



SHAME IN THE SIXTH GRADE AND THE CONTINUED SURVEILLANCE OF FEMALE BODY HAIR

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Abstract

This essay links past and present examples of the construction of gendered bodies through the presence or absence of body hair. Through autoethnography and feminist visual media analysis, I argue that trends indicate a growing resistance to normative constructions of a body amongst younger audiences. I analyze the case of Balpreet Kaur, whose image was captured and posted on the website Reddit without her consent, and a recently retracted media campaign by the hair removal company Veet. While my analysis looks brightly to the future, due to encouraging collective activism on the topic of body hair and gender, it is noted that the high occurrence of surveillance and subjectification continues to plague visual representations of the female body. Culture-jamming practices by students within classroom spaces serve as tools of resistance to hegemonic media imagery.

Keywords: *body, hair, culture-jamming, activism, autoethnography*

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Hair is directly linked to identities and behaviors: relationships (growing or cutting of hair with the changing of a partner); age (purple-dyed spikes at age 14 recess into employment-friendly blond locks at 22); race (strangers commenting upon, or even groping, hair unlike their own); ethnicity (crimson hues signify Irish); and gender (shaving body parts as a rite of passage or cultural signifier). In this essay, I revisit connections between visualizations of an adolescent memory and the persistence of both body normalizing and body shaming of the female body through corporatized visual culture. To do so, I extend arguments developed by scholars that correlate sexist attitudes with social surveillance of women's bodies (Basow & Braman, 1998; Tiggemann & Hodgson 1998, 2008; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). As Mason and Magnet (2012) note, the concept of surveillance—the visual policing of an individual—takes root in feminist theories on slavery, state-approved eugenics campaigns, economics, media, and the racist “gaze” (p. 107). The connections made between visual memory, the analysis of an image of Balpreet Kaur, and rejected marketing images from the hair removal company Veet point to a growing societal rejection of female surveillance in visual media.

Shame and Surveillance

I fuzzily remember the blocks of sunlight falling through half-pulled shades landing on classmates' desks, all arranged in clusters of five desks per pod. It was late afternoon, and we were in the final stretches of the school day. Mrs. Gebby, our sixth grade teacher, struggled to solicit class involvement by students too preoccupied with listening for that final bell ringing announcing the dismissal of the school day. I have no memory of the subject matter being discussed that day. I do, however, have a crystal-clear recollection of what happened next.

Mrs. Gebby spoke in her strong, dominant voice that carried into the air not only a question, but also a command that we all stay seated and focused on the task at hand. We still had at least another hour until the buses arrived to ferry us home. Her question lingered in the hazy air, illuminated dust particles slowly circling in the warm and stifled room. I heard muffled voices as I raised my left arm to answer her question in the manner of Isabelle, my childhood best friend and someone who I often imitated. I kept my hand raised, since I didn't think those voices had anything to do with me; I was too preoccupied with answering the teacher's question. Yet the voices did not soften or blur into typical classroom background noise, only to be drowned out by my voice. The voices grew louder. They turned distinct and individual: “Look at her!” “Ew!” “Gross! She's like a man!” I was confident that I would be called on and mistakenly thought that

the voices I heard just wanted to answer the question before I had a chance. I recognized each and every voice as belonging to five of the most popular boys in the class. With a flash of awareness and a reddening face, I plunged my hand downward and into my lap, grabbing the wrist tightly with my opposite hand. It was too late for me, for my underarm, for the boys seated next to me, and for the teacher who expected a quick answer to her query.

Mrs. Gebby called on me and waited for her answer. I had ooh-oohed my way to the front of the class countless times, but the answer she sought evaporated amongst my growing embarrassment. Whispery breaths came out of my mouth as my mind screamed, they saw! What did the boys see that drove them to hurl insults at me, as I turned, red-faced, to look at them? My unshaved armpit offended them and, apparently rocked their 13-year-old brains. Mrs. Gebby would not take mumbling for an answer, and I quickly put an escape plan into action: I feigned ignorance and turned to a desk pod-mate of mine, asking, “What are they laughing at? Is something wrong with me?” to which she sweetly replied, “No, not at all.” I then asked to go to the bathroom instead of answering the question. The exasperated middle school teacher relented and allowed me to grab the bathroom pass required to leave the room. I sought solace in the empty girls’ bathroom where I faced the mirror, angled my body to the degree that it would have been facing the boys’ views, and raised my hand. A small patch of pubescent body hair underneath my arm was clearly visible in the mirror’s reflection. My stomach dropped as I agreed with the (however immature) realization that the boys were right: I did look like a man. No woman or girl I had known or seen had visible body hair; only men had such affordances. I slunk back to the classroom to snickers, pointing, and name-calling that ceased only when I left the school two years later.

What strikes me in a secondary moment of analysis of this memory is that I specifically remember desiring to raise my hand like someone else: Isabelle. I relinquished my authenticity in order to be someone I deemed to be better than I was; this was learned through affirmation and re-affirmation of a media-generated trope of femininity and its stereotyped attributes. I liked the way her thin, feminine arm raised itself into the air like a ballerina marking her position. I wanted to be like her: French to my American; only child to my oldest-amongst-three-siblings; extrovert to my introvert; short to my tall; feminine to my perceived masculine. My manner of answering a teacher’s question was often bolder than on this particular day: a quick strike of my hand, foisted into the air before I lost my train of thought (a veritable Hermione Granger of the early 1990s). At this moment in time, I actively chose to change something about myself (how I raised my arm, the method of participation), and this minute decision had a domino effect on how I was treated by many classmates throughout my tenure at this school. Frequently bullied by this group of boys and their female friends, I became much more introverted and second-guessing because I thought every snicker, sideways glance, spit-balled piece of paper, or hushed conversation was directed at me and at something “wrong” with my body.

When my body started to change between the ages of 11 and 12, I rebelled against it. I hid my first period from friends and family members, only to be betrayed

by one of our dogs that found my bloodied underwear in a trash can and trumpeted out the discovery to my mom like it was some spoil from an ancient hunt. I turned beet-red at the mere mention of a bra. I refused to shave under my arms and rarely, but clumsily, removed the hair on my legs. These examples are not representative of a pathological avoidance; on the contrary, I simply enjoyed the status quo of my adolescent body and resented that it had to age and morph into a womanly, “otherly” body that I did not feel comfortable enough to claim as my own. In claiming it, I believed that I would have to undertake the myriad body maintenance routines like shaving, and I did not understand the rejection of the natural state of the body signified by such acts.

In retrospect, I wonder if my ignorant rebellion was more deep-rooted in my rejection of the social preoccupation with the “ideal” adult female body. As soon as breasts developed, periods shed, and hair grew, I noticed that the conversation—both in the micro-circles of friendship and within larger social vehicles of television, music, and movies—centered on these “feminine” bodily functions and attributes. This dominant conversation served and continues to serve as a method of creating a desirable type of female, womanly body, albeit one that is racist, sexist, and cis-ist. A “cis” gendered body is one that conforms to gender expression, gender assignment, and gender identity, i.e., being born female and fitting social expectations of womanhood (Steinmetz, 2014). A body’s owner can either accept or reject the social ideal. Yet, regardless of the owner’s choice her body often becomes an object to ridicule, admire, and/or separate from the personality to which it is attached. It becomes an object to surveil or self-surveil. I did not then—nor do I now—want to be reduced to a set of glands or secondary sex characteristics. I was, and I am, more than my vessel of a body. Are we a “nation of teenage boys” preoccupied with and fixated on the ideal, cis, female body (Newsom, 2011), or has society progressed to the point where individualized, diverse types of bodies are accepted? Visual culture scholars ask us to link our lived experiences with our analyses of media (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007). Exploration of such a memory exposes a recurrent, cultural visual narrative of what it means to inhabit a male or female body and the social discourse surrounding what it means to be a man or woman.

Sexual Attraction and Social Rejection of the Naturalized Female Body

To normalize or homogenize bodies via social discourse enables discrimination, as assumes a singular, natural type of body without acknowledgement of possible variations. Normality, if conflated with social dominance and power, is always detrimental to those who fall outside of its boundaries. Therefore, a woman’s body hair can be termed as, in the words of my former classmates, “gross” and “manlike” since normative practices in Western society, specifically within the United States, encourage women to rid themselves of it. This reaction of disgust toward the natural female state occurs not in isolation, but in collectivity and engenders a specific type of socially permissible sexual attraction to those bodies on display. Tiggeman and Lewis (2004) found a high correlation between social rejection and American women who did not regularly

shave their legs or underarms. Not only did unshaven or unwaxed women appear less attractive than their peers, but they were also equated with animalistic and masculine behaviors. Hairy women would not attract a mate, and as such, they were deemed unattractive, social outsiders. The desire to remove underarm, bikini, and pubic hair—while not limited solely to a female gender primarily exists due not to hygienic reasons, but cosmetic rationales based in garnering the attraction of potential opposite-sex partners (Tiggemann & Hodgson, 2008; Weitz, 2001). This finding extends research by Basow and Braman (1998), who found viewers' perceived hairy female bodies as belonging to less attractive, less intelligent, less sociable, and unhappy individuals. In other words, the unshaven women were viewed as dim loners with questionable sexualities.

Conforming or rebelling against the social norms of the female body sets up a dichotomy that delineates idealized genders. The acceptance of any variances to this dichotomy is socially taboo in the United States. That is, an individual can be either a hairy, anti-social lesbian or a hairless, extroverted heterosexual woman; no in-between space exists. Toerian and Wilkinson (2003) agree, as their study “Gender and Body Hair: Constructing the Feminine Woman” finds that contemporary Western society uses bodily hairlessness to demarcate femininity from masculinity. The removal of body hair becomes a means to widen the chasm between genders; society then packages this desire for delineation across media in ways to make buyers believe that hair removal is always safe, sanitary, and necessary in order to find a suitable partner and lead a fulfilling life. Serano (2007) claims that this sex-role divide is perpetuated by the insistence on attributing distinct physiognomies (like body hair) to masculinity and femininity, male and female. Of course, this philosophy and practice, as Serano points out, also ignores the entire trans community that already suffers from repercussions stemming from such ideology.

Selling the Self-Enhancement Myth

How do women and men come to believe that disciplinary body practices, such as shaving and waxing, are necessary enhancements to daily life (for male body hair removal trends concurrent with sex appeal, see Boroughs, Cafri, and Thompson, 2005)? The current construction of the ideal female body in the United States, a country that is an influential barometer of beauty, as White, thin, and upper-class can be traced to advertisements placed in U.S. women's magazines in the early twentieth century (Hope, 1982). As such, the cultural framing of the ideal feminine body as one that is both hairless on legs, pubic areas, and underarms, with the owner purchasing products designed to remove those types of hair, is relatively modern. By buying and using these products, the desirable female body is constructed. The continued prevalence of this advertising framework was evidenced as recently as the spring of 2014, when hair removal brand Veet introduced its “Don't Risk Dudeness” campaign. With commercials instructing viewers to “feel womanly around the clock” by waxing off their leg hair, the company hoped to tap into a market they assumed not only already existed, but also enthusiastically agreed with the philosophy that hairy women do not make for happy, attractive, or

successful women (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Advertisement depicting a woman who has not shaved and who then is viewed as a man (KRMG News, 2014).

In April of 2014, Veet released three 30-second commercial ads plus a blitz of social media visual ads upon the U.S. consumer. To sell its wax strips and depilatories, these commercials followed a similar theme of bodily surveillance and social rejection of the ad's protagonist. Scenarios presented in the ads included: a male partner (commercial one opens with a man repulsed by his lover's leg stubble and apparent subsequent sex change); a male stranger (commercial two portrays a taxi cab driver refusing to stop for a woman who hailed him with an outstretched, hairy arm); and a female in service (commercial three focuses on the only woman of color in the ads performing a pedicure on a hairy-legged woman). Such ads imply women must literally and figuratively buy into the Veet lifestyle, which will remove them of socially undesirable body hair in order to be loved by their partners and socially accepted by both strangers and peers alike.

The manner in which the company implores its audience to shed unwanted hair (and unwanted gender associations) is also suspect. The language of the print ad (see Figure 1) equates shaving—typically a less painful disciplinary body practice than waxing—to “risky” behavior since hair regenerates at a much faster rate when shaved rather than waxed, producing stubble that signifies masculinity. These ads not only infer

a cultural acceptance of hairless femininity, but also encourage painful bodily modification. These waxing commercials and advertising banners posted in social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter encourage women to submit their own stories of body hair, surveillance, and social rejection (Figure 2).

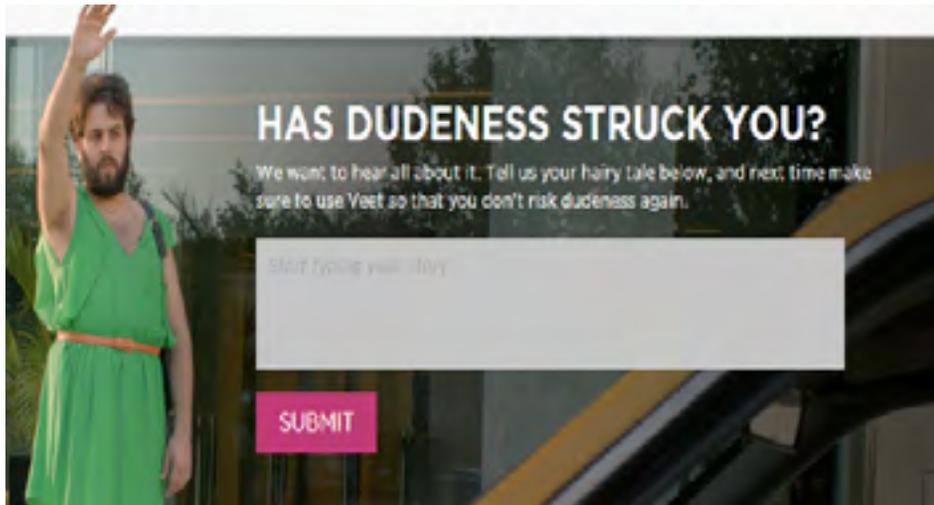


Figure 2. Secret-sharing of “risky” behavior encouraging consumerism and reinforcing gender normative attributes (Koerber, 2014).

As such, the marketing team, by cajoling other women to talk about their “risky” behavior, attempted to firmly establish the hairless female norm (see Figure 2) through a secret-sharing-type process. By encouraging women to share a story of transgression, the marketing team established a horizontally hostile (White & Langer, 1999) practice of surveillance and subsequent social rejection of an unshaven female body by only involving women rather than involving people of all genders and sexes. This marketing approach backfired; the commercials and print ads were pulled due to public outcries of sexism and homophobia. Was this failed campaign indicative of a wider trend? If so, where did the budding rejection of such sexist visual representations of the female body begin to take root?

A Building Social Resistance to Surveillance

It would be hard to claim that one example of a failed media campaign indicates a growing resistance to the hairless female body norm. However, momentum possibly built behind an example that preceded Veet’s failure in the case of Balpreet Kaur (see Figure 3). In the fall of 2012, an individual personally unknown to Kaur

photographed her without her consent and subsequently posted her picture to a forum on the Reddit website (european_douchebag, 2012).



Figure 3. – A young woman with facial hair unwittingly has her picture taken. (european_douchebag via Reddit, 2012).

The picture, snapped while she waited in line at her campus’s commissary, shows a smiling young woman on her phone, oblivious to the secret photo being taken. She wears a uniform of t-shirt and jeans, representative of many young women. The photo is also unrepresentative of many media images of a female body in that Kaur wears a turban and has visible facial hair. The Original Poster (OP) of the photograph captioned the image with the question, “I’m not sure what to conclude from this ...” in an attempt to shame Kaur because of apparent visual transgressions against the female body. The caption of the photograph, while vague, speaks volumes in its efforts to elicit community retribution against a woman who transgressed socially determined bounds of what it means to look like a young woman.

In a twist to the story that demonstrates how small our online communities truly are, a friend of Kaur’s saw the post and brought it to her attention. Kaur took action and in an eloquent, yet firm response, explained the links behind her faith as a devout Sikh and the presentation of her body to the outside world:

When I die, no one is going to remember what I looked like, heck, my kids will forget my voice, and slowly, all physical memory will fade away. However, my impact and legacy will remain: and, by not focusing on the physical

beauty, I have time to cultivate those inner virtues and hopefully, focus my life on creating change and progress for this world in any way I can. (Kaur, 2012, n.p.)

So enlightened and astounded at Kaur's lengthy response, which received more accolades and community response than the original post, which meant to shame her, the photographer ([deleted], 2012) returned to the forum and apologized to Kaur and the Sikh and Reddit communities for being insensitive, subsequently taking down the image and removing the Reddit account. No doubt, from an outsider's perspective, Kaur embraces the space between two United States gender-normative attributes. But this is only to the eye unfamiliar with individuals to adhere to traditional Sikh practices and, certainly, in its existence serves to both separate and unite in its education of the Christian majority and Sikh minority in this country. To Kaur, and many Sikh women like her, a turban and body hair are part of the bodily norm she presents to those who view her. As the Sikh population in the United States is quite small in comparison to a Christian majority, the presentation of a woman with visible body hair draws attention. An even smaller percentage of this minority religion are devout practitioners like Kaur who refrain from hair removal. While religion is not the focus of this essay, it is important to recognize the influence it carries in establishing "normative" gender traits within society. Any type of deviation from the gender norm can cause increased surveillance of the individual transgressing those boundaries.

While many commenters—eventually including the original user who posted the picture meant to shame her—came to Kaur's defense and championed her boundary-blurring body, other Internet memes, Tumblr pages, and websites highly reliant on visual content continue to solicit body-shaming and gender-normalizing images. Reddit, a website known for its free-speech policies, hosted the infamous "creepshots," "jailbait," and "rapebait" sub-forums, where pictures of unsuspecting women were posted onto those forums to be ogled, critiqued, and commented upon by viewers. These forums, while controversial, did not go unchallenged by all users; the Internet, as we can glean from Kaur's experience, can engender community support of the othered outsider and, through that support, open conversations about social norms. As such, while surveillance continues, active rejections of such surveillance build alongside it, as evidenced by the prevalence of memes like "Girls Did You Know" (Figure 4).

Such memes, whether dedicated to surveillance of hair or other parts of the female body, demonstrate that individuals are beginning to refuse the subjectification of female bodies to surveillance practices. In effect, visual media is being used to return the gaze from the subjected to those in power perpetuating surveillance. Visual media, either stealthily-taken photos of an unknowing woman waiting in line at a café or photos within an internet meme, have become tools to further transfer power and control of dominant gender norms. Using the internet to spread images of women not adhering to these norms speaks to Foucault's thesis that power is used by "an individual to influence and modify the actions of other individuals in order to realize certain tactical goals" within a panoptic society (Heller, 1996, p.83).



Figure 4. A young woman chastises other young women who wear too-revealing clothing. (thoggamaja via Know Your Meme, 2012).

The online meme "Girls Did You Know" gained popularity both by people in agreement with its creator, Sabrina, who chastised girls posting online photos deemed too risqué, i.e., showing cleavage, and by people in disagreement with the images. Users responded to Sabrina's photos by appropriating the style, layout, and textual design of her original photograph set to reject the collective shaming and body policing occurring in the original image (thoggamaja, 2012) (see Figures 5 and 6). The women subject to the original meme rejected their subjectification to an ideology demanding women to conform their bodies a certain way. Figure 5, in which the creator tells women to embrace the ownership they have over their bodies, is a small step to broader acceptance of further deviation to gendered body traits, like visible body hair; other responses to the meme took more humorous approaches (Figure 6).



Figure 5. A user responds with a body-positive message in a similar format to the “Girls, Did You Know” meme. (thoggamaja via Know Your Meme, 2012).

From the stages of puberty to the stages of pregnancy, viewing and commenting on female bodies is conventional and often one-sided, that is, the masculine body, while not excluded from objectification, is often less medicalized and commercialized (Morgan, 1998). Since we have created and accepted an ideal theoretical feminine form that gets established as the norm, the disambiguated body, like its breasts, gets critiqued and handled—physically or metaphorically—at every stage of its development. So when my adolescent self or a young woman like Kaur rebels against any facet of the constructed feminine bodily norm, it becomes imperative for those observing that body to call attention to such deviations as dangerous or “risky” affronts to social ideology. It is important to acknowledge that age, among other contextual differences like ethnicity and religion between Kaur and me, distinguished our experiences. I unknowingly rebelled against a gender norm by raising my hand in class and showing underarm hair, but I took this action without a conscious intent to rebel; I simply wanted to answer a question. This resulted in swift and consistent shaming. Kaur, as a young adult in her early 20s, resisted similar body hair norms and also faced harsh surveillance because of that resistance, but she, openly took action against such surveillance. The harassment we both received was part of larger social discriminatory attitudes toward and actions upon girls, women, and female-identified people.

Unpacking Privilege to Form Collective Resistance

Research indicates that peer and partner rejection occurs against any individual who challenges conformity (Serano, 2007; Tiggman & Lewis, 2004). But do examples of the failed Veet campaign and social media pushback against surveilled bodies indicate a growing rejection of the normalized feminine body? Hair is a prime vehicle for rebellion and a target of vitriol because of its malleability and symbolization of gender identities. While public objectification and self-objectification continue to plague visual representations of the female body, it seems that voices are rising against such social surveillance and shaming. (For example, see *ladypithair* (2015), which has 3504 followers and 264 photos of women showing their underarm hair, some dyed pink or turquoise, or with decorative hair bows and clips.)

Media communities as sites of identity formation wield power through collective affirmation or rejection by the members comprising those groups (Hipfl, 2007). Visual media and communities reliant upon such visualization, including advertising campaigns and blogging sites like Tumblr continue to be sources of a regeneration of the socially accepted or socially rejected traditionally “female” and “male” bodies. These sites concurrently support and reject surveillance practices because they offer alternatives to the bodily norm via both critique and assuagement in memes like “Girls Did You Know” and *ladypithair*. Such renegotiation of bodily norms in visual media is unique in that it reaches audiences outside of those familiar with feminist and visual culture discourses and ideologies.

While this visual reengineering of the female body as separate from a Western-



Figure 6. A user responds with humor to the surveillance and shaming in the original meme. (thoggamaja via Know Your Meme, 2012).

ized, capitalized norm is encouraging, we can truly only avoid visual surveillance of masculinity and femininity only when society broadens its too-restrictive definitions of female and male bodies, feminine and masculine bodily traits. I was ashamed of my pubescent, feminine body. I wanted to reject any change (hips widening, breasts growing, hair sprouting) that linked me to womanhood because my body became public property open to surveillance and to critique, much like Kaur's body. I thought by severing my ties to a womanly body I could escape the trap of feminine surveillance and remain in a more, unobserved, private space, as I viewed it at the time.

How can we engender strategies of resistance to cultural gender norms at a much earlier age in young people? Outside of the social institution of the family, an individual's education remains the secondary source of norm-creation and norm-affirming behavior. Both surveillance stories, Kaur's and mine, referenced in this essay occurred within educational spaces. Pedagogues have a unique opportunity to broaden the spectrum of socially acceptable ways to be human through assigning art and critical media literacy projects that catalyze subversively activist behavior. Culture jamming, like the "Girls Did You Know" meme, is a subversive practice that reworks a piece of visual media. Jamming not only creates new art, but also undermines prominent cultural discourses through visual (re)creation (Darts, 2004; Martinez, 2012; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Practitioners of culture jamming claim it "provides students with tools they need to question, critique, and reinterpret images" long after the exercise ends within a classroom space (Martinez, 2012, p. 13).

But why wait for an adult teacher to be the sole source of learning resistance tactics? Resistance also can be learned through peer interactions. Plenty of adolescents already use social media like Tumblr.com to "jam" or push back against dominant ideologies of identity. While I have employed the Tumblr platform in my classroom as a required blogging activity for students to record a real-time log of their learning throughout the semester, its strongest value as a tool of resistance lies in users' continuous engagement with other Tumblr users long after their assignment ends. Tumblr blogs like "Teen Mag Makeover: SPARK's 17/Teen Vogue Challenge" began with two young women, YingYing and Alice (2015), who created a blog to document their recreations of actual advice given to readers of Seventeen and Teen Vogue magazine. They adopted and acted upon fashion advice like wearing more skirts rather than pants or shorts, and they encouraged their male prom dates to buy a tuxedo instead of renting one—because his manliness is questioned if the tux is a rental! The young writers even reenacted archaic relationship advice, such as dropping a load of schoolbooks in front of a crush to demonstrate how easily girls are flustered by a boy's good looks. In documenting their actions, the women reframed, resisted, and recreated ways of being feminine while creating a base of followers who also engaged in similar resistance.

We can follow YingYing, Alice, and other culture jammers' leads to recodify our collective consciousness to include the treatise that physiognomies do not equate to femininity or masculinity. Our bodies will remain objects to be viewed and commented upon until we reclaim power from that body ... or from the people who wield power over our bodies' images.

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Julianne Guillard holds in a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction and a Ph.D. Minor in Women's Studies from The Pennsylvania State University. As a faculty member within University of Richmond's Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies program, she uses visual media in all of her courses—from introduction to women's, gender and sexuality studies, to feminist research methods, and special topics curricula—to emphasize the power of imagery both to re-inscribe and to reject norms about identities (gender, sexuality, race, and age). Her research includes feminist pedagogical leadership, queer studies, and childhood studies. Guillard's scholarly publications can be found in *Feminist Teacher*, *Girlhood Studies*, and *Visual Arts Research*, and on the popular blog, *Feministing*.

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