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# Is this working out?: a spatial analysis of women in the gym

Kristine E. Newhall  
*University of Iowa*

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IS THIS WORKING OUT?: A SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN THE GYM

by

Kristine E. Newhall

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Women's Studies in the Graduate College of The University of  
Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Susan Birrell

## ABSTRACT

American women have been accessing fitness spaces since fitness became an industry in the United States starting in the 1960s. Since that time the fitness industry has grown exponentially. Though a majority of Americans do not engage in fitness regimens on a regular basis, the cultural mandate for fitness (a combination of health and aesthetics) permeates American society. Though seemingly gender neutral, the fitness imperative has gendered prescriptions and results; some of which are on display in fitness spaces.

Because of a presumption of equal access, supported by data illustrating that women use gyms in greater numbers than men, little research has focused on their specific uses of gym spaces and potential barriers they encounter in trying to access all the spaces in the gym. This dissertation is a qualitative study of the gendered barriers and fitness prescriptions in the contemporary American fitness center, or gym, as it is colloquially known.

Using qualitative interviews (N=25) and participant observation at three gyms, I discuss the sociocultural creation of gym space and gym practices focusing on their gendered implications. The study focuses on specific spaces (i.e., the aerobics room, the weight room) as well as the more general uses of “open” gym space. I examine the sources of women’s fitness knowledge, their entry points into fitness spaces, and their use of fitness technologies. I found that while women’s movements within the gym and their choice of fitness regimens varied, they all understood the gendered nature of fitness as a whole and how it manifest on women’s bodies. I discuss the pleasures gained as well as anxieties women had about using both traditional and non-traditional gendered gym

spaces. Women's fitness regimens comprise part of their identities, in and outside the gym. In fitness spaces women earned social, cultural, and physical capital based on their fitness abilities, physiques, and fitness knowledge. These rewards were available to all women in all fitness spaces but the amount of capital accumulation varied depending on age, race, sexuality, ability and which fitness spaces they accessed and for what purpose.

Abstract Approved:

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Thesis Supervisor

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Title and Department

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Date

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of  
Kristine E. Newhall

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Women's Studies at the May 2013 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

---

Susan Birrell, Thesis Supervisor

---

Julie Andsager

---

Naomi Greyser

---

Ellen Lewin

---

Catriona Parratt

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE FIT, THE GENDERED, THE SPACE

In the United States, January is to the fitness industry what April is to accounting firms. After months of relative quiet, there is an increase in business. For the fitness industry, January is the time to capture new customers or entice former ones to return. In the new year, the industry exploits the feelings of negativity and personal failure that result from the alleged transgressions Americans engage in over the holidays (i.e., over consumption of food and alcohol and a decrease in physical activity). Acts of atonement and reengagement are most visible in gyms, which experience a surge of activity in the form of returning and new members. The latter become obvious to the “regulars” because of their behaviors: wandering among rows in the locker room, quizzical looks at the imposing weight machines, failing to sign up for a treadmill or register for an aerobics class, leaving behind a sweat-marked weight bench. These are negotiations of policy, procedure, and gym etiquette that every new member experiences to some degree. They are obvious and most often temporary.

But there are other the negotiations that are not as visible or discussed and that are ongoing. I argue that these negotiations are influenced by the ways in which gym space is used and constructed—literally and discursively. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which women negotiate their fitness practices in the space of the gym. The influences on women’s fitness practices are numerous and include prescriptions for appropriate femininity, a societal mandate for personal health and wellness, and pressure to achieve a functional, skilled, and natural body. All of these influences have been addressed, to varying degrees, by the literature in the fields of sports studies and feminist studies.

Missing from these discussions, however, has been a consideration of space and the ways in which fitness spaces construct and influence fitness practices. And so, in this dissertation, I present an analysis of gym space that will elucidate the ways in which fitness practices are gendered, the consequences of gendered practices, the creation of gendered fitness boundaries, and how women transgress literal and discursive boundaries in gym space.

It is not that men walk into a gym without reservations. Prescriptions for masculinity, which include visible strength and knowledge about exercise and fitness, require negotiation as well. And like the negotiations women undertake, they are not homogenous among men as a group. There are two gender-specific differences, though, that I argue underlie the respective negotiations women and men undertake when they enter gym space.

The first pertains to women's presence and movement in public spaces. Historically, women's movements into and within public spaces have been more limited. Despite the equal access discourse that pervades public spaces, gendered access to them and limitations of movement within them remain. I observed these limitations among women in the gyms I visited during my fieldwork. In these allegedly gender-neutral spaces, men moved more freely among pieces of gym equipment and among the spaces within the gym, with the possible exception of the aerobics room (as I discuss in Chapter Three).

This freedom of movement is connected to the second gender-specific negotiation women face when making decisions about fitness practices in a gym. There is a connection between the types of bodies built through fitness practices and the spaces in

which this is accomplished that is more salient for women than for men because of the narrow construction of the ideal female body. For example, a woman who lifts weights in a weight room is viewed differently than a woman who lifts weights during the course of an aerobics class. The former is more likely to be seen as transgressing gender norms because she is using a space that has historically been marked as masculine and could be building large, unfeminine muscles in the process. The woman who strength trains in the aerobics room may be doing similar body work, but in a space that was created for women. I discuss these hierarchies and boundaries at length in Chapters Three and Four.

Throughout this dissertation I discuss how the prescriptions for embodied femininity are mediated by and negotiated in fitness spaces. Definitions of physical fitness and their manifestations in human form and human function continue to change, but the dominant version of fit is always on display. Turn on a television, open a magazine, glance at a billboard and it will be there. It conveys the cultural emphasis on and societal mandate for a healthy, fit, aesthetically-pleasing body. It reflects more than just good looks; it embodies the values of hard work, independence, and—in the case of women—moderation.

The value of fitness in contemporary America is a result of a convergence of discourses about health, aesthetics, and individual responsibility. “Discourses about fitness are part of the sociocultural terrain of contemporary industrialized societies” (McCormack, 1999, p. 156). Discourses are “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1973) and, as such, they govern what can be said or done at particular times and places. They sustain specific relations of power and construct practices, including embodied practices such as exercise (Rail & Harvey, 1995). The benefits, as determined by the fitness industry and

medical establishment, are circulated through media, by fitness and medical professionals, and in fitness spaces. And the messages are powerful.

Even the unhealthy denizens of New York City have succumbed to the ubiquitous gym culture that has swept America in the past twenty years. Everyone, from the rural farmer in Kentucky to the ivory tower academic in New York City, goes to the gym in order to work out. Even overweight, masculine, working-class lesbians...feel compelled to join a gym, work out, get in shape, lose weight, and build muscle. Today, it is not enough to simply be thin. One must be thin and healthy, with low cholesterol, clean lungs, caffeine-free brains, and the correct ratio of body fat to muscle. Functional activities, such as lifting children or pets, walking, riding a bike or climbing stairs, are not enough to attain this ideal. One must by necessity join a gym, where a variety of machines and classes will help gym members attain these new ideal physiques. (J. Klein, 2001, p. 21)

In this excerpt about the performativity of fitness in contemporary American culture, the author addresses the issues and intersections that are at the center of this project on gender and gym culture: health, aesthetics, sexuality, gender, sociocultural power and pressure, and finally gym space. Klein, however, oversimplifies the fitness mandate and overlooks the ways in which a widespread application of a singular version of fitness privileges and provides benefits to some while limiting access to, desire for, and alternative constructions of fitness.

A central theme in this project is the creation, maintenance, and transgression of binaries and boundaries. In the passage above, Klein illustrates one of the most obvious: working out versus not working out. The idea that everyone in the United States is now compelled to go to the gym is problematic. For some, the thought of going to the gym is quite repellant; perhaps because of a lack of desire to exercise or because exercise in a gym seems unnatural for those who prefer outdoor physical activities such as running, kayaking, hiking, or playing sports. I explore these binaries, the indoor/outdoor and natural/artificial, in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The gender binary also is central to the analyses I undertake throughout this project. The gender differences in the gym are quite noticeable to even a casual observer. A three-minute video from a humor series called *The Flip Side* posted on *The Huffington Post* in December of 2012 provided a satirical look at some of these. The premise of the series is an examination of what gender role reversal would look like in various situations. In this particular video the setting was the gym. Though it relied a little too heavily on a paradigm in which women do not take fitness seriously and men take it too seriously, the affirming comments by viewers were likely due to the portrayals which reflected a version of a reality that people experience in the gym. Men talk about how many calories they must consume to build muscle, which protein drinks they use. They grunt while lifting, offer unsolicited, hands-on advice to women, and overtly preen in the mirrors. Women bounce for a few minutes on a stability ball, chat with their workout buddy about how much they ate last night before calling it a day. As a reward, they procure smoothies from the gym's juice bar. These behaviors and others (which I discuss in Chapter Four) have been too easily compartmentalized in the gender binary by both fitness workers and exercisers.

In other words, many fitness behaviors and practices which have been marked as male or female are blurred in the space of the gym. Beliefs about gendered gym behaviors are part of the discursive construction of gym space which includes the marking of specific spaces as masculine or feminine. But how did the aerobics room become feminine space and the weight room masculine? The answer may seem obvious: women comprise the majority of aerobicizers, while men historically have dominated the space of the weight room. The practices have been gendered seemingly based on the

practitioners. In fact, in the case of aerobics, the practice was created expressly for women, drawing from and on their presumed interest in dance, or movements that are perceived as more artistic and require both grace and strength (Stern, 2008). In this project, I explore the strategies and beliefs that maintain gendered boundaries in the gym as well as the crossing of literal boundaries and the transgression of discursive ones.

I also complicate the long-standing spatial binary: public versus private. I argue that the gym is neither public nor private. The unique ways in which gym space is used, and by whom, reflects this binary blurring, which I discuss in Chapter Two.

Understanding the gym as outside of this binary also creates theoretical space for me to engage in further questioning of the ways in which a gender binary creates gendered boundaries in fitness spaces.

My interest in these crossings and transgressions lead to a focus on non-heterosexual women who use the gym. The premise of the inquiry was based in possible connections between the outside-gym transgressions of heterosexuality and dominant gender that queer women negotiate and how these manifest inside the gym. Does transgression, in terms of gender and sexuality, outside the gym result in transgression inside the gym? And what do such transgressions look like? The literature on non-heterosexual women in sports has been extensive, but their participation in fitness cultures and fitness spaces is almost non-existent. My analyses of queer women's fitness practices in the gym begin to fill some of that gap. This is not to suggest that heterosexual women are uniformly adhering to the gendered boundaries that exist in the gym or that their negotiations are not affected by their sexuality. Throughout this project, I make note of the ways in which women's practices and fitness decisions transgress gendered norms.



Also central to this project is my examination of the results of these crossings, blurrings, and transgressions. Previous literature on women's fitness has focused on the ways in which conformity and nonconformity can provide moments of empowerment and pleasure for participants. My use of cultural geography to examine the role of fitness spaces provides a new way to theorize women's fitness beyond an empowerment discourse. The literal and discursive constructions of space, and the ways in which people interpret and use the spaces they inhabit, complicate the rather simplistic understanding of physical activity as universally positive, accessible, and healthy. Grosz (1994) writes that "body image is not an isolated image of the body but necessarily involves the relations between the body, the surrounding space, other objects and bodies" (p. 85). The gym is an ideal space for the study of how bodies and body image are constructed in conjunction with gym space. The gym is a space of bodies interacting with objects, both other bodies and the inert objects in the space. The bodies are gendered in and by this specific space just as they are in the spaces outside the physical walls of the gym.

The intersections of identity, utilization, and behavior have all contributed to the marking of spaces and the drawing of gendered boundaries in the gym. The history of the contemporary multi-use gym provides insight into how gym spaces became gendered even as the gym itself maintains a version of gender neutrality. I explore the gendered markings and boundaries of both the weight room and the aerobics room, as well as the ways in which spaces perceived as gender neutral take on gendered characteristics and/or reflect gendered dynamics. I note the boundary crossings women engage in and the ways in which the spaces themselves enable or discourage such transgressions, and their embodied effects. As Maguire and Mansfield (1998) note in their study of aerobics

classes, “women’s bodies are sites for studying the interrelationships between power and gender, discipline and control, and gendered identity construction” (pp.109-10). These dynamics are central to my thinking about women in the gym.

### Studying Sporting Spaces

As I have already noted, gym space is unique in that it is neither public nor private. In this dissertation, I employ several different theories to my analysis of gym space, its gendered boundaries, and its use by female exercisers. First, following the lead of cultural geography, I understand the space of the gym as a social space; one in which people’s movements, actions, speech, and behaviors both reflect the space and create it (Ardener, 1981; Grosz, 1995; Lefebvre, 1992; Massey, 1994; McDowell & Sharp, 1997; McDowell, 1996, 1999; Rose, 1993). “The gym” is not simply a room or configuration of rooms in which activities such as weightlifting, aerobics, running, walking, or climbing occur. It is not simply a structure. It is not neutral. And women’s use of gym space is integral to an understanding of gendered fitness regimens and the consequences of engagement in them.

In this project, I explored these dynamics in the context of the space in which they are occurring. What are the power and gendered dynamics that exist in gym space? And so, by examining gym space using Foucault’s work on disciplinary space, I am able to theorize the ways in which women’s bodies, in the form of movements and practices, are affected by spatial constructions and the simultaneous ways in which space is complicit in the construction of identity and the conferral of privilege.

In the fields of sport sociology and sport studies, scholars use the theories and lenses employed in geography to enrich understanding of the ways in which sport and

space collude in the creation of ideology, physical space, and social relationships. Interest in this dynamic emerged in the 1970s when geographers began studying sport spaces (Bale, 2000). The “spatial turn” in the study of sport and the social sciences more broadly coincided with the postmodern turn in social sciences—including sport sociology. But scholars of sport turned more concerted attention to the geography of sport in the 1990s as they conceptualized sport as not solely a product of time, but of space as well (Bale, 2000; van Ingen, 2003; Vertinsky, 2004).

Foucault has become a central theorist in the discussions of sport and space. Believing that twentieth century Western civilization was marked by its meditations on space (versus a nineteenth century attention to history), Foucault theorized about the ways in which three-dimensional space was created by discourse and the effects of discursively constructed space on people—specifically the creation of subjectivity (Foucault, 1986). He too was preoccupied with the spatial turn. His epistemological vision of the study of space generally and his work on the disciplinary effects of space has been particularly appealing within sport studies.

In more recent years, the work of French theorist Henri Lefebvre has also been foregrounded in the study of sporting spaces, particularly his monograph *The Production of Space*. Attempting to correct the notion that space is merely a vehicle for people, their mental processes, and their social relationships, Lefebvre insists that spaces are not occupied passively and argues forcefully for an understanding of space as agential. In sport studies, van Ingen (2003) has advocated for the use of a Lefebvrian conceptualization of space as a means of discussing racial, gendered, and sexed subjectivities in space. Fusco (1998, 2006) applies Lefebvre’s theories on the production

of social space to a very specific gym space: the locker room. She argues that social norms about hygiene, fitness, health, the body, and the concepts of public and private create subjectivities that exist along a spectrum of normativity that is established in spaces outside the locker room but that permeate its boundaries.

In addition to Foucault and LeFebvre, I draw on the work of Michel de Certeau—who has not been as widely used in the study of sport and space—to highlight the ways in which space is constructed through its use. de Certeau conceptualizes space as practice. The practice of space is part of the practice of everyday life in which participants, or practitioners, remain unaware of the ways in which they are constructing the everyday. Applying de Certeau's "practiced space" to the gym I suggest that many members recognize the gym as a cultural product. The ubiquity of televisions built into exercise machines is an example of gym culture constructed through trends. The emerging presence in gyms of Zumba, a Latin dance-inspired aerobics class and the decline of Reebok's once popular Step aerobics are examples gym users speak of when discussing how gyms have changed, or how fitness has changed. They see culture, and the ways in which culture changes, reflected in their gym spaces. But they also remain distanced from their participation in cultural production. Zumba is popular because—at the most basic level—people attend the classes. Step is in decline because people do not attend those classes. But there is no questioning of how personal preferences and community dynamics affect this specific culture.

To understand the converging political and physical effects of gym space on women, I use Bourdieu's writing on forms of capital, specifically cultural, social, and physical capital. "Bodies...cannot simply be treated as though they are the 'natural'

foundation or passive surface upon which culture overlays a disciplinary system of meanings” (Budgeon, 2003, p. 51). Though I do not subscribe to a theory of liberation and empowerment for women via physical activity, I contend that in gym spaces women earn physical, cultural, and social capital that they use outside gyms. There are limitations to both this earning potential and the exchange value of this capital in and outside of the gym based on factors including race, class, ability, and sexuality. Still, women are able to negotiate their presence and practices in the gym and sometimes do so in ways that do not comport with the markings of spaces and practices based on ideas about gendered behavior. I ask how such transgressions affect the accumulation of capital.

The purpose of the study, however, does not include a prescription for the liberation of women through a radicalized or even modified use of gym space. As Jamieson (2005) notes, the liberated woman is a problematic concept because it implies that a “utopian womanhood founded on the notion that the post-colonial is here, and that its best form is the athletic, slightly muscled, individually disciplined and (flexibly) white, female body” (n.p.). In addition to the difficulty of attaining this vision of a liberated woman, this version of womanhood was not universally desired among the participants in my study. They negotiated not only the space and their respective fitness practices, but their expectations and desires around their self-image and bodies as they bumped up against the version of the ideal which American culture provides.

Rather, my goal in this project is an analysis of “the activity and agency, the mobility and social space, accorded to women” in the context of fitness (Grosz, 1994, p. 19). I question the contemporary definitions of fitness and the ways in which they affect women’s fitness practices, including their movements in gym space. Probyn (1995) says

that “space is a pressing matter and it matters which bodies, where and how, press up against it” ( p. 81). In this project I use my observations of three gyms and interviews with 25 participants (female exercisers, aerobics instructors, and personal trainers) as an opportunity to employ the work in cultural geography, feminist theory, sport studies, and cultural studies in exploring the issues around the historical and contemporary constructions of gender and physical fitness.

### Structure of this Dissertation

In Chapter One, I describe my methodological approach to the study of gym spaces and gender. I discuss my reasons for using participant observation and qualitative interviews and how they support the goals I had for this project. In this chapter I also describe my process for site selection, participant recruitment, observation, interview methods, and data analysis. I provide descriptions of each observation site and the communities in which they are located. Finally, I discuss the ways in which participants in this study will be presented throughout this dissertation and reflect briefly on my own position as a participant-observer.

In Chapter Two, I provide the theoretical foundations of this project, beginning with cultural geography. I understand “space” in its Lefebvorean sense: as fluid, constructed, and constantly altered (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). As suggested by van Ingen (2004), “all spatial locations are dialectically constructed through social interactions and are saturated with relations of power” (p. 254). I explore these concepts as well as the division of space in a binary manner and present the gym as neither public nor private, but as semi-private and unique.

Chapter Two also includes an overview of the American gym since the mid-twentieth century and its gendered constructions. Drawing on this history, I present the ways in which gym culture is created generally as well as uniquely at my three observation sites. I discuss the disciplinary effects of gym space on women followed by an analysis of how gym space affords certain women the opportunity to accumulate capital. Finally, drawing on the latter, I end with a discussion of the ways in which a cultural mandate for fitness reflects and perpetuates the interests of the fitness industry and America's neoliberal philosophies and policies.

Chapter Three is devoted exclusively to my observations and considerations of aerobic spaces. I include a brief review of the literature on aerobics before proceeding to a discussion of the disciplinary effects of aerobics spaces and the rewards offered in and outside these rooms to individual women who can gain status within the space. Though these spaces have been marked as nearly exclusively feminine, I discuss the recent fitness industry trend, "total body," which has resulted in classes that incorporate strength training into aerobic workouts. I argue that these classes disrupt constructions of aerobic rooms as exclusively feminine spaces.

In Chapter Four, I present the spaces where exercisers engage in weightlifting focusing on the gendered markings of the space and weightlifting as a practice. I discuss the ways in which women have disrupted these male-dominated spaces through their presence, their practices, and the attainment and dispersal of knowledge about weightlifting. I use my interviews with women who lift weights to discuss the ways in which women access the space and their apprehensions about doing so.

I devote Chapter Five to a discussion of queer women in gym space noting the ways in which the queer women in this study engaged in gym practices that reflect a crossing of boundaries, literal and metaphysical. Though these practices are not unique to queer women, they explained their piecing together of gym activities and crossing of boundaries as part of their identity. I discuss their negotiations of transgressive behaviors, including the benefits and penalties of their respective practices. I conclude the chapter with a case study which I use to demonstrate the somatic enactment of queer identity through gym practices.

In the concluding chapter, I move away from a discussion of specific spaces by incorporating an analysis of the fitness technologies present in gym spaces. Access to fitness technologies is part of the construction of gendered identities and bodies in the gym. The presence, use, and results of fitness technologies are often overlooked because of the ways in which the “natural” and the technological are at odds in gym spaces. The reliance on technology is rarely acknowledged in the laudatory discourses about hard-working bodies and their innate capabilities. I argue that in fitness generally, but specifically in gym spaces, any distinction between the natural and the technological is a false one.

#### A Note about Terms

There are several terms unique to the fitness industry and/or my use of them that I want to define before going any further because they are integral to understanding the specifics of the settings and activities that I or my respondents describe. First, is the term gym; it is a colloquial term that was employed by nearly everyone I spoke with. Despite its history as a term used to describe spaces that were male dominated and devoted



almost exclusively to weightlifting, it is used in everyday speech to refer to multi-use fitness facilities which provide a range of fitness equipment, classes, and other amenities. I describe the specifics of these offerings in the following chapter. In publications from the fitness industry or discussions with fitness professionals, the preferred term is either fitness center or health club. I use these terms either when discussing the history of the multi-use exercise facility or when recounting conversations with fitness professionals who themselves employed these terms.

When discussing the specific equipment found in gyms I use the following generalized terms: cardiovascular equipment, free weights, and Nautilus. Cardiovascular equipment includes treadmills; stationary bicycles; ellipticals (machines on which the exerciser stands on two large pedals but engages in a motion that is a cross between stepping and cycling); stairsteppers (machines that imitate stair climbing); and treadclimbers (treadmills with two belts—one for each foot—which are used on an incline to mimic walking up a hill). Free weights include dumbbells, barbells, weight plates (usually added to bars to customize weight); and the benches and racks on and in which weightlifting occurs. Nautilus is a specific brand of weight-assisted gym machines. Weight-assisted machines use pulleys, levers and adjustable weight plates to allow the user to work a specific body part. Not all weight-assisted machines are made by the Nautilus company, but the company name has become a stand-in (à la Kleenex) for all such machines. Personal trainers and exercisers I spoke with referred to these machines using the term Nautilus even when such this equipment was produced by a different company. Equipment that falls outside of these categories, I describe as necessary.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODS

A girl walks into the gym. She averts her eyes when fellow exercisers walk by, around, near her. The high ceilings trap the sound of piped-in pop music interrupted by the occasional grunt or the crash of a dumbbell on the matted floors. The metal on metal as a weight bar is heaved back onto its rack. The whir of treadmills, ellipticals, stationary bikes. The white noise of the gym.

She wants to see, but not be seen; an impossibility in the open space in which every wall is mirrored. There is no escaping herself, or the others. She has to look somewhere. And so she looks everywhere.

That is how this project began. I had to look somewhere when I was exercising. And so I looked everywhere. I wanted to know how everyone went about with seemingly none of the dis-ease that I felt doing something so allegedly mundane: working out. How did other women negotiate the space of the gym? How did they enact their fitness goals? Did they too feel, not like women, but like little girls, inept and on display? Were they judging themselves? And were they doing what they wanted? And how did they know what they wanted?

Finding the answers to these questions, as well as the ones that arose throughout the formulation of this project, dictated the methods and methodology I employed. My previous unstructured moments of looking and my desire for narrative explanations engendered this qualitative inquiry into gym cultures. I did not need to count the number of men and women in an aerobics class to know that women engage more often in these activities; I wanted to know why. I did not need to discern the average level of comfort

women felt on a scale of 1-5 when entering the male-dominated weight room, to explain why women did not enter as frequently; I wanted to better understand where the discomfort comes from and how women deal with it. Qualitative research, as Denzin and Lincoln (2007) write, “involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter.... qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2).

Also, because one of my goals in this project was to sort and see through and around—to deconstruct—the many discourses that circulate within gym spaces, a qualitative research paradigm was the most appropriate (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2003). I was interested not only in using this project as a means of questioning prevalent beliefs about gendered fitness regimes in the gym, but also in hearing and conveying the ways in which gym goers and gym experts (instructors and trainers) counter dominant discourses of fitness, gender, sexuality, and health.

Initially, it seemed fitting to turn to or, more accurately, be drawn towards, ethnographic methodologies given VanMaanen’s (1988) contention that ethnographic research is “hauntingly personal” (p. ix). Stepping back from my own experiences, however, while considering the methods appropriate to this study, I also had to account for “the paradigms shaping women in sports [that] are embedded in the changing cultural matrix in which women approach sports and exercise through their bodies, through models of femininity, and in conjunction with gender inequity in a complex society” (Bolin & Granskog, 2003, p. 248).

Gym and fitness cultures are quite different from sport cultures that have historically excluded, marginalized, and trivialized the participation and accomplishments

of girls and women. But there exists both a shared history dating back to the institutionalization of girls' physical education in schools and the current cultural complexities and somatic negotiations—which differ depending on class, age, race, and sexuality—required of physically active women in the United States. Using multi-sited participant observation along with semi-structured interviews, I sought out women's experiences of these negotiations, particularly the ways their personal histories and identities have intersected with fitness discourses and fitness spaces. I was less interested in their socialization into fitness, though, than in how personal access had and continues to influence their thoughts on and practices of working out in a gym, thus my choice of methods established in the field of anthropology. As Bolin and Granskog (2003) note in their consideration of methodological paradigms in the study of women's sports and physical activities, “while an anthropological inquiry takes into account the significance of the institutional framework within which socialization processes take place, it also takes analysis one step further by placing primary attention upon the ways in which those cultural constraints are manifested in the qualitative experiences of the participants themselves” (p. 250).

I used both participant observation and semi-structured interviews together (and simultaneously) to provide a more comprehensive picture of women's experiences in the gyms. By undertaking interviews simultaneously with participant observation I was able to expand my own ways of seeing when I made site visits based on the experiences and observations my participants shared during interviews. For example, when a trainer spoke about her purposeful efforts to gradually bring her female clients into the weight room, I began to observe whether other trainers did this as well and listened to how they spoke to

their female clients during training sessions. Conversely, I was able to ask participants about things I had observed during site visits.

I have divided this chapter into four sections. In the first two I explicate the reasoning behind and the processes I used as a participant observer and as an interviewer respectively. In the third section, I discuss the process of data analysis. And finally, I reflect on my position as a co-participant and researcher of gym culture.

### Participant Observation

I am drawn to Van Maanen's (1988) comment about the proliferation of ethnographic work in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: "the accumulation of ethnographies indicates and enhances an enduring domain of human discourse more than it signals any advance in our formal understanding of cultural affairs" (p. x). I apply this sentiment on a micro level to this project by noting that my choice of participant observation was born of my desire to add to the discourse about gender, fitness, and gym spaces. I did not desire—nor could I have accomplished—a comprehensive understanding of women's fitness practices and beliefs as they exist in gym spaces.

My approach to participant observation is reflective of the transience of gym culture. I could not live in the gym for months, participating with the other exercisers and observing their patterns. No one literally lives at the gym. But many gym goers— and certainly I during fieldwork— live at the gym in that they spend considerable time there; it is a space which contains activities and allows for the expression of values which some people prioritize. As evidenced by my interviews and in casual conversations during field work, some gym goers think about the gym and what happens in it even when they are not there.

Though fitness is undertaken as an individual endeavor (a paradigm I discuss in the following chapter), there is a version of community, a culture that exists and is comprised of many gym goers. Over time, we begin to recognize one another as members of this community and the specific positions we occupy within it: gym rat, winter warrior, lughead, cardio crazy, class addict, yogi. Here routines are established, altered, broken. Some people join a gym and go 3-5 times a week. Some people go 7 days a week. Some go for a month regularly and then attendance wanes. Sometimes we just stop going altogether. One day the person who always took the spot at front right side of the aerobics room for Saturday morning boot camp is gone—and she never comes back. Did she move? Did she injure herself? Did she switch gyms? Did she...die? Unique to gym culture is that *not* knowing what has become of someone who was part of this shared culture is not uncommon. If I was friends with the front right corner woman, I might know that she had moved. Or if right corner woman was friends with others in the class and I overheard them talking in the locker room after class one day about how she was doing after her knee surgery, then I too would know what had happened to her.

As a researcher, I could not talk to everyone who was part of the culture. I could not even listen to everyone. In some ways this established culture of transient members allowed me to fit right in. Though I recognize that a member of any culture lacks permanence, gym cultures, more than most, are comprised of members who have the ability to come and go. They are constrained, though, by factors such as economics and free time or motivated by health, aesthetics, or desire. Various factors constrained my research as well including money and scheduling. I discuss other constraints below in my discussion of the process of site selection.

Clifford (1986) writes that “the ‘method’ of participant-observation...enact[s] a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity” (p.13). I began—and will end—this chapter considering my position as a co-participant researcher of gym culture in an effort to expound on the subjective nature of this project. And I cannot truly say that I sought an objective account of gym culture at any moment in the process that has resulted in this project. But I hold onto Clifford’s sentiment because I did seek out not objectivity, but a greater number of subjectivities. This manifests most obviously in the site selection process. Seeking a greater range of gym members, in terms of age, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic class, I approached four different gyms and received permission from three of them. The time spent observing at two of the three facilities was limited by either cost (I could not spend more on membership fees) or management approval. At the first gym, of which I am a member and a contracted indoor cycling instructor, I had unlimited access. I could observe whenever I wanted and for as long as I wanted. At the second gym, I was given free access for a period of three months with no restrictions placed on where I could go or what I could use in the gym. At the third facility, the general manager told me, after I presented my project and the appropriate paperwork, that I could do whatever I wanted so long as I was a member. So I joined the third gym for two months thus giving me access to everything other members had access to.

At my own gym, I stopped regular, scheduled observation when I began noting the same types of activities and people. Though I spent the majority of time here, my more limited time at the other two sites did not prevent me from a complete gym experience at these locations. When I ceased observations at these two facilities, I had attended group exercise classes, observed at different times of the day, had spent

significant time in the various spaces of each facility, and even become recognized as a regular receiving nods of acknowledgment and engaging with others as we all went about our activities. I became familiar with the routines of others and my field notes began to reflect the monotony of both my own and others' workouts and patterns.

I recorded field notes in notebooks both while working out and immediately after visiting a facility. I kept a separate notebook for each facility and noted such things as population size and demographics at any given time; space layout; space atmosphere (music, cleanliness, colors); conversations among members and between members and staff; movement within and among spaces of the gym; conversations I had with members and staff; comparisons to the other facilities in my study; and, as I spent more time, the patterns of regular members. At the end of my field work at a facility, I transcribed my hand-written notes and included them as part of the software-assisted data analysis I discuss below.

### *Site selection*

The three sites I chose for participant observation were selected to maximize diversity in the clientele. Located in cities with different socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial characteristics, these three sites were within a 25-mile radius of one another. The three gyms are all commercial enterprises. I chose to exclude YMCAs from consideration for this study because they are not considered commercial facilities, and because they overtly state the connection between ethics and fitness (i.e., exercise as character building). Commercial facilities may also make such ethical claims—either explicitly or shrouded in other forms of discourse—but such claims are not the predominant focus of their mission; and most commercial health clubs construct themselves in opposition to



YMCAs and other non-commercial fitness entities (J. S. Maguire, 2008). Commercial fitness centers market benefits beyond character building, such as entertainment and aesthetics. Though many YMCAs attempt to keep up with the trends seen in commercial gyms (i.e., installing televisions, bringing in the latest and “hottest” fitness classes), they do so only to remain part of (while also, paradoxically, remaining outside) the overall fitness market. In other words, even though YMCAs are non-profits, they must continue to offer services and amenities to users to be able to continue to spread their own fitness discourse(s).

I engaged in participant observation at these three sites over the course of one year. While the owners/managers of all three sites knew I was there as a researcher, most of the clientele did not. I was an active exerciser during my periods of observation. Though I would occasionally take minimal notes while in the gyms, the sight of someone jotting notes in a notebook was not uncommon in any of the sites. Many exercisers, particularly those engaged in weightlifting routines, chart their exercises in personal notebooks.

The majority of my hours of observations were done at a facility I call Western Massachusetts Athletics (WMA) because, as I previously noted, I was already a member there and had easy access. WMA is an independent gym whose primary competition is the local YMCA. Its price is comparable to that facility. Membership costs are dependent on payment plan, length of intended membership (3 months, 6 months, 1 year), family status (single, couple, family), and reimbursements from health insurance companies. The average cost (before reimbursement) for a single adult who joins for a year is \$45 a month. The cost for a couple, in the same circumstances, is approximately \$65 a month.

Membership includes free towel service, participation in all group exercise classes, access to a range of cardio machines, free weights, and Nautilus machines, as well as use of the basketball court and rock climbing wall. Members can pay for additional services including personal training, child care, small group training classes, tanning, and massage. There is a café with a small seating area where members can purchase sandwiches, soups, snacks, drinks, and smoothies.

The clientele at WMA ranges in age from teenagers (who are only allowed to use the facilities at certain hours of the day) to senior citizens. It is a predominantly white population with some black, Asian, and Latino/a members. The majority of the staff members are white and under the age of 40. The greatest diversity that I observed and that was commented upon by current and former members was in age, body types, and levels of physical fitness. Members I spoke with about WMA's culture and clientele commented upon the age range, particularly the significant number of middle-aged members and the visibility of people over the age of 65. Also, members commented on the range of fitness levels found within the population while connecting this spectrum to the variety of body types among members. Specifically they felt that this variety spoke to the welcoming and comfortable atmosphere at WMA.

The population within the gym mirrored the demographics of Northampton, the city in western Massachusetts where it is located. The local labor force is described as "diverse, well educated and highly skilled" with 43 percent of the employed population working in education and health services (Northampton, 2011). The median age is just under 40 years old and the median income is just over \$50,000. In 2010, 25-34-year olds comprised the greatest percentage of the population (18.7) followed by 45-54-year olds

(15.2) and 35-44-year olds (11.5). Half the residents hold a degree from a four-year institution and 91 percent have high school diplomas (Northampton, 2011).

The population, in 2010, was comprised of 87 percent white people, 6 percent Latinos (of any race), just under 4 percent Asians, and 2 percent black people (Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2006). Women make up 56.1 percent of the population, about 5 percentage points higher than the state average. Households that earn \$75,000 or more comprise the greatest percentage of households in the area (35.1) followed by households earning \$50,000 - \$74,999 (17.7) and those earning \$35,000 - \$49,999 (14).

The second site is located in West Springfield, Massachusetts. Wellness Athletic Center (WAC) is a regional chain and is affiliated with a local medical center.

Demographics in the city resemble those of Northampton in terms of population size, racial breakdown, and median household income. However, West Springfield borders, and its businesses—including WAC—draw heavily from the population in Springfield, which is considerably larger (153,000) and more racially diverse. White, non-Latinos comprise 36.7 percent of the population, black people are 22.3 percent, and people who identify as being of Latino or of Hispanic origin are the largest group at 38.8 percent. The median household income is almost \$35,000.

WAC is similar to WMA in its offerings: basketball court, group exercise classes, weights, weight machines, and cardio machines. WAC does not have a café but puts out free coffee for members in a lobby area in the mornings. Snacks such as nutrition bars can be bought at the front desk. WAC does not have a climbing wall but does have a pool and several racquetball courts. According to the manager, Nina, a white woman in her 40s, WAC is considered a health and wellness center (rather than a gym), in part because

of its affiliation with a local health center. The center's mission focuses on the promotion of health, especially geared towards persons with health risks and those recovering from illness or surgery. Exercisers over the age of 65 are quite visible at the center as are members who are overweight. Nina noted that many WAC members come after specific recommendations from their doctors. The average age of the members here (39 years old) is lower than at other regional WACs. This could be because the local population is relatively young: only 10 percent of Springfield residents are over 65—lower than the state average of 13 percent. In terms of age, Nina said, it resembles the population of a typical gym.

The cost ranges depending on insurance reimbursements as well as place of employment. WAC has arrangements with several companies in the area which provide employees with reduced price memberships. The approximate cost for an individual is \$50 a month. The cost for a couple is \$75 a month. Child care, tanning, and massage services are extra, as are personal training sessions (every new member receives three initial sessions for free) and small group personal training classes. Data collected by WAC, according to Nina, reveals that the average income for West Springfield WAC members is \$45,000. Other WACs have much higher income levels; an average of \$75,000. My observations, along with Nina's descriptions about the population reveal a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse clientele. Nina said this was because the gym draws so heavily from the surrounding cities and towns which are populated with eastern Europeans, Latinos, and black people.

The third site, which I call Universal Fitness (UF), is a national chain known for its low rates and no-nonsense attitude toward fitness. Its philosophy is one of moderate

fitness for everyone in an atmosphere where no one should feel intimidated. Membership costs range from \$10 to \$30 per month for an individual depending on length of commitment at time of sign-up and chosen package (some packages include towel service and tanning sessions). The UF I chose is located in Chicopee, Massachusetts, one of the cities bordering West Springfield. Though it might appear to be a competitor to WAC, there are UF franchises in West Springfield, and the facilities are quite different from one another. The Chicopee UF provides extensive cardiovascular machines to its members. Despite the high volume of members, I never observed someone waiting for a treadmill, a stationary bike, or an elliptical machine. They also offer a full complement of Nautilus equipment and free weights. Following the trend for quick workouts, UF has fenced off (literally) a corner of the facility which contains a circuit of weight machines and instructions for body weight exercises that can be completed in 30 minutes—similar to the workout regime at places such as Curves, which cater to reluctant and/or previously sedentary exercisers and promise results (usually in the form of weight loss) in three, 30-minute sessions per week. UF does not offer many of the programs and amenities of WAC and WMA, though. There are no group exercise classes, no café, pool, climbing wall, yoga studio, or basketball court. There are locker rooms with showers but no steam room/sauna or whirlpool.

Despite the array of well-maintained and modern fitness equipment, UFs are generally considered to be more “bare bones” types of gyms. This approach, which means UF can employ fewer specialized staff members (at a lower rate of pay), is one reason why the cost of membership is so low. (UFs also have a high rate of membership, but a low rate, approximately 10 percent according to Nina from WAC, of actual usage.

This means UFs profit from the high percentage of members who do not use the facility.) Though there are many UFs in the geographic area I was studying, I chose the one in Chicopee because I believed the low cost of membership would be particularly appealing to community members. The low price point potentially appeals to the over 65 population of the city which, at 16 percent of the population, exceeds the state's average of 13 percent. The median cost of homes owned by the inhabitant is \$182,500, well below the statewide median of \$343,500. The household median income is also well below the state median: \$45,763 and \$65,981 respectively. So it appears spending on non-necessities such as gym membership fees is more limited in Chicopee.

Also, the Chicopee UF had greater racial and ethnic diversity than the WMA but similar to WAC. Though white, non-Hispanics comprise a high majority (80 percent) of the population, there is also a significant Hispanic/Latino population (14 percent). In just over 20 percent of Chicopee households, a language other than English is spoken. During field work at the UF, I regularly heard eastern European languages and Spanish being spoken by members.

### Qualitative Interviewing

Because I was not a newcomer to gym culture and because I had established many of my own opinions on what happens in gym space, qualitative interviews were a necessary component of this research. I knew what I saw and felt when I looked at a group of 20-something men crowding around the weight bench I wanted to use. I knew my own reactions when I heard an aerobics instructors' encouragement to "keep it up—bathing suit season is around the corner." But I suspected that my experience was not universal. The use of qualitative interviews allowed me access to aspects of gym culture

and interpretations I had never observed or considered. Several of my research aims were consistent with Weiss's (1995) list of reasons to begin a study using qualitative interviews: developing detailed descriptions in order to achieve "the fullest, most detailed description possible"; integrating multiple perspectives in order to understand a space and culture that "no single person [can] observe in its totality"; describing the process that people use to establish a routine; developing a holistic description in order to gain an understanding of the systematic functions of a space/place; learning how events are interpreted by those who experience them; and bridging intersubjectivities to bring an understanding of people's experiences to "outsiders" (p. 9).

Interviews are a necessary component of any work that engages in discourse analysis of texts. Though my analysis focuses on space rather than specific texts, my understanding of discourses that come into and are (re)produced in the space of the gym, for example, fitness and health discourse, are born out of readings of various texts by other scholars (Cole & Hribar, 1995; M. C. Duncan, 1994; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Heywood, 2003; Morse, 1987). My use of qualitative interviews complements and complicates some of these analyses. As Hall (M. A. Hall, 1996) writes: "cultural analyses based solely on public discourse or texts, without also exploring the meaning of these discursive practices to those who participate in them, provides a one-sided, probably inaccurate, picture of the activity or cultural form" (p. 59).

### *Sampling*

I present the gym, in this project, as a social institution because of its role as a space in which fitness and health discourses are enacted. These discourses circulate in the contemporary Western world in ways which reify their position as upholders of a

particular moral and social order, something I discuss at length in the following chapter. Thus in choosing interview participants, I wanted a sample of women who had experienced, in different ways, the gym as a social institution. I wanted to know how it fit into their lives either currently, in the past, or both. I did not, however, seek out a representative sample because what is representative of a sample of female gym members is both difficult to discern and difficult to recruit for, the latter because of IRB restrictions on recruitment methods and because a representative sample of female gym members would necessarily include those who use the space for limited periods of time (several months) and somewhat reluctantly. The high attrition rate at gyms means some members cease attending. Recruiting the people who have stopped going to a gym is much more difficult than recruiting subjects who are current, active members. Recruitment materials, however, did explicitly state that a potential participant did not have to be an active member of a gym and participants did discuss the times when they were not active members and the reasons for their inactivity.

I employed convenience sampling for this portion of data collection. The criteria for interviewees who were exercisers were minimal: 18 or over, English speaker, female, current or former member of any gym. The criteria for fitness instructors and personal trainers were: 18 or over, English speaker, current or former instructor/personal trainer at a gym. I chose to include personal trainers and fitness instructors (those who teach a class offered by gyms such as aerobics, boot camp, yoga, indoor cycling) because of my focus on fitness discourses and epistemologies and their transmission to gym members. The knowledge that instructors and trainers hold is not regulated or standardized (there is no accreditation body for fitness and exercise programs). In fact, though most gyms require



its fitness and training staff to complete a certification course and exam, few see certification as indicative of one's ability to instruct or train (J. S. Maguire, 2007).

For this reason, and because of my own experiences as a fitness instructor, I did not treat the trainers and instructors in my sample as fitness experts. Rather I wanted to know about their experiences both as observers of gym culture and as creators of that culture. Regarding the latter, despite the lack of a uniform body of fitness knowledge, instructors and trainers are looked to as experts. They provide varying levels of advice and consultation. As gym goers and fitness enthusiasts wade through the mire of fitness information available in magazines (both specialized and general), on television (there is a cable channel devoted to fitness), on the internet, and from informal networks of friends, family, and colleagues all with their own varying levels of expertise, they must sort through it all. Those employed by gyms as trainers and instructors are held up as purveyors of fitness knowledge. They are also uniquely positioned as non-members to comment on the gym culture they see members creating as well as the ways in which members absorb the cultural messages about fitness and health.

To recruit volunteers for the interview process I relied largely on snowball sampling. I sent interview request letters, approved by the University of Iowa's Institutional Review Board, to friends and colleagues who then sent them on to their own networks of friends, colleagues, and sports teams. I posted flyers, also IRB-approved, at two of my three observation sites. I gave interviewees an information sheet to pass on to others they thought might be interested. Finally, some people volunteered to be interviewed after inquiring about my project.

In addition to snowball sampling, I had wanted to use in-person recruiting (explaining the project and handing out information sheets with my contact information) at my observation sites. But during the IRB approval process, the board informed me that this would not be allowed as they felt it would be applying too much direct pressure on individuals to join the study. Though this restriction did not limit my sample size, it did limit the racial diversity within the sample.

As I mentioned in the previous section, one of my considerations during site selection was the presence of racial diversity and queer sexualities. I wanted a similar diversity among the sample of interviewees. I was able to interview eight women who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer, but I was not successful in achieving racial diversity among my 25-person sample. There was only one person of color, a Latino trainer, among my interviewees and no women of color. There were two major limitations that affected the recruitment of people of color. The first was the fact that management at UF would not allow me to post a flyer seeking participants. My experience there was limited solely to observation. Though several of my interviewees had, at one point in their exercise lives, belonged to a UF, none used the one in Chicopee where I conducted fieldwork. UF had the highest number of Latino/a members. But I had no way of advertising my study to anyone at UF.

This was also due, in part, to the IRB restriction I mentioned above. Not being allowed to approach potential interviewees limited my ability to recruit people of color at all of my observation sites. I tried to compensate for these restrictions by explicitly asking my initial network to send the information along to people of color who would qualify for the study, but received no positive response via this method.

Snowball recruiting itself has its limitations, self-selection being the most significant in the context of this project. The people I spoke with had an interest in talking about fitness generally and *their* fitness practices and histories specifically. Exercise in a gym was an important enough part of their lives that they volunteered to discuss it. Notably, even though participants could be former members of gyms, only one did not have a current gym membership. I connect this particularity to the moral implications when one stops working out and the failure associated with this (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Frew & McGillivray, 2005).

The effects of self-selection were exemplified to me when, months after completing field work, I ran into one of my participants who felt obligated to report—in case it would “mess up” my data—that she was no longer going to the gym because of work, family, and economic obligations. At the time of our interview she was very enthusiastic about going to a new, very structured, very expensive gym after having a largely sedentary adulthood and limited and unsatisfying previous gym experiences. This participant now—though still meeting criteria for my study—would likely not volunteer at this moment in her life. Though I worried that self-selection would lead to largely positive accounts of gym experiences, this did not end up occurring. All of my respondents spoke of a range of experiences in positive, negative, and ambivalent terms.

#### *Interview process*

I conducted interviews with respondents after establishing initial contact, by phone or email, and setting up a date, time, and location. I had a general question list to guide the interview, which I altered depending on whether the person was a personal trainer, fitness instructor, or exerciser and additional questions for anyone who identified

as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. The questions and categories of inquiry were meant to elicit the gym biographies of participants as well as their thoughts and observations about the gym cultures they have participated in and were based, in part, on the findings of previous research on gender and the gym (i.e., Bridges, 2009; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; A. M. Klein, 1993; J. S. Maguire, 2007; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Markula, 1995, 2003a, 2003b, 2003b; Vertinsky, 2004). During interviewing, however, the question guide served primarily as a checklist for me as I opted to create an atmosphere in which a two-way conversation occurred rather than a question-answer session.

Participants chose the location where they wanted to meet. All interviews took place in one of the following locations: the participant's home, my home, the gym, or a public space such as a café. The interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes. I recorded all of them and took notes during the interview. Both the notes and interviews were later transcribed. I did not conduct any formal follow-up interviews, but I did speak—usually in the gym—to some of the participants who would mention an additional piece of information they thought I should have or reflect on the interview itself. I recorded such conversations in my field notes.

#### *Presentation of respondents*

Throughout this dissertation I refer to my participants and observation sites using pseudonyms. To preserve anonymity I limit the amount of identifying information about each participant, for example providing an age range rather than a specific age. At times I use several pseudonyms for one respondent for two reasons. The first was, again, to preserve anonymity. The second was to distinguish when a respondent was speaking

from a particular perspective. For example, many of the personal trainers I interviewed also shared their own experiences of working out. A respondent such as this might have one pseudonym when speaking as a personal trainer and another when responding as a gym member about her own practices and history. I have changed other forms of identifying information, such as occupation or place of birth, that I felt might reveal the identity of the participants.

### Data Analysis

I completed all formal data analysis after the completion of field work and at the end of all interviews. Though I continually reviewed field and interview notes looking for places in need of revisions and additions both in my question-asking and in my observation patterns and schedule, I did not begin the process of coding and analyzing during data collection. And so, while I remained reflexive, I did not alter my study in reaction to any early findings. My analysis of the interview data and field notes (the primary documents) was facilitated by Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software. I first undertook a thematic analysis of each interview transcription as well as my three sets of field notes by keeping the “focus on the description, analysis, and interpretation of the culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 2006, p. 161).

Undertaking a line-by-line analysis of each primary document, I established categories using two types of coding to aggregate and analyze the data. First, using open coding, I began to establish a list of codes, such as “knowledge,” “gym history,” and “gym atmosphere,” based on the themes I saw in the primary documents on first review. I revised this list through my analysis, at times merging codes or establishing code families to better delineate sub-themes in codes with particularly large densities. I then re-viewed

each primary document ensuring that I applied codes I might have established later in the process, to my earlier primary documents. I also used in vivo coding to mark statements and passages in the data in which the participant's phrasing was particularly indicative of a theme or employed unique terminology to a particular aspect of gym or fitness cultures. I applied open codes to all in vivo codes as well. The software also facilitated notetaking simultaneous with the coding process. I used notes to explain a code or the application of a code to a particular passage.

After coding all primary documents, I used the software to "query" my data based on my codes. For example, when I wanted an overview of the sources from which my participants received their knowledge about fitness, I was able to produce a report based on the code "information source." Atlas.ti also facilitated data querying that allowed me to examine the concurrence of codes across the primary documents. Because I coded for the specific spaces in the gym participants mentioned as well as concepts, for example "comfort," I was able to analyze all moments when participants discussed feelings of comfort in the weight room. I could extend this query as well adding the term "sexuality" which allowed me to find moments when queer women discussed their comfort levels in weight rooms. I continued this data analysis throughout the writing of this project.

### A Reflexive Moment

Entering this project, I was quite aware of how my own gym experiences, in combination with my academic training and interests, have shaped my views on contemporary fitness spaces and practices. And so I would like to believe that even while this project was in its nascence, I maintained a high degree of reflexivity about my positioning as a researcher on this subject. I knew I had to carry this into my fieldwork as

well. As Foley (2002) notes “to make ethnography at least quasi-objective, one has to become much more reflexive about *all* ethnographic practices—from field relations and interpretative practices to producing texts” (p. 473). Despite best intentions and efforts at reflexivity, I remain aware that “truth and facts are socially constructed, and people build stories around the meanings of facts” (Denzin, 1997, p. xiv). My truths and facts and stories may not be at the forefront of this project in the same way as those of the people I observed and interviewed are, but ultimately I, the researcher and the writer, construct the truths and the facts and the story that comprise this project. And though conscious of the ways in which I present this research, ultimately I chose what to include and what to leave out.

The managers at all three facilities knew I was a researcher doing work on women’s activities in the gym. This meant that even though I was a co-participant in each respective gym culture, very few people—including staff members—knew I was also a researcher. I had achieved insider status in that I was perceived to be just another member. But this status remained consistently under negotiation. Davies (1999) discusses the contradictions inherent in ethnographic research:

In doing research of any kind, there is an implicit assumption that we are investigating something “outside” ourselves, that the knowledge we seek cannot be gained solely or simply through introspection.[...] On the other hand, we cannot research something with which we have no contact, from which we are completely isolated. (p. 3).

I had to negotiate my semi-stealth status throughout participant observation, especially as I “came out” to various people in the course of fieldwork. When asked “are you new here?” I would answer yes and tell the questioner why I was new: because I was a researcher. And so in coming out, I became somewhat of an outsider in that my intentions in the gym were less clear. This was made quite obvious to me when, after

interviewing a trainer at a site, she did not look at me or engage with me for the rest of my time at the site—despite the very productive interview we had in which she commented on how very glad she was to be able to share some of her observations about gym culture that she found problematic for women, and for herself as a young woman and a new personal trainer. But I was not someone with whom she had to interact, because I was not a “real” member. Or perhaps my presence as an outsider in her work space, after sharing her critiques of that work space, became difficult for her to negotiate.

Though this project is not explicitly autoethnographic, I cannot ignore the ways in which I became part of the gym cultures I observed. I had the benefit of never truly being an outsider, any more than another new gym member—with the exceptions I mention above. But again because I was never announced as a researcher by management, I was not a visible outsider trying to participate in the culture. I was participating in the culture in ways that resembled the experiences of those I was observing. And like my fellow gym goers, I engaged or was engaged in conversations and interactions in which people assumed I was merely a white, 30-something, female exerciser. Thus throughout this dissertation I include the moments in which I became just another gym member, lifting weights, going to aerobics, using a stairstepper. What follows is my effort at reflexivity without “complete self-absorption” (Davies, 1999, p. 25).



## CHAPTER 2

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF GYM SPACE AND CULTURE

*One thing that I like about that gym a lot is there is a good age variation. It's not a fashion show. There are not a lot of people with, you know, make up and their hair perfect. I feel very comfortable looking like I look. And doing my workout, I don't feel self-conscious at all. I guess it's why I keep going back. It feels like more of a community. There are regulars that go there that you see all the time. I talk to the woman who works at the café because sometimes I will go get a smoothie after a workout or something. She gives me a taste of her soup and we just talk. It's nice. [Meredith]*

*The athletes come here. It's great. [Iris]*

Meredith and Iris are both middle-class, white, professional women; they both belong to Western Massachusetts Athletics (WMA). But, based on their own accounts and experiences, they see the culture very differently, and they chose WMA for different reasons. For Iris, WMA is an exciting place where she can try new activities, like boxing which she took up after becoming a member. She is inspired by the athletes she sees. It is also very close to her home and office. This is not the case for Meredith, who drives a half hour to WMA from her rural town. After joining and then leaving to find a cheaper and closer option, Meredith came back to WMA because it was, she says, the best fit for her. It offered plenty of group exercise classes and equipment with which she was familiar. Finally, this gym provides her an environment she describes in ways that one might a neighborhood: community, chatting, casual, tasting of food.

What a gym—the same gym—is or becomes to someone varies among its members (and former members). How people such as Iris and Meredith understand and interpret their gym experience is often viewed as external to them. They see the creation of gym culture happening around them and done by other people. In this chapter, I present gym culture—its creation and interpretation and replication—as more than simply a reflection of the clientele. The relationships among members and management and their respective uses and understandings of the space, along with the societal mandates for health, exercise, and fit bodies underlie the complex creation of gym culture.

This chapter focuses on the concept of gym space, its connection to gym culture (and the construction of both gym space and culture), and the effects, both physical and cultural, of the culture/space connection. I begin with a short history of the contemporary multi-use gym which emerged during the 1970s, focusing specifically on its gendered history and legacies. Next I present my conceptualization of gym space using the work of cultural geography to explore the public/private binary, a concept that is ill-fitting for my purposes here. Then, using my three sites of observations, I explain the ways in which gym culture has been created in these spaces by members and management.

These discussions allow me, in the following two sections, to focus on the effects of gym space on bodies as well as gym-made bodies in culture. Drawing on the theories of cultural studies and the applications to the physical and social body, I first discuss the disciplining effects of space. How does gym space create bodies? This discussion continues in subsequent chapters when I focus on specific spaces within the gym. This section provides the foundation on which I construct those discussions in light of my field work. Finally, using the work of Bourdieu, I address the use of gym space as a means to

building physical, cultural, and social capital and the limitations on the accumulation of all forms of capital based on gender and race. I end the chapter with a discussion, started by others (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Heywood, 2006a; Silk & Andrews, 2012) but crucial to this project, about the fitness imperative in American neoliberalism and how this influences the ways in which knowledge is created and enacted in contemporary gym spaces.

Gym goers, like the ones I quoted at the start of this chapter, also see the ways in which people create spaces. Many of my participants understand that gym culture is a product of the people in the space, but will separate themselves from their role in this cultural production, speaking about the others in the gym as part of the culture but speaking only of themselves in the gym as individuals engaged in specific gym activities. For example, Meredith, who likes the sociability of the gym, says that she “fits into” the social gym culture at WMA, but does not talk about herself as a creator of that culture. She arrived into a pre-existing culture, she believes. Her perspective is due, in part, to her experiences as a member at other gyms where she did not feel comfortable. Gym culture, for her, is pre-established; it is only a matter of finding a pre-produced gym culture in which she can thrive. She does not see her presence, her actions, her chosen activities, as part of the production that culture.

Going forward I draw on the work about space produced by de Certeau, Foucault, and Lefebvre in discussing the cultural construction of space, as well as the work of Bourdieu and those scholars who have applied his concept of capital to other areas, including fitness and the body. I am particularly interested in Bourdieu’s concept of physical capital and its connection to cultural and social capital because of the ways in

which gym space can facilitate the accumulation of these forms of capital. Such discussions require an ongoing awareness of this highly commercialized industry and the space to which people are buying access when they join a gym. What else are members potentially buying access to when they pay a membership fee?

### A Brief History of the Gendered Gym

In this section I begin with a brief history of the contemporary gym, looking at its role in the commercialization of fitness and its presentation of gender neutrality. I then employ the work of cultural geographers, specifically feminist cultural geographers, in discussing the ways in which social spaces are constructed, how access to space is itself part of the socializing process with social effects, and how these theories apply specifically to gym space. A comprehensive history of the contemporary gym and its antecedents is not the goal here. A mention of the ancient gymnasia of Greece does little more than note the obvious: the gym and physical activity has always been gendered. Even this problematic “starting point” in a chronology of the gym serves only to reinforce the ways in which perceptions of gender privilege and gender neutrality have shifted historically. That spaces created for building bodies, for sculpting muscles, for constructing the culturally ideal physical form were spaces created by and almost exclusively for men, is not at issue. What is important to note is that today multi-use, mixed gender fitness centers are perceived as gender neutral because the spaces themselves are not obviously imbued with a gendered history. (Women-only facilities, ironically, somewhat tacitly acknowledge the history of male domination of gyms by marketing themselves as spaces in which women can free themselves from the perceived irksome ways in which men dominate gym spaces.)

Many perceive the gym as gender neutral for the simple reason that both men and women have access to the same space. Mixed gender as synonymous with equal access is an oversimplification of both access and equality, as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation. The perception, though, is linked to the emergence of fitness as an industry in the United States in the late 1960s. The contemporary commercial gym, most often referred to by those in the industry as a health club or fitness center, was an early indicator that fitness was becoming an industry. Its creation was driven by numerous factors including the increase in physical activity among Americans (i.e., the jogging craze of the 1970s), a greater awareness of health (and its connection to exercise), a societal emphasis on self-improvement, and a neo-liberal political and economic climate, the ongoing effects of which I discuss toward the end of this chapter (J. S. Maguire, 2007).

It was at this historical moment that fitness became its own “genre,” according to Maguire, who points to the replacement of “gymnasiums” with “health clubs” in the 1975 Yellow Pages as one indicator of this institutionalization. But facilities that resemble contemporary health clubs actually emerged in the 1940s most visibly with the clubs started by Vic Tanny, a former high school teacher, in California. Tanny increased the number of his clubs in the state throughout the 1950s, moved to franchise some of them in the 1960s, and eventually sold many to Bally, now Bally’s Fitness, one of the largest fitness chains in the country. The goal of Tanny’s clubs and the thousands of other stand-alone (non-chain) clubs that followed in the 1970s, was to create a space that offered atmosphere—nice equipment, décor, and no grunting men—as well as a complete

exercise experience (i.e. not just weightlifting or racquet sports). By 1978, there were 3,000 private health clubs in the United States (Stern, 2008).

Fitness centers have been marketed and constructed in distinct ways that reflect the commercialization of fitness as well as a change in the desires of the working-out public, especially women. The multi-use fitness facility marked not just the growth of fitness as an industry but the advent of a female market for fitness. The spaces previously called gyms were one precursor to the multi-use facility. They were male-dominated and working class spaces used primarily for weight training. They were comparatively basic in their offerings: free weights, weighted bars, benches, Smith machines (for self-spotting), and weight cages and towers. Racquet clubs, another popular option, also had male-dominated clientele: middle and upper class businessmen. Offering some of the amenities (whirlpools, saunas) currently associated with contemporary gyms, they retained an exclusivity because of the membership (J. S. Maguire, 2007).

Though some gyms maintain a focus on weight training and some former racquet clubs still have racquet sports, the emergence of the health club in the 1970s was more than a semantic shift. Any gym owner who wanted to break out of a niche market and increase membership had to add some amenities such as locker rooms, showers, steam rooms, group exercise classes, juice bars and cafés, cardio machines, basketball courts, swimming pools, and tanning booths. So even gyms that have maintained or created a culture that emphasizes weight lifting, for example, must have some of the above amenities in order to compete in a fitness marketplace that caters to a more general or recreational exerciser versus a specialist (Stern, 2008).

The growth of the “lifestyle health club” illustrates the shift to a consumer model of fitness (J. S. Maguire, 2007). The selling of fitness as a product and a lifestyle indicated the start of the contemporary gym’s history in the latter half of the twentieth century. It also was reflective of the ways in which these spaces and the version of fitness produced in them were, and largely remain, products of a middle-class consumer culture; a culture in which women have had increasing buying power.

Converging in the 1970s was fitness-as-an-industry and the stress on the economic independence of white, middle-class women. This demographic desired fitness and had the ability to purchase it. The ubiquitous liberal feminist messages of empowerment and individualism are ones that have become foundational in the fitness industry and were eagerly adopted by the advertising industry (Douglas, 2000). Women have held consumer power since the emergence of a middle class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of their control over the domestic sphere; they were the buyers of products and goods for the home (Andrews & Talbot, 2000). But as more white, middle-class women moved into the labor force in the 1970s, their ability to consume goods and products for their own use grew as well. Scanlon (1995) related the growth in targeted advertising to women to their increased economic power in the 1970s. And women were encouraged, in the late 1970s and early 80s, by advertising that took the feminist messages of the mainstream second wave and the emerging neoliberalism and told women “reward yourself, you deserve it” (Douglas, 2000, p. 268). Advertisers were selling, in individualized packages, women’s liberation via consumption.

Women quickly surpassed men’s level of fitness consumption (Stern, 2008). They began to engage in a greater amount of purchasing overall as they wielded their new

consumptive powers. Specific to the fitness industry, a woman either has to be earning her own income or have a joint income status that allowed for the purchase of fitness, in some senses a luxury item even as it has been (and remains) marketed to the American consumer as a necessity and not at all optional. But fitness was also part of the larger culture of consumptive narcissism that emerged during this time.

The ability to spend time and money on one's appearance was a sign of personal success and breaking away from the old roles and rules that had held women down in the past.[...] The ability to indulge oneself, to pamper oneself, and focus at length on oneself without having to listen to the needy voices of others was the mark of upscale female achievement. (Douglas, 2000, p. 268)

The growth of the industry was facilitated by this receptive market. In addition to being a marker of a successful woman (because fitness took both time and money), "fit" became an identity for those who sought a healthy and active lifestyle and a body that was perceived to be the result of such a lifestyle. A hallmark of modernity, Maguire (2007) writes, is the achievement of identity through work. This marker is quite visible in the world of fitness. A 1978 issue of *New York Magazine* categorized these workers as the "Physical Elite." Though the concept of class was invoked as a category seemingly absent of any economic denotation in the article, focusing instead on the intensity and devotion to fitness, I argue that the Physical Elite as a class cannot be divorced from any economic connotations. This is especially evident when considering the reasons for its emergence, as well as the growth in the consumption of fitness in the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Even in the earliest days of the fitness industry the relationship between health and wellness and aesthetics was a fraught one. A critical examination of the start of the fitness industry illustrates the difficulty of separating aesthetic concerns from health and wellness ones. A hierarchy which moralizes health and connects it to looks is both



problematic and limiting in any discussion of fitness—past or present. For example, the focus on fitness in the 1970s grew out of concern for the increasingly sedentary lifestyles Americans were leading, the ways in which technology had contributed to the former, and the commercialization and degradation of the food industry (which also spurred the organic health movement) (Douglas, 2000). But the proper enactment of fitness, it was thought, would also result in an aesthetically pleasing physique.

Fitness was less about the accomplishment of a goal (miles run, biked, climbed or weight lifted) than a bodily ideal, and this ideal was achieved through consumption. The fit became their own market in part because of new aesthetic requirements for both men and women which were compulsory due to competition in the labor market. Good looks, epitomized by the fit body, were an asset (J. S. Maguire, 2007).

### Understanding Gym Space

The framing of fitness as an industry is especially salient when examining commercialized fitness centers. But how do we understand this industry in terms of the spaces it occupies and the cultures that it creates? First, I suggest that gym space is unique space because of its liminal positioning in the public/private binary, which ultimately has an effect on the kind of gym cultures that manifest within it. Such positioning affects the creation or existence of sub-spaces and their purposes and boundaries, as well as the human interactions that occur within all gym spaces. I begin this section with a discussion of the categorization of gym space and its unique aspects that trouble both its categorization and the relationships produced within it. Because of the connections between space and culture that are at the core of this study, I then address the culture of the gym and how gym cultures are constructed within gym spaces, always

focusing on culture, space and their respective and constitutive elements through the lens of gender.

McDowell (1996) writes that “space is relational and constitutive of social processes” including the processes that have constructed the contemporary social hierarchy in the United States (p. 29). Gender—and its intersections with age, race, class, ability, and sexuality—on one’s social position also affects access to space. As feminist geographers have noted, women have experienced greater restrictions on their ability to access a variety of spaces in the public sphere (McDowell & Sharp, 1997; McDowell, 1996; Rose, 1993). The concept of the public/private divide in cultural geography has long been used by scholars both within and outside the field to categorize space and explain its construction and access to it. Though some have complicated the too easy overlay of this binary to the gender binary, women’s access to public spaces remains more limited than men’s access (N. Duncan, 1996). This equation becomes more complicated by the existence—or recognition of the existence—of spaces that are not easily categorized as public or private because of what occurs within them and who enters them. Understanding the role of gender in some of these liminal spaces, which I elaborate on below, is crucial to understanding the social aspects of a space and its ramifications. It allows for more than simply marking a space as public or private, masculine or feminine.

Every space, regardless of where it is placed on the public/private spectrum, is not nearly as homogenous as it may be perceived initially. Even in the very specific space, for example, of the weight room in a gym, I observed a variety of people using the space in ways that counter the common perception of the weight room as a place where large,

bulky men with questionable intelligence grunt and sweat, smell bad, and drop weights that clang to the floor and rattle the walls. But even setting aside temporarily the fact that women also use the weight room, an examination of just the men who use the weight room reveals a noticeable range of users in terms of age, ability, race, and class—all factors that affect how and why people use it.

Depending on the gym, its location, and its membership fees, weightlifters may occupy very different positions in the social order. This was the situation I observed at WAC which drew middle-class, white collar workers and professionals who worked in the adjacent large city as well as locals with varying histories in the community (new world versus old world immigrants) and a mix of white and blue collar workers. And lifters used the space for different reasons. Local college teams would come in for off-season training. Semi-professional football players trained there. Some men used the space to build muscle, others to maintain current physiques, others to rehabilitate injuries. The heterogeneity of a space creates unique flows of power. This is especially true in a space like the weight room where the numbers and types of people change by the minute as people move in and out.

Crucial to an understanding of gym space is its existence as neither private nor public and, central to this project, its gendered and gendering effects. Geographers have coined various terms for spaces that do not conform to public/private binary. Liminal space, in-between space, quasi-privatized space. The term that is most applicable to this project, to this space—the gym—is semi-private space. The term itself is not especially significant in that it does not offer more or less semantically than the others I note, but the

qualities, as explicated by feminist geographer Ellen Rooney, that define semi-private space provide a more concrete understanding of gym space.

Rooney (2005) writes that the semi-private space “is a site of peculiar intimacies and coercions... self-revelations and decisive constraints” (p. 334). She based her concept, and expounded on its specific characteristics, using the primary school classroom as her model. But I argue that the descriptions she offers of semi-private space are well-suited to the space of the gym: “the semiprivate room shelters strangers who have in common the quite particular neediness that brings them there, in close proximity to each other and, crucially, available to a host of other people, most of them strangers as well” (Rooney, 2005, p. 335). Markula and Pringle (2006) note that in the gym, specifically the aerobics room (a classroom of a different sort than Rooney’s, but a classroom still), “participants [are] effectively exercising alone in a group” (p. 75). The activities that occur in semi-private space are often seen as individual endeavors, in the case of the gym and the classroom, aimed at the improvement of the self. But they occur outside the home making them somewhat public. In the the semi-private space of the gym there is a membership fee, signaling a version of private space, a level of exclusivity.

The semi-private space, however, is not a blending of public and private spaces. The qualities that typify the semi-private space are unique to it. This is exemplified in gym spaces. What do people wear to the gym? Gym or workout clothes. These are clothes that one does not wear to an out-of-the-home paid job (unless one works in a gym). And they are not clothes that one typically wears around the home when relaxing or completing domestic chores. There is little need for a wicking tee shirt while doing the laundry or watching television. What do people do in the gym? Physical activities that

require various levels of effort or “work” (unpaid) but do not, for the most part, resemble any physical activities completed in an occupational setting.

Similarly, in the private space of the home, the unpaid labor and the activities that occur there do not resemble gym activities. Also, the level of social activity tends to be different than in either a domestic/private space and a work or public space. There is less intimacy than in the home but greater intimacy, I argue than in the workplace where often a certain level of decorum and level of familiarity is acceptable (depending on the workplace). But there is a different type of competition than in the workforce. There is less at stake in terms of personal relationships; one is not required to interact with anyone at the gym creating a certain level of comfort on an individual level in terms of sociability. And, of course, the types of clothing one wears, as I said above, are not as formal and often provide less coverage than work clothing. It is hard to argue that there would not be a less formal atmosphere than in many work places.

The version of sociability that occurs in the gym also marks the space as unique from public and private spaces. Lefebvre’s work is particularly relevant to an understanding of the gym as social space because of the way in which his theories move us out of a conceptualization of space as mental. This is crucial in an examination of gym space because of the role of actual bodies in the space of the gym and the role of body work in understanding the space. I begin specifically with Lefebvre’s conception of space as practice. One of his arguments in *The Production of Space* (1992) is that too often space is perceived of as a thing when it is, he writes, “neither subject nor object” (p. 92). Conceiving of space as a practice, creates an understanding of space as something always in progress. As the title of his book suggests, space is produced, but there is never, he

argues, one product. The modes of production within and of space change and perceptions of space can be highly individualized or context-specific.

Space as practice, as doing, brings light to the sometimes hidden struggles over and the construction of social spaces. This is especially important for a study of the gym where the quasi-social nature of the space, the shared endeavor (exercise), the equal access philosophy (everyone pays nearly the same fee) hide the struggles over the space as a whole and the ways in which various spaces inside of the gym are constructed to restrict access. Because the gym is seen and marketed as a space in which various bodily practices occur, mostly under the rubric of exercise, the spatial practices initially seem obvious. But applying Lefebvre's concept of spatial practices requires a re-viewing of the gym and its practices, which again affect its construction as social space. Lefebvre writes that spatial practices "ensure continuity and some degree of cohesion" which "implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance" (p. 33). The continuity and cohesion of spatial practices in the gym are most obvious in the practice of exercise. Though exercise takes many different forms within the gym, exercise as a spatial practice organizes the space of the gym. It makes it understandable and recognizable as a space. It imbues meaning. And it requires a certain level of competency, though the actual level is often the product of an individual's perception of exercise and gym culture.

*I see some of the same people [at the gym] a lot, but do I want to talk to them? Not really. I mean, I don't feel any connection to go and strike up a conversation with people that I randomly see there. I think it's just more seeing the same people over and over again and you are sharing an experience with them.*  
[Meredith]

Surrounded largely by strangers or perhaps acquaintances—though many of my respondents noted they cannot recognize regular gym goers in public because no one is

wearing gym clothes!—members go to the gym to meet their own particular needs, however they have imagined and constructed them. In the space of the gym one is actually doing something that in any other context would be viewed as personal and private: physical exertion in a leisure context (i.e. not as an occupation), often involving sweat, while wearing little clothing. Very few people admit to looking better when their clothes are wet with perspiration, their hair is damp and messy, they are out of breath, making strained faces as they push themselves to lift a weight or run another half mile or finish a spin class. In other words, very few people would choose their gym self as the one they would present in any other setting: work, a restaurant, a shopping mall. Rooney (2005) calls this “impersonal intimacy” and Klein (2001) further explains the unusual relationships that occur in the gym:

One has much more intimacy with the strangers at the gym than with almost any one else, save lovers or spouses. Body fluids, particularly sweat, flow freely at the gym, held in check by little more than the standard issue square towel given out at the front desk. In using the weight lifting machines, one places one's body upon the ghost of another. (p. 125)

Despite the many ways in which members are exposed and thus potentially vulnerable in the gym, people continue to go to the gym in great enough numbers that there is little threat to gyms industry-wide. The nature of semi-private space actually creates room for the potential discomfort that arises from the ambiguity of the space: “a certain discourse or ‘contract’ of cooperation and compromise reigns although it is always and everywhere vulnerable to renegotiation” (Rooney, 2005, p. 336). In the gym, this sometimes manifests as a “we’re all in this together” kind of attitude, like the one Meredith expresses above. Everyone is there to exercise, exercise is discursively marked as something laborious and painful for the majority of those who undertake it. Even though the motivations, experiences, and chosen activities of members vary greatly, there

is the underlying commonality, or neediness as Rooney (2005) called it, that binds the members of a gym together. “The cadre that gathers in the space of the semiprivate is contingent, impermanent, only partially identified with one another” (Rooney, 2005, p. 348).

What is important to remember about semi-private spaces is, first, that they appear more private than public. Rooney (2005) writes that semi-private space is perceived as “exclusionary (perhaps even exclusive) and impersonal” (p. 333). Second, the perceived private-ness of the space, as Rooney and other feminist geographers have noted, has significant effects regarding access, possession, culture, and the heterogeneity of the space. Duncan (N. Duncan, 1996) notes that space which cannot easily be categorized as either public or private is “subject to various territorializing and deterritorializing processes whereby local control is fixed, claimed, challenged, forfeited and privatized” (p. 129). This Foucauldian movement of power, however, does not make the space equally welcoming or comfortable for all who enter. It creates possibilities, but the semi-private space is not, Rooney emphasizes, a utopian space. And, of course, not all semi-private spaces operate in the same manner. Even the semi-private space of the gym is not a uniform entity. In the following section I discuss the three sites I observed during the course of my research and how in each there existed a distinct gym culture.

### Creating Gym Culture

*I think that people see this gym as being a much more open place. People don't see it as a gym where people go to lift weights. There are enough different things you can go in there and do. The fact that they kept the snack bar, even though hardly anybody ever uses it—there is kind of that space there. They have birthday parties [at the gym], but they also have people who are pretty hard core weight lifters there too. And when you have that range of possibilities, I think it invites more openness. You can go in there and just chat. You can go in and take a class*



*and then spend the next half hour talking to somebody in the hall and it's an accepted part of the culture. [Carole]*

Carole's comments about the culture of her current gym illustrate two of the ways in which gym culture is created. First, the people in the space: how they use it, their actions and behaviors, the level of sociability among members. Second, management: setting policies; the provision, placement and quality of equipment; providing amenities (café, salon or spa services, steam room); creation of atmosphere through music, staff, social spaces, events. But in addition to these two more obviously active culture-creators is the role of space. Is it open space? Segmented spaces? Space is also a culture creator.

The concept of a gym culture is one which the majority of my respondents addressed, sometimes directly, like Carole, but also indirectly, like when they spoke of the people who were regulars in an aerobics class. Before attempting an explanation of gym culture, I offer the version of culture that I am using in this study of cultural production. Like many in the field of cultural studies, I have adopted a wide view of the concept of culture which comes from the various historical strands in the field of cultural studies. I have been particularly influenced by Stuart Hall's explanation of the strands of cultural studies (structuralism and culturalism) and the epistemological spaces in between these two paradigms that this project occupies. Though as Hall himself notes "neither structuralism nor culturalism will do, as self-sufficient paradigms of study" (S. Hall, 2009).

First, in this project I have conceptualized culture—gym culture, specifically—as part of the everyday. This culturalist strand, established by Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, carved out an epistemological space for my study of the gym as it challenged prevailing ideas about the inferiority of a common or mass culture. Culture as the

everyday, informs my understanding of the gym as an everyday space, even though I recognize that the majority of Americans do not go to a gym. Given the ubiquity of discourses of health and fitness and the connection to exercise, I argue that most people living in the United States are subject to, if not gym culture directly, certainly a culture in which an entire industry around fitness has flourished. This means that even those who have not embraced this culture of “wellness” are aware of it and subject to its hegemony, as I discuss in the last part of this chapter. Williams’s common culture also creates a space for a study of the gym as a place in which community is created and/or contested as well as a discussion of its construction through popular discourse. Also somewhat in this vein I draw on the work of de Certeau. His postulating of culture as the everyday includes the dissonance most of us experience in our everyday practices. In subsequent chapters, I discuss this aspect of gym culture as it exists in particular gym spaces.

The philosophical foundations of the second strand, which Hall refers to as the structuralist paradigm, also inform my analysis of gym culture and gym space. The role of ideology in culture, as used by people such as Althusser, Saussure, and Levi-Strauss, works at a larger level, explains Hall, than the individualized experiences of culture as viewed by the proponents of culturalism. The structuralists provide a framework. The emphasis on ideology necessarily gives this paradigm of cultural studies an obvious political component that is essential to my study of gym culture precisely because of the focus on individual and common culture as applied to the gym. A structuralist paradigm, and particularly the political ramifications of this way of thinking about the study of culture, allow me to discuss not just the everyday practices of gym goers, but the ways in which these practices have been influenced by ideology. Culture-as-political allows me to

theorize the movement of power in the gym and the real-life effects, the ones I observed and that respondents reported. Later in this chapter, I discuss both the disciplinary power of gym space and the (potential) power that comes from the building of physical, cultural, and social capital that occurs in the gym.

I cannot help but note that my attachment to Hall's essay—which includes an explanation of other somewhat in-between ways of doing cultural studies—and these two paradigms parallels my understanding of the workings of space in the creation of culture and meaning. It is not simply people creating the meaning of gym space nor does the space impose its ideological will on the people in it. It is the dialectical experience of space, and of cultural studies' foundational paradigms, that has constructed this study of the gym, its space, its members, their practices, and their lived experiences.

Each gym has its own culture. Even at Universal Fitness (UF), a national chain, the culture changes from one location to another despite the high level of standardization among the franchises mandated by the corporation in terms of promotions, equipment, design, and policies. But because the communities in which UFs are located differ from one another, the culture in each also differs. My observations at a UF in a working class community with racial and ethnic diversity revealed a gym culture which included a high level of sociability among members of certain groups within the community. For example, the large Latino population was represented in the gym by mostly young Latinos and some Latinas who often either came to work out in groups or met up with one another at UF. There is also an older eastern European community. In the mornings, groups of retired women speaking Polish used the recumbent bikes, chatting as they pedaled. Other women from their community would approach. Speaking in both Polish

and English they would catch up with one another and spread a little gossip. It was a coffee klatch but on exercise equipment—and without coffee. The overall gym culture was marked by a high level of sociability that also included, at times, sociability among groups of different ethnicities, ages, races, and genders. This is not unique to UF. In most gyms “the regulars” establish themselves as a loosely-knit group based less on identity and more on gym practices.

Regulars are members who are a consistent presence (4-7 days a week) and exhibit specific patterns in terms of the time of day they come and the exercise regimens in which they engage. Regulars become a group of their own over time even though they do not usually coordinate their activities. Sometimes one becomes a regular just by going to the gym at the same time of day and days of the week as others—regardless of the activity one does. For example, most people who work out in the early morning (before 7am) become part of a group of regulars. This was quite obvious at WMA which had a unique culture in the morning (versus other times of the day) when a distinctive group of regulars used the gym. I observed this not just in the exercise spaces, but in the locker room where the group of female morning regulars discussed not just their workouts, but what books they were reading, their children’s activities, and their own jobs and activities.

Beth, a longtime WMA member, became part of a different group of regulars because she uses the weight room late at night. She found herself among the same group of middle-aged, professional men—and a few women—almost every time she went to lift. Even though she never lifted with other people in a coordinated way, just being around the same group she developed a community. At a basic level regulars

acknowledge one another with a nod or a quick hello. Sometimes regulars become more sociable, sharing details of their lives outside of the gym or taking their gym friendships into their non-gym lives. Though she does not socialize with them outside of the gym, Beth started making pies for her group of regulars which they would eat at the gym after their workouts.

The regulars at UF were similar in their nods of acknowledgment and casual conversations had between exercises. A significant difference at UF from WMA was the racial and ethnic diversity among members. Because of the diversity within the gym, groups of regulars were comprised of members of different races, ethnicities, and age groups. And while regularity facilitated the joviality that often marks a group of regulars, the dynamics that exist in the community at large were also reflected within the space. The tensions among the established groups (the working-class eastern European community) and the newcomers (the Latino community) that exist outside the gym affected the culture within it. This was particularly evident one mid-week morning when a group of regulars, three white middle-aged women and one 30-something black man who all lifted together three days a week before noon, engaged with another group of regulars, three young (20s) Latinos who were also going about their weight workout.

Their status as regulars prompted recognition along with casual banter between the two groups which focused on lifting and the obvious fitness of one of the older white women. But it became something more when the older woman—with a cheerful tone—told the young Latinos that they should speak English in the gym so they (the English-speakers perhaps? Or the white people?) could understand them. Many UF members spoke Spanish in the gym, including this group of young Latino men on this morning.

This incident was about power dynamics within the space. The conversation began with physical strength but turned into one about cultural authority. When commenting on the language preferences of the young men, the older woman was exerting her power over the space along with her anxiety over what the Others were saying.

One of the young Latinos responded that she should learn to speak Spanish since Spanish-speakers were a growing part of America. One of the other white women in the first group chimed that they should “watch it” because the first woman could “take them.” Again, there was a certain light-heartedness in the tone of the white women, but also a conflation of physical power, cultural power, and anxiety over losing both—to age and outsiders respectively. After the conversation ended and the two groups went to their respective exercises, the young man recounted the story to his girlfriend, clearly upset by the comments of the women. He pointed out that soon Latinos will be a majority in the United States. The common understandings and interactions among regulars—this part of gym culture—was disturbed by racial tensions.

UF gym members’ outside lives were influential in the creation of gym culture. This was also noticeable when examining which groups of regulars spoke with one another. The older eastern European women did not cross racial or age boundaries. Occasionally they would speak with older white men whom they knew, but they would never speak to a group of young Latinos. (I never observed anyone telling these women to speak English.) In part this was because they worked out in different areas of the gym. These older women never lifted weights and the young Latinos rarely spent time on cardio machines. So, in this situation, the gym offered a reprieve from the mixed race

community in which they lived. They could self-segregate in this space even though it was a wide open room with no walls.

The physical structuring of the space facilitated, to some degree, the sociability among gym members. But this was also actively cultivated by the gym's philosophy and by events the gym sponsored. UF's structuring of an open space is in keeping with their goal of making their gyms welcoming to everyone and not creating an exercise hierarchy. UF is actively countering the stereotype of the gym as "meathead" space: something that has traditionally kept women and smaller men out of gyms. Though the multiuse gym was established in the 1960s to appeal to a range of prospective exercisers, UF's philosophy and gym space attempts to counter an ongoing gendered gym culture. Regarding the spatial dynamics at UF, the areas where weightlifting occurs or, conversely, where cardio exercise is done, are not segregated from one another by walls or any other vertical barrier that would obstruct surveillance of the entire space. There are clear views from almost every spot on the floor. This theoretically allows for the free movement of people among the different stations and pieces of equipment.

It also, though, creates greater possibilities for mediated sociality. As Klein (2001) notes: "Unlike most social spaces, the gym is set up so that social interaction occurs via the agency of the mirrors, rather than taking place in the center of the space. Bodybuilders, when they speak to one another, will often address the mirror image, rather than the actual person to whom they are speaking" (p. 125). In an open space such as the one at UF, everyone—not just bodybuilders—could use the mirrors for establishing contact with one another. The mirrors facilitated seeing who was present in the gym at any given moment. Because the space was so large and open, mirrors could only be

placed on exterior walls; and so while members might use them to survey the scene, they usually had to move to actually engage in socialization. This was not the situation at WMA, though, where the division of the gym into many smaller spaces meant that mirrors played a pivotal part in both seeing and communicating. Eye contact could much more easily be made via mirrors in these smaller spaces. Later in this chapter I discuss the disciplinary effects of the mirrors.

UF management creates a specific gym culture as a form of branding. For example, the chain imposes a no grunting policy which it maintains through a membership contract (it is part of a list of conditions prospective members must agree to). To enforce the contract, a “grunt alarm” is installed high on the wall near the free weights. Next to the alarm, which looks like an industrial fire alarm (red light and in a cage), this definition is painted on the wall: “lunk (lunk) n. [slang] one who grunts, drops weights, or judges.” Apparently the alarm is functional, though I never saw it go off and heard only one story about someone (interestingly it was a 5’2, 100-pound female wrestler) setting it off. The no grunting, no lunks, no work boots policies all are aimed at creating a space that counters the stereotypes about gyms as places where big men go to lift heavy weights.

UF has also tried to construct a gym culture which supports and values sociability. In addition to the open space concept, the gym holds two socials per month always at the same time (first Friday of the month or second Tuesday morning). The socials involve food. One is a breakfast social and the other is a pizza party. Because of the way most people structure their gym visits—i.e., they have specific times of the day and days of the week—the socials did not, from my observations, create connections among people who



were not already immersed in the gym culture. UF does not offer group exercise classes, which facilitate socializing and bonding among members; it does host organized, but not exercise-related, events.

Food was a social culture creator at WMA as well. WMA was the only one of my three sites that had a café. The café area had several sets of tables and chairs as well as counter with stools. As Carole noted, not many people use the café to sit and talk. Its most frequent uses included the purchase of smoothies, kids' birthday parties, or meeting places for trainers and clients. Though it was a space established by management, there was no concerted effort to prescribe its uses. Beth and her group of regulars held their "pie nights" in the café.

Beth's pie nights were reflective of the WMA culture. It is somewhat exclusive in that the various groups of regulars are quite obvious to newcomers or those not in the group. But most members are not especially uptight or fanatical; they were eating pie in a gym after completing a workout after all. Contributing to this environment was the small, somewhat homogenous community where WMA is located. The culture of Northampton reflects its location in a community comprised of three adjoining cities or towns in which there is a cluster of institutions of higher education. There is a mixture of working class citizens whose families have long resided in the region and relative newcomers who have come to the area for jobs in education or for the quality of life—rural but accessible to shopping, cultural venues, and good schools. Many of the female members, ages 30 to late 50s, knew each other in their outside lives, specifically through children, who were frequently a topic of conversation among them. The high school girls' basketball coach and football coach, along with their wives, are members. It also was reflective of the

larger academic community. For example, in January, when gyms are usually quite crowded in the evenings or early mornings with new members, WMA had crowds in the mid-mornings as well reflecting the academic calendar: students and professors were still on break.

The ways in which culture was created at both UF and WMA were more straightforward than the culture at the Wellness and Athletic Center (WAC). First, WAC is not identified or promoted as a gym. It is a wellness center affiliated with a local medical center. The goal of this collaboration is a holistic approach to illness and injury prevention and recovery. But it contains the same types of equipment and amenities as other multiuse gyms and closely resembled WMA in its offerings. The labeling was not necessarily apparent to members who were not using the space for recovery or rehabilitation. The WAC director explained, though, that her facility is different not just from other multi-use gyms, but from other versions of WAC that exist along the east coast because of the age and racial and ethnic diversity in the space.

Whereas at UF there was a tension among racial and ethnic groups, at WAC there was noticeable friendliness among all members. Throughout my field notes are my observations of interracial, intergenerational, and mixed gender sociability. I was startled by the contrast to WMA where I was simultaneously engaged in field work but left unengaged with by most members. The first morning I got out of my car in the WAC parking lot a black 40-something man on his way to work (dressed in a suit) pleasantly said hello to me as he walked toward his car. A white male teenager held the door and said hello to me when I was walking up the stairs from the locker room to the exercise floor one day. An older white man initiated a conversation on the stairs about his progress

actually taking the stairs after several months at the gym. In no other space did I have these experiences. At WMA especially there was a distinct male youth culture, as noted by several WMA members who spoke of it in the context of personal comfort in spaces such as the weight room and basketball court, where young men dominated. These men interacted only with one another and some of the younger members of the staff.

One of the differences at WAC was that while there were a range of ages, I observed fewer people under the age of 20 than at the other sites. The gym culture skewed more towards older people. This was especially evident in the offerings of senior-specific aerobics classes. The creation of the open gym culture, however, was largely due to the members. There were no social events, no café space, but plenty of spaces (the pool and hot tub, the hallways outside the basketball courts, and the open exercise floor) for people to unobtrusively gather and chat.

Why WAC had less racial tension than UF and visible interracial and intergenerational socializing, I could never completely figure out. WAC membership costs anywhere from 2 to 4 times as much, which might have resulted in greater class cohesion, though I often heard conversations about the second shift or blue collar jobs people worked and was told by the center's director that many members received insurance discounts or worked in places which covered part of the membership fees. Also, there was no dominant minority group at WAC like at UF where Latinos—who were mostly young men—were most prevalent. Again, members were a little bit older than the average gym goer and there was a mix of white Eastern Europeans (Polish and Russian), African Americans, and Latinos.

My observations, during field work, of three different gym cultures centered on how the people interacted with one another and how they interacted with the space. The discussion in this section has focused largely on the former, while in the next section I discuss the latter. Though I noted briefly above the ways in which gym space was configured so as to facilitate or hinder interpersonal interactions, in the following section I focus more specifically on the ways in which gym space works as a disciplinary mechanism.

### The Gym as Disciplinary Space

In this section I discuss the concept of disciplinary space as it applies to the gym relying on both Foucault's work as well as the sports scholars and feminist theorists who apply it both to sport and exercise practices and their institutions and to bodies. First I discuss the gym as a disciplinary space and then address the ways in which the gym's disciplinary power affects women's bodies, using work from the field of feminist philosophy.

Positioning the gym as semi-private space allows not just for a greater understanding of access to the space, but also the ways in which power operates in this specific semi-private space. Rooney (2005) contends, in a very Foucauldian way, that in semi-private spaces power "flow[s] in many directions" but cautions that this space is not to be seen as some egalitarian alternative to the deeply gendered and otherwise inequitable public and private spaces:

There is always a ruling authority, so recognized, in the semiprivate room, but it is not lodged in a sovereign body, and the questioning of authority is also a regular, indeed, essential, feature of its disciplinary practice, a critical mode of the subjectivity that operates there. (p. 336)

The visibility or cognizance of the authority holder is hidden or unacknowledged in gym spaces. In part this could be because of the flow of power that Rooney sees as a marker of semi-private space disguises the inegalitarian nature of the space. Or it could be because there is no space in the space to contest the inequality. The concept of equality in a gym space would seem strange to most gym goers in any of the gyms I observed. Everyone has access to everything, outside of gendered locker rooms. Or so it appears. In the following chapters I discuss issues of access to specific spaces. But how does gym space itself structure power relations?

Many scholars, including those in sports studies, use Foucault's discussion of the panopticon in respective works on space, power, and discipline. The concept of a panopticon is particularly appealing in a discussion of gym space because there is a lot of looking going on. The absence of a central position (as seen in Bentham's panopticon) for (potential) surveillance in gym spaces, does not free the space from surveillance. In fact, surveillance becomes more ubiquitous and open to more people in gym space, because of particular qualities of the space. Though there may not be a "sovereign body" (Rooney, 2005) governing the space, there are many bodies engaged in various displays of power over themselves and others, and they utilize gym space to do so.

One of the most obvious means of surveillance is through mirrors. Their presence, Klein (2001) writes, "encourage[s] a constant state of surveillance, both of oneself and of others as well" (p. 125). The ubiquity of mirrors means that everyone has an opportunity to see others without the other knowing he or she is being surveyed. Mirrors, for example, positioned on opposite walls, as they were at WAC meant a person facing one could use both that one and the one behind him to look throughout the space. At WMA

the positioning of mirrors on perpendicular wall space allowed for angled views of the entire weight space on the first floor. At UF, the length of mirrors in front of the lifting stations allowed others on the opposite side of the space to look at anyone in the middle of the gym—a vantage only available through the mirrors because of the way the Nautilus equipment blocked the view.

Danni, a personal trainer at WAC, pointed out the power of mirrors unintentionally when she noted that the side of the gym that has more “toys” (stability balls, exercise bands, medicine balls, Pilates rings) and mats for stretching does not have any mirrors in it. It is not coincidence, she believes, that more women utilize that space, which she referred to as the “softer side of the gym.” In addition to the relatively fewer number of men who use the softer side, women get a reprieve from surveying themselves while also avoiding the mirror-enabled surveillance that other members can employ. Danni attributes the reluctance of many of her female clients to go into the weight space (the non-soft side of the gym) to the mirrors. It is about sounds and mirrors, she says:

*Oh, the amount of grunting that happens and the staring. Men stare at themselves a lot in the mirror. A lot. I think that women do it outside the gym. I think we're too embarrassed to do it inside the gym. We do it outside the gym. But men do it a lot.*

I found women using the mirrors for self-surveillance, but in less public ways; in the locker room for example. One mid-week evening, when WMA was quite crowded, a white, middle-aged, fit-looking woman came in and out of the locker room twice to use the full-length mirror solely for the purpose of examining her body and clothes from several different angles. This is something she could easily have accomplished in almost any of the other gym spaces, saving herself multiple trips to the crowded locker room. Every space at WMA has a large mirror on at least one wall. The self-surveillance that

women engage in generally, but especially in the gym, is quite stealthy. Though Berger (1972, 2009) theorizes that women see themselves through a male perspective, in the gym, and in the male-dominated space of the weight room especially, the male gaze takes on a different meaning. Women are being seen by men and by themselves in ways that they cannot control and in a space to which they have only recently begun to have access. In many situations in the gym, to draw on Mulvey's (1975) work on the male gaze, the mirrors are the camera; they facilitate the male gaze.

The gazing the men do of their own bodies is less stealthy, as Danni noted. I too observed men flexing and turning and examining all parts of their bodies. I saw men lift their shirts to look at their abdominals and then lift them even higher to flex a pec or two. Men who do not want to bother moving clothing around cut large armholes into their t-shirts to facilitate an easier examination of their stomach and chest muscles by themselves and others.

If women "are constructed as their own disciplinarians" through their surveillance of themselves as Brush (1998, p. 38) maintains, then the space of the gym certainly assists in this process. Mirrors engender a great deal of self-surveillance, whether obvious or stealthy. Self-surveillance is both gendered, as seen in the above examples, and a function of the specific gym spaces in which it occurs and how those spaces themselves have been marked as either masculine or feminine. During my observations at WMA, I found that more women used the upstairs weight room despite the fact that it was more cramped and often busier than the downstairs space which was almost entirely comprised of men (at least during peak hours). When I walked into the downstairs weight space early in my field work, I was confronted with at least one reason why. The positioning of

the mirrors meant that I received a 180 degree view of my body just walking in, before I even picked up a weight. I was not in charge of my own image even when I was the one doing the looking. I could not choose a best angle; I got all angles.

I contend, though, that the diffusion of the power of surveillance is accessible to women as well, though they might use it in different ways. And it is not necessarily true that women in the gym are any more subject to the male gaze in the space, especially given the amount of surveillance men undertake of themselves and of each other in the gym, than in other semi-private spaces. I do not want to suggest that the gym is any more or less a space of freedom or empowerment for women in this regard. Women, especially in the spaces marked as feminine (i.e., the aerobics room), are often surveying each other as well (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula & Pringle, 2006). In my role as a participant observer, I used the mirrors to facilitate my observations. I was able to participate and observe without being any more or less on display than any other woman in the space. And I was able to literally see more because of the mirrors without being seen as an outsider. For example, the incline chest press at WMA faced a mirrored wall. Even with my back to other exercisers, I was able to see what almost everyone else in that space was doing.

Another aspect of the disciplinary nature of gym space emerges from the enclosure and partitioning of spaces. Foucault (1995) states that disciplinary space is always cellular. Though the gym, outside of the locker room, lacks the cellular spaces Foucault envisioned, most gyms are partitioned in some ways. Even the open space of UF was partitioned not using walls but using the placement of equipment (cardio section, Nautilus area, stretching area) or the use of different flooring in the free weight area,



which created a visual separation of the space. At my other two sites there were many partitions: aerobics rooms, indoor cycling studios, basketball and racquetball courts, stretching rooms, the check-in desk which separates staff from members and grants entry into the space, the café space, and tanning booths.

Foucault (1995) contends that the partitioning of space creates useful spaces in which discipline can be enacted through the performance of productive tasks. According to Markula and Pringle (2006), “the act of distributing discipline require[s] partitioning” (p. 74). In the gym, the partitioning and the disciplining takes many different forms and provides multiple effects. For example, the disciplinary space of the group exercise classroom is unique in its deeply gendered practices and the ways in which it produces a hierarchy among the women who utilize the space while also, in ways that are not often discussed, vanquishing them from other gym spaces for the purpose of producing a heterosexy physique (Theberge, 1987). I discuss the disciplining aspects of specific spaces, including the group exercise classroom, in subsequent chapters.

In many gym spaces, disciplined bodies are created. They are classed and raced bodies as well, reflective of one’s ability to garner and maintain social, cultural, and possibly economic capital through physical fitness. Within the partitioned spaces of the gym, fit bodies are created. And again, the concept of fit is an amalgam of aesthetics and health and ability, of form and function. Fit in the weight room (how much can you lift, press, hold?) is different from fit in the aerobics room (how high is your Step bench? how quickly do you master the routine?) is different from fit in a café (what are you eating?) is different from fit in a locker room (how do you look without clothes on?).

The ability to visually access partitioned spaces is also a factor in their disciplinary power. At WAC, a glass door allows people who are sitting in the coffee lounge to see into the aerobics studio. The same is true of the door to the indoor cycling studio but because the lights are always turned low for those classes, the ability to survey is minimized. It is only if one is in the classroom—laden with mirrors—that one can survey other participants. How fast is she going? How high is his tension dial? Who has pools of sweat next to their bikes? Who is breathing heavy? Who is the best? Most fit? Most disciplined?

At WMA the visible access into most of the partitioned spaces (besides the locker rooms) is easily facilitated by the architecture. There are four different visible entry points into the basketball court: the windowed entrance door, the window that opens to the downstairs weight room, the window that opens to the second floor weight room and the window in the second floor stretching room. The latter two provide a view from above and a somewhat stealthy one given that those below rarely look up to the second floor. The court is used not just for the male-dominated pick-up basketball games, but for group exercise classes including Zumba, boot camp, and TRX (a body weight training system). These classes are female-dominated. While some users—myself included—appreciated exercising in a space without mirrors, we were always either being watched or knew we could be watched by anyone in any of those spaces. Again, the version of fit was always different depending on the activity, but the disciplining power of the space was always present.

Visual access to the aerobics studio at WMA where traditional aerobics, Zumba, boot camp, kettlebells, yoga, sculpting, and Pilates all are held has drawn complaints

from participants. As a result, management installed blinds and then replaced them better blinds that provided more complete blocking. Zumba, the patented Latin dance-based aerobics program, arrived at WMA during my observation period. The first night class was held, groups of people—men and women—gathered at the window as they passed down the hall. But even longstanding aerobics and yoga classes consistently drew curious onlookers peeking into the windows or through the door (often left open to moderate the temperature) as they passed by. Some gazed while continuing to walk; others stopped for a second; some for longer. The visual access to the partitioned spaces of the gym, and the people who use them, make more obvious the disciplining gaze that exists in the gym. The blinds on the aerobics room window at WMA literally and figuratively mask the disciplinary nature of the space. They acknowledge the looking by “outsiders” but subsequently hide the ways in which performances of aerobicizers—for the instructor, for the self, for the others in the class—are also part of the disciplinary surveillance process.

If discipline is in the details, the minutiae, as Foucault (1995) contends, then the fitness industry should be considered one of the contemporary era’s major disciplinary institutions. And it is not only in the very specific messages provided to us by magazines and advertisements (banish underarm flab! eliminate upper thigh cellulite! tighten those abdominals! lose the double chin!), but the space of the gym itself which requires gym goers to focus on the details. Every gym I joined for the purposes of this study had rows and rows of Nautilus machines. Every machine was equipped with instructions which included a musculoskeletal diagram of which muscles were “hit” by using the machine. The leg extender, for example, pictured a standing male form in which the striations of the quadriceps—the fronts of the thighs—were highlighted in red. Most machines work

one to two muscles. To make sure every muscle (or detail) is covered, one has to go through the line of Nautilus machines, often called the circuit.

Though fitness is indeed an institution, it might be better understood, following Foucault, as a technology for the purpose of this discussion of disciplinary regimes. Balsalmo (1995) explains a Foucauldian technology as “the workings of a collection of practices that produce specific cultural effects. Technology names the process whereby discursive practices work interdependently with other cultural forces to produce effects at the level of the body” (p. 21). Fitness exists at the intersection of several cultural forces—medicine, consumerism, gender normativity, the beauty industry—and these intersections become evident in the fitness discourses and in the bodies of those who subscribe to them and, to a different extent, to those who do not subscribe. The disciplinary effects of space manifest in the bodies of gym users. Foucault’s discussion of bodily inscription, however, is notably gender-neutral (Foucault, 1984). Grosz (1994) reminds us that the disciplining power of surveillance is an equal opportunity power, directed at both men and women. But, she notes, its intentions and effects are neither gender neutral nor gender blind.

Women are no more subject to this system of corporeal production than men; they are no more cultural, no more natural, than men. Patriarchal power relations do not function to make women the objects of disciplinary control while men remain outside disciplinary surveillance. It is a question not of more or less but of differential production. (p. 205)

The differential production of discipline is obvious in the space of the gym and the discourses of fitness. Fitness magazines are one of the means of conveying gendered messages about health and fit bodies (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). And these messages enter the gym through members and staff. Personal trainer, Danni, reads fitness magazines as well as women’s magazines despite both these genre’s problematic portrayals of women which she describes as a “pet peeve.” Though she participates in the

consumption of these messages, she expressed frustration at the inaccuracies and myths perpetuated by the media and the negative effects they have on women, which she, as a trainer, must contend with:

*Every women's magazine, except for Real Simple, always tell you that you have to lose weight. All of them do. Every month there is a new headline about how you can get fit in six weeks. Or drop ten pounds by May 31<sup>st</sup> or drop two dress sizes by summer. So women, hardly ever men—for men it's always "get stronger, get ripped, grow your biceps." Right? For women, it's always "get fit, lose weight, slim your stomach, tone, tone, tone your arms." All of the magazines tell you this is what you have to do to be considered attractive. You have to shrink to be considered attractive.*

Discourses about gender and fitness pervade the spaces of the gym. Here Danni is speaking specifically to the perpetuation of what I have termed the "toning discourse." The toning discourse allows, mandates actually, women to build muscles, but they are very specific muscles which need to be built in very specific ways. The muscles themselves should be visible but not too large. They should be lean and never bulky. Women can achieve these muscles, they are told, by lifting a lower amount of weight at higher repetitions or by engaging in practices such as yoga and Pilates which use body weight for the same purpose

Enactment of the toning discourse is just one example of how discourse and space collude in the creation of bodies. "We do not grasp space directly or through our senses but through our bodily situation" Grosz explains (1994, p. 90). The gym as space, particularly as a semi-private social space, contributes to the inscription of bodies. And the gendered body becomes recognizable through inscription and thus the fit (gendered, raced, and classed) body, is also an inscribed body. The gym is an ideal space in which to observe and understand the ways bodies are produced through inscription.

I offer two caveats to my use of the phrase bodily inscription here. One, the notion of inscription has been problematized by feminist scholars (Bordo, 2004; Budgeon, 2003; Fournier, 2002; Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1987) because of the implication that women's bodies are passive surfaces waiting to be written upon. The problems with this approach are all the more salient in a study such as this in which I observe and discuss the choices women make about how to sculpt and build their bodies. The limits of their choices—whether discursive or spatial or both—are a main focus of this project. And like Budgeon (2003), I have not conceptualized women's bodies as simply objects upon which discourses and spaces act, but as events “beyond the binary of materiality and representation” (p. 36).

Second, I do not mean to suggest that the gym creates a specific body that does not exist outside gym culture or that might not have been achieved through other means. I employ the term and discuss its processes because inscription is how the body, in this case the female body, gets put into discourse, fitness discourse. It also problematizes the concept of the natural body, which pervades the fitness industry. In engaging in the deconstruction of the discursively constructed body, we have already, Balsalmo (1996) notes, acknowledged the absence of a natural body. This point is particularly important in a discussion of fitness. Though it seems as if the construction of bodies might be obvious in fitness discourses, exercise is presented as a natural body changer. For an exerciser, the natural is constructed against the unnatural—surgery, diet pills, and performance enhancers primarily—but maintains the body as a natural entity that has been acted upon in unnatural ways resulting in unfit and unwell bodily states in our contemporary society.

The Paleo Diet, espoused by Crossfit, a chain of gyms whose philosophy is to get back to natural and functional exercise, encourages practitioners to eliminate from their diets anything ancient man could not obtain through hunting and foraging. This includes cereal grains, legumes (beans and peanuts), salt, non-grass-fed meat, and dairy (except for eggs). Humans had a natural body once, Paleo Diet proponents claim, but our food consumption has become decidedly unnatural. The Paleo Diet is intended to get us back to our natural selves. Even in exercise-specific discourses, people are encouraged to use their resources, to dig deep, to access the capabilities inherent in their bodies. The natural body can build muscle—so do it. The natural body can run barefoot (another natural trend in exercise), so train your body back to where it should be. All these trends rely on a pre-existing, natural body. That body may be the body of a caveman ancestor or the body of a Native American in the mountains of current day Mexico whose life has remained relatively untouched by modern-day technologies. That so many are trying to achieve—or get back—their natural bodies points to the lack of such an entity.

I do not propose that an inscriptive process via gym space is somehow contained in or unique to gym space. Rather I want to note the ways in which gym space, and in particular the discourses existing within it, participate in the inscriptive process. And finally, I do not wish to erase the subjectivity of gym goers. Gym space does not simply act upon bodies. Space is not a conventional “actor.” Not only do people in a gym make choices (to join, to go, and what to do when they get there), their choices have physical manifestations. I can make a choice to join a gym in the name of fitness, but never go. I can make a choice to start a weightlifting routine, but decide only to lift small amounts of weight. This is not to say that these choices are somehow unencumbered by discourse in

the process of choice-making. Gym bodies are not waiting to be inscribed. They are always already inscribed.

Bodies become inscribed in the gym in numerous ways. In this project, I focus on the ways in which gym spaces contribute to the writing of the female body. In the following chapters I focus on the specific spaces (the aerobics classroom and the weight room) and offer here a more general explanation and examples. In considering the discursive potential of the gym, I also must consider the economic costs of fitness. As I mentioned, fitness as a technology, includes a consumer component. Gyms are part of the consumption of fitness. Money is required to be able to join a gym so as to inscribe the body with the regimens of fitness and health that can be achieved through use of the space. The economics of fitness remain a necessary component of this discussion.

Individual gym cultures and spaces have potential mitigating or exacerbating disciplinary characteristics. They all are organized spaces, however, which people move in and out of for some purposive activity—even if that activity is, as in the case of a locker room, taking a shower. In using the space, in engaging in purposeful activities, all gym goers are both subject to and creators of the discursive processes that are inscribed on gym bodies—their own and those of others. But different gyms offer different amenities and thus inscriptive possibilities and outcomes.

This can be seen in the case of UF, the lowest-costing gym in my study with prices ranging from \$10-\$20 a month. The more expensive package included access to the club's tanning beds and towel service. But in comparison to the other two facilities, which cost between \$45 and \$85 per month depending on plan, insurance coverage, and payment type, UF offered fewer amenities. The lack of group exercise classes meant a



woman who desired lean, muscled arms in accordance with the toning discourse which mandates visible but limited female musculature could not take a sculpting class offered in the relative safety of an aerobics room; she must figure it out on her own. The more money one had to invest in a gym membership, the better the equipment and amenities. Only WMA had a café that made protein smoothies for after-workout recovery periods. WAC was the only club with a pool which draws people at all levels of fitness, including older members. Older people with the means to do so could choose to engage in low-impact fitness or use the pool for rehabilitative activities.

Despite the ways in which power is inscribed on bodies, the fit, discipline-inscribed body is also inscribed with privilege. Though there are a greater range of low-cost fitness options (in addition to UF, other chain fitness centers advertise membership fees of \$10 a month), individuals who are economically compelled to “choose” low-cost options bear a greater burden of individual discipline, as I discuss in the final section of this chapter. Alongside an understanding of fitness as a technology, there must exist a discussion of the rewards gained from the disciplined body.

#### Bulking Up: Building Capital in the Gym

Months after finishing my fieldwork, I headed to the gym for my own workout which, on that day, was an attempt to clear my mind of the feeling that I was cycling through the same issues about reconciling and merging theory and practice as I sifted through and analyzed my data. After wriggling the soft earbuds into place, I opted for a podcast instead of music. Ira Glass, host of the radio show *This American Life*, begins to speak as I start my climb on the Stair Mill, a Promethean instrument on which I step, on real stairs, but never get anywhere as they cycle underneath me. He says “there is a gap

between theory and practice. And it is an annoying gap.” I hear him out as I keep stepping “up” while staying in the same spot. But I cannot quite overcome the feeling that I am just not getting anywhere.

Is exercise in the gym purely an exercise in failure (J. Klein, 2001)? Does the high attrition rate among gym goers (18 percent) indicate that we are constantly failing at fitness? (Frew & McGillivray, 2005). Among weight lifters, there is a training-to-failure principle in which one lifts a large amount of weight until he cannot do so anymore. Sometimes this is 8-10 repetitions; sometimes it is 2-3. Though the practice is controversial, it does seem to affirm, along with running on a treadmill or using a *stationary* bike, that the exerciser is not really achieving much. Where are we going on stairs that lead to nowhere? What is the use of snatching a 250 pound weighted bar over one’s head—or worse—not succeeding in the snatching?

Failure, fear of failure, appears in fitness industry marketing materials in overt and subtle ways. What happens, after all, if one does not heed Nike’s call? Failure to “do it”? I link the construction of a gym-as-failure sentiment to two strains of thought. One is the view that what happens in the gym is not natural. Present-day gym exercise is often viewed as contrived and lacking in functional value. I discuss this natural/artificial binary in the concluding chapter of this dissertation. The second line of thinking is what I focus on in this section: failure to achieve capital. Not doing it, in a fitness context, means not achieving physical capital and its benefits in the marketplace. Specifically, I focus on the accumulation, display and use of physical, cultural and social capital. (In subsequent chapters I return to a discussion of capital as it pertains to gender and specific gym spaces.) Even within a failure rhetoric there is an accumulation (which may be

problematically marked as “success”) of capital in gym spaces. Lifting to failure, despite its potential dangers, will build muscle. And muscle has value both inside and outside the gym, depending on the type of muscle and on whose body it grows.

According to Skeggs (1999) (who paraphrases Bourdieu) “social space is the metaphorical means by which the different forms of capital to which one has access come to have value and legitimacy....one brings with one, embodied, certain quantities of different capitals” (p. 214). Bourdieu (1984) links physical capital to cultural and social capital. Physical capital is, simply, the embodied form of capital. Like cultural goods and services, it is an asset that affords individuals greater success in the “market.” Also similar is that physical capital is unevenly distributed. The ability to earn physical capital is based on one’s ability to access it. Though the fitness industry presents itself as equal opportunity, one can only “just do it” if she has the means to purchase it. It is not only a matter of working hard (on fitness). The skills and the bodies that are achieved—the physical capital itself—only is possible for certain people; those who can make the ongoing investment.

The health club provides an ideal space for the attainment of physical capital not only because it is a space exclusively devoted to building better bodies (under the guise of health and wellness rather than attainment of social and cultural capital) but because it provides access to greater social and cultural capital (Frew & McGillivray, 2005; J. S. Maguire, 2007). By joining a gym people access social networks and membership in a group of similar-minded people. Unlike working out at home, which can also lead to the attainment of physical capital, gym membership also provides access to social capital:

networks of people, of information and more cultural capital, education and proficiency in fitness and health as well as other knowledge gained through the social networks.

Within the gym (as social space) different forms of capital are valued, but they are also utilized outside the space. “One is always moving in and out of spaces carrying and sometimes increasing the value of different capitals....some groups can increase their capital because of the access they have to social space” (Skeggs, 1999, p. 214). The access to the forms of capital gained in the gym requires an initial investment of capital: one has to have the money to pay the membership fee. And we must remember that fitness (a version of fitness which focuses more on health and less on aesthetics for my purposes here) is itself a result of social, cultural and economic capital: access to preventative medicine, to education, to safe housing. In short, fitness costs money, directly and indirectly. Though Shilling (2003) writes that the procurement of physical capital cannot be purchased like other economic goods, this idea is complicated in the case of physical capital earned at a gym. The consumer model of fitness means gym goers have bought their way into a space. And, if they work hard, they are promised to get their money’s worth. But in what form? Why would one pay simply for access? The access must be worth more than physical entrance into a space. It is what the space can provide in terms of the social and cultural capital that results from the accumulation of physical capital that has value in the case of the gym.

“What gym do you belong to?” is a frequent question posed when people start discussing their workout habits. Some gyms confer more capital than others. Because UF is a low-cost chain, it is seen as less desirable and people who use it are less likely to be viewed as committed, long-term members. Nina, the manager at WAC, noted that UF has

a 10 percent usage rate (percentage of members who use the gym), whereas her gym is at 70 percent usage; well above, she said, the industry standard of 40 percent. UF members might not be gaining as much social capital from their membership, at least according to outsiders and members of other gyms. But inside I observed a significant amount of networking occurring among regular members. In addition to support provided to one another in achieving fitness goals (physical capital leading to cultural capital in the form of skills and knowledge about fitness), they discussed jobs, people they knew at one another's workplace, and the local community. I argue, though, that UF members have to work harder to achieve cultural capital in part because of the perceptions of the larger UF chain and because this specific franchise contained so many working class people and racial minorities.

The attainment of physical capital in the United States is becoming more and more important. Contained in the achievement of physical capital, manifest in a "classical body," are moral implications as well as "enhanced work opportunities and social and sexual success" (Frew & McGillivray, 2005, p. 163). Its importance is most obvious for the white middle class. The achievement of a classical body is both raced and classed, but it is not so clear that work and social and sexual success will result from the achievement of physical capital. This was evident at WAC where I saw no obvious path from physical capital to social capital because the flow of physical capital to cultural and social capital is neither one-directional nor always realized. The romantic pairing of two WAC members with non-classical bodies, but other forms of capital exemplified the complications of accumulation.

Damon, a black man in his 30s and Cara, his white girlfriend of a similar age, worked out at WAC together several times a week. He had nearly achieved a classical body, but was slightly more muscular in his arms, shoulders, and back than the idealized symmetrical classic body (based on the depictions of ancient Greek and Roman men). And he was black. Though not conforming exactly, it is difficult to suggest, especially after observing his body and his workout routine, that he had not achieved physical capital and that he had not converted some of that capital into cultural and social capital within the gym. He was adept at negotiating the practices of the weight room; he was quite social; he was sought out by other members for advice and general gym companionship. But outside the gym the benefit of his physical capital was unclear. In fact his large, muscular frame, in combination with his skin color, could be viewed as threatening.

His girlfriend, Cara, had achieved a different version of capital. She was also skilled in gym practices (cultural capital) and highly social. But she was overweight. She achieved capital through her social relationships with her boyfriend and her gym peers, but again her ability to convert this capital outside the gym was also in question. Frew and McGillivray (2005) note that within gym space physical capital is not only accrued, it is celebrated (but on display and thus available for consumption) by other gym members. Cara's body shape does not convey the attainment of physical capital in any space but the gym where other exercisers see her working out and interacting.

The display of physical capital is very much a part of gym culture. I noted many examples in the above section on disciplinary space. Within the gym, physical capital manifests as form (musculature, shape, clothing) and skill (form when exercising, number

of reps, coordination in an aerobics class, flexibility in yoga and Pilates, speed on treadmill, stair climber, or bike). The desire for physical capital, Frew and McGillivray (2005) argue, is why there is so much gazing, and so much acceptance of looking, or “nonchalant ocularism,” happening in the gym (p. 166). The attainment and display of capital is part of the creation of disciplinary gym space. And it is a constant process. The looking most often results in a desire for more physical capital, or the realization that none has been achieved. That woman has better thighs. That guy has larger pecs. The gym becomes its own marketplace.

### The Individual Mandate for Fitness

I conclude this chapter with a focus on the gym’s function and role in the current era of American neoliberalism. But this discussion also brings together strands of the preceding discussions about discipline and bodies and how these ideas need to be considered within the larger economic and cultural framework of contemporary America. The acquisition of capital through fitness is one reward of a fitness industry that emphasizes individual accomplishment earned through hard work. The fitness meritocracy places success and failure of fitness—again largely perceived as an aesthetic—on the individual. This is reinforced in popular and consumer culture. The display of physical capital signals achievement in the gym and success in adhering to and operating within a neoliberal market economy. The individual who can display and trade on such capital is the successful, idealized consumer.

Few actually attain an idealized form despite sometimes high levels of consumption (membership fees, fitness apparel and paraphernalia): “the quest for physical capital only provides distinction for the few, whilst also serving as a perpetual

reminder of the aesthetic frustration and the dissatisfaction of desire for the many” (Frew & McGillivray, 2005, p. 172). Shilling (2003) cautions that the effort put into accumulating physical capital might not be worth the reward. There must be other reasons why people continue to go to the gym, participating in cycles of dissatisfaction, and subjecting themselves to the competition, the discipline, and the judgment.

Fitness is also part of, in addition to the acquisition and display of capital, the neoliberal discourse about individual health and wellness. The discussion of physical capital and its value is about form: the body and how it looks. The discussion about wellness and health is about function. I argue that most of the time, the two are not so easily separated. Even the individual mandate for fitness and fitness knowledge, because of its link to health and wellness, is never that far away from a discussion of aesthetics.

In the earliest days of the modern fitness industry, the individual mandate for fitness was evident in corporate culture and immersed in American society’s neoliberal turn. Notable is that the term “wellness,” often used somewhat obliquely in an attempt to emphasize health over aesthetics, was a product of the 1970s corporate culture in which male executives who were suffering the health effects of stress were costing companies millions of dollars. Fitness not only became corporate, it became part of corporate culture (Stern, 2008). The wellness push in corporate America was an individualized effort, couched in a “team spirit” mentality, that allowed for a substantial accumulation of economic capital, mostly for the companies that were establishing in-house gyms or affiliations with local, private health clubs (Stern, 2008).

Today there remains—flourishes even—a cultural mandate for fitness that is distributed or maintained largely by the white middle class; the manifestations of it differ.



Just as the ways in which bodies are inscribed through fitness practices and fitness spaces differ, the ways in which a cultural demand for individual attention and attainment of a healthy, fit body is “heard” varies. As Foucault (1995) notes:

The power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties and to render differences useful by fitting them into one another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (p. 184)

This statement reflects the neoliberal fitness regime: you, as an individual, have to do it to be like everyone else; you have to be healthy in order to successfully participate in and contribute to America’s welfare and success in the global marketplace. “Capitalist culture is infused with notions of ‘health’ and health promotion that reveal assumptions about normality, well-being, and morality” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 11). Though fit and healthy individuals are not necessarily the norm, they are presented as the ideal. They are a romanticized version of the American citizen. So even though there is no majority when it comes to fit and healthy bodies, there is a mandate for homogeneity and we can easily assess an individual’s degree of distance from it (Body Mass Index calculations, chest, waist, hip measurements, lung capacity, heart rate, etc.). “Health and disease are framed as matters of individual will or failure, investing in the body—through regular physical activity, for example—can help to minimize one’s health risks” (J. S. Maguire, 2007).

But a failure discourse is not at the forefront of the neoliberal fitness rhetoric. Though it undergirds the messages consumers receive, it is not—marketers have realized—the most effective way to sell fitness. Rather, the individual mandate for fitness is encouraged through a discourse of individual control, choice, and success all in the name of health. “Health is deemed a socially legitimate and individually responsible

concern” (J. S. Maguire, 2007, p. 41). Health and wellness is what fitness consumers report seeking when they join a gym. The top reason gym members provided, in 2012, for why they maintain a fitness regimen in a gym: “overall health/wellbeing” (“Latest IHRSAtrend report analyzes health club membership trends in q3 2012, plus 3-year trends,” n.d.).

Brush (1998) writes that a disciplinary regime has succeeded when one seeks out and desires bodily control. The fitness industry has succeeded in bringing individuals to fitness (how long they remain and how often they come back varies) through a message of control, choice, and the benefits of success. The industry tells the potential consumer that she can control her success through hard work and effort and that it can provide numerous options for doing so. Choice and control over one’s own workout are crucial selling points. One of the top five reasons gym members remain at their current gym is because of the access to and variety of exercise equipment (“Latest IHRSAtrend report analyzes health club membership trends in q3 2012, plus 3-year trends,” n.d.). “The rhetoric of choice works on the premise that self-determination—in a bodily sense—is simply a matter of diet and exercise; it is a matter of effort and hard work” (Brush, 1998, p. 36).

The achievement of health, of fitness, of the ideal merger of form and function in the body is framed in terms of a meritocracy. Hard work will earn the devout exerciser results. Every commercial sends that message. Sweaty (usually white, though tan, young) bodies, run, jump, and lift, to convey the message that hard work equals these bodies—as long as the viewer can buy the right shoe, shorts, tank top, or water bottle. In the American meritocracy, hard work earns one a job, a nice home and car, bright children, a

kdevoted spouse. In the fitness meritocracy hard work earns toned abs, arms, glutes and thighs (for women), broad chest and shoulders (for men), and reduced body fat (for all). These earnings then assist in achieving the American dream. It is a merger of the meritocracies.

One fitness blogger wrote that fitness was indeed the *only* true meritocracy noting that “the body you have right now is the one *you have earned* through your past nutrition, sleep habits and the amount of effort and sweat you put forth in the gym/garage/living room/wherever you workout [sic]” (“Fitness,” n.d.). The blogger exhorts readers to take control of their own lives in order to see results in their bodies. Despite his earlier noting of benefits such as lower blood pressure, the end results are focused on appearance:

Are you waiting for a magic pill/supplement or looking for someone else to blame because you don't like what you see in the mirror? Or are you going to take ownership of the body you have and feel good about your "body of work"? A healthier body is out there waiting. You just have to earn it on the merits of your behavior. (“Fitness,” n.d.)

“Have you made the choice to take control?” is the question he is asking readers.

The discussion of health is overridden by the focus on aesthetics, and consumerism is entirely absent from the discussion. The same neoliberal imperative for individual health and fitness exists in the space of the gym, and the commercial aspects are similarly masked. The promises of fitness, the praise for success, and corresponding fitness discourses all affirm individual hard work and morality. But the spaces in which these philosophies are applied differ greatly. Higher end gyms provide services and amenities such as saunas, whirlpools and steam rooms. The healthful aspects of these features are marketed by management: the benefits of relaxation, the curative or rehabilitative effects of hot water, dry air, or warm misty environs. But these are services for which patrons pay. Though members often discuss them as a benefit of membership, they are services

offered at gyms with higher membership fees. At the three commercial gyms I observed, there was a marked difference in the amenities available to members.

Both WMA and WAC had saunas, for example, and either a steam room or whirlpool. WMA had contracts with local masseuses to use their space. While massage is an added cost, it is an on-site service the club provides. But even at a more basic fitness-focused level, I saw differences in the gyms' offerings that affected one's ability to achieve fitness. UF, with the lowest membership fee of the three, offered no group exercise classes. Staff members who worked the desk were not required to be certified personal trainers. They did not roam the floor helping members or offering advice. Limited personal training was available for an additional cost. The gym itself had up-to-date cardio and Nautilus equipment, but it lacked smaller, simpler pieces such as stability balls, weight bars, resistance bands, and jump ropes that can be purchased in sporting goods stores for use at home and are often featured pieces of equipment in fitness magazines.

The absence was notable for two reasons. One, such equipment, though seemingly simple in construction, can be more dangerous to use than, for example, a Nautilus machine in which a member places herself on a seat or bench, adjusts the weight, and simply moves a lever or bar with one body part. Though it looks more complicated than a large rubber ball (stability ball), it is actually far easier to use and arguably more safe. It is difficult to fall off a Nautilus machine. By not providing such equipment, UF does not have to employ staff members who are qualified to teach people to use it. One would have to acquire such knowledge outside the gym to use the few pieces (such as medicine balls) that were there.

Second, this makes a member more reliant on machines, both weight and cardio machines, that are not widely available for purchase and most often not affordable. In so doing, UF—but other gyms as well, even the more well-equipped ones—have constructed a version of fitness and a path toward fitness success that is reliant on gyms and their specialized equipment. Thus success can only be achieved, for the UF member, by actually going to the gym. Not going to gym is equated with failure because of an assumption of sedentariness. Inside the gym, fitness happens. Outside of the gym is a greater propensity for failure.

In these examples, choice is limited. And limited choice means less control. Will the result be failure? If so, it is the individual's failure. The above examples exist solely within the structure of gyms. But the limitations on choice and control, the effects on health, and the individual failure associated with bad health are part of the larger healthism philosophy maintained in a neoliberal society. Poor health is the result of individual failure, we are told. It is not presented as a larger systemic issue which includes lack of government funding for preventative healthcare, or access to education, nutritious foods, or physical activity (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Again, a meritocratic ideology is invoked. Because some Americans succeed in achieving health and fitness, everyone should be able to with enough hard work.

The singular focus on personal responsibility operates to promote healthism and particularly the neoliberal ideologies that underlie such ideas. In consumer culture, such ideologies are literally reified in the flesh as privileged bodies are able to use their existence as the justification for it in the first place. (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, pp. 63-4)

The contemporary American gym is part of a consumer culture in which even health must be bought. Contemporary commercial gyms differ significantly from places such as the YMCA or similar programs and institutions aimed at education and recreation

within communities. These endeavors have traditionally been non-profits. Their goal, in part, is to remedy existing disparities around access to fitness and leisure based on a number of often intersecting factors: class, gender, age, location, ability. Though work-hard ethics and neoliberal philosophies often frame these programs as well (Heywood, 2006a, 2006b; Silk & Andrews, 2012), because they lack an overt capitalist intention and because the product is a fitness that is less centered on an aesthetic, failure to achieve within the context of such programs and institutions is not as strongly framed as individual failure. It is more a sign of inability to play the neoliberal game and earn capital, because of both individual and structural limitations. In short, in a not-for-profit program either centered on or inclusive of fitness components, there is, I argue, a greater awareness of systemic limitations to achieving the markers that signify success.

Contemporary fitness centers, however, follow a for-profit, service-oriented model. There is no educational mission at a commercial gym. It is not a non-profit focused on community betterment, but a commercial enterprise aimed at individual improvement. The gym itself is a product that people purchase; it also contains numerous other products as well as promises. The promises—for better health, fitness, bodies—themselves are potential products that manifest (if performed correctly and with diligence) in the physical, social, and cultural capital of members.

I employ the concepts in this chapter—the gym as semi-private, culturally constructed, disciplinary space, requiring and producing capital, and affirming neoliberal ideologies and structures—in the chapters that follow. Though I provide some examples of these concepts above based on my fieldwork, in the following chapters I apply them to specific gym spaces and the people in those spaces.

## CHAPTER 3

### AEROBICS SPACES

Fitness regimens within the fields of sport sociology and sport studies, have received less critical attention than institutional sports. This has been especially true of the study of aerobics. Markula (2003) noted that at the time of her dissertation research on aerobics in the early 1990s, there were few studies looking at the culture of aerobics, despite its visible presence in the United States since the 1980s. But in the ensuing decades, research on aerobics as a practice and culture has grown. Scholars have focused on the incorporation of aerobics into fitness, beauty, and health discourses and the role of aerobics in the maintenance and creation of gender norms. Some studies explore the ways in which women exert degrees of agency in resisting the patriarchal aspects of aerobics (Brabazon, 2006; Haravon Collins, 2002; Haravon, 1995; Markula, 1995, 2003b). Others theorize and study the ways in which aerobics contributes to the inferiorization of women's physicality and the mandate for an ideal female body (Lloyd, 1996; J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). These studies, as well as those which focus on gendered proclivities in fitness routines (Dworkin, 2001, 2003), greatly inform this chapter on aerobics space and my thinking on gendered fitness practices.

In this chapter, however, I do not linger on the ways in which aerobics is patriarchal or how women negotiate the pleasures, pains, and problematics of the practice in their quest for or decrying of a societally approved version of femininity. Rather I see these aspects of the practice, or aerobics as part of the "exercise body-beautiful complex" (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998), and women's negotiations of the mandates from the fitness and beauty industry as more of a given in this sociohistorical moment, which is

marked by numerous and sometimes competing rhetorics and information about health, beauty, body shapes, fitness, nutrition, empowerment, and womanhood.

Instead, I draw on these studies and their findings to discuss the role of space in aerobics culture. I examine the specific aerobic cultures I observed during fieldwork and the implications of space in the construction of these cultures. I observed the use of space for practices that are categorized as traditional aerobics (cardiovascular exercise based, in varying degrees, on dance movements), but also fitness regimens that have moved into the space in recent years that are more focused on strength training. By focusing on aerobics spaces, I can explore the ways in which practices within them have changed, potentially disrupting the perceptions and uses of these spaces often referred to as “aerobics studios,” a term derived from the origins of aerobics in dance and as occurring in spaces resembling dance studios (i.e., wood floors, full-length mirrors, open space) (J. S. Maguire, 2007). Trends in fitness move in and out of aerobics spaces and reflect the norms for gendered bodies and gendered expressions. For example, the use of light weights (2- to 5-pound dumbbells) at the end of a Step aerobics class is not part of this trademarked program, but rather a result of the toning discourse which demands a slender *and toned* female body.

I begin this chapter with an examination of the ways in which aerobics has been marked as feminine. This includes a discussion of feminine space and incorporates some history of the practice and its origins. Lloyd (1996) notes that there is no thorough history of aerobics and most historical information has been provided piecemeal from various industry and scholarly sources. I continue this discussion of the space in the following section about aerobics culture, which includes my observations of this culture.



Continuing my earlier examination of physical capital in the gym, in the following section I discuss the use and display of social, cultural, and physical capital in aerobics spaces. Finally, I conclude with an examination of the recent trend of strength training classes that have moved into the space and been accessed by women and men.

### Making and Marking of Feminine Space

One of the absences in the literature on aerobics and gyms is an interrogation of the marking of the space in which aerobics occurs as feminine—and the consequences of this marking. The movement of women into the masculine space of the weight room has been variously praised and encouraged in popular and scholarly literature. The still unequal participation of women in weight room culture has several explanations (which I explore in the following chapter) and is frequently cited as something that needs to be changed for (the rather simplistic) reasons of feminism/empowerment and the physiological benefits of strength training. But the writing of aerobics spaces and aerobics as a feminine practice is so engrained that the absence of men is not noted as a problem. Maguire and Mansfield (1998) observed that “men seem to be ideologically barred from the [space] via the networks of relations between the sexes both in the microcontext of the [aerobics] class and in the wider sociocultural sphere” (p. 122). When I explicitly asked fitness instructors about the lack of men in aerobics spaces, no one discussed this absence as a loss for men. They were not seen as missing out on something potentially rewarding or beneficial, even though aerobics are marketed to women in these ways. One fitness instructor noted that her husband used to attend some of her classes—that he was good—but that he would rather just run on the treadmill. While a run on the treadmill is also an aerobic workout, it does not provide the variety of

movement that results in greater balance, muscle confusion, and improved footwork. And, according to popular medical discourse, running is potentially more damaging to joints and muscles. But aerobics is not presented to men as either an option or alternative.

There has been little in the scholarly literature that complicates the practice of aerobics by examining the physiological benefits (versus aesthetics), the gendered creation of aerobics regimens, or the connection between aerobics spaces and aerobics cultures. In this section, I focus on the gendering of aerobics practices, and the connection between aerobics spaces and aerobics cultures as I illustrate the mechanisms—beyond the patriarchal demand for beauty—that create aerobic regimens and aerobic spaces.

Does the absence of men make a space, by default, a feminine one? Or are feminine spaces explicitly created? In the case of aerobics rooms, history suggests the latter. Aerobics classes were created just as fitness was becoming an industry. Basing the movements in dance was a deliberate choice aimed at attracting female consumers to exclusive spaces: either the home (via television programs or workout videos) or women-only exercise studios. Before the contemporary gym became the one-stop model for fitness, aerobics classes were held in exercise salons. These female-dominated spaces existed in contrast to male-dominated weightlifting gyms as well as the middle- and upper-class executive clubs frequented by businessmen (J. S. Maguire, 2007). Initially catering to upper- and middle-class women, the exercise salon provided access to the physical and social capital that was becoming more desirable in this era. An added benefit was that exercisers were shielded from the gazes and dangers of the street (experienced by runners and joggers) and the masculine and working-class culture and

bodies of gyms, making exercise salons safe spaces for the women who could access them. Most salons have disappeared because of the incorporation of aerobics studios in multi-use, commercial gyms. Some of the benefits of the salons (protection) thus have disappeared as well, but the problems that arise from the marking of the space as feminine remain.

One such problem is the missing discussions about the gender-neutral benefits of aerobics. Implicit in this absence is a devaluing of women's physical activity, similar to the gendered comparisons within institutionalized sports. Because aerobics classes "are a legitimate way for women to sculpt a petite, passive ideal and embody the myth that women's bodies are inferior to men" both the practice and the space in which it occurs remain ideologically bounded (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 128). The space is both feminine and inferior; descriptions which reflect perceptions of the practice itself. Roth and Basow (2004), drawing on the work of Judith Butler, argue that the construction of gendered bodies is itself a gendered process. "Strength differences are constructed as bodies *do* femininity and masculinity. That is, *doing* masculinity builds strength, whereas *doing* femininity builds weakness" (p. 247). Aerobics rooms are marked as feminine, and the practices within them are associated with the doing—to use Butler's language—of femininity and thus they will never be seen as equal to the activities that occur outside of the space even if one can achieve similar results (i.e., cardiovascular health, weight loss, sculpted bodies).

Like other feminine spaces, spaces in which women dominate—for example, the kitchen—the activities, when done inside them are marked as distinctly feminine in a way that allows women to have control over the space. But this control is limited to the space.

Outside the space there is little validation, compensation, or reward for proficiency in the feminine space. When women are the cooks in their families, some social rewards can be earned by being a good domestic cook, but rarely are they economic ones. The food industry, where economic and cultural capital can be earned, is dominated by men, as chefs and restaurateurs. A similar situation exists in the fitness industry. There is an expectation that women of the middle and upper classes be fit. Aerobics classes facilitate fitness or at least the belief that fitness is forthcoming and can be achieved in the space. Within the space of the aerobics room, women earn social and cultural capital by adopting fit as an identity and exhibiting competency as aerobicizers. But in the fitness industry, economic capital remains in the hands of men as gym owners (and thus to some extent, creators of fitness spaces) and as the developers and purveyors of fitness products including equipment, apparel, and aerobics programs. According to Barb, a female fitness instructor I spoke with, the gender dynamic is obvious:

*When you go to the workshop or to a conference, the majority of people taking the classes are women, even though a lot of the presenters are men. And they have videos. They all have videos and websites and they have been around for years.*

Men have created many of the most popular fitness programs designed for gyms and in-home workouts. There are numerous examples of programs marketed for women but created by men. In the 1960s it was Jack LaLanne, who was notably rather condescending in his attitude towards women's bodies even as he tried to whip them into shape (Willis, 1990). LaLanne, a heavily muscled strength expert, had a daily exercise show on television aimed at women. In the 1980s Richard Simmons brought fitness to the sedentary woman by making it fun rather than making fun of his audience (à la LaLanne). Today most of the fitness trends and programs are created and marketed by men for

women. Zumba, Body Pump and Body Step, Pilates, and indoor cycling were all created by men.

Zumba, one of the newest patented trends in the aerobics industry, was developed by instructor Alberto Perez in Columbia and packaged and marketed by Perez and two other men in the United States (“Learn about Zumba fitness: Zumba fitness classes,” n.d.). Zumba, as a company, has apparel lines, equipment, music, a certification program. Other international companies produce trademarked group fitness routines set to music in a variety of aerobics genres (Step, yoga, strength training, indoor cycling, cardio boxing). Les Mills, a former Olympian from New Zealand, is the namesake of one such company which creates fitness routines choreographed to accompanying music and sells them to gyms. Mills’s son is the founder of the company which created and distributes one of the most popular group fitness products in the world, BodyPump; a strength training class set to music, held in aerobics rooms.

Even the now-trendy Pilates (advocated by celebrities including Cindy Crawford, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Vanessa Williams), established around World War I by Joseph Pilates, who intended the movements be used by war detainees and soldiers for rehabilitation from injury and disease, is now marketed to women as part of the toning discourse because of its ability to build the lean, toned body. In short, what women are doing in the aerobics room are often programs created by or propagated by men.

Two notable exceptions are Jazzercise and the Jane Fonda Workout. Jazzercise was invented and trademarked by Judi Missett (who remains CEO of the company, Jazzercise) in the late 1960s. In the 1980s, Willis (1990) cites Jane Fonda’s books and videos as “feminist alternative[s] in the exercise market” (p. 6). Both have been critiqued

for their maintenance of a narrow construction of female fitness. Also they both have become cultural jokes, especially Fonda's exercise programs which have not had the longevity of Jazzercise or any lingering feminist influence (if there even was one to begin with) in the fitness industry. While Brabazon (2006) notes that aerobics has provided "a path into the gym space that has historically excluded most women" (p. 66), others are more cautious about what is being entered into and the limits of aerobics (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

The 1990s saw the advent of group exercise workouts that were combinations of aerobics and various forms of combat sports or martial arts practices: boxercise, cardio kickboxing, karaerobics (karate plus aerobics) (Markula, 2003b). Markula contends that this trend marked a move from aerobics as dance-based to a more athletic activity in the popular imagination, which gave it a better "public image" (p. 58). Regardless of the image as more physical, I argue that the suffixes often denoted the imitative nature of these practices and had an inferiorizing effect, despite the actual effects of the class or the level of intensity. They might as well have been called "boxing light" or "gentle karate." The connotation of aerobics as feminine/inferior cannot be overcome even with the introduction of martial arts.

Whether more athletes have been drawn to these new versions of aerobics classes is difficult to say. Markula (Markula, 2003b) writes that "despite all this effort to convince the public that aerobics is as tough and serious as sport, it remains inferior to sport" (Markula, 2003b). Perhaps this is why even sport-infused aerobics remained firmly in the realm of the feminine. Barb and Edie, who have been teaching for over two decades, have witnessed many of the trends and note that aerobics classes, whether

dance-based or athletic-infused, fail to attract men. Though they both can speak very specifically about the one or two male regulars they have had in their respective classes throughout their years of teaching, they said this number rarely changed. Also, in this the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might be in the midst of another shift in trends. While strength remains prominent in the fitness/health discourse and integral to the offerings of commercial gyms, the obesity rhetoric has created a renewed focus on weight loss via low-impact cardio workouts and bringing more accessible, non-threatening and appealing workouts to non-athletes and a more sedentary population. In other words, reincarnations of traditional aerobics are emerging. Zumba, says Edie, falls into this category.

The sport-infused aerobic forms are less prominent than in the 1990s and early 2000s. There were no such classes at Western Massachusetts Athletics (WMA), and the Wellness Athletic Center (WAC) only offered one session a week of GroupKick, a trademarked cardio kickboxing class by Body Systems Training (the former distributor of Les Mills programs in North America; now its own producer and distributor of workouts). In addition to Zumba, cardio-focused aerobics are re-emerging with an emphasis on fun and less on intricate footwork (a critique of Step aerobics). Hip-hop classes were offered at both WAC and WMA. Pole-dancing classes—not offered at any of the gyms I observed—have gained popularity and infamy (“Funky fitness ideas,” n.d., “Oklahoma Gazette Life,” n.d.). Perhaps fitness trend makers have stopped trying to force a sport model onto aerobics and embraced it as an activity “that emphasizes fun and playfulness” (Markula, 2003b). If so, the emphasis on being sexy remains prominent (not

just as a result but as part of the process, as in Zumba and pole dancing), while the emphasis on (appropriate) strength has not waned.

### Aerobics Culture

Despite the physiological benefits of traditional aerobics, in the context of larger gym culture, aerobics is viewed as inferior to other types of workouts. I argue that this is due to its marking as a feminine activity and the connotations associated with the feminine in gym space. This makes the functional benefits difficult to see. Aerobics classes are held in a separate gym space—the aerobics studio or room. The flow in and out of this room is scheduled—unlike almost any other gym space. Also, only a minority of gym members attend aerobics classes regularly. Access is discursively restricted by the marking of aerobics as feminine. Gym goers see and experience the functional and training aspects of non-aerobics activities because they are translatable to outside gym practices (which carry with them their own physical and cultural capital). Running on a treadmill can be used to train for an event like a half marathon; the stationary bike for outdoor cycling training in the midst of a cold winter; even the rock wall at WMA is used primarily by outdoor climbers. Obviously not everyone who uses such equipment is in training, but those who are become labeled “athletes.” The regular female aerobicizer may be a comparable level of “fit,” but she will not receive the same amount of cultural capital because her activity is not seen as athletic in the same way.

Shilling (2003) writes that “it becomes more or less automatic for people to participate in different forms of physical activity which are themselves invested with unequal social value” (p. 118). Aerobics as an activity, confined to a specific space marked as feminine, does not provide the same social or cultural capital within gym



space the way running does for some women. Though both the aerobicizer and the runner may be able to take their physical capital outside of the gym and experience similar benefits because they are both affirming the tenets of the toning discourse by building similar (lean and toned) bodies, the marking of the space and the activities within it hold different values which are perpetuated by the people who choose to do them. This is a major influence on the creation of an aerobics culture and its unique place in gym culture.

Maguire and Mansfield (1998) contend that aerobics is for women who want to maintain or achieve appropriate femininity via a toned, slender body. While this desire is certainly palpable in the space of the aerobics room, it is not unique to the aerobics room. Plenty of women I observed spent considerable time engaged in cardiovascular activity in other areas of the gym—the effect of which is similar to aerobics. It is not desire for a body type that makes aerobics a unique culture. It is also the image of the practice and the practitioners. Again, within the larger gym culture, the runner (so designated by having the right apparel, gear, consistent routine, proficiency) is an athlete. The aerobicizer (with the same characteristics) is not. This affects who chooses to enter and remain (over the long term) in the space.

One aspect of aerobics culture that has been noted in the literature and which affects who enters and uses the space is the competitive atmosphere (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995, 2003b). It is not the existence of competition, but the ways in which it manifests that make its place in the aerobics room unique from other gym spaces in which competition also exists. The space is marked and territorialized by the exercisers. Maguire and Mansfield (1998) found that the space in the front of the room was “reserved” for the best in the class. Though some women would come early

and mark their spots with towels, equipment, or gym bags, often this was not required because women who felt they were not as good moved themselves to the back. “A distinct type of rivalry exists between women in the exercise figuration in their quest for optimal performance and the achievement of better bodies. They compete against their ‘opponents’ without using force but clearly gauge their levels of fitness and expertise against other performers” (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 122).

Markula and Pringle (2006) observe the occupations of space in an aerobics studio: “each exerciser is claiming his or her own space instead of being engaged in a group task. Even in the group exercise studio, exercisers like to reserve their ‘own’ space” ( p. 75). Researchers of aerobics regimens continue to examine their gendered nature and pull out potential benefits (independence, empowerment, community, social networks), while tempering these claims with various cautions (Haravon Collins, 2002; Haravon, 1995; Lloyd, 1996), including the competition over space. Willis (1990) “want[s] to maintain a sense of all the positive features exercise for women generates including...the possibility for bonding between women” (p . 5). Bonding does occur in the aerobics room; I discuss its intricacies below. But as Willis herself notes, the presence of commercialized exercise in a capitalist culture places limits on the positive effects (outside of health) of working out. The bonding potential is notably limited by the wrangling over personal space in the aerobics room.

At WMA competition over space was a consistent concern. Instructors I spoke with told many stories of disgruntled participants and outright squabbling. Instructors attributed the fights over space to different factors, though. Barb spoke of the types of people who take particular classes.

*People are territorial. And partly, it's Saturday. You know, it's during the week too, but Saturdays you get more of those working people who come and so...it's different.*

Barb does not teach the Saturday morning Step class to which she is referring unless she is subbing, but she often hears of the incidents from the instructor or her own regulars during her weekday classes. Edie relayed many incidents when people moved others' Step benches, the grumbling from women who find themselves next to less competent exercisers, and complaints about the proximity of neighbors' equipment.

*There are people who want someone to move away from them. "Why did you put your bench here?" and "no, I'm not moving up." And people, they can be, um, vicious maybe is too strong a word, but there have been some little nasty tangles over somebody wanting either not to have a person who is not very good near them and then having that person be there. And saying, "no, you were late and I want you to move." It's about control.*

The desire for control over space is evident at other times of the week as well.

The classes I attended on weekday mornings had a group of regulars who would congregate on the left side of the room from front to back. To ensure that they were near one another, those who arrived early would set up benches for the rest of the group, including a woman who consistently arrived ten minutes after class had begun, and others who would not show up at all. The practice was allegedly banned (a sign posted in the room states that setting up equipment for others is prohibited) but they continued to dominate that side of the room after the policy went into effect.

This group of aerobics regulars, which Maguire and Mansfield (1998) might refer to as "insiders," controlled the space, but their insider status was not, in contrast to other studies of aerobics participants, based on their skills or their bodies. There was a range of ages, fitness levels, and proficiencies and the group even included a white, married, retired man. Some of them used no steps, only a bench. And none of the women had

achieved the idealized fit female body; one was obese, many were overweight, and they all talked about their weight and bodies before and after class. Their insider-ness was due to their longevity and their close-knit status. Many socialized with one another outside of the class. They were generally kind to others not in their immediate circle, but their interactions and behaviors before, during, and after class made it clear to anyone observing that they were a group.

Even though this group did not exhibit competitive tendencies over skill and proficiency, that version of competition was evident among other individuals and groups in the aerobics classes at WMA. Edie's classes were notorious for attracting participants who wanted to exhibit their skills. Some of the women in Markula's (2003b) study of aerobics culture considered competition anathema to the practice. But she and others (Lenskyj, 1987) note that the constant comparing (of bodies and capabilities) that occurs among participants in fact competition and thus does not allow for a completely freeing or empowering environment. Willis (1990) writes that the aerobic workout focuses women's "positive desires for strength, agility, and the physical affirmation of self and transforms these into competition over style and rivalry for a particular look and performance" (Willis, 1990, p. 7). And Maguire and Mansfield (1998) contend that "women are arguably empowered at the expense of other women" (p. 122).

*I think that [competition] is a body language kind of thing. In Step, I think the competition is involved in not making a mistake. And who can do the biggest turn, and who can do the biggest arms and who can put the biggest flair on a move. I think it's about having the biggest flourishes. And also again, about that territorial thing, where you know, "this is my space and my space is a big space because I move beautifully and you are just gonna have to be in your small space." [Edie]*

Competition in the aerobics room differs from the version of competition that exists in institutionalized sport. First, the ubiquity and acceptance of a weight-loss

discourse in aerobics culture is a driving force behind the competitive environment. But this is not overt competition like that which exists in sports. The winner is never crowned, but I argue that she is obvious to others in the room. Sometimes there is more than one winner and sometimes the winners change. The winner can be: the woman who comes to nearly every aerobics class and has mastered the choreography. She can be the older woman who remains “in great shape.” She might be the outsider who earns insider status. Often she is the woman who has lost a visible amount of weight. These winners are discussed openly in the aerobics room and in the locker room after classes. I did not see any obvious begrudging of the winners during my participation in classes, and routinely heard comments about weight loss, dieting, and the mastery or drudgery of particular classes and instructors. These conversations disguised the competitive atmosphere of the space.

What could not be disguised were the large reflective surfaces that covered the walls of the aerobics room. In the aerobics classroom, competition is facilitated by the mirrors, which also mark the space—as I noted in the previous chapter—as a disciplinary space. The gaze of the instructor who faces the mirror can be on anyone. And the gazes of the participants can wander and land anywhere in the room because of the mirrors. At WMA there were actually fewer mirrors than at other gyms I have attended. Full-length mirrors lined the front wall and one half of a side wall. Some aerobics rooms have mirrors on multiple walls. This was true of WAC where, in addition to the front wall, there were also mirrors along both of the side walls. “The mirror in aerobics classes facilitates the unidentifiable gaze that at the same time every participant possesses” write Markula and Pringle (2006, p. 80).

Aerobicizers become participants in and observers of the competition. Markula (2003a) found that exercisers use the mirrors to compare their own bodies to those of other aerobicizers. They have engaged in their own disciplinary power over themselves using the space of the aerobics classroom. Other studies done in aerobics classrooms found similar dynamics among power, self-discipline, and mirrors/the gaze.

The significance of aerobics...is based upon its influence in controlling bodily appearance and function. Seeing their reflections in the mirrors and gazing at others, [participants] realize the gap between their existing form and an ideal appearance. They make themselves into objects, scrutinizing and adapting their bodies within specified social limits. (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 124)

Mirrors then create competition among participants but also within the individual who is trying to achieve the idealized female body. She is being disciplined by the others in the class whom she can easily see via the mirrors and by an image of herself which she does not see in the mirror. “The woman who perceives her body to be out of condition, lacking in muscle tone, in need of correction and reshaping through aerobics, has also become committed to relentless self-surveillance” (Lloyd, 1996, p. 92). Mirrors encourage this practice.

Notable about WMA is that one session a week of Zumba, the Latin-dance aerobics class that drew many bystanders when WMA initially brought it to the club, was held in the basketball court. Though others could see into the court from various vantage points, the participants could never see themselves. Though I was never able to take one of the basketball court classes, I noted that they were always very full and that no one, in the locker room after the class, complained about not being able to see themselves. Several of the boot camp type classes, which I did take, also are held on the basketball court because of scheduling and equipment issues. No one expressed frustration at the

lack of mirrors to monitor form—a common rationale for their presence—or anything else.

Competition manifests differently in aerobics rooms because of the reasons I have discussed above but also because of the discord between discourses of community and individuality that exist in the space specific to its marking as feminine. “This female space provides the performers with a sense of place in which there is the possibility that they can freely experience their bodies” (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 120). As individuals, some women come to aerobics to do their big turns and make sweeping flourishes with their arms; to perform for themselves and for others. This gets in the way, at times, of others attempting the same thing, as Edie noted. It also disrupts the perception that within this female space exists a community environment where all are welcome.

Female-marked space in the gym is perceived as welcoming space because it is feminine space. Brabazon (2006) argues that “aerobics is an important intervention in the masculine modalities of sport, providing a pleasurable site for community building among women” (p. 65). The divergence from traditional sport, as I have already noted, marks the practice as inferior but does create room for some (most obviously members of the in-group and the “flourishers”) for a pleasurable experience, but the idea of community (as real, as constructed, as natural?) is less explored. The concept of community and sociability was raised, however, by several interviewees in reference to group exercise classes. Sophie came to aerobics classes in her early adulthood after doing sports training since her teens. Though she had free access to a college gym, she chose to join a commercial gym that had aerobics classes.

*I got really into doing the classes. I just thought they were really fun. The aerobics classes. Step, especially. The instructor was great. I just liked it a lot more [than other forms of exercise]. I liked the groupness of it. [Sophie]*

Barb, when she was a new mother, just liked that it got her out of the house and among other people.

*I was pregnant when I got certified [to teach aerobics], but then I was home alone and it was a way to get out and so I think that a lot of the people, especially when I teach in the mornings, it's a lot of moms. So sometimes that's your only time to talk to adults during the day.*

Ruby, a former instructor, echoed the idea of just being around other people—moms or not.

*I think it's kind of comforting especially when you see the same people over and over [in class] even if you don't know them outside of the gym. You get to say those hi's and hellos at the gym. I think it's nice especially in our kind of disconnected society and feel good about that.*

But others spoke about either the limits of sociability or the lack of desire for it. The former was mentioned by two women who felt out of place in aerobics because of their size.

*Roni: I will take a yoga class, every once in a while, but I tend not to be class focused – I don't really like classes that much.*

*Kris: Any particular reason?*

*Roni: I'm a larger woman. I worry about that a little bit. I never really liked the social thing all that much.*

Faye expressed similar reservations.

*I've never really been into classes ever. I tried. But my coordination...and at different times self-esteem definitely does play a part. I always feel like the biggest person there.*

For some, there is discomfort in this space that is marked as feminine and which mandates a certain level of sociability. The social is impeded because, for Roni and Faye, they have not achieved the desired female body they believe is valued and accepted in



aerobics spaces, even though many who attend regularly do not meet those standards either. They feel their bodies impede their own sociability and what is being directed toward them. They have both established gym routines around other activities and do not negotiate a culture they find uncomfortable.

Others do not desire sociability. Dana makes a distinction between going to classes and going to play recreational sports. Both are physical activities but ones which she uses for different purposes in her life.

*I'm experiencing the same type of activity with people [in the space] and afterwards I can relate to them and ask them questions. I can ask them questions and it turns into a social type of situation—it's that mutual experience that I like. You know I also participate in softball which is absolutely a social thing for me. And that's where I draw the difference. I go there to socialize and have fun versus I go to train and the socialization that happens as a result of that is secondary. My primary goal is to train.*

Other participants would rather not be social, and they attend despite the perception of mandatory sociability because they want to be told what to do—rather than developing their own fitness programs or daily routines—to combat boredom with standard gym equipment such as treadmills and ellipticals, and to gain the knowledge fitness instructors are perceived to have. They desire external motivation: from others in the class (sometimes via competition), from an instructor, from the music and the movements.

*I think people like the idea of being motivated. You know it's that idea of well I'm paying for it so I'm more likely to do it. [Ruby]*

*I prefer people telling me what to do. It goes by quicker. [Lyndell]*

*I'm really interested in joining some of the classes because they do have those group activities and that for me is the motivation. I was so bored with everything before. [Dana]*

*I feel like the classes are a little more interesting for me, I get pretty bored doing elliptical and bikes. [Thea]*

### Capital through Aerobics

In addition to its marking as the only feminine space, the aerobics room is—more than any other space in the gym—the location where the most obvious demonstration of a woman’s physical and social capital occurs. Like the exercise salon of decades ago, the aerobics rooms in commercial fitness clubs are where middle and upper class women gather for socialization and exercise away from the male-dominated weight room and the more mixed-gender cardio spaces. Though men can and do participate in traditional aerobics, when they are present there are a minority presence; they do not have the ability to challenge the significance of the practice or the marking of the space as feminine. Aerobics classes then freely allow for a woman-centered display of (or competition for) skills and bodies that earn them social, cultural, and physical capital. Acquiring the socially acceptable body is a means of earning multiple forms of capital and “aerobics is a way to achieve the social body” (J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 125).

In this section I explore the types of capital gained and displayed in the aerobics room beginning with a discussion of the physical capital that women seek when they do aerobics while also noting that the access to aerobics itself is a demonstration of capital. Finally I explore the ways in which social and cultural capital can be gained and displayed via aerobics without accompanying physical capital. For my purposes here I understand physical capital as a gendered commodity both in the space of the aerobics room and outside. Shilling (2003) has noted the absence of gender in Bourdieu’s discussions of physical capital, but it is nearly impossible not to see the gendered differences in the types of bodies that accrue physical capital and the way it is accrued in the gym. For women, in accordance with the toning discourse, it is a slender, lean-

muscled body that is most valuable; a body that can be achieved via aerobics in a space that is designated for women and for such purposes. This is not to say, however, that even women who attain this ideal will have unfettered abilities to transform this capital. As Markula (2003b) notes, “aerobics provide women with strength and powerful femininity to some extent, [but] the potential power has been channeled by the requirement of shaping the body to the commercially supported ideas of femininity” (pp.66-7). I would add that the power is also affected by the spaces in which it can be wielded.

As I noted in the previous chapter, physical capital can be used to accrue social and cultural capital. Within the gym generally and in the aerobics room specifically, these forms of capital differ in their manifestations and uses outside the gym. At times “outside” capital comes into the gym to help build more of the same and aid in the acquisition of physical capital. Cultural capital, in the gym, most often manifests as knowledge and skill about exercise, how to get and remain fit, or even knowledge about the gym itself—how things work at a particular gym. Personal trainers and aerobics instructors thus are seen as holding a significant amount of cultural capital by virtue of their positions. But gym members demonstrate their cultural capital as well through their proficiency using equipment, mastering steps and exercises in classes, and offering advice to other members. Social capital allows members to make and maintain social networks in the gym some of which extend outside the gym. Regulars and members who have developed friendships with staff, instructors, or personal trainers display social capital through these relationships.

The ubiquitous discussions of weight, weight loss, the questioning of what diet others were on (one of the weekday insiders asked an outsider who had recently lost a

noticeable amount of weight if she had used a liquid diet when they were changing after class in the locker room), and the confessional (“I ate way too much last night) is part of the culture of aerobics at WMA and arguably the greater aerobics culture. In *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book*, Fonda herself confesses to all the harmful methods of weight loss and maintenance she engaged in before she found aerobics (Lloyd, 1996). In no other spaces of the gym were these types of discussions occurring. Even though weightlifting men are sometimes ridiculed for their attention to things like protein powders, recovery drinks, and special diets, these discussions were not a prevalent part of the weight room culture at any of the gyms I observed, even at WMA which was the only gym that sold some of these products on site.

Any amount of weight loss means moving closer to the ideal social body and an accrual of capital for women inside and outside of the aerobics room; one reason why it is discussed with such frequency. Although I did hear praise provided to women who had lost weight, the focus of the attention was on how they did it. There was an implicit understanding that aerobics alone was not the vehicle for weight loss given that everyone in the room was doing aerobics but not everyone had achieved her ideal. In addition to physical capital, the female aerobicizer who loses weight gains cultural capital in the form of knowledge about weight loss. She embodies the knowledge and often shares it with others in the group (one WMA aerobics instructor actually brought in the supplements she used when she lost weight), though others’ ability to gain the same cultural capital is limited by their own weight loss processes.

The feminine marking of the space allows not just for the transference of knowledge but a shared aggravation with the process of achieving the ideal body. In

addition to the confessional moments are the discussions of diet failures, intense exercising, and food deprivation. The shared complaining is part of this space in which different forms of work manifest as women try to achieve the ideal body. Conformity to current norms of femininity requires both emotional and physical work. As McDowell and Sharp (1997) note: “The body is an object over which we labor—dieting, working out, picking, pruning, squeezing and decorating to conform to some idealized view of an appropriate femininity or masculinity” (p. 203). Some of this work, for women, happens in the space of the aerobics room. And successful work brings rewards: the body and the social and even economic benefits that come with it. Morse (1987) writes that “exercise can be added to the applications of makeup and clothing and to the body-molding regimes of corseting, diet, and surgical intervention (including plastic surgery and liposuction) as a means of achieving femininity” (p. 24).

Even as women accrue capital through aerobics, we have to remember that the ability to do so is available only to certain women. Solid positioning in the middle class is almost a requirement for access to gyms today. “The dominant classes have the time and resources to treat the body as a project [and]...tend not to be overly concerned with producing a large, strong body, but with a slim body” (Shilling, 2003, p. 115). The aerobics room is an ideal space for both the building and display of such capital. At WMA, the most popular aerobics classes were scheduled from 8am to noon or at 4pm and included dance aerobics, Step, and sculpting (high repetitions of light weights) classes. All of these reify the toning discourse because they are designed to build lean muscle and slim figures by reducing body fat rather than build mass. And they are accessible only to people who do not work traditional 9-to-5 jobs. They have acquired the

resources which allow them the time to exercise in a very specific way, in a specific space, in the middle of the morning. It is a job and the privilege of being able to work at it is the proverbial mixed blessing.

Women's fitness has been referred to as the "third shift" denoting not only its role as labor but the way it is experienced by and mandated for middle-class, white, heterosexual women (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). The pay comes in the form of the physical capital that buys various forms of social and cultural capital. The requirement for physical capital has become another form of women's work in a time when most middle-class, heterosexual women must work outside the home but still perform the majority of domestic labor (Hennessy, 2000). But it is not exclusive to this group. At all three sites I observed women of color, gay, and working class women working out in accordance with the toning discourse; they were building of a lean, muscled body.

Women of color, though never many at one time, participated in aerobics classes at both WMA and WAC. Participation in aerobics classes, however—especially when they occur in the middle of the day—demonstrate middle-class flexibility in terms of hours worked or type of job. A lack of flexibility might not signal lower-class status, but it does mean any woman who does not have a flexible job schedule must find other ways to build her physical capital outside of aerobics classes.

This is an issue for all women at Universal Fitness. As I have noted earlier, UF provides access to people across a greater range of income levels. The membership fee is less of a barrier than at other commercial gyms. But it is not as "multi-use" as other gyms in that UF does not offer aerobics classes. And so to accrue physical capital, a female member must come in with a certain amount of cultural capital already. She must have

enough fitness knowledge to know how to build the appropriate female body. She does not have luxury of getting bored with traditional machines and seeking motivation from an instructor who tells her what to do (i.e, how to build physical capital while passing on some cultural capital in the form of knowledge). This is not to say that women who go to UF do not receive their information elsewhere. The ubiquity of fitness information from magazines, television, and peers outside of UF came into the space. Women often worked out with one another demonstrating exercises, techniques, and routines they learned elsewhere. Among young women especially, I observed the practice of using small weights while completing a higher number of repetitions; this technique is part of the toning discourse and has been advertised to women by the fitness industry because it is said to create the highly desirable (and “profitable”) lean musculature without any worry of bulking up. Female members at UF could build physical capital without the use of aerobics, but in ways consistent with appropriate femininity.

In another example of the varied flow of capital in the gym, I observed that, in the aerobics room, one does not necessarily need to have acquired physical capital in order to have and display social and cultural capital. Social capital, on display in the aerobics room most obviously in the presence of cliques, did not require any physical capital or much cultural capital. Just as in the more general spaces of the gym, there are groups of regulars, some more closely-knit than others. The group of weekday aerobics regulars at WMA, as I noted above, have little physical capital among them, but they demonstrate their social capital when they reserve spaces for one another, when they freely engage in chatter during class, discuss shared outside gym social activities, and report on the activities of missing members. Even though they are regulars with social

capital, not all of them have earned cultural capital, which is demonstrated through individual achievement.

Cultural capital in aerobics is demonstrated through competency, apparel, and positioning. Even if a woman is not an insider with a group of friends who save her a space on the aerobics floor, she can earn cultural capital by being good at aerobics. She is the woman who quickly masters the choreography in a class, knows how to increase the intensity of a workout with alternative moves and steps, receives praise from the instructor, or loses weight. Or she can be the stylish woman with outfits by well-known brand names. Clothing signals capital inside and outside of the space in different ways. Within the space, the expertly attired female aerobicizer signals to others that she has economic capital (to buy the outfits), and cultural capital (knows which brands are best). Outside of the gym, aerobics clothing conveys both of these in different ways. She is signaling that she has the economic capital available to take aerobics (even more if she can take them in the middle of a traditional work day) as well as cultural capital—she knows about fitness. When women wear their aerobics clothing out in public—grocery store, café, mall—they are, they are making a public statement about how they have gained control over their fitness (Willis, 1990).

Finally, positioning in the room is a display of capital. Maguire and Mansfield note that those who are at the front of the room, closer to the instructor, have established relationships with her “signal[ling] a greater access to her expert knowledge” (p. 120). This is a display of cultural and social capital. But it is not exclusive to the front of the room and not entirely a product of insider/outsider status. At WMA, people who positioned themselves in the back of the room were also proficient practitioners. It was



the middle of the room where people tended to hide. Because of the mirrors and because of the moves (most often performed in a Step aerobics class) that turned the whole class to face the back, the back row was able to display their expertise, too. The back row aerobicizers at WMA were not usually affiliated with a group, though instructors did categorize those who positioned themselves there as “back rowers.” But their skills were known among participants. Expertise was conferred on a back rower when an instructor would, when doing a back-facing move, say “follow X—she knows what she is doing.” Capital flowed from the front to the back of the room.

### Weights in the Aerobics Room

One of the reasons why the term “group exercise” has come into vogue in the fitness industry is because it more accurately describes the range of classes most gyms offer. The space designation in most gyms typically remains “aerobics room” or “aerobics studio,” but such spaces are used for far more diverse activities now. Aerobics rooms are not just for intricately choreographed, high-knee-stepping classes led by slender women in leotards. In fact, instructors I spoke with noted a decline in traditional aerobic classes such as Step and hi/lo (a floor aerobics class where students can make the moves high or low impact) and dance-based classes modeled on the early days of Jazzercise. Brabazon (2006) has referred to aerobics as “a salad bar of opportunities and choices” (p. 66) and this has never been more true with the addition of yoga, Pilates and other mindful fitness classes (Markula & Pringle, 2006) as well as classes that are less focused on providing a fat-burning, cardio-intensive workout and more on strength and conditioning. The latter are the focus of this section.

The goal of these classes is a “total body” workout. Total body is a popular fitness phrase that connotes a complete exercise routine and is placed in contrast to the body fragmentation routines of the past (i.e., by muscle groups) and to classes with a singular focus (i.e., fat burning). The phrase (and its promise of overall toning) has been used to advertise exercise equipment (celebrities including Chuck Norris hawk the Total Body Gym in infomercials) and routines (i.e., “total body toning”; “total body pilates”). The emergence of total body and the way it has been applied to exercises from Pilates to weight lifting is not surprising when considering the place of fitness in the United States and the desire to appeal to everyday exercisers. People fit exercise into their day; this is especially true of women and the “third shift” some are working when they go to the gym (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Total body is the fitness version of one-stop shopping. And in the context of a group exercise class, this paradigm promises a complete workout: hit all the muscle groups, sweat a little, raise the heart rate—all in the span of an hour.

Total body classes include many boot camps which incorporate lighter weight work, body weight exercises, core-focused exercises, balance, dynamic movements, and cardiovascular exercise in the form of plyometrics (explosive movements) and traditional movements such as jumping jacks and jumping rope. At both WMA and WAC boot camp classes were held in the aerobics classrooms. Total body, in the form of boot camp, is appealing to both women and men, based on my observations. The breakdown (men versus women) was dependent not on the class itself, but on the instructor and scheduling.

Boot camp is a generalized term used to describe group exercise classes that include series of the exercises listed above in such a way that a participant’s heart rate

remains elevated but with moments of higher and lower intensity depending on the exercise. There is no prescribed way of conducting a boot camp, however, and so they all differ depending on the instructor and the equipment available. The boot camp culture at WMA was tied more closely to the overall aerobics scene at the club. Some of the same instructors who taught traditional aerobics also taught boot camp. But it differed in that the classes taught by personal trainers were often more popular.

At WAC, only personal trainers or instructors who specialized in boot camp taught these classes. And they were all men. One personal trainer taught the class wearing camouflage pants and cap, an Army green t-shirt, and a whistle (which he used liberally to indicate the beginning or end of an exercise) around his neck. He was not an aerobics instructor teaching an aerobics class—he was a drill sergeant running a boot camp. The presence of boot camps in aerobics studios, spaces created for the purpose of bringing fitness to women through the employment of allegedly feminine movements incorporated into exercise routines, complicates the understanding of the space and suggests it is more heterogeneous than it initially appears.

Some of the moves in boot camp, though, are grounded in traditional aerobics. Brad, a personal trainer and instructor at WMA who teaches many of the strength training classes, including boot camp, noted that men come into his classes because he is known around the gym for being tough. As a result men do exercises and focus on areas they would not normally do while doing traditional weightlifting in the weight room.

*More than half the class is legs and hips. Men don't like to do those exercises as much. Especially when I have them do the hip raises. Guys never do that. That's like so feminine. But the guys all do it and they don't feel bad about it. But in other classes, guys would be like, "that's feminine, I wouldn't do that." But they all do it in boot camp.*

So while total body classes appeal to women working their third shift, they also provide physical benefits to men. The “feminine” in aerobics is integral to a complete workout—one that men have not historically been encouraged to engage in.

In addition to boot camp are other strength training and conditioning classes including kettlebells—a popular class at WMA that I attended almost weekly during my observations. Kettlebells are molded cast iron weights that resemble cannon balls with handles. This shape makes them ideal for both lifting and swinging movements rather than just the lifting that is done with dumbbells and weighted bars. Though developed in 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia, they are a fairly recent arrival in the United States (1960s) and even more novel to the general gym population. WMA was the only club that had kettlebells and though several sets were on the floor for use by anyone, they were most often used in the aerobics room where about three dozen kettlebells of various weights resided for use in kettlebell and boot camp classes.

Kettlebell classes were a new addition to the group fitness schedule during my fieldwork and were offered two times a week: noon on Tuesdays and 4:30 on Thursdays. The same instructor, Brad, taught all the sessions. The noon classes were dominated by men with the evening classes mixed but often with a greater number of women. Day group fitness classes are usually perceived as being popular among women because of the greater likelihood of flexible, part-time, or stay-at-home schedules. But the noon hour allowed men and women who may work more traditional hours to take the one-hour class on their lunch breaks.

Brad’s classes are known to be difficult. His background in the martial arts and combat sports marked him as a tough instructor, and he could often be seen on the floor

training his clients using boxing moves and equipment such as medicine balls. Like his boot camps, men entered the space because he was the instructor and because the classes were billed as strength training.

*Kris: So your classes seem to attract more of a mixed gender crowd than almost any class here. Why?*

*Brad: I think because males feel like I'm a man's man and they can come in and do my class, even if it is kind of like, more seen as a woman's class. Like, yeah, so I would think that because I'm a man's man, I guess and they think "well, he's tough, so I guess I can do that class." They feel more comfortable. And women feel comfortable with me I guess, because they just say I'm a friendly guy, nice guy. Even though I look kind of intimidating sometimes, they say I have a nice smile and I'm warm.*

Female instructors at WMA, no matter what their smiles are like, have not been able to draw as many men into their strength training classes. Barb's sculpting class at WMA—based on the popular BodyPump, and which at WAC draws a mixed gender crowd—has never had more than several male participants.

*Never had very many men [overall]. Now I'm starting to get a few more in the weight classes. I have one regular guy and so I think when people see a guy in there, it helps. They are more likely to come in. So now I will have a few. I think I'm just, you know, like a little – girl. I just think – I don't know. I don't know if they think I'm not going to work them very hard or – I don't know. I have to figure out how to get more men in there, which I have been trying to do for years.*

The appearance of feminized strength in the aerobics room is not just affecting the number of men who enter the class, though. Women who desire an intense strength training workout have been hesitant to enter the sculpting classes taught by female instructors at WMA *because* they appeal to women who might not otherwise engage in strength training. Some of the women I spoke with were reluctant to take these classes in the aerobics room because they saw “a type” of woman in there and felt it would not be a rigorous enough workout. They described the women who went into the aerobics room as older, not athletic-looking, and concerned with maintaining an appropriate femininity as

evidenced by the use of make-up and stylish clothing. This perception of who went into the space for traditional aerobics influenced even the perception of the weight classes that were held there. Speaking specifically about the weight classes in the aerobics room at WMA, both Faith and Lyndell, young, white women who work out 5-7 times a week and rarely take traditional floor aerobics, initially expressed reservations about going in.

*I didn't investigate [classes] earlier because I saw people who were doing the classes are more like older folks...I wanted to be challenged if I was going to restructure my day around going to a class. And from what I would just quickly observe, I couldn't really figure out if it was going to be challenging or not. But when I took time to actually start going, it was actually very challenging and really good. It's not watered down. [Faith]*

At her former gym, Lyndell took BodyPump regularly. But there, unlike at WMA, it was always mixed gender. The (nearly) women-only presence affected the atmosphere, she felt.

*I don't like that there is only women in it. Women with small weights – which is why I didn't do it for a while. I was like, I don't want small weights. And there is a weird general kind of suggestion to go down in weight. My fitness goals are not particular. I don't want to be really jacked or anything like that, but I do like challenging myself and getting better. And there is a little bit of a wimpy factor. And part of it is that I have heard people talk about it saying "I don't want to get really bulked up." You are not going to get bulked up on five pound weights. Or there is this one woman was like "yeah, I have noticed a lot of women have developed big shoulders." [Lyndell]*

She does not attend these classes much anymore, she said, but has been going to boot camp when she can fit in into her schedule.

The writing of the space as feminine was seemingly a larger impediment for women who wanted to strength train in it, but felt that such an endeavor in an aerobics room with women well-acquainted with traditional aerobics might be “watered down.” For women like Faith and Lyndell, the boundary crossing was entering feminine space. For them the transgression was being marked as a particular version of feminine, an

aerobics femininity. Neither of them expressed reservations about using any other gym space.

The issues that arose most obviously from my observations of strength training in aerobics spaces were around the protection of traditional women's spaces. Has the emergence of total body strength training pushed women from a space that has always been theirs? Or has it provided a safe space for them to engage in strength training? In the following chapter I discuss women's presence in weight rooms. The hesitation or outright refusal of many women to enter male-dominated weight rooms means the aerobics room can offer an alternative with options like Barb's sculpting class. Even Brad's nice smile at the front of a kettlebell class might not be enough to draw women in. Maybe some women need a female instructor and a largely female space. Is a move toward gender neutrality really a pushing of the masculine over the feminine?

Thus far, no. Female-centered strength training remains and is growing while ideas about what strength is and the techniques to build it evolve. Feminized activities, such as Pilates classes are still, at WMA, dominated by women. And the arrival of Barre at WMA reinforces the idea that aerobics spaces are women's spaces while also expanding the concept of the space as one in which only fat-burning, dance-inspired practices occur. Barre is a recent arrival to the fitness industry that harkens back to the dance roots of aerobics but is focused on strength training rather than intensive cardiovascular exercise. The patented Cardio Barre was invented by a former male ballet dancer who brought ballet moves into the aerobics studio. Simply called Barre at WMA, it is taught by a former dancer and has drawn almost exclusively women.

Is this a sign of women taking back the space from the highly militaristic or Russian-inspired practices that have brought more men into the aerobics room? A view such as the one Brabazon (2006) espouses might allow us to see the feminized strength that has come into the aerobics room as potentially feminist. “Fitness can and should be used by feminists to further the social, political and collectivist struggles” (p. 75). But is the struggle political or is it over how to build “long lean muscles and burn fat” like Cardio Barre promises? (“Cardio barre,” n.d.).

Grosz suggests that feminine practices, such as aerobics, provide promise and limitations. “The practices of femininity can readily function, in certain contexts that are difficult to ascertain in advance, as modes of guerilla subversion of patriarchal codes, although the line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one, difficult to draw with certainty” (1994, p. 144). Also, we must ask how much power do practitioners of femininity actually have? How effective and how conscious are female aerobizicers of their subordinated position in the gym hierarchy? According to Markula and Pringle (2006) “participants in group exercise classes are not necessarily the key creators of change because they have only a limited freedom and knowledge to shape the actual classes and consequently, their margin of ‘resistance’ is rather small” (p. 161).

Will a practice such as Barre be subversive? Maybe if it re-takes the space of the aerobics room for feminine purposes, assuming that female-only space is indeed subversive. But pushing out boot camps also harms other women who are seeking non-feminized strength training. One problem with the realization of subversion (no matter what is being subverted) coming from within the aerobics room lies with its status as a semi-private and isolated space. Duncan (N. Duncan, 1996) writes that this “may have an



undesirable depoliticizing effect on a group, fortifying it against challenges from, and allowing it to inadvertently assume independence from, a wider public sphere” (p. 129). If only feminized strength is allowed into an aerobics space, then only feminized strength is valued. The reinforcement of a largely singular version of female strength is indeed depoliticizing and affects, as I discuss in the following chapter, the women who are building different versions of strength or choose to engage in strength training outside of the feminized aerobics room.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE WEIGHT ROOM

Women do cardio. Men lift weights. Women go to the gym to get smaller. Men go to get bigger. Previous research, along with the ways in which women themselves discuss their gym practices, corroborate this binary (Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Heywood, 1998, 2003). But as with all such distinctions, there are exceptions. Men do perform cardiovascular exercise. And women lift weights. Sometimes women lift significant amounts of weight and build muscle mass in ways that present a visual challenge (at the very least) to the norms of femininity cultivated in the Western world. But how much weight does a woman have to lift to do so? Or how much weight *can* she lift before she exceeds appropriate feminine behavior? How big can her muscles get and which ones?

Considerable scholarly debate has focused on the extent to which muscle-building in women is or can be non-hegemonic, queer, resistant, liberating, or empowering. Schulze (1997), in her analysis of the readings and responses to female bodybuilders, concluded that “the female bodybuilder threatens not only current socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity, but also the system of sexual difference itself” (p. 9). While some have seen potential in weightlifting to disturb the dominant discourses about women’s bodies, and particularly musculature and strength, most scholars have either placed conditions on this potential or outright critiqued the practice for reifying the dominant norms of femininity through apologetic processes as compensation for the non-normative physiques female bodybuilders present (Balsamo, 1996; Fisher, 1997; Heywood, 1998; Moore, 1997).

None of the women in this study were, at the time of data collection, lifting weights for the purpose of competitive bodybuilding. But they were indeed bodybuilding; they were engaging in activities in the gym designed (or believed to have the ability) to shape their bodies in specific ways. This version of bodybuilding occurs in most of the public spaces in the gym. Cardio-focused workouts are meant to build a lean body by “burning” fat. Cardio exercise allows an individual to build her body—whether it be a lean body or a slender body or a thin body—to her own standards. I suggest that cardiovascular exercise, though its effect is reduction of fat, is a form of bodybuilding as well. Throughout this chapter, my references to bodybuilding are meant to be read in this paradigm. This understanding of bodybuilding is in contrast to that expressed in the instructional literature on bodybuilding as well as some of the research in the social sciences (Bolin, 2003). I maintain that the work an exerciser engages in within the gym for the purpose of creating a specific body (of her choosing) is a form of bodybuilding, even when the building is meant to reduce.

In this chapter I focus on the bodybuilding women do in the space of the weight room. First, I discuss the importance of this discussion as it pertains to the woman who lifts weights in a gym for non-competitive purposes. The remainder of the chapter is structured by two larger questions: first, how and why do women enter the space and secondly, how do they construct the space through their experiences and observations. Regarding the former, I discuss women’s motivations for entering the space; the people who introduced them to the space; and the role of trainers and gym employees in shaping women’s experiences in weightlifting spaces. The second part of this chapter is a discussion of the common perceptions about the space and weightlifting. I end the

chapter with a discussion of the potential for resistance when performing resistance training (i.e., weightlifting).

First, though, I discuss the meanings that have been constructed around women's musculature. Though much of the scholarly discussion of women's musculature has been through the lens of competitive women's bodybuilding, I attempt here to illustrate the meanings of muscle for the non-competitive female bodybuilder. To do this I draw both on the literature about women's competitive bodybuilding, and women's competitive sports, as well as the work about identity through bodily inscription and construction that has proliferated within the field of feminist philosophy.

#### Lean or Mean? The Meanings of Women's Muscles

Women must negotiate the many and sometimes conflicting discourses around muscularity, femininity, and body building. As Dworkin (2001) notes, "the more muscular new millennium is here" (p. 333). But how do women, compelled by fitness and health discourses, develop muscle mass when the spaces in which muscle building occurs have been marked as male? The use of aerobics spaces and aerobics discourse has made the lean muscled body mandate easier for women to achieve without having to contest gendered spatial boundaries in the gym. Still, for numerous reasons, women want access to the full complement of resistance machines that exist in weight rooms as well as information about resistance training. Whether women choose to lift weights or are compelled to lift weights to meet criteria set by coaches, peers, or cultural mandates, the building of female musculature remains a complicated and contested process.

George's (2005) study of female intercollegiate soccer players highlights the varying responses women have to their musculature. During her time with an NCAA

Division I women's soccer team, George frequently heard complaints from these athletes about their bodies that were based on how much muscle they were building. The women, who were concerned about maintaining the slender and toned ideal, were dismayed when their bodies grew larger because of muscle. To them, getting bigger was getting bigger whether they were growing muscle or fat. "The most feared transgression against femininity and heterosexuality appeared to be size in general" (George, 2005, p. 327). The further they moved from the fit feminine ideal, the more distressed they grew. As a result, they developed strategies to alter the building of their bodies.

These women negotiated their own feelings as well as cultural attitudes about gender, femininity, and muscle throughout their college athletic careers. Though many felt that the size of the muscles they were developing did not comport with standards of fit femininity, none felt they were not women because of their muscles. The participants in Fisher's (1997) study of competitive female bodybuilders, however, often would not identify as women because of their desires for an extreme musculature and the results. Competitive bodybuilding, and the resulting bodies, affected the process of gender identity construction. The musculature Fisher's participants maintained in order to stay competitive exceeded, they felt, the norms of femininity and so many chose to identify as "human" even as they engaged in various practices (hair design and use of make-up) to maintain some connection to the category of woman.

Dworkin's (2001) research on women who exercise in fitness centers presented similar findings. Though these women were not compelled by coaches or by the promise of social and cultural capital that exists in intercollegiate sports, they were heavily influenced by the intersecting discourses of fitness, femininity, and biology. Women who

chose to lift weights as part of a regular fitness regimen, developed strategies that would prevent them from developing physiques that they found to be unfeminine in that they were too big or bulky, or lacking in the appropriate number and location of curves.

The women in my study also negotiated the building of their muscles though they did not explicitly tie these negotiations to their femininity. TJ embraced her large muscles and admitted that much of her weightlifting was vanity induced. Carole started weightlifting in her 20s trying to get stronger for her sport, but also because she did not want to be skinny anymore. Her motivations, as she expressed them, were not in conflict and resulted in a positive body image when she lifted weights. More focused, though, on her cardio-intensive sport, weightlifting was not a consistent part of her routine. But in her 40s when her body began to change as she approached menopause, she returned to a regular weightlifting routine in order to “be fit and tone” and to gain endurance rather than build muscle. She, like the women Dworkin (2001) categorized as moderate lifters, engaged in the lower weights, higher reps strategy popular among lifters who do not want to build muscle mass. But even this strategy includes the use of typically masculine exercises, like chest presses with free-weight bars, in the space of the weight room. Carole describes her current routine as “much more practical now. Back then I was still young enough to believe that there was some beautiful starry thing that might happen.” Her statement suggests she is more realistic now about what weightlifting can do. The negotiations she engages in are mostly around how much change she can accomplish, at her age, through weightlifting.

Sophie, a varsity athlete in high school, began lifting—like many of the women in George’s (2005) study—to build and maintain strength for her sport. She lifted in the off-

season (not required) because peers and family members did so as well. It took on a casually competitive aspect for her and though she was successful—in competing with others in the gym and at getting stronger—she was highly conscious of the ways her body was changing.

*I wanted to get better at [my sport], but I was also pretty self-conscious about the way I looked. I thought it would help with weight loss. And I actually just got pretty muscley because I tend to get muscley, and so I was a little horrified by that.*

Sophie's horror reflects the reality that some women experience when they lift weights. They get large muscles, even when popular discourse, fitness industry publications, and fitness experts, like trainers, tell them they will not get big and "muscley." As she has gotten older, Sophie said she misses the ability to change her body fairly easily through weightlifting.

Most women know what the normative feminine body looks like. And they know, from both fitness industry materials and their own experiences, how weightlifting can help achieve or challenge the (ever-changing) norm. Whether they are quite comfortable (like TJ) maintaining or building a body that challenges the norm, or they currently or have in the past constructed weight lifting routines to maintain a desired level of conformity to the norm (like Sophie and Carole), all women who lift weights negotiate their lifting behaviors. No woman has the privilege of not thinking about how to build her body in relation to the current acceptable version of the feminine body. Access to weight lifting spaces and knowledge about weightlifting are part of the negotiation.

### The Benefits of Boundary Crossing

What happens when women enter male gym space? Are they challenging the ways in which that space is conceptualized? What disruption, if any, occurs? In this

section I discuss the spaces I observed and how their layout and conceptualization (by users and gym employees) marked the spaces in ways that affected movement and behaviors. I then address how the entry of women into weight spaces enables the acquisition and sharing of gendered knowledge that can disrupt the marking of the space as masculine. First though I discuss women's means of access.

The issue of access remains a fraught one. A discussion of access to previously male gym spaces and practices must include a questioning of what women are gaining access to and why. In Chapter Two I explained how the individual mandate for fitness conforms to American neoliberal philosophies about individualism, health, and well-being. When considering access to gym space generally and the weight room more specifically, what women are gaining access to must remain at the forefront of these discussions.

Again, there is a dissonance that women must negotiate. Weight lifting produces certain concrete, measurable health benefits: strengthening of bones (to reduce risk of osteoporosis), building muscle strength for use in everyday activities, losing weight (to lower risk of or combat weight-related health conditions), and reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. Simultaneously, as women encounter these health discourses, they are also negotiating the aesthetic benefits of weight lifting: weight loss/management, and the development of appropriately sized muscles. [Even within the health discourse women are assured that they will not come out of the weight room looking like a body builder ("Benefits of weight lifting for women," n.d.).]

Recognizing that access is not neutral, that it requires—but does not always receive—thoughtful analysis and consideration of motives and effects, I nonetheless



proceed, in this chapter, with the following basic belief: that women should have access to the space of the weight room. In some ways this privileges the health discourses that encourage women to lift weights in ways in which I am not comfortable with, either as a researcher or a woman who lifts weights. My belief, however, is rooted less in these discourses and more in the effects of weightlifting reported by the women in my study, the potential disruption of the masculine space by women, and the knowledge gained and proffered when women enter into weightlifting spaces and practices. Whatever the reasons for crossing the gendered boundaries of weight space, it was the effects, both physical and mental, that kept them going back to the space.

Some participants reported feeling good in the moment, in the actual space of the weight room, because of the ways in which weightlifting challenged their own as well as others' ideas about their strength and women's strength more generally. MJ pays little attention to the men in the weight room as she goes about her routine, in her zone, trying to get her workout done so she can get to work, or home, or to a softball game. But she notices when the men notice her.

*Sometimes it can be kind of fun to just get a look and turns. It's not that they're checking me out, but it's "wow—I can't believe she lifted that." I'm like "yeah—haha and it was easy and I'm going to lift something heavier next."*

MJ gets noticed because of her physique and her competency in the weight room. Dana, a white lesbian woman in her 40s, has had similar experiences. Her response to and interpretation of such moments are different, though, for two reasons. One, they happened when she was younger and looked more feminine; and two, she was not entirely comfortable at these times. Unlike MJ's attention, Dana's seemed to draw competition rather than awe. This could be because of the time period—the 80s, when there were fewer women using weight rooms for general fitness purposes. Sometimes,

she said, the challenges were overt. Men would come up to her and challenge her to press or curl a certain amount of weight. But more often they were covert. And they still, she reports, continue—though less frequently than when she was younger.

*Usually what happens is that they will come to a piece of equipment right next to mine and start adding more and more and more weight. It was just kind of fun. Sometimes I play with it and try to compete with them which obviously I can't ultimately—but some of them I can.*

She remains ambivalent about the competition, especially when it occurs today. This is, in part, because of the harassment she has received in gyms for presenting in a more masculine way, she says, than most people in such environments are comfortable with. So rather than deal with the stares and questioning both of her gender presentation and her lifting abilities, she will go to the women's area when she is able to find a gym with a space for the exclusive use by women.

Dana was not alone in her issues with and strategies around not being noticed in the weight room. It was something many of the women I spoke with felt self-conscious about. I discuss this discomfort with being seen later in this chapter. But it was clear that not every woman felt this way or, if they did, they prioritized the positive effects of weightlifting over feelings of discomfort. In part this was because the effects of weightlifting—even more than the act itself—were rewarding. Lyndell goes to the gym seven days a week and does a range of activities in addition to weightlifting: group exercise classes, cardio machines, and yoga. But she does not like all of them—including weightlifting.

*I don't really enjoy the actual act of weightlifting. The weightlifting I like for the fitness, the muscular part. I like to feel my muscles. I don't look in the mirror or anything like that, but I just feel like, okay, I have muscles. And then I like to be able to pick up things and move things. I don't like to really ask for help or anything like that, so I want to be able to do all those things on my own. I like moving the air conditioner.*

Enjoying one's muscles was a benefit others cited. Nora, a white professional who did not become a regular gym member until her early 30s and had no background in athletics or organized physical activity, became more pleased as her muscles grew in her first few months of weight training.

*The changes were minimal but I could feel them. I thought, "I'm not going to show my muscles [in the gym], they aren't even that big." But to me they were huge. I was just so excited by it. To have some – just a little bit—I don't even know how to describe it. To see my body change and become stronger was really exciting.*

Strong muscles had positive effects for others in addition to just existing where there had been none or few before. Several women talked about using weightlifting to rehab from injuries. Rehab was a vehicle women have used subsequently in developing their lifting routines. Beth rehabbed a persistent shoulder injury which included multiple surgeries. Both Tanya and Faith have strengthened their injury-prone backs. Faye has used weightlifting for strength and balance, both of which have been compromised by chronic illness.

Sport-specific training is how many of the women in my study got into weightlifting. Though some had to reconcile these practices with the not-always-welcome changes to their physique, the improvement to performance was appreciated. Carole, a former competitive cyclist who started lifting in her 20s, gained upper body strength that enabled her to stave off fatigue when she was racing. Diane and Roni, both white middle-aged women who took up martial arts in the past decade, have used weightlifting to increase leg strength which creates greater knee stability and overall balance in their respective practices.

The positive effects of strength that many of the women cite were not always contained in physical strength. Danni, a young white personal trainer and fitness

instructor, gets frustrated when her female clients come to her and express reservations about lifting because they do not want to get too big. She does not say it aloud, for fear of losing clients, but her internal response is “don’t you want to be able to handle yourself?” She means both mentally—the self-confidence that others reported getting from weight lifting—as well as physically. Danni herself recounted a situation of sexual harassment by co-workers in a gym. And she “handled herself” by reporting the situation to a supervisor and ending the harassment. Danni could not quantify how much of the confidence was attributable to weightlifting, but she was not alone in this feeling. MJ reported gaining self-confidence though she was ambivalent about her ability to use it outside the gym.

*[Weightlifting] kind of gives a sense of confidence outside of the gym and inside the gym. It’s like a sense of feeling strong whether or not that translates to anything that would be useful in the outside world.*

Confidence also came from the aesthetic effects of weightlifting. Some of the women viewed the mental and physical benefits as intersecting rather than dichotomous even as looking fit and being fit was a continual negotiation. Carole has used weightlifting, in recent years, to maintain her fitness level. When I asked her what a fit body was she acknowledged the struggle between health and aesthetics:

*For myself, [a fit body is] a body that is able to do what I want to do. In whatever kind of sport or movement, it’s not going to fatigue easily. But vanity plays a part in it, too. I know when I feel healthier, I feel like I look better; my clothes are fitting better because I’m at a good weight for myself, which is something I struggle with. I have a better outlook on life. So that plays into it, definitely. Feelings of self-esteem.*

Some attributed their positive response to weightlifting to a biochemical response. “It just feels good” is what Tanya, who “wouldn’t really call [her]self a lifter,” said about using free weights. It is a feeling many women also were not able to articulate further. “It

feels good” and [helps me with sports, makes me look good, helps so I can move things] were frequent responses. Tanya stated it so matter-of-factly, though. “Endorphins. It feels good to be in shape.” And she did not need any other reason to keep doing it.

### The Epistemology of the Weight Room

In this section, I assert that an additional benefit of women’s weightlifting is the acquisition of knowledge that women use for the physical and mental benefits described above, as well as the sharing of that knowledge among other women in ways that have the potential to alter the space. Spaces in which weightlifting occurs are always marked in masculine ways, even when there are no men in them, though as my observations and participants’ accounts indicate, such an absence is rare. Two of my sites were open concept gyms; cardio machines, Nautilus machines, and free weight equipment all could be found on “the floor.” They were not segregated into separate rooms. Any activity could be done without moving to another room. But there was still division.

At WAC signs hung over the various sections of the floor. Over the free weights the sign stated “Advanced Training.” This signaled to anyone who entered the floor that this section was reserved for those who were more advanced. The criteria for advancement to this section, though, were unclear. And my observations suggested that it was not knowledge alone that provided comfortable entry into this space. More men than women were there at almost every time of day. Sometimes during the late afternoons, before the evening crowd came in and when the Advanced Training space was almost empty, more women would be working out on their own there. But overall, the women who were in the Advanced Training section were either there with men or conveyed their belonging through their attire (weight gloves most prominently or long pants that would

not be revealing if they were lying on a weight bench or doing exercises such as squats) or their activities (setting up circuits, maintaining proper form, and generally moving without hesitation through the space from one exercise to another).

The physical division was minimal. There are no steps or lines or different flooring delineating it from the other areas. Even the sign designating the free weight area as “Advanced Training” is not especially obvious. I did not notice it myself until weeks into fieldwork and after many forays into that space. But people are aware of the divisions. On the opposite side of the room are many of the same weights and equipment. But there are also things like stability and BOSU balls used for balance training and core stabilization. Ironically, the addition of stability and balance to any weight training (i.e., doing tricep dips with one’s feet on a ball, or standing on the BOSU while doing shoulder raises with a dumbbell) is considered by trainers to be more “advanced” weight training. But such activities were not conducted in the area marked as “Advanced Training.” In addition to stability equipment, there are elastic bands for resistance training. There are more mats. Weight training can occur in this space as well—which does not have a sign designating its purpose—but it is viewed differently. It attracts more women, though men move freely in and out of the space. Danni, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, called it “the softer side of the gym” because it contained so many “toys.” Toys were balls and bars and bands, which tended to be bright colors, in contrast to the black and metallics of the free weights, which were never referred to as toys. Softer/harder. Toys/equipment. Feminine/masculine?

Though every gym is its own space with distinct set-ups and boundaries (though most share common aspects like grouping all treadmills together or all Nautilus machines

together and making distinct free weight spaces), they all get divided in ways that discourage entry into some spaces for some individuals. For the purposes of the project, I wanted to know the ways in which women were discouraged from entering weight spaces, including how these spaces were perceived by users, non-users, and employees.

The weight room remains a space that is marked as masculine. The various descriptions of weight spaces (smelly, harder, advanced, cold, loud—from grunting, encouraging shouts, and weight dropping) in addition to the fact that men were more likely to occupy them in greater numbers than women, corroborated this. Women have the potential, as many have noted, to challenge hegemonic femininity when they use the weight room because they are building muscle (Johnston, 1996). But what challenges do they present just by entering the space? How do they disrupt the space in ways that can extend beyond their individual bodies? I argue first that the visibility of women in weight spaces presents some disruption to the popular conceptualization of the space as masculine. Second, but overlapping in some ways, is the knowledge women gain from weight training and what they pass on to other women enabling them to use the space, sometimes more comfortably.

Dworkin (2003) examined the gendered nature of the weight room and also found that women were reluctant to enter the space or that their desire was tempered by the intimidating nature of the space. This was more than just dealing with the men who were there, but about a “gender knowledge gap” (p. 140). She attributes the significance of that gap to the historical lack of access women have had to weight training instruction. The women I spoke with who were young enough to play sports in a more competitive era (1990s) were more likely to feel comfortable in weight rooms because they had a

familiarity with weight spaces due to their sports training. But most of these women also noted that they were continually seeking out new knowledge.

Kristin, a former Division I intercollegiate and national caliber athlete, started lifting when she was a high school varsity athlete. But she did not really know the reasons for doing the exercises required of her. She followed the advice of strength trainers and coaches and the practices of teammates. She knew how to train in sport-specific ways. It was only when she began the process of becoming an athletic trainer that she gained specific knowledge about particular exercises, parts of the bodies affected, how and why to establish particular training regimens, and the importance of keeping good form when exercising, particularly when weightlifting.

This is not inherently gendered knowledge nor is it knowledge that every man who has entered the weight room has access to. If, like Kristin, many men learned weightlifting in the context of sports, they know exercises and techniques that are sport- and/or goal-specific (i.e., strength, endurance, speed). How knowledge about exercise, fitness, and weightlifting specifically is acquired is rarely examined when discussing adults who played sports as children. Because sports have historically been the purview of men, the acquisition of knowledge about sport-related practices, such as weightlifting, makes these unexamined assumptions about knowledge acquisition gendered: men just know how to lift. Kristin said that she could not remember “any formal learning taking place,” just that by the end of her competitive athletic career she had acquired enough information that she felt comfortable creating her own workouts by picking and choosing from the repertoire of exercises she had learned while training for her various sports.



My observations suggest, as do the experiences of Kristin and other trainers I spoke with, that men in the weight room do not necessarily know what they are doing either. Even lay people like Carole, who often finds herself as the only woman in the weight room at her current gym, said that she sees men just lifting large amounts of weight because they think that is what they are supposed to do. But their apparent comfort (enough that it does not prevent most men from entering the space) is due, in part, to the marking of the space masculine. Men have the freedom to enter in a way that women do not; but this is because, according to Carole “no one ever showed [women] what to do.”

Still there are many holes to poke in this rigid binary: men lift weights, women do cardio. As the evidence that is the foundation of this chapter, along with similar studies of women’s fitness, suggests women do lift weights (Dworkin, 2001; George, 2005; Heywood, 1998, 2003; Schulze, 1997). And men do cardio. At all three observation sites there were times of the day when men outnumbered women or were equal to women in cardio spaces, which housed treadmills, elliptical machines, stair steppers, stationary bikes, and other cardio equipment. This was even true at “off times” such as midmornings which are generally seen as more female-dominated because of the perceived greater flexibility of women’s work lives. There is nothing explicitly feminine about running on a treadmill or riding a stationary bike. As such, able-bodied men do not experience significant impediments to their access of cardiovascular spaces. This was especially on display at Universal Fitness.

UF is also an open concept gym. Stepping into the front door, one is confronted with an enormous space, reminiscent of a factory—exposed ductwork, high ceilings,

long, straight rows of equipment that stretch from the front of the space to the back of the building, dark décor, and a general murmur comprised of voices, the whir of machines, and clanking of weights. There are no walls which segregate cardio machines from Nautilus machines from free weights from stretching areas. Most of the equipment is on one level. There is a slightly raised platform in the cardio area where machines are lined up in three rows. This level facilitates the view of the ceiling-mounted televisions by people in the back row. All the equipment is adequately spaced so as not to give an impression of crowdedness. It is very easy to walk around the space without worrying about negotiating an awkward layout of equipment or running into people.

Despite this open feeling and the seeming ability to access any part of the space and any piece of equipment in it, women's movement was more restricted. Men at UF moved from weights to cardio to Nautilus in any number of patterns: warm-up with cardio then to weights or vice versa; weights only; weights and Nautilus. Some men spent their time exclusively on cardio machines, others exclusively on weights. They occupied all the spaces of the gym at all times of the day. Women were more concentrated in cardio, with some slipping over to Nautilus machines and, less frequently, to free weights, but were more likely to do the latter in the mornings. The cardio machines on the far left of the space were frequently populated with both men and women. In the middle of the space were the lines of Nautilus machines. These drew more men than women, but there were always a few women using these machines no matter the time of day. There were, though, very few women who moved over the far right side of the gym where the free weights were located. Men dominated this space.

During my period of observation, a core group of women would enter the space. Most of these women came in the morning. Though they always had to share the space with men, there were fewer people in the gym which made access easier purely based on availability. But even some of these weightlifting regulars chose to lift outside the specific areas marked as weightlifting spaces (by the presence of weight equipment). Two of these regulars—a woman in her 20s with short hair who had an androgynous appearance and demonstrated competence with weights and another white woman in her 30s who wore a baseball cap with a long ponytail who was petite but had musculature that suggested prior sport experience or a long commitment to recreational (possibility competitive) weightlifting—would remove dumbbells from the racks in the free weight area at the front of the space and carry them all the way to far end of the gym. They used them in the open space used by others for stretching and abdominal exercises. This occurred during the mornings when the weight space was not crowded but also contained very few women.

One way to view these episodes is to suggest that these women were taking control of or making their own space. Though this is certainly plausible and perhaps even expressing some version of the truth, that they chose to bring the weights to a space that women occupy in greater numbers (it also contained some of the “toys”) is telling. It could be read as a moment of empowerment or exertion of agency. But it must also be read in the context of the gendered space and the experiences and feelings women have when entering weight spaces; a topic I discuss later in this chapter.

Knowledge facilitates movement for women in the gym. So when women move into weight space either bringing in knowledge with them or learning it on site, they

disrupt the knowledge gap, the assumption that they have less knowledge about weightlifting, as well as creating opportunities to pass knowledge on to other women. Kristin's work as a personal trainer exemplifies the way she disrupts the space through her knowledge and teaches others to do the same. As a trainer, her knowledge is on display, not just to her clients but to other exercisers. She has been approached by women who do not want to use a male trainer, as well as men who see that her style of training is not the traditional lift-large-amounts-of-weights-for-ten-reps-over-three-sets regimen. As more and more information about what constitutes fitness and what people need to do to achieve it emerges, people begin to question the things they thought they knew. After seeing Kristin use stability balls with her clients or working on stabilization with weights, she will have other gym members approach her with questions about fitness. She says clients have asked things like:

*"I've heard that balance is really important" or "I've noticed that my balance isn't what it used to be" or "it never occurred to me that balance was something I could work on in the gym." Or "I'm really inflexible and I notice that I'm getting more injuries or I'm having a harder time recovering and you know there's all this hoopla about core...mmmm...like I don't even know what it is."*

She has become, in her gym, a source of knowledge. And she passes this knowledge on to her female and male clients. Though she might look like she is playing with "toys" and engaging in alternative types of exercises like balancing on one foot while doing bicep curls, clients who train with her recognize her expertise and also pass it on. A woman whom Kristin trained showed her very fit husband some balance exercises Kristin taught her. When the husband was not able to do them, he began to question his own knowledge about what constitutes fit. He sought out Kristin for personal training.

Other female trainers report being very purposeful in their transfer of knowledge about fitness and especially weights to their female clients. Kim, on a sabbatical from her

academic career, took the opportunity to get her personal training certification. Kim began lifting in her late 20s and when this moment of greater schedule flexibility arose, she took her interest in and enjoyment of the gym and got certified. She has never formally trained anyone or been affiliated with a gym; her goal was not so much to make money, but to share her knowledge and passion with other women.

*Kim: I hardly charged people. I was really just into doing it because I wanted women to get comfortable being in the weight room because I think it's great.*

*Kris: So did you go in with that goal?*

*Kim: Yeah, my goal was basically to—I wanted to expose women to the gym. To have a buddy, you know. And show 'em some stuff so they themselves were comfortable going and exercising in that form and in that way.*

*Kris: And why did you think that was important?*

*Kim: The weight training? Because it's so gender divided and weight training is great. I've done it for so long and I love it.*

Unlike Kristin and Kim, Jackie is a full-time personal trainer and fitness instructor affiliated with a gym. Like Kristin, she was exposed to sports early in life. She became a self-proclaimed “gym rat” during her high school years as she trained in the off-season for field hockey. Her collegiate athletic career was curtailed by injury. But her experiences working out with a personal trainer (a Christmas gift from her parents one year), pushed her toward training as a career. Like Kristin, the weight routines she takes her clients through look non-traditional in that she uses a lot of the toys in the gym as well as focusing on functional movements. But her goal is also to make the space more comfortable for people who have not been exposed to it as she was an at an early age.

*People are scared of the gym. I don't know if it's just that they are nervous to be in a part of a gym or just nervous to start to change their lifestyle and to start something new. It's a challenge, you know? It's emotional. So yeah, they are pretty nervous in the beginning and they will say it. They will be honest. They will be like, “I just don't know—I don't know what I'm doing in a big gym; I get a little intimidated by people in the weight room. I don't know what to do with weights.”*

Her tactic with nervous clients is to “ease them in” to the space by exposing them to the equipment but not spending an entire training session in the weight room.

*If they can't afford to see me all the time, or if they just want to do other things on their own, you know, I will make sure they know what they are doing and what they can use in the gym—in [the weight room]—so that I can give them some things to do on their own.*

Trainers and past sporting experiences are two means by which women gain entry into the weight room. In the following section, I explore these as well as other ways women discussed their introductions to weight spaces.

### Crossing Boundaries

Previous work on women who lift weights to meet personal goals or training as competitive bodybuilders has been framed in terms of exceptionality (Bolin, 2003; Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Heywood, 1998). This research acknowledges, correctly, that women remain in the minority in weight spaces, while suggesting that the body work they are doing presents challenges to the dominant gender order. As I argue above, women's presence and their body work, even when non-hegemonic musculature is not the goal or result, is also a disruptive force because of the knowledge women gain and pass on when they gain access. Other studies (Dworkin, 2001, 2003; Heywood, 1998) have discussed what motivates women to begin weightlifting, but little has been written on how women actually cross that gendered boundary. This absence might imply that pure will and determination causes women to step over that line (whether it is a literal or figurative boundary). This assumption diminishes the power of the gendered boundary as well as the successful crossings of it. The majority of women I interviewed gained access via men—at least initially. This “all-access pass” that men granted women took many different forms, from formal instruction to casual advice. Access to the space is also

affected by the creation of discursive boundaries that personal trainers and other gym personnel construct. The language used by these visible and accessible representatives of the fitness industry also affects women's access to weight lifting space.

Many women spoke of the space as intimidating because of the people in it already and the actual exercise that occurs there. To deal with these issues, most sought the assistance of men, whether in person or through fitness literature. Women who started lifting outside of an educational setting sought the advice of male colleagues, friends, and fitness experts. Thea, a white female in her late 30s who had been going to the gym regularly for most of her adult life, continued to believe, even as she saw evidence to the contrary in person and in fitness magazines, that weightlifting was more a "man's thing." She also acknowledged being afraid of the weights. But because of a desire to change her workout routine, with the goal of losing weight, she decided to add lifting to her repertoire.

Thea initially did not have the money to invest in a personal trainer, so she went to a male friend who owned a gym and with whom she worked informally. When she was in a financial position to hire a trainer, which she referred to as "formal training," she hired a woman whom she credits with providing her with the foundation for her weightlifting practice, even though this person was only temporary. Because of the cost of personal training, Thea stopped when she felt she had a base level of knowledge. Thea's experience also illustrates one of the ways in which the gendered boundary is also classed. She still seeks out advice from a male colleague who is also a personal trainer on the side.

Her experience mirrors Carole's, who also used her personal network to find someone whose advice she could trust.

*The weights were kind of enticing and I worked with a man at that point that was really into body building. And he kind of introduced me and suggested, "go do the weights, don't be afraid to do the weights."*

This colleague, Carole later said, was only somewhat serious about her commitment to weightlifting, which only gave her more incentive to proceed. But once he saw that this was something she really wanted to do, he provided her with advice about exercises and routines. Carole sought out the advice of trainers in her gym, most of whom were male. Once she had accessed the space, she learned by watching what others did, specifically by watching other women. She used the weight room at times of the day when she knew more women would likely be in the space.

Faith also sought out gendered information when she got interested in weightlifting, despite her contention that weightlifting is "common sense" and that any gender-neutral or male-centric advice can be easily adapted for a woman—and implying that it should be. Over the years she has read many books, magazines and internet sites about weightlifting. But her initial entry into the practice and the space was facilitated by *The Body Sculpting Bible for Women*, which is authored by two men.

Women who turn to fitness industry publications, as Faith did, find advice given by men. Roni, a white woman in her mid-40s, wanted to transition from using Nautilus machines, which she used as a high school athlete, to free weights after she graduated. This switch required a movement to a more masculine space and acquiring new knowledge. She gained her entry into the weight room in the mid-1990s via information provided by Arnold Schwarzenegger. She bought one of his early books about



weightlifting, used it in her home where she had set up a home gym, and then, upon rejoining a gym, used the weight room.

Though it was a woman, her girlfriend, who motivated TJ to start weightlifting, it was her male friend “who was way into it” who showed her what to do. He never trained her, she said. “He was never like, ‘do this, TJ.’ He just did it beside me.” TJ was the only woman in the study though who spoke of experiences working out alongside men in a cooperative way. During my site observations, I witnessed many women working out in weight spaces with male partners—some were arrangements among friends while others were romantic pairings. Men would provide specific instruction to the women about form as well as explanations of what muscles were being worked and how the exercise was supposed to feel.

At Universal Fitness, there was a regular group of weightlifters comprised, most often, of three white women and one black man. The women ranged in age from 40s to late 50s and the man appeared to be in his late 30s or early 40s. The women were all very competent with the weights and knew the rationales behind their regimens (i.e., Monday is back and shoulder day; Tuesday is a leg workout to allow the upper body to recover), but it was obvious that the man set their daily routine, which he always did with them. He moved them around the various spaces and forms of equipment. He always did the exercise first. He was always the one who gave feedback.

At other times I observed men come into the spaces that women carve out for themselves in the weight room, by setting up an area around a bench with several types and sizes of weights. Men would offer unsolicited advice to the women about form or exercises they might try instead. Women in my study explained that this was not an

uncommon practice among the men in the weight rooms they have used. But no woman—even those certified as personal trainers—reported ever approaching a man in the weight room to suggest he is doing an exercise wrong. Even male trainers I spoke with who had tried to do so, for the sake of safety, have been rebuffed.

All the women in this study who were introduced to weight spaces through high school sports were instructed by male coaches. None of them remembered the specifics of their training. They did report being told what to do rather than taught why they were doing something. So when people like Jackie and Kristin took their interest in athletics and working out to the next level by becoming certified personal trainers, they were learning the rationale behind both specific exercises and the development of weightlifting routines.

*There was this short, bald guy named Jeff, who was kind of the professional trainer [in the athletic program]. I don't remember formally learning—we would just kind of partner up and some of the more experienced players would review the exercises with us or we actually had team training sessions where Jeff would take us through the exercises. So in terms of kind of the technique, I don't really remember how I learned the technique or the names of the exercises. [Kristin]*

MJ also was introduced to weight training by male coaches when she was a track and field athlete. When she switched sports after graduating from college and got into semi-professional mixed martial arts, she sought out information from a friend.

*I had a friend who was a wrestler. And he had a lifting routine so he kind of walked me through his lifting routine and I modified that.*

Tanya was the only woman I spoke with who used weights who just went into the weight room and learned by watching and talking with other women.

*I would say I've never gotten weight instruction from a guy.*

That men often provide women a way into weights was not surprising. Women who come to the practice as high school and collegiate athletes have a greater chance of

being introduced to weights by male coaches because of the continuing gender disparities in coaching. And, in this study, women who took up weightlifting in adulthood sought formal and informal knowledge from men to ease their transition to the practice and the space. This is not to suggest that entry via men is wrong or that they chose access via men on purpose. For many of them, there was no choice. Young women coached in high school by men take instruction about their fitness from men. Women who learn by watching others in the space are more likely to gain knowledge from other men because of their greater presence in weight spaces. Entry into the space is often prescribed by male norms and often women receive comfort from entry via men. Carole received encouragement from her colleague. TJ had a male workout buddy who taught her in a way she could learn.

Kim's mission as a personal trainer has been to pass on knowledge to other women. She provides entry to other women. The same is true of the other female personal trainers in the sample. Kristin learned weightlifting from male sports coaches and male strength training coaches. Jackie had a similar experience learning sport-specific exercises from male coaches during high school and college. In the process of becoming a trainer, these women also gained knowledge and continue to do so because they must maintain their certifications—from agencies that are run by men.

There are many certification-granting institutions. The National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) was the most popular among trainers I spoke with. Like most other fitness industry organizations, it is male-controlled. Their "leadership team" is comprised of five men ("Nasm leadership team," n.d.). As Dworkin and Wachs (2009) noted in their intensive study of fitness publications, the fitness industry is both male-

controlled and male-dominated even when it is not male-centered. As I noted in the previous chapter, women are the majority of instructors but men reside at the top of the aerobics industry.

Once inside the weight room, all the women began their own negotiation of the epistemological process. Even though the access pass was often granted by men or facilitated by male-produced knowledge, once inside women felt more comfortable finding their own way or seeking out information from female-based sources. For example, though she gained entry via a man, it is the training Thea received from her female personal trainer that has allowed her to take the routines she currently receives from her male colleague and adjust them to fit her own needs and goals.

Gym employees and personal trainers have great power in constructing and maintaining dominant fitness discourses around general concepts like fitness and health, as well as specifics like the benefits of muscle confusion or plyometric training. Their participation in the discourse means they have influence on the construction (or deconstruction) of the boundaries that exist in contemporary gyms. Those who cannot afford personal trainers or who only want basic instruction in or information about gym equipment often rely on gym employees for instruction.

Danni, who also does personal training at WAC, is one of those employees whom members seek out for advice. She came up with the term “soft side of the gym” and is very aware of how different areas of the gym are perceived by members. Though she does not use that phrase with members or clients, her ways of understanding the space influence her behaviors as a trainer. Because she does not believe the softer feminine side of the gym should confine women and because she herself has experienced the positives

of working out in the “hard” side of the gym or the Advanced Training area, she is deliberate in her actions. She takes all her female clients over to the Advanced Training area. But even this reinforces the spaces’ respective boundaries. She begins on the feminine side because it is more comfortable and then challenges her clients by taking them into the masculine, hard spaces of the floor.

*I try to make it a point to take them over to that area from time to time and I tell them that it’s because I don’t want them to feel intimidated or to feel like they don’t belong there. Mostly it’s because I don’t want them to feel that they don’t want to use a certain part of the gym.*

It is difficult for any trainer to truly challenge the ideas their female clients have about the weight room without acknowledging the gendered boundaries that surround it. Though Jackie tries to convince some of her female clients that the weight room is not a “scary” place filled with big, hulking men, sometimes she will simply capitulate and devise workouts so they will never have to enter the space. As a trainer it is her job to encourage her clients to work out in the present and the future. Danni has a similar goal but would rather her female clients build confidence about their right to use all the spaces of the gym as they are building their bodies.

*It’s not really good for business, but I would love it if my female clients felt comfortable enough to go over into the free weight section and do their own workout without paying attention to the predominantly male group that tends to hang out over there.*

Eric, a white male trainer who has been working at the same gym for almost twenty years, is less likely than the female trainers I spoke with to push his female clients into the weight room. He said that he “makes them try [the weight room]” but if they really hate it, he does not take them back. He also said that he is less likely to take these clients to the weight room in the evening when “there is a gaggle of men around.” During

the middle of the day, though, he brings his female clients there and explicitly points out the other women who are lifting, he said.

In the early mornings, I would see Eric taking his female clients into the upstairs weight room. WMA has two weight spaces which contain free weights. One is downstairs and the other is in the upstairs loft. Both spaces contain the same equipment: a set of dumbbells, a rack of pre-weighted bars, Smith machines, cable towers, bench presses. The loft has been marked as slightly more gender neutral. Women were more likely to be in that space than downstairs. Though the weight space was on one side of the loft, the other side had cardio machines. The downstairs room had no views of cardio machines. I only once observed a personal trainer take a client into the downstairs weight space for the purpose of using free weights. These distinctions seemed subtle at first until I overheard an employee giving a tour of the gym to a prospective female member. In the gyms I observed, all members receive initial tours of the space that provide various levels of instruction. Most gym employees, even if they are not personal trainers, can be called upon for providing additional, less formal instruction. In the loft area this WMA employee told the woman that this weight space was considered “the beginner space” even though the major difference in the physical spaces was the size (upstairs was smaller). The equipment upstairs was as nice as—perhaps even in better condition than—pieces in the downstairs space.

One of the possible reasons for the distinction between these similar spaces was the visibility factor. Walking into the downstairs space, a member is confronted with her image from multiple angles because of the placement of the mirrors. There are fewer mirrors in the upstairs space. Also, the lofted area overlooks a portion of the downstairs

space. So anyone using the cardio machines upstairs can easily see lifters who, for example, might be lying on their back on a bench doing chest presses. It was not surprising then that I observed more women upstairs lifting weights, especially after interviewing many women for whom being seen in the space produced concern or anxiety.

### Fear and Loathing in the Weight Room

Being seen in the space, and by extension being judged in it or for being in it, was one of the reasons women I spoke with cited for not going in the space at all, or for monitoring their actions and bodies while in weight spaces. Most of the women felt their presence in the weight room was noticed by the men who used the same space. But being seen in the space is also related to being identified as muscle-building and muscle-having women. Participants in both Fisher's (1997) and George's (2005) respective studies discussed how they were viewed by men and how they felt their musculature influenced how men saw them: as less feminine, as lesbians, as not-women.

Others though felt that their presence was so non-threatening as to make them nearly invisible to men in the space. Others said they conveyed a level of sexuality that would not draw men's attention (i.e., they were not heterosexy enough). Some of the women thought their displays of homosexuality (through their gender presentation), did however, draw attention. Even the women who said they felt comfortable in the space, with few exceptions, manifested concern over visibility, whether it was over what they were doing or what they were wearing or who they were with.

The women who regularly incorporated weightlifting into their exercise routines and felt competent lifting weights reported either not caring whether men were looking at

them, or taking some enjoyment in making men take a second look based on what they were doing. MJ, as mentioned above, liked that the guys in the weight room would look impressed when they saw her lifting. Mia told a story about being in the weight room at WAC and having her muscles pointed out to two young white men from a local college by a black man who was a “gym friend.”

*He said, “Look at those guns” to me as I was doing bicep curls. Then he turned to these guys who I had seen a few times and said “you better watch out—she can lift more than you.” The guys kind of agreed. I felt bad for them.*

Mia was amused by the comments but not quite sure how to handle being on display and how she was being used to make two white men uncomfortable about their physique.

At WAC women’s movements seemed more impeded. Younger women (under 40) who were working out alone did not slip in and out of the space. Usually they established a station with all the weights they needed around a bench or they moved within the Advanced Training area while not speaking to anyone, in contrast to the very social culture at WAC. Women of all ages and races who arrived with or met up with a male partner were provided a certain level of “safety” from comments like the ones Mia received when she was working out on her own. The older women who were regulars most often ended up engaging with the men in the space, primarily the black and Latino men who were in their mid-30s or older. Young men, as was the case at all the sites, were less often in co-ed groups or pairings. They formed larger (3-6 people) groups of their same-sex peers, a phenomenon noted by Carole who attends WMA and always works out alone, but often in the late afternoon when these young men were most present.

*It interests me that [all the young guys] come there together. Like, what is that about? Is it helping them get their workout done because they feel less noticed? It will be like a group of five or six of them working out together, which I don’t see there among the women. But you get the gang that sort of circles a piece of equipment for half an hour.*



These “gangs” take up space in an unquestioned manner. Carole rarely will interrupt these groups even if they are blocking her access to a piece of equipment. She noticed them. But did they notice her: a white middle-aged woman working out alone in the space? Unless someone got in their way, using a weight or a bench they wanted, the groups of young men in all the gyms were focused on themselves, occasionally interacting with other groups of young men or regulars. They notice one another, which is one reason for the group workouts. They monitor and police each other, in addition to learning new exercises and receiving encouragement. Encountering one of these groups in the weight room at WMA one afternoon, I witnessed one young white man approach his white friend of a similar age and say: “Dude, feel my pecs. No homo!”

“No homo” is a phrase used by young men when they engage in same-sex touching or other actions that could be construed as homosexual. It is very prevalent in fitness spaces. These young men wanted both their progress and their heterosexuality to be on display. I noticed, and the women I spoke with reported, that they more often see men than women preening in front of the mirrors. Some lift their shirts to examine their abdominal muscles. They turn around in front of mirrors to glance at the deltoids, their glutes and calves. They turn to the side to flex their biceps. Willis (1990) writes that “men flexing for themselves and each other in front of a mirror is the single most expressive metaphor of masculinity and exercise” (p. 8).

I never saw a woman move aside clothing to look at her musculature or flex in the mirror. Some women went to great lengths not to be seen using the mirrors. Female consciousness about visibility in the space is high. Even though women were not using the mirrors in the same way as the men, they were concerned with how they were being

seen, and often—despite the above exceptions—uncomfortable with the level of visibility they felt they had in the weight room. There was a connection between being seen and being vulnerable in the space. Carole explained the lack of women who use the bench press by discussing her own feelings while using it.

*It seems more public than some of the other exercises, even though they are all equally public. But there is something about laying down on the bench—sometimes it can be so vulnerable.*

Carole can often adjust her schedule so she can use the weight room when it is less populated with men. But when that is not possible, she still goes to the weight room, though she is often reminiscing about the women-only nights her former gym held. In the mixed space, she has to negotiate her own insecurities.

*I tend to feel self-conscious, I feel self-conscious around those gangs of weight lifters. You know, whenever the group exceeds three and the [phone] texting is happening and the swearing starts and I find it—I still find it hard to walk up and say, can I work in a set?*

And so she usually does not. MJ, who belongs to multiple gyms to facilitate her extensive training and her life and travel schedule, has no problem taking up space in the weight room and exerting her right to be there.

*Gym life is much different for me than outside life. When I am in the gym, that's my ground. Like even—this is going to sound awful but—they're all my gyms and I just allow people to work out in them. And that's clearly my thought process when I walk in. And so I don't have any problem using a bench or saying "can you get that drink off that for me please so I can use it?" Where I wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable doing that outside. But somehow I am in gym mode.*

She explained that she had to learn to be comfortable in the space when she was training for sports. She could not go back to a coach and say she did not do part of her prescribed routine because boys were preventing her access. When she became a semi-professional mixed martial arts fighter, the success of her career meant she had to weight train. Though she no longer has those same requirements, she has retained her “gym

mode.” But even in “her” weight room, she is conscious of her presence. She does not apologize for her performance or for her musculature; she enjoys the challenges they present to the men in the space. She does not, however, want to draw certain kinds of attention. She wears loose-fitting sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt.

*I don't show up in a tank top. I don't show up in like a sports bra, which some women will. I never wear spandex.*

She has no issues being visible because of her non-conforming musculature, but MJ wants to be in control of how or whether she is perceived as a sexual object by the men in the space. That is not what she is there for, she says, so she works to prevent it. For MJ, her muscles reflect her competence, which has mitigated concerns over visibility.

The issue of competence—of lifting the right way—was also an issue of safety. Whether they were excited about weightlifting or more hesitant, the women who sought out help when they began weightlifting expressed concerns about getting hurt.

*I just got to not trust weights and my body, because I was strong enough to do it all, whether I was doing it right, whether it was too heavy, too light, but not in a safe way. [Rose]*

*I didn't even do [Nautilus]. I had never done any sort of weights [prior to receiving personal training] so I didn't really know the form or how much weight to use or what your goals are and now I do. I know how to do it in a way that I won't hurt myself. [Nora]*

*I just don't want to [lift weights] because it's hard work and I don't want to do it because I'm scared that I'm going to get injured. I hate getting injured, I hate that. [Marcia]*

The trainers in this study emphasized the role of weights in preventing injury or rehabilitating injuries incurred during sports participation. But their expertise was available only to those who could pay for it. Someone like Marcia, who already spent money on a gym membership, a massage therapist, a yoga studio, dance lessons, and a chiropractor, could not imagine paying a trainer to teach her to do something she was not

really interested in. Faith was one of the few people who was basically self-taught (she used a book) and had no fear of injury. She actually repeated what the trainers had said about using weights to get stronger.

*I've heard other people complain about [lifting weights]. I think when other people complain about it, they're like "oh that stuff causes back problems." But my back has gotten a good bit stronger and so I don't see that to be an issue.*

Carole speculated that the fear of injury many women have is not fear of throwing out their backs or tweaking a shoulder, but of the weights actually hurting them—especially the larger ones like the bars used for bench pressing.

*If they have never bench pressed, it looks a little daunting to be holding this thing up. And the first time you are holding the bar up – it's a lot to think about. If you drop that thing...They are imagining it landing right here [points to neck and makes choking sounds].*

While such an event is probably rare, it is just as likely to happen to a man—if not more so—given that women are more likely to have less weight on the bar (in accordance with the toning mandate). They can manage without assistance. But as Carole, a regular bench presser, notes most women do not assess the reality of the situation when they are intimidated by the space, the equipment and fear of getting hurt.

What Carole did not speak about was that women might not be using the bench press because of a different kind of fear: muscles that are “too big.” Bench pressing builds pectoral muscles. They are some of the most visible muscles on men, next to arms. Their large chests are often on display in the weight room, through tight-fitting t-shirts or tank tops. Women who are not lifting for competitive body building purposes do not express a desire to create a similar-looking chest. Much of the research on women and weightlifting, whether for sports, for fitness, or for competitive weightlifting, has discussed the negotiation of muscles that women are compelled to engage in because of

societal demands for gender-appropriate musculature (Dworkin, 2001, 2003; George, 2005). George (2005) writes that “having too much muscle is a violation similar to excessive body fat” (p. 317). Choosing which pieces of equipment to use are part of the negotiation and one reason why women continue to use free weights less frequently than men.

Also a part of the negotiation is determining how much muscle is too much muscle. Toned to one woman may be huge to another and also is dependent on overall body type. Even so, women have been subject to similar sociocultural influences, including the toning discourse, that affect their lifting behaviors. Dworkin (2001) describes the “glass ceiling” on women’s musculature that exists in the United States. In encouraging women to lift weights, there are the simultaneous promises and assurances that they will not get “too big.” Most of the trainers I spoke with had to address this concern with their female clients who came to them saying things such as “I want to tone; but I don’t want to get big or bulky.” And trainers reassured them:

*I say, “Hey look. Part of it is genetics and part of it is working out.” I mean it is genetics. I had abs when I was like 5. So, you know, it just doesn’t work like that. You don’t lift weights and then become a big person. [Kim]*

They reassure them with talk of hormones and steroids and genetics. This is presented as common sense based on biology. Faith echoed this common sense of biology mantra when she talked about how she adapts literature on weightlifting aimed at men to fit her own needs:

*I knew from commonsense and knowing about biology that women are not going to turn into the Incredible Hulk. It doesn’t happen. There’s no way.*

But many women do gain muscle and get bigger (what exactly constitutes “too big” remains subjective). This reality, this lived experience, presents at least a partial

contradiction to the commonsense of biology argument. And the reality is felt by women such as the soccer players in George's study (2005) who disliked the growth of their muscles and prominence of their musculature and undertook their own strategies, also based on a version of commonsense biology, to try to counteract or conceal their musculature. They did more cardio in addition to their team workouts for example. Dworkin's study (2001) included many interviews with and observations of women doing the "more reps/lighter weight workout" designed to create toned-but-not-bulky muscles.

Schulze writes about the marketing of weight lifting to women and the ways it attempts to dispel the fears about getting too big. Articles, many in women's magazines, send the same message: average women who engage in moderate weight lifting will not build those ugly or unfeminine muscles. In such reassurances are also the implication that "there is no danger of acquiring the kind of physicality that will challenge the status quo" (Schulze, 1997, p. 13).

The right kind of weightlifting will build the "right" kind of muscle. The messages of moderation provide comfort, and they "also assure women who are thinking of working out with weights that they need not fear a loss of privilege or social power; despite any difference that may result from lifting weights. These muscles are a difference that won't make a difference" (Schulze, 1997, p. 13). But they do make a difference in that, for a white middle-class woman, the type of woman I most often encountered in this study, there are pressures to obtain a specific musculature. The muscle produced by moderation is a marker of a woman's class status in addition to her

fitness level. She has the time to work out. In addition to balancing work and home life, she can fit in her third shift (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

Fear of getting too big might be verbalized most often, but it is the fear of not being “toned” that drives many women to the gym. It might not always be to the weight room. Women who can afford to, hire personal trainers. Women who cannot or do not want to, now have weightlifting classes that occur in non-weight spaces, a trend I discussed in the previous chapter. Even the majority of women in the weight room are influenced by the toning discourse because they desire lean muscles that do not challenge the norms of gendered bodies. Despite the conformity to a gendered body norm, they have entered the weight room in increasing numbers, itself a challenge to gendered space and practices, in order to achieve it.

*A lot more women do weights; but it's more to tone. And the goal isn't necessarily to increase the weight. It's "ok how do my biceps look; how do my triceps look; how do my shoulders look." Kind of keeping it more like a softer look as opposed to more buff. [MJ]*

### Resistance Work?

Weight lifting is categorized as resistance work. The weight provides resistance to the muscle as the lifter moves. The phrase “resistance work” takes on a different meaning when considering the women who engage in it. What is being built in this resistance work? The literal bodies, the muscles, of women, certainly. And, as I discussed above, the meanings of female musculature are also being built in this space—some of these are counter discourses. Women’s non-normative musculature is a visual symbol of resistance work. Pleasure, too, is a result of this resistance.

Fiske writes about the pleasure that comes from the enactment of resistance and maintains that the “terrain of resistance/refusal” comes via “the signifier, the body, and

physical sensation” (Fiske, 1987, p. 240). Women expressed moments of pleasure that came just from being in the weight room. Carole’s pleasure came just from entering and knowing that she was doing something she was not socially sanctioned to do as a woman. MJ’s pleasure, mentioned earlier, came from being seen as a strong woman. From turning male heads and showing them not just that she could lift a heavy weight, but that she could lift even more.

Despite the concerns most women expressed over it, visibility provided a resistance to the marking of the space as male as well as the types of lifting women were permitted to do. The literature on women’s competitive or recreational bodybuilding (weightlifting for the purpose of achieving a desired and subculturally prescribed physique) draws on, as I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the visibility of non-normative musculature on women as disruptive to a gendered body hegemony. But how does the visibility of any woman, no matter her musculature, in weight spaces provide a potential disruption?

Carole, Ruby, MJ, TJ, Faith, and Kristin all spoke about lifting heavy weights or doing exercises such as body squats and chest presses on the bench, exercises only men used to perform. Women’s behaviors and their bodies in the space provided resistant moments. MJ talked about how people in the weight room questioned her routine.

*I will get asked a lot “are you competing for something.” And it’s just like “no I’m just working out.” And that’s usually even more of a surprise because they’re assuming, ok she must be [competing]. Ok she’s still in college. Or she’s training for something. And when I’m not it’s kind of like well why are you lifting so much?*

In these moments she disrupts the discourse about women’s weightlifting. Her weightlifting builds bulk. Though the level of muscularity for women changes, the concept of building muscle for purely recreational or fitness purposes remains, as MJ



states, confusing for some people. Women who lift not for the purpose of maintaining toned muscles but for muscles that exceed toned—whatever the current version of toned is—physically perform a different version of femininity in their weight rooms. But the presence of women with non-conforming muscles also serves to interrupt the discourse about appropriate weightlifting techniques for women.

Finally, I want to introduce another way to conceptualize resistance in the weight room. Duncan (1996), in her discussion of the public/private gendered divide, draws on Massumi's (1992) work on urban peoples and their movements and uses his metaphors of fort and street to exemplify this divide. When bodies are displayed in the open they are "holding the street" (Massumi, 1992, p. 6). The street here, Duncan notes, is a site of resistance when women are occupying the street. This metaphor is realized in cases of feminist protests of the past, but its application to the space of the gym and specifically women in weight spaces offers a way into understanding how resistance in some spaces occurs.

Though it is not as public as a street or as private as a fort, the gym is a space where bodies are on display in impersonal (like the street) but also exclusionary (like the fort) spaces. When women's bodies enter this semiprivate space of the weight room, they experience both the impersonal and the exclusionary. For most women, despite their level of musculature or expertise, and regardless of their race or perceived sexuality, the space is more like the street. In addition to being seen by strangers, it is a site of potential resistance, whatever their motivations for entering. Though their raced, classed, abled, sexualized bodies are all read differently in this (and every other gym) space, they are (almost) always read as women. And though, as individuals on display to other

individuals in that space, their level of acceptance by others and personal comfort varies, the larger issue of women in this male homosocial space allows for a consideration of mere presence as resistant.

## CHAPTER 5

## CROSSING BOUNDARIES: QUEER WOMEN IN THE GYM

In the previous two chapters, I focused on women's use of spaces and fitness technologies; the ways in which women contest gendered boundaries in the gym; the discursive markings of gym spaces and their effects on women's practices and movements, focusing on aerobics room and weightlifting spaces respectively. In this chapter I discuss the movements and activities of queer women and the ways in which they challenge the markings of the space through their presence and practices and the meanings gay women ascribe to their gym practices and identities (both inside and outside the gym).

Throughout the course of my field work, in observing, but especially in talking with queer-identified women, I came to see the ways in which they use and conceptualize gym spaces as different from many heterosexual women. They spoke of moving across gendered gym boundaries with less apprehension than non-gay women. Despite being young (25-42), they all had extensive experience in the gym and had acquired knowledge from a variety of sources: past experiences in sports, peers, fitness certifications, fitness publications. They all expressed comfort in developing and altering their fitness regimens to fit their training and personal needs based on their acquired knowledge. They were more likely than the non-gay women I spoke with to diversify their practices by mixing classes, cardio activity, outdoor exercise and sports, and strength training.

I came to see the piecing together that gay women do in the space of the gym as bricolage. Denzin and Lincoln (2007) write that "in their work, *bricoleurs* define and extend themselves" (p. 5). The lesbian, as *bricoleur*, moved through gym spaces with

relative ease. In doing so, she challenged gym boundaries and binaries, while also engaging in a process of identity formation and reification. Exercise is part of her, but also its own product reflective of her. “The choice of practice...is pragmatic, strategic and self-reflexive” (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1991, p. 2).

In this chapter I begin by drawing on the work in queer cultural geography to discuss the queering of gym spaces. This topic is connected to the issue of visibility in the gym, which I explore using the experiences of my participants alongside the history of visibility/invisibility for gay women. In the following section I use the work of sport sociologists to discuss the somatic enactment of identity—specifically gay identity—for women through fitness practices. Finally, I end the chapter with a case study. Using Carrie’s story I explore some of the above issues and discuss the formation of a queer identity in gym space using Foucault’s writing on care of the self.

First, though, a brief explanation of my use of the term queer in this chapter. I refer to the women who participated in my study who identified as something other than heterosexual as queer. Some of my participants used this label to describe themselves; others used the labels gay or lesbian. I am particularly interested in the ways in which their performance of fitness bricolage expressed or reflected queer desire: for non-normative gendered bodies that were part of their sexual identity and for freedom from or comfort in the gendered and sexualized markings of fitness spaces and practices. Also, queer women in this study were more likely to speak of the ways their gender and sexuality influenced their negotiations of gym spaces and practices. Though I employ this term, not all of the women used the label when describing themselves.

A queer reading of their experiences negotiating their sexuality and the flow of heterosexual desire in gym spaces is valuable to revealing the hidden sexualization of spaces. As Browne, Lim, and Brown (2009) write: “The sexualization of space...does not only apply to spaces where people might expect to engage in explicitly sexual activity of some kind. Many other banal and everyday spaces are structured by sexuality” (p. 3). Gay and non-gay gym members experience this. My data, however, about non-gay participants’ experiences of or views on desire in the gym could not support a productive discussion—queer or otherwise—of the sexualization of space.

I find the term queer useful in my thinking for two other reasons. First, it allowed me to conceptualize desire as expressed by participants that was rarely about object desire. In other words, the queer women I spoke with were not solely interested in being seen by other queer women in the gym or using the space as a meeting place for potential sexual or romantic encounters. The desire was directed inward; towards building bodies and emotional states that were part of the process of identity creation and the presentation of their selves in and outside the gym: “a desire that is corporeal” (Grosz, 1994, p. 53).

And finally, my use of the term queer is used to work towards a less binary and homogenized understanding of sexual identity. Though all my queer participants were white, not all were middle-class or college-educated. Their gender expression fell along a masculine-feminine spectrum and some spoke explicitly to the ways in which changes in their presentation and/or self-concept had changed since they first began working out in gym spaces. Queer offers more space in which I can theorize these intersections of identity. It allows me to discuss embodied experience as a product of more than just sexuality (as object desire) and to be inclusive of, for this project, age, experience, class,

and gender presentation. As Knopp (2009) writes, “a queer perspective, informed by embodied and lived queer experiences can...help us rethink some additional spatial ontologies, including place, placelessness and movement” (p. 23).

### Queer Space

Beginning in the 1980s, geographers started publishing their studies of gay spaces in the United States and Great Britain focusing on the dynamics of these spaces and how they compared to heterosexual spaces. This work on the intersections of sexuality and space revealed the ways in which spaces are infused with sexuality as well as the heteronormativity of most public spaces. “It is difficult to get people to recognize normative geographies until these are transgressed” (N. Duncan, 1996, p. 139).

One theme on which queer geographers have focused their work since the 1990s has been the ways in which gay people use space—both public and private—in transgressive ways. But within this work attention to gym or fitness spaces has been limited. One chapter in Betsky’s *Queer Space* (1997) is devoted to gay men’s experiences in gym locker rooms. van Ingen (2010) discussed the spaces and landscapes in which a group of recreational runners comprised of sexual minorities trained. But scholars have had little to say about gay women’s experiences in fitness spaces. Brown and Knopp (2007) contend, in their review of queer geographies, that the literature has provided insights into the hidden lives of queer people in ways that reveal their political and cultural power. Queer geography also contributes to a more complete history of queer people in Western culture.

While scholarship on the history and experiences of gay women in sports continues to grow, the same has not been true for gay women in fitness. Also missing are the ways in

which gay women's negotiations of and presence in fitness spaces produce capital (cultural, subcultural, social) and counter narratives to dominant discourses of gender, health, and fitness. How have gay women interrupted the everyday uses of gendered fitness spaces? How does the queer woman's embodied experience alter the space? In the following sections I suggest that queer women's visibility and the somatic enactment of sexuality have transgressive potential.

### Queer Visibility

Because of cultural assumptions about the privacy of sexual acts and the binary construction of space as either public or private, the idea that sexuality is enacted in public (or even semi-private) spaces remains anathema to most people's conceptualization of public space. When sexuality becomes visible in public spaces, it is often viewed as deviant sexuality: gay men in public bathrooms, or male-on-female street harassment, for example. But when sexuality is not overtly on display, spaces—public, private, and semi-private—are assumed to be heterosexual. “It is difficult to make heterosexuals aware that their spaces invoke a sexuality” writes Duncan (1996, p. 138), but it is possible to illuminate that heteronormativity when the markings of the space are transgressed. In this section I discuss how queer women's visibility provides transgressive moments in gym spaces.

Throughout women's sporting history, the visibility of lesbians in sports has been, at different times—but often simultaneously—paradoxical, spectre-esque, celebrated, and discouraged. Even when the presence of lesbians in sporting spaces is merely speculative, the speculation alone creates a presence, a visibility. This visibility, however, has largely been seen as a problem for lesbians and their experiences in sport rather than as a means

to disrupting the masculine heteronormativity of most institutionalized sports. Research on lesbian athlete experience (Blinde & Taub, 1992a; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2003), the lesbian stigma and female apologetic (Blinde & Taub, 1992b; Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009; Festle, 1996; Wughalter, 1978), and the difficulties for lesbians in coaching and administrative positions (Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005) has contributed significantly to our understanding of the structure of discrimination in sport, its history and persistence, its effects on female athletes of all sexualities, and the larger “image issues” women’s sports face (Knight & Giuliano, 2003).

Outside of organized sport, specifically in exercise and fitness culture(s), little research has focused on gay and lesbian women. Theberge (1987), most notably, began the discussion of the heteronormativity of the aerobics craze, and others followed with discussions of both the potential empowerment and impediments of the practice for a presumed heterosexual woman (Haravon, 1995; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Markula, 1995, 2003b). In the research on exercise culture(s) and the fitness industry, scholars discuss heteronormativity, but the research on discourses of health, physicality and the body, gender, and capitalism that all exist in this domain have not engaged significantly with female homosexuality (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Lloyd, 1996; J. S. Maguire, 2007). [Roper and Polasek (2006) are one notable exception.]

The lack of research mirrors the lack of visibility of lesbians in the fitness industry, as leaders and consumers. Only two high-profile public fitness figures have revealed their non-normative sexualities: Jackie Warner and Jillian Michaels. Warner gained national visibility with her reality show, *Work Out!*, which aired on the Bravo cable television station from 2006-2008 and revolved around the personal and business



relationships within Sky Sports and Spa, the Los Angeles gym Warner owned until 2009. She has numerous exercise videos and a clothing line.

Michaels is famous for her role on NBC's *The Biggest Loser* and has subsequently launched a line of exercise and diet products, videos, and books. While Warner's sexuality was an integral part of her show and public persona, Michaels has been more reserved in discussing her sexuality, only publicly announcing in a 2010 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* that she is bisexual. She was featured on the cover of *People* magazine in June 2012 with her female partner and their two children. Her sexuality, however, is not discussed on *The Biggest Loser* or on other television shows, including *Dr Phil* and *The Doctors* where she appears regularly.

Outside of these two women, there is little representation in the fitness industry of gay women. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note that none of the women's fitness magazines they examined for their study contained references to gay women. Unlike in men's fitness magazines, which will subtly cater to gay men using "gay vague" techniques, women's magazines do not even bother. Given that only three of the gay women I spoke with had received their fitness knowledge from intense participation in sports as children and young adults, the majority of my sample turned to knowledge produced by a fitness industry that remains both heteronormative and gender normative. Gay women who seek to build bodies and identities that are not in line with the gendered norms espoused by the fitness industry must acquire knowledge from other sources and piece together information from a variety of sources. This constitutes fitness bricolage.

The invisibility of lesbians in the gym provides both tension and reward. In the previous chapter, I related the story of Dana who was always negotiating her butch

presence in the gym. The thrill she got from men who competed with her when she was younger has waned as she has aged and her appearance has become more gender non-conforming. She will now seek refuge in the women-only areas of gyms because her queer visibility creates tension for her in ways that impede her workouts. She has had to leave gyms because of the homonegative environment and the comments and looks she receives from both male and female members. And she is not just a target when she is in male-dominated spaces like the weight room.

*Going into the swimming pool—it was a mixed bag of weirdness there between the young men and the older men. And just some of the looks I would receive were pretty interesting. Some men were pretty disgusted. People would switch lanes when I was swimming to not be near me.*

MJ, however, revels in her queer visibility. She likes challenging the ideas men in the weight room have about what women can do in the same space. Her heavily muscled and tattooed body will sometimes, though, be the focus of negative attention.

*I experienced some issues with—I'm heavily tattooed as well—and some comments from the male gym goers about me being butch and some issues with that.*

But it has not been to the same level as the negative attention that Dana's non-gender conforming body and practices receive and it is difficult to say why this is so. MJ expresses a more nonchalant attitude about other members and what they think about her, while remaining quite aggressive in her pursuit of fitness and having no qualms about taking up her fair share of space in the weight room. She is also able to use queer visibility to avoid many of the issues straight or straight-appearing women have in the gym around sexual harassment or sexualization by men. Rose, who describes herself as gender non-conforming lesbian, also uses her visibility to create a literal space for herself

in male-dominated weight rooms. Because she does not fear sexualization, she does not hesitate to enter the weight room when men are present.

*If I looked more like a straight woman—if I wasn't so out in my identity—I think I would think differently. I also tend to go to gyms because of the geographic area that I live in that are primarily white men and I don't fit most white—again I am going to stereotype—but I don't think I fit what is sexy for most white men.*

Mia has used queer visibility to her advantage as well—mostly the queerness of others. She often works out with other gay women who are more masculine-appearing, which keeps most men away, she says. She also said she puts on a butch gym persona when in the weight room.

*There is a guy at my gym who goes up to a lot of the women in the weight room to tell them what they are doing wrong or how they should try something else. He has never approached me. Maybe he knows I'm not straight because he has seen me with other more obviously gay women. Maybe it's because when I am alone working out I have this butchness to me. I don't engage with any men. I take up space. I don't hesitate to use weights or benches. And I never ask for help.*

But outside the weight room, when she goes into the aerobics studio for yoga or Step class the other women in there think she is a young, stay-at-home mother because she is white and works out in the middle of the morning.

The presence of queer women in gym spaces produces different effects. The experiences of Rose and MJ are quite different even though they share many characteristics. Both are more masculine-appearing and known in their respective gyms for being serious about weightlifting. Rose was once an aerobics instructor. Her queer visibility along with her position as a leader—the leader—in the room challenged the heteronormativity and femininity of aerobics spaces. Rose actually met her wife when she took one of Rose's classes. They became lifting partners and then started dating.

Both TJ and Dana negotiate their gender non-conforming musculature in yoga classes that, in their experiences, are dominated by women. They recognize their queer

visibility in these spaces and Dana in particular has had some problems in her attempts to be social here, but for TJ doing yoga has disrupted her own notion of what strength is while also putting her lack of yoga skills on display for all these women.

*I've taken yoga classes, right? I think wow—I'm really not strong at all cause if you have like—let's say you're doing warrior pose. And I'm in there with a group of women who maybe all they do is yoga or maybe all they do is cardio and they don't do weights—and they can hold warrior pose for like ten times the length I can. I'm like [panting] you know. And I thought “why is this? Maybe I'm weak or my shoulders are overdeveloped or my arms are a little heavy.” But I'm just like “I can't do it” and everyone around me can.*

Part of the visibility queer women negotiate is based on their chosen activities and the ways in which their bodies doing these activities draw attention. As I mentioned above, this visibility sometimes interfered with their physical activities, a problem that was compounded for women whose activities are integral to their sense of and construction of their selves.

### Somatic Sexuality

The shaping of the body is very important to most of the queer women I spoke with. As with non-gay women, gym activities construct identity for individual women. Non-gay women, though, did not recognize or discuss the ways in which their gym activities shaped or reified their sexuality. The queer women in my study did, though. The gym offered many of them a space in which to somatically enact their sexuality.

Previous work on bodybuilding as subculture discusses the ways in which bodybuilders create identity through their sport (Fisher, 1997; A. M. Klein, 1993), but little work has focused on identity creation through more generalized fitness practices. Weightlifting or, more specifically, being proficient at weightlifting is associated positively with men and somewhat negatively with gay women. The ways in which desire, negation, and loss come together in this practice for gay women cannot be

analyzed through the singular lens of either gender or sexuality. Queer women who weightlift enjoy the benefits—both aesthetic and practical—of this practice and the way it allows them to positively embody their identities. These feelings and benefits are not exclusive to queer women, but among non-queer women the feelings are not as closely tied to sexuality—and certainly not a historically deviant sexuality.

Rather than denying a same-sex desire, queer women in this study facilitate it through their gym practices. This does not mean that they are free to engage in any and all activities in any space of the gym. Most queer women continue to engage in a negotiation of their bodies as a result of their somatic enactment of same-sex desires. This was especially true in Dana's case where often her body is read as male or predatory making her susceptible to increased scrutiny, comments, and outright harassment in a variety of gym spaces: the weight room, the pool, the locker room. There are consequences for her within the gym that other queer women including TJ and MJ have not faced. Because the latter are rarely confronted or are more comfortable under scrutiny, they have been able to move more freely throughout their respective gyms and to build their bodies to reflect their queer identities relatively unhindered.

I argue that this form of physical activity is a somatic process of reverse affirmation, a concept Foucault (1990) names to describe the ways in which “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its own legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged” (p. 101). Foucault writes that a positive discursive affirmation emerged from the negative discourses around homosexuality from the legal, medical, and literary worlds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor and Whittier (1992) employ the term in theorizing the lesbian feminist movement:

The process of asserting “who we are” often involves a kind of reverse affirmation of the characteristics attributed to it by larger society. Boundary markers are, therefore, central to the formation of a collective identity because they promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group. For any subordinate group, the construction of positive identity requires both a withdrawal from the values and structures of the dominant, oppressive society, and the creation of new self-affirming values and structures. (p. 111)

Reverse affirmation for many queer women in the gym is a somatic process of identity formation. They assert their female masculinity in this space and through their practices. The queer women I interviewed consistently affirmed their right to occupy gym spaces as queer women. They do not defer to men in the space by giving up their position in line for equipment. They do not lift less weight than they are capable of. None of them expressed fears of getting “too big.” They did not confine themselves to the “beginner” or “softer” gym spaces. They did not change their appearance.

Any reversal of a discourse, Foucault (1990) notes, is dependent on the dominant discourse: its vocabulary and meaning-making capacities. The majority of these women, for example, were all introduced to the space of the gym and specifically weight rooms and the exercises done within them, by men. Male coaches, friends, and colleagues provided their entrance in and knowledge of the space and what to do in it. As queer as a butch lesbian or an androgynous lesbian or a sporty lesbian might make the space—as a visible presence—she often is still forced to conform to the standards set by the fitness industry and culture at large. Though those standards are often ones applied to men or to select women in higher levels of competitive athletics, they are still the dominant standards. Some of the queer women pushed back against them by, for example, creating weight regimens solely for the purpose of gaining or maintaining muscle mass.

As weightlifting for women becomes more normalized, it is possible that the pleasure queer women who lift receive from their transgression of gender norms will be diluted. They maintain their practice currently not because only queer women lift weights, but because it is an affirmation of a non-normative identity. For more masculine-appearing queer women there is a pleasure that emerges from the subversion of hegemonic femininity that includes their actions (i.e., weightlifting) and appearance (i.e., short hair, masculine muscles, male attire, unremoved facial hair). If the former becomes less subversive, it is possible that the reverse affirmation queer women currently access through weightlifting will be less available to them via this practice.

Weeks (1987) writes about the power of coming out, of naming oneself gay or lesbian. “[Naming] is an absolutely fundamental concept, offering a sense of personal unity, social location, and even at times a political commitment.[...]But to say ‘I am gay’, ‘I am lesbian’...is to make a statement about belonging and about a specific stance in relationship to the dominant sexual codes” (p. 31). Some queer women in the gym, through their actions and bodies, are expressing their sexuality. More than a way of walking or gesturing, working out and the results of working out, are used by these women to state their belonging in a community. These queer women stated their belonging somatically and in ways that can be just as political.

#### Carrie: A Case Study of Queer Identity Formation

*She called me “muscles.” I got into playing with that dynamic; and weight training and working out was a part of that. Sort of developing an outer masculinity; developing the masculinity that I had always had in my adulthood. This was just a full expression of just really embracing the female masculinity. So modifying my body naturally in a way that made me feel good about myself was working out. I got to get back to being in my body the way I was when I was a kid. But also, it was about an outward expression of something I very much felt. And it was also about sex and sexuality and desire.*

In this final section of the chapter, I illustrate the political aspects of the somatic enactment of queer sexuality as well as the issues discussed thus far regarding visibility and the negotiation it requires of queer bodies, and queer identity formation in the gym. I discuss how Foucault's technologies of power and technologies of the self create the queer subject in the space of the gym in an attempt to understand the movements and enactments of power on the queer subject.

In his essay "Technologies of the Self," Foucault (1988) notes the four major types of "technologies" (original quotation marks): of production, of sign systems, of power, and those of the self. While separate for the purposes of classification because they each pertain to a specific form of domination, they rarely function independent of one another. His own work focused on the latter two. Toward the end of his life, though, he writes of his growing interest in technologies of the self and his desire to explore how the individual, rather than systems, displays power over other individuals and over herself. Foucault (1988) defines technologies of the self as the ways:

individuals [...] effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

That individuals "do" work on themselves is a concept particularly well suited to a discussion of fitness practices (Markula, 2003, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Further, applying this concept to a discussion of the identity-forming mechanisms of queer women, specifically butch lesbians, allows for an investigation into the power dynamics butch women experience and into the ways their position changes in relation to dominant technologies of power in different spaces and through different actions. Simultaneously, in the butch woman who works out there is the experience of the push power (external) of



the technologies of power to conform to both heteronormativity and hegemonic femininity (the latter experienced by all women) and the push power (internal) of the technologies of the self to create an identity. Subjectivity is created through the body for the purpose of finding happiness (or purity, or wisdom, or perfection, or immortality) as a queer woman who identifies as butch.

This is a case study based on the experiences of a butch lesbian, Carrie, and how her work in the gym operates both inside and outside the space as an identity maker and marker. “Carrie” is a composite of several queer and butch-identified women. The narrative pieces in this section, the story of Carrie, is “true” in that these events, these feelings, these ideas do exist—but in multiple people. The narrative moments are entirely from interviews I conducted.

At the forefront of this project is my consideration of the dialectical construction of gym space and gym identities through the lenses of gender and sexuality. Carrie’s story is bounded by space—by the literal and figurative boundaries that exist in the gym. I used several gym voices from several gym spaces to construct a narrative that extends across voices and spaces (Bruce, 1998). In creating a more coherent narrative and coherent understanding of the space, my desire was not to present *The Experience of the Lesbian in the Gym*, but to share a narrative created from actual experiences in order to engender further consideration of the potentials and limitations of gym space for queer women. Carrie’s story provides an opportunity to examine how she uses this heteronormative space in ways that subvert the technologies of power it exerts in order to shape her *self*.

Carrie is a white, middle class woman in her early 40s who has a sports background. She grew up playing both individual and team sports at various levels of seriousness—from recreational team sports as a child to intense, near-Olympic level training in swimming as a teenager. Burnt out, she stopped training and most physical activity after graduating from high school. The gym seemed somewhat foreign to her after a history of participation in sports.

*I never thought that someone would just go to a gym and lift weights and do stuff on their own.*

In her mid-20s she did join a gym and begin to lift weights and “stuff,” but she was not motivated by any prescribed notion of fitness or health. She read no fitness magazines or manuals and because she did not belong to a gym—and never had—she was not familiar with any type of gym or fitness culture. Her experience with sport in her childhood had been colored by the prescriptions for proper girlhood that many girls—of all sexualities—feel they must abide by. So while she continued with appropriate activities, like swimming, Carrie gave up on baseball and softball.

*I quit softball when there was no word lesbian. But you reach a certain age, I was maybe 12 or 13 when it was no longer ok to play softball—in Virginia, at least. And at that point it was awesome to play softball, and I was really good. I loved it. But, yeah, I quit because I was no longer encouraged to play softball and there was something about it. No one could put a finger on it. I couldn't. But I thought “I'm not supposed to be associated with this anymore.”*

These comments exemplify the enactment of the technologies of power as experienced by Carrie, and similar to other queer women (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005). Carrie was already a lesbian when she began going to a gym but she had a negative view of butch and butch/femme and had spent much of her life, in her words, “tamping down” aspects of her identity that would mark her as too masculine (to play softball without questions, to live openly in Virginia, to abstain from wearing make-up and keeping her

hair long). Hiestand and Levitt (2005) describe how the acceptance or realization of butch identity is different from the process(es) of lesbian self-identification or coming out as a lesbian:

Coming to terms with being butch was described [by participants] as a process closely linked to developing a sense of pride in being (and looking like) a lesbian.[...] Their exposure to butch–femme flirtation and social dynamics helped them re-construe butchness as a sexually desirable aesthetic. As most of the women had coded their gender difference as undesirable and struggled to minimize it most of their lives, this insight initially took many of the women by surprise. (p. 74)

Carrie’s entry into a commercial gym was motivated by interactions with a self-identified femme to whom she was attracted. Because she had heard that this woman liked “old-school” butches, she began to turn her gender non-conformity, and the repression of it, into a desirable trait as she undertook a care of the self that included going to the gym and lifting weights. She referred to it as a second coming out. Weeks (1987) has written that when sexual minorities proclaim their identity, they are taking “a specific stance in relationship to the dominant sexual codes” (p. 31). Carrie’s initial proclamation of her butch identity was almost entirely based on aesthetics. The “looking like” part of the butch identity became pivotal for Carrie.

*I would get attention for my muscles and I loved that. Because it was like I felt seen. I mean it wasn’t like the muscles were all a part of it, but I felt seen.*

Carrie’s use of the space was part of the construction of her butch identity. The power of sexual desire and the power of another person whom she desired motivated her actions: first, to enter the space, and subsequently influenced how she used it. The power relations she felt and exerted all exist within a subversive paradigm. The desire itself, her own and that expressed by another woman, motivated a subversive use of the gym: to

build large, unfeminine muscles in a space (the weight room) dominated by men and marked as masculine.

Interestingly she has found herself the object of gay men's desire in the gym when she is mistaken for a young, gay man. This exemplifies one of the ways in which technologies of the self bump up against technologies of power: even as Carrie creates her ethical self in congruence with her desires for a specific aesthetic, her desire to be visible in a certain way and to certain people cannot be controlled. While she finds sexual attention from gay men in the gym more amusing than threatening, there are also instances in which her body, the product of these technologies of the self, is not well received.

*The disadvantage [of being muscled and butch] is being kind of vilified and looked at like I'm a freak.*

She realizes that this is the "price [she] pays" for choosing to expressly present and construct her body in ways that are congruent with her gender and sexual identity. But the advantages are significant.

*I'm seen by the person [I desire]; I'm understood so I can be seen by my object of desire.*

And she notes that this is not an advantage femme lesbians have because they almost always pass as straight.

Carrie's experience of fitness and her care of the self practices are nearly in opposition to the ways in which the athletes in Chapman's (1997) study of female rowers experienced and built their bodies. They experienced discomfort with their bodies, despite the fact that the ways they built them were necessary for success in the sport. Carrie's built body brings comfort and allows her to experience pleasure in *her* social

world—the lesbian community. (Though, as I noted above, outside of this community she faces criticism for the same body that creates such pleasure for her). Her care of the self is about both fitness and aesthetics. They are mutually reinforcing of her identity rather than discordant.

Chapman finds that female athletes' experience of discomfort in their bodies counters one of the dominant discourses operating within women's sport: that it has liberatory power. In Carrie's narrative, we see many liberatory moments (being back in her body, being an object of desire, being visible) emerge from her choice of physical activities—despite the fact that both her built body and her weightlifting are read as non-conforming. Many female athletes have to reconcile their non-conforming bodies with their images of hegemonic femininity. Carrie's work on the self is not dissonant.

Carrie's affirmations of her care of self practices are productive and vital to her identity and they are largely positive accounts. The gym allows her a space in which to have liberatory moments. But it remains a space occupied by numerous and divergent discourses as well as other individuals engaged in their own care of the self, the aims of which are just as varied and diverse as the people present. Carrie, as a butch lesbian, engages in processes of self care in the space of the gym as a means of pushing back against the technologies of domination to which she has been subject, but the former cannot provide an entirely liberatory experience. As Foucault notes, technologies of the self do not have this ability. Complete liberation is not a possibility for Carrie no matter how much weight she lifts, how large her biceps become, how desired she is by other women. She experiences what Foucault calls "degrees of liberty" through her self-care practices; enough so that she continues to faithfully frequent the gym.

Because of her gender non-conforming identity, however, Carrie experiences the technologies of domination that exist around gender and sexuality outside the space of the gym and which permeate its boundaries. Despite the degrees of liberty she experiences in the gym (and the ways they allow her to push back against the technologies of power outside of the gym), the space itself (and Carrie, as she exists in it) is not immune to the ways that technologies of power are exerted in the gym. The manifestations of these forces come largely because of issues of visibility and how they change depending on the space and who is occupying it.

Carrie has never experienced problems in the weight room, though her visibility there has paradoxical effects. At times she is invisible. It is not (only) that she is one of few women in the space; it is because she is a masculine woman. More feminine women receive the attention of men, she says. Men offer to spot these women, help them figure out how to use a piece of equipment, and offer advice. She has never been offered such assistance. Not all women, it should be noted, want such attention. Carrie does not want to be sexually visible to men.

*It's not like I am looking to attract guys--hopefully women. "Look at me! I can change your tire!" But I've never felt leered at or weird in that setting.*

She does not go entirely unnoticed, though. She becomes visible to men when she does something that they relate to and recognize as an achievement, like lift a lot of weight. While often not an issue (i.e., their attention is diverted and she becomes invisible again), there are times when men become competitive with her.

*[Men] tend to like to compete with me. [In the past] they would come up and challenge me and say that they could lift more weight than I could.*

Though these actions are seemingly innocuous (she neither feels nor is threatened—though she did report being annoyed some of the time), they do reflect the power these

men hold. They demonstrate their (believed) physical superiority and in doing so reify their dominant position—both inside and outside the gym. Carrie accepts this power dynamic even as she “plays with it.”

Less innocuous, though, are her experiences in the locker room. If one of the defining characteristics of disciplinary space, according to Foucault, is partitioning, the locker room most certainly meets this criteria. It is itself a space partitioned from the other spaces in the gym. And within it are further partitions: bathroom stalls, shower stalls, changing rooms, rows comprised of lockers. It is also a space that exists in duplicate. There are two (at least) locker rooms in every gym: one for women and one for men. And thus the locker room is an explicitly gendered space. This creates problems for someone like Carrie whose masculine identity is written on her body. Far more than the men outside the locker room in their demands for gender conformity are the women within the locker room.

*Women usually just avoid me. It was pretty much avoidance and pulling their kids out and trying to keep me out of the women's locker room. One woman was like “let's go” dragging her kid out of the locker room or out of the aisle that I was in even though I was just standing there getting dressed. I even had a woman call security on me while I was in there.*

Carrie now engages in certain behaviors in order to avoid such conflicts. She does not look women in the eyes while she is in the locker room. She does not want any woman to think she is checking her out. She generally avoids showering in the gym—especially after one time when she came out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, and was accused of being in the wrong place. Because her hyperconsciousness about her own appearance making other women uncomfortable—*created in this space*—Carrie has engaged in her own version of apologetic behavior. She attempts to compensate for being too masculine, for not conforming, for looking different in a space and among people that

expect a certain level of conformity to gender norms. But her concessions in the locker room do not extend to the gym floor.

*Having a muscular, masculine-looking body is something that is very much a part of my self expression. It's so much a part of my identity just because I've been doing it so long. And so if I think, "God, what if I never go to the gym again? What if I don't have any muscles ever that show?" And I think, "could I live with that?" And right now, no. But later I may because [the way I express myself] has changed.*

She acknowledges that the practices she finds critical to her identity now, might not always be so, based on her own history of embodied identity. As Markula and Pringle (2006), following Foucault, note identities change because an individual is constantly compelled into self-reflection or what Foucault (1988) calls a "hermeneutics of the self."

Important to note here is that Carrie has a freedom to change that has been afforded to her by her positioning in society. She is white and middle class and living in a liberal region of the northeast United States. In fact, her ability to build her body in a gym is a privilege of her economic status. And her (partial) invisibility could be attributed to her race. As she engages in a hermeneutics of the self she is not forced to consider how a less privileged woman might be perceived and treated doing the same things in the same spaces to which Carrie has access. A less privileged butch lesbian will likely engage in work on the self in quite different ways because she experiences power differently than Carrie. But she too would have liberatory moments.

The use of body modification via working out in a gym may not provide queer women harmonious interactions in the social world—as Foucault hopes for—because it is a heteronormative social world. But these practices provide comfort because they help her construct her body in a way that is consistent with her identity. Such a quest, however, can create discord (having security called, being called a freak). The queer



woman cannot liberate herself from the dominating powers of the systems of heteronormativity, but the practice of fitness, of building one's body in a way which comports with her sexuality and gender identity provides a push back against these dominating powers.

## CHAPTER 6

## CYBORGS IN (GYM) SPACE?

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the effects of the fitness industry as they manifest in the space of the gym and subsequently on bodies, specifically on the gendering of bodies. I have also attempted to show the ways gendered bodies themselves construct fitness spaces and what is at stake in this dialectical relationship of bodies and space in terms of discursive power over space and the attainment of capital for use in and outside of the gym. In this final chapter, I consider more explicitly the product of gym space, bodies, and the modes of production. I focus on the boundaries between bodies and machines, and the natural and the technological binary as it manifests in the gym. I examine the discursive construction of fitness as natural and the seemingly contradictory discourses about fitness technologies. I draw on the discussion about the individual mandate for fitness and health that I began in Chapter Two and add to that conversation by analyzing how gym equipment and trends complicate both the natural/technological and inside/outside binary, and how gender is implicated in these binaries and the blurring of the naturally/artificially created body.

The Natural

In February 2013, the *New York Times Magazine* included a column addressing the benefits of outdoor exercise. Drawing on recent studies, the author noted that exercise in the outdoors works different muscles (when comparing running on a treadmill versus outdoors), requires more exertion, and generally puts people in a better mood (perhaps due to increases in vitamin D production) which motivates them to keep working out (Reynolds, 2013). The space in which exercise occurs has been one of the trends in

fitness—even before it was an industry—that has shifted based, in part, on perceptions of the natural. Eichberg (1986) undertook an historical review of European exercise spaces, indoor versus outdoors. These preferences continue to fluctuate. One of the goals of this chapter is to illustrate how the indoor/outdoor divide has affected indoor fitness spaces (i.e., gyms) as well as the physical and discursive forms the “natural” takes inside the gym. As Butryn and Masucci (2009) note, “bodies and their modes of expression...have long been shaped by and within larger discourses over indoor and outdoor, technologically infused and naturally existing sport and exercise landscapes” (p. 290). In this section I discuss technologies of fitness and their positioning in the natural/technological binary. In the following section I draw on this discussion as I note their role in the production of gendered bodies.

The natural is a concept the fitness industry grapples with and is evident in the spaces of gyms, especially gyms that cater to middle and upper classes. The fitness field (prior to and inclusive of fitness as an industry) has been subjected to debates about where fitness is best accomplished: indoors or outdoors. “Green waves,” for example, are marked by the promotion of outdoor sport and fitness activities (Eichberg, 2002). Contemporary promotions of fitness do not seem to favor either indoor or outdoor activities with most fitness media advocating exercise generally and mandating flexibility in the exerciser to complete her workout wherever she finds herself: inside (the home, gym, hotel room) or outside (urban, rural). Outdoor exercise is not promoted as heavily by the larger fitness industry, which has less to gain monetarily from people who eschew gyms, trademarked programs, and expensive at-home gym equipment in favor of outdoor activities.

The natural/technological tension manifested differently among my three sites. At Western Massachusetts Athletics, for example, the largest of the spaces, the room in the front of the building that housed the majority of the cardio machines and all of the Nautilus equipment had floor to ceiling windows (in a space that was nearly two stories in height). All the treadmills were placed up against these windows, which were tinted. Runners and walkers got to see the outside—an illusion of an outdoor experiences—while outsiders had greater difficulty looking in thus providing the protection of an enclosed space, perhaps more appealing to female runners who can experience harassment while running outdoors. The large windows also meant that everyone in the space experienced so-called natural light, to such an extent that it became bothersome at certain times of the day when the sunlight streamed in at a certain angle that bounced off and obscured the digital screens on the equipment.

Notable was the atmosphere at Universal Fitness, which was in no way natural. The colors on the walls and machines reflected the UF brand. There were no windows at the franchise I observed. The facility looked like a factory. “The allusion to production is enhanced by the layout of the room housing the nautilus. Anyone who has ever visited a machine shop will see in the nautilus’ division of labor, where separate machines are designed and situated in order to accomplish specific tasks, a mirrored and chrome version of a tool-and-die shop” (Willis, 1990, pp. 10-11). It was a space that was in the business of producing bodies. There was no pretense of the natural about it. There was no rock wall to simulate an outdoor activity. There was no pool. The factory feeling was maintained not just by the structure—high ceilings, visible ductwork, dark space—but by the positioning of the equipment in rows. Equipment was grouped by function/type in

such a way as to facilitate movement and de-hierarchicalize the type of exercise people chose, reflecting a well-advertised UF philosophy. The naturalness of the groupings is in contrast to the assembly line feeling it inspires as well as the way in which the bodies that are “on the line” are ranked. In his examination of factory space and factory bodies, Foucault (1995) notes how the partitioning of the spaces produces—in addition to a disciplinary effect—a hierarchy. The gendered hierarchy at UF is revealed when observing who is going down which assembly line. Women were more likely to literally go down the line of Nautilus machines set up in the center of the space. Men’s use of Nautilus was in more of a pick and pluck manner when they jumped onto specific machines. Rarely was their resistance training exclusively performed on the Nautilus line. Men’s ability to move among all the lines—cardio, Nautilus, free weights—allowed them to establish their position at the top of the gym hierarchy.

The natural in the gym is contested by the factory-like aspects of gyms. UF had staged its equipment in assembly-line fashion. WMA and the Wellness Athletic Center also had lines of Nautilus and cardio machines. WMA is actually housed in a former factory building though the division of spaces and the strategic installation of windows mitigated, to an extent, the factory feel of the space. At times the natural aspects of the space as well as the natural associated with bodies and movements, disguise the productive nature of the space. But Lefebvre reminds us that the pursuit of leisure, sports, and games are “concentrated in specially equipped ‘spaces’ which are as clearly demarcated as factories in the world of work” but continue to be “dominated socially by the bourgeoisie” and “determined economically by capital” (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 227).

Willis (1990), too, is quite adamant in the symbolic linkage—and its real-life effects—of exercise and factory work. In focusing on Nautilus machines, she contributes a gendered reading to these machines, which as I noted in Chapter Four, are more acceptable for and by women for resistance training.

The nautilus machine is a capitalist wish-fulfillment. It gives a woman access to the machine but denies access to production; it requires energy and effort and negates the experiences of labor. It isolates the individual from other women who workout (sic) and defines her body as an assemblage of body areas and muscle functions, each requiring a specialized machine and machine function. (Willis, 1990, p. 10)

The exerciser encounters a potentially paradoxical experience when using the equipment in the gym. While most trainers will argue that there is little that is natural about Nautilus machines and while scholars critique their resemblance to capitalist production reminiscent of an industrial era, there are other gym machines for which the machine-ness is made less visible because their function is to replicate the natural. The most basic treadmills and stationary bikes measure distance. But newer, more technical models include components that help the exerciser visualize her own run or ride.

Some treadmills, for example, can be set to mark the distance one has covered around a standard oval track or the elevation as marked on a hill. Advanced stationary bikes are attempting to simulate outdoor rides. The Espresso Bike, a specialized stationary bike, which both WMA and WAC had among their cardio equipment, includes clipless pedals for exercisers who own bike shoes that attach to pedals (the pedals flip over for those with standard sneakers). And riders can choose their courses based on desired distance, elevation, difficulty, and scenery. The Espresso Bike has dozens of scenarios. The rider can steer (with moveable handlebars) her way over mountains, through farmland, around temples in Asia, and in urban environments as she rides among

other cyclists and attempts to keep up with or surpass the “pacer” who wears a yellow jersey. The Stair Mill, a large machine which resembles a staircase, has real-size stairs that scroll underneath the exerciser’s feet.

The machine mimics real-life functional movement, but it also contextualizes that movement—like most cardio equipment will. In an attempt to minimize a feeling of failure that results from an inability of gym machinery to move the exerciser literally from point A to point B, the fitness industry incorporates mechanisms, measurements, and methods to simulate a natural, functional experience; but these measures simultaneously reveal the artificiality. How many of us are counting stairs or calculating steps per minute? How many recreational runners and cyclists have the technology to assess energy output in watts or calculate steps or revolutions per minute?

The meanings of natural and artificial collide in gym space. Within this inorganic, constructed space occurs the building of organic matter, the body, in ways that are perceived as natural often via a hard work discourse. But it is the equipment, these pieces of fitness technologies, that assist in the so-called natural construction of bodies via their mimicking of the natural. Though not every piece of equipment (i.e., Nautilus) is replicating a natural experience, the natural pervades gym spaces. Are you building muscle or losing weight naturally (i.e., without drugs)? Are your supplements herbal? Do you take fish oil? And there is the natural as it relates to fitness technologies: Do you use equipment or spaces (like the rock wall) that mimic the outside? The latter has the simultaneous effect of reifying the gym as unnatural even as so many aspects of gym space fight against this construction.

These examples illustrate some of the ways in which women's bodies are mediated by fitness technologies. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Shilling (2004) writes that "the body constitutes our active 'vehicle of being in' the world" (p. 54). In the space of the gym, women's bodies are purposely active and exercisers are conscious of the ways in which they are active because the gym is space designed for the expressive purpose of actively engaging the body. The technologies, however, become secondary to the working out process, even as they facilitate it, when so much focus is on health and aesthetics. The technologies disappear and along with them an awareness of how they are mediating the body in the gym. Body consciousness remains heightened during time spent in the gym, but the consciousness is not focused on how gym bodies are interacting with fitness technologies. The mandatory achievement of aesthetics and health results in an individual focus on how the body is being perceived based on what it can or cannot do. The technologies of fitness women choose affect what they look like. The bodies produced (the focus of the following section) influences what the body can accomplish both in and outside the gym: run for an hour, draw sexual attention, earn capital.

The forgetting of fitness technologies is the result of human dominance over the objects that constitute fitness technologies; the natural over the artificial. "By developing expertise in the use of objects, we effectively embody new means of projecting ourselves onto the world," writes Shilling (2004, p. 55). These objects, a category in which I include gym equipment, become an extension of the body. And in doing so, I argue that they are naturalized and paradoxically erased. Nature triumphs over technology every time in the gym when the human moves the required mechanism (by pulling or pushing a



lever, a platform, a pedal) even as that technology is required for the achievement and/or maintenance of the gendered body.

McCormack (1999) notes the dual definitions of fitness when discussing bodies and exercise technologies. Fitness, as I have noted throughout this project, is equated with the equally abstract concept “health” and associated with a specific body type. But fitness is also about how human bodies interact with non-human entities in the pursuit of the other definition of fitness. This fit-ness, in the space of the gym, is determined by how the exerciser adapts to the technologies present in the gym. Fit-ness in this case can be about how exercisers choose their methods and modes of fitness. This is a unique process based on knowledge (and where and how it was acquired), comfort with various technologies, and the spaces in which they are practiced (as discussed in regards to weightlifting in Chapters Four and Five). In addition, fit-ness also applies to how the bodies fit into the technologies: how do they interact? how effective is the interaction (i.e., is the desired effect achieved)? In the following section, I focus on the ways in which fitness technologies produce bodies and what kinds of bodies are produced based on this fit-ness.

#### The Production of Natural/Technological

Fitness conceived of as natural allows for a disguising of fitness as a mode of production (as well as hiding much of the consumption that accompanies the productive process). And in a post-industrial era, as more and more global companies take their manufacturing jobs to countries where the bodies are allegedly more docile and expendable, the American body is said to be in crisis (obesity, sedentary lifestyles, increasing rates of heart disease). Discourses of fitness, gender, class, race, and sexuality

are consumed, produced, and reproduced in the gym. The discursive production of bodies and the norms to which they must adhere require further questioning: what is this space producing and how are technologies of fitness used in the production process?

The gym is a factory where the fit body is produced. The creation of the fit body relies on human interactions with non-human objects (McCormack, 1999). “Technology has determined what counts as our own bodies in crucial ways” (Penley, Ross, & Haraway, 1990, p. 12). As Haraway (1985) argues, the interface of man and machine constructs identities. Haraway names the cyborg as the artifact that “describes a human-machine coupling” (Balsamo, 1996, p.18).

Sport studies scholars have employed Haraway’s cyborg in discussions that focus on the blurring of the natural (the body) and the technological (machine). The disabled athlete has figured prominently in this literature which explores both historical and contemporary understandings of what is natural and what is artificial (Apelmo, 2012; Norman & Moola, 2011; Swartz & Watermeyer, 2008). Others in the field have expanded the discussion of the cyborg athlete in their respective analyses of the sport technologies that mediate modern sporting experiences (Butryn & Masucci, 2003, 2009; Butryn, 2003; Cole, 1998; Jönsson, 2007, 2010; Pronger, 1998). The cyborg—the gendered cyborg, specifically—in the space of the gym, though, is largely unexamined. In this section I examine the ways in which the natural/constructed binary is challenged in the gym, the interactions of women’s bodies and fitness technologies, and how gendered identity is shaped through these interactions.

Shilling (2004) notes that academic interest in and theorizing on the body is the result of several trends, including the technological advances of western society which

have resulted in “increased control over bodies, but instituted a weakening of the boundaries between bodies and machines that prompted some to reconceptualize humans as cyborgs” (p. 4). The weakening of boundaries is displayed in the gym in both the advanced and more basic technologies of fitness. Many cardio machines have special grips on the handles that measure the user’s heart rate and then projects it on a digital display, externalizing the user’s heart functioning. Another technology through which the natural/technological boundary is blurred are the seemingly basic bike shoes. The shoes which employ a clipless pedal system, are used in gyms on indoor cycling bikes and Espresso Bikes.

Because a clipless pedal system transforms the entire shoe into part of the pedal, it allows for more efficient power transfer from the rider’s muscles into the bike. Also, because the rider’s feet are fastened to the pedals, she can pull up on the back portion of the pedal stroke when she climbs a hill or accelerates. Both of these advantages of clipless systems lead to faster more efficient riding. (“How Do Clipless Bicycle Pedals Work?,” n.d.)

The technology is described as providing an advantage to the human rider. But the human/technology divide still exists. The shoe, as explained, becomes part of the pedal. But the rider’s (disembodied?) feet, which are securely fastened into the shoe, are presented as separate from the technology. When, based on the above description, the rider accelerates, it is as if she is doing it alone; the many technologies (the shoes, the pedals, the mechanism of the bike) are erased. But she is very much a part of her bike.

One of the most obvious moments of the false man/machine divide is seen in the Nautilus equipment:

When asked to describe the nautilus, most people have expressed...feelings of being assimilated into the machine. Rather than the direct expenditure of effort out of your body, along a wire, over a pulley to lift a weight, the nautilus incorporates your body into its function. The woman inside the nautilus machine is the object produced by the machine even while she is at the same time the producer producing herself as the product of the machine. (Willis, 1990, p. 10)

At UF, Nautilus machines are set up in such a way that users can start at one end and work their way down the line of machines. Even when one chooses a less deliberate path down the assembly line (alternating between free weights and Nautilus or skipping machines), there is the process of establishing the fit between exerciser and machine. The machines have some adjustable parts—seat height, for example. The user adjusts and then fits herself in, placing legs against a lever, or a forearm against a pad attached to a pulley, or palms on a grip. The user chooses a weight setting and pushes or raises or lifts or twists or pulls in such a way as to move the machine which attempts to move the human using it. The machine resists the human's movement and at some point succeeds in pushing the human back to her original position. The process is repeated any number of times before the user extracts herself from the machine.

In the previous three chapters, I discussed the gendered markings of gym spaces and practices. I shift that discussion now to the gendered aspects of technologies of fitness beginning with Nautilus equipment as one part of resistance training technology. As I have noted several times in this project, women I observed across three sites were more likely to use Nautilus machines for resistance training because of their placement in gyms (peripheral to or completely separated from male-dominated weight spaces) and because they are perceived as safer. And while the human-as-machine feeling Willis (1990) writes of might be experienced differently among users, the gendered effects of Nautilus as a technology extend beyond individual experience.

Balsamo (1996) writes that the body is “materially redesigned” through the application of various technologies (p. 3). This redesign is what exercisers often desire when they go to the gym, overlooking the technological aspects of fitness equipment and

focusing on “natural” hard work. In the process of the redesign, the body becomes the product, leading Balsamo to theorize the body as both product and process. In the gym this duality is on display. The product, the body, already exists; the process includes the ways in which exercisers use technologies of fitness for the redesign. The product/process elision is never disaggregated because, in the context of fitness, an end product can never be truly achieved. The definition of the fit body remains so subjective that it will never be completely realized. There is always more to do, farther to run, more to lift, more to lose, more to tone and tighten. The closest thing to a product is the in-process body.

Technologies of fitness are part of the process and use of specific technologies affects both product and process in gendered ways. Nautilus equipment serves as an appropriate example of the gendered process/product production that occurs in the gym. Where female exercisers see them as an entry into resistance training or a safe form of resistance training, trainers and other fitness experts view them as limiting or inferior. Trainers I spoke with noted that Nautilus equipment works muscles in isolation which can create a false sense of strength, limit functionality, and limits the creation of neural pathways which will facilitate additional and more efficient lifting both in training and for functional movement. Nautilus equipment places the user on a set track, according to Kevin, a certified personal trainer with a degree in kinesiology. The user does work but is assisted by cables, levers, and pulleys. This means the muscles “think” less. With free weights, there is no start or end point, and no track; use of free weights or one’s body weight (push-ups, pull ups, etc.) requires more work for the muscles and brain in order to stabilize the muscles being worked as well as surrounding muscles. Some women were

able to note the difference. Beth, who used Nautilus machines for rehabilitation purposes (one of the few benefits of the equipment, according to Kevin) prefers free weights.

Beth: *My routine is almost all free weights. I avoid the machines in general.*

Kris: *Is there a reason for that?*

Beth: *I feel like you can localize things a little bit better and start bringing some stabilization that you don't get with the machines. It's a little bit more control. Or you are forced to be more controlled.*

The repetitiveness of Nautilus, though, is appealing to many women. The ability to repeat exactly the movements with little thought or concentration is a marker of modern society's desire for technological replication as a way to cope with human mortality (Balsamo, 1996). Ironically, the body-machine mechanism that manifests in Nautilus equipment does little to enhance functional human movements that could, at least, prolong quality of life. As Kevin noted, there is no piece of Nautilus equipment that replicates the motion of getting in and out of a chair or bed.

Both Kevin and Danni, as trainers, felt uneasy about the incorporation of Nautilus machines into the regular workouts of their clients. But they recognize the limitations of some clients and the barriers presented by free weights and body weight resistance training.

*Do I advocate the [Nautilus] circuit to my clients? If they are interested in general fitness, I suggest they do it a couple times a week, because most people aren't going to be personal trainers, most people aren't going to want to be able to reach down and touch the floor on one leg, holding 30-pound weights. Most people aren't that motivated. They just want to lose weight; they want to get fit and have more endurance. And the circuit will get your quads stronger, technically. I mean, you are going to work your quads, and they are going to get stronger. You are going to be working them one way and in one range of motion with one type of contraction. But there are people who have been doing the circuit for a long, long time who are stronger on the machines than me, who can push out more weight. I'm probably more coordinated and probably more flexible, but I can't press out 250 pounds on the leg press.*

But during her training sessions with clients, Danni never uses the Nautilus machines.

*I pretty much use free weights and the bands and body weight training with my clients. I'm really particular about form. I spend a lot of time correcting their form. I don't care how heavy the weights are, as long as they are doing it right. Because, in my opinion, they don't need a trainer to do machines.*

The lack of expertise required to use Nautilus machines marks the practice and the user as inferior or beginner. The confluence of factors that I discussed in the chapter on weightlifting—knowledge, fear of injury, comfort in space—come together in marking the Nautilus as a more feminine technology of fitness. The inferiority becomes inscribed on the women who use Nautilus because the bodies they are building through Nautilus might appear toned and strong but lack long-term functionality even as they provide external benefits:

Individuals use technological resources available to them in order to develop their own esteem and sense of self, and to increase their physical capital...women who change their bodies in line with dominant ideals of beauty frequently achieve a greater sense of power and control over their physical selves and social life, even though they may be reinforcing gendered norms that are disadvantageous to women as a group. (Shilling, 2004, p. 189)

Finally, the need for efficiency at the gym, in terms of time and economics, is one that women disproportionately feel when they are doing gym work as third shift labor (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). It is quick and easy to work through a circuit of Nautilus machines. UF, for example, has cordoned off an area and marked it as the 30-minute workout zone. A circle of Nautilus machines is interspersed with instructions for quick cardio movements (jumping jacks, jump rope) or stretching. Men who used that area never completed the circuit; they only went in to use a specific piece of equipment. Women would start at the first station and proceed through each exercise.

Meredith, a WMA member, expressed regret at her lack of knowledge and lack of time which compelled her to use Nautilus.

*I would like to know how I can use free weights to better tone myself. I don't know; is it better than Nautilus? How so? What are the benefits versus doing Nautilus? I have my little routine now and it's nice and easy and I go through it. You don't even have to think, which is nice because I have to think for a living.*

But Meredith explained that she cannot hire a personal trainer. A self-employed consultant, she does not have the disposable income to spend on training. And because Nautilus works for her in that it is easier—physically and mentally—she continues to do it. When a woman who wants to do resistance training has a lack of knowledge, time, and money, using Nautilus is easier, faster, and more economical than hiring a personal trainer.

A discussion of Haraway's (1985) cyborg extends beyond the technologies the exerciser uses. The concept of the self split into many cyborg selves is particularly compelling in this examination of women in gym spaces for two reasons. First, women's identities, as I have touched on in previous discussions about women's gym proclivities, are shaped by which technologies of fitness they engage in. Is she an aerobicizer? Is she a weightlifter? Is she a toner? Is she a runner? As well as to what level of intensity she exerts in these technologies: does she wear a heart rate monitor? how much time does she spend on the stairstepper? how skilled are her class performances? The technological engagements though, as I have already noted, are largely ignored. This may be due in part to the second reason the cyborg allows for a more in-depth look at women's gym experiences: the me factor. Women's gym selves are not always easily integrated into their social selves because women construct gym time as distinct and separate from their everyday lives. The gym self a woman presents affects the presentation of her social self in the space. This physically active self runs and lifts and goes to boot camp maybe; but it



does not mother, or work, or mentor. She is a different version of her social self constructed in relation to her use of fitness technologies.

The women in my study expressed a variety of social selves with many proclaiming anti-social selves in order to facilitate their desired gym self. But they displayed a range of sociability. And even those who professed to be somewhat social felt they had to guard their gym time carefully. And those who regularly took classes still spoke of the phenomenon of individual exercise within a group (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

*I actually prefer when I don't see a lot of people I know, because I like to go in and work out. And it seems - if I want to socialize, I will go someplace else.* [Carole]

*When I work out, I kind of ignore everybody else. I come to the gym to like - to retreat and to be anonymous and to not have to talk to anybody.* [Drea]

*I don't consider [the gym] a social place. It's like my me time.* [Faith]

*When I am there to exercise that's like really me time and so I am often really focused on what it is that I am doing.* [Kristin]

*[The gym] is strictly me time. The gym is strictly for me and when I'm there, I'm on a mission too.* [MJ]

*I am not really interested in using [the gym] as a social kind of thing. And I get kind of annoyed at people that talk to me while I'm running.* [Nicole]

So is the gym cyborg a solitary figure? She interacts with the technology and nothing else? If success is measured by her engagement in technologies of fitness, then she must be solitary. But this is certainly not what I observed or what my participants—even those who expressed an aversion to sociability—saw either.

An observation of sociability reveals more of what has been hidden: humans do engage with technologies of fitness in the gym, and this engagement constructs one's gym identity.

*I have been amazed at the number of people who—I will be there a half hour and I don't see them do anything except talk. And they are dressed to work out.*  
[Carole]

They have technologies of fitness on their bodies: the dri-fit t-shirt, the compression shorts, the sports bra. But apparel could be the extent of their engagement. Their intentions for further engagements are negated by their non-technological engagements with other humans for the purpose of sociability.

In other ways, though, women's sociability has been their point of access to fitness technologies.

*If you go with a friend you are more likely to try [weightlifting] because you can have somebody spot you.* [Carole]

*I think by having a friend at the gym, that makes it easy for anybody to come in and continue to work out, if they know there is somebody there they can say hi to and have a friendly interaction and not be a stranger.* [Eric, a trainer]

*My best friend from college is the one that got me to join. So we would—we actually didn't end up going a lot together, but once in a while we would meet up.*  
[Thea]

Access through a social connection or the belief that social connections will occur in a particular gym space have encouraged the interactions with fitness technologies in ways that are disguised by the sociability. This is also true of the relationships between trainers and female clients.

*Women in particular want personal trainers because there is a social aspect there. A big social aspect. I like to work my clients really hard, so there is not a lot of time for talking and socializing. They are usually panting a lot. But I have seen other trainers have clients who are clearly not that interested in working super hard.* [Danni]

Kristin, also a personal trainer, echoed Danni's observations about training as a social outlet. But, depending on the level of expertise and personal philosophy of the trainer, the desire for sociability is the means through which many women will engage with fitness

technologies. The types of technologies women engage with is also part of the identity creation.

Though she does not employ Haraway's cyborg, Grosz (1994) addresses identity creation via the objects with which one interacts. Only when incorporating the objects into the body image is the person able to complete a task. She gives the example of the doctor and his instruments or the writer with her typewriter, but the same is true for the gymgoer and her equipment. The equipment is an integral part of body image creation along with the mastery (a combination of skill and knowledge) the exerciser believes she has over it. The treadmill is used by the runner or the person who is concerned with heart health or a leaner body. The bicep curl Nautilus machine indicates a different type of exerciser: maybe one who wants to be efficient in her workout without having to think about her whole body posture or who only wants to develop bicep muscles without simultaneously enlarging her shoulders. The weight bench is used by the exerciser who sees herself as being able to effectively design her own strength training workout.

According to Grosz (1994), "the body image is capable of accommodating and incorporating an extremely wide range of objects. Anything that comes into contact with the surface of the body and remains there long enough will be incorporated into the body image" (p. 80). The cultural acceptance of what Balsamo (1996) calls "techno-bodies" began in the 1980s when advances in technology promised better-than-natural bodies "enhanced, and fully functional—more real than real [with] new body technologies ...rationalized as life-enhancing and even lifesaving" (p. 5). But these technologies exact a price in the form of surveillance. In previous chapters I have discussed various disciplinary mechanisms women encounter in the gym, including the space itself.

Technology, Balsamo warns, acts on bodies in disciplinary ways through mechanisms of surveillance. Like other forms of disciplinary surveillance, they often go unnoticed. In the case of fitness, they can be self-inflicted. Technologies of fitness are largely self-disciplining techniques: tracking calories, steps, miles, time spent. Again, most cardio machines in the gym provide all this data to the user.

### Escaping the Natural?

In concluding this chapter, I offer a caution regarding the theorization of a gym cyborg, a cybernetic information system in the form of a female exerciser. The woman/nature relationship must continually be problematized so as not to erase the ways in which women, via their bodies, have been dismissed as inferior or lacking. Even the female gym cyborg, her connection to fitness technologies and the circulation of knowledge required for their use, exists in a feminine-negative environment. Writes McCormack (1999): “geographies of fitness produce hybrid fusions of human and non-human bodies, at the same time they are located in an imaginative landscape that is firmly rooted in the masculinist quest for technological mastery over a supplicant, feminine nature” (p. 156). In such a space, can the gym cyborg truly challenge the symbolically constructed gender binary? (Balsamo, 1996; Haraway, 1985). Does this hybrid “forget” previous theorizations about women’s nature and, if so, to what effect?

Balsamo (1996) argues that the cyborg, placed on a woman’s body, “displaces” the nature/culture dichotomy because “in this age of body technologies...the given-ness of the female body is a constructed artifact of various systems of meaning” (Balsamo, 1996, p. 34). But we cannot forget the issue of masculinist space or the discursive constructions of women that circulate within it.

“The body imposes a natural constraint on individuals” (Shilling, 2004, p. 64) and even the cyborg has limitations because of its hybridity. In trying to overcome natural constraints, the exerciser employs fitness technologies, thus creating the cybernetic organism. But the discourse of the natural remains prominent. Natural constraints are discussed in fitness media as overcome-able. It all can be remedied—our health and aesthetic concerns—we are told, by getting off the couch and eating organic. The negotiation of these competing ideologies—the naturalness of our bodies and the fitness technologies employed to alter them—is ongoing and, I argue, makes room in the discussion for a critique of the natural, the technological, and the hybrid.

Women’s bodies have been historically marked as out of control and subject to the whims of nature. Exercising creates a level of control over these bodies which may be empowering individually even though the control is gained through surveillance and fitness technologies with the goal of achieving the ideally-toned figure, a general disempowerment to women because of difficulties in both accessing the mechanisms for control and enacting it successfully. Women in their fitness regimes are often seeking to overcome the natural to which they feel they have been assigned.

Technologies of fitness (equipment, hardware, software, social media, clothing, shoes) can, McCormack (1999) notes, “muddy” traditional binaries of gender, humanness, and the natural, but at the same time they reinforce the very same dualisms (male/female, human/non-human, nature/culture) in the process of constructing an ideal body (while simultaneously creating, through opposition, the unacceptable body). I chose to conclude this project with a discussion of the natural/technological divide in gyms and hybrid possibilities (the gym cyborg), in part because of the transgressive possibilities. As

Pronger (1998) writes: “it is clear that we cannot simply opt out of boundary projects such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, regionality...we are complicitous in them, and simply progressing beyond them is out of our range” (p. 285). But by transgressing boundaries, moving through fitness spaces and through fitness technologies rather than futilely attempting to get beyond them, the female gym-goer retains the possibility of control over her gym experience even as she remains in the discursive intersections of space, fitness, gender, technology, and bodies.

## CONCLUSION

### Summary and Contributions

Fitness is an industry and institution in American neoliberal society. As such it helps define healthy and fit bodies and in doing so contributes to the gendering of bodies. The same is true of sport, the study of which includes these same issues. But since the 1990s, sport studies have also included analyses of the role of sport spaces in the construction of dominant ideologies. The literature on the fitness industry and fitness regimens, however, has not more than marginally considered the role of space in structuring fitness practices. This dissertation attempts to fill some of that gap. Using a multi-sited study of fitness spaces along with qualitative interviews, I argued that an analysis of gym space provides further insight into the ways in which fitness practices are gendered, the consequences of gendered practices, the creation of gendered fitness boundaries, and how women transgress literal and discursive boundaries in gym space.

My goal in undertaking a spatial analysis of gyms was to provide a new way of thinking about fitness generally and women's fitness specifically. Previous studies have also addressed women's negotiations of fitness practices and discussed the ways in which such negotiations conform to or transgress gender norms (Brabazon, 2006; Fisher, 1997; Haravon Collins, 2002; Haravon, 1995; Heywood, 1998; Johnston, 1996; J. A. Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995, 2003b; Schulze, 1997). Many of these, however, employ an empowerment discourse or discuss the ways in which both conformity and non-conformity to gendered fitness practices—and the bodies they produce—can be both problematic and empowering for individuals.

My use of cultural geography and cultural theory in this study of women's use of fitness spaces allowed me to focus on the interactions with and within the space rather than the empowerment potential of fitness regimens. I used Foucault's work on space to argue that gym space has disciplinary power and discuss the movements of this power within specific gym spaces such as the aerobics studio and weight room. I discussed the effects of this power, including how they affect women's entry into and use of fitness spaces, arguing that access to and movement among and within specific gym spaces has significant consequences.

The positive effects of access go beyond just feeling good about oneself. When women enter spaces that have been historically marked as masculine, such as the weight room, they have the opportunity to acquire knowledge about weightlifting and pass that knowledge on to other women in both formal (as personal trainers and instructors) and informal (advice to friends, colleagues and other members) ways. Their presence challenges this particular gym binary: women do cardio, men lift weights. This is not to minimize the positive feelings women have when transgressing gendered boundaries, but rather to emphasize that use of space contributes to positive experiences. It is not just about weightlifting; it is about taking up space and displaying competency in the male-dominated weight room. This is why some women were reluctant to engage in weightlifting in aerobics studios, many of which now host strength training classes.

Many of the women I spoke with discussed these feelings in the context of learning and practicing a regular weightlifting routine. For non-heterosexual women, transgression of the literal boundaries that exist in the gym was more than just a part of their daily routine, it was part of their identity. They spoke of the ways in which



weightlifting affirmed their non-normative gender and sexual identity and allowed them to embody their identity in a positive way.

Similar to other studies of women's experiences in aerobics rooms, traditional feminine spaces, I discussed the negotiations women engage in when entering this space and practicing aerobics regimens (Haravon Collins, 2002; Haravon, 1995; Lloyd, 1996; Markula, 1995, 2003b; Willis, 1990). I argued, though, that their negotiations of the space were just as important as their feelings about the practices themselves. Where they stood in the room and how they used the mirrors for surveillance were an integral part of how they viewed their fitness experience. Also, their use of the space could facilitate the acquisition of physical, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Shilling, 2003). There was more at stake than feeling like one had received a good workout.

For all female gym members, how they use the spaces in the gym can result in the acquisition of capital. Using Bourdieu's work (1984) on physical, cultural, and social capital, I was able to discuss more than just an individual's experience of empowerment or disempowerment and focus on the ways in which the political and physical come together in fitness spaces. Women are not liberated, I said, through their gym activities, but they can acquire capital for use in the gym as well as outside of it. Sometimes this capital was earned by conforming to gendered boundaries. Women who practiced aerobics often became immersed in a social network as they sought physical capital via the idealized female body. There were consequences to the use of this space, though. No matter how much capital they acquired, in the context of a larger gym hierarchy, their activities were seen as inferior and not as athletic as other cardiovascular exercise available to them outside of the aerobics room. The social and cultural capital they

acquired had little value outside the space or among non-aerobicizers. But outside of the gym, the ways in which a woman earns her physical capital (i.e., by running, or biking, or doing aerobics) is of little relevance.

Women who transgressed boundaries, for example by entering the weight room, also earned capital. They too formed social networks, though they were often mixed gender. Some women exceeded the idealized female body through their weightlifting regimens. This limited the amount of physical capital they could “exchange” outside this space. But most of the women I spoke with and observed were building physical capital by conforming with the toning discourse: muscle that is visible (i.e., there is no fat overlay) but that is not too big.

In the last chapter, I addressed one final binary that I discovered during the course of fieldwork: the technological or artificial versus the natural. This binary became visible in the ways some gyms brought the natural, often understood as “the outside,” into the space through the use of lighting, windows, colors, and atmosphere. The incorporation of the natural emphasized the importance of the natural in fitness regimens. I saw this in my analyses of gym equipment. As part of the more general category of fitness technologies, some types of gym equipment—usually cardio machines—straddle this binary by mimicking a natural exercise experience. For example, treadmills measure distance that the user never literally travels.

Though others have questioned the natural/artificial binary that exists in sports, less scholarly attention has been paid to its manifestation in fitness regimens (Apelmo, 2012; Butryn & Masucci, 2003; Butryn, 2003; Jönsson, 2007, 2010; Norman & Moola, 2011; Swartz & Watermeyer, 2008). Humans-as-exercisers and their use of

(incorporation into?) fitness technologies remains undertheorized. I argued that the ways in which gym members use fitness technologies has resulted in a blurring of the technological/natural binary that is present in gyms. I employed the figure of the cyborg in this last chapter for two reasons. First, my use of the cyborg—the gendered cyborg—further complicates the idea that fitness discourses and spatial dynamics and markings are acting *on* women. Using the cyborg figure in this way was enabled by the discussion I began in Chapter Two where I introduced the concept of inscription. Inscription was a theme I carried throughout this project in my discussions and examples of the ways in which fitness, health, and space mark women’s bodies.

#### Who Goes There?: The Scope of This Study

I maintain that the neoliberal discourses about gender, health, fitness, and beauty circulate among and are “heard” by the majority of American women. I also argue that they compel many women to join a gym and affect their use of gym space. The “why” and “how” regarding women’s use of gyms formed the basis of my inquiry. In this section, I address the “who.”

First, the majority of American women do not go to the gym. For some, this is a choice. The discourses are not compelling enough to persuade them to enter a gym. Others choose other forms of physical activity, in both indoor and outdoor spaces. For some women there is no choice: individual limitations including time, money, and ability impede their access to the gym. The voices of both of these groups are absent from this project.

Second, the voices that are present represent a very narrow segment of the gym population. Though I observed women of color at all three sites, there were no women of

color in my interview sample. The same is true for physically impaired and older women. My oldest interviewee was in her mid-50s and the greatest physical challenges women I spoke with faced were a result of their physical activity (i.e., generalized aches and pains). Though some of the homogeneity is due to the IRB restrictions I discussed in Chapter One, another reason is because the dominant discourses of femininity, fitness, and health are aimed at young, middle- to upper-class, white, able-bodied women. The framing of the discourses affect women differently depending on a range of identity factors including age, health, race, class, and ability. I discussed how sexuality affected queer women's gym patterns, but did not include analyses of how they might affect a woman over 65, or a woman with limited mobility, or a woman of color.

#### What Comes Next?

I believe most of these limitations can be addressed in future research. This research is necessary, in part, because there are public health implications regarding access to physical activity. Though a continued questioning of the rhetoric about health is essential, there is little doubt that moderate exercise has health benefits. Future research that focuses on both cultural issues and more program- or institution-level impediments should address the barriers to access for specific groups. For example, regarding the former, I believe there are sociocultural explanations—in addition to time and money—for why women of color exercise less frequently than white women including differences in cultural definitions of beauty. Regarding the disabled population, a recent study found that people in wheelchairs have difficulty accessing medical care (Lagu et al., 2013). Is the same true of gyms? Every gym I visited had handicapped parking and accessible entrances and bathrooms. But access is more than just parking spots, ramps, and

bathroom stalls. How much of the space and which pieces of equipment could a person with impaired mobility truly use?

Though my focus in this study was on women, I found myself continually questioning how the men I observed negotiated their gym presence and knowledge. How did they feel about being on display? Were they disciplined by the mirrors in the weight room in ways that were similar to women's experiences in the aerobics room? I know of no studies that address the male gym goer who uses the space for general fitness.

Regarding gay men, their fitness habits are discussed in popular media, and gay male athletes' experiences in sport have been documented as well (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Anderson, 2002, 2005; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Caudwell, 2006; Woog, 1997). But no study has examined how sexual identity affects men's use of and experiences in the gym

Finally, throughout this project I became more and more aware of fitness trends and their marketing. Evident in one of these, the total body workout, which I discussed in Chapter Three, was a militarization of fitness programs. These exist both inside the gym (i.e., boot camp), in specialized gyms (i.e., the CrossFit franchise), and as at-home programs (i.e., P90X and Insanity). What is of interest to me are the ways in which these programs do not mandate conformity for women to the toning discourse but simultaneously invoke military tropes. Women are encouraged to build significant amounts of muscle but in a highly masculine environment. Marketing for these programs conveys their levels of intensity by comparison to fire, police, and military training. Women gain access to these regimens via the fitness industry much more easily than to the actual institutions which inspire these programs. Research into the militarization of

fitness continues one of the questions that inspired this project: what does gender equality in fitness look like?

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