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# Not Simply Women's Bodybuilding: Gender and the Female Competition Categories

Sheena A. Hunter

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NOT SIMPLY WOMEN'S BODYBUILDING: GENDER AND THE FEMALE  
COMPETITION CATEGORIES

by

SHEENA A. HUNTER

Under the Direction of Dr. Megan Sinnott

ABSTRACT

Once known only as Bodybuilding and Women's Bodybuilding, the sport has grown to include multiple competition categories that both limit and expand opportunities for female bodybuilders. While the creation of additional categories, such as Fitness, Figure, Bikini, and Physique, appears to make the sport more inclusive to more variations and interpretation of the feminine, muscular physique, it also creates more in-between spaces. This auto ethnographic research explores the ways that multiple female competition categories within the sport of Bodybuilding define, reinforce, and complicate the gendered experiences of female physique athletes, by bringing freak theory into conversation with body categories.

INDEX WORDS: Women's bodybuilding, Gender performativity, Femininity, Gender, Freaks, Competition categories, In-betweenness, Stuckness

NOT SIMPLY WOMEN'S BODYBUILDING: GENDER AND THE FEMALE  
COMPETITION CATEGORIES

by

SHEENA A. HUNTER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2013

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

At age 25, I competed in my first NPC bodybuilding competition<sup>1</sup>. New to the sport, I chose to compete in Women's Bodybuilding, though there were other categories to choose from. For me, this decision was based on my personal preference—I did not like the overt sexuality that seemed to be attached to (and seemingly required from!) the other categories of competition. I wanted to display my physique in terms of its muscularity—not in terms of its sex appeal. However, after my first competition I understood that the choice is gendered, complicated, and invariably requires competitors to compromise on some level. This research will explore the ways that gender and power shape the complications and compromises surrounding the female competition categories in the sport of bodybuilding.

After my first bodybuilding contest, it became quickly apparent to me that the sex appeal associated with the other categories also came with privileges that I would not have as a bodybuilder. Supplement companies that market products to *bodybuilders* routinely sponsor male bodybuilders but usually sponsor only females from Figure and Bikini<sup>2</sup>. Even at the contest I noticed a difference between the regard for Women's Bodybuilding and the way the rest of the categories were regarded<sup>3</sup>. The judges and announcers spun their words to emphasize how attractive and desirable the Bikini girls<sup>4</sup> were and how competitive the Figure girls were, but barely seemed to notice the female bodybuilders. “Ladies and Gentlemen, feast on this eye candy!” was the introduction of the Bikini girls, followed by a simple, “and now for Women's

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<sup>1</sup> Names, dates, and locations of all contests are deliberately left out to ensure anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> While it is virtually impossible to quantify this statement, a glance at the websites for the leading supplement companies, fitness apparel, and workout gear reveals very few female bodybuilders represent these products, compared to dozens of male bodybuilders, Bikini competitors, and Figure competitors. These include Optimum Nutrition, Gaspari, and Dymatize Nutrition, among many others.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix A for an example of the differences in the presentation of the categories.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term “girl” because it is the term used most often in the industry to describe Figure and Bikini competitors, while competitors in Women's Bodybuilding are referred to most often as “women.”

Bodybuilding...” After the buildup and wild crowd reaction in response to the Bikini competitors, nearly half the crowd had left by the middle of the Women’s Bodybuilding posedown.

When I decided to compete for a second time, the choice to remain in Women’s Bodybuilding was difficult—I knew that I was not likely to win against the heavily steroid-enhanced physiques that are typical of the category. However, unwilling to don the high heeled shoes and expose myself to the judging criteria of the Figure category, and being much too muscular for the Bikini category, I made an attempt to shape the category of Women’s Bodybuilding by bringing a “more feminine” look to the competition. This time I showed up with more makeup, more glitter on my suit, and ready to capture some middle ground between the glitz of the Figure girls and the muscle of the female bodybuilders. However, as soon as I arrived at weigh-ins (covered in a bathrobe!), the judges and other officials began making comments that I was “too pretty” for bodybuilding and that I was in the wrong category, suggesting that I should have chosen Figure instead. I immediately understood that categories are about defining the feminine aesthetic, and that in this sport, complying to the expectations attached to a category is just as important—if not more so—as embodying gender norms.

Between the femininity and sex appeal of Figure, and the muscularity and presentation of Women’s Bodybuilding, there was no middle ground for me—that is, until the introduction of the Women’s Physique category in 2011. Designed specifically as a category for women who are “too muscular” for Figure but “too small” for Women’s Bodybuilding, Women’s Physique offers female competitors more options. I competed a third time—this time in Women’s Physique—in 2012. But instead finding solace in a new category, Women’s Physique actually created more complications for me, and left me feeling more “stuck in the middle” than I did before; the

creation of a new category also created a new space between two categories, and I got stuck in this space once again, too small for Women's Bodybuilding but not long and lean enough to fit the Physique ideal.

This research is a study on the theme of in-betweenness that underlies the sport on multiple levels. This in-betweenness, I suggest, results from a complicated relationship between femininity and power that exists both within and outside of the bodybuilding industry. While Women's Bodybuilding was created as a transgressive space in which the muscular woman could express herself, it also became a space regulated by gender norms; Women's Bodybuilding both defines and is defined by socially normative ideals of femininity, particularly the ideal of the slender body. While female bodybuilders seek a more powerful physique, their association with Women's Bodybuilding also brings a loss of social power; as I will explore in Chapter 2, some variation of this complication exists for competitors in all of the competition categories.

As female bodybuilding has grown in terms of body size and participation, it has been split up into several categories. These categories can be seen as an attempt to create spaces of inclusion for women who either can't or choose not to be competitive in Women's Bodybuilding, or an attempt to redefine the ideal of the muscular woman; I suggest that it is both. The female competition categories form a continuum between the feminine ideal and the outermost reaches of female masculinity which, to date, remain limitless, as female bodybuilders continue to push the female physique beyond the limits of the imagination in terms of size, muscularity, and conditioning. Recent attempts to eradicate Women's Bodybuilding, however, suggest an overt attempt to end the limitless potential for the female physique, pushing the feminine continuum into a narrower space of regulation.

Instead of creating more inclusive spaces for women, the creation of more categories

finds more women stuck in the in-between spaces; instead of having a greater opportunity to fit into a category, women find it increasingly difficult to fit the parameters and are forced either to comply to category criteria to be successful, or to redefine success. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, my informants defined success either in terms of success on stage, or in terms of offstage successes that include business, fanbase, or self-attainment. Both forms of success are most often mutually exclusive, and therefore competitors find themselves stuck between industry ideals, social power, and over-arching gender norms that heavily influence both.

### 1.1 WOMEN'S BODYBUILDING: DEFINITIONS AND HISTORY

My research is specifically focused on the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) and its amateur subsidiary, the National Physique committee (NPC), because they are the most widely known and influential federations. Created in 1946, the IFBB first allowed female bodybuilding competitors in 1979 (IFBB: History). What began as female bodybuilding has shifted over the past 10 years to become a series of progressively smaller body categories.

There are now five categories of competition for female athletes: Women's Bodybuilding, Physique, Figure, Fitness, and Bikini. These categories can be interpreted as progressive steps along a continuum between femininity and masculinity, where the outermost limit of acceptable female masculinity, dominance, and age is represented by the "Women's Bodybuilding" category, while Bikini is positioned opposite Women's Bodybuilding in terms of age, sexual passivity, and size. It is generally understood that the categories between Women's Bodybuilding and Bikini are hierarchical in terms of size, making each category relative to the next in the following order: Women's Bodybuilding, Women's Physique, Figure/Fitness, Bikini. For instance, Figure is smaller and not as hard as Women's Bodybuilding, while Bikini is smaller than Figure; Women's

Physique is for women who are “too hard” for Figure but too small or feminine to succeed in Bodybuilding<sup>5</sup>. This research focuses specifically on the role that body size and presentation play in the interpretation of femininity and the parameters of the categories.

My term “fitness industry” refers to the competitors within the sport of bodybuilding and the surrounding participants including, but not limited to, supplement companies, photographers, judges, fans, magazines, and other companies and organizations that directly support and/or shape the general subculture of the sport. When referring to the actual sport of building the body, I will refer to both “bodybuilding” and/ or “physique competition” in the lower cases; when referring to a category, such as Women’s Bodybuilding, I am pointing specifically to a category within the NPC and will capitalize it. Thus, female bodybuilding differs from Women’s Bodybuilding. Similarly, a physique competitor may be anyone who competes in a physique sport, while Women’s Physique refers specifically to the category.

Female bodybuilding has, since its beginning in the 1970s, complicated the very definition of what is—and is not—a feminine body (Butler, 1985). Judging criteria for female bodybuilders clearly articulate that the women must remain feminine and “look like women” (NPC Rules)—but what, exactly, a woman looks like remains a subject of interpretation. While the bodybuilding stage is a platform on which women can mold and display their bodies as they choose to, the power to interpret and define femininity is left in the hands of the judges. The disconnect between competitors’ attempts to redefine the feminine body, and the judges’ reactions to these interpretations, has been the source of conflict and controversy for over three decades (Bavington, 2000; Boyle, 2005; Brady, 2001; Heywood, 1998).

Over the years, Women’s Bodybuilding has grown both literally and figuratively. As

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<sup>5</sup> See tables at the end of Chapter 1 for a list of judging criteria.

more women have been drawn to physique competition, and these women have continued to compete to build larger and more muscular physiques, standards have shifted so that today's top female bodybuilders are significantly larger and more muscular than they were in the 1980's. As the bodybuilders have gotten larger, more categories have been created to accommodate smaller competitors, and now the sport attracts far more women than it first did.

The creation of the Women's Physique Division (WPD) led to immediate controversy and backlash from female bodybuilders and fans of Women's Bodybuilding, who feared that the category was designed to eventually replace and eradicate Women's Bodybuilding (dvsness, 2010; Hinds, 2012; Chick, 2010; RXMuscle). Like Bikini before it, Physique raises questions of the feminine ideal within the bodybuilding industry. On the one hand, these controversial categories offer more women the opportunity to subvert feminine ideals—but at the same time, these categories can be read as “more feminine” versions of Women's Bodybuilding, suggesting that the female bodybuilder is increasingly less and less welcome.

Despite speculation in forums, as well as statements from IFBB administrators that Women's Bodybuilding was expected to “phase itself out” as a result of “dwindling participation” and lack of interest from spectators (dvsness, 2010), Women's Bodybuilding is alive and well. By the start of Women's Physique, several national-level and Pro-level shows had cancelled their Women's Bodybuilding categories, and it was rumored that the Olympia would not host the Women's Bodybuilding category in future shows. However, some of those announcements were reversed, and so far it appears that Women's Bodybuilding will continue as an event at the Olympia.

While it would be a stretch to say that Women's Bodybuilding participation and popularity increased in the wake of statements that Women's Bodybuilding was expected to end,

fans and competitors who often remained silent came out through social media channels to rally in support of Women's Bodybuilding, suggesting that the female bodybuilding fanbase is underrepresented by ticket sales and participation at shows. The female bodybuilding fanbase is complex and often hidden, and like the sport itself, which remains outside of the mainstream, its fans are not always visible. It is well known within the industry that the majority of its following is reflected by social media profiles that hide the true identity of the individuals they represent. While I have neither conducted nor encountered research on the topic, I have observed that many male fans, including a close friend of mine, keep their interest in Women's Bodybuilding hidden, for fear of judgment by peers who would not understand.

Because of the fans and competitors who care so much about the sport, Women's Bodybuilding continues to provide a transgressive outlet on multiple levels. Like female bodybuilders, who compete despite pressures to conform to normative gender, many fans love the sport so much that they are willing to transgress norms in order to follow it. The aesthetic is desirable not only to the competitors who seek the muscularity, but also by the following of predominantly male viewers who express sexual interest in muscular women. In fact, many female bodybuilders earn a living by posting photos and videos to sites that require viewers to pay to enter; the frequenters of these sites, known in the industry as "muscle worshipers," anonymously pay for access to sexually explicit photos and videos of muscular women.

This research project originally began as an attempt to capture the pivotal moment in which Women's Bodybuilding was excluded from the sport of bodybuilding. As the IFBB made attempts to eradicate Women's Bodybuilding, I wanted to explore the tense relationship between muscle, desirability, and power. More than anything, I wanted to point it out as an attempt to limit gender expression. Since then, however, and during the two year span in which this

research was conducted, Women's Bodybuilding has demonstrated an extreme resiliency.

While so far the long-term fate of Women's Bodybuilding is unknown, the fact that it continues to exist suggests that in some way women will continue to pursue extremely muscular physiques, with support from fans. And this very fact suggests that gender norms are and will continue to be transformed by the sport, shaped not only by the competitors who demonstrate new interpretations of the female body, but also by the fans who support them.

## 1.2 POWER AND GENDER

Women's bodybuilding is, by its very nature, defiant and disruptive of gender norms. As female bodybuilders have pushed against feminine ideals, particularly that of the slender body, the bodybuilding industry has responded by increasing the overt monitoring, limiting, and articulation of what the feminine body should look like. As a result, female bodybuilders now strive not only to build muscular physiques, but to do so while maintaining a feminine appearance, "...reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested" (Bordo, 1993).

The film *Pumping Iron 2: The Women* (Butler, 1985) introduces the complex relationship between muscularity and femininity in Women's Bodybuilding by following several competitors and judges as they prepared for a competition. Through interviews with both judges and competitors, the film highlights the complication between the judges' expectations of the competitors, the competitors' interpretations of female muscularity, and the judging criterion that requires competitors to appear feminine. The focus of the film is ultimately a controversial battle between Rachel McLish's slender (yet muscular) frame, and Bev Francis's much larger and more muscular frame. McLish most closely represented traditional feminine ideals, while Francis

clearly had the more muscular frame—in the end, McLish won and Francis was penalized for her lack of femininity. During an interview, the head judge stated very clearly that “women should look like women,” ultimately raising the question of what a woman should look like and suggesting that femininity is something that must be achieved and can also be lost (Pumping Iron, 1985).

Since then, the discussion of femininity in Women’s Bodybuilding has evolved, as female bodybuilders themselves have evolved. New categories have been created to accommodate a broad variety of size, muscularity, presentation, and—ultimately—femininity. These categories allow for multiple interpretations of femininity, and form a continuum between masculinity and femininity. Illustrating Bordo’s (1993) concept of the *backlash phenomenon*, in which gender insubordination is used against itself to reinforce gender norms, these categories appear simply to give women more opportunities to compete, but instead ensure that femininity, even at the most extreme ends of the continuum, is regulated by a set of criteria to which competitors must comply in order to succeed on stage.

While success on stage is regulated by definitions of femininity, female physique athletes individually challenge the regulatory parameters by redefining success in ways that are independent of on-stage placing, such as increased visibility that drives their personal training businesses, increased fanbases that result in sponsorship opportunities, or even simply attainment of personal physique goals. However, these subversive competitors continue to find themselves stuck in one way or another—those who succeed onstage often face social and professional challenges outside of the sport, while those who find success outside of the sport must often be willing to face challenges inside of it.

While a competitor may define her femininity by the category she chooses, she may also

be defined by it. The complexities surrounding which category a competitor chooses to compete in are many—the choice is sometimes influenced by genetic convenience for competitors whose bodies are naturally a close fit for the parameters of a category, and is other times deliberately subversive or overtly conformative. For instance, a slender woman may choose to compete in Women’s Bodybuilding as a stance against having to compete in high heels or be judged on her makeup, with disregard for whether or not she fits the category well enough to win. Another woman may secretly desire a large, muscular physique but choose to remain in a smaller category, such as Bikini, because she values the power bought by industry recognition and fears social and professional repercussions that might come as a consequence of having large muscles. Others choose their categories based on which they are most likely to win. In any case, the category a woman chooses is both definitive and reflective of her gendering, and she may choose to move to other categories as she explores her own definition of femininity and/or its importance to her.

For some, the pursuit of an extremely muscular physique begins with a desire to “get in shape” and later transforms their understandings of an ideal aesthetic. For others, it becomes a form of control (over their bodies, over the way they are perceived, over gendered expectations). While work has been done to explore reasons behind the extreme manipulation of the physique (Boyle, 1993; Heywood, 1998), ultimately the reasons why women choose to manipulate their bodies are all very personal to the athletes who choose to participate, and these reasons are often reflected by the categories of competition they choose. Power, money, aesthetic preference, and control (over one’s body, over gender expression, etc.) are among the reasons often named by competitors.

Some female physique athletes choose to push their physiques to a level that appears to

completely disregard both socially normative femininity and industry standards of femininity, becoming what I will describe in Chapter 3 as the freak. I will describe the ways that the freak is regarded in the industry both positively and negatively, and explore the role that the freak plays in regulating gender in female physique athletes—that is, while all female physique athletes are aware of the invisible line one must cross to become a freak, they may choose at some point to accept Freakdom (some directly seeking it), or purposely avoid it.

The choice to introduce high levels of male hormones for the purpose of building a larger physique is—ultimately—the choice to become a freak. Steroid use is common among all of the categories, including Bikini, despite the likelihood of virilizing side-effects; that most competitors are willing to accept the possibility of some virilization suggests that on some level, competitors at all points on the continuum are willing to sacrifice some amount of femininity in order to build their physiques. And, the fact that Bikini competitors are [arguably] never called into question over femininity suggests that it is size, above all else, that is under scrutiny by normative feminine standards.

While many competitors dance around the line into Freakdom by using milder or smaller levels of steroids, the choice to use certain steroids and higher doses is ultimately the active and largely irreversible choice to relinquish any remaining ties to normalcy and enter Freakdom. This choice is often unspoken but lives in the minds of most female physique athletes as “the line” which may or may not be crossed. Once this line is crossed, it is generally permanent, and there is little left to limit the female bodybuilder, who is now able to push her physique beyond the biological limits of femininity. In this way, female bodybuilders hold the continuum open-ended; feminine or not, their capacity to build size and muscularity is so far limitless. As the sport evolves, female bodybuilders will continue to push the boundaries of feminine interpretation; if

the sport should ever succeed in the abolishment of Women's Bodybuilding, it would succeed also in placing a limit on the open end of the continuum.

This research finds a close link between gender and power, demonstrating that power is not androgynous—instead, power is divided as either masculine power or feminine power. At the most extreme end, female bodybuilders may seek masculine power, as Bordo (1993) suggests, wishing to shed the powerlessness associated with being female, but ultimately become socially powerless as both society and even the bodybuilding industry marginalize them. On the opposite end of the continuum, Bikini competitors manipulate their bodies in order to attain power as well, and succeed in doing so by embodying femininity while presenting muscular and hypersexualized physiques. Unlike the struggle for self-made power undertaken by the female bodybuilder, Bikini competitors strive for (and often achieve) a distinctly feminine sexual power that is ultimately no more than an extension of male power—a reward of table scraps for good performance.

On the gender continuum of the competition categories, social power runs inversely proportional to body size; as physiques get larger they are met with a progressive loss of power. For instance, Bikini competitors, at the smallest end of the continuum, enjoy power in the form of industry recognition, publicity, and monetary awards that are not available to female bodybuilders. Women who build their physiques may seek power, but I argue that they are aware of the gradual loss of power associated with doing so. It takes years for a female bodybuilder to reach a competitive amount of size and muscularity; by the time she does, she is generally aware of the political and social consequences of doing so, having observed the industry long enough to know that, as Bordo (1993) pointed out, “To reshape one's body into a male body is *not* to put on male power and privilege” (p. 179).

The category a physique athlete chooses is often a reflection of the power she desires. The gender continuum set up by the categories is not only based on body size and muscularity, but also on gender performance. In Chapter 2 I will outline the judging criteria that determine how gender meets body size to suggest that the smaller the competitor, the more feminine her performance on stage must be. For example, Bikini competitors must wear heels and are judged on hair and makeup, while female bodybuilders must compete barefooted and are not directly judged on their hair and makeup (NPC Rules). Perhaps the reason that Women's Physique is so popular is that it gives women with larger physiques access to a more beauty-based category, allowing them to perform their gender in a more normative way while demonstrating large, powerful bodies—and the hope of access to some of the power enjoyed by Bikini and Figure competitors.

The categories of competition succeed in creating more spaces of “stuckness,” but may also have transgressive potential. Female physique athletes are caught in a strange paradoxical moment: they are simultaneously subversive and docile; subversive to the extent that they purposely deviate from normative femininity, and docile to the extent that they are engaged constantly in a form of self-improvement. While one perspective might conclude that competitors manipulate their bodies to comply with the rules of the sport, another perspective might conclude that the sport of bodybuilding manipulates its competitors by imposing rules to which they must comply. However, the extent of their subjectivity is arguable. Through the narratives of my informants, I will examine the fluidity of gender, power, and manipulation in the sport of bodybuilding.

Both the body and the categories become tools of strategization. A competitor can never inherently fit one category perfectly—she must therefore manipulate her body to fit the category

in order to achieve success on stage, or manipulate her definition of success (i.e., sponsorships, recognition, placing) to allow the category to serve simply as a means to another desired outcome. To compete in any capacity of the sport is to modify the body to fit a set of criteria, sacrificing absolute control over one's appearance and subjecting the body to industry manipulation.

This research will examine the inverseness of gender and power, and explore the ways that these are used as tools of manipulation in the sport of bodybuilding. Bikini competitors, whose bodies appear to be most docile through voluntary objectification, may in fact manipulate gendered expectations in order to attain social power. On the opposite end of the continuum, female bodybuilders, whose bodies appear most intentionally transgressive, “serve, not transform, a social order that limits female possibilities” (Bordo, 1993), by styling their hair, painting their nails, and posing in compliance with industry standards. In these ways, the subversive body may also be the body made docile, while the most apparently docile body may in fact be the most subversive.

### 1.3 A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Female bodybuilders are quickly recognized by many observers as gender deviants—women who step outside of the traditional boundaries of femininity. While such boundaries are often unspoken, they are real—and female bodybuilding has served to make those invisible boundaries much more apparent. Many, from both within and outside of the sport, have questioned the gender and judgement of women who strive for physiques which were once (and arguably still are) synonymous with masculinity (Boyle, 2005; Heywood, 1998; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004). Feminist scholars have long been interested in the subject of

women's bodybuilding and its implications for gender (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; Brady, 2001; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Heywood, 1998; Ian, 1991; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Lindsay, 1996; Schippert, 2007; Shea, 2001). Researchers seem most concerned with the discussion of whether or not the female bodybuilder subverts gender norms (Brady, 2001; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Schippert, 2007) as well as the challenges presented by judging criteria that emphasize femininity (Boyle, 2005; Boyle 2003; Brace-Govan, 2004; Ian, 1991). While there is some existing research from the bodybuilder perspective (Heywood, 1998), much of what has been written is missing the inside perspective of bodybuilding culture, and is concerned only with one of the five competition categories available to women who build their bodies—Women's bodybuilding. This research builds on academic discussions of Women's Bodybuilding to discuss the complexities and paradoxes of the additional competition categories from an inside perspective.

This research pulls together several bodies of literature that are useful in the analysis of the *sport* of female bodybuilding, which now includes multiple competition categories. One useful body of literature explores theories of the body, and includes Judith Butler's (1990) performance theory, Bordo's (1993) discussion of the slender body, and Foucault's (1977) concept of docile bodies. Another useful body of theory, led by Bogdan (1988), Fiedler (1978), and Garland-Thomson (1996), explores the social construction, framing, and social uses of the freak, which I will build on to explain the hidden implications behind the competition categories. In addition, this research considers work that has already been done to explore female bodybuilding (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; Brady, 2001; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Heywood, 1998; Ian, 1991; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004;

Lindsay, 1996; Schippert, 2007; Shea, 2001), as well as ethnographic treatments of gender and sexuality (Pascoe, 2007; Ryan, 2001; Schippert, 2007; Valentine, 2007).

#### 1.4 GENDER AND BODY THEORY

Throughout my research, I explore the complex relationship between feminine ideals and the women trying to achieve, subvert, or maintain them. My work is largely informed by Susan Bordo's (1993) discussion of gender socialization in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. In this collection of essays, Bordo describes the female body as the site of Western cultural construction. Exploring the various manifestations of both societal attempts to construct the feminine, as well as woman's endeavors to subvert attempts to construct her against her will, Bordo describes woman's body as the site of a fight in which woman simultaneously works for and against it.

Bordo (1993) deconstructs bodily symbols of femininity, including slenderness and youth. Arguing that the slender body is highly valued because it is the embodiment of passivity and weakness, this analysis serves as a framework for my own deconstruction of the hierarchy of body size within the fitness and bodybuilding industry. Also present in my research is Bordo's suggestion that women are purposely kept in submission to men by being kept at war with their own bodies; Bordo posits that the body can be viewed as a metaphor for culture, through/by/on which gender is displayed. The display of gender--whether as a picture of normalcy, deviance, or protest--reproduces it. Those who meet the aesthetic ideal serve as an example of normalcy, while those who do not are considered deviant and thus marginalized; the constant threat of marginalization keeps women in a state of docility. Those who protest are counterproductive, as they both reinforce normalcy by exaggerating its traits, and cross into self-defeating disorder. I

explore the ways in which the slender girl, represented by the Bikini category, is pitted against the muscular woman, most extremely represented by Women's Bodybuilding.

Opposite Bordo's (1993) analysis of the slender body is Phillip White and James Gillett's (1994) analysis of the muscular body. As Boyle (2005) and Ian (1991) have articulated, women's bodybuilding calls into question definitions of femininity, ultimately highlighting the emphasis placed on the masculine/feminine binary; it would make sense, then, that an analysis of femininity might hinge on an analysis of masculinity. In *Reading the Muscular Body: a Critical Decoding of Advertisements in Flex Magazine*, Philip White and James Gillett (1994) decode images and advertisements in the bodybuilding industry's most popular magazine to understand media representations of discourses surrounding the male body. White and Gillett focus their analysis on "how bodybuilding discourses address the erosion of power felt by many men, and how bodybuilding practices are represented as a means of self-transformation" (p. 19). If male and female bodybuilding involves the same practices, then an understanding of how bodybuilding is valuable to masculinity might provide insight into why it is antithetical to femininity.

White and Gillett (1994) analyze the significance of the muscular physique as a cultural ideal, and explore the ways in which the athletic physique—both male and female—is depicted in magazines, including, and most focused on, *Flex*. The article seeks to examine the extent to which magazines strategically place hidden meanings that promote and perpetuate dominance-based masculinity. Positioning male bodybuilding opposite the current discussions of female bodybuilding, White and Gillett suggest that studying the construction of masculinity, as well as its recent loss of power, might lead to a better understanding of the constructed confines of femininity. White and Gillett's analysis is particularly useful when brought into conversation

with Bordo's (1993) analysis of slenderness as a symbolic loss of power, because in this article White and Gillett theorize that loss of power among males has led to an ideal femininity which is proportionate to a decline in male power, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) suggests that in order for women to reclaim their bodies from social subjection, we must learn to recognize that they are treated as vessels for the non-corporeal existence and exercise subversion accordingly. To Grosz, this means thinking of the body not as a vessel for the mind, nor as a physical actor which controls the mind, but as acting in unison with the mind to create a total lived experience. This research builds on Grosz's theory to explore the many ways that female physique competitors reconcile their desires with their actions. As I will show in Chapter 3, there is often a difference between the physique that a competitor ultimately finds ideal, and the category in which she competes. This difference is often due to a fear of a loss of power that comes with increased body size.

## 1.5 BODYBUILDING RESEARCH

Women's Bodybuilding itself is a juxtaposition of many contradicting binaries, and this phenomenon remains prevalent even within the academic community, as scholars attempt to determine whether women's bodybuilding transgresses or reinforces gender norms. Many feminist scholars (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Schippert, 2007) suggest that female bodybuilders do both. Even those scholars who focus on the empowerment potential of the sport (Brace-Govan, 2004; Brady, 2001; Heywood, 1998; Krane et al., 2004; Ryan, 2001; Shea, 2001) fail to acknowledge the ways that female bodybuilders still reinforce gender norms; that is, the stronger the claim that bodybuilders transgress norms, the stronger the underlying implication

that there is a norm that is reinforced by difference.

Marcia Ian (1991), in “From Abject to Object: Women's Bodybuilding,” suggests that bodybuilding—both male and female—functions both as a statement against traditional femininity, where femininity is synonymous with softness and passivity, and as an embrace of masculinity, where masculinity is synonymous with hardness, strength, and aggression. Arguing that while muscle is not necessarily sexed, larger muscles tend to be deemed more masculine, whether that muscle is on a male or female body, Ian suggests that women turn to bodybuilding as an overt rejection of or refusal to embody the oppressive feminine traits that have been imposed upon them by society. However, as Bordo (1993) points out, attaining a masculine physique does not necessarily mean attaining masculine power.

In a later article, Ian (2001) discusses the motivation behind a woman's choice to compete in bodybuilding. In “The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding: Transgression and Other Postmodern Myths,” Ian builds on her previous work to further develop the conversation about female bodybuilding, and suggests that whether female bodybuilders transgress or reinforce gender norms, their motivation is to hide from them. Ian concludes that female bodybuilding is not ultimately about gender transgression at all, but is instead about seeking refuge from standards of femininity that leave many excluded.

An example of the masculine/feminine binary and its representation in bodybuilding is the forced contrast between women's and men's bodybuilding. The film *Pumping Iron 2: The Women* (Butler, 1985) was intended as an exploration of the difficulties faced by women in the sport; however, the film hinges on depictions which unintentionally deepen the male/female binary. Claudia Schippert's (2007) article, “Can Muscles be Queer? Reconsidering the Transgressive Hyper-built body,” builds an analysis of female gender transgression by using the

film as a framework of analysis. Schippert takes the conversation about female bodybuilding into a new direction by applying a queer theoretical perspective to explore the issue of gender transgression in bodybuilding. My argument builds on this discussion of gender and sexuality within Women's Bodybuilding, suggesting a shift of focus in society from sexuality to gender performativity.

Whether for the purpose of transgressing gender expectations or simply expressing it differently, female bodybuilders must somehow navigate tight spaces of gender performativity in order to succeed in the sport. Often the winner is not decided on terms of successful building of the muscles; the judging criteria require female bodybuilders to appear simultaneously feminine and masculine, and a misstep in either direction is enough to ensure failure in the eyes of the judges. Lex Boyle's (2005) article, "Flexing the Tensions of Female Muscularity: How Female Bodybuilders Negotiate Normative Femininity in Competitive Bodybuilding," links Butlerian concepts of performativity and identity (Butler, 1993) to the understanding of the turbulent climate within and surrounding female bodybuilding. Building on Boyle's analysis of the ways that race, class, and gender intersect with sex, my work posits that women in the fitness/bodybuilding industry are categorized according to intersections of age, size, and gender performativity. Where Boyle's work explores the difficulties faced by female bodybuilders; my own work will move Boyle's discussion forward to focus on female bodybuilding judging criteria, cultural concepts of the feminine ideal, and the inverse relationship between the two.

## 1.6 FREAK THEORY

There are many interpretations and applications that treat the body in terms of the lived experience, but one I find most useful to my research focuses on the freak. The "True freak,"

according to Fiedler (1978), is one who “challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, between self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth” (p. 356). The freak, therefore, is the embodiment of multiple dualisms. Similarly, the female bodybuilder is simultaneously masculine and feminine, strong and vulnerable, sexy and undesirable. Discussions of freak theory (Bogdan, 1988; Fiedler, 1978; Garland-Thomson, 1996), explain how the freak is constructed, maintained, and framed.

Taking up Bogdan's assertion that the freak is socially constructed through a specific social process that Garland-Thomson (1993) calls “Enfreakment” (p. 4), I will explore the social construction of the freak as it is experienced by the female bodybuilder. Within Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's *Freakery* are several chapters which are useful to my research. Elizabeth Grosz's (1996) “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit” explores the freak's important cultural function of simultaneously defying and defining normalcy by “straddling binaric oppositions” (p. 57). According to Grosz, the freak is neither Self nor Other, man nor woman; the freak “rests on the boundary between Self and Other” (p. 57). My work highlights how the female bodybuilder serves the same role by skewing boundaries between masculinity and femininity, sexual dominance and passivity, old age and youth. In the past, the female bodybuilder has been used as a point of reference for the outermost limits of female masculinity, sexual dominance, and youthful bodies. I will build on Grosz's analyses to first assert that female bodybuilders are freaks, and later suggest that the IFBB deliberately positions the freak to police and regulate competitors in the other categories.

Cecile Lindsay's (1996) “Bodybuilding: a Postmodern freak Show” directly makes the connection between postmodern body theory, the freak, and the female bodybuilder. Drawing

heavily from Feidler's (1978) definition of freak and Bogdan's (1988) analysis of the freak in early 20<sup>th</sup> century freak Shows, Lindsay posits that the female bodybuilder is a contemporary illustration of Fiedler's "True freak," who actively becomes a subordinate Other through "personal choice or action" (p. 357). Essentially, Lindsay suggests that female bodybuilders position themselves as the subordinate Other, either by accepting the role or by actively seeking it. My work will use these analyses as a framework for my interpretation of experiences provided by my informants.

Theoretical discussions about the body can be traced to very basic questions about agency and subjectivity, choice and consent. One basic question that lies beneath my work is that of the power relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Moving forward from Butler's discussions of insubordination, my work will invoke Butler once again in the discussion of subversion. Does the female bodybuilder have the power to subvert gender norms, or is she implicated in their reinforcement? Is the intention to be subversive enough on its own, or is it dependent on the interpretation of viewers?

## 1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foucault's (1977, 1995) contribution to body theory lays a significant foundation for my study of female bodybuilding. Underlying the sport of physique competition—hidden beneath the judging criteria and the unspoken understandings of the categories—is the question of gender norms: who created them, how are they enforced, how might they be subverted, and what happens to deviant bodies? Foucault's theory of the "Docile Body," later taken up and applied to gender by Susan Bordo (1993), explains the process by which gender norms have come to be. According to Foucault (1995), "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and

improved” (p. 136). Foucault explains how this process functions and reproduces itself, exploring docility by linking discipline and punishment to the body. As Butler (1990) later points out, women’s bodies are made docile through impossibly elusive expectations of femininity.

Tracing the history of the human body, Foucault (1995) pinpoints the moment at which the body was recognized and punished not in physical terms, but as “something higher than the corporeal body” (p. 24). According to Foucault, this was achieved through “uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement” (p. 137).

Judith Butler's (1993) concepts of gender performativity and insubordination are illustrated by academic discussions of the pressures placed upon female bodybuilders to be, and remain, feminine. Tracing the conversation led by scholars such as Lex Boyle (2005) and Marcia Ian (1991), my work draws from Judith Butler's (1993; 1990) essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” as well as selections from her book *Gender Trouble*, as a framework of analysis in my exploration of the ways in which female physique athletes must navigate competition and identity categories both within and outside of the fitness.

A perfect example of the ways in which the corporeal body is disciplined through noncorporeal methods is illustrated by CJ Pascoe (2007), whose ethnography, *Dude, You’re a Fag*, observes gender policing in high school boys. Pascoe explains that masculine identity is never “safe” and that in order to be read as masculine, her subjects must constantly perform their masculinities in order to be read as men; the unwanted alternative is to be read as feminine (p. 127). Ultimately, the premise of the book is to explore how the word *fag* is used by high school

boys to police masculinity. Concluding that “fag” is synonymous not with homosexuality but with failed masculinity, Pascoe explains that there is a “distinction between fag as an unmasculine and problematic identity and gay as a possibly masculine, although marginalized, sexual identity...” (p. 58-59). Boys, not girls, are called “fag,” and usually without any sexual meaning; in fact, they could be called that for “anything...really, anything” (p. 57). However, Pascoe takes care to note that “these nonsexual meanings didn't replace sexual meanings but rather existed alongside them” (p. 57).

The use of “fag” is not confined to a random slur that is hurled in hatred at homosexuals. In fact, Pascoe (2007) finds that many high school boys admitted that they would never consider using the word directed toward or in the presence of homosexuals. Instead, “fag” is used systematically in joking between and among boys as a device for policing gender identity. According to Pascoe, “the fag identity was fluid—certainly an identity that no boy wanted but that most boys could escape, usually by engaging in some sort of discursive contest to turn another boy into a fag” (p. 61). When used as a joke, “fag” keeps boys comfortably afraid of being perceived as one; the boy who uses the term is not one, while the boy who has been called one will be quick to use the term in order to disassociate himself with it. Pascoe writes that, “In this way the fag became a hot potato that no boy wanted to be left holding” (p. 61). This observation specifically informs my analysis of an informant's narrative in a later chapter.

Critics of female bodybuilders are similarly concerned with how gender is performed (Butler, 1985); female bodybuilders are rarely, if ever, assumed to be lesbians. Female bodybuilders are taken as symbols of gender deviance, and are constantly under pressure to maintain a “feminine” appearance. Given that the female physique athlete chooses to maintain a physique that is often interpreted as deviant and/or overtly masculine, one has to wonder whether

or not the female bodybuilder is purposely participating in gender subversion. As Judith Butler (1993) argues, however, there can be no subversion that does not ultimately reinforce the very categories in question. My research will explore how the categories of competition reinforce this standpoint.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) dissects the concepts of subjectivity, identity, sexuality, and gender performativity, as well as the ways in which these terms exist in relation to one another. Butler builds on Foucault's (1995) analysis of discourse, in which he states that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1995). Butler invokes this analysis as the springboard for her own discussion of the deep-rooted conflict that exists—overtly or dormant—when one movement attempts to discursively counter another. While Butler's purpose is to explore her own conflict over her inclusion within and adoption of the “lesbian” identity, her theory stands as a versatile argument that can be useful in the discussion of identity and performativity in general. In my research, Butler's discussion of identity discourse will be applied to the categories of competition (and arguably identity) within the fitness and bodybuilding industry—more specifically, the ways in which these discursive categories are used to both overtly signify and quietly control gender performativity.

Just as Butler (1990) questions the determination of the subject under the lesbian category by discourses within both the heterosexual and homosexual communities, I remain similarly skeptical of the determination of gender subjectivity within the fitness industry which appears to be a direct reflection of gender normativity imposed from without. Where Monique Wittig (1982) argues in favor of lesbianism as a revolutionary signifier which operates independently and outside of the man/woman heterosexual contract, in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,”

Butler (1993) argues that even lesbianism cannot escape its position as subject of homophobic discourse; similarly, even if female bodybuilding could be seen as an escape from gender normativity, the sport is still subject to—and of—heteronormative gender expectations.

In *On Female Body Experience*, Iris Marion Young (2005) takes up Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) argument that woman is neither Subject nor Other, but is instead caught somewhere between—a Not-Self. Young suggests that “the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality exhibit this same tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object” (p. 32). My research will build on Young's observation to explore the extent to which sport of female bodybuilding illustrates and exaggerates these tensions.

## 1.8 METHODS

This research is presented as an ethnography, as it is concerned with the current discursive climate within the fitness industry as experienced by its participants. Information was gathered from three primary sources: formal and informal interviews from competitors and other industry participants, information contained in social media, and personal experience from my own time spent in the industry. My work also brings in a textual analysis of the IFBB rulebook judging criteria. Through my participation in the industry as a coach and athlete, and through interviews with other athletes and participants in the bodybuilding and fitness industry, I am uniquely positioned to provide valuable insight and gain access to the experience of bodybuilding culture.

I formally interviewed ten competitors and/or industry participants—at least one from each category. I was specifically interested in how competitors experience their competition categories, how they view the other categories, and what they think about the categories in

general. Preliminary questions included:

1. Why did you choose the category in which you compete?
2. Would you ever consider competing in any other category? Which one and why?
3. Is there any category that you would never consider, if so why?
4. Are there any categories that you think shouldn't exist?
5. What would you change about your category or any of the others?
6. Have you had to change yourself in order to better fit a particular category?
7. How do you define success in this sport?

Because of my position within the industry, I am generally aware of the discourses and sentiments surrounding the various categories. For instance, many female bodybuilders I have spoken to think that the Bikini category was created for the gratification of male audiences. And I have had the general impression that while many bikini competitors have a lot of respect for female bodybuilders, they also commonly express that they have no interest in gaining that amount of muscle. While to some degree I did anticipate some trends in the answers from my informants, I believed that it was important to ask them, both so that the responses could be documented and so that I could avoid assumptions and generalizations that may not be true.

Social media also plays a significant role in the bodybuilding industry; Facebook and forum participation are two key ways that competitors network with one another and position themselves politically within the industry hierarchy. While my research has not been formally conducted through these sites, I have gathered some information from public access forums. These sites also play a large role in my experience and understanding of the industry.

Online forums play a key role in the bodybuilding and fitness industry today, because they are platforms by which IFBB administrators, competitors, judges, photographers, and fans

may openly communicate. When the IFBB first announced the addition of the Physique category in 2011, the announcement was made through two online forums: RX Muscle and Sioux Country (Chick, 2010; SiouxCountry). As competitors and other industry participants raised questions, they did so publicly through these forums and IFBB administrators posted answers and clarifications through these forums as well. There was a lot of initial backlash and speculation over these announcements, and IFBB administrators had to work hard to put an end to rumors and speculation that female bodybuilding was being replaced. However, as rumors continued and facts were “leaked,” IFBB administrators eventually had to address the rumors and admit plans to end female bodybuilding altogether. Since then there has been a lot of negotiation and further clarification between competitors and IFBB administrators. I plan to use information posted on these forums to explain exactly what changes are taking place within the IFBB, how competitors initially reacted, and how the discussion has evolved since. For instance, some female bodybuilders immediately spoke out against the new category, but have since competed in it.

In addition to formal interviews, I was also able to participate in impromptu conversations with other competitors at my most recent competition. In one instance, I met a number of Bikini competitors backstage in the dressing room, and found myself in the middle of a conversation about body size, muscularity, and gender that occurred entirely organically. While waiting to take the stage, I also participated in a conversation with competitors in my own category, in which we discussed body size, muscularity, femininity, and uncertainty over what the judges would be looking for when we took the stage.

## 1.9 METHODOLOGY

My work on this subject draws heavily from my own experience in the sport. This project is not only inspired by my experience as a female bodybuilder—it is also heavily informed by it. It is difficult to separate my role as an athlete and coach from my role as a researcher, because I have been trained to view experience through a feminist lens, and I have been trained to listen with an analytical ear. However, it is precisely because of my personal involvement in the industry that I am able to ask relevant questions and accurately interpret responses.

I draw largely from my own experiences as a participant in the industry both as a coach and an athlete. In the tradition of feminist anthropologists such as Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (1992), I find it necessary to acknowledge and employ my positionality for the benefit of my research, in this way departing from traditional ethnography in which the researcher strives to remain as objective as possible (Saugko, 2003; Haraway, 1991). It is not my role as researcher but rather my role as participant in which I find authority to write about the culture of the fitness and bodybuilding industry. I will write about this culture not only as I observe it, but also as I experience it.

My position within the industry is particularly helpful because it allows me to ask questions that are relevant and insightful, and it allows me to interpret the experiences of my informants more meaningfully. Much of the existing research on female bodybuilders fails to interpret meanings and accurately interpret the experiences of its informants, because much of bodybuilding culture involves things that are either unspoken, taken for granted, or generally considered taboo to discuss. My positionality makes me best suited to understand how to navigate my questions in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

My work is most closely aligned with ethnography, though at times it approaches autoethnography, which combines the researcher's personal experience with those of informants. While the narratives included within my work are predominately those of my informants, my own voice and experience are valuable to my interpretations and analyses. My role as researcher merges fluidly with my role as an industry participant, and to separate the roles would be to lose a valuable perspective that is necessary in order to adequately describe the industry as it is at this point in time.

This project has stalled several times because of methodological struggles. How do I discuss ideal femininity from a feminist standpoint without acknowledging that the ideal varies across spaces of race, class, nationality, and sexuality? How do I discuss female masculinity from a bodybuilding standpoint without utilizing cultural assumptions about masculinity itself? Is there a power struggle between the researcher and the subject, and if so how is that complicated by my role as both researcher and subject?

Paula Saukko (2003) suggests that cultural research offers the possibility of a "methodological continuum" in which there are no absolute truths and there is an understanding that the only truths implied are the truths *as told from* the standpoint of the researcher (p. 61-2). This research neither suggests that there is a single ideal femininity, nor that an ideal does not exist. Instead, it invokes the term loosely and acknowledges its subjective reality within the bodybuilding industry.

Saukko (2003) asserts that "the counterpart to being true to Other realities in the new ethnography is to be critically aware of the way in which one's Self and its commitments shape the research" (p. 62). Saukko calls this self-reflexivity, and suggests that allows the researcher to "be more receptive to perspectives that approach the world from a different position" (p. 62).

Self-reflexivity, as it is used in this research, is a necessary and valuable tool that allows me to discuss and analyze my own experiential contributions to my understanding of the fitness and bodybuilding culture.

In the chapters that follow, I will introduce the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) and its subsidiary, the National Physique Committee (NPC), and explore the significance of their judging criteria and rules. Chapter 2 will explore the ways that judging criteria across the five categories of competition are used to define and reinforce varying levels of femininity, and will provide an analysis of how these criteria are used by both judges and competitors in a struggle to define femininity itself. Finally, Chapter 3 will introduce several competitors and their experiences with the fitness industry, and provide an analysis of their experiences in order to explain the ways in which female athletes in the fitness industry must carefully navigate gender and femininity in order to define and create success for themselves as athletes in a subjective industry.

## 2. COMPETITION CATEGORIES

As multiple theorists have observed (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Schippert, 2007), the sport of women's bodybuilding is inherently subjective and riddled with contradictions. The sport invites women to build and display muscular physiques, but then places restrictions on how muscular they can be and how they must express them. The rules seem to change from one contest to the next, as a physique which was too small at one contest could be too large at the next, and vice-versa. If it's not enough that female bodybuilders must navigate very narrow spaces to be successful, there are also the added complications associated with the additional categories. This chapter will focus on these categories of female physique competition, including not only the complications within them but also those surrounding them.

While each category has its own complex system of judging criteria and expectations that competitors face on stage, the complexities of selecting a competition category are quite significant. It is not only that a competitor chooses the category which best suits her physique—she must also then make her body suit the category. In some cases genetics simply won't allow it, and in others it is the competitor's choice not to comply. In either case, the competitor must ultimately decide if she competes to win or to serve another purpose, such as to achieve a large fan base and industry recognition, drive business for personal training, or reach a personally gratifying aesthetic standard. But, even this choice has many layers, as choosing to win on one level often comes with the sacrifice of winning at another. It is rare that a competitor falls neatly into one category and succeeds on every level of her expectation—for most, sacrifices must be made in order to continue to compete. For instance, a competitor who chooses to get as large as possible without complying to industry standards of femininity does so at the risk of losing on

stage. Or, a competitor who competes mainly for industry recognition may similarly refrain from manipulating her aesthetic to satisfy competition standards.

For many, if not most, competitors, reaching Professional status is the pinnacle of success in this sport—but relatively few go on to actually compete at the professional level once they’ve made it from the amateur to professional level. Therefore, this discursive analysis of rules and judging criteria will focus on the rules and guidelines for the United States’ amateur organization—the National Physique Committee. The NPC is arguably the most significant and influential amateur bodybuilding federation in the United States because it feeds directly into the largest and most recognized Professional bodybuilding organization in the world (IFBB: History).

The NPC is by far the biggest competition federation in the United States, as it is the national subsidiary of the largest bodybuilding federation in the world. With participation from 169 countries and over 90 national governing sports agencies and Olympic committees, membership in the General Association of International Sports Federations, and an active International Congress, the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) is the world’s most widely recognized bodybuilding federation (IFBB: History). Formed in 1946 in Montreal, Quebec, the IFBB made history in 1970 when it held its first International Congress in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Today, the IFBB sets the precedent for bodybuilding federations world-wide (IFBB: History).

The IFBB is an organization for professional bodybuilders; therefore, bodybuilders must earn their way into the organization through amateur competitions. Each country that participates in the IFBB has its own amateur federation that acts as a subsidiary of the IFBB. Those who earn their Pro statuses through these amateur competitions automatically become

members of the IFBB and have the option to go on to compete in IFBB Pro competitions against other national and international professional competitors.

At the amateur level, which is where the majority of participants compete, there is a high turnover rate of competitors, as it can take so many years to reach the Pro level that many give up before reaching Pro status. To earn a Pro card, a competitor must compete and win on several levels. First, she must compete at a local or regional level show that is a designated National Qualifier, for the chance to be eligible (for just one year) to compete in a Junior National or National level show, where she can compete for the Pro card (NPC Rules).

There are fewer than a dozen National level shows each year, so there are only a handful of opportunities to compete for the Pro card. Given the highly subjective nature of local and regional level judging criteria, a competitor might compete time after time just to reach the National level and not earn a Pro card. At this point, she must go back to the local or regional level and re-qualify for the National level, beginning the process all over again.

For many, the Pro card is not necessary. Unlike other sports, whose athletes only find financial success through athletic success, physique athletes don't have to be successful on stage to make money. As a manager once told me, "you must decide if you want to be a Pro, or if you want a fan base." Many competitors manage to build a following on social media through training, modeling, and writing, while others find success on the stage but never build a following. Iris Kyle, the most decorated competitor in women's bodybuilding history--eight time Ms. Olympia and six time Ms. International—is not generally known for having a long list of high profile sponsors (Jason, 2011). On the other hand, there are several women, such as Allison Moyer, who have competed for many years and never achieved Pro status, but have major

endorsements<sup>6</sup>. In this way, the competitors themselves have redefined what it means to be successful, while struggling to comply with the highly subjective judging standards; despite their successes off stage, many continue to struggle for Pro status.

Part of what makes the Pro card so elusive is that the judging is so subjective that it is impossible to predict the winning combination and show up with the right package at the right time. Sometimes, the difference between two competitors is so subtle that hair color is rumored to be the deciding factor. In fact, among the female categories it is very common for competitors to dye their hair, use hair extensions, or have breast enhancement surgery just to try to please the judges. Judges are instructed to judge everything from suit color and makeup to overall femininity. It is in the ambiguous and broad language of these instructions that slippages and controversies occur, and in which cultural gendered norms are defined and redefined at every competition.

In the sport of bodybuilding there is a muddy distinction between the official rules and expectations, and the unspoken—but very real—rules and expectations that competitors experience. Each category has special nuances and unspoken rules. For instance, a Figure competitor who won multiple “overall” titles at her smaller shows consistently placed low in her class at every national competition for two years, despite the common consensus among her peers that her physique was the best on stage. Eventually, she had a surgical breast enhancement and began placing second in her class at national shows. Still not wanting to stop her career short of a Pro card, she invested in hair extensions and colored her hair (she had been known for her red hair and signature pixie cut). With little or no change to her physique, she began placing

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of these sponsored competitors are found under the “sponsored athletes” sections on most supplement companies’ websites, including the websites for Optimum Nutrition, Gaspari, and Dymatize Nutrition. Very few of the sponsored athletes are IFBB Pros.

consistently higher in her national shows. Certain that she was close to reaching her Pro status, the competitor spent a year decreasing her size and muscularity to comply with feedback from judges—but by the time she took the stage to debut her smaller physique, the expectations had changed again to favor a more muscular physique. Currently, her most recent national placing was 11<sup>th</sup> of 20 competitors.

Stories like hers are quite common. There are many common perceptions that judges tend to score competitors in favor of their personal tastes in what they find attractive, rather than purely focusing on physique. Among these perceptions is that competitors with breast implants are scored more favorably than those without, that judges don't like redheads, and that judges prefer long hair. The short-haired, small-breasted Pro is hard to find—if there is one. These rumors vary across regions, and are impossible to verify—however, they often shape a competitor's decision when choosing a show. For instance, it is rumored that judges in the north east prefer brunettes, while judges in the South prefer blondes, so seasoned competitors and coaches will often choose shows based on this information.

As a competition coach, I have even placed my own clients into shows based on hair color and other factors that may be an advantage in one show and a disadvantage in another. In one instance, I drove a Bikini client 10 hours north just because she was Asian and we were trying to avoid shows in Georgia and Tennessee, where judges are typically rumored to favor blondes. She went on to win overall at her Ohio show, but we will never know how she might have placed in Georgia. Since then, she has competed in several shows and despite repeating the exact same performance and aesthetic at each show, has received different placings at each one.

For this reason (among many others), the judging criteria are extremely problematic for competitors. In some instances the rules are problematic because of what they specify, but in

most instances they are problematic because of how vague they are. And this vagueness appears to be deliberate. In some instances, contest administrators at the regional and local amateur levels post IFBB approved addendums and additions to the IFBB rules in an effort to give judges—not competitors—a better understanding of what to look for while judging competitors.

In various language across each category, the rules leave room for unspoken criteria by specifying only that competitors will be judged subjectively on overall appearance. The IFBB could never specify that large breasts are a necessary feature without facing huge legal and/or political ramifications, so the authority to judge in such a way is hidden behind vague language. Bikini competitors, for instance, are judged on “overall appearance including...overall presentation,” while the language of the bodybuilding rules states that Bodybuilders will be judged on “the total package.” So long as breasts and hair style are a part of the total package or overall presentation, these factors can weigh in significantly with judges.

The vague wording of the IFBB rules serves multiple functions. On the one hand, it leaves room for subjectivity from the judges. A judge could, in theory if not in reality, reference a vague term to justify his or her scoring decisions. A judge who scores a blonde more favorably than a brunette with a better physique can do so with little consequence. An entire panel of judges could give a low score to a competitor with an amazing physique but without breast implants, and justify the decision by referencing “overall presentation.”

In addition to vague standards and judging criteria regarding aesthetics, favoritism plays a large role in the outcome of a show. While it is impossible to prove, it is understood and ultimately even accepted by competitors that these forms of favoritism occur often. For example, I recently brought a client to a competition at which she arguably had the best physique. What I

could hear from surrounding audience members, and from the feedback I heard from other competitors backstage, she should have placed first. Instead, my client placed second while a girl much more slender won. We learned later that the girl who beat her was affiliated with a well-known training group, and it was rumored that she was scored favorably because of her association. However, because of the subjectivity of the sport and its judging criteria, it is impossible to prove or disprove these rumors. In instances such as this, a competitor's only option is to compete again and hope for better circumstances.

However, judges aren't the only ones who manipulate the vague wording of the judging criteria. Competitors have spent over a decade stretching the interpretation of femininity (as the judging criteria specify that they must appear feminine), literally forcing the judges to accept them on their own terms. One thing is always certain: as long as there are competitors, there will be a winner, and the competitors are always scored relative only to each other. So if there are five competitors lined up on stage before the panel of judges, and none of them comes close to demonstrating what is considered acceptable femininity, the judges will still be forced to put them in order by score and choose a winner—thereby effectively contributing to the [re]definition of femininity<sup>7</sup>. In this way, female bodybuilders have continually set new precedents for what is acceptable in the sport, and pushed the boundaries of femininity at large.

The boundaries of gender have been discussed and defined since the early years of the sport. The film *Pumping Iron 2: The Women* (Butler, 1985) highlights this discussion of femininity in Women's Bodybuilding, by following female bodybuilders as they prepared to

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<sup>7</sup> In my very first show, I lost by a controversial decision against a competitor who demonstrated extreme symptoms of virilization, including facial hair and an extremely deep voice, as well as scarred injection sites—clearly pointing to steroid use. In her favor, and to support the judges' decisions, she was much more developed than I was, but while I had more symmetry and a more feminine complexion in general, the feedback I received from the judges was that she looked "more like a bodybuilder" than I did. I have interpreted this to mean that they have come to accept a degree of virilization as the norm for the category.

compete a national-level competition for the chance to win Pro status. The competition presented in the movie was between Bev Francis and Rachel McLish; while Bev Francis had the most muscular physique in the competition, she lacked McLish's feminine appearance and was penalized for it with an 8<sup>th</sup> place finish (Butler, 1985). Nearly a decade after Bev Francis' controversial muscularity, the interpretation of femininity has grown—both literally and figuratively—to include size and muscularity that are beyond anything the judges of the 1980's could have imagined.

The first category for women to be introduced by the IFBB was Women's Bodybuilding; since then, a handful of new categories have emerged. The creation and evolution of these categories provide a necessary context for understanding the current state of the IFBB rules. The language of the rules from one category to the next is inconsistent; elements that are articulated in the rules of one category may only be understood by the tradition of another. Grammar, spelling, and general structure also suggest that the "rulebook" is really just a hodgepodge document that has been altered, amended, and added to—but never truly rewritten for clarity and standardization<sup>8</sup>. This appearance is reflective of the general evolution of the sport itself—the sport that started with Women's Bodybuilding was, over time, altered, amended, and added to—but never given the clarity and standardization that would threaten the tradition of subjectivity that have permeated the sport from every angle.

In my analysis of the judging criteria for bodybuilders, I include male and female rules together as they appear in the original text because it is necessary to see how the rules for female bodybuilders are only slightly adapted from the original rules given to male bodybuilders. The contrast between the similarity of the rules and the differences in the expectations (limits to size

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<sup>8</sup> Since the time this statement was written, the NPC website has been reorganized; still, despite the restructuring, evidence of the original hodge-podge exists within the rules for each category.

and muscularity in women, for instance) are significant. Over and over, the NPC sends the message that female bodybuilders are simply female extensions of male bodybuilders, while at the same time holding them accountable for their [lack of] femininity.

Each category created after Women's Bodybuilding provides a snapshot of the state of the sport at the moment of creation. For instance, the Fitness category was created for women who wanted to demonstrate muscularity and athleticism but either could not or did not want to achieve the size that is necessary to make one competitive in Bodybuilding. Fitness competitors pose onstage and are judged on their physiques, but they also perform a routine that incorporates mandatory movements that are designed to display strength and flexibility, known as "mandatory movements."

Figure was created as a competitive outlet for women who wanted to demonstrate muscular physiques but who lacked (or did not want to demonstrate) the size and gymnastic components that were necessary to make one competitive in Fitness. Today, Figure and Fitness competitors are nearly identical with the exception of an additional "performance round" in which Fitness competitors demonstrate and are judged by their displays of strength and flexibility.

The addition of the Bikini category was—and is still—criticized by many in the industry (SiouxCountry.com). Bikini brought to the sport a new influx of both fans and competitors. The rules and judging criteria of the Bikini category reflect what many critics of the category point out: the criteria have little to do with fitness, muscularity, or even athleticism. I will explore this point further in my analysis of the Bikini category rules and criteria.

Because of the lack of standardization across female competition categories, it is impossible to line them all up in a parallel fashion and compare them point by point. Instead, I

chose three common points that appear within the rules in each category, summarizing them as follows: “what they wear,” “what they do,” and “how they are judged.” These three aspects are significant to the understanding of how gender is enforced, regulated, expressed, and quite literally performed in each category.

## 2.1 WHAT THEY WEAR

The IFBB rules are very concerned with what the competitors wear. Of particular significance is the way that these rules are written. In some instances, competitors **MUST** (emphasis in original) wear high heels and in another, high heels cannot be worn “at any time.” In three of the categories, jewelry “may” be worn, while in Women’s Bodybuilding it is prohibited (NPC Rules). Only in one category—Women’s Bodybuilding—are suit embellishments discussed at all; the rules do not specify that the other categories allow embellishments, though it is an unspoken understanding that Figure, Fitness, and Bikini competitors wear highly embellished suits.

Despite the tremendous amount of pressure that is put on female bodybuilders to appear “feminine,” they are prohibited from expressing their femininity through their mode of dress. These athletes are stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place—in order to be competitive against the other bodybuilders, they must display muscularity and hardness, but to appease the judges they also must appear feminine. Without the clothing and accessories that competitors in other categories must wear, female bodybuilders are left with few options.

Meanwhile, in the other categories it is mandatory for competitors to display their femininity in this way. Bikini competitors are actually allowed to wear “off-the-rack” bikinis, such as the swimsuits one might find at the beach (NPC Rules). For Figure, Fitness, and

Physique competitors, the suit itself is as important as the physique wearing it. Large pieces of jewelry and flashy sequined suits (known in the industry as “bling”) sparkle and twinkle from the stage so that often a shiny suit is significant to the audience’s perception of the competitors on stage. The more bling a suit has, the more it costs—so in a sense, money can buy success for these competitors. High heels, and the characteristic walk of those who wear them, also mark Bikini, Figure, and Fitness competitors as feminine in the most traditional (if not oppressive) sense.

High heels, like certain of the criteria for posing (which I will discuss next), create a visual display of demonstrated powerlessness. In stark contrast to the “hard core” lifting that many competitors actually do in the gym, there is nothing “hard core” or remotely masculine in the demeanor of a woman standing, walking, or turning in high heeled shoes. Despite the fact that, in order to achieve the muscular physiques demonstrated by many Figure and Fitness athletes, the athletes spend countless hours sweating lifting heavy weights that many men would struggle to lift, they are required to demonstrate the results of their athleticism in a demure and completely passive manner. High heeled shoes, unlike the sneakers that they wear in the gym and on the track to prepare for this moment on stage, completely limit their movement, rendering them powerless as athletes.

## 2.2 HOW THEY PERFORM

Similar to the way that requirements for shoes and attire limit athleticism for some and limit feminine expression for others, posing criteria are significant. It is here that the continuum is apparent, as the range from to completely passive and powerless to powerful and dominant posing creates a distinctly apparent range of femininity across the categories. Taken out of

context, the posing criteria for a single category appears insignificant; but when considered in relation to the other categories of competition, a clear pattern emerges.

The Bikini category, controversial for its lack of demonstrated athleticism and criticized for having little to do with the sport of bodybuilding in general, has the most relaxed posing—and most unconventional language—of all the categories. In Bikini, first and foremost, there is no flexing of muscles (In fact, as I will later point out, these competitors should not demonstrate any degree of muscularity). The criteria for Bikini posing simply require that the competitor will “perform their Model Walk” (NPC Rules). There is nothing in the rule book to define this Model Walk, but there is a clear standard to this Model Walk, which appears as a caricature of its namesake—an exaggerated runway-style walk.

In practice, the Model Walk has become an exaggeration of how it might have been intended to look. The competitor walks out onto stage, faces the audience, and places a hand on one hip as she exaggeratedly cocks her hip to one side. She then turns around (facing away from the audience), cocks her hip to the other side, looks over her shoulder, and literally rotates her hips from side to side while still facing away from the audience. Today, this posing has become widely regarded as increasingly inappropriate for young audiences, as it is now common for competitors to bend over almost completely at the waist while facing away from the audience. The image created by Bikini posing is that of a flirtatious, overtly sexual, powerless girl, ultimately mimicking a stripper pose.

Opposite Bikini on the continuum of demonstrated femininity is Women’s Bodybuilding. There is no distinction in the IFBB or NPC rules between male and female bodybuilding poses, with the exception of the number of mandatory poses: for men there are eight, for women five. The most technical of all the competition categories, bodybuilding compulsory poses are

specifically designed to flex and display specific muscles.

First, it is important to discuss the specifics of how female bodybuilders must present themselves. According to the IFBB rules, bodybuilders must directly face the audience, with no turning at the waist. While this rule is specifically intended to prevent bodybuilders from creating the illusion of a smaller waist (which would be a competitive advantage), it is important to note that this turning will be a requirement of Women's Physique, which I will later discuss. Facing forward is also a posture that creates a dominant appearance. In addition, bodybuilders must remain flat-footed. The overall result of the bodybuilding still pose is an image of an overtly dominant, large, and muscular athlete (NPC Rules).

Bodybuilders, while standing still in the "relaxed pose," must flex every muscle at once, as they are compared to one another. At this time, it does not behoove a competitor to appear passive—this posing is specifically a time in which to appear aggressive, muscular, and large in stature. Their dominance and athleticism are readily apparent, and it is easy to associate these posed athletes with conjured images of "hard core" and relentless work in the gym. In fact, many gyms where athletes from all categories compete have images of fully flexed bodybuilders plastered on their walls to inspire others to train harder.

During their five compulsory poses, there is more room for individual interpretation. Some women choose to pose open-handed in an attempt to appear more feminine, while most (myself included) find that closed-fisted posing allows for a greater flex of the biceps, triceps, and deltoid muscles. It is the case that female bodybuilders must literally choose between the best flex of the muscles (which is ultimately the point of posing) and the best display of femininity. It should be noted that male bodybuilders pose exclusively close-fisted (NPC Rules).

Along the continuum between the opposing poles of Bikini and Bodybuilding, the Figure

and Fitness pose falls somewhere between the dominance of the bodybuilder and the passivity of the bikini competitor. Standing completely still and performing only three quarter turns, Figure and Fitness competitors are on display like dolls on a pedestal, with little sign of the teeth-gritting, sweaty, masculine gym behavior that many of them associate with contest preparation.

There is little to this posing aside from the fact that these competitors must stand still while flexing most of their muscles at once. However, it is significant that the arms must be turned and held in a way which accentuates the deltoids and triceps while minimalizing the biceps. In fact, Figure posing does not leave room for the appearance of biceps peaks at all. When we remember that Figure was created to allow for smaller, more feminine competitors to have a competitive outlet, this posing suggests that biceps were deemed too masculine.

The newest of the competition categories, Women's Physique (WP or simply Physique) falls just between Women's Bodybuilding and Figure on the continuum. In terms of its posing, Physique is very similar to Bodybuilding, except that Physique competitors are *required* to twist at the waist and pose open-handed. They are also prohibited from remaining flat-footed or front-facing (NPC Rules). Essentially, the WP posing appears to be modeled on bodybuilding posing, but with all of the dominance and power stripped away.

The open-handed posing requirement for Women's Physique is especially significant because, as I pointed out earlier, it is very difficult—if not impossible—to get a solid, tight flex on the biceps, triceps, and deltoids without making a fist.<sup>9</sup> This requirement is indicative of an overt, purposeful attempt by the IFBB to disable these competitors from displaying their muscularity to the full extent of their potential.

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<sup>9</sup> Many WP competitors have been getting around this by squeezing the muscle close-fisted and then quickly opening up the fingers to meet the open-handed requirement.

## 2.3 HOW THEY ARE JUDGED

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the IFBB rulebook is the language used to describe the criteria by which the competitors will be judged. In some instances, the rules describe what a competitor *should* look like, while in others the rules articulate what a competitor should *not* look like. Some of the category judging criteria is extremely vague and includes over-generalized terms that are clearly subjective, while others include extremely specific language. In all of the requirements, however, there is significant space for interpretation.

Just as Bikini, Figure, and Fitness require heels, “bling”, and other feminized factors in their manner of dress and movement, these categories are also expected to be, for lack of a better overarching term, “pretty.” Just as it is difficult to define “pretty,” and to the extent that beauty remains in the eye of the beholder, it is impossible to define the ideal Figure, Fitness, or Bikini competitor. And it is impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy, based on physique alone, the winner of any competition.

While the word “pretty” is not used specifically in the IFBB rules, they articulate—in a way that they never have in Women’s Bodybuilding—that Figure, Fitness, Physique, and Bikini competitors will be judged on aesthetic factors having nothing to do with the shape of their bodies. Makeup, “skin tone,” complexion, and “overall appearance” are all terms that show up throughout the language of the rules for these categories (NPC Rules). There is little or no continuity across categories, but the criteria are generally the same for Figure, Fitness, Physique, and Bikini—and they can all be taken to mean that competitors will be judged on beauty.

In terms of how their bodies are judged, the categories are made relevant to one another. Though the relationship between, for instance, Bikini and Figure, is implied rather than

articulated, the significance of the competition categories lies in the fact that they force women to categorize their own bodies and adapt to specific body standards, by virtue of the categories they choose to enter. A Bikini competitor knows that she is expected to appear more slender and less muscular than a Figure competitor, though the rules state only that they will be judged on “balance and shape” (NPC Rules).

IFBB rules do not articulate the way that the Figure physique is relevant to the female bodybuilder, but this relevance is apparent upon even the most casual analysis of the judging criteria, which require Figure competitors to have a “small degree of muscularity with separation, no visible striations,” and “overall muscle tone with shapely lines, overall firmness and not excessively lean” (NPC Rules). By entering the Figure category, a competitor with any expectation of winning will comply with the unspoken understanding that Figure competitors are significantly smaller, less lean, and less muscular than bodybuilders.

While it is understood and apparent, upon analysis of body standards presented in the IFBB rules, that Bikini is smaller than Figure and Fitness, which are smaller than Bodybuilding, there is nothing in the IFBB criteria to suggest a limit to the size and muscularity of a female bodybuilder. In fact, the limitlessness of the category has been the basis for all of the controversy surrounding Women’s Bodybuilding. There is so little to go on that individual amateur regions have created addendums to the IFBB rules in order to give judges a better understanding of what is expected of the competitors in a given category. While often these descriptions are hard to find and not always made public, in some instances they are posted publicly<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Notably, after the creation of the Figure category, there was a brief attempt to scale down the size of Women’s Bodybuilding, known as the “20% rule,” which stated that female bodybuilders had to strive to be 20% smaller in order to be considered for Pro status. The rule did not catch, and some believe that Physique was created because of

Women's Bodybuilding, the first of the female competition categories, was so generally modeled on [men's] Bodybuilding<sup>11</sup> that the IFBB rules do little to address differences between male and female judging criteria. Added much later to articulate issues surrounding the standards of femininity, an addition to the IFBB rules, titled "Note to Judges Concerning Female Bodybuilding," was created (NPC Rules).

It should be noted that, in the year since I initiated this study, the NPC rules have changed slightly. In the NPC rules, which are located online (IFBB), Figure, Fitness, WPD, and Bikini all have separate links from the IFBB page. However, male and female bodybuilding share the same link, as they have traditionally been treated as one sport with similar judging criteria. The change that I must highlight is that, while male and female bodybuilding have been treated as one sport with one set of uniform rules, there has been until recently a "Note to Judges Concerning Female Bodybuilding" section that was written specifically for the judges to answer questions about femininity and how to judge the female physique. Today, this "note" is no longer on the website, and has slowly disappeared from local and regional NPC websites<sup>12</sup>. I will include the section in my analysis because it still serves as the standard for judging the NPC female bodybuilder.

While the note may no longer exist on the public-facing NPC website itself, local and regional branches of the organization still must deal with the issue of femininity in female bodybuilding and therefore fall back on original standards set by the national-level NPC administration. I believe that its absence from the national NPC website is likely due to three

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this failed attempt (Chick, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> When Bodybuilding began, it was open only to men. Added later, the female version of Bodybuilding was called "Women's Bodybuilding," while the male division remained simply "Bodybuilding." Separate research could be conducted on the linguistic implications of the naming standard.

<sup>12</sup> The only place I have been able to find this note is on an outdated website:  
<http://www.getbig.com/info/npc/npcrules.htm>

factors: 1) backlash from female bodybuilders who have been explicitly resentful of feminine standards set by the NPC 2) The fact that those standards of femininity, because of how female bodybuilders have evolved to become much larger and more muscular than they were at the time the rules were written, are clearly no longer relevant to today's female bodybuilder 3) with the new WPD category, the NPC has given up on trying to pull back the reigns on female bodybuilders<sup>13</sup>.

Women's Bodybuilding is not the only female competition category with problematic judging criteria—every category created after Women's Bodybuilding seems to include slightly more wording in the judging criteria, as if to suggest that each new category builds on the last to bring the IFBB closer to what it ultimately wants from its ideal feminine athlete. That is, until the newest addition, called the Women's Physique Division (hereafter WP or WPD).

Specifically created for competitors who are too muscular for Figure but too small to be competitive in Women's Bodybuilding, Women's Physique will likely replace Women's Bodybuilding in the near future<sup>14</sup>. There was a lot of speculation between the announcement of the category and the first WP competition, and in attempts to explain what they wanted, the IFBB suggested that many lightweight female bodybuilders would be ideal candidates for WP. In fact, the rules articulate that “while all types of physiques will be considered when it comes to height, weight, structure, etc. excessive muscularity will be scored down accordingly. Women's Physique should be judged as a standard between women's figure and women's bodybuilding” (NPC Rules).

Women's Physique is given the longest description of all the competition categories, and

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<sup>13</sup> NPC and IFBB officials have made statements that they expect female bodybuilding to die out by 2015 (Chick, 2010).

is directly compared and contrasted to Women's Bodybuilding, going so far as to use female bodybuilders to describe exactly what a WP competitor should not be. If the "problem" with Women's Bodybuilding is the limitless growth potential of the category, then the IFBB has taken all the steps that it can to prevent that "problem" from occurring in WPD.

Women's Physique, and the implications that come with it, suggests that once Fitness, Figure, and Bikini were created, there was still the one last problem of Women's Bodybuilding. In a passage taken directly from the IFBB rules, it is apparent that WP is a first step toward replacing the female bodybuilder with a more feminine version of the muscular female physique:

The following are examples of common terms used in the bodybuilding industry. these words can be helpful to assess what should not be descriptive to the physiques being judged in wp: ripped, shredded, peeled, striated, dry, diced, hard, vascular, grainy, massive, thick, dense, etc. (NPC Rules).

Instead of the standards of "size, symmetry, and muscularity" by which female bodybuilders have been judged, WP competitors are to be judged on "symmetry, shape, proportion, muscle tone, poise and beauty flow" (NPC Rules). Unlike the female bodybuilder, whose effort can transform her overall silhouette into a muscular masterpiece, the Physique competitor, like her Figure and Bikini counterparts, can be at the mercy of genetics, as judges typically favor the "shape" of high glutes and wide collar bones, to name just two characteristics which are entirely genetic traits. In addition, the Physique competitor is also now subject to the same concerns over hair color and length, suit "bling", and breast size and shape that Bikini and Figure competitors are concerned with.

Women's Bodybuilding, as an extension of Bodybuilding, limits the judges' capacity to

vote in favor of the prettiest woman on stage. Precisely because it is called *bodybuilding*, it is understood to be a sport that focuses on building the body. Years of male bodybuilding set a precedent that implied that Women's Bodybuilding would be a category dedicated to the female pursuit of a muscular physique. Perhaps judges in the first years of the sport failed to anticipate just how well women would be able to build their bodies, but whatever the case, it is clear that the creation of a woman's category failed to address how women might be judged differently. And, as *Pumping Iron II* (Butler, 1985) makes clear, the IFBB failed to define "femininity."

Women's Physique essentially makes room for a similar sport called by a new name and with judging criteria that allow judges to essentially "pick the prettiest one," or the most aesthetically pleasing one, similar to the way they are able to do with Bikini and Figure. It is likely that the IFBB anticipated that the competitors would attempt to make the category their own, as did the bodybuilders, by getting progressively larger and more muscular. But because the category is no longer linked to bodybuilding by name, and because the judging criteria have been defined much differently, the IFBB retains a deeper and stronger hold on the category by virtue of its judges' opinions. Now, as with Figure, Bikini, and Fitness, women who wish to build their bodies for competition in the Physique category are not protected by a category that assumes the best physique will win. They are now at the mercy of judges' preferences: those who prefer blondes, a judge who prefers tall or short women, or even one who prefers the look of large breasts.

Ironically, the first women to win Pro status in Women's Physique demonstrate all of the characteristics that are forbidden by the IFBB's description of the category, suggesting that WP, like Women's Bodybuilding, will be defined by its competitors in whatever way they choose to

interpret it<sup>15</sup>. However, even if Women's Physique should become identical to and indistinguishable from Women's Bodybuilding, the fact remains that it is not and will never be [Women's] Bodybuilding. If the Women's Bodybuilding should cease to continue, the IFBB will have otherized female athletes in a way that runs even deeper than the designation of Women's Bodybuilding as a "more feminine version" of male bodybuilding. Without the Women's Bodybuilding category, there would be no category to represent limitless growth of the female physique.

For women, the sport of building the body is a conundrum: they are challenged to build their muscles, but what could be taken as a space for subversion against the confines of gender norms that favor the slender body is instead another space that places overt and implied limitations on body size. The sport invites women to build and display muscular physiques, but then places restrictions on how muscular they can be and demands idealized femininity.

In addition to the confusing limitations and complex expectations for body size and muscularity, the interpretations of the rules change from one contest to the next, so that a physique which was too small at one contest could be too large at the next, and vice-versa. If it's not enough that female bodybuilders must navigate very narrow spaces to be successful, there are also the added complications associated with the additional categories. This chapter introduced these categories of female physique competition, exploring not only the complications within them but also highlighting the spaces between them.

While each category has its own nuances, there are also complexities surrounding which category a competitor chooses; it is not only that a competitor chooses the category which best suits her interpretation of the ideal physique—she must also then make her body suit the

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, several of the first IFBB pros in Women's Physique were former bodybuilders.

category or be willing to compete and not win. In some cases genetics simply won't allow conformity, and in others it is the competitor's choice not to comply. In any case, the competitor is forced to choose a category that represents (accurately or not) not only her physique but also her goals, ideals, and interpretation of success.

Table 1.1: Bikini, Figure, and Fitness Judging Criteria

Category	What they do	What they wear	How they are judged
Bikini	Competitors will walk onstage alone and perform their Model Walk (personal preference)	Competitors must wear high heels.  Competitors may wear jewelry.	Balance and Shape  Overall physical appearance including complexion, skin tone, poise and overall presentation.
Figure	Competitors will walk to the center of the stage alone and perform quarter (1/4) turns, face the judges as directed then proceed to the side of the stage.	Competitors must wear high heels.  Competitors may wear jewelry	Small degree of muscularity with separation, no visible striations  Overall muscle tone with shapely lines, overall firmness and not excessively lean  Full general assessment --Healthy appearance --Make-up --Skin tone
Fitness	Round two (2) is maximum two minute routine.  The contestants will be brought out on stage in one or more lines for quarter turns.	Competitors must wear high heels  Competitors may wear jewelry.	The contestants should have shape to their muscles but not size, definition or vascularity as in bodybuilding physique. If these are present the contestant will be scored down.  Firmness Symmetry Proportion Overall physical appearance including – Complexion Poise Overall Presentation

Table 1.2: Women's Physique Division Judging Criteria

Category	What they do	What they wear	How they are judged
Women's Physique	<p>mandatory poses will be performed with open hand style and include the following poses:</p> <p>front double biceps/ open hands (no flat footed full front pose – some sort of front twisting pose)</p>	<p>no heels may be worn at any time during the competition/ judging of WPD.</p>	<p>symmetry, shape, proportion, muscle tone, poise and beauty flow physique assessment and comparison will take place during prejudging</p> <p>physique should display all of the above criteria without compromising femininity, beauty/ flow of physique, etc.</p> <p>the following are examples of common terms used in the bodybuilding industry. these words can be helpful to assess what should <b>not</b> be descriptive to the physiques being judged in wp: <b>ex. ripped, shredded, peeled, striated, dry, diced, hard, vascular, grainy, massive, thick, dense, etc.</b></p> <p>while all types of physiques will be considered when it comes to height, weight, structure, etc. excessive muscularity will be scored down accordingly.</p> <p>wp should be judged as a standard between women's figure and women's bodybuilding.</p>

Table 1.3: Women's Bodybuilding Judging Criteria

Category	What they do	What they wear	How they are judged
Women's Bodybuilding	<p>Keep your feet flat</p> <p>Keep your heels together</p> <p>Hold your arms at your sides</p> <p>No twisting</p> <p>Your head must be facing the same direction as your feet.</p>	<p>Suits worn by female competitors at the <b>Prejudging</b> must be two-piece and plain in color with no fringe, wording, sparkle or fluorescents.</p> <p>Suits worn by female competitors at the <b>Finals</b> must be two-piece but may include a printed design with fringes, lace, sparkle or fluorescents that are in good taste.</p> <p>All Prejudging suits will be checked at the morning check-in.</p> <p>Competitors are not permitted to alter the fit of the posing suit by hiking it up in the back or by pulling up the sides during Front and Rear Lat Spreads.</p> <p>During the Prejudging male and female competitors are not permitted to wear any jewelry onstage other than a wedding band. Decorative pieces in the hair are not permitted.</p> <p>During the Finals female competitors are permitted to wear earrings.</p>	<p>Judges will score competitors according to the NPC "total package" which is a balance of size, symmetry and muscularity.</p>

### 3. NAVIGATING THE CATEGORIES

The “true freak,” according to Leslie Fiedler (1978), is one who “challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, between self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth.” The freak, therefore, is the embodiment of multiple dualisms. The female bodybuilder, for instance, is simultaneously masculine and feminine, strong and vulnerable, sexy and undesirable. Can we consider today’s female bodybuilders freaks? And if so, how do the categories of competition relate to the freak—are all competitors freaks? This chapter will explore the freak in the context of bodybuilding, as well as the ways in which the freak shapes participation and the feminine experience in the sport of bodybuilding.

The freak, as Robert Bogdan (1996) points out, is a social construction, which is “not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have...‘freak’ is a way of thinking about and presenting people—a frame of mind and a set of practices” (p. 24). In many cases, such as the freaks of early 20<sup>th</sup> century freak shows, and even female physique competitors who are perceived as freaks, freaks are constructed, often against their wills, by the language and understandings that frame them. For instance, freak shows often used daring and entertaining stories to introduce their Freaks, painting stories to frame how the freak came to be (Bogdan, 1990).

Female physique athletes complicate definitions of freak construction; while they are not freaks by definition, they approach the line of freakdom and may be read as freaks by some. To compete at all, to build muscularity to any extent, is to become visually symbolic of a gender-transgressive sport. While smaller competitors may be read within the industry as gender normative, viewers outside of that context may perceive them differently, and the image that the

competitors represent may frame them as freaks without their consent or awareness.

Uniquely, the female bodybuilder is one who is aware of this framing and who willingly chooses to become a freak definitively and across all audiences, to viewers both within and outside of the sport.

Borrowing from Leslie Fiedler (1978), Cecile Lindsay (1996) adopts the word “freak” to refer to those who position themselves as the subordinate Other, either by accepting a role that is forced upon them, or by actively seeking it. According to Lindsay, “it is through personal choice and action that he or she becomes a freak” (p. 357). The female physique athlete believes that she has a choice—she can build her muscles limitlessly and become a freak, or she can consciously attempt to stop short of freakdom by limiting her size and muscularity. The very personal choice to compete in a particular category is completely relative to the individual’s position on what it means to be a freak or, ultimately, what it means to be “normal.”

Female bodybuilders at the highest level of competition have chosen to become freaks, while those who compete in the other categories attempt to avoid freak status. For anyone who has chosen freakdom, as female bodybuilders have, there are social, professional, and even financial sacrifices; on the other hand, many who want to become a freak but stop themselves in order to avoid ridicule face personal disappointment instead, as many of my female physique informants expressed. This damned-if-they-do, damned-if-they-don’t frustration is just one of the many ways in which female physique athletes are “stuck” between two places. This chapter will explain how a competitor’s choice to become a freak or avoid it is directly acted out and reflected by the category she chooses, and the many ways that competitors straddle the line between multiple opposing binaries.

In this chapter, I will present the responses from several interviews of female competitors

in each of the categories. When I started this project, I admittedly had concerns about how I would separate my own observations and experiences from those of my informants, but what I found was that our similarities and differences still formed a pattern that was easy to negotiate. While we all had different experiences within our categories, different approaches to the industry, and different understandings of what it means to be feminine, we all shared similar confusion about what is expected of us by the industry. But the one thing I found most significant was the constant mention of feeling “stuck” between two opposite characteristics, though the exact characteristics we pointed to varied. This “stuck-ness” has become the theme of this research, and I will examine that theme more closely in this chapter.

In “Bodybuilding: A Postmodern Freak Show,” Lindsay (1996) explores female bodybuilding as the [post]modern manifestation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century freak show, in which “individuals of extraordinary dimensions and/or physical strength” performed for fascinated audiences (p. 357). The difference between bodybuilder as Other and bodybuilder as freak is significant: where the subordinated Other is marginalized and often made invisible, the freak is in some way glamourized and becomes a spectacle. The comparison itself is particularly significant in that it focuses on the roles of both the bodybuilder and the audience in the process by which the bodybuilder becomes a freak. While the bodybuilder makes the conscious choice to become Other by achieving an extraordinary physique, the viewer's simultaneous fascination and horror are necessary for the progression from Other to freak.

Lindsay (1996) also observes that, “In respect to female bodybuilding, bodybuilding culture itself is clearly caught up in conflictual discourses pitting essentialist views of sexual difference and physical appearance against a bodybuilding ethic of undifferentiated, transcendent muscularity” (p. 363). Nearly fifteen years after Lindsay's observation, the IFBB has moved to

end the conflict by creating new competition categories that are highly favored and positioned in contrast to Women's Bodybuilding, essentially placing a cap on the extent to which women can achieve muscularity and still find social and professional acceptance. The presence of Women's Bodybuilding provides a freak against which the other categories are shaped and maintained.

The basic premise of bodybuilding is to manipulate the body for the purpose of building muscle and, later, shedding bodyfat to display the muscle. This constant cycle of building the body up and dieting it back down, paired with the general philosophy that the body is an ever-evolving work in progress, invokes discussions of the *docile body* (Bordo, 1990; Foucault, 1977; Pitts, 2003). The docile body is one that becomes unconsciously self-disciplined and obedient to social norms in order to avoid forms of social discipline that are applied to anyone who deviates from established norms. Bordo (1990) suggests that women's bodies are kept in a state of constant docility and obedience through impossibly difficult beauty standards. It is not the achievement of the standard, she argues, but instead the constant state of improvement and transformation, which makes the body docile.

Because female physique athletes strive not only to improve their bodies, but to do so while also maintaining a specifically feminine standard of appearance, they can be seen as docile bodies that reproduce rather than transgress gender norms. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo (1993) uses the term *backlash phenomenon* to explain the conditions by which gender insubordination is used against itself to reinforce gender norms. She describes this phenomenon as an intentional move to strengthen social order against attempts at change, resulting in stronger imposition of gender normalcy in response to changes, shifts, or threats to power relations; intent is irrelevant—there can be no agency in the performance of gender because it is entirely subject

to the interpretation of the audience.

This assertion is well illustrated by the plight of female physique competitors; those who meet the aesthetic ideal, such as Bikini competitors, serve as an example of normalcy, while those who do not (most apparently, female bodybuilders) are considered deviant and thus marginalized. As Chapter 3 suggests, the constant threat of marginalization keeps many female physique athletes in a state of docility and prevents them from fully reaching their physique goals. Continuing with Bordo's (1993) assertion, those who protest are counterproductive because they both reinforce normalcy by exaggerating its traits, and cross into self-defeating cycles of constant improvement.

### 3.1 THE IN-BETWEEN BODY

My own experience as a female bodybuilder has been largely shaped by the contradictions surrounding the category, and where I compete in a category designated for Freaks but have not developed my muscles enough to reach freak status and evoke fascination and horror, I remain Other to an audience and panel of judges who are not quite sure how to categorize me. I could avoid this by choosing to compete in a category other than Women's Bodybuilding; eventually I did compete in Women's Physique and still found a similar in-between-ness that I will discuss in this chapter.

From the very beginning of my involvement in the sport, my body has been constantly out of place in some way—starting out a little overweight, I felt perpetually not fit enough. When finally I began to transform my body, I identified bodybuilding as the pinnacle of fitness—to my mind, it was the ultimate way to turn myself around. Unfortunately, the closer I got to my goal, the more I became aware that people around me (at the grocery store, at the gym, at dinner,

etc.) thought that I had gone too extreme. So I became immediately aware of an invisible line between two undesirable points on a continuum: not fit at all, and too fit. Disregarding the stares and negative comments, I continued in my journey in the hope that I would find acceptance at a bodybuilding show.

At my first bodybuilding contest, however, I didn't feel any more accepted than before, because it was immediately clear to me that the female bodybuilder was the outsider, while Figure, Fitness, and Bikini girls were the "cool girls" at the party. Despite the fact that the sport of bodybuilding itself implies a primary focus on *building the body*, what I found instead was a sport riddled with complications, contradictions, and conundrums regarding what bodies should be built in which way.

The first thing a woman has to do after she has made the choice to compete is to determine the category in which she will compete. This choice is based on several factors and is an extremely personal decision that crosses multiple dimensions. Many women choose a category based on where her body type would likely be most competitive—a slender body would be more competitive in Bikini than in Women's Bodybuilding, for instance. However, a woman might choose a category based on how she prefers to express herself, the opportunities that might come with a particular category, or out of fear over the implications associated with a category.

Rebecca, a 32 year old single mother and personal trainer, is a Figure competitor who struggled with her decision not to compete in Women's Bodybuilding<sup>16</sup>. While she has a larger and more muscular physique than most Figure competitors and would probably fit better in Women's Bodybuilding, she explains that her choice was made based on the opportunities that

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<sup>16</sup> To ensure anonymity, all names have been changed; also, because of the nature of close interaction between competitors within the bodybuilding industry, it is likely that identifying information, such as location, would reveal the identities of my informants. For this reason, I chose not to include this information.

exist in Figure but aren't available to female bodybuilders, such as sponsorship opportunities, modeling opportunities, a better chance at Pro status, and recognition. Her experience in the industry is heavily influenced by the categories of competition—to the extent that her work in the gym is focused less on building her body larger and more on molding it to fit a category.

I thought about bodybuilding, and actually I entered my first show expecting to compete in it. But shortly before the show, I met with a trainer who told me I would win if I did Figure. And I wanted to win because so many people were watching me, rooting for me. So I did it, and I won, and now I want to see how far it will take me. I have made some money on photo shoots, but most of them don't like it when I flex too hard or get too big, so I don't get to see how big I can get. One day I will just go for it, get as big as I can! But right now, I'm actually trying to get a little bit smaller, lifting lighter weights and higher reps, to make my lines a little sleeker so I can come in perfect for Figure and stop looking so much like a bodybuilder.

Rebecca's statement suggests that she has learned to manipulate the appearance of her size by changing the way she flexes her muscles or displays her body. She also suggests that she views large muscles as an ideal that she can't have if she wants to be successful. On the contrary, she feels pressured to be smaller so that she can win in Figure competitions, pointing to a definition of success that is dependent upon stage performance.

Rebecca was also among several of my informants who expressed being very conscious of her femininity and the way she is perceived by others both within and outside of the industry. Much like my own experience, she expressed feelings of being an outsider in the general public and not quite fitting in at bodybuilding shows. I was surprised to learn that, even as a Figure

competitor, she had this same experience.

Everywhere I go, I meet men who tell me I'm too big, or women who tell me they want me to train them but they don't want to look like me. Yeah, I feel a little bit like a freak and sometimes it really bothers me, but mostly I think it's funny. I like it, knowing I have created this thing that no one else has. I'm different, I stand out. Sometimes I feel a little awkward, like at my kids' school functions, or in a dress at church. But I spend so much time in the gym...well, yeah I feel like a freak there too but I like it! I make sense there, and everyone knows why I look like I do. At shows, though, it's frustrating. Last time I competed a judge told me at weigh-ins, before I even got to compete, that I would be scored low for being too hard for Figure. I had the best physique, I thought, but I still only got third place. I was devastated, because at my last show I was beat by a girl who was much harder than me, so this time I thought I had it. I really hate that you can't predict what the judges are going to want. But I'm going to compete anyway, and wait for the right moment. I'm so close [to the Pro card] that it would be stupid to stop now. Rebecca observes a difference between culture in the gym and culture outside of it.

While she uses the word freak to define herself, Rebecca suggests that inside the gym it is a positive thing, while outside the gym it isn't perceived to be good. Rebecca was not the only of my informants who used the word freak to describe herself. In fact, three Figure competitors and three Bodybuilders I interviewed described themselves as freaks, while four of my Bikini informants used the word to describe others. All who mentioned the word freak seemed to agree that being a freak is most problematic outside of the sport. Rebecca points to specific spaces outside of the gym that are particularly problematic, and which are typically sites in which

femininity is enforced both socially and literally. At children's school functions, for instance, the desire to be perceived as a good parent leads Rebecca to feel uncomfortable and out of place because she does not fit the image of "how a mom should look," and at church, where Rebecca is aware of a general biblical description of how women "should be," and her perceived differences, which are spotlighted against the femininity of the dress she feels compelled to wear in order to conform.

Interestingly, while she performs the duties associated with feminine roles (attending school functions in her role as Mother, wearing a dress to church to conform to expectations of women), she willingly subverts the expectations of her appearance in those roles but experiences discomfort in doing so. These things suggest that while Rebecca is completely torn between what she wants and what she feels compelled to do, she has begun taking steps to move out from under the burden of the expectations placed upon her. Her gender, like her body, appears to be a work in progress.

It's also important to note that while she generally takes pride in being considered a freak, Rebecca expresses the most negativity when talking about how she feels at contests. The one space in which one would assume a competitor would feel most at home is actually the space in which Rebecca feels most out of place. From Rebecca's observation, we can deduce that the industry categories are so hard to fit into that there is no comfortable space for competitors who feel caught between categories.

Another informant used similar language to describe her experience, but responded very differently to the pressures associated with success in the sport. Rather than feel perpetually uncomfortable and caught between categories, this informant chose to avoid them entirely. Beth, a 30 year old single personal trainer who chooses not to compete, defines herself as a female

bodybuilder and is well known in the industry through her participation on Facebook, gyms, and multiple online forums. Because of her frustration with the pressures to conform to the parameters of a competition category, she has chosen to build her body and make a name for herself without ever having to step foot on stage and face criticism for her size and muscularity. In this way, her experience as a bodybuilder has been informed by the competition categories also. A self-proclaimed “freak” who chooses to build her body as big as she can, Beth is not immune to the struggle over femininity and the ways that she is perceived by others.

So looking like this can be difficult at times. Like trying to find clothes that fit. Most shirts don't fit right. Jeans are impossible. I get pissed every time I go shopping. That is just the tip of iceberg. So I remember when I first started getting really big, like 14 years ago. People were very mean. People would say I was gross. They would ask why I wanted to look like this. They would ask if I was guy or a girl. I was always upset and did not want to look like this anymore but by then I couldn't go back. My husband was great; he always supported me and told me if I wanted to look like this I would have to take the negative comments. Now I did get tons of compliments too. One of my breaking points, and I actually stopped training, was when somebody said look at the faggots as me and [my husband] held hands walking through the movie theater up North. I was devastated. I of course started training again. The negative and positive comments continued for years and still bothered me sometimes. I went through a phase that I wouldn't even wear a tank top. Now where I live I love it. I can't walk anywhere without people staring and commenting. People want to take pictures with me. I still get negative comments. But as everyone tells me to, I take every comment as a compliment. I am even a freak in the most famous [bodybuilding] gym in the world and it feels amazing when I have all the

pros complimenting me. I know how hard it is to look like this and I am proud to say I have done it and continue to do it!

Beth's statement uncovers multiple layers that deserve exploration. First, it articulates a long and painful experience of frustration with her choice to build her muscles—while she enjoyed building them, she was not necessarily ready to part with her perceived femininity. Beth also expressed having experienced ambivalence over her size. Similar to Rebecca's desire to build against pressures to be feminine, Beth wanted to build her muscles but felt such tremendous negativity and backlash that she began to question her choice. However, while Rebecca seemed to be only on the cusp of the choice to pursue a larger physique or stay smaller, Beth made the irreversible choice to push her body past any recognizable size norm.

The shocking incident in which Beth was called a “faggot” evoked pain on multiple levels: either she was entirely mistaken for a man and someone mistook her and her husband for a gay couple, or the person was deliberately trying to make a statement about the severity of her loss of femininity--in either case, the pain was complicated by the fact that she had made the choice to look that way in an intolerant culture. As Pascoe (2007) observes, the term “fag” is ultimately used as a tool for discipline, a term that is flung most commonly at males for the purpose of enforcing gender performance. The fact that she was female and was called a fag made the situation was troubling to her on multiple levels, implying not only that she was performing her femininity incorrectly, but that she was so convincingly masculine that she was being subjected to a distinctly male gender policing tactic.

Another interesting point from Beth's statement is that she suggests that the feminine experience is shaped by the size and shape of the clothing that is available to us. Even despite

her rejection of the confines of the competition categories and her choice to grow her muscles, Beth still meets body limits and size constraints when she shops for clothing. Every time she shops she is reminded that someone has predetermined the norm for female body size, and that she literally doesn't fit.

While Rebecca feels torn between a world of norms and the world she finds in her gym, where being a freak is a positive experience, it is important to point out that Beth's newfound love of Freakdom occurred around the time that she moved to a town that is famous for its bodybuilders from a rural town in the North East. Unlike Rebecca, who maintains one foot in each culture, Beth has chosen to exist almost exclusively in a culture in which being a freak is more positive than negative. It is important to note that both are employed as personal trainers; seven out of 10 informants I formally interviewed work in some capacity of the fitness industry, while the others are either students or are not employed full-time. In addition to being a student, I work as a personal trainer as well, admittedly because I find the most acceptance and feel most at home in my gym clothes.

In addition to location, the extent to which female competitors are concerned with being perceived as too masculine appears also to be directly proportional to their sizes. For instance, I did not speak to any Bikini competitors who feared being perceived as too masculine, though a few did express fear over what might happen if they began lifting heavier weights. One lightweight female bodybuilder, Vanessa, expressed excitement over having muscular arms but a relatively small build, and made no mention of having received negative criticism for being overly masculine. Valuing both her femininity and her muscularity, the 26 year old mother of two describes herself as being the "best of both genders." She is aware that she is perceived as an attractive woman "with arms like a man," and is openly conscious of the advantage that this

could give her in an industry that typically doesn't sponsor female bodybuilders. Vanessa explained,

At first, I got a lot of attention because I'm cute...this should help with sponsorships because there are a lot of female bodybuilders, but there really aren't a lot of cute female bodybuilders.

Vanessa also articulated her desire to remain feminine and muscular, and had very specific and calculated ideas about what it means to straddle the line between femininity and masculinity:

"I could probably drop 5-6 percent more body fat and gain a few pounds of muscle, but I want to look like a girl. I don't have any breasts, so I kind of need my butt."

Vanessa makes no connection between the size of her muscles and attractiveness. When I asked her to define "cute," she was concerned mostly with facial features, suggesting that she could remain attractive with muscles as long as her facial features didn't change. For Vanessa, feminine appearance itself is defined by both the breasts and the butt, but she suggests that only one of the two needs to be present in order for a woman to remain feminine; a loss of both would imply a boyish or masculine appearance. At the same time, Vanessa expressed a fascination with having "arms like a man" but a feminine appearance otherwise, suggesting that masculinity itself is not problematic as long as certain feminine body and facial features remain.

This feeling of being both masculine and feminine at once was mentioned by all but one of my eight informants. None who experienced criticism for being masculine expressed a total dislike of being perceived as masculine, but instead they each described situations in which sometimes they were comfortable with it and sometimes they were not. However, nearly all of my informants who had not been perceived as masculine expressed fear over the possibility of

crossing an invisible line in the future. All informants expressed some preoccupation with remaining feminine in ways that were very personal to them. One informant, another self-proclaimed freak, described herself as looking “exceptionally manly,” and described that as an ideal look that she worked hard for. However, Mari, a 34 year old married mother of two who competes in Women’s Bodybuilding, listed one exception in which she regretted that look and was very uncomfortable.

As much as I go hard in the gym, and I talk tough, and I can talk shit with the guys, I had dreamed of my wedding since I was a little girl. I finally found the guy and was excited to plan my wedding, but when I went to try on dresses I felt really bad. The other women would stare, and sometimes the sales person wouldn’t even help me. My mother was embarrassed and I just felt like maybe I wanted to be small for just long enough to get married. We actually ended up having a wedding on the beach in our bathing suits!

Again, as Beth suggested, body size norms are subtly enforced by the cut, size, and style of clothing. This informant felt pressure to be thin as a direct result of a very feminine wedding fantasy, but when forced to choose between the fantasy and muscularity, she rejected the dress entirely.

Similarly, I typically embrace my muscular aesthetic but am extremely self-conscious about how I look in a dress. The first time I really lost body fat for a show, I put on a dress to wear on a date, and when I asked a friend how I looked he advised me to wear something “a little less feminine.” He was shocked by the juxtaposition of my masculine build and the pink, ruffly halter dress. To this day, I am still very self-conscious about wearing things with ruffles, lace, or other details that are typically attributed to feminine clothing.

On the other hand, at my most recent competition I competed in Women's Physique. Despite the fact that my physique was almost exactly the same as it had been when I competed in Women's Bodybuilding, I was regarded differently backstage, despite the fact that I was still "too big" to win in the category. Again, I found myself stuck between two categories—too big for one, too small for another--only this time it was apparent that I had chosen a more socially acceptable (in terms of inter-industry relations) one.

I spoke with a number of Bikini competitors who were openly envious of my muscular physique, but who expressed fear over attaining it themselves. I engaged in a conversation with three Bikini competitors who expressed frustration over being perceived as "skinny" or not as hard-working in the gym. These three women were new to the sport and had not yet gained the muscle size that they desired—as a result, Bikini was the obvious foot in the door to competition, and they embraced it as such. However, they all asked me for diet and training advice on how to "get bigger," suggesting that perhaps even women who appear to be situated on a favorable end of the continuum still feel out of place or somehow stuck between two places. While they appeared thin outwardly and were being praised and rewarded for it, inwardly their goals contradicted their appearances.

In a slightly different way than the Female Bodybuilder, the Bikini competitors I spoke with embody multiple dualisms as well. Interestingly, however, their dualisms lie in the juxtaposition of desire and appearance; they embody an ideal that is different than their own ideals, trapping them between what society expects them to be and what they want for themselves. While many of the female bodybuilders I spoke with suggested that they felt like Freaks before they began competing, the Bikini competitors I spoke with do not feel like they are perceived as Freaks, but were very aware of the Freaks and took great care to avoid becoming

one—hiding their secret desires to build in order to avoid the social and professional consequences they would face over just the desire to become a freak.

Physique athletes are not the first to experience the feeling of being caught between two opposites (in this case masculin/ity and feminin/ity) in a body that is considered exceptional<sup>17</sup>; the anomalous body was a significant subject long before the creation of Women's Bodybuilding. Over time the words used to describe these anomalous bodies have included *deviant*, *disordered*, *monster*, and *freak* (Garland-Thomson, 1996). Theorists such as Robert Bogdan (1990), Leslie Fiedler (1978), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Michael Chemers (2008) have all studied the phenomenon that occurs when one person is perceived to be an anomalous embodiment of two opposing characteristics. Referencing the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century freak Show, in which the exceptional, anomalous body became a popular source of entertainment, these theorists discuss the creation, definition, and function of the freak in society. Building on the works of Fiedler and Bogdan, Garland-Thomson connects the freak phenomenon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the more recent rise of Women's Bodybuilding.

Within the fitness and bodybuilding industry, the IFBB has taken upon itself the task of defining femininity. However, this definition speaks to femininity outside of the industry as well, as it upsets the balance between freak and Normal by producing new Freaks and new Norms for comparison. Exploiting the societal creation of the docile body (Butler, 1993), the ever-growing fitness industry has a fresh pool of bodies for the production of both the Norm and the freak. The female bodybuilder is positioned as the freak, providing a limit for the outermost acceptable range of femininity and also a point of reference for enforcing the ideal. The example of what not to be, she serves as an illustration of “too much,” providing a model of

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<sup>17</sup> That is, exceptional in the sense that the body is an exception to a cultural standard of what is considered normal.

comparison for other competitors who wish to avoid becoming Freaks. Women's Bodybuilding limits and is limited by gender norms, suggesting that Freaks, who appear to be the antithesis of docility, in fact remain within both structure and discipline.

In my most recent competition, which occurred in August of 2012, I chose to try out the new Women's Physique Division. In addition to the ways in which I have always found myself "stuck" on the line between the dualisms of masculine and feminine, big and small, the sport of bodybuilding presents yet another instance: I am too small to win bodybuilding shows, yet too big to succeed on stage in Figure. Barring heavy steroid use, I will likely never gain the size necessary, but no amount of starvation or lack of training will lead to a loss of size great enough to "fix" my physique for Figure. The Women's Physique Division offers an interesting possibility for women in my situation, so after two years of observation I decided to try it out. I placed second out of three in my class, and interestingly the winner was the most slender of us all, while third place was larger than I<sup>18</sup>. A similar trend toward favoring the more slender physique in Women's Physique has been observable across dozens of shows in the NPC and IFBB. Instead of a solution to my in-between-ness, Women's Physique only created more in-between space.

Women's Physique has consistently lured others like me away from Women's Bodybuilding, leading to a swift decline in the number of female bodybuilders at NPC shows across the industry (Sioux Country, RXMuscle). An already dwindling category, Women's Bodybuilding participation continues to decline. I observed four shows that had four competitors per class in 2010 and 2011; each only had two female bodybuilders *total* in 2012, while the

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<sup>18</sup> At its very nature, this sport is highly subjective and I must acknowledge that there were likely many other factors involved in the outcome of our placings. I do not think the size factor is a coincidence, but I have to acknowledge my own bias on this observation and make it clear that placings could have been—and likely were—influenced by a number of other factors.

Women's Physique division continues to grow steadily, with between nine and 15 participants in those same shows. In fact, the Bikini competitors I referred to earlier in this chapter expressed specifically their interest in competing in Physique, and I heard several comments from Figure competitors backstage who had plans to compete in Physique in the near future. This overwhelming interest in the Women's Physique division suggests that it appears "safe" and desirable, in contrast to Women's Bodybuilding, which is increasingly avoided and abject. This sharp decline in Women's Bodybuilding supports the IFBB's early prediction that the category would end by 2013; however, despite declining participation, the fans and competitors who support the category have ensured its survival. So far, there have not been any further statements by the IFBB that suggest ending the category.

Just as "the true freak challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, between self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth" (Lindsay, 1996; p. 356), female bodybuilding disrupts and upsets many feminist understandings of the body within the context of culture. For instance, Pitts' (2003) idea that society eventually "gets used to" its deviants, such as in the case of hard-core punks, heavy metal music, and even cutting-edge fashion trends, is overturned by female physique athletes, who even at lower levels of muscularity and size struggle for acceptance outside of the industry. Contrary to any optimistic hope that culture might continue to follow a forward trajectory in which understandings of the female physique become more accepting of larger and more muscular physiques over time, the IFBB is actively attempting to move the sport backward.

While it may be argued that some corners of culture have adapted to female bodybuilders as they have increased in size and muscularity over time, many competitors believe that the

IFBB never truly has (Chick, 2010). The announcement of the new Women's Physique Division received a mixed reaction—it was embraced by some who saw it as a new opportunity, and it was criticized by many who feared that it was the IFBB's attempt to replace Women's Bodybuilding. In the words of one skeptical informant:

They've [the IFBB] pulled the plug on us. We pushed too hard and now we're paying the price. It's not like I could have ever gotten as big as Iris [Kyle] anyway, but god it would have been awesome! And I would have had a reason to do it, you know, like something to work toward. Now there's no point in getting any bigger than I already am. How fun is that? We do this because love having goals, like a reason to wake up and do it. But now what? I'm already too big for Physique, so I guess I can concentrate on running a marathon. No way.

It is difficult to predict what will happen to Women's Bodybuilding, and how (or if) a new freak will be established and understood. But what is even more significant than the existence or eradication of the category is the implications that the outcome will carry on the female body—including not only how the other categories are defined, but also what it means to have a feminine physique. Other categories will continue to exist, new ones will likely emerge in time, and women will somehow find new ways to carry on the legacy of defiance and rebellion that has pushed the boundaries of what it means to be feminine; but if Women's Bodybuilding were not included by that name, there would be no Other against which to define the other categories. If somehow the category dies, then it will be a significant extinction of a very important possibility for the female body and will signal new challenges for the female athlete.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that, semantically and practically, Women's Bodybuilding was intended to be a female version of the male sport, the category has not ever existed on such simple terms. Because the word "female" is so strongly attached to gender and femininity in mainstream culture, female bodybuilders' attempts to transgress norms associated with femininity complicate definitions of "female" and "femininity." Therefore, "Women's Bodybuilding" itself is inherently frustrated by an almost oxy-moronic interpretation that plays out in the judging criteria. Attempts to define and redefine the category have led to the creation of several other categories for women, and further complicate the ways that female physique athletes experience gender in the sport of Bodybuilding.

Within the IFBB and NPC, the two sister federations discussed in this research, Women's Bodybuilding has undergone a dramatic transformation since its beginning in the late 1970's. From the relatively thin, toned frame of Rachel McLish who was thought of as virtually unstoppable in the 1980's, to today's most decorated female Bodybuilder, Iris Kyle, whose large and dominating physique could easily be mistaken for that of a male bodybuilder, clearly female physique athletes have pushed back the previously restricting limitations on body size that once resulted in Bev Francis' defeat (Butler, 1985).

As many of my informants described, and as I have experienced, it makes little sense to define success solely on the outcome of a contest. Because of inconsistencies and the generally subjective nature of judging, it is difficult to predict how physique will be received by a judging panel. There is no standing definition of perfection—physiques are judged in relevance to each other, and placings only represent a snapshot of the judges' opinions in an isolated instance.

In Chapter 2, I explored how the subjectivity of the rules, the multiple definitions of beauty

and femininity, and the possibilities that surround physique athletes off stage converge to create a sport in which success is defined by the individual. Competitors such as Allison Moyer, who is still in pursuit of Pro status, and Dana Linn Bailey, who has had a rough time finding a consistent top placing at the Pro level, are extremely successful business owners with well-known sponsorships, and could be considered highly successful as a direct result of their physiques and involvement in the industry but not necessarily as a result of on-stage performance.

Adding to the complications of subjective judging for female physique athletes is the constant slippery balance between muscularity and femininity; on the one hand, they are judged on their abilities to build and present a muscular physique—on the other hand, they must maintain the appearance of femininity, which can be compromised by going “too far.” Going too far could mean being too big, being too hard and vascular, or too lean to be interpreted as feminine; at the same time, not being enough of any of these could compromise her success as a bodybuilder.

Contrary to existing research that focuses only on Women’s Bodybuilding, this project contributes an understanding of how the slippery balance extends beyond Women’s Bodybuilding to include all female competition categories. They must not only balance femininity and muscularity—they must balance them appropriately for the category in which they compete. While there are numerous examples in rumors, industry reports, and other research of women who are penalized for being “too masculine” or simply not feminine enough, I was only able to speak to one informant who had experienced penalization for this. On the other hand, I have witnessed competitors who were penalized for being too “hard” and unfeminine for other categories (suggesting that Women’s Bodybuilding would have been a

better choice for those individuals), and have been penalized myself for being too feminine for the category of Women's Bodybuilding (suggesting that, by virtue of my face, I'd have been a better fit for Figure).

The four competition categories that were created after Women's Bodybuilding are still rooted in it. They exist as an outlet for women who can't or won't compete as female bodybuilders, and hiding places for women who want to build muscle but fear the cultural consequences (alienation, etc.) associated with female bodybuilding. At the same time, the newer categories of competition are spaces of agency for women who still want to push traditional boundaries of femininity or embody them differently. In these ways, Women's Bodybuilding acts as a point of reference for the other categories, while female bodybuilders serve as points of reference for physique athletes.

A woman might choose to compete in only one category for her entire career, but it is also natural for a competitor to move through several categories. The category she chooses carries many implications, and is an extremely personal choice. Some choose a category that best fits their bodies, while others attempt to make their bodies fit a category; similarly, some choose a category solely to win, while others see the choice as an opportunity to express personal preference for a particular look.

The categories are commonly regarded as hierarchical in terms of size, muscularity, and experience; thus, a competitor might knowingly "start out" in Bikini, while she's new to the sport, with plans to "move up to" Figure as she spends more years training and gains more size. The extent to which a competitor is able to grow in size and muscularity depends not only on training, but on genetic inclination or some combination of the two. While some competitors can train for years without reaching the size and muscularity necessary to outgrow a category,

complications commonly arise for those competitors whose size, muscularity, and experience increase beyond their expectations.

While it is commonly understood that most competitors train in the pursuit of muscle, most competitors have a line in the sand that defines their ideals. For many, the invisible line between ideal and “too much” existed for a long time between Figure and Women’s Bodybuilding—but the newer Physique category seems to complicate that line, as more Figure competitors find themselves “too big” and “too hard” to succeed in Figure, despite enjoying their hard-earned muscularity, and see Women’s Physique as an opportunity to express a more feminine look while displaying a harder and more muscular physique.

The invisible line between acceptable and “too much” is also the line that separates the physique athlete from the freak. The line beyond which a female bodybuilder becomes a freak is elusive and can depend on both context and how she is perceived within her surroundings, but ultimately she crosses that line willfully. It is understood that for a female bodybuilder to achieve freak status requires extensive supplementation with male hormones, in addition to rigorous training and nutrition programs. However, while some actively seek and embrace Freakdom itself, others simply seek the muscularity required to become a freak, and therefore struggle to come to terms with the social and professional implications that come along with their muscular ideal.

The freak is also defined as one who skews the boundaries between two opposites—human and animal, large and small, sexed and sexless. In the case of the female bodybuilder, the freak is one who embodies aspects of masculinity and femininity. While the multiple categories within the sport now offer a wider variety of definitions for femininity, they do not change the perception of the freak nor the attainability of Freakdom—instead, they reinforce “normal” and

“freak” by drawing a firm line in the sand between multiple acceptable interpretations of femininity and “way too much.”

Instead of simply creating more spaces for inclusion and more possibilities for the definition of femininity, the competition categories also create more in-between spaces, complicating a competitor’s pursuit of success under multiple definitions. Competitors still struggle to fit the parameters set by the judging criteria, and are now more likely to find themselves caught in the middle. Ultimately, this suggests that bodies can not be defined within generalizing terms—the harder we try to define and prescribe the ideal, the harder it is for a body to comply.

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## APPENDIX

**GNC**  
presents the  
**2012 NPC National**  
BODYBUILDING, FIGURE, BIKINI & PHYSIQUE CHAMPIONSHIPS

To All Georgia NPC Members

GNC is again presenting the **NPC National Bodybuilding Championships** – with Men's and Women's Bodybuilding, Men's and Women's Physique, Figure and Bikini competitions.

Held again at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta's Centennial Ballroom, 265 Peachtree Street NE, in Downtown Atlanta, **there will be a total 62 PRO CARDS awarded at this event! OMG! How can you miss it?!?!?**

**So where will you be on November 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>?** Will you be sitting the audience of this enormous competition cheering on your hometown friends and some of the best new up-and-coming men and women in the country? Or will you miss the opportunity to see **more than 1,000 competitors** strut their stuff on the stage?

We start at **1 p.m. on Friday** with Men's BB, Women's Physique and sexy Women's Bikini Prejudging  
**Saturday morning at 9 a.m.** for Women's BB, Men's Physique and Glam Figure Prejudging  
**All finals are on Saturday night at 5 p.m.**

Tickets are available online at [www.nationalbodybuilding.com](http://www.nationalbodybuilding.com). Some may be available at the door.

Oh, and make sure you stop at all the fitness expo booths where you can get the latest sports nutrition and activewear – and meet your favorite pros!

**Plan now to attend the best of the best in NPC competitions – the crown jewel of the NPC – the 2012 NPC Nationals. Be there!**