

“Big Freaky-Looking Women”: Normalizing Gender Transgression Through Bodybuilding

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Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 10 college-level female bodybuilders, this paper focuses on several aspects of female bodybuilding that are underexplored in existing literature, including purposeful gender transgressions, gender attribution, racialized bodies, and the conflation of sex, gender, and sexual preference. We draw on critical feminist theory and the social constructionist perspective to enhance collective understanding of the subversive possibilities emerging from female bodybuilders' lived experience. Collectively, female bodybuilders' experiences affect somatic and behavioral gender norms in a wider Western-type industrialized society such as the United States.

À partir de l'observation participante et d'entrevues en profondeur avec 10 femmes culturistes universitaires, cet article se centre sur plusieurs aspects du culturisme féminin qui sont sous-explorés dans les écrits, incluant la transgression intentionnelle des genres, l'attribution des genres, la « racialisation » des corps et la confusion existant entre le sexe, le genre et l'orientation sexuelle. Nous empruntons à la théorie critique féministe et la perspective de la construction sociale pour améliorer la compréhension des possibilités subversives émergeant des expériences vécues par les femmes culturistes. Collectivement, ces expériences affectent les normes de genre au plan somatique et comportemental dans une société occidentale comme les États-Unis.

I think femininity exists on a continuum and I think that society can accept women I would say like one or two standard deviations from the normal curve, but those who are the outliers, when you get closer to the plus three and you are kind of skewing stuff—I think that is when it becomes a problem. (Carla)

Do hypermuscular women transgress normative gender boundaries, or do they merely reinforce the current gender order? The answer depends upon who you ask, although the most recent scholarly works on women's bodybuilding and other sports involving visible female muscle tend to agree that they do both (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; George, 2005; Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Schippert, 2007). Both question and answer are slippery and resist definitive analysis, as do other social issues requiring "both/and" discourses rather than "either/or" binaries (Hill Collins, 2000). Contemporary feminist and postmodern theorists continue to examine the gendered, sexed, and raced complexities, confusions, and contradictions of the lived experience of female athletes often labeled as "muscular" in popular discourse.

In this paper, we investigate the extent to which female bodybuilders intend to subvert cultural gender norms, and the effects such transgressions have on their everyday worlds. Through participant observation and interviews with ten amateur female bodybuilders attending a university in the Midwestern U.S., we explore this question and the intersection of transgression and complicity with cultural conceptions of sex, gender, race, and sexual preference. As authors, our view is one of pragmatic optimism—we acknowledge limits on female bodybuilding's subversive potential, but we also seek greater insights into the mechanisms of its transformative power.

Transgressing Gender Norms

Critical and postmodern feminists generally conclude that female bodybuilding is at times subversive and empowering, but also colluding and reinforcing of the normative gender order (Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Grogan et al., 2004; Wesely, 2001). For instance, Bolin (1992) and Ian (2001) argue that cultural and institutional gender controls function to nullify or reduce bodybuilding's subversive potential and recuperate transgressive bodily displays through constraint and reinscription. The French women bodybuilders interviewed by Roussel and Griffet (2000) felt personally empowered by this muscle development. Three years later however, lack of institutional and cultural support had disempowered these female bodybuilders (Roussel, Griffet, & Duret, 2003).

Many feminist scholars (Brace-Govan, 2004; Brady, 2001; Heywood, 1998; Krane et al., 2004; Ryan, 2001; Shea, 2001) agree however, that bodybuilding can empower women in several ways. For example, women bodybuilders can perceive their development of large muscles as a "semi-rebellious act" against Western ideals of thinness (Wesely, 2001, p. 173). The development of muscularity may increase women's self-esteem and confidence; they often feel more powerful, healthier, and sexier (Grogan et al., 2004; Monaghan, Bloor, Dobash, & Dobash, 1998). Bodybuilding gives some women a sense of control over their own bodies (Fisher, 1997). When their most important reference groups become other bodybuilders and contest judges, many women bodybuilders shift their internal ideas of what the "ideal" body should look like to one with more muscularity. This leads to feelings of increased self-confidence and personal power (Grogan et al., 2004). Likewise, female weightlifters experience themselves as masterful and strong and

refuse to apologize for taking up space (Brace-Govan, 2004). As Roussel and Griffet (2000) observe, female bodybuilders are constructing their own bodies as "an expression of the will to self-construct, to self-fulfill" (p. 140). Finally, as Dworkin (2001) argues, women are constantly pushing up on the glass ceiling of female muscularity, even if "gently" at times.

Despite increased empowerment, the prominent theme of female bodybuilders' experience is one of contradiction, often leading to attempts to "balance" popular notions of femininity and muscularity. Critical feminists, postmodernists, and sport sociologists describe how female bodybuilders balance contradictory demands of muscular development versus expectations of normative femininity. These include regulating muscular size to avoid being labeled as "too big," "mannish," or lesbian (Bolin, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Grogan et al., 2004; Lowe, 1998; Monaghan et al., 1998; Wesely, 2001); using body technologies such as breast enlargements, plastic surgeries, and feminizing hairstyles, outfits, and accessories to counteract "masculinizing" effects of steroid use or loss of breast tissue (Bolin, 1992; Lowe, 1998; Shea, 2001; Schippert, 2007; Wesely, 2001; Williams, 2000); and emphasizing heterosexual desirability by posing for erotic photo spreads or performing choreographed heterosexual routines during competition (Boyle, 2005; Choi, 2000; Heywood, 1998; Ryan, 2001).

Many laypeople perceive hypermuscular women as possessing more "masculine" personality characteristics (Ryckman, Dill, Dyer, Sanborn, & Gold, 1992), and as more likely to have an "ambiguous sexual orientation" than other women (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Holmgren, & White, 2004, p. 499). As Halberstam (1998) asserts, female masculinity (such as large musculature) clearly equates with lesbianism, while female femininity assumes heterosexuality. Although critical feminist theorists argue persuasively that sex, gender, and sexuality should not be conflated (Lorber, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987), other scholars point out that this is still the case in the context of female bodybuilding (Boyle, 2005; Fisher, 1997; Schippert, 2007; Schulze, 1997; Wesely, 2001; Williams, 2000). However, as Cahn (1994b) maintains, this is a fairly recent development. Early in U.S. women's sporting history, "mannish" female athletes were not viewed as particularly threatening and/or were believed to be "over-eager" heterosexuals. The increased sexual freedom for men and women and the rise of a sexualized economy in the 1930s influenced the conflation of gender and sexual preference.

In addition to gendered expectations, class and race affect social constructions of female bodybuilders. Boyle (2005) explains that white, heterosexual middle-class expectations of feminine sexual morality shape stage routines, such that competitors who pose in sexually overt positions are considered too "low class" for what is defined as a "family affair" (p. 145). However, middle-class respectability on stage is often undercut by oversexualized media images (Boyle, 2005). Although "tan" not white is the ideal skin color for most competitors, darker skin tones and other "ethnic" features remain a liability in bodybuilding (Williams, 2000). As Cahn (1994a) writes, "African American women's work history as slaves, tenant farmers, domestics, and wageworkers constructed them as more 'animalistic' and disqualified them from white middle class standards of femininity" (p. 127). Contemporary social perceptions of black bodybuilders as more "masculine" reflect historical constructions of race (Boyle, 2005; Williams,

2000) as do media portrayals of black, Asian, Native American, and Latina bodybuilders as sexually “exotic” (Heywood, 1998).

Perceived sexual preference intersects with race and ethnicity. Visibly muscular female athletes of color are more likely to be labeled “mannish” or lesbian and less likely to gain positive media attention (Boyle, 2005; Cahn, 1994a; Holmlund, 1994; Patton, 2001; Williams, 2000) unless they follow the “heterosexual imperative” (Griffin, 1998). As Williams (2000) discusses, black female sexuality is often conflated with lesbianism because of the so-called sexual excesses assigned to both lesbians and black women by the early scientific community. The success of black women in bodybuilding offers a positive model of strong, black femininity. Yet these women also work extra hard to obtain the “hyperfeminine” look of “done hair” and use feminizing accessories to subvert the “gender and sexuality confusion among the general public” (Williams, 2000, p. 109). Williams argues, “If the questioning begins with gender, it inevitably segues to sexuality” (p. 109).

Gender Attribution

An interesting thread of discussion that runs through the literature on female bodybuilding involves *gender attribution*. Kessler and McKenna (1978) define this as the cognitive process of deciding whether someone is a “man” or a “woman.” Muscles are culturally coded as “masculine,” signifying power, control, aggression, and dominance (Bolin, 1992; Choi, 2003; Klein, 1993). Although contemporary body ideals for women emphasize a toned, fit, and firm body with limited muscle definition (Bordo, 1993; Dworkin, 2001; Lenskyj, 1994; Markula, 1995), too much bulk on a woman indicates a gender border crossing into the realm of masculinity, which is widely and cross culturally considered “inappropriate” for women (Boyle, 2005; Brace-Govan, 2004; Grogan et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2004; Lowe, 1998; Roussel & Griffet, 2000). Indeed, the decline of female bodybuilding in France and Australia (Boyle, 2005; Roussel et al., 2003), and the rise of the more traditionally “feminine” fitness and figure competitions in Western cultures (Heywood, 1998; Ian, 2001; Klein, 1993; Ryan, 2001; Wesely, 2001) have been attributed to cultural reaction toward the narrowing muscle gap between male and female bodybuilders. As compared with traditional physique competitions that feature choreographed muscle poses, fitness and figure competitions place more emphasis on popular notions of femininity and less on muscle development and striation (Heywood, 1998).

Steroid use among female bodybuilders is generally touted by researchers, media analysts, participants, sportswriters, and audiences as a “clear” gendered border crossing. When observers perceive a female bodybuilder as crossing the gender line, they also tend to assume she may be lesbian (Bolin, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Grogan et al., 2004; Heywood, 1998; Patton, 2001; Roussel et al., 2003). For example, as Patton (2001) cites in her media analysis, *Natural Physique* magazine clearly draws such a line: “In taking steroids, women cross the line from natural to unnatural: They become dykes” (p. 132). Female bodybuilders also tend to judge themselves and each other based on (perceived) steroid use: “To me, it’s like stepping over the line between being a woman and being a man” (Boyle,

2005, p. 138, quoting participant). Similarly, as Grogan et al. (2004) assert, in the bodybuilding subculture there is that line—cross it and be called “freak” (p. 55).

The line may not be as clear as many may assume. First, there is a common misconception that women cannot “naturally” develop large muscles without the use of drugs. This belief is often accompanied by a paradoxical fear that lifting heavy weights will make women “huge.” These contradictory notions are reflected in fitness magazines (Aoki, 1996; Schulze, 1997), general gym settings (Dworkin, 2001; Markula, 1995), bodybuilding and weightlifting subcultures (Brace-Govan, 2004; Heywood, 1998; Lowe, 1998), and other female sport participation (George, 2005; Krane et al., 2004). Wesely (2001) argues that steroid use and other body technologies should be viewed as a continuum between “natural” and “unnatural.” She points out that the gender line between men and women is negotiable and changes over time and within contexts. In sum, “[female] muscles clearly have meaning, but exactly what they mean and how they are valued is not agreed upon even among feminists” (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996, p. 47).

There is very little agreement in extant literature on the cultural meaning of stereotypical gender attributions or in what ways their usage is connected to meanings given to homosexuality. There are numerous anecdotes in the studies about how hypermuscular women are “trying to look like men” (Wesely, 2001, p. 173), or cross the line into “irretrievably male” (Schulze, 1997, p. 26) or look “identical” to a man (Choi, 2000, p. 60), which prompt reactions from (mostly) men such as “I wouldn’t mess with you” (Grogan et al., 2004, p. 54). Despite these generalizations, few scholars explore the curious fact that most female bodybuilders are not actually believed to be men. Audience members generally do not perceive female bodybuilders as (literally) male-to-female transsexuals, although they have occasionally been compared with “transvestites” or “drag queens.” Perhaps this is an attempt to point out some “failed” attempt at “passing” as a natural woman (Aoki, 1996; Roussel & Griffet, 2000; Schulze, 1997). Like drag queens, female bodybuilders are sometimes perceived as engaging in somatic practices that “mimic and almost exaggerate the traditional requirements of femininity” (St. Martin & Gavey, 1996, p. 55). However, as Aoki (1996) asserts, it is more accurate to say she looks “*something like* a man,” which also means she looks something like a woman: “Then the female bodybuilder looks like a woman who fails to look like a man who fails to look like a woman; she is performing a failed impersonation of a failed impersonation” (p. 61–64, emphasis his). But she does not look exactly like a man in drag, either, since she is often read as a “woman wearing a man’s body,” which Aoki (1996) argues is “much more disturbing” to mainstream audiences (p. 70).

Thus, while Ian (2001) argues that the most muscular women do not “win” bodybuilding contests, Aoki (1996) counters that those who do win are often perceived as somatically disturbing as (failed) attempts to “completely codify the un-mainstream body” (p. 65), and are therefore transgressive—because to some, they look more like men than many men do. This conclusion reaffirms Kane’s (1995) conception of sport performance as a continuum, where “many women routinely outperform many men” (p. 193), and supports Schippert’s (2007) interpretation of female muscle as having queer “slippage” potential (p. 167). In our data analysis, we explore these themes and draw upon participants’ voices to con-

nect notions of gender transgression through purposeful rebellion with patterns of gender attribution in female bodybuilding.

Data and Method

This ethnographic, qualitative study is based on participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten women who are involved in college-level amateur bodybuilding. The first author participated in bodybuilding competitions on the amateur level for two and a half years, and has been weightlifting for a total of four years. She has immersed herself in the bodybuilding subculture at a large Midwestern university for two years, and spends an average of 30 hours per week working out at the gym. The second author participated in weightlifting on and off for over 20 years, although she does not consider herself a bodybuilder and does not compete. However, she partakes in the subculture of the gym, performs as training partner and spotter, assists others in competition preparation (such as body shaving and tanning), and attends numerous bodybuilding competitions. In addition, both authors engage in many informal conversations with male and female bodybuilders and power lifters. Our status as insiders in the bodybuilding subculture gives us access to “backstage” behaviors normally inaccessible to outsiders (Goffman, 1959). In addition, the first author’s direct participation in competition allows her to form closer bonds of trust and mutual understanding with interviewees, which puts them at greater ease when discussing their own perceptions and experiences.

Through her participation, the first author identified ten female bodybuilders willing to be interviewed. She conducted and transcribed all interviews from October 2005 to June 2006. All formal interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim and direct quotes are used to support the analysis. Interview lengths vary from 45 to 90 min, and some took place in the school gym while others occurred in various locations such as a local coffeehouse and the first author’s home. Each participant knows the first author as a fellow bodybuilder and each was fully informed regarding her role in the research. The second author also informed all participants she (informally) conversed with of her status as participant observer.

In general, both researchers were very open about their intentions to study “female bodybuilders,” although the first author explained our aims in more detail to the interviewees at the time of the interview. She developed an interview guide to assess how participants perceive themselves in terms of body image and femininity, how others perceive them and what kinds of support they receive, how they perceive the borders between normative and deviant femininities, and how they negotiate them. In addition, she asked them what they thought about the different types of competitions and the judging criteria, their opinions on steroid use, their precompetition diet and supplement practices, and what they did during a typical workout. The women were assured anonymity before the interviews took place and were asked to sign a consent form that was approved by the human subjects committee of the institutional review board at our university. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.

The ten women are between the ages of 21 and 37, and all engage in bodybuilding at an amateur level, ranging from a few weeks to eight years (See Table 1). Six participants are graduate students, and four are undergraduate students.

Seven women identify as Caucasian American, one as African American, one as Ghanaian, although she spent time in Canada before attending college in America, and one as Palestinian (like her parents), although she was born and raised in Kuwait. Nine women identify as heterosexual, and one as bisexual, although she had a male partner at the time. None are married, but seven women were involved in a steady heterosexual relationship. The women became involved in bodybuilding for various reasons, including weight loss, strength gain, long-term interest in the sport, and encouragement from others. Seven women identify as "athletes" and have been involved in additional sports ranging from cheerleading to rugby. Two women (one African American and one Ghanaian) previously participated in beauty pageants, and two (one Caucasian and one Palestinian) are former gymnasts. Three women (Caucasian) got involved primarily to lose weight and tone up. Of the ten participants, we consider four to be relatively experienced bodybuilders (Jeanie, Carla, Bev, Kelly). Everyone else is "new" to the sport and the subculture.

We began our analysis using Ragin's (1994) insight that qualitative research is a process of "retroduction," or the interplay of induction and deduction (p. 47).

Table 1 Demographics of Study Participants

	Age	Race/ethnicity	Student status	Length of training	Type of participation
Rachel	37	Caucasian American	Graduate	9 months	College and regional BB
Carla	26	Ghanaian/Canadian	Graduate	4 years	College, regional, national BB, and fitness
Brittney	21	Caucasian American	Undergraduate	9 months	College BB
Kelly	22	Caucasian American	Undergraduate	2 years	College and regional BB
Michelle	24	Caucasian American	Graduate	3 weeks	College BB
Bev	26	Palestinian/Kuwaiti	Graduate	8 years	College, regional, national, world BB, and power lifting
Kendra	22	African American	Graduate	5 years	High school and college BB and power lifting
Cathy	21	Caucasian American	Undergraduate	7 months	College BB
Elaine	21	Caucasian American	Undergraduate	13 weeks	College BB
Jeanie	26	Caucasian American	Graduate	1.5 years	College BB

This involves a “spiraling research approach” that is fluid and changeable, which is subject to revision and refinement during the research process (Berg, 2004, p. 20). After recording and transcribing the interviews, we used the technique of open coding (Strauss, 1987), approaching the task with a set of sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) based on extant feminist theory. These include sex, gender, and sexual preference as social constructions (Lorber, 1996, 2001; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and Kessler and McKenna’s (1978) concept of gender attribution. We identified recurring themes or patterns in the data, thereby reducing the data into manageable “categories of evidence” (Ragin, 1994, p. 68), representing a combination of interviewees’ lived experience and our theoretical and conceptual approach.

Findings

The women’s discourses reiterate several themes already discussed in literature on female bodybuilding. These include: experiencing bodybuilding as personally empowering (Grogan et al., 2004; Roussel & Griffet, 2000; Wesely, 2001); difficulties in balancing requirements and expectations of muscularity and femininity both in competition and in everyday life (Bolin, 1992; Boyle, 2005; Grogan et al., 2004; Lowe, 1998; Monaghan et al., 1998; Wesely, 2001); trivialization of the labor involved in female bodybuilding (Brady, 2001); and reinforcement of patriarchal standards of femininity (Bolin, 1992; Ian, 2001). The aforementioned are apparent in our interviewees’ accounts and thus lend further support to previous findings.

In this analysis, we explore a synthesis of previously discussed patterns in the data and an elaboration of insufficiently explored ideas, which we refer to as: gender rebellion, somatic normalization, racialized bodies, and gender attribution. These “categories” provide ease of analysis, and should not be interpreted as discrete experiences in female bodybuilders’ lives. In short, we recognize that bodybuilders’ lived experience tends to be “ideologically messy” (Schulze, 1997, p. 28). Therefore, we attempt to find a balance between honoring the women’s voices and interpreting them in theoretical context.

Gender Rebels

Gender rebellion explores *intentional* transgression of cultural expectations of femininity as discussed by participants. Nine women we interviewed expressed distaste with or distance from normative femininity requirements. These include embracing muscular women as “beautiful” (Michelle), breaking up with a boyfriend because of his disapproval of her bodybuilding activities (Rachel), disparaging the “boob femininity connection” (Carla), and telling her friends she did not care what they thought of her as a bodybuilder (Kendra).

Participation in female bodybuilding is a gender transgression in itself (Wesely, 2001), so we argue that the participants are all rebels, even as they are all conformists. For example, most interviewees assert their right to be women and bodybuilders, to take up space in the gym, to be muscular, and to be nonnormative in various other ways, although they occasionally contradict themselves, thus returning to the realm of normative femininity. In general, our findings debunk the

idea that female bodybuilders *either rebel or conform* to demands of traditional femininity, and reinforce Hill Collins' (2000) concept of *both/and* along a continuum of individual variation.

Bev is our most outspoken "gender rebel," and she is the most experienced and the most muscularly developed bodybuilder of the group. Bev is short, muscular, lean, striated, and has dark olive skin and long dark hair. She has won several contests and has set amateur world powerlifting records. Judging from comments several of our interviewees made about Bev, others perceive her as "mannish," arrogant, and sometimes intimidating. However, each of the participants has a working relationship with Bev, because she is a recruiter and one of the judges for the university competition. Thus, she spends time with each participant, advising and guiding them in training and contest preparation. We believe that Bev, a former gymnast from Kuwait, is accustomed to negative comments from others, including her Palestinian family:

The people who go to the gym are mostly scared of me. . . . They just don't like me cause they can't get themselves to my level cause it takes a little time to get to an advanced level. The people who go to the Nautilus room are idiots and don't like muscular women. . . . Yeah, sometimes my brothers don't like it but I tell them I don't care. . . . They think I am doing too much and they think I am getting too strong because I am stronger than them. . . . I honestly don't see myself as being too big. (Bev)

In this passage, Bev says she doesn't "care" what her brothers think of her. In addition, she interprets others' reactions to her appearance and physical strength as based on fear, ignorance, or jealousy. These are primarily individual or psychological explanations.

Brittney, in contrast, takes a critical feminist view and blames media images for influencing what "society thinks" of muscular women:

I am going to keep lifting weights and if I get bigger than I am then I won't quit lifting just because others think I am getting too big and because society thinks it is gross or because magazines put Photoshop women on their covers for the ideal body type. The media is what makes people have certain views. (Brittney)

Brittney is relatively inexperienced, although she is already outspoken regarding anyone else's idea of how she should look and what she should do with her body. She told us that her boyfriend "had a problem" with her losing her breast tissue during training, but that she "just didn't care" because she has "no respect" for women who get breast implants. Likewise, several women express a certain enjoyment from participating in an activity that is considered less "socially acceptable" (Rachel) for women than men:

I like the look so I keep working towards looking better, or what I think is better. I also participate because people think it's kind of strange. It's not something people necessarily want to do because it's not an easy thing to do. (Jeanie)

Clearly, Jeanie takes pleasure from others thinking that what she does is “kind of strange,” and she exudes pride in her muscular body and the work it takes to get it in condition. For Jeanie, who has very pale skin and long blond hair, developing muscles is a definite improvement over her earlier body type, which she describes as “weak and skinny, like skin and bones.” She detests her “genetics” and has worked hard to build muscle on her tall but slender frame.

Somatic Normalization

In some instances gender rebellion stems from or results in what we call somatic normalization, or the emergence of new social norms related to the athletic and muscular female body (Grogan et al., 2004; Monaghan et al., 1998). Our use of the word “new” reflects Dworkin’s (2001) observation that women continue to “push gently” on the glass ceiling of acceptable female muscle—and that socially constructed ideals of femininity and attractiveness related to the female body continue to change over time. In other words, others begin to perceive a wider range of female muscle and female body types as normal and even attractive, rather than deviant or pathological. Our interviewees’ accounts affirm our conceptualization across several contexts, such as changing attitudes of family and friends, changes in self-perceptions, and childhood socialization:

Yeah they [my parents] don’t care I have done stuff like this before. They were more crazy about me doing a pageant than they were about me doing a power lifting competition. I have been an athlete for so long that it is pretty much like you know whatever. . . . I saw them [bodybuilders] so early in life I can’t remember. My dad was a workout buff guy and he did that stuff. . . . So when I see it on television it was normal, well I guess it became normal. (Kendra)

Several interviewees have been athletes all their lives. For their families, female sport participation is normative. Bodybuilding is just another healthy activity in a long line of sports in which their daughters have been involved. Kendra is medium height, has medium brown skin and shoulder length, usually braided black hair with a stocky, compact athletic build and a body that responds quickly to weight training. She told us that she is a “tomboy” and that her father “wanted a son” as a way of explaining to us that her muscular physique is “normal” in her family. In Kendra’s case, being in a beauty pageant was the rebellion that made her parents “crazy.”

Similarly, Carla’s parents, who are Catholic, are more concerned with the morality of her extracurricular activities than with her muscular appearance:

My parents think it is cool um because my parents are very—they like the idea that I am doing something that I am passionate about. As long as I am not stripping or doing pornography or something that is morally questionable then yeah they are happy that I am doing something I like. (Carla)

Carla, who was raised partially in Ghana (where she was born) and partially in Canada before coming to the U.S. for college, is a lifelong athlete and has a well-developed musculature. Carla is tall and lean, has very dark skin, wears long,

braided hair extensions, and considers herself very feminine. Like Kendra, she has participated in beauty pageants, but seems unsure as to the moral and personal value of this activity. She prefers to compete in fitness or figure competitions, which to her are worthier pursuits. Although these two women hail from very different cultural backgrounds, it is interesting to note that they share a similar range of experiences from pageants to bodybuilding competitions, and that both sets of parents frown on the pageants but view their daughters' bodybuilding involvement as just another "healthy" athletic activity.

Kendra and Carla's accounts support Cahn's (1994a) argument that community expectations of black women's femininity encompass a wider gender spectrum than their white counterparts. Indeed, several of our white interviewees articulate their family members' initial negative reactions before their "resocialization" and increased acceptance of their loved one's activities. For instance:

She [grandmother] was worried in the beginning because she didn't know what I looked like and when she heard the word bodybuilding she looked it up and I am sure that whatever she saw when she looked was not good . . . after she saw pictures from my last show. . . . She is now better about it. She shows every one at church pictures. . . . I didn't look any weirder I just looked athletic. (Kelly)

Kelly's anecdote illustrates a general pattern in the data among Caucasian American women: initial resistance from family and friends followed by their realization that the woman in question does not look big and "freaky" (Rachel) like the media images they have seen. One participant mentions that her strength training "opened up [her friends'] eyes that muscular women look nice as opposed to stick women" (Cathy). In addition, several women note that not only do they feel better about their bodies since being involved in competition and training, but their general perceptions of the ideal feminine body have shifted to encompass a more muscular frame. As Dworkin (2001) might say, they are "tapping on the glass ceiling" of female muscle, and by so doing often alter the opinions of those around them.

Racialized Bodies

Interpretations of the ideal feminine body remain subject to stereotypes and cultural beliefs based on race and ethnicity, which alter perceptions and expectations of the female bodybuilder (Balsamo, 1994; Boyle, 2005; Heywood, 1998; Williams, 2000). Although lived experiences of race and culture are constantly shifting and blending, there remain discernable differences in gendered expectations as reflected in our data. For example, Carla's traditional Ghanaian family has responded positively to the change in her appearance and behavior and even joined her in exercise for health's sake:

I went back [to Ghana] three years ago and . . . it was interesting because . . . I ran with my nephew and every time we would run by they [villagers] looked a little curious [as to] why would you get up and run just for the heck of running, are you going to the store to buy bread and we would come back with empty hands. . . . The village is a little behind and they have not developed as

quickly. . . . I ended up running fitness classes for the women because I would come back and do push ups and squats and my grandmother decided one day she was going to join me and then my mom joined in and we had a little class going on. Usually when people run in Ghana, they do it for a purpose. It is so different there. (Carla)

In marked contrast to most Western cultures, Ghanaians consider strenuous physical activity a necessary part of everyday labor, rather than as a way to lose weight, get in shape, or stay healthy. Carla tells us that because of increased access to “Western [media] programming,” Ghanaian women are “learning that there are more options available to them than traditional soft roles.” Therefore, although many Ghanaian women’s bodies are hardened from working, they do/did not view this form of strength and muscularity as freedom from traditional female gender roles. Thus, Carla’s cross-cultural experience as a black female bodybuilder is part of the current shift in Ghanaian beliefs about femininity. Now, Carla’s brother shows pictures of her to his friends and “brags how his sister can beat them up,” which pleases her.

In contrast to Carla’s family, Bev’s Palestinian family gives her a hard time about her increasing muscularity and her “intense” dedication to the sport:

Some of my family they think I am overworking. I am doing it too intense or too much. But I told them that it is my life and my body and when I listen basically to my body and when it is to much on my body I will back off. (Bev)

Although Bev doesn’t discuss her cultural experiences in detail, she repeatedly mentions how her brothers criticize and make fun of her body. This is consistent with traditional Palestinian views regarding female gender roles in a culture where women are not expected to perform hard labor as part of their everyday lives, especially in the middle and upper classes. Thus, Bev is forced to rebel against an even stricter code of acceptable female appearance and behavior than Carla and our American born interviewees.

Another indicator of difference in racialized gender expectations emerges from interaction with friends and significant others. Kendra relates an interaction she had with an African American male friend, who “was doing the head shaking thing” when she told him about her involvement in bodybuilding and makes fun of her because she told him she “didn’t care” what he thought about the possibility that she might “lose her ass.” This mutual friend expressed the identical concern to Michelle, who is white, because he admired her (ample) backside and did not want her to work it off. His preference for the large female posterior reflects a racialized concept of what is constructed as sexually attractive to heterosexual black men (hooks, 1992). Carla’s interaction with her boyfriend corroborates this as she discusses the point at which she feels she has “gone too far” with her training:

Well too big is when I have no shape in my butt when my boobs are reduced to nothing and when my friends start making little remarks about me and my boyfriend starts making remarks about he has nothing to hold on to. And when the girls are like, oh my god look at her butt; there is nothing there but

muscle. It makes me feel like a freak generally and that is when I feel like I have gone too far. (Carla)

Carla's significant others reinforce ideals of black femininity by remarking on her "reduced" breast size and her "butt," which has "nothing there but muscle." Unlike Bev, however, Carla responds to the criticism by "holding back" on her workouts (Dworkin, 2001) and utilizing feminizing body technologies and accessories (Williams, 2000):

I have some issues with [labeling]. . . . That is one reason why I wore braids in my hair because I used to wear my hair short and you know—still lifting and with my musculature—I think sometimes people doubted my [sexual] orientation and that bothered me cause they—you know, potential come-ons, and I figured that if I just avoid the confusion at all then I don't have to deal with it one way or another. When I got the braids, it conforms to some ideal of black femininity—long hair—that seems to be pretty much universal, so I got the braids and then I um at one point I had considered getting breast implants. (Carla)

In short, Carla reacts to American culture by conforming to "some ideal of black femininity," whereas in Ghana, which is "a little behind" the times, she is more rebellious. Perhaps this is because she has more investment in what her current cultural contemporaries think of her. Although "in Ghanaian culture women are supposed to be full figured and have huge butts," so standards of black femininity are similar.

In addition, Carla's reference to people doubting her sexual preference and her reaction to that supports Williams' (2000) argument that black women bodybuilders are especially prone to being read as lesbians. The fact that Carla responds by lengthening her hair and considering breast implants suggests that gender attribution (in this case, butch) is conflated with sexual preference (in this case, lesbian). In other words, she believes if she looks sufficiently feminine, people will assume she is heterosexual.

Gender Attribution

As we define and expand it here, gender attribution (Kessler and McKenna, 1978) is based on how people interpret themselves and each other not only in terms of their sex (male ↔ female), but of their gender presentation (feminine ↔ masculine) as compared with generally dominant Western norms. In other words, we use the concept as a heuristic device to represent the sometimes complex process of attributing sex and gender characteristics to an "other" to render them understandably human (and therefore sexed and gendered) in terms of existing social norms. We explore and analyze the curious but widespread practice surrounding female bodybuilding of correct sex attribution (female) mixed with ambiguous gender attribution (female masculinity). Our results are similar to those of Boyle (2005), Fisher (1997) and Wesely (2001), who found that gender expression is linked with sexual preference. In other words, females attributed as displaying "feminine" characteristics are typically assumed to be "normal" heterosexuals, whereas those perceived as more "masculine" are generally assumed to be lesbian

and/or pathological (see Halberstam, 1998). In our study, participants typically criticize those they perceive as “mannish” females:

I think people like the big freaky looking men but they don't like the big freaky looking women. I mean I just hear more and more people making comments about, um, the women that don't look feminine anymore; no one wants to see that really. I have respect for them and for what they do, but I think people are turned off to what they have done to themselves. I think people want to see dedicated muscular people but without that going over the edge. (Rachel)

Rachel, who is tall, thin, and has light olive skin and long brown hair that she wears in a ponytail, is a lifelong athlete with a well-developed upper body, slender legs, and squarish facial features. She initially became involved in bodybuilding to “lose weight” but stayed because she enjoys the training and being on stage during competitions. Like many of the women we interviewed, she is vocal about the existence of a gender “edge” that when crossed results in something “freaky” that “no one wants to see.” Brittney echoes the sentiment: “I think . . . the [Ms.] Olympia women you know that do bodybuilding. . . . I actually think that they are crossing gender lines.” This comment contradicts her earlier statement criticizing media-driven norms of femininity, providing a clear instance of both subversive and normative gendered attitudes (Hill Collins, 2000). Elaine, also in bodybuilding to lose weight and tone up, says, “I don't want to do bodybuilding I want to do overall fitness. I don't want to dewomanize myself.” Her description of her mother's reaction to learning what she was doing is striking and may help explain her intense fear of looking like a “man”:

My mom . . . thought I would be a man at the end of it. She was like ‘I don't want her to look like that’ but I can't get any bigger than I am now unless I take drugs. When she saw Ms. Olympia, she almost threw up. I want to keep losing fat and getting leaner, but I don't want to look like that. She [Ms. Olympia] looks like that from years of steroid use. (Elaine)

As others have stressed, steroid use is linked to perceptions of female bodybuilders as masculine (Grogan et al., 2004; Patton, 2001) or unnatural (Wesely, 2001), although steroid use in itself is not sufficient for such attribution. As Cathy (correctly) observes, “some girls can take stuff and not even look like they are taking stuff.” Nevertheless, when others interpret a woman's musculature as “huge” and “bulging” (Michelle), they tend to assume she is using steroids and therefore “screwing with nature” (Jeanie). Whether she is using or not is often unknown. However, if she looks like she is using, they label her “mannish” or call her a man:

I would say Bev is basically a man; she does as much steroids as the guys. . . . There is not a doubt in my mind that she is on steroids . . . and her jaw line. Her muscularity is unbelievable for her. I mean look at her family her sister is tiny. Genetically no way girls will get that big. There is no way a girl can increase her bench press by fifty pounds in one summer. (Cathy)

Cathy, who is also a rugby player and is characterized by others as "uppity," is nevertheless one of several in our sample who are outspokenly critical of Bev's size and other physical attributes. Here, Cathy is not literally making a mistaken sex attribution. She knows that Bev is a "she," which we interpret to mean that to Cathy, Bev is like a man but is not synonymous with one. Rather, she is making a gender attribution that Bev is a masculine female, and therefore deviant. Jeanie echoes the sentiment:

I know for sure one woman [Bev] who does them and she looks scary. You can tell that she is a woman but her acne is so bad on her back and . . . the steroids actually make you lose hair and give you a receding hairline, which makes your forehead look like it has gotten bigger. I don't respect people who do steroids it is like cheating, but of course people cannot look like that naturally they need something to help them out. Since steroids that bodybuilders use is a male hormone then I would consider it unnatural for a woman to take them. (Jeanie)

Even Bev agrees that a woman has to use steroids to obtain a large musculature:

For women though they will never be big unless they use steroids. If you just work out and train hard and eat right, you will never get big; you will get toned but not big. That is a total misconception. (Bev)

Bev refers to the fear many women have of gaining muscle from weight training. This fear is the crux of an ideological paradox: Many women believe that females cannot obtain big muscles without steroids, yet they are afraid of bulking up from lifting weights when not taking drugs or supplements (Aoki, 1996). Our interviewees reflect these contradictory beliefs about the effects of weight training by eschewing steroid use and worrying over how others see them in terms of gender attribution. A few examples:

I don't use steroids so I feel like I am still considered feminine but I know there are some people who do not agree with me but I feel like I have stayed plenty feminine. (Rachel)

I think there are images that guys look at and be like yuck she is way to muscular. But I would say that anything in the natural bodybuilder I would not be afraid to look like at all. Um, if that is feminine I don't know. I guess. (Michelle)

No one would consider me to be masculine. . . . They think it is really cool that I bodybuild, but no one would ever mistake me for a guy. There are some women who cross the boundaries and it is often done by steroid use, which I could never imagine using. But my body type does not allow me to get large enough. I look more like a figure competitor. I get a lot of comments like your arms look really toned stuff like that, but no one ever makes comments about how mannish I look. . . . I don't think I could physically ever get masculine without using technology to alter my body. (Jeanie)

Although our interviewees rebel against traditional feminine gender norms in various ways, they all draw the line somewhere between “beautiful,” muscular, “natural” women (Michelle) and women who are “disgusting,” “all veiny and steroidy,” (Michelle), “unnatural,” “hulking” (Jeanie), and “freaky” (Rachel). Thus, hypermuscular women are often targets of accusations of steroid use and masculine gender attributions, which are typically based on interpretations of appearance.

The problem with finding a balance between femininity and muscular development is not only social but structural—built into a sport which rewards women for developing large, striated, lean muscles and punishes them for looking too big, too bulky, losing their breast tissue, or other somatic consequences of training. If the female bodybuilder wishes to be successful, she must constantly negotiate between gender extremes, especially at elite levels (Heywood, 1998). As Bev comments, “people pay that money for a ticket to see good and muscular people not to see skinny people.” In the world of bodybuilding, it is insufficient for a woman to be *only* muscular or *only* feminine—she must be *both/and*.

Discussion and Conclusion

Data are based on participant observation and ten in-depth interviews with college-level amateur female bodybuilders. In our analysis, we expound upon several themes that are understudied in existing literature, including intentional gender rebellion, somatic normalization, racialized bodies, and gender attribution. All interviewees identify the use of steroids as crossing a gender boundary. However, most of the women distance themselves from steroid use and from (overt) female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998) such as visible muscle bulk, which they characterize as pathological. Like their family and friends, participants tend to characterize hypermuscular women as “men” or “mannish,” although they do not mistake a muscular woman for an actual male. Therefore, the gender attributions of participants are not based on mistaken sex/gender attribution (Kessler & McKenna, 1978) but rather upon ideals of femininity and masculinity in the context of the bodybuilding world.

Race/ethnicity and (perceived) sexual preference intersect with gender attribution in several patterned ways. The families of the white participants tend to show greater resistance to accepting female bodybuilding as “normal,” whereas their friends are typically supportive. The African American and Ghanaian women we interview say their families are supportive, but their friends are resistant. Bev (Palestinian) receives the greatest criticism and resistance from both family and friends, possibly because her culture’s gender norms are very strict, and/or because she has the bulkiest muscles of the female bodybuilders in the group. Whatever the reason, women of color in our sample express frustration with others labeling them as “mannish” women or as “men” (Carla, Bev, Kendra), or explicitly connecting their hypermuscularity with lesbianism (Carla).

Despite gender prejudice, we found that individual participants both rebel and conform to current standards of white femininity, and that a great deal of their gender transgression seems purposeful. For instance, most of the women continue

to build muscle despite others' criticism. In addition, Carla and Brittney refuse to get breast implants in spite of pressure to conform to both competition and "real-world" standards of femininity. Bev rebels by disparaging the personal character of others and accusing naysayers of being fearful or jealous of muscular women. Brittney and Michelle speak out against normative gender expectations, while Jeanie and Rachel take overt pleasure in being "different."

In their micro everyday worlds, participants' gender rebellions shape the ways in which interviewees' family, friends, and significant others perceive female bodybuilders. This occurs through a resocialization process that we call somatic normalization. In other words, attitudes of significant others tend to shift from viewing female bodybuilding as a deviant activity to a fairly normal one due to experiencing their daughters', sisters', friends', or partners' involvement. Most participants describe how others' opinions of them change from fearful or disgusted to fairly relaxed and accepting over time. Sometimes the initial reaction is visceral, as illustrated by Elaine's mother when she "almost threw up" upon seeing Ms. Olympia. Now, like many other parents, grandparents, siblings, and partners of participants, Elaine's mother expresses pride in her daughter's bodybuilding accomplishments. Carla brings cultural diffusion to her birth country of Ghana, where her female family members now exercise with her for health as opposed to (only) labor motives. Interviewees' own gender perceptions often change during their bodybuilding participation, as they become more accepting of themselves and others as hypermuscular women.

There is no easy answer to the question of whether or to what extent purposeful gender transgression actually results in lasting changes to existing Western constructions of gender. However, we agree with Lorber (2001), who argues that intent is the key to resisting and reshaping gender categories. In sum, despite lingering gender prejudices, the women's insistence on increasing their muscularity and strength and their refusal to allow significant others to determine their level of participation in a sport considered deviant for women contribute to a slow but growing societal acceptance of visibly muscular female bodies as within the "normal" range of possible femininities. Therefore, we conclude that female bodybuilders are in a unique position for causing gender foment. To us, this signifies progress toward the freedom of human gender expression.

Future research would benefit from a more in-depth investigation into whether female bodybuilders' feminizing labor is comparable to the work of female impersonators (drag queens), particularly because both groups' goals, to some varying extent, are to "convince" audiences to read them as feminine/female (e.g., Aoki, 1996; Taylor & Rupp, 2005). This is one avenue of approaching bodybuilding as a "transgendered" activity and might provide insight into how femininity is (literally) constructed upon the body.

Acknowledgments

Our appreciation goes to *The Sociology of Sport Journal's* editor and anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for their insightful comments and suggestions, and to the women we interviewed for sharing their wisdom and experience.

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