

**Female Bodybuilding and the Politics of Muscle:**

**How female bodybuilders negotiate race, gender, and (hetero)sexuality in bodybuilding  
competition**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Since the launch of women's bodybuilding as a spectator sport in the United States in 1979, the relationship between femininity and muscularity has been fraught with contradictions. Current developments in women's bodybuilding have seen the institutionalization of 'femininity' as an official judging criterion as well as the overrepresentation of less than muscular fitness and physique athletes in mainstream bodybuilding magazines. Based upon interviews with six competitive female bodybuilders, my research seeks to understand female bodybuilders' subjective understandings of their practice. How do they negotiate attempts by bodybuilding gatekeepers to police the boundaries of female muscle and how do they reproduce and/or resist social norms of race, gender and (hetero)sexuality in their understandings and practice?

My theoretical framework draws on a range of feminist perspectives (Laurie Schultz 1990; St Martin and Gavey 1996; Jacqueline Brady 2001; Jennifer Wesley 2001) that theorize women's engagements with bodybuilding as a negotiation of gender norms. My contribution to this literature is to explore, in more depth, how heterosexuality and race, as central tenets of normative femininity, structure the sport and how women negotiate pressures to reproduce them. I explore four main themes that arose from the six interview transcripts: 1) Why women build, 2) How they perceive the relationship of muscularity to femininity, 3) How normative femininity shapes their competitive performances and 4) How they make sense of sexualized portrayals of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines.

I draw on anti-racist feminist methodologies which attempt to render power visible to help me work towards minimizing unequal relations of power between myself and my research participants. Though most of my analysis is based upon the interview transcripts, with the permission the participants, I also analyze some of her photographs published in a bodybuilding magazine. My research reveals that gender structures the participants' engagements with bodybuilding in complex and multiple ways. Their attitudes towards bodybuilding suggest that their practice is not an escape from gender norms nor as a means to better fulfill them, but as an alternative strategy used by women to negotiate classed, racialized and heterosexist expectations of normative femininity.

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the women who build.  
Your biceps and pecs are my inspiration.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE POLITICS OF FEMALE MUSCLE

“...all the women were huge but I was massive.”  
Bev Francis, quoted in Steinem, 1994, 115

“You’re born naked and the rest is drag.”  
Ru Paul, quoted in A & E documentary, 2003

#### The research

Since the first Women’s World Bodybuilding Championship in Los Angeles in 1979, the relationship between femininity and muscularity has been a central problematic of the sport.<sup>1</sup> Although, throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s female athletes pushed female muscularity way beyond the sport’s initial beauty contest boundaries, in the current historical period, these gender bending bodies are being attributed to the “death of women’s bodybuilding as a spectator sport” (Williams, 2001). The year 2000 saw ‘femininity’ institutionalized as a formal judging criterion as well as the increasing portrayal of less than muscular fitness models in bodybuilding magazines. My research investigates how female bodybuilders make sense of these pressures to police the boundaries of female muscle. Based on interviews with six female bodybuilders in Vancouver I ask: What personal meanings do female bodybuilders attach to their sport? How do they make sense of their own hypermuscularity<sup>2</sup> within current attempts to feminize muscle? What can these meanings illuminate about how female bodybuilders negotiate issues of gender, sexuality, age and race in their various practices of competitive bodybuilding?

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<sup>1</sup> According to official women’s bodybuilding historian, Steve Wennerstrom, bodybuilding, as a sport for women, was conceived as early as 1976. A few competitions, known as ‘physique’ competitions, were held in 1977 and 1978 but it was not until 1979 with the advent of what was billed as the first Women’s World Bodybuilding Championship that bodybuilding was taken seriously as a sport for women. See Steve Wennerstrom (2000) for a concise history.

<sup>2</sup> See glossary for definition.



My theoretical framework is situated within feminist theories of how female bodybuilders *negotiate* gender norms (Laurie Schultz 1990; St Martin and Gavey 1996; Jacqueline Brady 2001; Jennifer Wesley 2001). Further clarified, these theories explore how female bodybuilders both comply with and resist social pressures to perform and project normative identities of race, gender, class, and sexuality. My contribution to these theories is to examine, in more detail, how race and heterosexuality structure bodybuilding competition. I ask: How do female bodybuilders' make sense of racialized and heteronormative bodybuilding ideals of 'female muscle'? How do they position themselves as well as other hypermuscular women in relation to these ideals?

*Why study women's bodybuilding?*

My entry into the world of competitive bodybuilding began five years ago via a somewhat different path to the women I interviewed for this project.<sup>3</sup> I was introduced to the sport in an academic setting in 1998 while taking a feminist Cultural Studies course as part of my undergraduate degree. The topic of women's bodybuilding was couched in a discussion of the paradoxically liberating and oppressive possibilities of body modification technologies along with dieting and cosmetic surgery. When our professor asked us to express our reaction to female bodybuilding in a single word, some of the most common responses were: "vain", "ridiculous," "oppressive," "unnatural" and "pointless." All of us seemed quite sure of our opinions despite the fact that none of us had any direct experience with bodybuilding and only knew as much as we might have glimpsed on late night television or in a magazine.

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<sup>3</sup> My participants were introduced to bodybuilding through one of the following three avenues: injuries incurred through other sports, encouragement by male partners and friends or through a desire to lose weight.

As the school week progressed, I found myself considering alternative possibilities and meanings of female bodybuilding other than the parody of a beauty pageant I had initially believed it to be. I found myself arguing for the possibility of women's agency and empowerment created and enjoyed through the process of building and displaying a hypermuscular physique. I saw this as a brave and transgressive pursuit in a society that derogates women for taking up space with their bodies and makes assumptions about their sexuality (i.e. assumes heterosexual women to be lesbian and/or naturalizes the 'deviance' of lesbian women).

I was intrigued by the questions asked by my professor during that short week but needed to uncover more satisfactory answers. Training and competing as a novice bodybuilder was the only way that I believed I could gain a better understanding of the sport. I wanted to know what it felt like to lift weights to a high intensity, to grow in musculature and strength, and turn people's heads in the street. But my biggest challenge would be to walk on stage in a pair of high heels, a fake tan, make-up, hairspray and wearing less than I would wear to bed, and still feel like a powerful embodied subject. That is, in competition, could I maintain my feelings of empowerment that I gained from working out with weights in the gym? From the beginning of my training in November of 1999 to the day of my one competition in August 2000 at the Natural Bodybuilding and Fitness Championships in Melbourne, Australia, I experienced a journey that would transform both my body and my politics <sup>4</sup> (see Fig. 1, p.12).

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<sup>4</sup> All of my bodybuilding training as well as academic study took place in Melbourne, Australia, my home town. I moved to Vancouver in 2001 to undertake this research as part of a master's degree.

A fledging feminist, I mostly viewed my engagement with bodybuilding as an experiment in measuring my practice against my politics. Could I actively resist the objectification of white women's bodies by placing my own on display in the context of showing off my muscle? Could I transform what I perceived to be sexist gender norms of bodybuilding competition (i.e. pressures to 'feminize' my body and performance) through my choice of music, posing style and adornment (or lack thereof)? Yet this was not all bodybuilding was about for me. Struggling with severe disordered eating at the time, bodybuilding became a strategy for me to confront and work through my own negative ideas about my body. It was both a way to maintain low body fat in compliance with current cultural ideals of slenderness but also to challenge these ideals by growing into a skin that was thicker, more muscular, and undeniably strong.

I kept a diary to document my progress throughout this period of training for my competition. When I revisited my diary entries during the fieldwork process I asked myself the same questions that I posed to my participants. How did I become involved in bodybuilding? What made me take it to the competitive level? What did I see as my greatest achievements? What barriers and/or lack of barriers did I face in training and competition? In almost every diary entry I display a clear preoccupation with my body fat and the urgency to dissipate it. Though some of my concern is connected to the quality of muscle being built, I make comments that now appear to me to be indicative of the kind of 'female fat hatred' theorized by Susan Bordo (1991, 1993, 1997). On the 25<sup>th</sup> of December 1999 (Christmas Day when I trained for a good part of the day), I wrote: "Getting stronger and managing weights more smoothly but concerned about fat I'm still carrying. Weight down to 74kg now but excess fat on stomach and buttocks." Yet, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, 2000, I wrote:

“Today’s session showed much improvement in upper body strength. I can finally bench 4 sets of 10 reps at 30kg. The last set is always the hardest but determination squeezes the last two reps out.” My diary reveals to me that my experience of bodybuilding was not simply about capitulating to current female body ideals of slenderness, nor was it entirely about transcending gender norms. What I see in my diary is a far more complex process of *negotiation*. That is, negotiating between adherence to and refusal of sexist gender norms. Leslie Heywood describes a similar struggle in her semi-autobiographical book, *Bodymakers: A cultural anatomy of women’s bodybuilding* (1998).

“...24 percent of my waking hours, almost one fourth of my life since adolescence, has been spent working out...But those hours are my sanity, my identity, my life...Building out of that nothingness, I am a feminist bodybuilder...to touch me is to touch a flesh that has been inhumanly forged...shaped into a wall you’ll never fit through. Grams of protein, grams of fat. Teaspoons of creatine, capsules of time, the test-tubes of chemicals I ingest” (1998, 186).

Yet neither Heywood’s nor my own narrative can represent the experiences of all female bodybuilders and the issues are by no means limited to gender. Some of us face more barriers than others and although I was not aware of it at the time, my diary attests to the privileges I enjoyed because of my social status as a young, white, heterosexual woman. Although my sex was a barrier to my initial acceptance in the hypermasculine space of a gym, my sexuality was never publicly challenged, nor did I have to face the everyday insults of racism. Building on my starting point that female bodybuilders negotiate conventional feminine norms in their bodybuilding practices, I add to this the assumption that women’s membership and success in the world of competitive bodybuilding is also shaped by their positions within hierarchies of class, race, sexuality, ability and age. These categories intersect with gender in complex ways to differentially and hierarchically define women-

either closer to or further from western ideological constructs of woman. Exploring differences of race, class, sexuality and age among female bodybuilders is important for understanding how power circulates within bodybuilding as a sport and women's abilities and opportunities to usurp, transform and resist oppressive power.

*The importance of experience for producing knowledge: a feminist postmodern perspective*

Beginning from my own experience of competing in a bodybuilding competition, I consider my research to be 'embodied' research because it not only engages me intellectually but physically, in a profound and indelible way. I am not suggesting that every researcher needs to become a bodybuilder in order to write about the sport. Like Heywood, I am suggesting that my involvement as a competitive participant in bodybuilding allows me to bridge the gap, to an extent, between audience member/researcher and the bodybuilder on stage. Although, the use and concept of women's experience for producing theory has been problematic for feminists (see Wolf, 1996 for debates) I maintain that experience is important for making connections between material inequalities and social structures that uphold oppression. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that this standpoint

"...is a way of taking women's experience as fundamental to knowledge of political relations between women and men...it is a way of exploring (as opposed to assuming) how women experience life differently from men or others because they live in specific social relationships to the exercise of male power" (2002, 61).

I also take up the postmodern position that experience cannot be taken as absolute 'Truth' (Foucault 1979, Butler 1990, Haraway 1985, Harding 1990). I cannot fully *know* the research participants' experiences. The interview narratives that I collected for this project are incomplete; they constitute single versions of stories that could be told in many different ways. The ways in which my participants related their experiences to me are shaped by their

social locations as well as by the power dynamics of the research relationship (see Chapter

1). Beverly Skeggs sums up my position nicely:

“ I want to hold on to experience as a way of understanding how women occupy the category ‘women’, a category which is classed and raced and produced through power relations and struggles across different sites in space and time. I do not, however, want to argue for experience as a foundation for knowledge, a way of revealing or locating true and authentic woman” (1997, 27).

Although I am interested in the similarities between my research participants’ experiences, I wish to move away from essentialist theorizing of ‘women’s experience.’ I am more interested in sites of contradiction and confusion. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) Judith Butler argues, “The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility qua possibility, but to re-describe those possibilities that already exist, but which exist within domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible” (1990, 149). I believe that these “unintelligible” sites can tell us more about the multiple, messy and fluctuating relations of power in which hypermuscular women are situated. Attention to sites of confusion, or what Butler terms ‘gender trouble,’ engages us in the work of “confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness” (ibid.). Women’s bodybuilding is an excellent site for investigating ‘gender trouble’ and how women make sense of, as well as negotiate it. Though my focus is specifically on questions of politics, performance and power in women’s bodybuilding, my investigation more broadly contributes to Butler’s project of denaturalizing gender and other social categories that gender intersects. This work can enable us to begin to envision how marginalized bodies and identities, such as those

embodied by hypermuscular women, might become “intelligible,” acceptable and even celebrated.

Chapter 1 outlines the methods I used to conduct my research as well as the methodological considerations that informed my choice of which methods to use. This discussion revolves around issues of power in feminist research and how I dealt with power imbalances between my research participants and myself during the fieldwork and post-field work stages. I focus specifically on dilemmas of interpreting data and representing my research participants. I evaluate three strategies that I used to illuminate and challenge unequal power dynamics in my research relationships: 1) reciprocity with the participants, 2) accountability to the participants and 3) accessibility of the text to the participants.

In chapter 2, I critically review feminist literature on women’s bodybuilding to identify their theoretical contributions, gaps and silences. I build my own theoretical framework out of feminist theories of how women negotiate gender norms in bodybuilding competition. I include literature produced by female bodybuilders in my discussion, to help me challenge some of the assumptions made by feminists about women’s engagements with the sport. I identify the work of black feminists as particularly useful for my own investigation because of their insights into intersections of race, class and gender and how these intersections differentially shape women’s perceptions and experiences of bodybuilding. I also rely on these latter writings to maintain a vigilance of my own reproduction of racism in relation to my black female participants.

Chapter 3 addresses my main research questions of how women make sense of and negotiate the current political terrain of competitive women’s bodybuilding. My analysis of racialization and heterocentrism are the central organizing themes of this chapter. I theorize

race and heterosexuality at three different levels of my participants' engagements with bodybuilding: 1) why women build: how gender, age and heterosexuality structures the participants personal motivations, aspirations and pleasure derived from bodybuilding, 2) Constructing the ideal female bodybuilder: how race and gender inform the participants' perceptions of the relationship between femininity and muscularity, and 3) Bodybuilding performance: how heterosexuality, class and gender structure expectations for their competitive performances and how female bodybuilders negotiate these expectations.

Chapter 4 follows on from my discussion in Chapter 3 in which I look at how pressures on female bodybuilders to feminize muscle is perpetuated by the highly racialized and heterocentric context of bodybuilding magazines. Making a distinction between mainstream and hard-core bodybuilding magazines, I explore my participants' reactions to the erasure of female bodybuilders from mainstream magazines as well as their attitudes to sexualized photography of hypermuscular women in the hard-core literature<sup>5</sup>. I theorize how heterosexuality and race shape my participants' responses to sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders and take seriously the assertions made by some of the participants that this representation can be empowering and pleasurable. Specifically, I examine sexually explicit photographs in a 2002 issue of *Muscle Elegance*, in which one of my participants is featured. The only woman in the interview group to have posed for a magazine, nude or otherwise, this was a unique opportunity to explore her positive attitude towards sexualized photography with how she is portrayed in these pictures. I examine how racism and sexism are reproduced in this magazine through the binary representations of black and white

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<sup>5</sup> Hard-core simply refers to the type of magazine aimed at a bodybuilding audience. These magazines are mostly male oriented and feature the most massively muscular male bodybuilders, bodybuilding specific products for sale and almost always sexualized or sexually explicit photography of female bodybuilders or fitness models.



women's bodies.<sup>6</sup> I situate this discussion within broader debates over the implications of sexually explicit representation for white women and women of colour. I also draw on the work of black feminists and queer theorists to theorize how my participant, who appears in *Muscle Elegance*, negotiates and destabilizes the highly racialized, heterosexist and gendered context of these photographs. I conclude with some reflections on what I have learnt from this research as well as offer suggestions for future work to be conducted in this area.

*You don't have to have biceps to understand power: a note on audience*

During the fieldwork stage of my research, I read bell hooks' collection of essays, *Remembered Rapture* (1999). In one of her chapters, hooks urges writers focusing on the margins to make their writing accessible to a range of readers across race, class, sexuality and gender. Contrary to beliefs that literature about the experiences of a specific group of people cannot relate to people beyond those borders, hooks argues that we need to engage a wider audience in discussions of oppression and marginalization. This strategy can illuminate how we are all complicit in oppression by demonstrating the connection between social locations and access to privileges. Using methods to make academic writing more accessible to a range of readers can also facilitate the building of bridges between the academy and the community. However there are limitations to achieving this goal.

My research was designed and conducted within the institutional constraints of the University for the conferral of a master's degree in Women's Studies. Diane Wolf acknowledges:

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<sup>6</sup> Only white women and African American women are photographed in this issue of *Muscle Elegance*. However, I do theorize the absence of Asian women and other women of colour.

It is difficult to change power differences during and after fieldwork without radically changing the kind of research that is done and, therefore, without confronting and challenging the structure of academia: how products are judged acceptable and by whom, how progress is viewed and how theory is understood... (1996, 3).

There are, therefore, constraints on what form my research can take, the language in which it is written, and what information it should include. Yet, within these constraints, I have tried to produce a text that is accessible to those not as familiar with women's studies and feminist theory. I have attempted to do this by limiting my use of academic jargon as well as avoiding abstract theorizing. I have included glossaries of both bodybuilding and academic terms (see Appendix 4) to aid various readers with understanding the languages of the text. Although I cannot fully dismantle the institutional constraints of the University that shape my research, it is my hope that this work contributes to the democratization of knowledge produced in the academy. The following chapter continues this theme with a more detailed discussion of the difficulties and dilemmas I encountered in my attempts to design and conduct more equitable feminist research.



Fig.1. Author at the Natural Bodybuilding and Fitness Championships, August 2000.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**METHODOLOGY AND METHODS: SOME ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION AND REPRESENTATION**  
**IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Introduction

At the heart of my methodological considerations are issues of power. Diane Wolf (1996) outlines the dynamics of power in feminist research in three interrelated dimensions: 1) power differences created by differing social locations between the researcher and research participants (i.e. age, race, class), 2) power exercised during the research process such as in defining the research relationship and 3) power exercised in the writing up of the research and the use to which it is put (1996, 2). In my research, I have sought methods capable of challenging inequalities even though I may not be able to eliminate them entirely. Specifically, I have struggled with questions of how to interpret my research participants' experiences in ways that are respectful and limit the reproduction of race, class and heterosexist hierarchies. In this chapter I want to discuss how these three dimensions of power operated in my own research process and the ways in which I have tried to illuminate and challenge them. I will begin by describing the methods I used to collect my data and conduct my analysis, and then move on to explicate the methodological considerations that led me to make these choices. In the latter part of this discussion I will also evaluate the three main strategies I used to produce a text based on honest and equitable research. These are: 1) reciprocity between myself and the research participants, 2) accessibility of the text to research participants and 3) accountability to those included in and excluded from my research.

### Methods

My research is based upon in-depth interviews with six competitive bodybuilders: one professional and five amateur female bodybuilders in Vancouver.<sup>7</sup> My reason for choosing to conduct interviews as opposed to focus groups or surveys was influenced by the level of intimacy and detail I hoped to generate from each exchange. I felt that interviews would be more conducive to discussing and probing sensitive topics such as sexuality and racism. Furthermore, since most of the participants were friends, acquaintances and/or fellow competitors, a focus group discussion may have limited what they felt comfortable revealing or articulating in each other's company. I chose to limit my sample to six women so as to collect enough data to produce a credible analysis yet small enough to be able to consider each narrative in detail. Although this sample is not large enough to generalize across a population of female bodybuilders, it provides an opportunity for an in depth study of how some female bodybuilders negotiate the power relations of competitive bodybuilding (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

My decision to only interview competitive female bodybuilders is based upon my interest in how hypermuscular women make sense of themselves and their practice within the institutional constraints of bodybuilding competition. Though there are some hypermuscular women who practice bodybuilding recreationally, they are excluded from my research because they do not negotiate the same political terrain of bodybuilding as do competitive female bodybuilders. All of the interviews took place in Vancouver where most of the women resided with the exception of one participant who lived on Vancouver

Island. This interview had to be conducted over the phone, as neither of us was able to travel during the time I had allotted for the interviews. We were both comfortable with this decision since we had already met a few weeks earlier at a bodybuilding and fitness event. Most of the participants were found using a snowball technique except for one woman whom I located through my own inquiries at local gyms. My initial approach to recruiting participants was to place posters in gyms and health clubs throughout Vancouver (see Appendix 1 for poster). Although no one contacted me for an interview from the posters, this personal approach of going to gyms and speaking with their owners was helpful for establishing credibility and attracting potential participants. My key informant was introduced to me through one of the gym owners with whom I initially spoke. The relationship I developed with this participant established trust that led her to then put me in touch with the other women who became participants in this research.

Despite my fears of ending up with a homogenous sample that is the danger of using a snowball technique, there was significant age, ethnic and experiential diversity amongst the research participants. The participants range in age from thirty to forty-eight years of age. Two of the participants are black, one shares Cherokee and Anglo Saxon heritage and three are white. All identify as heterosexual and middle class and none are married though two are divorced, two are single mothers, one is engaged and one is living in a common law relationship. It is important for me to recognize and maintain an awareness of these differences in social locations between my participants and myself as well as among the participants. Recognizing differences of racialization between myself as a white woman and

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<sup>7</sup> Professional bodybuilders advance to professional status by winning a national competition such as the Canadian Western Nationals. Professional competitors compete for prize money and international ranking whereas amateur competitors usually compete for trophies or other prizes.

my participants of colour, and choosing methods to limit the dangerous reproduction of racism, are crucial to my anti-racist feminist theorizing. As a white woman wishing to form alliances with feminists of colour in working towards the centering and dismantling of racism in feminist theory, this is an important structure of my research. It has also been the most painful and challenging aspect of my journey. I will elaborate on this admission later on in this chapter.

Interviews were designed to be as informal and interactive as possible (see Appendix 2 for interview questions). Although I had prepared a formal list of questions, interviews were fairly unstructured allowing each participant to pose their own questions or introduce issues that they felt were important. Background searches conducted prior to each interview also gave me the opportunity to significantly tailor the interviews to each participant based on her specific interests and involvement in the sport. I mostly obtained this information from the Internet where some of the women had their own websites or features in on-line magazines and bodybuilding sites. Although I asked all of them what I felt were the core questions of the research, a more open-ended strategy enabled me to focus on each participant's specific approach and contributions to her sport, highlighting the diversity among them.

Interviews lasted one and a half hours on average. I began each interview by re-explaining my research interests and the sorts of things I wanted to learn from our exchange. During the first set of questions, I showed my own contest photographs which initiated a discussion about the similarities and differences between our initial experiences of the sport. This was helpful for breaking the ice and creating some common ground. All of the

participants were excited by my participation in the sport that initiated the telling of some of their own stories about how and why they became involved in bodybuilding.

A second method that I used to minimize power imbalances between the research participants and myself was to encourage feedback on their interview transcripts. Once I transcribed the tapes I made two copies, kept one in a file and sent the other to the participants to read and make any corrections. Each participant took the time to do this and all were pleased to have the opportunity. By allowing the participants to read their own narratives and either elaborate on comments or retract anything they did not feel comfortable with me using, I hoped to alleviate some of their feelings of vulnerability. I recognize that doing field research is still a selective and subjective process, riddled with relations of power that neither my research participants nor I can step outside of. Creating space for dialogue between the participants and myself helped to illuminate some of the power dynamics in my research relationships.

The feedback process was not as smooth and coherent as I had anticipated. A dilemma arose when two of the participants, both women of colour, censored their comments about the operation of racism and sexism in bodybuilding competition. Despite my efforts to make it clear to all the participants that my analysis was more concerned with the larger power structures than making personal judgments of them, I was surprised to receive two transcripts that had been heavily censored. My immediate reaction was to panic, believing the silenced data to be unusable. Interestingly, both women explained their reaction in terms of their fears of being characterized as 'negative.' Their reactions and concerns about being judged by me underscores the vulnerability of being a participant in any kind of research. Furthermore it underscores power differentials between myself as a



white researcher and my black female participants. Racialised relations of power can be too easily reproduced. Implicit in their fears of being interpreted as negative, are also issues of mistrust of how I would represent them and whether conscious of it or not, my power to reinscribe them within subordinate positions of power. Thus, a white feminist, like myself, must walk a tendentious tightrope when trying to dismantle racism because we also risk reproducing it.

As I touched on in my introduction, this dilemma raises important questions for feminist researchers hoping to tell the 'truth' about women's experiences. We need to recognize that we actively construct our participants' realities and experiences in our attempts to understand them. And that the knowledge we produce about participants is racialized, classed, and influenced by sexuality and whether or not we are able bodied. Thus, questions of 'truth telling' are bound up with my dilemma of how to talk about the data on racism and sexism that was censored by my participants' while also respecting their wishes to suppress sensitive information. In her research on women and social class, Beverly Skeggs (1997) shares a similar dilemma in which women she interviewed expressed concern about a class analysis of their narratives because of their intense desires to dissociate from their working class status. Rather than accept their rejection of class and instead turn to other issues, Skeggs realized the importance of focusing on class more closely. She writes: "...their rejection of class did not lead me to abandon it. In fact, it did the opposite. It heightened my sensitivity to the ubiquity and made me construct theories to explain their responses" (30).

At first I thought the participants' wishes to retract their statements would be detrimental to my analysis. Yet, Skeggs demonstrates that race and gender should be central

to my analysis. That is, how they are institutionalized in bodybuilding and why women might police their criticisms of these structures. For women in any level of society there is much fear around being labeled 'negative,' 'ungrateful' or not a 'team player.' These are labels often leveled at women who are critical of oppressive structures and environments and can be used to alienate them from a community or institution such as bodybuilding. For one of the participants, a relative newcomer to bodybuilding competition who wishes to excel in her competitive career and personal training business, it is entirely plausible that she was concerned about tarnishing her name with what she feared would be perceived as 'negative' comments. For the other, a professional competitor, such statements could mean the death of her career (see Lowe 1998). Jacqueline Brady (2001) raises the issue of the marginalization black female bodybuilders face when attempting to force social change: "The hard cold fact is that their livelihood as bodybuilders depends largely on company endorsements and commercial work. Severing their ties to the other female bodybuilders who anchor them, albeit to a white female space, might just mean a long hard fall from the grace of the bodybuilding industry" (2001, 273-4). Naming experiences of sexism, homophobia, and racism takes courage. The consequences for being critical of an institution in which one is marginalized as a woman, as a woman of colour or a lesbian, are sufficient to cause women to police themselves for fear of damage to their careers and alienation from their communities. This dilemma has been useful for helping me to think more deeply about the politics of my responsibility and accountability to my research participants. Must I be silent about inequality when my research participants do not acknowledge, refuse to acknowledge, or censor their statements about racism and sexism? How can I explore these

issues and my participants' complicity with institutional oppression without further marginalizing them?

### Methodology

I set out with the naive ambition that I could transparently apply 'sensitive' research methods such as Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna's "methods from the margins" (1989, 1) to ensure equal sharing of power between the research participants and myself. Though, as my previous discussion demonstrates, inequalities are easily reproduced. Kirby and McKenna define methods from the margins as:

...based on the commitment to advancing knowledge through a process of exploration, grounded in the experience of people who have usually been treated as the objects of research...in particular, methods from the margins must focus on describing reality from the perspective of those who have traditionally been excluded as producers of research (1989, 61).

The main requirements of this research model are to clearly and firmly situate myself as a partial knowledge producer throughout the research process and to implement methods capable of creating more equal sharing of knowledge with participants. By partial knowledge producer, Kirby and McKenna mean that one can never be completely objective. That is, we bring our own biases, attitudes and experiences to the issues we study. Although in some ways this is an excellent research model given the level of reflexivity it requires of the researcher; it is also highly seductive in its idealization of the elimination of power imbalances from the research process. Reviewing the flow of power in my own research process, where power often accumulated at my feet, I wonder to what extent 'equal' sharing of power and responsibility in research relationships is possible, especially within the temporal and financial constraints of most research projects.

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that we cannot take for granted the assumption that more equitable research methods will dissipate unequal relations of power. Furthermore, they highlight that being feminist does not mean that one is any less “immune than other social researchers to arrogance, ignorance, complacency, academic insecurity, power hunger or limited capacities for self-knowledge, empathy or patient listening” (2002, 109). They arrive at these insights through recognition of the many imbalances between researcher and researched in the research process. For example, though as a feminist I might consider myself to be equal with my participants because of my gender, class, heterosexuality, able-body and my experience as a bodybuilding athlete, I am “still constituted as (a) particular knowing self(ves), in particular social situations, (are) generally located in hierarchical relationships, and have the power to distance the researched from their experience” (2002, 107). Thus, in the process of interpreting my participants’ experiences, no matter how much ‘sharing’ of information I have initiated, in the writing of my analysis I make power-laden decisions about what to include and exclude and how my research subjects will be represented. I have used three strategies to recognize and challenge these power dynamics in the writing up of my research: 1) reciprocity with my participants, 2) accountability to my participants and 3) accessibility of the text to my participants.

My choice to write the introductory chapter in an autobiographical style is informed by my hope of producing a more accessible text to non-academic readers as well as contribute to the level of reciprocity between myself and the research participants. It is my hope that by telling my bodybuilding story, I will be giving something back to my participants in return for their generous sharing of information. Although I maintain that this is the best way to locate myself in my research, there are obvious power imbalances in

this gesture. I wrote my own story and had complete control over its interpretation. My research participants did not. I interpreted their stories and experiences in ways that *I* thought were interesting and insightful. Furthermore, though they might read the final analysis, there is no way for them to challenge, re-write, or take control of the text. Natasha Mauthre and Andrea Doucet point out, "Though we might adopt a bottom up approach in that the starting point for our research is the perspectives and words of the individuals we study, we are nonetheless the ones who will be speaking for them" (1998, 139).

Yet within these limitations there are glimpses of reciprocity to be found. Several of the participants were quite interested in my research and expressed pleasure and gratitude for being asked to participate. Some expressed flattery at being considered an authority on women's bodybuilding and enjoyed my interest in their athletic achievements. I would never claim to be in a position to 'empower' or raise the consciousness of any of the participants (Wolf, 1996, 26). Yet it was my hope that some of them might begin thinking about their practice in ways that they might not have considered prior to the interviews. An email that I received from one of the participants the day after her interview reveals how our discussion prompted her to think more deeply about her relationship to bodybuilding.

"I was thinking about our discussion on the drive home yesterday and how unique and interesting your topic is...I was also self-philosophizing that bodybuilding has changed me forever, opening up an ENTIRELY new world of friends, goals and achievements...Bodybuilding (post-surgery & hospital care) have also saved my son's life. Bodybuilding as rehab; bodybuilding as a lifestyle; bodybuilding as a venue for making friendships; bodybuilding as a venue for seeing others push through pain to achieve goals and literally seeing firsthand the incredible results of the hard work, discipline and sacrifice."

In this instance I believe I was successful in creating an affirming and open conversation with this participant. Her description of her interview as 'our discussion' suggests my success at making it more of a discussion between us than my interrogation of her. Rather than triggering uncomfortable feelings about what information she had imparted to me, she was able to reflect positively on the reasons why she bodybuilds and reaffirm what it has contributed to her life. Yet I was not successful in achieving this in all of the interviews. This is evidenced by the reactions described earlier of two of the participants who heavily censored their transcripts. This particular dilemma points to power relations that go beyond the research process and that I was unable to control. For example, athletes perceived as criticizing a particular bodybuilding federation can be reprimanded by bodybuilding gatekeepers by such methods as being poorly placed in competitions (see Lowe, 1998).

There are several limitations of my research that affected the level of reciprocity I was able to foster with my participants. I was only in the field for a total of four months conducting the interviews and during this time I had little contact with the participants. I had almost no contact with them during the post-fieldwork stage. Initially I had intended to conduct a second round of feedback with my participants on my analysis of the interview data but due to material constraints this did not eventuate. This step would have added a richer layer to my analysis and methodological consideration project. However, I did re-interview one participant whose photographs I analyze in Chapter 4. If she had been unknown to me, I could have analyzed these pictures without her consent. Though of course I still would have needed to approach my analysis with as much caution of my own position as a white voyeur as well as respect and sensitivity towards Emma. Because of the trust I

had built with Emma and because of my methodological and ethical commitment to being accountable to research participants, it was important to me that she felt comfortable with how I analyzed her pictures. Again, because of the racialized power dynamics between myself as a white woman and this black female participant, it is also important to realize how I risked reproducing racist objectification of black women's bodies and sexuality, if I had failed to consult with her.

However, in my view, collaboration with research participants does not necessarily ensure a more honest or 'truthful' text. If the researcher does not consider the role of their power in the interpretation of data, collaboration alone cannot challenge inequality in research relationships. My research was not designed to be collaborative, yet this does not release me from considering important ethical questions about my accountability to the individuals upon whose experiences my research is based. Throughout this project I have carried with me concerns about how to represent and interpret my interview participants' narratives in ways that might displease or offend them. In her article, "*That's not what I said*": *Interpretive conflict in Oral Narrative Research* (1991) Katherine Borland discusses the struggle between herself as the researcher and her grandmother as the subject of her research, to control the interpretation of her grandmother's narrative. Conflict arose when Borland's grandmother furiously rejected her granddaughter's feminist analysis of her relationship with her father. Angry that her story was no longer hers but Borland's, her grandmother asserts: 'You've read into this story what you wished to...the story is no longer my story at all' (1991, 70). Borland's article underscores the politics of representing and interpreting research participants' experiences. Ramazanoglu and Holland comment: "Acknowledging disagreement, inconsistencies and contradictions in interpretations of data

helps to show the situatedness of the researcher's own position, and the specificity of her approach to connecting ideas, experiences and reality" (2002, 117). Thinking about my own dilemma with two of the participants' self-censorship of their interviews, Borland's article raises some important questions for my own research. What can I learn from my research participants about the complexities, possibilities, and limits of interpreting their experience? What can these negotiations tell me about the power of race, gender, sexuality, and class to shape our interactions, social locations, and struggles to suppress and give voice to experiences of multiple inequalities?

My analysis in Chapter 4 is useful for beginning to answer these sensitive and difficult questions. As well as using interviews with bodybuilders, I also analyze some photographs of female bodybuilders in a 2002 issue of *Muscle Elegance* magazine. I chose to examine this magazine because it includes some pictures of one of the women I interviewed, who I refer to as Emma in the text. A black woman, she is the only woman in my interview sample who had posed for a magazine, nude or otherwise. I also saw this as a unique opportunity to compare and contrast her positive attitudes to this sexualized imagery with how she is represented in these pictures. I have placed Emma's pictures within the context of her interview narrative as a strategy to maintain her voice in the discussion. This way, it is my intention to maintain the participant as a living, breathing subject with important insights of her own rather than silencing her as simply a body trapped within these pictures. Although I look at these pictures through a critical feminist and anti-racist lens, I also examine them for glimpses of personal pleasure and power Emma expressed in her interview narrative.



This was the most difficult chapter of my thesis to write but the mistakes made in the process have taught me some invaluable lessons about developing anti-racist politics as a white woman. My intention was to examine Emma's photographs for glimpses of the personal power and agency she described in her interview narrative, whilst also producing an intersectional critique of the racialized and sexualized ways in which she is framed by *Muscle Elegance* magazine. The danger of this analysis, of course, is of reproducing racism through a fetishistic focus on Emma's black female body as a racial 'other.' For black women whose bodies and sexualities have been abused, demeaned and displayed for the racist entertainment of white supremacist culture, my discussion risks perpetuating this painful tradition. Even though this was not my intent, I came up against this difficult realization while writing Chapter 4. My mistake in my initial draft of Chapter 4 was to focus entirely on Emma's pictures to the neglect of discussing representations of white women. This led to an asymmetry in my discussion that reproduced the kind of fetishisation of the black female body that I am trying to critique. Compounding this oversight was my failure to consult Emma on this analysis and use of her pictures. I had fallen short of my aim to be accountable to Emma by failing to discuss my analysis with her. Despite the fact that she had introduced me to the magazine and sold me the issue in which she is featured, I needed to ask her permission to analyze her photos as well as clearly explain my analysis to her. Returning to Diane Wolf's quote at the beginning of this chapter in which she outlines the exercise of power at different stages of research, my withholding of this analysis from Emma reproduces the very inequalities I am attempting to minimize. This realization was shaming for me because of my belief that I am an anti-racist. Yet, this experience also illuminated the need for me to think more deeply about how politics are translated into

practice. It also taught me to be honest about my failures and to strive towards nurturing my critical perspective based upon the criticism of my instructors and peers. Having had this mirror held up to me by one of my professors, also a black woman, I had to come to terms with my error and make decisions about how to rework my analysis.

I chose to contact Emma and meet with her in person to discuss my analysis of her pictures. This was a source of great anxiety for me because I was afraid that she would reject my analysis and thus refuse to allow me to discuss her photos. Having assured her anonymity, I agreed not to identify the issue or the editors of the magazine as well as not to reproduce any of the photographs. As I mentioned above, this dilemma illustrates the importance of ethics in feminist research and my obligation to think seriously about how my analysis might betray the trust and confidence of my participants. It would have been a blatant exercise of my power as a researcher, as well as an act of disrespect of Emma, to have completed this sensitive analysis without consulting her opinion and permission to include this analysis as part of my thesis.

Finally, it is important for me to consider my accountability not only to those who have been included in the research but also to those who have been left out. Not knowing the bodybuilding demographic of Vancouver when I began this research, I started out with hopes of locating some of the subjectivities that have been excluded from or marginalized in existing qualitative studies of female bodybuilders. These include lesbian and transgendered women, black women, women of colour, First Nation's women and disabled women. When I began to place posters in gyms and contact local organizations such as the Native Sporting Association and The Centre for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender), I realized the limitations of my study. It was pointed out to me by one of my participants that

Vancouver is a much smaller centre for Canadian bodybuilding than cities such as Toronto and Montreal. Yet despite the sport's marginality in Vancouver, there are other reasons for the scarcity or invisibility of lesbian, disabled, and transgendered athletes. Racism, transphobia, ableism and heterocentrism result in the over representation of white, middle-class, heterosexual athletes. Although I was not successful in including Aboriginal, lesbian or transgendered women as participants in my research, I can be accountable to these groups and individuals by examining the processes of power that silence and erase them.

Steven Maynard, in his article, *Queer Musings on Masculinity and History* (1998) encourages gender historians to pay more attention to heterocentrism as well as to utilize sexuality as an axis of critical analysis. Although his article is specific to uncovering gay masculinities, I can adapt his methodology to my own work. It is my aim to contribute to literature on female bodybuilding by looking more closely at the operation of racism and heterocentrism in bodybuilding competition as well as in bodybuilding representation. For example, I can apply the axis of sexuality to examine the operation of heterocentrism in the judging of women's posing routines in bodybuilding competitions. Axes of race, gender and sexuality can also be combined to examine the ways in which white and black bodybuilders are differentially constructed in photography published in bodybuilding magazines (see chapter 4). Binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality, racial purity and racial otherness are fundamental to this analysis because hegemonic norms could not exist or become so powerful without the construction of a deviant 'other.' Focusing on hegemonic structures of power and how they produce binaries of norm/other is crucial for uncovering the silences surrounding female bodybuilders who are marginalized within bodybuilding institutions as well as those excluded from their ranks.

I continue this discussion in the following chapter where I evaluate how other feminist scholars have applied or neglected to apply, analytical lenses of sexuality, class, race, and gender in their research on women's bodybuilding. I identify the main contributions, gaps, and silences of these various theories and use them to I build a theoretical framework for my analysis of the interview data that constitutes Chapters 3 and 4.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Women's bodybuilding has given rise to a substantial body of literature across a broad range of disciplines. Most of this literature is situated in North America where bodybuilding originated and has flourished. As well as literature produced within bodybuilding circles such as bodybuilding magazines and training manuals, women's bodybuilding has been theorized in feminist, philosophical, artistic, historical and scientific circles. I have also identified some anti-feminist discourse in bodybuilding magazines where articles by male writers denigrate female athletes for their muscularity and transgression of gender norms.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I am most interested in critical feminist literatures that theorize intersections of gender, sexuality and race in women's bodybuilding, though not all of the literature included here is feminist. I also examine some bodybuilding manuals authored by female bodybuilders because, having competed as a bodybuilding athlete, I believe that literature produced by female bodybuilders is useful for challenging feminist theorizations of the sport.

I categorize the critical literature according to the complexity of the analyses and attention to factors other than gender in seeking answers to a variety of questions. These

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<sup>8</sup> For example, "Evolution or Devolution: Freaks or not?" Iron Man, Nov 2001. In this article the male author constructs female bodybuilders as sexually and gender deviant and marvels at the fact that heterosexual female bodybuilders still expect to be desired by men. Accompanying the article, are photographs of female bodybuilders with their heads cut off and compared to the physiques of male bodybuilders. These pictures are used to support the author's vilification of female bodybuilders' perceived grotesque transgression of heterosexual gender norms.

categorizations are not fixed or absolute and there is some degree of fluidity between them. I have conceptualized the literature in this way in order to establish an entry point for my own discussion. The first grouping is made up of two different and opposing arguments that perceive female bodybuilding to be either empowering for, or oppressive to, women. Combined they form a polarization of perceptions about women's engagement with bodybuilding as either an example of 'female self management,' or a means by which women may transcend gender norms. Gender is the main focus of these arguments, which marginalizes issues of race, class, and sexuality.

The second grouping is made up of research that offers more sophisticated analyses in terms of theorizing how female bodybuilders *negotiate* gender norms rather than simply adhering to or defying them. I have separated this category into two levels: textual analysis and qualitative analysis. Yet, like the first grouping, much of this research neglects to consider how muscular bodies are inscribed within ideological systems other than gender.

The third grouping, in which I locate my own research, represents the most nuanced set of investigations into female bodybuilding. Using intersectional analysis, these authors examine how race, class, age, gender and sexuality shape women's negotiations of normative femininity in competitive bodybuilding. These authors conceptualize women's engagements with bodybuilding as a more fluid and complex process of simultaneously resisting and transgressing norms rather than creating a separation between them.

#### *Bodybuilding as empowerment or oppression*

Sandra Lee Bartky's article, *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power* (1988), is one of the earliest feminist articles to discuss female

bodybuilding. Bartky applies a gender analysis to Foucault's theory of the modernization of power to examine how female bodies are produced: "a practiced and subjected body on which an inferior status is inscribed" (1988, 71). She argues that this occurs via three types of gendered practices: 1) bodily comportment (how women move and control their bodies in space), 2) 'feminine' adornment (including make-up and clothing) and 3) dieting and cosmetic surgery to achieve a slim and small body. Bartky positions all of these practices as oppressive to women without considering their subversive potential. Instead, she looks to the seemingly transgressive practice of bodybuilding for a vision of how women might reject or escape what she terms "the modernization of patriarchal power (1988, 70)." She writes: "an increasing number of women are 'pumping iron' with little concern for the limits of body development imposed by current canons of femininity" (1988, 83). Although it is tempting to view the building of muscle by women as entirely subversive, Bartky is suggesting that women who bodybuild are free from the hegemonic norms that she argues imprison other women. Furthermore, she suggests that every woman who builds muscle is deliberately and successfully resisting patriarchal gender norms.

Bartky's assumptions can be problematized by heterosexist attitudes and ideals held by female bodybuilders, many of whom promote patriarchal gender norms as necessary to the sport. Six times Ms Olympia<sup>9</sup>, Cory Everson, insists in her book *Superflex: Ms Olympia's Guide to a Strong and Sexy Body* (1987), that muscularity actually enhances heterosexual femininity. This is underscored by the many photographs throughout her book in which she poses with her husband. Despite Everson's hypermuscular physique and her proud claim that she can bench press more than her own bodyweight, Everson is careful to

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<sup>9</sup> This is the most prestigious women's bodybuilding competition in the world. Carla Williams aptly describes it as "the Wimbledon of women's bodybuilding" (2000, 105).

‘feminize’ her own strength and the strength all women can gain from bodybuilding. For example, she estimates strength developed through bodybuilding as sufficient “to carry a bag of groceries” (1987, 16).

Lisa Lyon, winner of the 1979 First World Women’s bodybuilding contest, also promotes (hetero)sex appeal of muscle in her book, *Lisa Lyon’s Body Magic* (1981). A much smaller muscled woman than Everson, Lyon poses throughout her book in many of the feminized body positions described by Bartky as patriarchal. These poses function to de-emphasize her muscle and emphasize her heterosexual ‘feminine’ appeal. Furthermore, many of the bodybuilding exercise books authored by female bodybuilders contain specific sections instructing readers on how to care for their hair, skin and nails- a necessity for maintaining one’s femininity as a muscular woman (Everson, 1987, Lyon, 1981, Barilleaux 1983). A closer examination of the literature produced by female bodybuilders reveals important contradictions between the meanings attributed to their hypermuscular bodies by outsiders, and the meanings they themselves attach to their bodies and their practice. These contradictions warn us against simplistic assumptions about the potential of women’s bodybuilding to subvert heterosexist gender norms.

Similar to Bartky, Gloria Steinem (1994) and Colette Dowling (2000) argue that bodybuilding represents the most radical feminist challenge to patriarchy. From her interview with infamous Australian bodybuilder, Bev Francis, Gloria Steinem positions women’s bodybuilding as a revolutionary way to refute patriarchal constructions of feminine weakness and inferiority. Although I agree with Steinem that, symbolically, a hypermuscular woman presents a powerful challenge to assumptions about women’s ‘natural’ inferiority to men, she fails to consider the ways in which female bodybuilders are



also 'made safe.' That is, depicted in ways that feminize and sexualize them in accordance with race and gender norms (Mansfield & McGinn, 1993; Balsamo, 1998). Colette Dowling takes Steinem's argument further arguing that muscular women are more feminist and liberated than 'frail' unathletic women. Citing all the benefits of a hard and muscular body, Dowling argues that possessing such a body is the only way a woman can truly empower herself in a patriarchal culture. Consequently, she narrows the range of positive body possibilities available to women and risks alienating those women and girls whom she believes she is liberating from eating disorders and low self esteem. Like Steinem, Dowling writes from a white, heterosexual, and middle class perspective, and fails to include any significant discussion of race, class, or sexuality in her analysis.

On the obverse, there has been a tendency by some writers to uncritically subsume bodybuilding into a continuum of modern techniques of female 'self-management' that includes aerobics, anorexia nervosa, and cosmetic surgery. In her compelling book, *Unbearable Weight: feminism, Western culture, and the body* (1993), Susan Bordo makes some troubling comparisons between bodybuilding and anorexia which she argues necessarily implicate women in the oppression of their own bodies. She writes... "the two ideals though superficially very different, are united in a battle against a common enemy: the soft, the loose, unsolid, excess flesh (1993, 77). Although some female bodybuilders may participate in the sport to negotiate cultural norms of slenderness, I find Bordo's generalizations problematic. From my own experiences of anorexia and bodybuilding as well as my conversations with other women, our experiences of bodybuilding do not simply mirror that of the anorexic. There is much diversity among women who bodybuild and women who are anorexic and women come to these practices for many and differing

reasons. Homogenizing them collapses these important differences. In fact, I like other women I have spoken to, came to bodybuilding to heal from disordered eating and destructive methods of weight loss. Rather than loathing our bodies and trying to reduce the space we take up by starving ourselves, lifting weights has helped us to re-build our self-confidence by building up our muscles and experience pleasure in the bodies we once hated.<sup>10</sup>

In another influential piece, *Braveheart, Babe and the Contemporary Body*, (1997) Bordo draws attention to the ways in which popular culture impacts women's self esteem. She focuses on modern technologies that are aimed at women such as cosmetic surgery, new-age diets, and intensive physical exercise (i.e. bodybuilding and aerobics), and critiques them for their power to recruit consumers by depleting their self esteem (1997, 54). Ultimately, Bordo positions bodybuilding as a punitive practice where the imperative of muscularity is to create an ideal fat-free body. Contrary to Bordo's perception, research by Guthrie et al. (1994) on body image amongst ten elite bodybuilders revealed that these participants felt happier and healthier in their bodies since they began bodybuilding. This study suggests that bodybuilding discourses of 'leanness' and mainstream discourses of slenderness (Bordo, 1990), need to be examined for their own nuances.<sup>11</sup> When we look to interviews with or literature produced by female bodybuilders, 'self-management' for the purpose of obtaining an ideal feminine body is not the only aim espoused. Renee Toney

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<sup>10</sup> Although some aspects of bodybuilding such as the strict dieting and intense focus on dissipating body fat might be seen as paralleling anorexia, testimonies by female bodybuilders reveal that this is not all bodybuilding is about for them. In the words of one woman who explained to me why she liked to build, "I like to feel myself expanding, like my chest is going to bust through my shirt" (notes from my personal diary).

<sup>11</sup> Though low body fat is a requirement for competition so that the athlete's musculature is well defined, this is not the only concern for athletes nor is it central to every woman's personal aesthetic. Although achieving as low a body fat percentage as possible is necessary for success in a competition, this is not the year round condition of athletes' bodies. They gain weight in the off-season and focus on diminishing or either building muscle.

cites male bodybuilders' physiques as her ideal (interview with Joanna Frueh, 2000). Tony explains, "to be honest with you, I don't really follow...women's bodybuilding. I look at the men as competitors...I would like to have Flex Wheeler's (a Mr. Olympia competitor) body on me (2000, 166)." By failing to situate bodybuilding in any specific way (i.e. recreational or competitive) Bordo seems to confuse bodybuilding with more mainstream practices of weight loss. Bodybuilding exists in a multiplicity of contexts, from its competitive practice, recreational practice and marketing practices - each being surrounded by different and nuanced discourses of power. St Martin and Gavey (1996) as well as Mansfield and McGinn (1996) critique Bordo for mistaking fashion models for bodybuilders and thus misrepresenting and misconstruing bodybuilding and its various cultural and symbolic meanings. St Martin and Gavey point out, "bodybuilding as a competitive sport develops women's bodies in ways that go way beyond these new norms (of the slender and toned body)" (1996, 46). Although Bartky and Bordo offer many powerful insights into the ways in which women are coerced into policing their bodies in a patriarchal society, they underestimate the ways in which individual women can interrupt, challenge, and subvert disciplinary power.

Moya Lloyd parallels Bordo's critique by citing statistics of disordered eating in order to link its contemporary prevalence to the increasing popularity of bodybuilding exercise for women (1996, 80). As I mentioned earlier, the conflation of bodybuilding with anorexia is a dangerous one that not only misrepresents bodybuilding practice and its practitioners but also limits social understandings of eating disorders. Focusing mainly on aerobics but making comparisons with bodybuilding, she argues that aerobics, like bodybuilding, has a

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purely aesthetic aim that “contributes to and masks a feminine aesthetic of fat hatred” (ibid.). Echoing Bordo’s skepticism, Lloyd challenges the positive aspects of bodybuilding exercise espoused by its practitioners, arguing that any engagement in aerobics/bodybuilding that “...does not visibly or publicly disrupt its conventions either through parody or subversion, represents public collusion in women’s own colonization by patriarchal norms” (ibid. 94). Not only is Lloyd suggesting that one can ‘get outside’ of power relations, but that aerobics/bodybuilding can only be empowering if it is practiced with a ‘feminist consciousness’. Lloyd narrowly defines resistance as self-consciously performed acts that challenge oppression. Yet this definition does not account for the contradictions between the transgressive bodies of female bodybuilders and their promotion of conventional feminine norms such as in my examples of Cory Everson and Lisa Lyon. If power is insidious and often invisible, then resistance to power must also be invisible and sometimes difficult to detect. Resistance can be easily mistaken for compliance which is my main critique of the authors in the first grouping of literature. For example, a middle-aged bodybuilder might be read as striving towards an ideal of youthful feminine beauty by refusing to let her body be transformed ‘naturally’ by age. Yet we can also read her engagement with bodybuilding as resistance to ageist stereotypes and expectations that middle aged women should not be athletes or sexual beings but should ‘age gracefully.’ Distinctions between acts of resistance and acts of compliance cannot be so easily separated, nor should they be. I believe that the inability in much of the above literature to fully examine negotiation in women’s bodybuilding is caused by a preoccupation with questions pertaining to whether or not bodybuilding is a feminist practice. These questions are unhelpful because they limit the ways in which we can interpret women’s experience and homogenize women into polarized

categories of feminist/radical and non-feminist/compliant. Postmodernists warn that power is not fixed but in a constant state of flux (Foucault 1979, Butler 1990). Thus any attempt to capture power as static fails to account for the complexity of female bodybuilders' engagements with bodybuilding and the slippages between their resistance to and compliance with sexist and heterosexist gender norms.

*Theorizing bodybuilding as a negotiation of gender norms: a) textual analyses*

An early piece by Laurie Schultz (*On the Muscle*, 1990) reveals progression beyond polarized debates about women's bodybuilding around the same time that Bartky and Bordo published their work. A somewhat disjointed article, Schulz begins with a critique of the ways in which female bodybuilders are 'domesticated' by representations in bodybuilding magazines. Pausing in the middle of her article to consider the limitations of this argument, she sketches out a framework for examining sites of resistance. She writes: "Where I would re-open an inquiry into professional female bodybuilding today, I would attempt to begin the work of mapping female muscle culture as a terrain of resistance/refusal, rather than giving ground to the terrain of control" (1990, 17). Drawing on a British cultural studies framework to rework her analysis, Schulz pays some attention to issues of class in competitive bodybuilding that have been neglected in Steinem, Dowling, Bordo, and Bartky's work. Although she moves in the direction of Steinem and Dowling by focusing more attention on women's resistance to disciplinary control, she allows more room than these authors for the contradictions of negotiating between the two positions. "A female body displaying extreme muscle mass, separation and definition, yet oiled up, clad in a bikini, marked with conventionally feminine-styled hair and carefully applied cosmetics juxtaposes heterogeneous elements in a way that frustrates ideological unity and confounds common

sense" (18). Where I see Schulz's greatest contribution is in her investigations of sexuality and homophobia in bodybuilding. In her initial analysis she argues that the overt construction of female bodybuilders as heterosexual serves to protect against assumptions that all muscular women are lesbians. Troubled by what this homophobic assumption both reveals and conceals, Schulz goes further to examine some of the meanings lesbian women attach to the sport. "The major discourses around female bodybuilding attempt to push lesbian desire to the margins. Nevertheless there are some fascinating and productive readings coming from a space that mainstream female bodybuilding would like to see declared out of bounds" (24). Although her brief investigation is not methodologically rigorous in that it is based on informal conversations with lesbian friends and colleagues, her discussion points to the nuances, paradoxes, and dualities in lesbian women's perceptions of a sport in which they are stereotyped as being most likely to dominate. She concludes: "this preliminary work suggests that it is dangerous to make assumptions about the relevance of a particular cultural form to social subjects on the basis of that form alone...we cannot predict from a person's social position what meanings and pleasures she or he will derive from a given text" (24). Yet Schulz leaves me wondering about how race intersects with lesbian sexuality to shape perspectives on the sport. Furthermore, what about the perspectives and experiences of lesbian female bodybuilders? Carla Williams points out that intersections of class, sexuality, and race for black women cause them to be stereotyped as more masculine than white women and more often assumed to be lesbian. Like race, there is a deafening silence around sexuality in this literature.

In her compelling semi-autobiographical book, *Bodymakers: A cultural anatomy of women's bodybuilding*, Leslie Heywood (1998) addresses intersections of race and gender in

various aspects of women's bodybuilding. Throughout my research I have returned to this book several times for its sophisticated insight into the paradoxical struggles of a feminist practitioner to create feminist activism through a sport that also reproduces gender and race subordination. Heywood theorizes bodybuilding more broadly, as a recreational as well as a competitive practice, she probes the salient question, "What does it mean to be a female bodybuilder in the late twentieth century and why do women build?" (1998, 12-13).

Although she does not examine lesbian sexuality specifically, Heywood theorizes how women can "do" gender differently through their practice of bodybuilding (West & Zimmerman, 1989). In her chapter, *American Girls raised on promises or why I prefer Henry Rollins to beck*, Heywood explores what she calls the 'double bind' of femininity. She explains this 'double-bind' as produced by the shifting gender relations of the 70's when changing ideas about gender led women and girls to believe they could do anything men could do but still found themselves constrained by existing gender ideology. Heywood argues that female bodybuilders pose a serious challenge to violence against women as well as gender subordination through the crossing of boundaries of femininity and masculinity the hypermuscular female body creates. Yet she is also vigilant of the ways in which anti-feminist backlash of the late eighties and early nineties has been and is being reproduced within bodybuilding. One of the areas she focuses closely on, that is also an exploratory area of my own research, is sexualized photography used to market female bodybuilders. Unlike many of the white authors whose work I review in this chapter, Heywood uses an intersectional analysis to show how women of colour and white women are differentially constructed in bodybuilding magazines. Heywood's analysis is useful because rather than judging women who enjoy this imagery or who are the subjects of sexualized photography,

her concern lies with “the kind of cultural work the image is doing” (1998, 100). For her, this photography is problematic not because of sex or sexuality that is depicted, “but that in the specific context of bodybuilding such messages undermine the revolutionary potential of female bodybuilders and athletes more generally” (1998, 105). Though Heywood does acknowledge the empowering potential for female bodybuilders of the sexually explicit portrayal of their bodies, it is not a possibility she takes up in any depth. While I agree with her powerful and somber analysis of photographs of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines that draw on the highly racialized and heterosexist conventions of pornography, I learnt from my participants that greater tension between the empowering and oppressive aspects of sexualized muscle need be maintained. Drawing on Jacqueline Brady’s article, which I will discuss later on, I build upon Heywood’s work by asking how female bodybuilders might destabilize heterosexist and racist conventions of sexualized photography at the same that they are contained by them. Also, by implementing a queer reading in my analysis, I deepen Heywood’s discussion by decentering heterosexuality and opening up spaces of queer/lesbian/bisexual desire. Although tacit, these sexualities are not explored in any depth in her book.

St Martin and Gavey’s piece, *Women’s Bodybuilding: Feminist Resistance and/or femininity’s recuperation?* (1996) is one of the most useful and sophisticated analyses of women’s bodybuilding that includes an historical context for the sport. This historical component enables them to address the limitations of both Bartky’s and Bordo’s work. They critique Bordo’s failure to contextualize bodybuilding, arguing that although bodybuilders’ bodies in the late 1970’s (the official beginnings of the sport for women) may not have differed much from the hard body image of fashion models today, developments in the sport



over the past ten years have produced much more massively muscled women “...that to the untrained eye, look virtually identical to the big and bulky forms of male bodybuilders” (1996, 46). Historical specificity when speaking about definitions of ‘feminine muscle’ within bodybuilding is crucial for understanding ideological shifts in the current historical period. St Martin and Gavey’s greatest contribution lies in their positioning of women’s bodybuilding as involving complex processes of *negotiating* normative discourses of femininity at the level of both cultural text and cultural practice. They go beyond Schulz in the tension they maintain between bodybuilding as resistance and bodybuilding as adherence to gender norms. They comment: “through the subculture’s attempts to be acceptable to the dominant culture’s expectations of femininity...it may in fact unwittingly offer different challenges to that dominant culture’s gendered social system (1996, 56).

Patricia Vertinsky’s piece *Making and Marking Gender: Bodybuilding and the Medicalization of the Body from One Century’s End to Another* (1999) also contributes to an historical understanding of bodybuilding. Vertinsky investigates contradictions in societal reactions to women’s bodybuilding at the end of the twentieth century through a comparison with societal reactions to male bodybuilding a century before. Discussing the ways in which the medical and social elite of the nineteenth century promoted particular gendered prototypes for healthy, fit, and productive citizens, we see how these discourses simultaneously promoted moral panic around hypermuscular male bodies. The erotic and homoerotic fascination that these men’s bodies inspired was perceived as threatening to heterocentric patriarchy. Comparing this with the treatment of female bodybuilders at the end of the twentieth century, Vertinsky shows how gendered notions of muscularity have shifted in order to protect a masculine, heterosexual hegemony. The historical context of

Vertinsky's and St Martin and Gavey's work help us to better theorize contemporary attitudes toward female bodybuilding in both mainstream culture as well as its own subculture (which share many of the same border controls for sexuality and gender) without confusing it with more mainstream practices of weightlifting/weight loss.

*Theorizing bodybuilding as a negotiation of gender norms: b) qualitative research*

So far I have mostly discussed literature that analyzes bodybuilding through cultural texts such as bodybuilding magazines, advertising, and film. Anne Hall (1996) comments on the potential problems of relying on these critiques: "Cultural analyses based solely on public discourse or texts, without exploring the meaning of these discursive practices to those participants in them, provides a one-sided, probably inaccurate, picture of the activity or cultural form" (1996, 59). Though textual readings of film, books, and magazines are rich with insights about the cultural and symbolic meanings of female bodybuilding, they cannot give us access to the personal perceptions and experiences of athletes. St Martin and Gavey comment:

...we must not conflate our reading of the practice at a cultural level with how we understand the experience of women who are bodybuilders. To ask whether bodybuilding is liberating or somehow empowering for women is to ask a totally different question (1996, 55).

Alan Klein (1993), Leslie Fisher (1997), Maria Lowe (1998) as well as Shirley Castelnovo and Sharon Guthrie (1998) base their analyses of women's bodybuilding on interviews with select groups of professional and amateur female bodybuilders. Alan M. Klein's ethnography of male bodybuilders, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding subculture and gender construction*, (1993) includes a chapter on female bodybuilders entitled "Sally's Corner: The

Women of Olympic.” In this chapter Klein theorizes three female bodybuilders’ engagements with bodybuilding who train at the same gym in California as the male bodybuilders interviewed for his research. Klein reveals very little information about the female participants’ social locations except that one of the women is Latino and another woman was 33 years old. In his analysis Klein focuses more on comparing and contrasting the small sample of three women to data from the fifty-five male bodybuilders he interviewed. He does not really theorize or even examine relations between female bodybuilders or how cultural norms of femininity shape the female participants’ engagements with bodybuilding. Instead, in his comparison between the women and the men he offers the findings that female bodybuilders negotiate between “at once mirroring male definitions of bodybuilding and resisting male definitions of the sport-subculture” (1993, 159). As well as the fact that Klein compares a much smaller sample of women to his sample of men (3:55), Klein is not sufficiently critical of how social constructs of gender shape men’s and women’s engagements with the sport. Also, he homogenizes male bodybuilders and female bodybuilders into static categories by neglecting to theorize differences of class, race and sexuality amongst men and amongst women. I am also uncomfortable with his analysis that female bodybuilders who perform masculinity are simply ‘mirroring masculinity’ of male bodybuilders (1993, 159). Leslie Heywood’s theorization that women negotiate between femininities and masculinities through their bodybuilding, reveals that Klein does not fully consider how his female participants’ might be ‘doing’ gender differently (West and Zimmerman, 1986).

Klein concludes his chapter with the suggestion that in order for women to oppose sexism in their sport they must create a distinctly female form of bodybuilding. This leaves

us at a dead end once again with the feeling that the only way to avoid reproducing unequal power relations between men and women is to ‘redefine’ femininity, and/or to reassert its essential difference from masculinity. Though his book is supposed to be a critique of masculinity, Klein places responsibility on the shoulders of the women for their subordination and allows male bodybuilders to escape having to critique and resist their own hegemony.

Joanna Frueh’s article, *Monster/Beauty: Midlife Bodybuilding as Aesthetic Discipline* (1998) reminds us yet again of the multiple and marginalized contexts of female bodybuilding. Frueh’s article is valuable because it highlights the different expectations of heterosexual femininity for middle-aged women and how they negotiate the specific taboos around age, muscularity, and sexuality. Frueh critiques Bordo for her condemnatory view of bodybuilding and failure to consider “the midlife bodybuilder as embodying different needs and pleasures than her younger counterpart” (1998, 8). Frueh uses the paradox “monster/beauty” to describe the simultaneous revulsion yet erotic stimulation that the midlife bodybuilder evokes in her viewers.

Based on interviews with four bodybuilders (three in their 40’s and one 63) in New York during the advent of the 1995 exhibition, ‘Evolution F: A Surreal Spectacle of Female Muscle’, Frueh argues that bodybuilding for these older women is a “supremely conscious” project of refusing sexist and ageist stereotypes. However, Frueh’s claim that bodybuilding is “supremely conscious” for her participants underestimates the ways in which they are also deeply invested in reproducing normative femininity. However, Frueh offers a useful and important perspective for theorizing intersections of age, gender and sexuality, often neglected in discussions of female bodybuilding. All of my research participants were over

thirty years of age with the oldest being forty-eight. Though young women are overrepresented in bodybuilding magazines and culture in general, mature female bodybuilders are amongst the most successful and experienced of bodybuilding athletes. To avoid homogenizing the experiences of women, it is important to recognize and theorize the different expectations of normative femininity for older athletes and how they both reproduce and resist taboos around sexuality, that is, what is seen as appropriate and tasteful feminine styles of posing and performance.

Interested in how elite competitors construct and develop their identity as athletes, women, and as a moral people, Leslie Fisher (1997) begins her article by sketching a picture of the patriarchal and hyper-masculine character of bodybuilding as an institution. Thus, before we even hear the participants' opinions, Fisher frames them as doubly subordinated within their sport by their gender and economic dependence on governing bodybuilding federations (ibid. 137). Fisher's sample consists of ten professional American bodybuilders (half interviewed in northern California and half in southern California), seven of whom were white and three African American. The average age was thirty-five and all women identified as heterosexual.

Although this critique is important for understanding the structure of gender relations within bodybuilding, Fisher ends up contributing to the women's containment by framing them within a rigid binary of dominant/submissive in which they are subordinate. Focusing on their relationship to their bodies, Fisher ignores much of the heterogeneity expressed by the group. She analyses her data according to five key themes: 1) definition of self against non-bodybuilders 2) low self-esteem 3) obsessive control of the body 4) sexuality/homophobia 5) Super-woman complex/ fear of being average (ibid.). Although Fisher

claims to privilege her interviewees' perspectives (furthering the point by calling them 'co-participants'), her treatment of the transcripts seems to undermine this claim. Rather than developing her argument from the issues as they arose in the interviews, she uses them to support an already established hypothesis that they are doubly oppressed. I am also uncomfortable with Fisher's patronizing views on her participants' refusals of the label 'feminist.' Instead of placing this refusal within the context of the sexism, racism, and homophobia that circulates within the sport, and looking at the consequences such an identity might have for these women, Fisher judges them as ignorant of feminist politics and their own subordinated status (ibid. 160).

Studying a similar sample of women in Southern California and the Midwestern United States, 12 white, 5 African American, 2 Latinos and 1 Native American, aged between 24-36, Castalnuovo and Guthrie address the research question, "Is bodybuilding a feminist mind-body practice that facilitates an Amazonian transformation among women" (1998, 54)? They critique other feminists for perpetuating "masculinist mental constructs" of a mind-body dualism in their "liberationist proposals" of women's bodybuilding (49). Castelnuovo and Guthrie claim to reach beyond this dichotomy by conceptualizing the liberatory possibilities of bodybuilding for women in its ability to unify mind and body, not separate them. The two main finding of their research is that female bodybuilders engage in two types of resistance to gender norms in competitive bodybuilding: 1) Reverse resistance or resistance as compliance typified by an obsession with the body and appearance in an effort to conform to hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty and 2) Resistance as freedom expressed through a "care-of-the-self" ethic (ibid. 56). Further clarified, their investigation

looks at the potential for bodybuilding to resist Cartesian dualism and secondly how women form collective resistance to oppressive gender paradigms (ibid.).

Castelnuovo and Guthrie pay equal attention to the articulation of both forms of resistance, neither privileging one discourse above the other. However, unable to imagine political possibilities beyond feminism, they also express skepticism towards female bodybuilders' ability to resist patriarchy. Like Fisher, they suggest that a feminist education would help female bodybuilders organize themselves politically (ibid. 63). This is problematic for two reasons. It ignores and devalues the many ways that female bodybuilders have resisted sexist treatment and attempted to organize for change and assumes that feminism is free of oppressive power relations. As I noted in the first grouping of literature above, I find the question of whether bodybuilding is feminist or not, problematic. 'Feminist,' is loaded with cultural and political meanings that cannot be universalized to all women. Many feminists of colour reject the term because of its association with advancing the rights of white middle class women to the neglect of women's issues and causes outside of this limited demographic (hooks, 1984). Feminist thought and practice, though liberating for some can be oppressive to others.

Castelnuovo and Guthrie's argue that competitive rivalries between athletes, to the exclusion of divisions of race, class and sexuality, is the main barrier to fostering political solidarity amongst female bodybuilders (ibid. 62). Like Klein, this suggestion places responsibility for their subordination on the women themselves. This brings me to my methodological concerns for qualitative research which I also discussed in Chapter 2. My contribution to this literature is to unpack relations of power between myself as a feminist researcher and my research participants to problematize unequal relations of power inherent

in feminist theorizing as well as relationships amongst women. None of the researchers discussed in this section examine their own social locations, motivations or consider how their political orientations shape the ways in which they interpret their data. For example, I believe that the failure of most of these authors to make visible their own whiteness leads to their neglect of any analysis of race and racialization of hypermuscular female bodies within bodybuilding discourses. I believe, that by examining one's own social location, class, race, sexuality, age and ability and motivation for doing research, we can also illuminate intersections of these categories in our data.

Maria Lowe's ethnography of female bodybuilders (1998) explains why female bodybuilders have not successfully established their own distinctly female form of bodybuilding. In her final chapter she details the ways in which women (individually and collectively) have tried to resist sexist regulations of their sport without success. By investigating why such attempts have failed, Lowe avoids the more simplistic explanation that female bodybuilders 'just aren't feminist enough' and shows how the hierarchical structure of bodybuilding prevents avenues for athletes to express their dissatisfactions as well as punishes those who step out of line. Based on participant-observation and in-depth interviews, Lowe offers a detailed picture of bodybuilding hierarchy and how female athletes are positioned within it. She selects a much broader interview sample of participants: 14 amateur and professional female bodybuilders, 20 female and male judges and officials, and 3 journalists. This enables her to create a more complex picture of how power relations operate in bodybuilding as a gendered institution. However, Lowe seems to take for granted that women's bodybuilding is dominated by white heterosexual women. She does not reveal or discuss differences of race, ethnicity, nor sexuality amongst her



research participants. Only the name, occupation, marital status and age of each woman is revealed to the reader (heterosexuality is presumed). Although she touches on the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is promoted in bodybuilding, it is only in relation to the experiences of heterosexual women. There is no discussion of how compulsory heterosexuality shapes the experiences of and opportunities for lesbian athletes or how race or sexuality intersects with gender to shape ideas around the appropriate relationship between femininity and muscularity. By leaving these aspects unexamined, Lowe privileges a white, heterosexual perspective and consequently reproduces the silence around racism and homophobia in bodybuilding.

*Intersectional analyses of how female bodybuilders' negotiate normative femininity in competitive bodybuilding*

It is clear that a failure to theorize race and how it intersects with gender presents a gap in this literature. Where I have located race analyses is in writing by black feminists. These writers discuss how the symbolic meanings as well as subjective experience of bodybuilding are different for African American bodybuilders from their white counterparts. Anglo-Saxon and African American female bodybuilders make up the main racial demographics of the sport, though, there are also a number of other athletes of colour from Asian, Native American and Latin American backgrounds. Although some of the literature such as Klein's and Castelano's and Guthrie's include participants from Native American and Latin American ethnicities, they neglect to discuss how hierarchical categories of whiteness and non-whiteness differentially define and shape women's experiences and attitudes towards their sport. In my research I rely upon the work of black feminists to theorize the differences between my white, black and bi-racial participants. By using the

work of black feminists it is not my intention to conflate race with blackness but to use their intersectional analyses as a framework to theorize racialization amongst my participants as a determining factor in how they interpret their bodybuilding practices.

In her excellent article, *African American Women and the metalanguage of Race*, (1992) Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham demonstrates the centrality of race to gender identity, upon which ideals of womanhood rest. She writes: "Gender, so coloured by race, remained from birth until death, inextricably linked to one's personal identity and social status. For black and white women, gendered identity was reconstructed and represented in very different, indeed antagonistic, racialized contexts" (1992, 258). Jacqueline E. Brady confirms this point in relation to bodybuilding (2001). She argues that black and white female bodybuilders are "bound up in separate processes of self representation- negotiating different discourses that link them to different subjectivities- experience the exhibition of the body differently" (259). Brooks-Higginbotham advises, "we must expose the role of race as a metalanguage by calling attention to its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class and sexuality" (1992, 252). The 'metalanguage of race' is critical to my own theorizing of how intersections of race and gender shape women's negotiations of the terrain of competitive bodybuilding differently. The following literature contributes to this theoretical framework.

Analyzing popular media representations of female athletes (magazine photographs, advertisements and film) Anne Balsamo (1998) shows how seemingly transgressive female bodies are 'recuperated' by the media to heterosexual gender norms. She correctly asserts that female athletes cannot easily escape the cultural fascination that objectifies women's

bodies because of the persistence of gender and race hierarchies in structuring technological practices (ibid. 55). This is important because not all bodybuilders challenge these norms and even if they do, the media has enormous power to dissipate their threat (ibid. 45). Balsamo analyzes the popular film *Pumping Iron II: The women* (U.S.A 1985) which appears in most textual analyses of women's bodybuilding (Mansfield & McGinn 1993, St Martin & Gavey 1996, Brady 2001). The film is a staged documentary of an elite bodybuilding contest in Las Vegas. The premise is to compare the three types of physiques that have been produced throughout the sport's history and to resolve the issue of femininity by choosing one of these competitors to represent the ideal embodiment of 'female muscle'. These three body types are: 1) the toned and slightly muscular white body represented by American, Rachel McGlish, 2) the hypermuscular yet equally feminine physique represented by African-American, Carla Dunlap, and 3) the extremely muscular white body that oversteps gender boundaries represented by Australian, Bev Francis. Carla Dunlap is the victor in this competition. Balsamo correctly notes that most discussions of this film ignore the plot's racialized dimension. She interrogates the racialised and gendered meanings of the film's staging of this competition and argues that the lone black woman becomes the backdrop for and is displaced by the film's focus on the rivalry between the two white women. Although Balsamo recognizes the transgressive potential of these massively muscled women's physiques, she concludes that they are necessarily recuperated to a heterosexual racialized norm.

Jacqueline E. Brady challenges Balsamo's reading in her article "Pumping Iron with Resistance: Carla Dunlap's Victorious Body" (2001). She argues against Balsamo's "rather bleak view that today's mediated representations of African American athletic women

hopelessly fail in their attempts to defy the dominant culture” (2001, 255). She performs a rereading of *Pumping Iron II* that seeks out ways in which Dunlap’s body refuses recuperation to dominant norms of race and gender (2001, 256). She writes: “It is my contention that sometimes Dunlap’s spectacularly muscular, technologically mediated, African American female body can shift its discursive shape” (ibid., 257). Brady borrows from Elspeth Probyn’s (1987) model of anorexia as a practice that helps women negotiate the network of discourses producing the female body. Applying this model to bodybuilding, specifically to a black female body as it is represented in *Pumping Iron II*, Brady argues that Dunlap’s body can be read as a site of feminist activism. Positioning Dunlap in a leadership role rather than as a backdrop for the rivalries of white women, the tone of Brady’s article is quite optimistic. The spaces of empowerment Brady is able to open up for black female bodybuilders has been crucial for my analysis of sexualized photographs of female bodybuilders in Chapter 4. I chose to engage my participants in a discussion of photography in bodybuilding magazines to better understand their perceptions of pressures from bodybuilding gatekeepers and promoters to feminize and heterosexualize female muscle. For one of my black participants, who has also been the subject of sexualized photography in a bodybuilding magazine, making muscle feminine and sexy is of great importance to her. While I am troubled by the highly racialized and heterosexist context of most of the photographs of female bodybuilders in the bodybuilding magazine I analyze in Chapter 4, this is also an opportunity for me to test the limits of Brady’s argument. I reformulate her question to ask: “Don’t the sexually explicit displays of black female muscle in bodybuilding magazines also give black women power?” Carla Williams is not as optimistic about black female bodybuilders’ ability to transform racist, homophobic and

sexist contexts in which the sport is embedded. This warns me against overestimating the empowering potential of sexualizing muscle in bodybuilding magazines that is the subject of Chapter 4. For many, sexualized and racialized imagery that capitalizes on racist assumptions about black women will always be a source of oppression.

In her article, *Hardcore: the radical self-portraiture of black female bodybuilders* (2000) Williams also takes up the problematic of racialized notions of femininity for hypermuscular black women. Her research question explores how "...black women have begun to challenge and reinvent what it means to be black and female within a culture that values neither" (2000, 105). Though she recognizes that "the accomplishments of black female bodybuilders are redefining both their personal and black women's collective image in relation to a legacy of images that preceded them in history and in popular culture," her article leaves the reader with a heavy sense of sadness and feeling of inability to move beyond the racialized structures of power that we reproduce with every step (ibid., 104). This is captured by Williams's comparison of the image of the slave woman displayed on an auction block and the black woman's body on display at a bodybuilding show where she will be watched and judged by a predominantly white audience.

Using interviews with four professional black female bodybuilders, she analyses the ways in which these women negotiate the racist, sexist, and homophobic discourses that produce the black female body. Importantly, she makes connections between race and the low-class status associated with bodybuilding that Schulz neglects in her analysis. "Black women, whose historical bodies are the very symbol of labour, are inherently representative of the working class whether or not they themselves are among it" (2000, 106). Williams also explores the associations between black women's sexuality and lesbianism and how

nineteenth century constructions of their supposed sexual excess makes the black woman's body "an easy if not logical target of frequent assumption and innuendo" (ibid, 110). She concludes: "Whether the sport survives, metamorphoses or fades away, the body of the black female bodybuilder is now part of the discourse, and that image will continue to inform the collective understanding every time a black women takes the stage" (ibid., 115). Yet, while I feel the immense gravity of being bound up in the constant reproduction of racialization of black female bodybuilders and women of colour more broadly, I am inspired by William's work to re-think how black female bodybuilders' power and agency can indeed transform, even if momentarily, oppressive structures of bodybuilding competition as well as representation used to market the sport.

These authors are important because they remind us of the dearth of literature on black female bodybuilders, and race more broadly. They also present theoretical and methodological challenges for white feminist writers wishing to produce anti-racist theories of women's bodybuilding. Having mapped out my methodological and theoretical frameworks, I will now turn to my own intersectional analysis of my interviews with six female bodybuilders. My focus and contribution to the literature is to examine how intersections of race, sexuality and gender differentially shape my participants' experiences of and attitudes towards bodybuilding competition as well representation of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines.

### CHAPTER 3

#### FLEXING THE TENSIONS OF FEMALE MUSCULARITY: HOW FEMALE BODYBUILDERS NEGOTIATE NORMATIVE FEMININITY IN BODYBUILDING COMPETITION

##### *Introduction:*

This analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 1 professional and 5 amateur female bodybuilders currently living and training in Vancouver during the fall of 2002 (see Appendix 2 for detailed bibliographies). At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were training for upcoming competitions except for one woman who had recently retired from bodybuilding to pursue a business project and to compete as a physique athlete.<sup>12</sup> Ranging from 30 to 48 years of age, four of the participants are Canadian born, one emigrated from England when she was nine and another emigrated from the United States as a young woman. There is significant racial and ethnic diversity amongst the group. Emma is black from Guyanese parents; Celine also identifies as black from Caribbean and Anglo-Saxon parents and Angie is bi-racial from Cherokee and Anglo-Saxon heritage. Kara, Kate, and Andrea are all from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> All of the participants identify as heterosexual and middle class and all are able bodied. None of the participants were married at the time of the interviews though Celine was engaged to be married and Kara was living in a common-law relationship. Angie, Kara and Emma are single mothers, and Andrea is single with no children.

Several themes arose from the interview data which I have organized under four main headings. 1) Why women build: how normative femininity structures the participants'

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<sup>12</sup> Physique is a fairly new addition to bodybuilding competitions designed for those women who do not want to get as muscular as bodybuilders and who do not want to perform the fitness round required of fitness athletes. There are 3 rounds to physique competition: a bikini round, an evening gown round and a symmetry round. Physique bears the closest resemblance to a beauty pageant.

<sup>13</sup> These names are all pseudonyms selected by me and agreed upon by the participants.

personal motivations, aspirations, and pleasure derived from bodybuilding, 2) Constructing the ideal female bodybuilder: how gender, racial, heterosexual and class norms inform the participants' attitudes towards relationships between muscularity and femininity, 3) Heterosexuality and gender performance in bodybuilding competitions: how female bodybuilders negotiate expectations of heterosexuality and middle-class femininity in their competitive performances and, 4) Representation: How they make sense of representation of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines. The fourth theme is the focus of Chapter 4.

Throughout my discussion of these four themes, I weave an analysis of race and heterocentrism. By heterocentrism I am referring to the cultural attitude that heterosexuality is the most normal and natural sexuality for men and women. This attitude leads to the stigmatization of homosexuality. Thus the term 'normative femininity,' implies that 'normal' women are heterosexual and should adhere to certain codes and behaviours of making themselves attractive for and subordinate to heterosexual men. The reason I have not separated my race analysis and analysis of heterocentrism into distinct categories is because they are both powerful and ubiquitous social institutions governing everyday life. They permeate interactions between people as well as mediate our relationships to ourselves regardless of class, racial and sexual status. I underscore their ubiquity by discussing them at each level of my analysis.

*Why women build: "It makes you stronger in all areas of life I think. Pun intended" (Angie)*

What makes a girl want to do this to herself? Why do women want to take their physiques so far that they look like men? 'I still look feminine,' they say. 'Just more muscular- and you can't handle it!' Pule-e-eze. Kmart is running a special on bullshit, and it's free to all female bodybuilders" (The Sandwich, "Freaks or not?: evolution or devolution?" Iron Man, November 2001, 153).



Given the almost daily attempts by strangers, partners, family, friends, and bodybuilding gatekeepers to police the muscularity of female bodybuilders' physiques, why do women build? What personal pleasures, strengths and gratifications, do women derive from their practice? How does bodybuilding define them as individuals and how has this changed at various points in their lives? Despite the token acceptance of certain 'buff' female film stars such as Linda Hamilton (*Terminator 2*) and Sigourney Weaver (*Aliens*), building muscle beyond 'athletic tone' (Bordo, 1990) is still a gender crime.<sup>14</sup> In a culture where the rewards for adhering to popular notions of feminine beauty and attractiveness are great, what possible alternatives can bodybuilding offer women (Heywood, 1988)? The answers to this question can challenge popular stereotypes about female bodybuilders such as that they are anomalies among women, 'obsessed' with their bodies, and plagued by low self-esteem. In comparison with studies conducted with male bodybuilders, the reasons why my participants build are much less structured by aspirations to approximate hegemonic femininity (Connell, 1987). Jennifer Wesley (2001) and Alan Klein (1993) both found in their research with male bodybuilders that the most common reasons men were attracted to bodybuilding was because of childhood ridicule for being skinny, weak or effeminate. These experiences prompted their male participants to transform their inadequate masculinity through bodybuilding. My participants expressed much more fluidity between desires to comply with cultural pressures to create a fat free female body and their wishes to transgress gender norms. The following analysis reveals that my research participants are a

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<sup>14</sup> Gender crime: when a person transgresses social scripts of gender and is punished by others for their transgression. Punishment can be anything from verbal insults to physical violence. Female bodybuilders are often punished in the form of public humiliation on the street or vilification in magazines, lack of support from partners, friends and family, and for some, damage to career as an athlete if judges decide she is too muscular and therefore loses out on sponsorship, prize money, success.

diverse group of intelligent and passionate individuals with many of the same desires and aspirations as women who do not bodybuild. In this discussion I draw out the diversity and complexity of their engagements with bodybuilding through three main themes: 1) inner strength derived from bodybuilding, 2) recognition from others for their achievements and 3) pride in being an athlete and living a healthy lifestyle.

### *Inner Strength*

Inner strength gained from training their bodies was cited by most of the participants as central to their attraction to bodybuilding.

Kate: It's in feeling muscular for sure and mentally strong because everything's strong. You're shoulders are pulled back and you portray a lot more confidence.

Angie: It's certainly not all about the exercise and changing of your body. It's about the mental health too that you get from it and a good circle of people.

Angie and Kate link inner strength and mental health to the condition of their bodies. Both quotes articulate a sense of embodiment achieved through lifting weights. Grounding the mind in the body through bodybuilding challenges sexist Cartesian dualism. This dualism separates the mind and body into polar opposites, attributing masculinity to the mind (superior) and femininity to the body (inferior). Kate and Angie confound this dualism in their reliance upon their mental strength to excel in their training and succeed as athletes. Achieving connection between her mind and body through self-discipline is a source of much satisfaction for Emma.

The discipline and self-motivation that it takes to go to the gym every day even on days that you don't feel like it. Also the discipline and will power it takes to get ready for a contest. I love the challenge and knowing not everyone can do it.

For Emma, being set apart from others by her superior athletic skills is central to the satisfaction she derives from bodybuilding. In comparison, Angie derives satisfaction from competing against herself.

...the best thing is just beating yourself, beating your own condition from the time before. Being able to go the extra distance. Being able to push yourself and get up and do cardio when you're crying because you don't want to do it. Just being able to test yourself to the utmost limit...it's a real test of character and whether you can truly pursue a goal to completion.

Pushing through physical pain and refusing to succumb to desires to give in, are central to both Angie and Emma's self-pride in bodybuilding. Testing the body and mind through extreme physical endurance carries them across boundaries of normative femininity as they engage in perceived 'masculine' activities and goals. Crossing gendered boundaries and channeling mental energy through the body has served Angie in periods of emotional trauma. After her son was assaulted and left with permanent brain injuries, she relied on bodybuilding to maintain her mental health and to set an example for her son's rehabilitation.

Doctors wanted to put me on tranquilisers but I took it out on the weights and didn't have to go the tranquiliser route or depression medication avenues. I just trained a hell of a lot and it set an example for him too. It was a big thing for his rehab that I wanted him to see that you have to push through the pain to achieve things sometimes.

In addition to refiguring gender norms, Angie also refigures gendered notions of age and maternity. Refusing "the tranquilizer route," she also refuses the category of the hysterical woman and assumes what would be perceived as a masculine role- pumping iron to set an example for her son. The oldest athlete in my interview sample at 48, Angie began

bodybuilding when she was 41 to lose weight and heal mid-life depression. Angie took up weights to prove that women can change the shape of their bodies in middle-age and that bodybuilding is an appropriate means to achieving this goal. Not only does this challenge cultural notions of how middle-aged women's bodies should look, but also assumptions about their athletic capabilities.

I think I did it (bodybuilding) more to show other people that don't listen to what anybody tells you, you can change the shape of your body. I've had three children, been obese; I had a 64-inch waistline at one point and the skin still tightened back up. My whole shape radically changed.

Angie's desire to motivate other women to change their lives via bodybuilding reflects her own experiences of feeling ashamed of her obese body. Told by a personal trainer that because of her age and obesity it was unlikely that she could ever be a successful bodybuilder, Angie persevered to prove her wrong. Although I remain vigilant to the ways in which gendered discourses of body management shape women's sense of Self, compliance to heterosexual beauty norms is not simply what is at work in Angie's comment. Joanna Frueh cautions feminists against condemning older women for working on their bodies. "We have too easily constructed the older woman who works on her body as being pathetic, as straining for youth, as fanatical" (1998, 12). Angie is proud of her achievements for her age and especially the condition of her body. This is evident in her comment: "It makes you feel very good when people say 'how old are you?' And I can say, 'I'm pushing 50 now!' Angie does not want to be twenty. Her pleasure is derived precisely from beating women in this younger age group. She explains, "It gives me a lot of pleasure to be able to compete against women in their 20's, especially beat them. That's a real motivation."

Angie's testimony of the positive effects bodybuilding has had for her life can be read as a transgression of gender norms that construct middle-aged womanhood. According to Frueh, "Wrinkles, gray hair, and untuned muscle characterize the conventional figure of the grandmother, whose body welcomes familial embraces and provides nurturance and warmth safe from- because sterilized- of sex." Hard not soft, tight not loose, labouring at lifting weights not tending grandchildren, Angie can be viewed as refiguring these cultural expectations. Although she took up bodybuilding to escape the socially imposed body-shame of being obese, her engagement with bodybuilding cannot be so easily interpreted as passive. First, she continues to exceed current norms of 'femininity' with her hypermuscular body, and second, she defies essentialist notions of a 'natural' female body. Angie interprets her transformation from being obese to hypermuscular as a continuing transgression of normative female body size. She says: "Now I carry the bigness in a different way." However, reading Angie's negotiations as fully transgressing barriers of age, as Frueh claims, also simplifies Angie's engagement with bodybuilding. In my view, Angie engages in a much more complex process of adhering to and defying stereotypes of age and gender. This can be seen in the following quote in which she both subscribes to and challenges assumptions about the athletic endurance of middle-aged women. "I think there are limitations as far as your endurance is not what it was in your 20's. It's just a fact of life. Although there's the exception to every rule. I have more endurance now than I did in my 20s'."

At the same time that Angie endorses the assumption that older women have less endurance than younger women, she simultaneously disproves this myth. The other participants affirm Angie's implicit valuation of age as a positive attribute of female

bodybuilding athletes. This points to a slippage between hegemonic discourses of femininity that value youth as a signifier of beauty, and bodybuilding discourses that value mature female athletes. The participants all described age as an advantage in bodybuilding because of the muscle maturity and competitive experience older athletes are able to develop. Celine expresses her admiration for mature female athletes.

I think it's really exciting. I believe we improve with age, women especially, and if you look at the mature bodybuilders, the muscle maturity, it's amazing when you see that...It's exciting to be a woman and it's exciting to be doing what I love as a job as well as having it as a passion.

Celine's excitement for having older women as role models subverts hegemonic ideals of female beauty that rest on youth and devalue maturity of age. This transforms the sexist notion that older women cannot be physically beautiful or role models for younger athletes. Emma names 41 year-old black female bodybuilder, Lenda Murray, as her role model.

There's no age limit, especially the women. With bodybuilding you seem to get better with age...Lenda Murray is 41 this year and she came back after three years retirement in her best shape ever to win.

Valuing blackness as well as middle-age in her role model, Emma subverts the racialized dimensions upon which ideals of feminine beauty rest. It is particularly subversive of bodybuilding ideals at the level of promotion. For example, mature female bodybuilders are very rarely portrayed in bodybuilding magazines that capitalize on the promotion of a mainstream image of female beauty; that is young, white and slightly muscular (see chapter 4 for this discussion).

*Recognition from others*

Another reason my participants gave for why they bodybuild is the recognition that they get from others. Though explicitly stated by some, satisfaction derived from recognition for hard work and dedication is more implicit in their narratives such as Emma who states that bodybuilding sets her apart from others. Like Emma, Celine and Angie derive pride in their abilities, both mental and physical, especially when it is recognized by others. Celine explains that, "It's the recognition I get from other people...it's my friends, my family, people that come to my classes, my clients. Those are the people that notice." Contrary to my assumption that a muscular girl in a co-educational high-school would be stigmatized for her size, Kate who began bodybuilding at 17 countered, "It was instant popularity. Grade 12, I was the most popular girl in school with abs." For Kate and Celine, the source of satisfaction from recognition from other people is in being noticed- having their physical achievements and mental strength noticed as exceptional. Like Emma, this sense of achievement is linked to being set apart from others.

Similarly, for Angie, being noticed for her achievements as a middle aged woman implicit in her statement above that she enjoys it when people assume that she is younger than her age. For Andrea, she explains that she is often envied by her co-workers and clients for her body and ability to maintain such a strict diet and training regimen. Much of the recognition they get from other people stems from their transgressions of social constructs of age, female athletic ability and female muscularity. Though, in the case of Angie and Andrea, there is also some overlap with eliciting admiration from others, especially women, for their abilities to manage their body weight. The tension between bodybuilding as a form of liberation from heterocentric gender norms and bodybuilding as a strategy to comply with these norms is powerfully illuminated in my participants' relationships with health and athleticism. In

this discussion, bodybuilding emerges as a strategy for my participants to negotiate between complying with and challenging heterocentric norms of femininity.

*Being an athlete and being healthy*

This can be better understood by analyzing the relationship between being an athlete and being 'healthy' which were linked in all of the participants' interview narratives. Angie cites the opportunity to be an athlete as a motivation for her competitive bodybuilding.

Angie: I've never been able to call myself an athlete and still when I hear people refer to me as an athlete it's like 'who are you talking about?' But perhaps one of the few ways, maybe the only way I can excel as an athlete is through bodybuilding. I can't run fast, I can't swim fast, I can't jump a hurdle. This has been my only shot at being an athlete.

For Angie, bodybuilding has enabled her to excel as an athlete as well as contest notions that middle-age is a hindrance to women's athletic capabilities. Kara explains the fear and excitement of discovering her athletic ability when preparing for her first bodybuilding competition.

Kara: I didn't know if I could do it. I'd never taken myself down to that level and I was scared that I could even do it...Then once I did my first show I guess it was just that excitement and addiction of it."

Her self-doubt in the lead up to competition seems indicative of the internalization by girls and women of the cultural undervaluation of female athleticism perpetuated in the classroom as well as in the media (Hall 1996, Richman & Shaffer 2000, Flintoff & Scraton 2001). Andrea links the self-pride she derives from being an athlete to the power she gets from feeling in 'peak' athletic condition: "Being an athlete, being healthy, being in the peak condition I can be in...I think it's just the satisfaction I get from being really, really healthy



and in top form.” Emma echoes Andrea’s positive assertion of living a healthy lifestyle through bodybuilding.

...bodybuilding as a lifestyle, competitive bodybuilding as a sport, just living the lifestyle you’re different. You’re healthier, you eat differently whether you’re competing or not. I’ve found friends that I’ve had over the years that aren’t into health and fitness, all just wanna party and drink and I’ve slowly weeded them out.

However, for Emma, satisfaction is derived not simply from feeling healthy but from being different from others because of her lifestyle. Similar to Andrea, Kate makes a connection between her self-confidence and the ‘lean’ and ‘tight’ body she has achieved through training for bodybuilding competition.

There’s nothing more empowering than feeling lean and firm; waking up in the morning and feeling so tight. It’s a huge confidence builder and you just think the sky’s the limit if you accomplish that.

This statement highlights the problematic relationship between women’s self-confidence and the degree to which their bodies approximate cultural norms of feminine beauty.

Considering the strength and power Kate exudes because of her embodiment in a hypermuscular body, I am prompted to ask whether female bodybuilders’ assertions of pleasure and power must always be read within discourses of female self-management? In comparison to Kate’s positive positioning of achieving a lean and “tight” body, Kara explains that bodybuilding perpetuated her struggle with body image.

I am not a naturally lean person so it was really a mind game for me. It just got to the point where I was like, ‘I can’t keep doing this to myself, I’m only loving myself when I’m at this perfection.’

Where Emma and Angie described bodybuilding as a mental challenge from which they derive much satisfaction, Kara describes bodybuilding, the process of building muscle and losing fat, as a mind game that was becoming self destructive. Bodybuilding emerges here as a strategy for women to negotiate between transgressing and adhering to gendered norms of performance and appearance.

In a fascinating re-reading of the 1983 film *Pumping Iron II: The women*, Jacqueline E. Brady theorizes bodybuilding as a strategy for black women to negotiate the gendered and racialized terrain of competition (2001). Theorizing the discursive spaces in which champion black female bodybuilder, Carla Dunlap, transforms gendered and racialized configurations of power, Brady writes: "Hence, Dunlap's discipline of bodybuilding...can be understood as an "embodied strategy" enabling a "small movement across the discourses of the current period" (2001, 257). Brady's article is helpful for theorizing the difference among my participants' experiences of bodybuilding because of racial location and the different meanings they attach to their practice. She highlights how race influences the extent to which differently racialised women can create "movement across the discourses of the current period." White and black athletes, as well as other athletes of colour, negotiate racialized terrain differently. For example, Angie's promotion of bodybuilding for helping middle-aged women to live a healthy lifestyle also intersects with race. Identifying with her Cherokee heritage, Angie views bodybuilding as a way for Aboriginal peoples to transform negative stereotyping.

Very recently I've become proud of my Cherokee heritage and I like to announce that I have proud Cherokee roots...it's (bodybuilding) example setting because there's such a negative image typically of Aboriginal peoples, you know, alcohol abuse, false-stereotyped laziness with no motivation to excel, etc., etc. I'm very proud to try to be able to set an example of proper living.

Proud of her Cherokee roots, Angie views herself as both evidence of the motivation, perseverance and strength Aboriginal people possess which challenges stereotypes as well as offers a positive role model. As a role model for aboriginal women, Angie's body can be interpreted as a very powerful challenge to domestic and colonial abuse that has deeply impacted their value within their communities since the imposition of western patriarchy (Emberley, 2001; Lomawaima, 1995). Challenging racist ideas around what Aboriginal women can look like and the power they can have access to (i.e. stereotype of the passive 'squaw'), Angie subverts primitive/other binaries that produce native bodies as somehow more "natural" (closer to nature) than white women's bodies (Barman, 1998). Yet her body can also be read as a colonized body in its compliance with western beauty norms and practices. This highlights the racialized dimension of femininity as a social construct and the double bind non-white women face in seeking valuation of their bodies in a racist and sexist culture (hooks, 1984, 1992). Angie's transformative vision of bodybuilding for aboriginal people raises the question: How and to what extent are women of colour, black women, and aboriginal women constrained by racialized and gendered western discourses of the body? Can the reconstructions of their bodies via bodybuilding significantly transform these discourses? In considering these questions I believe a central tension must be maintained: though bodybuilding might be a way to challenge and refute racist stereotypes, it is also a technology capable of colonizing the body because of its reproduction of racialized, classed, and gendered norms (see also chapter 4).

The Anglo-Saxon participants in this study are also bound up in the reproduction of whiteness in their resistance to or compliance with performing normative femininity. Similar to Angie's statement above in which she connects her increase in self-esteem to

weight loss, Kate describes the pressures she has felt to embody cultural ideals of white female beauty.

It's such a battle and when you get even close to it, it just doesn't matter anymore, it's not consuming you. You know how guys think about sex every 10 seconds (laughs), I think women think about fat loss that often: when you walk across a room, when you're getting changed, when you're eating food. It constrains your thought process. To ever get a handle on that and feel like you're on the right track or you're even getting close, then it's not such a big deal anymore and you end up focusing on other things.

Skeptical of women's use of any technology to alter the shape of their bodies, Susan Bordo discusses the insidious ways in which women are coerced into improving their bodies through a rhetoric of supposed empowerment (1990). That is, by coercing women into believing they are altering their bodies for their own personal satisfaction and not for the approval of others, patriarchal society benefits from women's work towards 'self-improvement'. However, to avoid conflating the empowerment felt by female bodybuilders from building muscle with mainstream discourses of self improvement, it is important to examine the nuances surrounding each.

On the one hand, bodybuilding practices of strict dieting and rigorous exercise do share some space with current hegemonic standards of feminine beauty. Kara underscores this connection with her perception that bodybuilding is unhealthy because it requires women to attain an impossible ideal.

It's unfortunate because very few women have what it takes to get down to that body fat level naturally. Is it healthy? I don't think the general public can do it, wants to do it or live that type of lifestyle.

This forms an interesting antithesis to Emma's motivations for bodybuilding. While Kara expresses disillusionment with the sport because few women can be successful athletes,

Emma enjoys bodybuilding precisely because she succeeds where others do not. Kara frames healthfulness as something that should be able to be achieved by the general public while Emma's definition of health is framed by an ability to succeed where others fail.

On the other hand, bodybuilding diverges from mainstream discourse of slenderness through its central imperative of building muscle way beyond the body type of most women. Although Kate, Angie, and Andrea strive to maintain low-body fat, they negotiate cultural pressures to be thin by building up their muscularity. Though they may be seen as compliant by Susan Bordo for their goal to achieve leanness, they are also heavily invested in an aesthetic of hypermuscularity - a physical characteristic not highly valued in heterosexual women. Although Kara felt that bodybuilding perpetuated her body image struggle, Andrea, Kate and Angie position bodybuilding as a release from the constant self-monitoring of body weight they experienced prior to bodybuilding. This is evident in Kate's response that because bodybuilding has helped her achieve a level of physical perfection, she is able to function better in daily life. Guthrie et al confirms this finding in their study of self-image in 10 elite female bodybuilders. The participants in their study reported increased self-esteem and less concern about their self image after becoming a bodybuilding athlete. Using their results to challenge Susan Bordo's argument that bodybuilding shares an axis of continuity with anorexia, they argue that although "great attention to and regularity of diet, reflecting obsessive attitudes and behaviours typical of those with eating disorders...bodybuilders in this sample possessed very positive body images that clearly distinguish them from anorexics and bulimics who commonly have negative and distorted body images and diet in health sacrificing ways" (1994, 180). In accordance with Guthrie et

al's findings, Andrea explains that bodybuilding has provided her with a strategy to better manage her disordered eating.

It's helped me grow a lot. It's helped me with my eating disorders and it's helped with how to eat nutritionally sound foods and know what's good for me and what's bad for me and how to appreciate having a treat...It was an out for me to stay healthy but also keep my body lean. My mum saw that too and she'd see that I'm getting skinny, skinny, skinny and I'm like 'Mum, I'm not skinny, look how much muscle I have on me.' So it's a far cry from starving myself into going into hospital.

Andrea positions training with weights and building muscle as an alternative way of maintaining low body fat instead of other destructive methods of weight management. Challenging her mother's fears that she was just getting skinny and bodybuilding was perpetuating her eating disorders she counteracts, "It's a far cry from starving myself into going into hospital." Contrary to the healthful image of slenderness promoted in the media, both Kate and Andrea position muscularity as more healthful than being thin and unmuscular.

There's this lady who came in the gym and she looked at some other lady and said, "That's the body I want. I want to look exactly like that." I said, "That lady is 98 pounds and she's got Crones disease and she is dying because she can't put on weight. Is that what you really want?" "Well I really like the size of her arms, they're so small." That's sick. It's so sick that people want to be that thin. A lot of those thin girls, 110, 120 pounds they're 35% fat. I caliper them and I couldn't believe it. There's no muscle, it's so unhealthy. To be 35% fat is very unhealthy.

Similar to Andrea's refutation of her mother's concern that she was getting skinny, "look how much muscle I have on me," Kate also makes an implicit distinction between the healthfulness of lean muscularity achieved from bodybuilding and the unhealthfulness of

simply being thin. In light of this distinction, it would be incorrect to conflate discourses of 'leanness' in bodybuilding with cultural norms of slenderness most highly valued by mainstream culture. The two are clearly not collapsed in the meanings my research participants attach to them.

This discussion reveals that the role of gender in the participants' attraction to bodybuilding, in their training and daily lives, is multiple, fluid, and constantly contested. The different meanings that the participants attach to bodybuilding underscores the heterogeneity among female bodybuilders who are often homogenized in both feminist and anti-feminist literature. Although my participants share a common practice of bodybuilding, there is much diversity and complexity amongst their experience and attitudes due to differences across race and age. In the next section of this chapter I consider how their negotiations of gender in their reasons for building compare with their negotiations of gender in the context of bodybuilding competition. What pressures exist in the context of competition that do not exist in the gym? How do my participants interpret the relationship between femininity and muscularity? In what ways do these meanings conform to and/or resist institutionalized bodybuilding gender norms? My first entry point for uncovering some of these meanings is through the participants' constructions of the ideal female bodybuilder. What are their ideals of the ultimate female bodybuilder and how are they racialised, gendered and classed? How do they make sense of their own hypermuscularity and the hypermuscularity of other women, in relation to their ideals?

*Defining female muscularity: constructing the ideal female bodybuilder*

As I outlined in my introductory chapter, the relationship between femininity and muscularity in women's bodybuilding competition is fraught with contradictions. Female

bodybuilders must carefully navigate this terrain if they are to be successful athletes. Kate explains the uncertainty around femininity for female bodybuilders and how to embody the balance with muscularity that judges are looking for: "Times have changed. They're looking for a mixture of muscularity and femininity and you have to be able to have both and these girls have a hard time figuring that out." Wayne DeMilla, IFBB vice-president explains the factors that forced the recent institutionalization of 'femininity' in women's bodybuilding:

"We saw that as the physiques became more extreme, we couldn't market it. At the beginning of 2000 we sent out a criteria that the athletes had to come in with more of an emphasis on symmetry and muscularity and that the face would be judged. We also switched to weight divisions so that the smaller women wouldn't have to try and get big like the larger girls" (*Iron Man*, November 2001, 12).

To comply with these new regulations, the BCABBA (British Columbia Amateur Bodybuilding Association) now stipulate the following rules and regulations for male and female bodybuilders on their web site ([www.bcabba.ca](http://www.bcabba.ca)).

"Men: assessment is of muscular bulk and balanced development. No women style trunks.  
Women: assessment is of a muscular yet feminine shape consisting of an hourglass figure"

In light of these regulations and the pressures on female bodybuilders to conform to them, how do my participants construct the ideal female bodybuilder?

*"The whole feminine package" (Emma)*

Emma: Lenda Murray is my favourite. When I first started (bodybuilding) I would flick through magazines and I would see her and I would notice her shape, her whole package. She's got everything a female bodybuilder should be. She's got class, she's professional, she's got great shape, symmetry and that's what they are going back to now in the last few years. Which is good. You know it is picking back up a little bit slowly but that's what women's bodybuilding is: your big, your muscular but yet still feminine, still shapely, you



have a face that still looks like a woman and that's the way it's supposed to be...A lot of them just get too big.

In this comment Emma subscribes fairly closely to the new guidelines aimed at reducing the muscularity of female bodybuilders. However, the figure she chooses to represent her ideal is a black woman. Carla Williams writes: "Black women, whose historical bodies are the very symbol of labour, are inherently representative of the working class whether or not they themselves are among it" (2000, 106). Associating Murray with high class and feminine beauty, Emma subverts stereotypes of the 'masculine' black matriarch (Hill-Collins, 1999) that also link black women to a lower class status. Andrea's description is also subversive of the IFBB and BCABBA's gender norms.

Perfect symmetry. Like the broad shoulders, nice thick narrow waist and the broad legs. Even proportions like a wide back, hamstrings and good calves, the whole product...If your bigger than men, personally, to me, I would never want to look like that, it's just too big. To me it's like stepping over the line between being a woman and being a man. Like what are you?

Valuing size, solid and thick proportions, her description adheres more closely to ideals for male bodybuilders. Yet there is a contradiction in so far as she employs the same protectiveness of sex and gender binaries as do bodybuilding gatekeepers. Her question, 'like what are you' reflects the confusion around the relationship between muscularity and femininity at the heart of the sport. Kate's somewhat humorous depiction of the stereotypical female bodybuilder 'gone too far' also reflects institutional derogation of perceived 'masculine' women.

I was sitting there at the Westerns in 94' and I saw a national level competitor and she was just massive, like freak. She was actually urinating at the time and she had the stall open and she kinda like grumbled at me and said "hey, if you wanna go pro get a tit job and take some

GH and you'll make it." And I looked at that and thought, 'that's not a woman anymore.' Now not to say that there's anything wrong with making different choices depending on where you're going. It isn't my dream to be a pro. It's my dream to excel and get leaner and to see more muscle and to have bigger hamstrings, just to sculpt my own body but it wasn't my dream to take it to such an extreme that I didn't look like a female anymore in my eyes.

For Kate, lack of breasts and 'grumbling' voice (attributed to steroid usage) represents the greatest transgression of gender by female bodybuilders. Most of these comments appear to adhere to gender norms institutionalized in both bodybuilding and mainstream culture and underscore the serious challenge female bodybuilders pose to the normalized division between the sexes. Annette Kuhn writes, "...when women enter the arena of bodybuilding, a twofold challenge to the natural order is posed. Not only is the naturalness of the body called into question by its inscription within a certain kind of performance: but when women have the muscles, the natural order of gender is under threat as well" (Kuhn 1988, 17 quoted in Mansfield and McGinn, 1993, 57). Fen Coles argues that female bodybuilders' muscles "constitute a kind of drag" (1999, 443). An inversion of the male drag queen who exposes the artifice of femininity, Coles argues that female bodybuilders equally expose the categories of men/masculinity as a construction that patriarchy teaches is natural (ibid). However, unlike female impersonators who can remove their costumes to authenticate their gender, female bodybuilders cannot so easily remove the signifier of their ambiguity- their muscles. Coles continues, "For this reason the female bodybuilder performs the transgressive potential of cross-dressing in a particularly radical way - her challenge to traditional ideas of sex and gender is not a costume (like hats and tails) which she can take off after the show; this challenge appears on the body" (1999, 450). Though this comparison is theoretically useful, most of my participants would be insulted or at least

troubled by the comparison between themselves and a drag queen. In fact, all of the participants were highly protective of their inscription within normative categories of heterosexual, middle-class femininity.

*A continuum of female muscle: Natural bodybuilding vs unnatural bodybuilding*

Jennifer Wesley, in a similar study on how male and female bodybuilders negotiate gender, found that her participants used a continuum of natural/unnatural bodies to legitimate their own hypermuscularity as 'normal.' Similarly, most of my participants made a distinction between natural bodybuilding (steroid usage is illegal) and non-natural bodybuilding (steroid usage is legal), where the latter is charged with ruining femininity. The inherent assumption in this distinction is that bodybuilding without the use of steroids is a 'natural' process. Andrea, who began her bodybuilding career in non-tested federations (as a drug-free athlete), relies upon these assumptions to explain her decision to compete solely in natural shows.

I don't want to take steroids cause that's where your femininity...the line is drawn. I'd love to get huge but as soon as you start taking those things that's when you start losing your femininity. Your voice changes, you get very muscular, you get break outs, facial hair.

All the characteristics that she cites as un-feminine are culturally coded as masculine and if present in a woman should be hidden or removed such as facial hair, a deep voice, or muscularity. Reproducing sexist assumptions about gender, Andrea comments that she would like to increase her size but is constrained because a) only drugs can help her achieve more size and b) greater musculature will make her lose her femininity. Andrea underscores how the image of the harsh unnatural female bodybuilder has and is being used to curtail women's muscularity and promote the more 'marketable' 'feminized' fitness shows and competitions and reinforce the naturalness of muscularity on men.

I think that's why fitness and galaxy and shows like that are so huge with women because they don't want to end up looking like this (Bev Francis) or being associated with that. A lot of women it's hard for them to diet really strict to get that lean but as far as the mainstream with men's bodybuilding it's not going to change because everybody is getting bigger. The quality, like the hugeness of these guys is phenomenal. They are huge.

While the women are encouraged to 'soften' and downsize their physiques, male bodybuilders' are rewarded for getting bigger. Yet despite the institutionally imposed fear of 'losing' their femininity, most of the women reported that they wanted to increase the size of their physiques.

Angie: Before I tried to keep the arms down but this time I want everything to be as big as I can and I'm eating for it now, every two hours just cramming the food in (laughs).

Celine: When I'm training women the first thing that comes out of their mouth and even in my classes is "Oh, I don't wanna get big." My first thing is to say, "look I'm lifting heavy and I'm shooting to get big. My goal is to get big."

Andrea: I'd like to stay in the middle weight category but in the high end middle weight. So instead of 116 pounds ripped, I'd like to weigh 124 pounds ripped.

The language they use to describe their goals reflects fluidity around gender: 'Ripped' 'big' 'heavy,' 'eating for it'. These adjectives do not connote femininity but hardness, size, and consumption of food and space more closely associated with masculinity. Thus despite ideological moves by bodybuilding gatekeepers towards less 'extreme' looking women, my participants continue to place importance on perceived masculine values of size and muscularity in their personal goals to improve their physiques.

Though some of the participants subvert normative 'feminine' through their language and ideals such as Emma's veneration of a black woman as the embodiment of the ideal

female bodybuilder, this does preclude them from defining themselves as 'feminine' in the mainstream sense of the word. As well as making distinctions between natural bodybuilding and non-natural (drug enhanced) bodybuilding, the participants distanced themselves from women who were "too big" in order to construct themselves within normative paradigms of femininity. To help initiate a discussion about what qualifies as unnatural or "too big," I showed my participants some pictures of the most infamously hypermuscular women in the history of women's bodybuilding.<sup>15</sup>

Celine: It wouldn't be appealing for me to be that big...I've always treated myself as being natural in so many ways so I think, it's not that I am appalled by size but I appreciate natural bodybuilding.

Emma: (about Renee Toney) that's a man. Like take the top off and you've got a man right there. You know, now when a girl like that steps on stage she wouldn't get looked at. They've gone away from that look which is good but that was what was ruining the sport because they were picking these big freaky looking girls and then the smaller ones, the smaller girls were thinking 'well I have to be that big to get there'. Like for me size is not an issue. I can get bigger if I want but I wouldn't, I can't because I wouldn't look as good so you gotta stay within your frame.

Celine and Emma's responses highlight the confusion surrounding hypermuscularity of the female body in bodybuilding ideology. When sex and gender are not so easily read off the surface of the body (i.e. lack of breasts, obscured genitals) and no attempt is made to 'do gender' in conventional ways (i.e. lack of feminine adornment such as make-up and long nails) this body becomes unintelligible within cultural domains of 'normal' sex and gender (Butler, 1990). Contrary to my initial assumption that the participants would celebrate the

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<sup>15</sup> The pictures I showed were of professional bodybuilders Bev Francis and Christine Eneval (current holder of the title 'world's most muscular woman') who are white Australian women and Renee Toney and Lenda Murray are African American.

transgressive muscularity of their sport's pioneers, they demonstrated an investment in hegemonic femininity similar to non-muscular women who reject hypermuscularity in women. Particularly surprising to me, was that Emma reproduced racist stereotyping of other black women. This is highlighted by Emma's description of black female bodybuilder Renee Toney as "manly." Race intersects with gender in Emma's association of black female muscularity with masculinity and reflects Emma's own internalization of racist stereotypes. Though Emma idealizes Lenda Murray, she does so because of her proximity to normative femininity evident in her description of Murray as 'classy,' as well as for her feminine beauty and heterosexual appeal articulated in her quote that Murray represents, "The whole feminine package." Renee Toney, on the other hand, signifies a complete subversion of these gender norms by refusing to adorn herself with make-up and long hair and idealizing the male bodybuilt body. Emma's interpretation of Toney as masculine points to the pervasiveness of racism in bodybuilding ideals of muscular female beauty and the extent to which it is internalized by black as well as white competitors.

Kate's response was different to those of the other participants. Although she expressed concern for the deleterious side effects of steroids for women, she also expresses a counter-hegemonic admiration for women who achieve a level of muscularity and leanness way beyond most female bodybuilders.

They are amazing. Like the things that happen to your body, the level they take it to and they have to train just as hard, put more investment into their body... it's really hard to sit on the fence and say one or the other (unnatural or natural bodybuilding) is good or bad, they're both awesome...I look at some of the women I know who use (drugs) and they're just freaky...It's just phenomenal to look at and I don't know if I can get there naturally but that would just take a huge amount of discipline.

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Kate's use of the term 'freak,' can be interpreted as counter-hegemonic. Rather than using it to derogate female bodybuilders as is often done in hard-core bodybuilding magazines, she subverts its negative connotations by using it to express awe and admiration for the most muscular female athletes.<sup>16</sup>

I can look at an extreme look in a woman who is aesthetically pleasing, her face is nice, that their shape is nice, they're ripped to the shreds and that's quite attractive. So I don't know, for me it doesn't necessarily have to do with the level of leanness, it's how they sort of carry it and some women are very graceful with it, they can make it look so beautiful and other women can make it look like a really harsh uncomfortable body to be in.

Kate challenges the stereotype that women who take steroids magically inflate and don't have to work as hard as natural athletes by acknowledging the awesome intensity of their training and dedication. Kate's use of both feminized and masculinized language to describe these athletes suggests that her awe of them is not simply because of their hypermuscularity but because of their hybridization of masculine and feminine gender with the steroid enhanced female body.

The meanings my participants attach to femininity and muscularity as well as to their own bodies, are not fixed but change over time. Jennifer Wesley learned from her research that the meanings female bodybuilders attached to their bodies changed over time due to a range of social, cultural and personal factors (2001, 174). Wesley gives the example of one of her participants who was proud of her hypermuscularity for most of her athletic career until one day when she was unable to fit into any of the dresses in a clothing store. Realizing her transgression of gendered body norms, Wesley's participant decided to retire

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<sup>16</sup> 'Freak' has also been used by other female bodybuilders in counter-hegemonic ways. Christine Envall titles her latest posing video 'SuperFreak' in celebration of her massively muscled body. See [www.cenvall.com](http://www.cenvall.com).

from bodybuilding almost immediately and down size her muscle to create a more socially acceptable 'feminine' physique. Andrea expresses her discomfort for some pictures of herself from a past competition in which she was more muscular than she is today.

There are some photos of me when I was in my contest shape and I look really muscular and it was like, 'oh my god, that's me,' and the guys were not exactly flocking towards me...I thought I looked phenomenal...I was so proud of myself that I got my body to look like that so to me it was a cool thing but as far as feminine went, no I didn't look very feminine.

Her feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence about her body when it is more muscular and therefore less conventionally feminine, underscores the instability of distinctions between natural/feminine muscle and unnatural/unfeminine muscle. This distinction breaks down in the moment when Andrea reads her own supposed 'natural' body built body as unnaturally masculine or unfeminine. The meanings Angie attaches to muscularity and femininity have also changed over time. Previously having prided herself on being a 'natural' athlete, Angie recently made the decision to take a cycle of steroids based on her goal to win in the master's category at the Canadian National Championships in 2003. Her negotiation between transgressing and complying with gender norms is visible in her justifications for using steroids.

It's not something you have to do but I'm not going to have any more children...it's a minimal risk that I'm willing to take for what could be my last competition and I've always been curious to see how much further I could take my body...I don't know how much more muscle mass I can put on naturally at this age.

Angie explains that most women 'over do' steroid dosage and that she intends to only take a mild anabolic that won't 'sacrifice' her femininity. There is a tension here between her desire to take her body as far as she can and win at the national level- "I'd like to win



master's, I want it very badly"- and a sense of guilt and or fear about potentially transgressing that invisible line between being a man and being a woman, the latter category which, as a 'natural' athlete, she assumes that she has not yet transgressed. Although the participants appear to adhere more closely to gender norms in their ideals of the ideal female bodybuilder than in their reasons for bodybuilding, the meanings they attached to their own muscularity and the muscularity of other women reflect complexity and variation among them. This complexity suggests an ongoing process of negotiation that does not simply parallel the current direction in which bodybuilding gatekeepers are forcing gender norms. Yet when it comes to performing on stage for prizes, sponsorship and athletic success, to what extent are my participants constrained by expectations of normative femininity in their competitive performances?

*(Hetero)sexuality and the subversion of normative femininity in bodybuilding competition: "you flaunt those muscles in every way you possibly can but I think you also ought to flaunt the femininity" (Angie)*

Bodybuilding competitions consist of three rounds in which different aspects of the athletes' physiques are judged. The first two rounds are usually done together and these are for judging symmetry of the body and muscular development. For the symmetry round, athletes are asked to perform four quarter turns before the judges in a semi-relaxed position.<sup>17</sup> For judging muscularity, athletes perform between five to eight mandatory poses depending on their gender. Though some federations sanction different poses for women, most do not sanction perceived 'masculine' poses for women. For example, women are not supposed to perform the 'most muscular' pose (also known as 'the crab') which requires the athlete to squeeze their chest muscles together by flexing their arms in front of the body to showcase

as much muscle as possible. This is the most crowd-pleasing pose performed by male bodybuilders. Poses not usually required for women in the muscularity round can still be incorporated into their posing routines, however, the more feminine their performance, the higher they are likely to place.

The final round is the posing routine which is an opportunity for athletes to display the strengths of their physiques to a song of their choice. This is the only round in which costumes are allowed to be worn and most athletes choreograph routines around a theme. This final round is the most crowd-pleasing round of the competition and is usually performed on the night of the competition. Female bodybuilders do not wear high heels like fitness and physique athletes but are allowed to use props and costumes for their posing routines.<sup>18</sup> As I have outlined, women's bodybuilding competitions do not differ significantly from men's bodybuilding competitions. Yet different gendered expectations are placed upon female athletes whose relationship to muscularity is deemed problematic as opposed to the supposed natural marriage of masculinity and muscularity. As Celine points out, these gendered expectations for women are not fixed or stable and can be a source of confusion and frustration for female athletes.

Celine: You never know, it's so subjective in bodybuilding. You don't know who's going to show up and you know it's hard to base...you can't compete with someone with completely different genetics and whatever the judges happen to be looking for.

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<sup>17</sup> Semi-relaxed means that the athletes should keep their arms by their sides but contract their muscle to highlight their muscularity but without fully flexing.

<sup>18</sup> In the first bodybuilding competitions, women were required to wear high heels for the muscularity and symmetry rounds. Yet, since pioneering female athletes in the early eighties refused to wear them (Carla Dunlap for instance kicked her heels off in front of the judges), female bodybuilders complete all rounds in bare feet like the men (Wennerstrom, 2000).

Celine's comment that femininity is "whatever the judges happen to be looking for," supports the theory that gender is socially constructed. This means that gender is not inherent or natural but is contingent upon the social location of whoever is defining it (i.e. majority white, heterosexual, male judges and executives). Thus in order to be successful in bodybuilding competition, female athletes must perform gender to the satisfaction of the judging panel as well as other bodybuilding gatekeepers. West and Zimmerman (1987) write: "to do gender is to engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment" (1987, 136). Thus, to do gender is not easy and in their efforts to figure out an appropriate balance between muscularity and femininity, female athletes face the risk of being perceived as performing gender incorrectly. Moreover, because of the racialized, classed, and heterocentric dimensions of normative femininity, some women are more likely to be perceived as doing gender incorrectly than others. For example, women who pose in ways that are perceived as 'low class' (i.e. overly sexual) are penalized for not adhering to the middle-class standards of normative femininity. Women who do not attempt to feminize their muscle through conventional feminine adornment such as long hair and pink bikinis can be perceived as lesbian and subjected to reprimand and ridicule. For example, infamous Australian bodybuilder Bev Francis was told by a bodybuilding judge "to get feminine or get out of bodybuilding" (quoted in Steinem, 1993) for refusing to adorn her massively muscled and pioneering physique. Furthermore, hypermuscular black women are penalized for their perceived masculinity.

Though resistance takes many forms, the constraints on women to perform hegemonic expectations of heterosexual femininity in the competitive arena are extremely powerful.

Rather than interpret the sites of my participants' adherence to these expectations as evidence of their 'lack of consciousness,' it is important to understand what is at stake if they refuse to conform. Professional female bodybuilders interviewed by Maria Lowe (1998) in the United States talked about the reality of having their competitive careers penalised because of their refusal to accept certain rules and regulations (i.e. that women should not develop their musculature to the level of men). Yet this does not mean that there is no room for resistance to rules and regulations that try to limit the size of their bodies and how they can display them. The process of negotiation does not stop at the stairs to the stage but continues throughout their competitive performances, even when contracts, sponsorship, and trophies are at stake. Some forms of resistance can only be caught as glimpses, either conscious or unconscious contradictions between women's carefully constructed gender performances and their hypermuscular bodies. Another subtle form of resistance identified in the previous discussion includes counter-hegemonic use of language such as Kate's reclamation of the derogatory term "freak" to express her admiration for the most massively developed women. More radical forms of resistance can take the shape of deliberate refusals to wear makeup or long blonde hair and insisting on building her body beyond what the judges and federation have outlined as acceptable.<sup>19</sup>

*Negotiating gender in choice of costumes, posing routine and music*

As I briefly outlined at the beginning of this discussion, the posing routine is the third and final round of judging in a bodybuilding competition. Each competitor performs a ninety second choreographed routine to music of their choice and may use props and

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<sup>19</sup> Professional bodybuilder, Renee Toney, a black woman from the United States, is a good example of more radical transgressions of gendered expectations for professional female bodybuilders. Massively built, she sports a closely cropped hair style (threatening to shave her head) and looks to male bodybuilders as ideals for her own physique (in *Picturing the modern Amazon*, 2000).

costuming to enhance their presentation. The posing routine is an opportunity for each athlete to highlight the strengths of her physique and is generally afforded equal weight with the symmetry and muscularity rounds. For my participants, choosing costumes and music as well as choreographing the routine are infused with personal meanings of self-expression, pleasure and creativity. Choosing music is also a source of relaxation, fun and introspection. Andrea chooses music that can convey her personality to the audience while Angie explains, "I always choose music that has words and means something to me, so that I can really feel and project that music." The creativity and thought that goes into a posing routine, especially at the professional level is enormous. As the women explain, it incorporates their creative selves and athletic abilities beyond lifting weights. The significance of a posing routine goes even deeper for Celine who dedicated one of her performances to a friend who was murdered only weeks prior to her competition.

I dedicated my pro-qualifier performance to a friend, an East Indian woman, who was murdered only a short time before the competition. I wasn't going to compete but I knew she wouldn't have wanted me to use her as an excuse. I didn't smile. It was a very somber performance.

Also, for Emma, learning to apply her stage make-up and the process of applying it for competition is a source of fun. After the months of hard training and intense dieting leading up to a show, preparing her facial presentation for competition is a welcome release.

*(Hetero)sex appeal and class in posing routines*

As I have already established, performing normative femininity is a key aim and expectation for female bodybuilders' competitive performances. Alongside expectations to wear make-up, long nails and have appropriately styled hair, female athletes are expected to project and embody socially sanctioned 'femininity' in all three rounds of competition. As I

pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, heterosexuality is also an implicit assumption of normative femininity. Thus, female athletes are not only required to police the boundaries of their muscles and performance to appear “feminine yet muscular,” they must also guard against accusations or perceptions of deviating from the heterosexual norm. Though most of my participants discussed the importance of performing heterosexual femininity, I have also identified some significant subversion in their narratives. For example, despite attempts to naturalize the relationship between muscularity and masculinity by bodybuilding gatekeepers, Emma inverts this association by suggesting that female bodybuilders are more appealing than male bodybuilders whom she refers to as ‘freaks.’

We’re different from the men cause you watch the men and it’s like, fine, people like that because they’re big, they’re freaks whatever whereas the female bodybuilders you know they’re muscular and they’re sexy and they’re strong and they can be dominating.

This inversion momentarily denaturalizes the relationship between masculinity and muscularity.

However, Emma creates this normalization by attaching the value of sexual attractiveness to the relationship between muscularity and femininity. Sex appeal is identified as being crucial to the image of female bodybuilders if they are to become more acceptable to a mainstream (and bodybuilding) audience which is key to the survival of the sport (Schulz, 1990, Heywood, 1998).

Yes, you flaunt those muscles in every way you possibly can but I think you ought to flaunt the femininity as well. I think it also makes it more widely accepted by John Q public, which is another goal because I’m trying to set examples for other people. I think if you are a strong woman, as long as you keep the femininity in it, it’s (competitive, radical bodybuilding) more accepted than it would be otherwise.

Heterosexuality, as a central organizing discourse of competitive bodybuilding, is also prominent in the mainstream marketing of female bodybuilders. Both Leslie Heywood (1998) and Anne Balsamo (1998) analyze the techniques used in photography and journalism to gender and heterosexualize female muscularity and athleticism. For both writers, language that focuses on the looks and beauty of female athletes and photography that fetishizes breasts, legs and buttocks, serve to defuse their transgression of racial, gendered and heterosexual norms. Indeed, the only ways in which female bodybuilders can appear in bodybuilding magazines is if they are (hetero)sexualized in ways that downplay their dangerous hypermuscularity and instead portray them as fetishes and sexual objects (see Chapter 4 for more detail).

Interestingly, when I asked Angie if she thought requirements to be muscular and feminine were contradictory, she interpreted my question to mean contradictory in specific women's performances.

I see it as a contradiction with most female bodybuilders. When I did my first competition I met a woman from Kelowna...She is one of those people that is muscular but extremely feminine, flaunts everything she's got so I was lucky to have that contact with her so where you see most of the muscular women who compete you'll see them after in their sweats and not any attention to hair or make-up or anything. I do the opposite. I put on the same glass heels that those fitness girls wear and I wear sequined dresses and I wear them cut halfway up to bum to show all of my legs and everything. I wear backless dresses and I wear false eyelashes to be as feminine as I can possibly get and push it to the limit. I even took a couple of ballet lesson to try to change the style of posing on stage and it helped a lot. You see so many women who get up there like this (pulls 'masculine' sort of pose) and I prefer to use the more graceful hand motions and turns similar to what the fitness girls do but still maintaining your bodybuilding poses.

At the same time that Angie naturalizes a coexistence between femininity and muscularity embodied by her friend, she simultaneously shows gender to be a construction at which she works hard to create. Constructing her femininity through 'hyperfeminine' style of dress and posing, Angie unwittingly suggests that normative femininity is just a matter of the 'right' performance. "Putting on the same glass heels as those fitness athletes wear," Angie can be read as parodying gatekeepers' attempts to enforce a normative femininity on female bodybuilders. A female bodybuilder in fitness model drag, Angie simultaneously reproduces naturalized binaries of sex at the same time that she parodies them.

As 'The Sandwich' (quoted p.50) so misogynistically points out, attempts to feminize massive muscularity of female bodybuilders does not equal normative heterosexual femininity. Hypermuscularity of women cannot be contained within normative discourses no matter how much lace and lipstick is used in their disguise. It can only mock sex and gender binaries and the 'natural' relationship that is supposed to exist between these categories. Yet, my contention that female bodybuilders can only ever fail at reproducing normative femininity does not mean that they have any less investment in its classed, racialized and heterosexist foundations. The following comment by Kate highlights the importance of middle-class notions of sexual morality for choreographing posing routines.

One of the things that are marked down is the 'moon pose' which is bending over in front of the judges...save certain things for strippers' stages. They're trying to keep some sort of level of class...and again there have been routines where women crawl. Strippers, like they lay and they crawl and they slide all over the stage and it's like, 'This is not bodybuilding,' from their point of view (the federation).

Despite the eroticisation of female bodybuilders in magazines and expectations for them to be sexy in their bodybuilding performances (via hair, make-up and 'feminine bodily



comportment), the demand for sexual morality on stage reveals the classed dimension of normative femininity. In the following quote Kate explains that discrimination on the basis of perceived class is more prevalent than racism in judging women's bodybuilding competitions.

It's best that they don't know (if a woman is a stripper). It's better if they think she's like a secretary a nurse or whatever, it's just a different...if they hear that it does sway people's minds...not all of them get swayed but I guarantee you that that would be one thing that would sway them more often than colour.

Reproducing middle-class notions of heterosexual femininity, Angie draws a distinction between her own 'flaunting' of her body and the perceived sexual immorality of some women's posing routines.

I am appalled to see bodybuilders pose as if they were about to perform a lap dance. I've seen far too many women do the 'bump and grind' on stage and I am embarrassed for our sport. Bodybuilding is a family affair...I am utterly disgusted to see the sexual degradation of flaunting one's body in such a manner that belongs solely in a closed-door bedroom.

Linking overt sexual performances to low class, Angie reproduces classist notions of who and what a stripper is in binary opposition to who and what a female bodybuilder should represent. In this class binary, the stripper is encoded as immoral, uneducated, a bad girl against which the ideal of the middle-class, feminine, bodybuilder can be constructed. Thus, negotiating a balance between femininity and muscularity for female bodybuilders also requires them to negotiate middle-class standards of (hetero)sex appeal in their posing routines.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I examined how female bodybuilders negotiate gender at three levels of their bodybuilding practice: 1) personal practice: why they build, their personal motivations, aspirations and pleasures, 2) ideology: how they construct the ideal female bodybuilder as well as their own hypermuscularity in relation to bodybuilding ideals and 3) competitive performances: how they create resistance to and comply with heteronormative expectations of femininity. I have argued that my participants engage in complex processes of negotiating gender, race and heterosexuality at all levels whether unconsciously or consciously and that some forms of negotiation are less obvious than others. Attention to the ways in which the participants reproduced racialized, classed, and heterosexist assumptions of femininity reveals their compliance with normative femininity promoted by bodybuilding gatekeepers. There were also significant sites of subversion. These include Kate's counter hegemonic use of the word 'freak' to admire the most hypermuscular of female athletes and Angie's vision of bodybuilding as a vehicle for transforming stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples. In the next chapter, I continue my discussion of the expectations for female athletes to perform heteronormative femininity at a fourth level of bodybuilding: representation in mainstream and hard-core bodybuilding magazines. A contradiction appears between the guarding of female bodybuilders' sexual morality during on stage performances, and pressures from sponsors and promoters of bodybuilding magazines to exploit their sexuality to sell magazines. I ask, how do my participants perceive mainstream representations of models that replace female bodybuilders in mainstream magazines? In contrast, how do they perceive sexualized portrayals of female bodybuilders in hard-core bodybuilding magazines? What are the slippages and contradictions between these

perceptions and what can they reveal about how women negotiate pressures to feminize and (hetero)sexualize female muscle?

## CHAPTER 4

### SEXUAL LIBERATION OR DEGRADING REPRESENTATION? HOW FEMALE BODYBUILDERS NEGOTIATE RACE, GENDER, AND (HETERO)SEXUALITY IN BODYBUILDING MAGAZINES

#### Introduction

Emma: "No they don't promote the female bodybuilders anymore...most of the *Muscle Mag*, *Muscle and Fitness*, which hasn't covered female bodybuilders for years now, they're all just "T and A" magazines cause they're trying to cater to the mainstream and they'll do what sells the magazines which is, you know, put a blonde on the cover with big tits and a tight ass and that's what sells the magazines.

One of the most complex sites for examining how women negotiate intersections of gender, age, race and sexuality are bodybuilding magazines. From my own examination of a variety of these texts, both the ones designed for bodybuilding audiences such as *Flex*, *Iron Man*, *Muscle Mag*, and *Muscle Elegance*, and those directed at mainstream audiences, for example, *Oxygen*, *Energy*, *Muscle and Fitness* and *Muscle and Fitness Hers*,<sup>20</sup> female bodybuilders are positioned in one of the following three ways: 1) erased and replaced by fitness models, 2) denigrated for destabilizing naturalized binaries of sex and gender,<sup>21</sup> or 3) fetishized and highly sexualized in photography featured in hard-core<sup>22</sup> bodybuilding magazines. The images that I will discuss in this chapter range from portrayals of women in bikinis

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<sup>20</sup> I am referring to issues of these magazines in the last 5 years, leading up to and surrounding the institutionalization of 'femininity' as a formal judging criterion. *Muscle and Fitness Hers* was launched by Joe Weider, the creator of the IFBB to create mainstream appeal for less muscular women and reduce the stigma attached to female bodybuilding. Both mainstream and bodybuilding magazines in their current phase dramatically underscore a gendered aesthetic of 'muscular tone' for women and concomitant abhorrence towards female hypermuscularity. Though the hard core bodybuilding magazines do feature female bodybuilders, they parallel the mainstream magazines with their over representation of fitness models.

<sup>21</sup> For example, "Evolution or Devolution: Freaks or Not?", (*Iron Man*, November 2001), and "Prizewinning Bodybuilder Quit Taking Steroids Because.... "drugs were turning me into a man" (*National Enquirer*, 1987, cited in Balsamo, 1998)

and high-heels draped on the hood of a car to more sexually explicit images of full frontal nudity and same sex eroticism. Although these are not the only contexts in which bodybuilders are photographed, (see Heywood's discussion of Bill Lowenberg's photography, 1998) sexualized portrayals of female bodybuilders are the most common form of cultural representations about female bodybuilders. The reason for this is fairly simple. Hypermuscularity of women is less marketable than 'athletic tone,' hence the over representation of fitness and figure models in mainstream bodybuilding magazines. The pressure on female bodybuilders to feminize and heterosexualise their muscle serves to guard against stereotypes of lesbianism and gender deviance of female athletes. Thus, the most successful way to circulate and sell images of female hypermuscularity in a patriarchal and sexist culture is through (hetero)sexualized imagery. The Internet, though beyond the scope of this chapter, is also an interesting site that has allowed for the proliferation of sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders.

At this stage, I should point out that sexualized photography is not part of all women's bodybuilding practice nor is it synonymous with bodybuilding as a sport. For those women who engage with this type of representation, it is a source of exposure as well as income in a sport that is only lucrative for a select few. My interest in sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders is from the perspective of how it contributes to the reproduction of heterosexist, sexist and racist ideals of 'female muscle' against which all female athletes are measured. Though only one of my

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'hard-core' refers to bodybuilding magazines aimed at serious bodybuilders. They are filled with bodybuilding products, training techniques and coverage of bodybuilding competitions. They almost always include sexually explicit photographs of female bodybuilders or fitness models.

participants has actually been the subject of bodybuilding photography, I am interested in how all of my participants make sense of sexualized female muscle in bodybuilding magazines. My aim in this chapter is not to argue whether these images are good or bad but rather to examine how female bodybuilders negotiate complying with and resisting heterosexist gender norms through their perceptions of and engagement with sexualized photography. I am interested in opening up perspectives on women's engagement with this form of sexual expression, as well as generating counter-hegemonic readings of these images. Annette Kuhn (1985) warns feminists against foreclosing alternative interpretations of dominant representations of women.

...there is another justification for a feminist analysis of mainstream images of women: may it not teach us to recognize inconsistencies and contradictions within dominant traditions of representations, to identify points of leverage for our own intervention: cracks and fissures through which might be captured glimpses of what in other circumstances might be possible, visions of "a world outside the order not normally seen or thought about?" (cited in hooks, 1992, 77)

I heed Kuhn's warning in my contribution to this highly controversial area of debate.

I analyze the racialized and (hetero)sexualized conventions of this genre of bodybuilding photography, while also seeking out "cracks and fissures" through which women's pleasure and empowerment can be found. I begin by examining the meanings my participants attach to the portrayal of fitness models in mainstream bodybuilding magazines. I then compare their responses with how they make sense of sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders in hard-core bodybuilding magazines. In the second half of this discussion I turn to some representations of female

bodybuilders in a 2002 issue of *Muscle Elegance* magazine. I chose this particular magazine because it includes some pictures of one of my participants, Emma. In comparison to my analysis of how white women are portrayed in this magazine, I examine how Emma, one of the few black women in the magazine, negotiates race, class and (hetero)sexuality in her pictures. I also apply a 'queer' reading to Emma's photographs to consider how lesbian/bisexual desire might destabilize the heterocentric context of the magazine. In my conclusion to this chapter, I make some tentative links between the erasure, derogation and sexualization of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines and the difficulties most of my participants have had in obtaining sponsorship. Though more research is required to answer this question, I wonder to what extent their differentially raced and aged hypermuscular bodies influence whether or not they will be chosen to represent their sport.

*Hypermuscularity vanishing: the erasure of female bodybuilders in mainstream bodybuilding magazines*

Andrea: The fitness girl is more the look that people want to be. They don't want to be muscular. They wanna look more like an in-shape fitness girl.

In mainstream bodybuilding and fitness magazines such as *Energy*, *Oxygen*, *Muscle and Fitness* and *Muscle and Fitness Hers*, fitness models or fashion models take the place of female bodybuilders. Bodybuilding for women in these magazines is clearly defined as a 'feminine' practice that enhances (hetero)sex appeal (Schulz, 1990). For example, the spring 2003 issue of *Oxygen* magazine, has a male bodybuilding and fitness expert, espousing the benefits of increased physical fitness for women's performances in the bedroom. The covers of the Spring 2003 issues of the magazines listed above are all graced by white women; tanned, smiling and posing in

the latest bikini-style athletic clothing. “Lithe legs” (*Oxygen*, 2002), “get a bikini body” (*Muscle and Fitness Hers*, 2003) and “Downsize your thighs” (*Energy*, 2003) speak to the insecurities of the mainstream reader looking for a foolproof method of moulding her body to current expectations of heterosexual femininity. Of course, this is not the way in which every reader reads these magazines. My point is that these magazines are capitalizing on a ‘look’ of heterosexual feminine attractiveness that promotes a racialized, aged, and able-bodied ideal of health and beauty that rejects “loose and unsolid flesh” (Bordo, 1990) on one end of the continuum and hypermuscularity on the other. Angie comments on this: “most of what you see in the magazines are thin, white, young women.” Similarly, Emma critiques: “All they do is bikini layouts and you look at most of these girls and they don’t even look like they’ve touched weights.”

The fitness ‘girl’/model is much more in line with current ideals of the white, feminine, female body and represents an infantilized female heterosexuality that maintains the sexist subordination of white women to white men. The use of ‘girl’ to refer to fitness models reproduces cultural values of youth and reinforces cultural abhorrence for the hypermuscular maturity of female bodybuilders.

While all of my participants maintained that bodybuilding as a sport is ‘race blind,’ most, like Kate, implicitly acknowledged the cultural currency of whiteness for marketing the sport to mainstream audiences.

I think that that, again, is marketing and you’ll very rarely ever see a female harsh, shredded bodybuilder on the front of a cover. But you will see more of a figure model with a good set of hooters there, that’s what’s gonna sell. That’s all marketing. That’s shown in too many studies...they will usually almost never put a black person on the cover.



Despite the fact that most of the top ten professional female bodybuilders in the world are black women and women of colour<sup>23</sup>, very rarely are non-white women portrayed in bodybuilding magazines or as the face of a particular company or product. bell hooks makes the point that when black women do appear in mainstream media, they are chosen for their closer proximity to white ideals of beauty: straightened hair, lighter skinned, thin nose, lips and limbs (1992, 72). Commenting on the inclusion of bi-racial models in the fashion catalogues of clothing companies Tweeds and J.Crew, hooks writes: "The non-white models appearing in these catalogues must resemble as closely as possible their white counterparts so as not to detract from the racialized subtext." (ibid). hooks links these portrayals of beauty, class and whiteness to notions of American citizenship. Similarly, while non-white women are among the top athletes in their sport, they are largely erased from media representations so as not to disrupt cultural fantasies that beauty, power, privilege and citizenship are intrinsic to whiteness. The following quote from Emma indirectly points to the capitalization on the overrepresentation of whiteness as a marker of health and beauty by mainstream bodybuilding magazines:

As far as the magazines go it's about making money for themselves so they put somebody there with blonde hair, big tits and a tight ass. That's going to sell more issues than if there was a black face on them. Unless you put somebody like Lenda Murray who is known all over the world for 20 years, but put somebody new in there that nobody knows and it's probably not going to sell as well.

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<sup>23</sup> The rankings as of 2003 season are: 1st Lenda Murray, 3<sup>rd</sup> Iris Kyle, 4<sup>th</sup> Yaxeni Orique, 6<sup>th</sup> Vicki Gates, 7<sup>th</sup> Fanny Borris, 8<sup>th</sup> Dayana Cadeau. See IFBB website: [www.ifbb.com](http://www.ifbb.com).

Emma's comment highlights the token representation of black women in magazines. Lenda Murray, despite her seven-year reign as Ms Olympia, has never been pictured by herself on the cover of a magazine (Williams, 2000). Tokenism perpetuates the myth of the exceptional black woman, either exceptional *because of* her race (biological essentialism around genetics), or *for* her race (if she more closely approximates a white ideal of feminine beauty) (hooks, 1992). Commenting on why she thinks non-white women are under represented in bodybuilding magazines, Andrea both reproduces and underscores racist stereotypes of non-white women.

They're (black women) too muscular and they're too manly and it's not marketable for the companies...again, Asian woman are stereotyped as very small, petite and fragile so to have a big muscular Asian woman, it would just be too out of the norm for people. It would be like a freak show.

Andrea's quote highlights the different types of "controlling images" (Patricia Hill-Collins, 1999) used to devalue, silence and erase black and Asian women in a white supremacist society. Whereas racist stereotypes of black women as masculine are used to explain their hypermuscularity (i.e. they are genetically more predisposed to building muscle than white women), Orientalist stereotypes that construct Asian women as fragile, weak and demure, confound the possibility of a hypermuscular Asian female body. Thus, representations of Asian female bodybuilders 'would be like a freak show,' as Andrea explains it. The hypermuscular Asian female body both symbolically and literally tears to shreds the myth of Asian women's supposed passivity.

Many of my participants' comments, whether implicitly or explicitly, demonstrate some awareness of the operation of sexism and racism in images of

white fitness models in mainstream bodybuilding magazines. Yet, when it came to making sense of sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders in hard-core bodybuilding magazines, most espoused the importance of sexualizing female muscle to combat 'negative' stereotypes about the inherent 'deviance' of female bodybuilders (i.e. that all female bodybuilders are mannish and lesbians). As Carla Williams writes: "If the question begins with sex it inevitable segues to sexuality" (2001, 108 ). Many of their responses also indirectly challenged feminist arguments that sexual depictions of women are necessarily oppressive and anti-feminist. For example, Angie responded to some pictures I showed her of a bodybuilder in heels and tiny white skirt leaning on the hood of a car:

It doesn't bother me. If someone wanted me to pose on the hood of a car in a bikini I would be more than happy to because I'm proud of what I've accomplished. But to me I don't see it as sex selling. I don't see myself as a sexual entity...I do see myself as being proud of what I've achieved and not ashamed of my body anymore and when I'm lean I like to show it.

In this comment, Angie suggests that exposing the muscular female body is not necessarily about 'sex selling' but an expression of a woman's pride in her body that she has worked very hard to achieve. Yet in Chapter 3, Angie espoused the importance of performing heterosexualized femininity at bodybuilding shows to legitimize her identity as a heterosexual, feminine woman and to create support and appeal of the sport. Though I still take at face value her above comment that showing off her body is a source of pride and pleasure, it also underscores the pressures female bodybuilders' face in always having to contend with this scale of values.

Andrea on the other hand expresses discomfort with sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders: "Like strippers, you know. Like 'are we gonna be at the Paramount this afternoon?' type thing." Commenting on the same set of pictures I showed to Angie, Andrea rejected what she called "sexist" portrayal of female bodybuilders and thought more suitable representations should include women wearing sponsored gym outfits and performing training techniques with sponsor logos in the frame of the picture. Celine, like Angie, took a non-judgmental position on women who pose for this photography but expressed concern for the negative consequences such representations have on public perceptions of female bodybuilders.

Bodybuilding, for women in general, are looked at as hard core...you get the stereotype of "oh they must be really into wild sex" or something because they are into bodybuilding and don't mind showing off their bodies. I really do believe that there is that stereotype.

Linking back to Angie's positive positioning of sexualised imagery, Emma argued that female bodybuilders should be seen as "sexy and feminine." Again, in Chapter 3, Emma also expressed concern for what she sees as women who are too muscular and 'manly' ruining the sport. On one level, for her, (hetero)sexiness is important for reversing this stereotype to save the future of the sport. Using the example of some work by bodybuilding photographer Bill Dobbins in *Iron Man* magazine, Emma commented: "They should put more of those Bill Dobbins' photos in there or photograph a girl in that kind of setting just to show that they are muscular but yet sexy." The photographs Emma is referring to rely upon highly racialized and gendered conventions of pornography in which female bodybuilders appear as

'cheesecake' amongst celebrations of hypermuscular male power. Leslie Heywood rejects the argument that female muscle must be sexualized in order to be acceptable. She takes issue with "pornographic representations" of female bodybuilders not because they are pornographic but because they reduce highly skilled and accomplished athletes to the sum of their sexualized parts (1998, 96). Heywood argues that sexualization negates the being-for-self that is key to bodybuilding practice for women and the third wave feminist agenda that she argues is implicit in the sport (1998, 95). Noting the gendered differences between how male bodybuilders and female bodybuilders are pictured in bodybuilding magazines, Heywood writes: "he is represented as a bodybuilding athlete, while she is represented as a woman who happens to be a bodybuilder" (1998, 98). She argues that while male bodybuilders are framed by a masculine privilege of being for themselves, sexualized photography upholds sexist relegation of female athletes to a position of being-for-others (ibid.).

While I agree with Heywood's insightful analysis, there must also be room to explore, seriously, women's expressions of pleasure and empowerment derived from being the subjects of sexualized photography. The pride and satisfaction Emma expresses for her own photographs published in a bodybuilding magazine, challenges Heywood's condemnatory position on bodybuilding pornography as necessarily negative objectification of women's bodies. While Emma takes a similar position to Heywood on representations of fitness models that she refers to as "T & A," she diverges from Heywood in her celebratory attitude towards bodybuilding magazines. In Emma's view, these pictures "glamorize" female bodybuilders and show that

muscular women, though strong, can also be feminine and sexy. For Emma, these representations legitimate muscular women as powerful, beautiful and sexually desirable in a culture that does not value muscularity on women.

On the one hand, Emma's protectiveness of female bodybuilders being seen as beautiful and sexy can be interpreted as her internalization of the heterosexist gender norms promoted by bodybuilding gatekeepers. Yet women who comply with the need to feminize and heterosexualize female muscle need not be viewed as passive dupes of patriarchy. Though not a bodybuilder, Nina Hartley, in her article, "A Porn Star's Journey" (1997) describes the satisfaction and self-empowerment she derives from expressing her sexuality as part of her career as a sex worker. Locating her argument within feminist debates on sex work, Hartley explains her decision to become a sex worker as motivated by her desire to gain confidence in her body and develop her sexual skills. She writes, "My life is richer and more rewarding having chosen a sexually oriented occupation" (1997, 58). I do not mean to equate sexualized photography of bodybuilders with sex work nor female bodybuilders to sex workers. I have used Hartley's article because it is useful for reminding us of the positive experiences women can gain from displaying and using their bodies in sexually explicit ways. This perspective, taken seriously and respectfully, helps us to resist stigmatizing and marginalizing women who engage in sexual expression through pornography, sex work and other perceived sexually 'deviant' acts/occupations. Hartley's perspective has helped me to take seriously the reality that for many female bodybuilders, participating in sexualized photography can be a source of self-affirmation and self-pride. Returning to Angie's comment that she

would pose in a bikini if presented with the chance, we can re-read this statement for its counter-hegemonic possibilities. Elsewhere in her interview narrative, forty-eight year old Angie declares: "I want to show it all as much as possible." Joanna Frueh argues that the mid-life bodybuilder's display of her body can be a powerful and transgressive act against social taboos of middle age that deny women sexual subjectivities (1998). Though some may interpret Hartley, Emma and Angie as having false consciousness, there is also a point at which their words must be taken at face value. To do otherwise is to patronize and reproduce moralistic and class-bound notions of the inherent 'immorality' of sex and sexuality. Yet, while I agree that women's agency is crucial in this discussion, I must come back to the central tension between sexualized imagery as liberatory in its expressive possibilities for women yet also oppressive in that it perpetuates the inescapable entanglement of women's self worth with persisting ideals of feminine beauty. This is acknowledged in Kara's comment, "So much of women's worth is tied to what her body looks like." Furthermore, while I encourage that we take seriously Emma's and Angie's perspective towards sexualized representation of female bodybuilders, this understanding must not negate the fact that for many, racist and sexist objectification in photography remains a source of oppression.

I am, however, reluctant to resign sexualized portrayals of female bodybuilders to the dustbin of female degradation. Having had the opportunity to discuss with Emma how she felt about the way in which she was portrayed in some sexually explicit images in a 2002 issue of *Muscle Elegance* magazine, I propose a re-reading of these photographs that navigates the tensions I discussed above. I challenge the

radical feminist perspective that sexualization of women's bodies can only be oppressive to women and flex the tensions between the empowering and oppressive implications of sexualized imagery in the context of *Muscle Elegance* magazine. Patricia Hill-Collins writes: "Black feminist analysis of sexual politics must go beyond chronicling how sexuality has been used to oppress. Equally important is the need to reconceptualize sexuality with an eye toward empowering African American women" (Hill-Collins, 1992, 132). In the following discussion I take up Hill-Collins' challenge in my analysis of *Muscle Elegance* and in particular, Emma's pictures that appear in this magazine. What racialized, heteosexualized and gendered discourses converge on women's bodies in this magazine and how do images of white women and non-white women reproduce and/or contest the heterosexist and racist terrain of bodybuilding photography?

Before I proceed it is necessary to position myself in relation to Emma and my analysis of her photographs. I recognize the problematic position from which I 'look' at these pictures as a white, heterosexual, middle-class observer who is potentially complicit in the re-objectification of Emma's body. I have chosen to examine these pictures for two reasons. First, Emma is the only woman in my sample who has posed for a magazine, nude or otherwise. Second, this is a unique opportunity to compare her own thoughts, ideas, and attitudes about the hypermuscular female body with how she is represented in these pictures. I do not pretend that because I share an axis of gender with Emma other differences do not matter. However, I can transform the way I 'look' at these pictures by looking through a critical anti-racist feminist lens informed by Emma and by black feminist



thinkers. As I discussed in Chapter 1, in my initial draft of this chapter I focused primarily on Emma's pictures which resulted in a problematic asymmetry of my analysis. This was problematic because it risked reproducing black women's bodies and sexualities as fetishized objects of the white gaze. To avoid this problem I have chosen to examine *Muscle Elegance* more closely as a text and place my analysis of Emma's pictures within the context of how other women are framed and positioned in relation to one another.

"Do we care about our readers or what?" (writer for *Muscle Elegance* boasting the derobing of a professional female bodybuilder): A critical re-reading of sexualized imagery in *Muscle Elegance* magazine.

*Muscle Elegance* is about showcasing women's sexuality in an empowered way. What *Muscle Elegance* is trying to do is tap into the independence that women in our society are talking about having today. Women are still growing. We're growing in respect to our sexuality, in talking about it, in expressing it and in not being made to feel that it's inappropriate because we're women (editor, *Muscle Elegance*, 70, 2002).

On one level, this quote from the female editor of *Muscle Elegance* echoes Nina Hartley's argument that porn or sex work or other kinds of sexualized acts and occupations can be positive and empowering ways for women to explore and express their sexuality. *Muscle Elegance* is one of the few bodybuilding magazines still in circulation that focuses on female bodybuilders.<sup>24</sup> It can be seen as valuable for its celebration of female hypermuscularity and presentation of muscular women as sexual, attractive and powerful in a culture that abhors muscularity on women. However, the above quote is also problematic because of its essentialist use of the

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<sup>24</sup> *Women's Physique World* is the another magazine still in circulation which is edited by bodybuilding historian, Steve Wennerstrom.

term 'woman' which obscures the sexist, racist and hereocentric signifying system in which sexualized photographs of female bodybuilders are produced. The title of the magazine speaks to the pressures by both bodybuilding gatekeepers and readers to feminize female muscle. *Muscle Elegance* connotes the demasculinization of female muscle that Leslie Heywood laments and recuperates the featured athletes' transgressions by framing them within norms of heterosexual attractiveness.

As I pointed out in my introduction to this chapter, my critical focus in this discussion is not to resolve debates around the inherent goodness or badness of depictions of nudity, sex and sexuality. Like Heywood who points out in her chapter on "bodybuilding pornography," "the criticism is not a criticism of sex, or of marketability, or of personal agency or judgments of women's choices to be photographed or pro-censorship arguments around the depiction of sex, sexuality and nudity" (1998, 99). Rather, and to paraphrase Heywood, my interest lies in examining the kind of cultural work that the images in *Muscle Elegance* are doing. That is, what assumptions, ideologies and meanings are built into the photographs of female bodybuilders in this magazine? How are white women and women of colour framed/positioned in comparison to one another? How do these various images reproduce and/or contest heterosexist, sexist and racist contexts in which most sexualized imagery of women's bodies are situated?

*Muscle Elegance* is made up of several features on different female bodybuilders. Each feature consists of erotic photographs of a bodybuilder which is also accompanied by an interview/article with them. All of the articles focus on the sex lives and sexual desires of the women (whether real or imaginary) to create an erotic

fantasy for the reader. Though the muscularity and athleticism of the models are not entirely marginalized in these pictures or in the accompanying articles, the purpose of the magazine is to commodify female bodybuilders, their muscle and athleticism, as erotic fetishes for the spectator. However, this does not mean that these images cannot be read in any other way, nor that the subjects of the pictures cannot subvert the dominant meanings intended by the magazine. But, and as is characteristic of much of pornography and even mainstream sexualization of women's bodies, the images in *Muscle Elegance* racialize and (hetero)sexualize women in specific ways.

Upon my first reading of this magazine, which I obtained from Emma in order to view her pictures, I was struck by the highly racialized framing of women's bodies. On the front cover is a picture of white, American Olympian turned fitness model, Sheri Papsy. She is dressed in white lace underwear with strips of lace wound around her wrists and hands that resemble reinforcements for something like boxing gloves or bondage restraints to be used for tying her down. Blonde, tanned, toned and muscular, Papsy more closely resembles the mainstream cultural ideal of 'athletic tone' that dominates the pages of mainstream fitness and bodybuilding magazines. Turning over the page, the reader discovers the "sizzling" and supposedly hypersexual world of female bodybuilders. These initial pages are occupied by advertisements for the latest "ultra hot" videos, accompanied by pictures of white women in various full frontal poses draped over couches or soaping each other up in the shower. Another full-page advertisement promoting subscriptions to the magazine features the rear end of a black woman. The model has her face to a wall, arms spread out and back arched for the camera to focus on her buttocks and

genitalia. The caption that is placed just below her buttocks reads, “Fallen a little behind lately? Order these back issues to complete your collection” (8, 2002).

Following more advertisements, letters to the editor and a description of the magazine’s contents, are four pages of photographic coverage from a professional bodybuilding competition. Though not all of the pictures of female bodybuilders in *Muscle Elegance* are sexualized, they are dominant and therefore the selling point of the magazine.

The first featured athlete is cover model, Sheri Papsy. Entitled “Beyond the blonde” her whiteness is underscored in both the pictures and accompanying article. The opening line of the article reads: “the ancient Greeks had the right idea when they staged the early Olympics in the nude, believing that the absence of clothing improved athletic performance... At least now, we can appreciate the grace and power of Papsy’s physique the way god and the ancient Greeks intended ” (12, 2002). Linking her to the perceived great civilization of the ancient Greeks, Papsy is portrayed in white lace underwear, alternatively flexing her biceps and touching her breasts or genitals while pouting at the camera. Later pictured in a black rain coat with nothing underneath but black knee high boots and a bondage-like studded belt around her waste, these images draw on the idealization of white woman as a beautiful and sexually available object of white male desire. These embedded assumptions about Papsy’s heterosexuality are bolstered by the article in which the writer probes her sexual history and her desires in a relationship with a male partner. A muscular but not too muscular ‘bad girl’ who is also infantilised by her shaved pubic region (consistent for all of the models in the magazine regardless of race)

Papsy along with other white models are part of a binary system of signification in which they are juxtaposed to black women in the magazine.<sup>25</sup> While black women are mostly pictured outdoors against a backdrop of nature, white women such as Papsy almost always appear indoors: against studio backgrounds such as bathrooms, bedrooms and shower stalls. White Czechoslovakian bodybuilder, Bianca Korbova, also a model, is pictured crawling on counter tops and perched on bar stools- the eroticized pedestals of white femininity. Korbova is also infantilized, dressed in a too-small school girl's uniform at which she tears at like an uncomfortable child but with a coy smile on her face. Though her ethnicity is highlighted as an erotic feature of her character, "The way I make love is very European," her whiteness ensures that she is read in ways that elevate her as an erotic object, not a primitive 'Other' that is characteristic of portrayals of black women. Alice Walker writes: "Where white women are depicted in pornography as objects, black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted as 'objects' if not human beings - black women are depicted as shit" (quoted on Hill-Collins, 1996, 344).

According to Anne Balsamo, racialization and exoticization of women into binary opposites "reveal(s) ...how culture processes transgressive bodies in such a way as to keep each body in its place - that is, subjected to its "other." For white women, this other is the idealized "strong" male body; for black women, it is the white female body" (1998, 55). Though Balsamo's quote does capture the way in

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<sup>25</sup> In this issue of *Muscle Elegance*, only white and black women are featured. Thus I am specifically problematizing whiteness and blackness in this discussion only. I do not mean to conflate blackness with race exclusively.

which *Muscle Elegance* frames female bodybuilders, her point fails to account for the absence of Asian women or

South Asian women in the magazine. In the context of bodybuilding, the binary racialization of white and black women seems to operate to the exclusion of Asian or other women of colour who are rarely depicted in bodybuilding magazines. In my earlier theorization of the striking absence of Asian women from bodybuilding representation, I suggested that hypermuscular Asian women are unintelligible within racist and sexist western discourse of who and what Asian women are.

Unable to 'make sense of' Asian female hypermuscularity because it confounds myths of their supposed sexual subservience, hypermuscular Asian women are rarely represented. This particular issue of *Muscle Elegance*, for example, does not feature any other racial groupings outside of Anglo-Saxon and African American.

Interestingly, in the absence of any Native American models, black female amateur bodybuilder, Ty Badger, is used as a stand-in for an exotic native Other. Pictured wearing a headband, jewelry and wrist cuffs reminiscent of the Pocahontas-type stereotypes of native women, Badger is described as "the essence of Spartan sensuality" (79, 2002). This conflation of differences amongst women of colour reproduces the racist assumption that all non-white people are essentially "the same" and thus can be interchangeably exoticized to fulfill white racist hunger for a racially subordinated 'Other.'

The binary racialization of women in *Muscle Elegance* can be further demonstrated by comparing Emma's pictures to the images of white women described above. Patricia Hill-Collins notes that images of white women's sexuality

in pornography are “intertwined with the controlling image of the sexually denigrated Black woman” (1992, 344). Entitled, “Dark Diva,” Emma’s photographs are situated in the middle of the magazine, following the pictorials of Korbova and Papsy. Covering twelve pages of the magazine, including a centerfold poster in the middle, Emma’s photographs are clearly the feature of this issue of the magazine. From pictures of her face and torso, muscular arms and breasts, to full frontal images, all of these pictures draw upon the myth of primitivism through the internal composition of the photographs as well as historical allusion (1992, Williams 2000, Brady 2001). This observation is not intended to denigrate Emma or undermine her agency and empowerment, that I argue, is also clear in these pictures. My point is that portrayals based on stereotyped notions of race, gender and sexuality are implemented in these photographs to tap into the socially constructed and racist desires of the intended heterosexual and perhaps, predominantly white viewer.

Allusions to primitivism and the myth of black women’s supposed hypersexuality are most powerful in two of Emma’s photographs. The first is a picture of her sitting side-on, somewhere outside in a courtyard or by water, with one leg raised and bent at the knee to reveal both her buttocks and genitals to the viewer. Wearing nothing but a heavy gold necklace with hair extensions cascading down her back, she drinks in the sun’s broad spotlight with her head back and her eyes closed. One of the few pictures in which she does not look directly at the viewer, the reader can gaze upon Emma who is seemingly unaware that she is being looked at. The second image of Emma that draws on these same racist assumptions is a full-page photograph in which Emma is pictured with her back to the viewer, crawling on all

fours up a staircase. She has her left leg raised so that both her buttocks and genitals are central to the viewer's gaze. Also, shot outdoors with a long mane of hair flowing down her back, Emma is photographed to capitalize on racist stereotypes about black women's sexuality as part of the animal kingdom. Coupled with the description: "she's all sex and muscle," both of these photographs illustrate how the magazine capitalizes on allusions to the nineteenth century racist myths of black female sexual primitivism (famously imposed upon the figure of Sarah Bartman a.k.a. the "Hottentot Venus" see hooks 1991 and Gilman 1985 ).

Representations of black and white women's bodies in this issue of *Muscle Elegance* can be better understood in the broader context of capitalist commodification of women's bodies and sexualities in pornography. The editors and publishers of *Muscle Elegance* capitalize on the legacy of white racist voyeurism of black women (and more broadly women of colour) in their associations of black women with animals. Emma describes the consumers of the magazine as predominantly male and heterosexual: "You get a lot of these bodybuilding fans, they love to see the women nude or glamourized and these guys all have a different fetish like legs, biceps or whatever so like this is the stuff fans ask for." Catering to this audience, the magazine's female editor,<sup>26</sup> states that the magazine's principal aim is "giving the readers what they want" (2002, 9). Though more research is needed to determine the racial demographic of *Muscle Elegance* readers, it is clear that the photographs are intended to cater to a predominantly heterosexual and male audience. The publication of only heterosexual and mostly male readers' letters to the editor provides some evidence for this assumption. The letters in this



issue are mostly from men praising the photography of women as well as one letter from a 'housewife' who praises the magazine for re-igniting her sex life with her husband (2002, 6). Though many of the images play with homoeroticism between women, the magazine is careful to construct all of the models as heterosexual. For example, in the article accompanying Emma's pictures the interviewer probes her sexual encounters with threesomes. Emma responds that she finds women to be "very sexy and sensual" but quickly counters: "I am by no means gay. And I could not be in a one-on-one relationship with a woman" (2002, 42). Yet, despite the magazine's attempt to encode Emma and other models as heterosexual, the enjoyment and pleasures queer/lesbian/bisexual readers might derive from these pictures destabilizes the heterosexist context. Steven Maynard makes the excellent point: "We must also be alive to the many visual pleasures homoerotic advertising may hold for the gay spectator" (1994, 9). Critiques that focus only on the heterosexualization of bodybuilding athletes in bodybuilding photography risk obfuscating the agency of lesbian/bisexual/queer readers to make alternative interpretations of images otherwise embedded in heterosexist contexts.

Maynard writes, "Photographs of course, do not have inherent sexual identities but take on sexual meanings only in complex relationship between image and spectator (1994, 7)." In his compelling article, Maynard argues that clothing companies such as Calvin Klein and Banana Republic seek to capitalize on the 'Pink economy' by embedding homoerotic messages in their advertising. Yet, he points out that this is often done in a way that speaks to the lesbian or gay viewer without

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<sup>26</sup> Respecting Emma's request, I cannot reveal the name of *Muscle Elegance's* editor.

disrupting the heterosexual context for straight viewers. His article invites some important questions for developing a queer reading of the images in *Muscle Elegance*. How do lesbian/ queer/bisexual readers interpret heterosexist photography? How do the meanings they attach to these images destabilize or transform the messages intended for a heterosexual, white, male audience? If any of the models in the magazine are lesbian or bisexual, what meanings might they make of their own sexualization as well as the portrayals of other women? Though queer readings aren't necessarily less problematic than heterosexual ones, and queer white readers might very well derive pleasure from the associations of blackness with primitivism, they remind us of the instability of meanings attached to any image. Furthermore, by being open to attempting queer readings of texts, we can avoid reproducing the heterocentrism that occurs when we fail to make heterosexuality visible.

Having briefly mapped this political terrain, I wish to turn now to Emma's agency in these pictures. Jacqueline Brady writes that, "the critique that ends by dismissing black female bodybuilders as white male replicants needs to probe the gym-built blank body further for the socially specific discursive layers that resurface or never fully disappear" (2001,261). As I explained in Chapter 3, Brady positions bodybuilding as an embodied practice through which women can negotiate discourses that produce them as gendered and raced bodies. Challenging Balsamo's argument that the technologically reconstructed body in the end is ultimately "reconstructed according to dominant codes of femininity and racial identity" (1998, 41), Brady asks, "Don't the self-reconstructions of black female bodybuilders also

give them power?" Like Brady, I am not so sure that Balsamo's theorization of the process of 'recuperating' women's muscle to racialized norms of femininity and heterosexuality can be as complete as she suggests. Foucault's theorization of power is extremely useful here because although he describes in detail how disciplinary forms of power constitute the modern individual, he also recognizes that power is dynamic and there is always "necessarily the possibility of resistance" (1979). I reformulate Brady's question to ask: "Don't the sexualized portrayals of hypermuscular black women also give them power?" I argue that there are three ways in which Emma can be interpreted as negotiating the sexist, heterosexist, and racist terrain of *Muscle Elegance* magazine: 1) her pride in her pictures articulated in her interview narrative, 2) her counter hegemonic gaze and 3) the ways in which she occupies space in the photographs.

*Emma's personal satisfaction and pride*

In her interview narrative, Emma expresses excitement about the magazine and her positive experience of posing for them.

*Muscle Elegance*, they do it for the girls, it's for you. It's all about you so they have the whole thing set up like whatever scene they want to put you in but they let you be creative, let you do your own thing. You are part of it too and they help you along but you know if you want to do a certain pose they let you be creative... They make you feel so comfortable and they let you get into it so it's not just for them, you know, it's all about you."

Emma constructs herself as an active agent in this quote, placing her comfort and her pleasure at the centre of her experience. This detabalizes critiques of sexually explicit imagery that position women as passive victims, objectified for the

voyeuristic pleasure of others. Though, and as I mentioned earlier, this should not cancel out the fact that for some this is the indeed case. Sex worker and feminist, Nina Hartley whose article I discussed earlier, supports the pleasure Emma derives from displaying her body in sexually explicit ways. Hartley writes: "I do not find it particularly demeaning to make a living with my body, because I don't think sex is intrinsically bad. I don't think vulvas and penises are dirty, and I don't think that lust is horrible or anti-love" (1997, 62).

In her excellent article, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie pictures in the mid-Twentieth Century U.S" (1996), Joanne Meyerowitz analyses the heated debates over images of black and white women in *Playboy*, *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* in the 1940's and 1950's. Contextualizing Emma's pictures within these debates helps to problematize their racialized context as well as challenge assumptions that sexualized images of black women are entirely negative and oppressive. Meyerowitz uses letters written by female readers to *Ebony* and *Negro Digest* to explore their conflicting and diverse responses to pornography of black women. These letters generally fall into two moral and political camps.

Meyerowitz writes:

The defenders of cheesecake saw it as respectable beauty, so respectable, in fact, that the inclusion of African-American women counted as racial advancement. In contrast, for the opponents of cheesecake, semi-nude images reflected negatively in the moral status of African-American women and hindered the struggles for racial progress (1996, 21).

Though the imagery I am discussing is far more sexually explicit than 'cheesecake' of the 1940's, these debates continue to resonate today. Although I find many of the images of Emma problematic in their historical allusions to racist stereotyping of

black women's sexualities, I cannot deny the positive attitude with which Emma approaches them. Referring to the editor with who Emma worked on her pictures, she says: "she takes the girls and totally glamourizes them...her magazine is about showing how muscular women can still be feminine, beautiful, and sexy." For Emma, being strong yet feminine and sexy is key to her pride in her body and enjoyment derived from posing nude. Though many anti-porn feminists would likely place Emma's nude photographs on a continuum with images of, "blonde women with big tits and tight arses," (Emma's words) featured in magazines such as *Muscle Mag*, Emma makes a clear distinction between them.

"I refuse to pay for garbage, especially when they are not supporting my sport. All they do is bikini lay outs and when you look at most of these girls, they don't even look like they've touched weights."

Emma's comment can be viewed as an affirmation of the beauty and sensuality of hypermuscular women who are most often marginalized in mainstream and hardcore bodybuilding magazines. Similar to supporters of *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*, Emma can be interpreted as defending black women's equality by exercising her right to take pride in her sexuality and her blackness in a culture that values neither. Emma straddles the tensions between her right to be a physically and sexually empowered figure and black communities' fears of invoking racist stereotypes through the display of her body. Yet, listening to her onbvious pride in her body I wonder how we can view Emma in moments of what bell hooks refers to as 'loving blackness' (1992). Loving blackness, hooks explains, "is self-love as revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination. Loving blackness transforms

our ways of looking and being and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the faces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (1992, 21).

Though Emma does not share the 'white' physical characteristics valued in black or bi-racial models such as Naomi Campbell, among the six participants in my study, Emma was one of two women who did not disclose body image struggles.

This is not to say that they do not affect her especially in a racist culture that values whiteness and white culture above blackness and black culture (hooks 1992). Rather I am suggesting that Emma is more comfortable in her body than some of the other participants and that these photographs speak to her pride and comfort in her body.

Hartley explains, "Through my experiences stripping, I learned many valuable lessons. I learned that my body was attractive to many different men, even though I am many inches and pounds away from any magazine model (1997, 61)."

Commenting that she had always wanted to do a nude layout in a magazine before her encounter with *Muscle Elegance*, Emma claims a space within this magazine to affirm her sexual Self. Although this space is problematic in that representations of women are produced through highly racialized, classed and sexualized binaries, Emma can still be seen as doing important cultural work towards loving blackness and transgressive female muscularity.

#### *Looking back: Emma's counter-hegemonic gaze*

Another way in which Emma can be seen as destabilizing the racialized and heterocentric framing of her image is through her gaze. The way in which she looks back at the viewer does not simply invite them to consume her body as a passive sexual object but dares them to desire her. bell hooks notes the significance of

‘looking back’ for black men and women who were historically exhibited on the auction block for assessment by white slave traders (1992, 115, also see Williams, 2001). As a woman, returning the gaze has a doubly transgressive meaning for Emma. She is not supposed to claim the masculine privilege of the gaze afforded to black male bodybuilders. In their article, “Reading the muscular body: A critical decoding of advertisement in *Flex* magazine” (1994), Philip White and James Gillett identify the gaze of the male bodybuilder as one of the defining features of men’s bodybuilding photography. Examining how meanings encoded in images of male bodybuilders promote and legitimate a “dominance-based masculinity,” they argue that the gaze is integral to the celebration of masculine physicality (1994,19). Analyzing an image in which a male bodybuilder performs a bicep curl and directs his cathartic scream at the viewer, they write: “His aggressive stare at the reader...counteracts the voyeuristic possibilities of his being looked at by the reader. His glare says that he is looking at the reader more than vice versa. Thus the standard expression of male domination and female subordination- the right to look- is not disrupted” (1994, 27). The gaze foregrounds the perceived heterosexual male’s physical prowess, the power and strength of his body connoted by his hypermuscularity. Femininity, on the other hand, is typically constructed in bodybuilding magazines as the binary opposite of the figure of the male bodybuilder. Leslie Heywood refers to these representations of women as “counter-representations” (1998, 99). She argues that women are objects to be looked at; to be valued only for their sexual availability and not their physical prowess. This is

underscored by many of the photographs in *Muscle Elegance* in which women deflect their gaze away from the viewer.

Unlike these images, in almost all of her pictures Emma looks directly at the viewer with a cool confident gaze. Her counter hegemonic gaze is particularly powerful in the centre-fold picture, a two page poster in which she appears in a full-body close up that is cropped at the top of her hair and mid-thigh. Emma poses against a background of water and trees in a colourful sarong that is tied around her waist and parted at the front to reveal her pubic area. Staring directly into the lens of the camera she poses with hands on her hips and her elbows out, opening up the photographic space. Her muscles flexed and rippling, this image more closely resembles pictures of male bodybuilders described by White and Gillett. Reading this image against Emma's own affirmations of her unique athletic ability and dedication, her gaze challenges representations of the black female body where "the black body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant" (hooks, 66). Despite the long white nails, large gold earrings and make-up that add a feminine touch to the image, her posture and confident gaze assert a masculine presence that challenges the heterocentric context of the magazine. A powerful figure both physically, sexually, and psychically, Emma's gender bending body and, at times, ambiguous performance in these pictures opens up spaces of desire not only for heterosexual men but to heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual female viewers. Emma's oppositional gaze has the power to disrupt dominant relations of male domination and female subordination as well as heterocentrism. bell hooks writes: "Even in the worse



circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (1992, 116).

*Posturing resistance*

One of the most powerful images of Emma in the "Dark Diva" collection is a seated back-double-bicep pose.<sup>27</sup> The first picture of this series, she sits with her back to the viewer, legs either side of the incline bench she is sitting on and with her arms raised and flexed to produce a body-length ripple of muscle. No costume or props are used in this picture except for the bench she is sitting on. Although it is not the largest picture on the page, it is a significant and powerful shot that does not diminish her muscularity. Repeatedly stating that "a muscular woman should be strong yet beautiful and sexy" Emma foregrounds her muscle in this pictures in the same way that she places *strength* at the beginning of her sentence. Pictured amongst the machines she has used to build her physique, this shot stands out amongst others that do use traditional sets and props to feminize and eroticize black women's bodies. It does not fit the type of 'do-me' pictures described by Leslie Heywood nor the primitivist-type of images of black women breaking from chains described by hooks and Hill-Collins. Similar to the centre-fold poster described above, this photograph also resembles portrayals of male bodybuilders (White and Gillett 1994). As the images progress from shots of her muscular upper body and face to full frontal photographs, a tension remains between the magazine's attempts to position her as an exotic, racial 'other,' and her own counter-hegemonic celebration of her body. The alternative meanings encoded in this picture are not

papered over in the rest of the photographs but continue to make their appearances through the make-up and leather boots, the long exotic hair and racist and sexist frameworks the magazine builds around her. However, controlling images can never be escaped entirely. Emma's blackness and hypermuscularity have implications for how she is perceived by others. Attached to the myth of the strong black woman is also the racist stereotype of the mannish black lesbian (Hill-Collins 1999) which in Chapter 3, was used by many of the participants to distance themselves from women perceived as having gone 'too far' with their muscularity. Emma works hard to counteract this stereotype in her interview narrative by distancing herself from black women who get 'too big' and whom she perceives to be mannish. She can also be read as trying to dispel this stereotype in her pictures by her need to project a sexy image of hypermuscular femininity. Yet, despite efforts to encode Emma as heterosexual, feminine and sexy, this does not mean these pictures have to be read this way.

Another photograph, in which Emma appears outside, against the backdrop of a white painted house, is a good example of how images can be read against the grain. This picture is a close-up of her torso and face in which she is leaning on one hand with the other arm outstretched to display her massive bicep. Cropped at the forearm, her bicep and breasts are featured in this shot. With her face turned slightly towards her outstretched arm but looking at the viewer, a smile plays across her lips. Emma can be read as holding out her muscular arm for erotic recognition. A famous photograph of Lisa Lyon, the winner of the first Women's World Bodybuilding Championship in 1979, by Robert Mapplethorpe (1983) provides a useful

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<sup>27</sup> See glossary for definition.

comparison with Emma's picture. This comparison is useful for unpacking the ways in which Emma subverts notions of normative femininity (read: white and heterosexual). In Mapplethorpe's black and white picture of Lyon, only her right breast and right arm (flexing her bicep) is included in the frame. Her breast as a symbol for femininity is clearly juxtaposed to her muscular bicep as a symbol of masculinity. Yet, Lyon's muscularity is representative of the sport's earlier ideals of female muscle when women were little more developed than the average woman. Compared to this photograph, Emma can be seen as radically refiguring dominant racist and heterocentric associations between femininity and muscularity encoded in the picture of Lyon. Even though both of Emma's breasts are included in the frame of her picture as a marker of her femininity, the size of her bicep exceeds the 'balance' between femininity and muscularity that is suggested in Mapplethorpe's photograph of Lyon.

Emma's confident, erotic gaze challenges assumptions implicit in stereotypes of the masculinized black women that blackness is not beautiful, feminine, or desirable. Emma performs a mixture of masculinity and femininity in all of her photographs that brings together all of the heterogeneous elements of her body and identity. To put it in her own words, she is, "Strong, yet feminine and sexy." Though I continue to feel discomfort with the ways in which Emma is positioned in these photographs, both because of their racialized context and the way in which I am positioned in relation to them, I also recognize the important cultural work that Emma is doing. That is, she negotiates this complex terrain of racism and sexism in which bodybuilding magazines are situated. Never fully contained by racist and

sexist discourses that Balsamo argues, “keep each body in its place- that is, subjected its “other” (Balsamo,1998, 55) but never fully free of them either, Emma is a complex figure of power, submission, subversion and pleasure. For her, building muscle and showing it off in sexualized photography is a source of satisfaction and empowerment. Flexing her muscles and refusing to close her eyes in submission to the discourses of whiteness and heterocentrism that construct her image, Emma flexes the tensions of taboos of both displaying her black body and being the subject of queer as well as heterosexual desire.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which black and white female bodybuilders negotiate race, gender and sexuality in sexualized photography found in bodybuilding magazines. Examining my participants’ diverse and often positive responses to sexually explicit depictions of female bodybuilders highlights the dangers of dismissing such representations as simply oppressive to women. Although these images circulate in a racist and heterocentric marketplace where editors capitalize on stereotypes of black women’s and white women’s bodies, bodybuilding magazines can also be a space for female bodybuilders, like Emma, to affirm their beauty, enjoy their sexuality and express positive self esteem. My focus on queer readings of Emma’s pictures builds upon the work of hooks, Hill-Collins, Williams, and Brady. Emma transgresses notions of heterosexual femininity in this magazine by both expanding her hypermuscular body in the frame as well as daring to look confidently back at the viewer. Thus she can be read as hybridizing masculinity and femininity in a way that appeals to readers across a range of genders

and sexualities. Discussions about black female bodybuilders' agency in sexualized representation is important for generating new interpretations that can celebrate black women's agency while also highlighting intersections between heterocentrism, sexism, and racism in the context of capitalism. Most importantly, for myself as a white feminist, anti-racist analysis must be conducted with honesty and a keen eye to recognize how our perspectives might reproduce racism, even though we are attempting to dismantle it.

Finally, my discussion of the ways in which female bodybuilders negotiate the erasure of female bodybuilders in mainstream bodybuilding magazines suggests some important connections to be made between the overrepresentation of young, white fitness models and the barriers most of my participants faced in gaining sponsorship. Kara explains the shift in popularity of female bodybuilders to fitness models because of the greater appeal of fitness models' more 'feminine muscularity.'

Kara: At the professional level women's bodybuilding is dying. If you review the statistics of the number of Ms Olympia competitors each year since it started, it has decreased practically every single year. The only female bodybuilding that I believe is growing is natural competition. I'll bet if you compare the numbers between natural bodybuilding and fitness or physique, those are growing much faster. It would be interesting to talk to B because she's having some real challenges getting sponsorship...if she were a fitness athlete she would probably have had sponsorship by a supplement company months ago.

More in depth research is needed with a broader cross-section of female bodybuilders, judges, promoters, reporters, and executives to investigate the extent to which this shift signals the demise of female bodybuilding as a sport as well as how it contributes to the lack of sponsorship available to female bodybuilding athletes.

## CONCLUSION

### CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR MY RESEARCH

Contemplating the developments of female muscularity throughout female bodybuilding's short history, there is some uncertainty in which direction the sport will next grow. Some of my participants lament the real possibility of the sport 'dying out.' This could well be the reality due to increasing abhorrence for hypermuscular women and concomitant popularity of the fitness and figure models who bear more of a resemblance to mainstream ideals of 'toned' femininity. In the view of some, if only female athletes would 'down size' and 'soften' their muscularity, the sport might have a chance. Yet, for those of us who wish to see female hypermuscularity maintained and grown beyond current attempts to curtail it, sadly, as Kara articulates, I do not see this in the immediate future of the sport.

I can tell you, I can guarantee you that the future of this sport is going to the more natural looking bodybuilder, well proportioned, fairly lean but still very recognizably feminine. The mass majority of peoples are going to be more appealed to that and it's just the way the sport is going to go. I can see it, I can feel, everything is leading to that way and the number of people who are an extreme bodybuilder in the extreme sense of the word are such a small minority of people. They realize that these fitness magazines and these health conscious magazines are selling way more copies, they're getting way bigger sponsors and bigger companies that are going to promote those type of people so they either jump on board or they lose out and that's their choice. It's going to be phased out and there may be a very small segment for the freak bodybuilder.

Living in an increasingly visual culture as we do, in which representations of women have gotten worse, not improved since the feminist movement, I am inclined to agree with Kara. More reasearch into the political, ideological, economic and social

factors behind this current movement to marginalise hypermuscular women is needed. Though I believe it to be a reality that women's bodybuilding as we know it may be eventually phased out, I must believe that hypermuscular women will continue to resist their extinction. At least this is what I tell myself each morning at 6am when I get up and pack my bag for the gym.

The relationship between muscularity and social constructions of femininity, though often an area of morbid fascination in mainstream media, is a very important area for feminist anti-racist research. As I touched on in my introduction to this text, the 'gender trouble' that the coupling of femininity and muscularity produces reveals much about how our current cultural systems work and how they can be transformed and/or resisted. Though my research is limited in so far as my findings are based on a very small sample of women, it's strength lies in the detailed insights I have gained into individual women's perspectives on their bodybuilding practice. These findings are useful for making some theoretical and methodological contributions to the feminist literature to which my research is indebted.

In chapter 2, I critique authors who reduce women's engagements with competitive bodybuilding to be either feminist and liberatory or simply passive dupes of patriarchy. Indeed, my research reveals that the participants in my study used bodybuilding as a strategy to negotiate ways of complying with and resisting race, gender, age and class norms that structure the sport.

In my literature review I argue against the simplification of women's engagement with bodybuilding into binary categories of liberation and oppression and suggest that resistance takes many and complex forms. I also argue that

resistance can be both consciously and unconsciously enacted and cannot be separated from sites of compliance. Though I have not applied her work to my analysis in any depth, Judith Butler's (1990) theories of identity politics are supported by the complex negotiations I have identified in my participants' engagements with bodybuilding. My research supports Judith Butler's theory that, "It is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of gender becomes possible" (1990, 145). This means that resistance is inextricably bound up with efforts to adhere to the culturally constructed rules of normative gender. This helps explain why resistance and agency can be located in the same site, even when resisting or complying to gender norms is not the intention of the subject. The many and diverse contradictions between my participants' ideals for the ultimate female bodybuilder and their own subversive goals and practices, warns us against attempting to separate gender performances into dichotomies of compliance and resistance.

This insight invites the question: How can we ask questions about female bodybuilders' engagements with bodybuilding that avoid dichotomizing them into exclusive categories of either resistance or compliance? In the context of her own work, Butler responds by insisting that questions of agency need to be "reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work" (1990, 144). That is, rather than asking if women's bodybuilding is a feminist practice or not we must focus attention on what cultural norms are embedded in bodybuilding as an institution and how female bodybuilders interpret them. My findings show that by avoiding over-simplification of data and instead complicating the analysis by using



intersectionality opens up spaces to consider marginalized perspectives and interpretations. These perspectives help challenge dominant discourses such as heterocentrism and Anglocentrism both in the data under study as well as in the writing of my research.

In chapter 3 I examine how gender structures three levels of my participants' engagements with bodybuilding: 1) their individual motivations for bodybuilding, 2) their perceptions of the relationship between femininity and muscularity and 3) their competitive performances. At each level I ask, how does gender inform their bodybuilding practices and what does this reveal about women's abilities to subvert the (hetero)sexist and racist foundations of normative femininity? My findings in this chapter support feminist literature that theorizes women's engagements with bodybuilding to involve complex negotiations of gender, race, heterosexual and class norms (Balsamo, 1998, Brady, 2001, Williams, 2000). I also extend on those that do not consider race or heterosexism in their analysis (St Martin and Gavey, 1996, Mansfield and McGinn, 1993, Wesley, 2001, Heywood, 1998). At the first level, why women build, I found that bodybuilding for most of my participants was a strategy for negotiating cultural norms of femininity. For those of my participants who began bodybuilding to lose weight and/or manage eating disorders, bodybuilding functions as an important structural element in their lives. That is, the dieting and training for an athletic goal helped them to cope with the pervasive cultural pressure to possess a lean body.

Gender also intersected with age and race in my participants' motivations for bodybuilding. For example, Angie was challenged to become a bodybuilding athlete

at forty-one because of discouragement she received from a personal trainer about her body- shape and age. Angie actively used bodybuilding as a vehicle to transgress barriers of age and gender and become an accomplished athlete at a time in a woman's life when society expects her to slow down. A woman of Cherokee decent, Angie perceived her bodybuilding as having an impact on racist stereotypes of aboriginal peoples as 'lazy' and 'unmotivated.' In my critical review of the feminist literature, I identify silence around sexuality and race in much of the theory. More specifically, I argue that many writers neglect to consider how heterocentrism and racism shape female bodybuilders' attitudes towards femininity and muscularity as well as their competitive performances. My analysis in Chapter 3 and 4 reveals the importance of applying intersectional analysis to data and shows the level of complexity and nuance that can be gained from probing these marginalized axes.

Though I identify many sites of transgression enacted by my participants, sites of compliance with gender norms are of equal importance. I extend Joanna Frueh's theorization of bodybuilding for middle-aged women as a supremely empowering activity by examining how Angie and other women also reproduce racist, sexist and heterosexist ideals. My research highlights the tension between discourses of empowerment that speak to the power and self-esteem women can gain from bodybuilding and discourses of female self-management that speak to the ways women might use bodybuilding to achieve a fat-free and controlled body. My distinction between these two discourses challenges Susan Bordo's conflation of them as two sides of the same coin. In Chapter 3, I examine how my participants' positioning of hypermuscularity as more healthful than being thin contests Bordo's

conflation of anorexia and bodybuilding. My participants' responses also pose challenges to the feminist literature examined in Chapter 2 that view female bodybuilders as dupes of patriarchy because of their practices of dieting and exercise. Their counter-hegemonic valuation of maturity of age as a positive attribute of female bodybuilders as well as Emma's valuation of blackness, reveals that my participants' ideals and practice are not simply molded and shaped by mainstream patriarchal gender norms.

Contrary to beliefs that the site of bodybuilding competition allows the least room for resistance to normative femininity, I found that the participants continued to negotiate reproducing and re-figuring hegemonic femininity in their posing routines. Their competitive performances cannot be easily contained as one-dimensional reproductions of institutionalized gender norms. Although they are shaped by dominant discourses of race, class, age and gender, on-stage performances are an embodied opportunity for these athletes to delight and express pride and confidence in their bodies, to construct personal meanings and express creativity. Yet, neither can they be easily read as resistance to these norms. My analysis of their attitudes towards their own as well as other women's competitive posing routines reveals the reproduction of heterosexism and classist notions of how female athletes should present themselves on stage. Heterosexuality and middle-class sexual morality are the values that all female bodybuilders must contend with.

This theme was continued in Chapter 4 where I examine how racialization and heterocentrism operate in bodybuilding magazines. I make a distinction between mainstream bodybuilding magazines, in which female bodybuilders are largely

erased and hard-core magazines in which female bodybuilders almost always appear in sexualized photography. In this investigation I found that while most of my participants saw the mainstream representations of fitness models as trivial and somewhat sexist, most promoted sexualized imagery of female bodybuilders in bodybuilding magazines as positive for combating 'negative' stereotyping of them as 'mannish lesbians.' My findings in this chapter deepen Leslie Heywood's work both theoretically and methodologically. Theoretically, I take the participants' statements that sexualized photography can be a source of pleasure and power for female bodybuilders at face value. Though I agree with Heywood's criticism of such imagery, I extend her analysis by examining how sexualized imagery can be empowering. Specifically, I look at some photographs of one of my participants in *Muscle Elegance* magazine. I examine both how she complies with but also disrupts the heterosexist and racist context of the magazine in which white women are sexualized in binary opposition to black women. Rather than simply analyzing her pictures, I engage Emma, through her interview narrative, in my discussion of her photographs. This chapter extends Brady's questions: "How might the self-reconstruction of black women's bodies also give them power?" to consider "how might the sexualized portrayal of female bodybuilders' bodies be empowering?" I also build upon Heywood, Williams and Brady's analysis by attempting a queer reading of Emma's pictures. I recognize that my analysis is limited in that I was not able to include any queer women in my sample or consult queer readers of *Muscle Elegance* magazine. However, I am accountable to them by asking how queer readers might enjoy and interpret heterosexist images of women in bodybuilding

magazines as well as how queer athletes might derive pleasure from posing in a heterosexist context. My reading contributes to destabilizing the dominant heterosexist context of muscle magazines.

As an area of future research I would like to see more in-depth research with lesbian/queer/bisexual bodybuilders to probe the meanings they make of their practice as well as sexualized bodybuilding photography. At the conclusion of chapter 4, I point to a possible link between the overrepresentation of white, less muscular, fitness models in mainstream and bodybuilding magazines and the difficulties my participants faced in obtaining sponsorship. Future research is needed to explore how race, age, heterosexuality, and muscularity determine women's exclusion or inclusion in bodybuilding promotion and sponsorship. This is beyond the boundaries of my research, as bodybuilding gatekeepers such as judges, executives and media would need to be interviewed as well as female bodybuilders.

Overall, my analysis has illuminated some of the complex networks of power that competitive female bodybuilders negotiate. Beyond bodybuilding, my research contributes to anti-racist, feminist theories of power. For example, my discussion in Chapter 4 has some important contributions for white feminists writing about sexualized images of women of colour. I learnt from the mistakes made in writing this chapter that even when the intention is to dismantle racism, it can be too easily reproduced. As I discuss in Chapter 1, I contribute to qualitative research with female bodybuilders by creating ethical and honest research that must be accountable to research participants. Though I do maintain Emma's voice in Chapter 4 by combining her interview narrative with my analysis of her pictures, it was necessary

for me to explain my analysis to her and maintain her respect and trust. Issues of ethics and accountability must be unpacked in writing about such sensitive areas as sexualized photography to maintain a vigilance for those places in which we slip into reproducing unequal relations of power between ourselves and research participants.

Feminist research is riddled with complex and unequal relations of power that need to be explored and unpacked. In chapter 2, I criticized qualitative research on women's bodybuilding where white authors do not state their interests in women's bodybuilding or locate themselves in relation to their white and non-white research participants. Failure to unpack our own motivations for doing research as well as our locations within social hierarchies can obfuscate the operation of hegemonic norms of whiteness and heterosexuality in our writing. To minimize this I have used methods that render my position as a researcher visible as well as challenge me to maintain self-reflexivity throughout my analysis. These methods include creating reciprocity between myself and the participants as well as ensuring that the final text is accessible for them. Though power cannot be completely eliminated from research, those of us who are serious about conducting anti-racist feminist research must seek out methods capable of contesting inequality.

Finally, I began my research in September 2001 shortly before the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and completed the writing of this text in April 2003 during the invasion and devastation of Iraq. My research has been framed by this devastating context of war throughout which I have struggled to see the immediate relevance of my work. Issues more closely related to the so-called "war on terrorism" such as colonization and globalization appeared to be in more urgent need of study. Now, as

I am completing the writing of this text, I realize my contribution. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, I have taken up the challenge to unpack the politics and privileges of my own social location. Race, sexuality, disability and other axes of social oppression remain under-theorized in academia despite the leaps and bounds women of colour, queer theorists and others have made in these areas. By accepting the challenge of my responsibility to apply anti-racist and anti-heterosexist thinking to my work, I contribute to challenging dominant and oppressive systems of knowledge. My methodological considerations of power and ethical dilemmas in interpreting my research participants' words has taught me how to recognize my mistakes and to approach these often painful realizations with humility, honesty and a willingness to work towards transforming them. This process has taught me much respect for my research participants. Re-reading their words reminds me that those who experience oppression are often the most qualified to provide insight into it, not those of us who are privileged enough to earn a degree in the study of it. I do not mean to devalue the knowledge gained from academic study of oppression. What I am suggesting is that as academics we must make efforts to be constantly aware of how our positions within academic institutions, especially colonial institutions, can reproduce race, gender, heterosexist and class-bound hierarchies in our writing. As a young, white, heterosexual, anti-racist feminist, I see my thesis contributing to anti-oppressive knowledge production. I am not so naïve as to think that by simply locating myself within these categories that I can achieve my goals. It is through my work of examining myself, who I am, how I am privileged and how I think that enables me to struggle towards anti-oppressive

knowledge and practice. I have learnt a great deal about myself through doing this research which I suppose is a privilege in itself. Though self-knowledge can be painful it is also a rewarding struggle that I would like to see become a staple of feminist research. For how can researchers who are privileged by their membership in cultural domains of whiteness or heterosexuality for example, really appreciate and fully embrace the liberating possibilities of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspective if we do not come to terms with our own prejudice first?

I suppose the moral of my story is that academics and non-academics alike must come to understand how our social locations within hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, ability and gender are intimately connected. We must struggle to do this without fear or hostility if we are to transform the painful reproductions of privileges and oppressions that unequally determine our realities. In my view, it is only when research enables us to grow emotionally as well as intellectually, that we can really be engaged in the struggle for a different, more understanding and compassionate world, than the one in which we currently live.



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APPENDIX 2  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Date:

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Nationality:

**Involvement and participation in bodybuilding**

1. How did you become interested in bodybuilding?
2. What made you want to take it to the competitive level?
3. How many years have you been competing? Training?
4. What is your competitive record? (name of titles competed in, place of competition and placing). Highs and lows?
5. Can you tell me a bit about your current relationship with bodybuilding? (i.e. are you still competing/training for competition, judging, working in the industry etc.)
6. Who are the role models that inspire you and why?

**Competition**

7. I know that there are a few differences in the rules for women such as women are not asked to perform the front lat. spread because "it is not considered a good assessment of muscularity for females" (INBA member's handbook 1999). What do you think of this justification and why do you/do not agree with it?
8. Bodybuilding competition has developed quite a bit in the past 10 years such as the increasing popularity of fitness and physique competitions as well as the more recent Galaxy Novo. Since no such alternatives exist for men, what do you think this says about attitudes towards women's bodybuilding at the present moment? Do you think women's bodybuilding is under threat from these alternative competitions?
9. How would you go about contesting a judge's decisions or wish to challenge any aspect of competition (rules and regulations)? Do you have a representative to help you?

10. To what extent can you go outside of the rules and regulations (even the tacit ones) in your performance (i.e. presentation, costume, choice of music, posing routine)? Are there consequences for doing so?
11. What informs your choice of costume, music, hair and makeup and posing routine?
12. I have noticed that in all the comps I have competed in or watched, white women make up the majority of competitors when there are a number of black women and women of colour who build. What is the general demographic of competitors and why do you think this is?
13. Bodybuilding magazines, posters etc. seem to promote heterosexuality as part of its image. Why do you think this is? Do you know of many lesbian women who compete?

#### **Sponsorship and media promotion**

14. How easy is it to make a living as a female bodybuilder? How do you fund your training and competition preparation?
15. Have you ever been sponsored? How do you go about landing sponsorship?
16. What sort of prize money is available to competitors and do you find this satisfactory and why?
17. Have you ever received media coverage in any form and can you explain when and in what form? How did you feel about the way you were represented?
18. Many women are starting to promote themselves through their own personal web sites. Compared to the men, the women often use highly sexualized bikini shots or pictures in which they are wearing short skirts and high heels when in fact bodybuilders do not wear any such clothing on stage. What do you think of these images? Would you like to see women promoted differently and why?

#### **For black women, Aboriginal women and women of colour**

19. How do you respond to the stereotyped images of black women in bodybuilding?
20. Are the white bodybuilders treated differently by the judges? Have you faced discrimination from judges or other competitors? How did you deal with it?

21. What sort of alliances exist between competitors of various ethnicities and is there some sort of support network (is it necessary) for black women within the bodybuilding community?

#### **For lesbian women and women in transition**

22. Are you currently 'out' as a lesbian/trans in the bodybuilding community? Why or why not?
23. Do you know of many other lesbian/trans women who compete? Do you have a network for support?
24. What sort of barriers have you faced as a lesbian/trans athlete that your heterosexual counterparts do not face? How does your sexuality present difficulties for landing sponsorship, winning titles, etc?
25. Have you ever faced discrimination in bodybuilding competition as a lesbian/trans athlete and what options are there for you to contest it (any policies in place)?

#### **Miscellaneous questions**

26. Do you have a specific idea of what the ultimate female bodybuilder should be?
27. How do you respond to accusations of female bodybuilders 'wanting to look like' or 'be men'?
28. How have your friends and family responded to you as a bodybuilder?
29. Has being a bodybuilder ever affected a relationship with a partner?

#### **Concluding questions**

30. What has been the best aspect of bodybuilding for you personally?
31. Do you see yourself as making a particular contribution to the sport and what is it?
32. What are your short term and long term goals for bodybuilding?
33. How would you like to see women's bodybuilding develop in the future?
23. Do you have any advice for women wanting to get into bodybuilding competitively?

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS /ADD/ OR ELABORATE ON?



### APPENDIX 3 BIOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Celine: 34 year old amateur bodybuilder. Began competing in bodybuilding competitions at 29 years of age and has been a fitness instructor since she was 16. An athlete since adolescence, Celine became attracted to bodybuilding after an ankle sprain led her to lift weights during her recovery. Celine was born in Vancouver where her father had emigrated from the Caribbean and raised in a middle class family. Her mother is white. Celine identifies as heterosexual and is engaged to be married to her boyfriend.

#### Competitive Record

Western Canadian Natural Bodybuilding and Fitness Championships, light weight  
2<sup>nd</sup> place

1998 Hercules International, New York, Novice 3<sup>rd</sup> place

Emma: 36 year old Professional bodybuilder. An athlete in soccer, track and gymnastics since adolescence, Emma began weight training after a bad ankle sprain incurred during running. After lifting weights for a few months, she noticed the definition in her body and with the encouragement of friends she decided to enter her first bodybuilding contest in 1992. She competed in 8 shows between 1992 and 1996 always placing in the top three. She won her pro card in 1996 after taking first place in the middle weight category at the Canadian National Bodybuilding Championships. Since then Emma has competed in the United States at professional shows and recently missed qualifying for the Ms Olympia. Emma was born in London, England and grew up in Winnipeg in a middle-class family before moving to Vancouver after graduating from high-school. Emma's parents are originally from Guyana, South America. Emma is a single mother and identifies as heterosexual. Emma currently works as a personal fitness trainer.

#### Competitive Record

1992 Gold Classic, 1<sup>st</sup> Middle weight

1992 BC Provincials 1<sup>st</sup> Middle Weight

1993 Western Canadian Bodybuilding Championships, 2<sup>nd</sup> Middle Weight

1993 Canadian National Bodybuilding Championships, 3<sup>rd</sup> Middle weight

1994 Canadian National Bodybuilding Championships, 3<sup>rd</sup> Middle weight

1995 North American Bodybuilding Championships, 1<sup>st</sup> Middle weight

1995 Canadian National Bodybuilding Championships, 3<sup>rd</sup> Middle weight

1996 Canadian National Bodybuilding Championships, 1<sup>st</sup> Middle weight & overall physique champion (Received Pro card)

#### *Professional contests*

1997 Jan Tana Pro Classic, 16<sup>th</sup> out of 29

1999 Women's Po Extravaganza, 6<sup>th</sup> out of 14

2000 Jan Tana Pro Classic, 4<sup>th</sup> Middle weight

2002 Southwest USA Pro Cup, 2<sup>nd</sup> Middle Weight

Angie: 48 year old Master's athlete. She began lifting weights at 41 to lose weight. Told by a fitness instructor that it was unlikely she could compete in bodybuilding because of her age and body weight she became determined to prove her wrong. She finally made it to the stage in 1999 and proceeded to compete in four competitions over the next 11 months. Angie was born into "an extremely upper class" family in Chattanooga, Tennessee to Cherokee and Jewish parents. Her grandfather on her mother's side was a hereditary Cherokee chief. Angie immigrated to Canada in 1973. Angie identifies as heterosexual and has three children and is currently single. She holds a master's degree in Journalism, a master's degree in International Business and has studied to work as a paralegal. Angie currently lives and works in Vancouver as a paralegal and personal fitness trainer. Her new business "Change For Life" is a fitness and referral service aimed at middle age women.

#### Competitive Record

1999 Canadian Western Natural Bodybuilding Championships, 3<sup>rd</sup> heavy weight  
 2000 Musclemania, 1<sup>st</sup> heavy weight and 1<sup>st</sup> masters  
 2000 BC Provincials 1<sup>st</sup> place heavy weight, 1<sup>st</sup> place masters, best posing routine  
 2000 Canadian National Championships, last place open division (non-tested event), 3<sup>rd</sup> masters  
 2001 BC Provincials, 3<sup>rd</sup> masters, 4<sup>th</sup> heavy weight

Kara: 33 year old self-described 'fitness entrepreneur'. After participating in bodybuilding as a spectator for several years Kara crossed from the floor to the stage in 1997. After 3 years of competing Kara decided to leave bodybuilding last year and is now preparing to compete in the physique category. Kara's main interest in bodybuilding is from a business perspective. In 2000 she launched her business Initiative "No limits Physiques", a competitor's club for aspiring and already competitive female bodybuilding, physique and fitness athletes. Designed to bring athletes together the club offers a series of work shops on everything from diet to posing routines and makeup and marketing of winning competitors. She also runs a 12 week weight loss program. Citing Oprah Winfrey as her role model, Kara aims to "put Jenny Craig out of business in the next 5 years". Kara was born in the Okanagan to Anglo-Saxon parents and was raised in a middle-class family. She identifies as heterosexual and is currently in a relationship.

Andrea: 36 year old amateur master's athlete. Began bodybuilding at 17 with the encouragement of a friend's brother and entered her first competition 9 months later in 1984 where she placed 2nd. She has competed in 7 shows and won first place, 3 second place, one fourth place and 2 master's trophies. She is currently training for the world qualifier in Hamilton, Ontario in July. Andrea was born in Vancouver where she currently resides, to Anglo Saxon parents and grew up middle-class. She identifies as heterosexual and is currently single. She is an aesthetician by profession.

Kate: 30 year old amateur athlete and recently appointed (2002) vice-President of the British Columbia Amateur Bodybuilding Association. Originally a track and field

athlete, Kate began bodybuilding at 17 and entered her first competition in the same year. She has competed in thirteen shows across Canada and placed second in almost all of them. Kate runs her own bodybuilding and fitness show which is also a qualifier for the Western Canadian Championships (nontested) and the BC Provincials (tested). In her position as the Vice President of the BCABBA she hopes to improve the number and quality of female competitors as well as create more fitness and bodybuilding liaisons to help organize shows and strengthen the structure of the organization. Kate currently lives and works on Vancouver Island where she also owns and runs her own gym. She identifies as heterosexual and middle class. Kate is currently a single mother.

APPENDIX 4  
GLOSSARY OF BODYBUILDING AND ACADEMIC TERMS

Bodybuilding terms

Back double bicep pose: a pose generally required of male and female bodybuilders in the posing round of competition. It consists of the athlete turning their back to the judges and raising both arms to simultaneously flex both biceps. One leg is also slightly extended behind to flex the calf and thigh to enhance the overall shape of their body.

Bench/Bench press: an exercise (free weights or machine) that targets the chest, biceps and triceps where one lays on their back on a bench and lowers a bar slowing towards the chest, then pushes it directly back up before repeating.

Cardio: cardiovascular exercise such as running or riding an exercise bike. Usually combined with weight training during contest preparation to reduce body-fat levels.

GH: short for growth hormone.

Muscle Magazines: bodybuilding magazines that primarily promote men's bodybuilding. Male bodybuilders are usually featured in ways that emphasize their massive muscularity such as lifting weights or flexing while women (most often models though sometimes actual bodybuilders) appear in highly sexualized outfits and poses that de-emphasizes their strength and musculature. Mostly white men and women are featured in these magazines.

Natural bodybuilding: bodybuilding without the use of drugs. Competitors must pass a urine test and often a polygraph test before competing. The standard rule is that you must be seven years drug free to compete in a natural show.

Posing: performing stylized body positions set by the International Federation of Bodybuilding to show off the muscularity of the body.

Pro card: licensee to compete as a professional competitor. Awarded to athletes who win their weight category at a National Event.

Pro-qualifier: Bodybuilding show to qualify athletes to compete at the National level. Winners of each weight class at the pro qualifier are qualified to compete at National level competition to compete for their Pro card.

'Pump Iron': lift weights

Ripped/ripped to shreds: when muscle fibers are visible beneath the skin due to extremely low body fat percentage. Usually achieved through steroid usage.

**Reps:** number of repetitions of an exercise

**Sets:** blocks of a certain number of repetitions of an exercise. For example, one might complete 4 sets of 8-10 repetitions of calf raises.

**Work out/train:** exercise according to a set program

### Academic terms

**Binary:** two opposing concepts that rely upon one another for their meaning and where one of the pair is subordinated to the other. For example, man/woman, white/black. The dominant side of the binary is defined by its dissociation from its binary pair. Man is everything that is not woman, and is perceived as superior in all its characteristics. These binaries are embedded in language and perpetuated in every day thought and speech.

**Compulsory heterosexuality:** as defined by poet and essayist Adrienne Rich compulsory heterosexuality describes the multiplicity of ways in which women are coerced into heterosexuality in a patriarchal society. Physical and psychological violence against women by men, patriarchal institutions of marriage, making women financially dependant on men and other forms of coercion in which the rewards for being heterosexual are greater than not being heterosexual, are examples of compulsory heterosexuality.

**Discourse:** I use discourse to refer to a particular knowledge about a subject. For example, feminist discourses on sexual exploitations of women and girls has developed a particular language, sets of ideas and ways of speaking and theorizing that are unique to feminism.

**Epistemology:** an academic term used for referring to knowledge developed from life experience. More simply, it refers to 'how we know what we know.'

**Gender norms:** ideologies about what is normal behaviour for men and women. i.e. men are supposed to be masculine: emotionally distant, physically active and strong, rough, dress a certain way etc while women are supposed to be weaker and feminine, make themselves attractive to men, nurture children etc. When an individual breaks or confuses these norms they are categorized as abnormal and often punished severely.

**Gender transgression:** when an individual crosses the boundaries of what is considered normal for their sex or gender. For example, women who bodybuild and develop large muscles and physical strength transgress those norms that dictate a 'real woman' should be smaller and physically weaker than a man.

**Hegemonic:** derived from Gramsci's term 'hegemony' used to describe the ruling ideologies and beliefs that govern a society. For example, hegemonic femininity describes the dominant set of ideals governing how women should behave and act.

**Heterocentrism:** viewpoint centred around heterosexual experiences to the exclusion of other sexualities.

**Heterosexism:** discrimination against non-heterosexual identified individuals where heterosexuality is held up as the norm and as the superior expression of sexuality.

**Homogenize:** to simplify diverse meanings and collapse them under a single category.

**Hyperfeminine:** extremely elaborate performance or display of stereotypically feminine characteristics. For example, because of their massively muscled bodies, many female bodybuilders adorn themselves in a fashion that is most stereotypically feminine so as to demarcate themselves from men. e.g. long blonde hair, long fake nails, make-up, extremely high heels etc.

**Hypermasculine:** that which embodies and expresses all the culturally constructed characteristics of masculinity. For example, I have described some male dominated gyms as hypermasculine because they foster an environment of aggressive masculinity that derogates and excludes women and everything that is culturally associated with them.

**Hypermuscular:** I use this term to differentiate between muscular women and extremely muscular women (bodybuilders) who muscularity goes way beyond what mainstream society tolerates as normal.

**Institutionalization:** the establishments of ideology, ideals, behaviours as dominant in society by institutions of power. For example, the belief that heterosexuality is normal and healthy and homosexuality is abnormal and unhealthy is upheld by institutions of medicine, psychology government and education. It is 'institutionalized,' built into our belief systems and perpetuated by everyday encounters, acts, and patterns of speech.

**Intersectional analysis:** form of analysis that takes multiple axes of oppression into account when theorizing relations of power. An intersectional analysis considers how race and sexuality, for example, intersect with gender to produce specific types of oppression and women's agency to resist it.

**Methodology/methods:** methodology, simply put, is the theory of how to actually go about doing research. It is the theory of methods and determines which methods will be used for particular research projects and why. Methods are the practical ways in which one actually collects data for analysis such as interviewing or being a

participant observer. In short, methodology is the theory and methods are the practice.

Reflexive/reflexivity: the ability to examine ones own social location, assumptions, and motivations for making certain choices in writing and research. Reflexivity is critical to evolving more equitable and intelligent forms of feminist theory.

Social location: describes where one exists in the social hierarchy and is dependant on multiple factors of class position, racial categorization, sexuality, ability, age and gender.