

Feminist Bodybuilding

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The broad objective of this essay is to contribute to the development of a thick perception of the gendered body in contemporary culture. For Michel Feher, editor of a three-volume collection of essays that describe an array of historical regimes of the body (*Zone #3, 4, 5: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*), this process involves an analysis of the “different modes of construction of the human body.”¹ I borrow Feher’s conceptualization of the modes of body construction as a framework for understanding the ways through which the body is conceptualized in feminist discourse. The female body has been “built” within feminist discourse in several different ways; in the course of this essay I draw on three domains of feminist body work:

- Scholarship that investigates the *ideological* construction of the female body in the history of women’s sport,
- *Semiotic* analyses of media representations of female athletes,
- A *cultural* interpretation of a filmic narrative about technologically reconstructed female bodies.

More specifically, the first section reviews historical studies of women and sport to illustrate how the physiological body is culturally redefined according to dominant beliefs about women’s proper and moral responsibilities for human reproduction. The second section focuses on media representations of prominent female athletes to examine how ideals about feminine beauty are revised to include signs of muscularity and vigorous health. Although these representations

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highlight the athletic capabilities and power of the female body, they also show the ways that power is symbolically recuperated to a dominant cultural order through the sexualization of the bodies of athletic "stars." The final section offers a reading of *Pumping Iron II: The Women* that examines how the film stages a symbolic contest about the proper definition of femininity; as a winner of the bodybuilding contest is announced, so too is the preferred form of female embodiment. Each section addresses one form of feminist bodybuilding; they all illuminate the way in which the "naturally" female body is culturally re-constructed according to dominant codes of femininity and racial identity.

THE IDEOLOGICAL TREATMENT OF THE SPORTING BODY

Lynda Birke and Gail Vines (1987), feminist sport sociologists, identify both science and sport as cults of masculinity marked by a belief in the superiority of the male body. Indeed, historical research on the cultural construction of the female body illuminates how sport experts continued the quest to locate woman's inferiority in her "physiological body" after the "science" of craniology failed to prove that her inferiority resided in her brain. In a similar line of analysis, Helen Lenskyj (1986) explains how reproduction became a defining characteristic of female athletes, regardless of whether an individual woman in fact menstruated or became pregnant. Her research documents how the female athlete's gender identity became intimately tied to her reproductive physiology. The physiological "facts" of her reproductive system establish the biologically sexed female body as the "natural" emblem or guarantor of female identity. Quoting from medical textbooks of the early 19th century, Lenskyj describes how the medical profession emphasized the fact of "reproduction" when prescribing safe and appropriate sporting activities for women.

Both women's unique anatomy and physiology and their special moral obligations disqualify them from vigorous physical activity. Women have a moral duty to preserve their vital energy for childbearing and to cultivate personality traits suited to the wife-and-mother role. Sport wastes vital forces, strains female bodies and fosters traits unbecoming to "true womanhood." (p. 18)

Encumbered as they were with the burdens of menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause, women were thus instructed to forego athletic activity in favor of less strenuous pursuits. According to this passage, both women's physiology and their moral obligations tied to that physiology combine to disqualify women from vigorous sporting activity.

Patricia Vertinsky (1987) describes yet another way in which women were discouraged from participating in sport through what we now understand to be

culturally defined "facts" of the female body. These facts asserted that women were "eternally wounded" because they bled during part of their reproductive (menstrual) cycle. This popular myth—again supported by medical knowledge of the time—defined women as chronically weak and as victims of a pathological physiology. Two things happen here: Not only is the female body irrevocably tied to a culturally constructed obligation of reproduction, but also, through the association between femininity and "the wound," the female body is coded as inherently pathological. Limiting women's participation in sport and exercise functioned both to control women's unruly physiology and to protect them for the important job of species reproduction.

These historical studies illuminate the process whereby one set of beliefs (about female physiological inferiority) is articulated with another discursive system (concerning women's athletic practices). Through their feminist analyses of the historical discourse on women and sport, both Lenskyj and Vertinsky show how physiological characteristics come to count as definitive emblems of female identity. Their body scholarship involves "rereading" the female body as it is inscribed in one discourse from within another textual/sexual system. The textual system they use to read the female body "against the grain" is informed by feminist cultural theory; as such it provides a perspective from which to document the process of cultural recoding of the female body, as first a "gendered" body and second one in need of special protection from the rigors of physical exertion. In this sense, their analyses provide a way of understanding the process of transcoding whereby the "natural" female body was taken up as a cultural emblem of the reproductive body, with the consequence that women were often discouraged from participating in athletic activities.

THE SEXUALIZATION OF THE TRANSGRESSIVE BODY

Lenskyj's and Vertinsky's analyses suggest that, historically, the properly feminine body was considered to be constitutionally weak and pathological. To be both female and strong explicitly violates traditional codes of feminine identity. Thus women who use bodybuilding technology to sculpt their bodies are doubly transgressive: First, because femininity and nature are so closely allied, any attempt to *reconstruct* the body is transgressive against the "natural" identity of the female body. Second, when female athletes use technology to achieve physical muscularity—a male body prerogative—they transgress the "natural" order of gender identity. What we discover through an analysis of media images of female athletes is that representations of their bodies often highlight their transgressive nature.

For example, a recent *National Enquirer* article ("Prizewinning Bodybuilder," 1987) featured a photo of bodybuilder Tina Plackinger accompanied by the headline "Prizewinning Bodybuilder Quits Taking Steroids Because . . . Drugs Were Turning Me Into a Man." Here the juxtaposition of physical strength,

represented in the photograph by Plackinger's well-defined "ripped" biceps, triceps, and chest muscles, with the markers of her female body (breasts, long curly hair) creates a gender "hybrid" that invokes corporeal codes of femininity as well as of masculinity. The reference to Plackinger's steroid use as part of her body reconstruction program further establishes the transgressive nature of her body. Plackinger's use of steroids to produce a grotesquely muscular body violates the "natural" order not only of health and fitness but also of femininity and weakness. Of course, the specter of a transgressed gender boundary visually enhances the "spectacular" rhetoric of the article.

But this also happens in the media treatment of professionally trained amateur athletes. A close analysis of the newspaper accounts of Florence Griffith-Joyner's performances at the 1988 Olympic Games reveals the process of sexualization at work. The week before the Seoul Olympics, glossy photographs of Griffith-Joyner graced the covers of *U.S. News and World Report*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. Most stories found a way to mention her body, not only in reference to its athletic capacity, but more obviously as it served as a mannequin for her flamboyant track outfits. One sportswriter (Hersch, 1988a) began his account of her record-breaking performance by ironically calling attention to her running outfit:

Okay, let's get the important stuff out of the way first. Florence Griffith-Joyner wore a shocking pink one-legger with a white bikini bottom in the first round of the 200 meters in the U.S. Olympic trials Friday morning. She wore a fluorescent gold body suit with an orange print string bikini bottom in the quarterfinals Friday night. For both races, the fingernails on her left hand were painted cobalt blue and decorated with Hawaiian scenes, including palm trees, birds and the moon. The fingernails on her right hand were multicolored with a variety of rhinestone designs, including a cross. It took her three to five minutes to do each nail. By the way, it took her nowhere near that long to run the 200 meters Friday night. In fact, it took her less time than any American woman in history, (21.77 seconds, .04 sec. faster than the American record). (p. 1)

The problem with such an account is not that her flamboyant outfits discredit her athletic ability—she is widely recognized as a talented athlete—but rather that her appearance invokes the production of stereotypical comments about her sexual attractiveness. Given that female athletes cannot easily escape the cultural fascination that objectifies the female body, and in light of her own penchant for highly stylized athletic outfits, "Flo-Jo" was recognized as much for her sexual desirability as for her athletic ability, perhaps more so. Tony Duffy (Hersch, 1988b), a sports photographer, had this to say about Griffith-Joyner's media popularity:

She was one of the sexiest girls at the 1984 Olympics. . . . She has this Polynesian look and an exotic feeling about her. I did a photo shoot of

Florence eight weeks ago, in body suits and bathing suits on the beach, and I couldn't give the pictures away. In the past two days (after her Olympic trials record), my phone has been ringing off the hook. *Playboy*, *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, *Life*—everyone wants pictures of her.²

This quotation describes the construction of Flo-Jo as cultural icon of exotic otherness. Accompanying newspaper images of Flo-Jo foreground corporeal markers of erotic identity: long, thick, curly hair; lean arms and torso; thick, muscular legs; dark skin. Without much coaching, we read in such newspaper images the construction of Flo-Jo as an idealized female body. But she is more than simply a body, she is identified as an attractive, *exotic* female body; her transgressive identity is as much a product of the color of her skin, her "Polynesian look," as of her athletic accomplishments. As such, these physical transgressions contribute to her construction as an object of desire. In contemporary U.S. culture, racial and ethnic identities function as signs of cultural difference; skin color, hair texture, and facial features are among the more familiar physiological markers of the cultural construction of "otherness." Much in the way that the biological "facts" of a woman's reproductive system are used to define her as a gendered body, so too are certain body "facts" invoked to construct Griffith-Joyner as an eroticized other. In this way we see how the athletic female body is also inscribed within other ideological systems of meaning, including race, ethnicity, and physical ability. This analysis describes how the black female body is constructed as a sign of transgressive cultural difference and as a "natural" sexual object.³

THE TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDEAL FEMININE BODY

The analysis of media representations of the female body shows quite clearly how that body symbolizes cultural ideals of "natural" femininity and erotic beauty. But the symbolic transformation of the female body is only part of the story. Through the practices of bodybuilding, weight training, and powerlifting, many female bodies are technologically transformed into material embodiments of such ideals. Because the form and quality of the bodies of women bodybuilders directly contradict received beliefs about the inherent pathology of femininity, female bodybuilding appears to be one arena in which the culturally constructed "natural" attributes of femininity could be redesigned in a more empowering fashion. But on closer examination, we see how technologically recrafted female bodies are delegitimated as cultural markers of proper femininity.

During the decade of the 1980s, an entire subculture grew up around female bodybuilding. The annual Miss Olympia contest was first staged in 1980 (Kennedy & Mason, 1984). By 1989 there were dozens of annual competitions, ranging from the World Professional Women's Bodybuilding Championships to amateur contests sponsored by local fitness centers. In 1989, estimates of the number of

female amateur competitors put that figure at 16,000, compared to 40 to 150 in 1980. The *Hardcore Bodybuilder's Source Book* (Kennedy & Mason) lists several products specifically designed for female readers: training courses and routines, cookbooks, foods, jewelry, posing-wear, posters, skin and hair care products, and bodybuilding horoscopes. This subculture includes glossy magazines, such as *Muscle & Fitness*, as well as special workout books, such as Rachel McLish's *Flex Appeal*.

The film *Pumping Iron II: The Women* gained wide acclaim as a cult classic among female bodybuilders and gym participants. The film unfolds a cultural narrative about the "natural" definition of femininity as it applies to the technologically reconstructed female body.⁴ In an early scene, the head judge instructs other judges about the rules of competition and describes the ultimate purpose of the contest:

We hope that this evening we can clear up the definite meaning—the analysis of the word femininity [by] determining what to look for [in these women competitors]. This is an official IFBB analysis of the meaning of that word.⁵

In an unambiguous address, the audience is told that the (film's) contest will determine with perfect clarity the "definite meaning" of the word *femininity*. Apparently, the quality of feminine muscle definition is an ongoing concern for the judges of female bodybuilding contests. As reported in the *The Hardcore Bodybuilder's Source Book* (Kennedy & Mason, 1984), judges are given the following instructions about judging female competitors:

First and foremost, the judge must bear in mind that he or she is judging a woman's bodybuilding competition and is looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape, a feminine shape. Other aspects are similar to those described for assessing men, but in regard to muscular development, it must not be carried to excess where it resembles the *massive muscularity of the male physique* [emphasis added]. (p. 181)

In fact, judges are instructed to look for certain faults in women that are not usually seen in men: stretch marks, surgical scars, and cellulite; they are also directed to observe whether female competitors walk and move gracefully, which seemingly is not a concern with male competitors.⁶

The film stages a contest between competing forms of female embodiment personified by two well-known female bodybuilders: Bev Francis, a muscular powerlifter, and Rachel McLish, a beauty-girl bodybuilder.⁷ But viewers of the film audience know that it is not a documentary at all; it is really a fictional account of a staged competition, the Caesar's Palace World Cup Championship. The film relies on several techniques and genre conventions to establish its documentary look: The camera records spontaneous (nonscripted) interactions

between characters, contestants are interviewed by an off-screen voice, and conversations are filmed at close range. And although the film uses "real" bodybuilders, this pseudodocumentary lists them in "starring roles" to compete in a contest that had been elaborately scripted.

The film records the reaction of judges and other women contestants to the embodied differences between the two stars. Symbolically, Bev represents the negative image of female bodybuilding: women who look like men. Rachel symbolizes the positive image: women with muscles who still look feminine (soft, curvy, and sexy when dressed in a bikini). Beginning with the sequences that introduce Bev and Rachel, the film visually constructs a system of differences between these two types of female bodies. Their differences concern not only the muscularity of their bodies, but their clothes, their local gyms, and their countries, cities, and families of origin. Narratively, the contest between Bev and Rachel structures the film's plot, so that at one level the film is about the competition between these two female bodies. But at another level, it is a film about ideologies of femininity.

The first shots of Rachel show her dressed in a zebra-print bikini wearing a feather headdress and gold chains around her neck and belly. She is posing for a photo session for *Muscle & Fitness*. Back in her home gym in Los Angeles, Rachel's posing coach wonders if her nonbodybuilding activities (commercials, posters, a beauty book project) diminish her status as a world-class bodybuilding champion. "Don't you think all this has made you a little soft, a little powder-puffish?" her coach inquires. "I've always considered myself a powderpuff," drawls Rachel, "a really strong powderpuff."

In contrast, Bev's introductory sequence opens with a shot of the rocky, rugged gray landscape of Melbourne, Australia. We meet Bev as she walks sideways up the walls of a hotel corridor. The next scene shows her competing in a powerlifting contest; she has just been introduced as a former ballet dancer who is now the strongest woman in the world. Bev, shown wearing a powerlifting suit and sleeveless T-shirt, successfully dead-lifts 510 pounds. Relaxing after the contest, Bev talks with her family (and presumably the film's interviewer) about the upcoming competition in Las Vegas. She ponders the reaction she will receive from an American audience who until now have only seen one type of female bodybuilder: the skinny woman with little muscles.

As the drama of the film unfolds, these two female bodies face off. Side by side on stage, Bev and Rachel are the first pair of competitors judged in the opening round of compulsory poses. While the other competitors pose, the audience is visually treated to several titillating shots of Rachel; for example, the camera caresses her with a long, slow take that moves from her ankles to her thighs to her face. Bev is not treated so kindly by the camera; rather we witness her in the dressing room sitting hunched over, elbows on knees, talking with her trainer. "Did I look like a girl?" she asks sarcastically. "How was my feminine quality?"

At the end of the contest, Bev's name is announced first: She finishes last of eight finalists. Her last-place finish symbolizes the significance of her body

transgressions when a judge explains that women with “big grotesque muscles” violate the natural difference between men and women. But Rachel’s physique is not simply elevated as the ideal female form. Portrayed throughout the film as a petulant “bad girl,” Rachel finishes third. When Carla Dunlap is announced as the winner, the film abruptly jags away from its narrative predictability. Carla, a former Miss Olympia, is clearly the best candidate in overall athletic ability and bodybuilding sophistication. In terms of the film, however, her victory comes as a surprise because she is never constructed as a featured competitor in the way that Bev and Rachel are.⁸ In fact, we learn very little about her personal body history or her philosophy about bodybuilding. Several times in the film she functions simply as a narrator, first to introduce Bev and the significance of Bev’s participation in the contest, and later to interpret for the audience the meaning of the judges’ struggle over competing definitions of femininity.

Yet Carla is an interesting selection as the winner. She is the only featured competitor who is not associated with a male trainer, husband, or father. Instead, her “real life” companions are a sister and mother who serve as surrogate audience for her explanations about the significance of Bev’s and Rachel’s participation in the contest. She is the only contestant to be shown doing physical activities other than bodybuilding (synchronized swimming and dancing). In choosing Carla, the film works hard to achieve a compromise position on the issue of femininity versus muscularity. Carla has neither the massive muscle-bound physique of Bev Francis nor the powderpuff figure of Rachel McLish.

But is Carla’s winning a compromise or a cop-out? Carla is the only black contestant. Although her racial identity is not discussed explicitly, by promoting her as the compromise between two technologically reconstructed forms of female embodiment the film implicitly engages a host of body issues that invoke different forms of body transgression. Carla’s victory signals a transgressive body posture through her identification as a black woman in a film world populated by white women. The meaning of Carla’s victory is subversively significant, with respect not to the issue of muscularity versus femininity but to her racial identity. If this was indeed a contest to determine the proper meaning of the word “femininity,” then how do we interpret the answer we’ve been given? What can it mean that a black female body is offered as a compromise between ideologies of muscularity and femininity?

For Annette Kuhn (1988), “Pumping Iron II” raises several issues regarding visual representation and feminist politics. Kuhn argues that Carla’s victory merely sidesteps the film’s central question:

The issue of the appropriate body for a female bodybuilder is not actually resolved: rather it is displaced on to a set of discourses centering on—but also skirting—race, femininity and the body, a complex of discourses which the film cannot acknowledge, let alone handle. Carla’s body can be “read” only as a compromise: other major issues are left dangling. (p. 18)

On the one hand, Carla’s success as a bodybuilder is only one of many athletic achievements of black women. She and Florence Griffith-Joyner are only the two most recent black female athletes to achieve media popularity in U.S. culture. The reading that the film promotes suggests that it is not unusual (or noteworthy) for a black woman to succeed as an accomplished athlete in U.S. sports; such a reading purports to be “color-blind” by purposefully foregoing any mention of race. Yet on the other hand, Carla’s victory suggests that racial distinctions are somehow less disturbing to a natural order than are the gender transgressions that Bev’s body symbolizes.

But according to bell hooks (1984), such an interpretation is constructed within a discourse of white racism.

Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women play in the maintenance and perpetration of that victimization. (p. 13)

Informed by hooks’s analysis, we can look again at Carla’s role. Although she is never portrayed as a victim per se, she is constrained in many ways. We see her constructed as an interpreter and guide to help the audience make sense of the meaning of the contest between two white women’s bodies. Carla herself is not featured as a competent, accomplished professional bodybuilder. She is not empowered to elaborate her own identity as a bodybuilder. In this sense, Carla’s narrative, repressed throughout the film, emerges as an emblem of the film’s sexist and racist agenda. In the end, the film sidesteps the issue of technologically constructed gender differences and opens onto the issue of racial difference, only to end without addressing either issue or the interaction between them. By denying Carla her own story, the film teaches us that the only stories that count are those about white bodies. Scripted in this way, Carla’s victory enables the racist fiction that asserts that white bodies are the bodies that matter, even if black bodies win from time to time. But it also points out that when white female bodybuilders engage in transgressive body practices, they enjoy a greater range of possibilities for reconstructing their corporeal identities in opposition to a traditional notion of white femininity defined as weak, pathological, and passive. Black transgressive bodies cannot as easily escape a “naturalized” race identity that codes the black body as “naturally” powerful. The efficacy of this power is recuperated, though, as Carla is also shown to be “naturally” subservient to the white bodies she competes against.

Thus, in sidelining Carla’s story, the film sidesteps a much more potent challenge to the ideological contest playing out on the fictional stage of Caesar’s Palace. What is much more interesting about Carla’s story is that it is populated by supportive women and female relatives; men simply do not figure in Carla’s narrative. In failing to offer a fuller account of her “woman-centered” athletic life, the film reveals how the debate about proper femininity and improper female

masculinity that preoccupies most of the contestants, judges, and audience is constructed within a dualistic logic that privileges the ideal-type distinctions between masculinity and femininity as the most significant markers of cultural difference. The repressed elements of the film, Carla's racial identity and her connections to other women, suggest some of the other submerged discourses that structure the organization of technological body practices but are rarely acknowledged in media accounts of technologically transgressive female bodies. In this case, we can begin to sense other factors that influence the meaning of transgressive bodily practices, namely those of racial identity and of homo-social relationships.

CONCLUSION

What I discover, not surprisingly, is that despite their appearance as forms of resistance, these technological body transgressions rearticulate the power relations of a dominant social order. When female bodies participate in bodybuilding activities or other athletic events that are traditionally understood to be the domain of male bodies, the meanings of the female bodies are not simply recoded according to an oppositional or empowered set of gendered connotations. Although these bodies transgress gender boundaries, they are not reconstructed according to an opposite gender identity. They reveal instead 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. A closer study of the popular culture of female bodybuilding reveals the artificiality of attributes of "natural" gender identity and the changeability of cultural ideals of gender identity, yet it also announces quite loudly the persistence with which gender and race hierarchies structure technological practices and limit the disruptive possibilities of technological transgressions.

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NOTES

1. Michel Feher, "Introduction," *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (New York: Urzone, 1989), 11-17.
2. The quotation from Duffy is from an article by Phil Hersch, sportswriter for the *Chicago Tribune*. This article appeared in the Tempo section of the newspaper rather than in the Sports section. (Tempo is a light news section focusing on current social issues and the arts; it includes the "Dear Abby" and Bob Greene columns.) The explicit focus of the article was Griffith-Joyner's track outfits and her running history. The article included a comment by rival runner Gwen Torrence, who said that she would not be interested in the one-legged outfit that Griffith-Joyner wears: "We're out there to run like Superwoman, not look like Superwoman." "Running Style," *Chicago Tribune* July 22, 1988, sec. 2:1,2.
3. Jennifer A. Hargreaves analyzes the ideology of masculinity that is prominent in sport in "Where's the Virtue? Where's the Grace? A Discussion of the Social Production of Gender Relations in and Through Sport," *Theory, Culture and Society* 3.1 (1986): 56-78. Another excellent study of the ideological system of the body is Sander L. Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 96-117.
4. Laurie Jane Schulze analyzes a made-for-TV movie, *Getting Physical*, in terms of the economic conditions of television production and the narrative form of television movies. In her reading, the movie presents several iconographic strategies to disrupt a hegemonic recuperation of a potentially problematic figure: a female bodybuilder. Laurie Jane Schulze, "Getting physical:

text/context/reading and the made-for-television movie," *Cinema Journal* 25.2 (Winter 1986): 16-30.

5. "Pumping Iron II: The Women," dir. George Butler with Carla Dunlap, Bev Francis, and Rachel McLish, 1985.
6. Physiologically, being "ripped" is a matter of fat content and water retention. Stripping off fat allows the muscle to bulge, producing the "ripped" look that many men popularize. Being "ripped" means that every sinew, tendon, and vein stands out under the skin, demonstrating very little fat content. The softer, rounder, smoother muscle definition of women occurs because there is more fat between the skin's outer layer and the muscle. Because women also battle a physiological sensitivity to fluid retention, they are advised to achieve better muscularity by minimizing sodium intake during "peaking cycles" (the final 4 days before a competition). Given women's physiological predisposition to higher body fat, the decision to remove fat is more than an appearance question: It is a matter of altering the biological composition of the female body. Fat removal is accomplished primarily through diet and a strenuous workout regimen with machines and weights that work to burn off all unnecessary body fat through calorie expenditure.
7. The film was created by Charles Gaines and George Butler based on their book, *Pumping Iron II: The Unprecedented Woman* (1984).
8. The film includes a sequence that shows Carla performing a synchronized swimming routine. Her biography in the book *Women of Iron: The World of Female Bodybuilders* (1981) describes Carla as a compulsive athlete who is expert in floor gymnastics, yoga, speed swimming, and dance. One of the few black women in bodybuilding (for most of the early 1980s), she was often asked if her race caused any problems. The reply: "No. She had never been taught that color was a limitation. . . . Her father was a chemist in Newark, and his children were provided with everything they needed. Carla had four sisters and a brother. They lived in a huge house. There were horses and boats, and lots of space to breathe in. A typical American middle-class background, she called it" (p. 59). Carla reports being plagued early in her bodybuilding career, by a physical structure that was deemed "too muscular" by various judges.

Chapter 23

The Embodiment of Gender: Discipline, Domination, and Empowerment

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I watch my daughter. From morning to night her body is her home. She lives in it and with it. When she runs around the kitchen she uses all of her self. She feels pleasure and expresses it without hesitation. . . . I sometimes feel she is more a model for me than I am for her. (A mother, quoted in Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1976, p. 40)

When we were kids there was release in playing, the sweetness of being able to move and control your body. . . . I felt released because I could move around anybody. I was free. (Hockey player Eric Nesterenko, quoted in Terkel, 1974, p. 383)

These reflections remind us of the virtual identity of body and self that we mostly take for granted in childhood. We ran, climbed, skipped, and threw, and in these activities of early childhood we discovered things about ourselves and what we could do in the world. We took an innocent pleasure in learning to move and control our bodies and experienced a growing sense of self that was intimately connected with our experience of our bodies, both what we could do and what we looked like. Yet the two recollections, one by a woman and the other by a man, serve not only to remind us how most of us become alienated from our bodies in adult life; they also point out how differently the childhoods of girls and boys come to be structured: by discourses of femininity and masculinity and by gendered practices of play that teach us to inhabit and experience our bodies in profoundly different ways.

WOMEN, SPORT, AND CULTURE

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