she knows what has to be done so that she will not hate herself.

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[20] Nike advertisement, Self Magazine. Conde Nast Publicatiosn: April 2006.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

The term `hot chick' becomes a contested sign here. There are multiple ways of reading it, which implies that there are multiple ways of conceptualizing the self. When there is disagreement over the implications of the ideology within certain signs, social struggle ensues. With the guise of `empowerment' veiling the systematic social forces at work that underpin the current hierarchical order of cultural identities, it becomes imperative to understand that "language and discourse are not just arbitrary tools of thought and expression…they are complicit in the representation of self and others."[23] The viewer of this ad is confronted with competing visions of the feminine self.

Feminine Self 5: Internalizing the Message

As has already been discussed, the articles themselves - what *Self* puts forth as its official word - also reflect the appropriation of these concepts by their readers ("Make Us Cute Again!" is located under the heading *Beauty: True Story*.) The various discourses put forth in the text of *Self* and the advertisements that are included in (and contribute to) the conversation establish very specific subject positions between readers and the social constructions which substantiate the content of the writing. The text in *Self* functions to create different mutations of the sign `woman,' but more importantly, there are identities wrapped up inside these variant discourses. Readers are continuously overwhelmed with images of what a woman should and should not be, which leads them to conceptualize themselves and others in ways that are consistent with gender constructions that establish the current social order. These discourses operate to circulate power relations. If women are to break out of the institutional molds that prevent them from achieving equality with their male counterparts, it is crucial to understand the discursive subject positions imposed upon them, not only through these limited examples of advertisements and magazine articles, but in the discourses that surround them in every daily encounter. Empowerment and love of the self become entwined in a dance with an unrealistic and idealized perception of the female physical form, which, in the end, functions to discredit the feminine subject.

[23] Brodkey, Linda. "On the Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters.'" *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*. 88.

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