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Author(s): Shari L. Dworkin

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"HOLDING BACK": NEGOTIATING A GLASS CEILING ON WOMEN'S MUSCULAR STRENGTH

SHARI L. DWORKIN*

Pitzer College

ABSTRACT: *Researchers have highlighted how numerous women in male-dominated occupations face a glass ceiling. Using ethnography and interview work, I argue that this ceiling is also useful to understanding women in fitness. That is, women in fitness—particularly those who seek muscular strength in the weight room—may find their bodily agency limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity that structure the upper limit on women's "success." Results show that nonlifters and moderate lifters uniquely negotiate the glass ceiling by avoiding, holding back on, or adjusting weight workouts. I consider what forces aid women in forging new definitions of emphasized femininity that push upward on a glass ceiling on muscularity over time. As women increasingly flock to fitness sites, daring to cross into the previously male-only territory of the weight room, we must ask whether a contained and "held back" musculature for women is now the (heterosexy) standard that simultaneously creates "new" womanhood as it re-creates "true" womanhood.*

Current work in gender studies points to how, "when examined closely, much of what we take for granted about gender and its causes and effects either does not hold up, or can be explained differently" (Lorber 1994:5). These arguments become especially contentious when confronting nature/culture debates on gendered *bodies*. After all, "common sense" frequently tells us that flesh and blood bodies are about biology. However, bodies are also shaped and constrained through cumulative social practices, structures of opportunity, wider cultural meanings, interactions with others, and more. Paradoxically, then, perhaps in thinking that one is "really seeing" sexed bodies, the effect of gender on sexed materiality is being viewed, and cause and effect have been reversed (Butler 1993; Hargreaves 1994; Lorber 1993, 1996).

As fitness memberships boom and the more muscular new millennium is here, we are presented with a timely juncture in which to examine one popularly acquired paradox of gender—muscles. On the one hand, "commonsense" ide-

* Direct all correspondence to: Shari Dworkin, Department of Sociology, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA 91711; e-mail: shari_dworkin@pitzer.edu.

ologies tell everyday women in fitness not to fear the weight room because natural, biological difference from men prevents them from getting "too big." At the same time, many women *can* and *do* experience gains in muscle mass when lifting weights, particularly women who do so regularly. The tension that results from the difference between common sense and knowledge of one's own bodily experiences is compounded by widespread bodily ideologies about what women's bodies *should* do. How do women actively negotiate these tensions? What do women in fitness *do*? Why do they do it? Immersed in a cultural moment in which it may seem that strong women are more celebrated than ever, are women in fitness in fact bursting into weight rooms, packing on plates, cranking out sets, feeling the thrills and benefits of tight skin stretched across bulging, growing muscles? Or do many women hold back on weights so as to negotiate what might be termed a culturally produced glass ceiling—or upper limit—on their muscular strength (Dworkin and Messner 1999)? Are both occurring, and to what extent? How might such an exploration inform nature/culture and agency/constraint debates, and what does this say about gender relations generally?

FITNESS, GENDER, BODIES

An analysis of women's participation in sport and fitness reveals a highly politicized terrain of gender relations. Contemporary United States culture tends increasingly to applaud and embrace athletic, powerfully strong women. The 1996 "Year of the Woman" Olympics, the 1997 premiere season of the WNBA, the 1999 Women's World Cup, and an ever-increasing number of women participating in high school and college athletics are just a few indicators of this trend. Corporate ad campaigns have hopped aboard the athletic empowerment wave to target women as a demographic, offering powerful messages about female fitness fanatics who "just do it." In the worlds of both sport and fitness, muscular ideals have pushed the previous cultural ideals of the tiny, slim body to include "allowances for substantial weight and bulk" (Bordo 1993:191). Thus many view today's fit woman as embodying power and agency in a manner that challenges definitions of women as weak, passive, or docile (Guthrie and Castelnuevo 1998; Heywood 1998; Kane 1995; MacKinnon 1987).

There is some question, however, about the extent to which this bodily agency poses resistance to the gender order. For instance, some ask if the more muscular bodily ideal is merely the most recent form of docile bodily self-surveillance (Foucault 1979) that aids patriarchal capitalism through the suggestion that bodies need to be increasingly industrious (Bartky 1988). Furthermore, cheering women on to "Just Do It" ignores the fact that numerous Third World women stitch Nike sneakers for low wages so that American women may more inexpensively "just do" their privileged leisure time (Cole and Hribar 1995; Dworkin and Messner 1999). While certain women disproportionately benefit from being physically powerful and healthy, an individualized fit bodily politics may be criticized as being removed from collective forms of empowerment that can challenge oppressive institutions and practices (Dworkin and Messner 1999).

Despite these limitations, many women have experienced sport and fitness as

sites of power and agency where they have rejected narrow constructions of femininity and where they can embrace physical power and independence (Bolin 1992b; Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994; Heywood 1998; Kane 1995). Being physically independent is an important feminist theme if one considers the historical relationship between femininity and dependency. Recent work by Heywood (1998) makes a compelling argument that weight lifting is a specifically third wave feminist strategy to physically self-empower, ward off attack, or heal previous bodily victimization and abuse.¹ This moves us beyond previous conceptualizations of women in fitness and sport as totalized objects under patriarchal control.

However, while men's participation in many sport and fitness activities has historically been consistent with dominant conceptions of masculinity as well as heterosexuality, women's participation has tended to bring their femininity and heterosexuality into question (Blinde and Taub 1992; Cahn 1994; Griffin 1998; Kane 1995; Lenskyj 1987; Nelson 1994). Thus not only do women challenge narrow constructs of masculinity and femininity through being active, fit agents, but they are also subject to narrow conceptions of womanhood that often become conflated with heterosexual attractiveness. Connell's (1987) concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity shed light on this discussion. "Hegemonic masculinity" is defined as the dominant form of masculinity in a given historical period—usually based on a white, heterosexual, and middle-class norm. "Emphasized femininity" refers to the most privileged forms of femininity that shift over time in ways that correspond to changes in hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995).

Since female bodybuilders have musculature and size that challenge norms of emphasized femininity, women's bodybuilding has been an intriguing realm in which to examine gendered bodily negotiations. Bolin (1992a, 1992b) demonstrates that women's bodybuilding both challenges and reproduces ideals of emphasized femininity because the increasing size of the female bodybuilder is only acceptable once "tamed" by beauty. It is for this reason that judges of bodybuilding contests have been found to institutionally reward women for various "feminine" physical markers (e.g., breast implants, painted nails, dyed hair) even when the goal of the sport is to display muscle mass, size, symmetry, and density. And, of course, commercialization is integrally linked to the kinds of femininity that are displayed and rewarded by and in the media. Research on media, women, and sport and fitness has shown that women are not presented solely as resistant and powerful athletes but rather are framed ambivalently through sexualizing and trivializing their athletic performances (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Duncan and Messner 2000; Kane and Greendorfer 1994). Whether these trends will continue should surely concern scholars in sociology, sport, gender, and media studies.

In the last decade a growing number of studies have examined women's bodies at the "extremes." That is, there are more works on female bodybuilders, on the one hand (Balsamo 1994; Bolin 1992a, 1992b; Daniels 1992; Fisher 1997; Guthrie and Castelnovo 1998; Heywood 1998; Klein 1990; Schulze 1997), and anorexics, on the other (Bordo 1993; Heywood 1996; MacSween 1996). Yet little work explores the everyday women in fitness who fall somewhere in between.² Ultimately, it is far too simple to take what "we see" in fitness centers and use it to

reinforce societal beliefs about natural, categorical gender difference. Rather, it is vital to understand women's narratives that reveal careful negotiations regarding bodily knowledge, ideologies, and practices, which in turn construct the bodies we see. As women define, contest, and press current definitions of emphasized femininity in the new millennium, they push upward on what I argue is a historically produced and shifting glass ceiling, or upper limit, on women's strength and size. More than simply "doing gender" or doing difference (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987), this work highlights how (shifting) gender ideologies, once embodied through cumulative fitness practices, construct the sexed materiality of the body itself.

THE STUDY

I employed participant observation over the course of two years, four days a week, for two to six hours a day in several local gyms on the West Side of Los Angeles from 1996 to 1998. One site, which I refer to as "Elite Gym," had a membership fee of about \$1,300 per year, with an additional \$1,300 required up front. In this site, any comfort I had from having years of sport and fitness knowledge was quite separate from the discomfort that came from being among so many individuals who could afford a vigorous and expensive cult of consumption.³ Members were mostly white, with a scattering of black men and a very small number of black women, Latino/a men and women, and Asian men and women. Participants at Elite Gym often pulled up to the site in their shiny Mercedes, Porches, BMWs, and other luxury vehicles and had the option of valet parking. Members frequently entered "the club" with impressively toned and buff bodies that reflected dominant ideals. Their bodies were draped in luxurious work clothes, complemented by gleaming accessories, shined shoes, and expensive leather bags and briefcases. Their fitness gear was a sampling of the latest and greatest sneakers, commodified urban wear, and flashy lycra wear, accompanied by expensive high-tech props.

The second site, which I refer to as "Mid-Gym," was far less expensive and required only \$25 down and an additional \$300 a year. Among the stream of fitness participants who walked into and out of the site, few were draped in silky work clothes or crisp pressed pants or carried expensive leather bags or briefcases. Members were dressed in a wide array of workout or work clothing, and many participants wore jeans, gym shorts, workout tights, and T-shirts into the building. There was a much wider range of masculine and feminine styles, classes, and races on site. Several participants stated that they were unemployed, while others owned the late-model luxury cars that were resting in the parking lot. Far fewer members at this site were obviously taut and fit in ways that are consistent with current middle-class styles and ideals. Approximately half of Mid-Gym's members were white and half were people of color.

In addition to participant observation at the two sites, I also carried out thirty-three in-depth interviews with women and hundreds more informal interviews with women who attended fitness centers during the course of my ethnographic work. Conversations were taped, pseudonyms were assigned to the interviewees

to protect confidentiality, and tapes were destroyed after transcription. The women ranged in age from nineteen to forty;⁴ 54.5 percent were white, 15.2 percent were African American, 15.2 percent were Asian, and 15.2 percent were Latina; 33.3 percent were heterosexual and currently married, 60.1 percent were heterosexual and single, and 6.1 percent were single lesbians.⁵ One widespread observation that I noted across sites concerned the degree to which women lifted weights. From this observation, I grouped women into three categories of weight lifting: nonlifters (25% of women on sites), light to moderate lifters (65% of women on sites), and heavy lifters (10% of women on sites).⁶ Because of race and class differences in the membership bases and the fact that working-class women and women of color disproportionately used their bodies to perform heavy physical labor in the paid labor force (e.g., construction, landscaping, fire fighting), there were proportionately more heavy lifters at Mid-Gym than at Elite Gym (15% vs. 5%). There were slightly more moderate lifters at Elite Gym than at Mid-Gym (70% vs. 60%). Both sites had similar proportions of nonweight-lifting participants (25%).

THE GLASS CEILING ON WOMEN'S STRENGTH

During ethnographic work, I learned that numerous factors affect women's and men's choices of fitness activities, some of which are personal preference, time available, access to organized sport or other fitness activities, and ability to pay for membership and training props. Other factors affecting the choice were interactions with others both inside and outside of fitness centers, the level of knowledge of and experience with activities.⁷ Less obvious reasons for fitness choices included negotiating commonsense ideas about muscle and women's biology, bodily knowledge and experiences, and ideologies about what women's bodies should do.

Researchers have highlighted how women in male-dominated fields and professional occupations such as law, science, the military, and business reach a glass ceiling (Reskin and Phipps 1988). Such a ceiling might be defined as a limit on professional success wherein women attempt to venture upward and are stopped. I argue that although the glass ceiling in the workplace is a structurally imposed upper limit on success that is not individually enacted, the concept is also useful for understanding many women in fitness. That is, women in fitness—particularly those who seek muscular strength—may find their bodily agency and empowerment limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity (Connell 1987) that structure the upper limit on women's bodily strength and musculature. Approximately three-fourths of the women I interviewed at fitness sites expressed awareness of a glass ceiling, which they described as an upper limit on the quest for seeking more muscular strength. This was expressed through a shared explicit fear of and repulsion to female bodybuilders' bodies, a fear of becoming too big or bulky themselves, and narratives that focused on how to structure fitness practices so as to ensure (new definitions of) emphasized femininity. While there was a shared understanding of the limits that women would allow regarding their muscular size, the three groups of women (non-, moderate,

and heavy lifters) consciously negotiated a glass ceiling on strength in unique ways. As so much recent work has been carried out regarding heavy weight lifters, I center here on non- and moderate lifters so as to analyze the largest groups of day-to-day women in fitness.⁸

Non-Lifters

It was common for everyday women at fitness sites to express fears that with the "wrong" kind of exercise, their bodies might develop "excessive" bodybuilders' musculature. This was the case despite the fact that professional bodybuilders engage in rigorous training and eating regimes and some also take steroids to gain size. One expression of this fear emerged from nonlifters, who constituted approximately 25 percent of the women at the two fitness sites. Nonlifters focused on weight work and bulk as "masculine" bodily villains and cardiovascular work as a "feminine" bodily savior. An example of this was Alyssa, a thirty-two-year-old white woman at Elite Gym, who had a small to medium build, wore a tight brown one-piece bodysuit, and agreed to an interview while her legs spun steadily on the pedals of a recline bike, saying it would "be great to pass the time." She explained that she was a former drug addict who felt that she was "fat" at one time but that "changed one day" when her boyfriend told her she was fat. She said, "[His telling me that was] the best thing that ever happened to me. It totally motivated me to work out." Alyssa did a cardiovascular workout five to seven days a week for at least one hour a day, with *no* weight lifting, and explained,

[I do this to] be more toned, and to burn fat, and to not get bigger . . . of course. I don't want to be buff, but lean. . . . I don't want to look like a female bodybuilder . . . I don't ever want to be nonfeminine. Women should have curves and be soft to some extent, you know?

Alyssa said first that she was once larger because of excess body fat and then expressed fears about increasing in size from weight lifting. For Alyssa and some others, it appears to be *size*—muscle or fat—that is the powerfully feared transgression against femininity (Dworkin, forthcoming; Haravon 1995; Lamm 2000). Alyssa stated that female bodybuilders and "buff" bodies were "nonfeminine," while "lean and with curves and soft to some extent" were considered feminine. At the same time, Alyssa was not concerned that her intensive cardiovascular activity would burn too much body fat or contribute to a loss of femininity. It is striking that the realm of the cardiovascular somehow retained its "feminine" status even as it threatened to revoke femininity according to the definitions used by some of the participants themselves. Work and occupations literature commonly reveals that job behaviors and tasks are somewhat randomly designated as masculine or feminine even when they are analogous across industries (Leidner 1993). The realms of sport and fitness reveal similar historically arbitrary and shifting definitions.

Other nonlifters agreed that cardiovascular work somehow contributed to the feminine while weights detracted from it. Several nonlifters in fact had lifted

weights in the past but stopped because of tension between what they thought their bodies *should* do and knowledge of what their bodies *actually* do. For instance, Joelle, a forty-year-old, white, very thin fitness participant from the same site spoke to me as she walked briskly on a treadmill, her arms moving rhythmically. One afternoon she bragged that she had come to the club "seven days a week for fifteen years" and declared, "I can have any job I want, the body I want, and any man I want." Her comments reminded me of the individualistic power and agency expressed through Nike "Just Do It" ad campaigns. I asked Joelle during an interview what fitness activities she did, and she explained that she walked on the treadmill seven days a week for an hour and a half. When I asked her whether she did weights, she replied:

I do legs sometimes, but nope, no weights, all cardio and walking on the treadmill. I gain muscle really fast . . . don't want to look masculine. They say lift light and with lots of reps and you won't gain mass, but *not me!* I gain mass so fast! I should have been a man!

Unlike Alyssa, who had never lifted, Joelle had lifted in the past and knew that her muscles responded to weights in a way that defied what she felt women's bodies "should" do. Not only did she describe gaining muscle as a masculinized look that she disliked, but she did not even see gains of muscle mass as appropriate to or in the realm of the fathomable for womanhood: "I should have been a man!!" Last, when Joelle told me that lifting light weights and doing lots of repetitions would prevent her from gaining mass, she reflected a common pattern of discourse I found in gyms. "They say lift light" was a commonsense solution offered by trainers to female clients' concerns about acquiring big muscles. Rather than cheer women on to simply "just do it" women were told to not do "too much of it" and to "just hold back" on weight lifting. The widespread use of avoiding weights or "lifting lightly" on the two sites so as to "ensure" femininity revealed a conscious struggle with what constitutes an acceptable upper limit on women's strength and size.

Consistent with the historical cult of true womanhood where white women define and are defined by notions of "ideal" femininity that can exclude many working-class women and women of color, a similar process may be partially operating in the realm of fitness (Dworkin and Messner 1999). That is, it was most often white women, particularly from Elite Gym in the nonlifting category, who offered narratives that weights caused bodily harm to currently shifting constructs of femininity. At Mid-Gym, numerous women of color and working-class women also offered strands of the same narrative, revealing how bodily ideals can normalize across various social locations such as race and class (Bordo 1993). However, white women, women of color, and working-class women at Mid-Gym in the nonlifting category also frequently emphasized a lack of time to use the gym given family care and paid labor requirements. Women at Elite Gym were far less likely to mention this need to juggle responsibilities and leisure and in fact discussed their ability to buy off the second shift (Hochschild 1989) so as to be able to have time to come to fitness centers. Once on site, several of these women paid personal trainers to help them adhere to what might be termed a "third

shift," or adherence to the latest bodily requirements. Thus popular advertisement claims that any woman can "have it all" obscure power relations and global and domestic inequality within groups of women that can help elite women to more easily meet bodily ideals. For instance, that women of color work for pay as domestics in the homes of middle- and upper-middle-class women (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997), may allow more privileged women (such as those found in Elite Gym) the time to attend a fitness center. Hence, while I have noted that three-fourths of women were aware of and negotiated an upper limit on women's strength and size, it is also clear that an analysis of social locations aids an understanding of agency and constraint within women's fitness "choices." Simultaneously, however, bodily ideals can and do normalize at times across race and class categories.

While numerous nonlifters told me they stayed away from the weight room so as to avoid bulk and to maintain their femininity, a handful of other nonlifters assigned an economy of value to cardiovascular work while stating that weight work wasn't "necessary." During the course of fieldwork, some nonlifters did not express an overt disgust or fear of muscle but used expressions such as "I don't need muscle," "I don't want muscle," or "I don't see the need for it." Looking at the depth of these narratives made more clear the underlying meanings of these frequently offered statements. Cardiovascular work was indeed referred to as the much more valuable activity. For instance, Mimi, a twenty-four-year-old Latina from Mid-Gym, stated that she did not lift weights and instead chose only cardiovascular work because she had "limited time": "The goal is to maximize the amount of calories burned and cardio gives me the greatest bang for the buck."

After hearing from several nonlifters that weight lifting was unnecessary and cardiovascular work was necessary, the next question became "What's the buck?" For nonlifters, the "buck" appeared to be maintaining femininity, avoiding masculine taint, and, in many cases, "maximum calorie expenditure" (assumed to be derived from cardiovascular work), which was discussed as being consistent with goals of body size reduction. Moderate lifters shared this "buck" with nonlifters but departed from it in unique ways.

Moderate Lifters

Moderate lifters, who constituted approximately 65 percent of the women at the two fitness sites, shared complex and contradictory views of the pleasures and dangers of weights. Both nonlifters and moderate lifters strategically structured fitness practices to ensure "femininity"—defined as the maintenance of curves coupled with a desire to not increase body size from fat or muscular bulk. Both frequently saw cardiovascular work as integral to the maintenance of "femininity," while too much weight work was perceived to threaten its construction. However, moderate lifters also described unique tensions about desiring muscular strength while not wanting to increase body size from muscle mass. Women across numerous race, class, and sexuality categories shared these narratives within the moderate lifting category.

Moderate lifters uniquely mediated the perceived pleasures and "evils" of weight lifting *not* by avoiding weights altogether but by seeking strength and pushing upward on a glass ceiling on strength. At the same time, contrary to the widespread belief that women cannot get big from weights, moderate lifters clearly struggled with their own bodily responses to weights. Moderate lifters carefully negotiated this upper limit, watched their bodies for signs of "excess" musculature, and consciously adjusted or stopped their weight workouts accordingly. So as to mediate an expressed fear of bulk with a simultaneous desire to seek strength, several distinct strategies were used that pushed upward on a glass ceiling on strength yet bumped up against it and then "held back." These strategic practices were to "keep the weight the same" across weight sets instead of increasing weights, to "stop lifting" weights for a period of time, to "back off" in terms of the number of days or time spent in the weight room, and to "hold back" on the amount of weight lifted.

"Keep the Weight the Same"

Lucia, a thirty-five-year-old African-American woman from Mid-Gym, had beads of sweat forming on her temples as she lifted herself up and down off of an incline sit-up bench. One afternoon in the weight room, at the end of her workout, she agreed to an interview off to one side of the weight room where stretching mats were available. She stated that she did cardiovascular work three or four times a week for forty-five minutes combined with numerous sets of light weights for fifteen to thirty minutes. When I asked her if she could explain why she did her workout this way, she said: "Well, cardiovascular work helps me to lose weight . . . and I do many sets of the same weight and don't increase it because I don't want to be like some women who are losing their femininity, you know, their curves. I don't want to be like a female bodybuilder."

Repeatedly, the icon of the female bodybuilder is drawn on to structure women's fitness choices and to make clear where the upper limit on women's size and strength lay. Like many nonlifters, moderate lifters often described a desire to retain their curves and viewed weights as the transgressive activity that could contribute to a "loss" of femininity. Lucia constructed and was constructed by current definitions of emphasized femininity in which slender is no longer adequate, while toned, firm, curvy, and muscled (but not too much) is (Bordo 1993).⁹ Despite fears about weights and masculinization and a loss of femininity, she did not resolve this tension by avoiding weights altogether (as did nonlifters). In fact, she routinely did many sets of the same weight, strategically working with knowledge of an upper limit on strength, and soothed fears of masculinization by not *increasing* the weight across several sets.

Another example of this frequently used tactic was Margaret, a twenty-one-year-old white woman from Mid-Gym, who often appeared bored or tired in the fitness center, judging from her facial expressions and yawns. She explained to me that she trekked to the gym five days a week to do thirty to forty-five minutes of cardiovascular work and lifted weights twice a week for twenty to thirty minutes. I asked her how many sets she lifted and what amount of weight across sets. She explained:

I do three sets of everything. I keep the weight the same across three sets. I would increase it if I had done it for long enough, if like, I've tried it too much on the same weight, but I'm cautious. I don't wanna look like a female bodybuilder. I don't want to look like a jock either, and I want strength, but I don't want to gain weight and sometimes it makes your muscles bigger even if you don't want them to . . . but I guess it's OK because that means you're getting stronger too, but I *really* don't want to get bigger.

Margaret discussed the joys of desiring strength, yet also revealed that she did not want muscle size or weight gain or to look like a female bodybuilder. There was a tension between wanting strength but at the same time fearing an increase in muscle size and having to hold back. I observed that Margaret's practice of keeping the weight the same across sets was widely used by women, while many male fitness participants (and female heavy lifters) increased the weight across three or more sets. Using ethnographic observation alone might lead one to believe that this is due to women's lack of strength or experience with weights, but interviews revealed the self-consciousness of the enacted strategies. Moderate lifters mediated tensions about common sense (women can't get big), bodily knowledge (women do get big), and bodily ideologies (women shouldn't get big) in such a way that pressed up against today's upper limits on strength but then backed away from it for fear of increasing body size.¹⁰

"Backing off"

Annette, a thirty-three-year-old Asian-American woman from Elite Gym, moved through the weight room with confidence and athleticism. Her movements lacked the hesitation, fear, or uncertainty that many other women's body postures showed. When we spoke, she explained that she "spun" (took a stationary bike class) six days a week for an hour and lifted weights twice a week for thirty to forty-five minutes. She stressed that she used to lift five days a week, "religiously," for nearly an hour but that she had decided to "back off" to two days a week. When I asked her if she could help me understand why, she said:

I like strength, and I like maintaining my physical structure with muscles, but I don't like the look of being too buff. I liked it *then*, but *now* I like lean, fit, a little buff, feminine. I don't wanna look like Cory Everson. I want to lean out more.

Annette pointed to historically arbitrary and changeable notions of "feminine" bodies. "The look" she described certainly extended beyond historical definitions of women's bodies as voluptuous (1950s) or very slim (1960s–1970s) to include current ideals defined as "lean, fit, a little buff, feminine." Yet she also highlighted other functional uses for strength. Seeking strength and desiring longevity were part of why she lifted weights, while not wanting to "look too buff" limited her time in the weight room. Cory Everson is a female bodybuilder who is well known for lucrative product endorsements, achieved through her simultaneous adherence to intense muscularity and emphasized femininity. Although Everson is popular in fitness magazines and is considered by many to succeed at displaying emphasized femininity, her muscularity and mass are profound, and she can still be a symbol of

what many women hope not to become. "Backing off" on weights or "stopping" weight lifting for a specified period were two of the ways in which moderate lifters mediated the numerous tensions surrounding gender and the body.

"Holding Back"

Kit, a nineteen-year-old African-American woman at Mid-Gym, had one of the most muscular frames among moderate lifters, and she frequently dared to venture into free weight spaces that were often largely male dominated. During our interview, she stated that her workout included one hour of cardiovascular work once a week and thirty minutes two days a week and weight lifting three days a week for fifteen minutes across three exercises (bench press, rowing, and squats). She discussed how she was taught to lift weights in high school when she was on the track team, how she used to play basketball in high school, and how she still loved to "shoot hoops." She said that she wanted to "touch the rim" when she shot baskets and added, "That's why I do those crazy squats." When I asked her about her sets and repetitions, she informed me that she carried out three sets on each exercise and that she started with a weight that "is comfortable" and increased the weight over two other sets. In this way she departed from several moderate lifters who kept the weight the same across sets and instead shared this practice with nearly all of the heavy lifters. After describing how she increased the weight over three sets, she laughed, shook her head, and added: "My mother says to not lift too much, that I'll get too big . . . so I'm always worried about that." When I asked her if she ever responded to her mom, she replied: "Yeah, I tell her not to worry, that women don't have to fear getting big because they don't have a lot of testosterone." Acknowledging the tensions between bodily common sense and actual bodily knowledge and experience, I then asked her why she was always worried about her mom's warning. She replied: "Well, I am worried about getting bigger. That's why I keep the reps low and I don't do too many."

Like Annette, Kit described a functional use for weight lifting. She wanted improved sports performance, and "crazy squats" moved her toward that goal. At the same time, despite commonsense beliefs that women can't get big, she was concerned about the cultural dictates that women should not get too big. To solve the ironic tension between what women are told they *can't* do and yet *shouldn't* do, she sought improved sports experience but was careful not to increase her size. In this way functional reasons led women to push upward on an upper limit on size and strength, yet at the same time fears of bulk consistently led many to bump up against a culturally produced upper limit on strength and size.

Similarly, when I first spotted Carla in Elite Gym, she reminded me of Annette and Kit in how freely she ventured into free weight and designated "heavy" spaces to lift. She moved confidently and fluidly, her posture was proud, she exuded strength, and her mesomorphic form seemed to speak athletics. When we first talked, walking on treadmills together, I learned that Carla was a thirty-two-year-old skier, walker, tennis player, swimmer, biker, and hiker, who did some combination of these activities seven days a week, in addition to recently joining a pilates studio. She inspired me to research pilates, and I found that it emphasized

a combination of spiritual and postural techniques from yoga, plyometric exercises (which use sudden bursts of muscle, as a basketball player would need to get a rebound and then jump to make a shot), and flexibility exercises. She lifted moderately, twice a week for thirty to fifty minutes, and was *much* stronger than most of the women (and some of the men) in Elite Gym. I observed that she did weight assisted pull-ups on what is known as a gravitron machine, and she continued these for an unusually extended period—over three minutes straight.¹¹ When I asked her about this type of workout, she informed me, “Its an endurance workout . . . for strength . . . but not to build.” When I asked why she chose this workout, she said:

I know my body type and I know I have a tendency to build mass, and I’ve had that in fact, to some degree, before being athletic, so my goals now are to lengthen my muscles and to keep fit to do all the sports I love to do.

Further along in the interview, I asked her to talk about how she decided on the specific repetitions and sets in her workout.

Well . . . what I did was I found my max—and I could do that ten or fifteen times. And I would do 40 percent of my max and sustain it for two minutes, so, for instance, I’ll do forty pounds on something, but that’s 40 percent of how much I *could* do. I used to do three sets of fifteen, but I *never* maxed out—I worried that it’d make me bulk, so I held back.

While it was common to see a number of everyday men at fitness sites “max out” on their weight-lifting sets or take supplements to make sure that fatigue did not set in, I observed less than a dozen women “max out” in the course of my fieldwork.¹² When I asked Carla how she arrived at her lifting routine, she stated that she consulted a trainer who offered her the program she described. She then explained how much she liked the program her trainer had taught her: “I really like it. I don’t feel bulked up now. Over the years, people tell me that I look so much better now—and that’s so nice, that feels so good—I have this more lengthened look. I think it’s just prettier.”

While Carla’s workout, similar to Kit, Annette, and other women in fitness, served a functional purpose—to keep her in shape for all the sports she loved to do—she simultaneously held back given size expectations and current definitions of emphasized femininity. She expressed pleasure in mediating bodily knowledge with bodily ideologies by holding back so as to no longer be bulky and now felt “lengthened” and “prettier.” Some scholars might refer to this “nice” look that “feels so good” as part of our current historical moment where a highly specified kind of “looking good” can become conflated with “feeling good” (Duncan 1994). Thus, while moderate lifters indeed sought out a desired level of physical fortitude and strength, blasting past nonlifters, they also bumped up against a glass ceiling on muscular size and “held back.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While the body has always been important to second wave feminism through its emphasis on abortion, reproductive rights, and sexual and domestic violence, it

seems to have been taboo in gender studies to directly tackle notions of gender, bodies, and biological difference. This may be because bodies are politically symbolic arenas in which fierce ideological debates about natural male physical superiority and female inferiority are played out (Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994; Kane 1995; Messner 1988). In early second wave feminism physical differences were dealt with by stating that gender was fully socially constructed, and discussions about biology were essentially abandoned. Although it was particularly useful to break away from the potentially oppressive implications embedded in the belief that "biology is destiny," flesh and blood bodies tended to drop out of the analysis. More recently, gender studies scholars and sociologists of sport have moved toward the subject of flesh and blood bodies by pointing out how physical differences between men and women are average differences that are erroneously assumed to be absolute and categorical (Davis and Delano 1992; Dowling 2000; Fausto-Sterling 1985, 2000; Kane 1995; Lorber 1993, 1994). While theorizing on this subject is not necessarily recent, few researchers empirically examine the ideologies and practices that might reproduce, negotiate, and challenge notions of categorical difference.

When using the naked eye, it appears that absolute, biological difference between women and men is the sole culprit in explaining the bodies we see. What is left out of this equation is women's conscious negotiation with a historically produced upper limit on strength and size. In opposition to quick commonsense claims that women are biologically different from men and therefore cannot gain much muscle, my ethnographic and interview work revealed that muscle *is* something that women can and do gain. In fact, based on tensions between what bodies *should* do, what bodies *actually* do, and culturally shifting standards of emphasized femininity, approximately three-fourths of the women at the fitness sites expressed an awareness of an upper limit on the quest for muscular size and strength. Non- and moderate lifters in fact used very specific weight-lifting and cardiovascular strategies in fitness settings to mediate these tensions.

Nonlifters made up approximately 25 percent of the women at the two sites, and many argued that cardiovascular work contributed to the "feminine" while weights detracted from it. Many nonlifters employed a strategic avoidance of the weight room so as to prevent an increase in body size while embracing cardiovascular work to help decrease size and maintain curves. These women actively defined and were defined by emphasized femininity described as small, lean, toned, and curvy. In this way nonlifters stayed safely below the glass ceiling, did not frequently challenge dominant bodily ideals, and can be described as enacting a bodily agency that reproduces these ideals. While white women at Elite Gym were most likely to express these themes given their ability to buy off the second shift so as to adhere to a third, many women of color and working-class women at Mid-Gym also shared these themes, revealing how bodily ideals can normalize across social location (Bordo 1993). At the same time, intersections of race and class also revealed situations of agency and constraint that did not even allow many working-class women and women of color time at Mid-Gym to regularly attend fitness centers or to be preoccupied with concerns about an upper limit on strength and size.

Moderate lifters, who constituted 65 percent of the women at the sites, agreed with nonlifters on themes of femininity but also departed from nonlifters in significant ways. Unlike nonlifters, moderate lifters rejected ideals of thin, weak bodies and avoidance of the weight room. Moderate lifters juggled ideologies of strength and functional physical performance with a careful monitoring of the body for signs of muscular excess. To mediate a desire for increased strength with new definitions of femininity they stopped weights for a while, backed off on the time and number of days per week spent in the weight room, struggled with whether to increase the amount of weight across sets, and held back on the amount of weight lifted. Moderate lifters indeed inched past nonlifters, nudged upward toward a glass ceiling but then bumped up against it and held back. In this way moderate lifters represent a negotiated bodily agency that actively pressed beyond thinness ideals but also feared masculinization and what might be considered a loss of heterosexual attractiveness (e.g., Dworkin, forthcoming).

The glass ceiling on muscular size is not simply imposed on women. Rather, they actively define it, wrestle with it, nudge it up and down, and shape its current and future placement. Women in fitness sites are immersed in an arena of continual negotiation as to the placement of the ceiling, which is in part influenced by historically shifting definitions of emphasized femininity. That 65 percent of women at these two popular fitness sites were moderate lifters who bumped up against the glass ceiling while only 10 percent of women were heavy lifters who blasted through it, is an indication that the present state of emphasized femininity is tipping toward muscularity rather than away from it. That is, although many women "held back," definitions of emphasized femininity in the new millennium indeed include more musculature than the last several decades. This continual push upward on the glass ceiling over time is due to numerous factors, some of which might include relational definitions of hegemonic masculinity that also dictate increases in men's size over time (Connell 1995; Dworkin and Wachs 2001; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000), Title IX and women's increased access to organized sport, an increase in the use of personal trainers, media coverage of women's success in sport, feminist consciousness of bodily ideals, and women's collective action with regard to dominant bodily ideals. Thus not only does the larger gender order shape and constrain individual agents in fitness, but women's everyday acts actively reproduce, shift, and transgress a gender order that is continually at play (Messner 1992).

Despite the message that women should "just do it," ideals of emphasized femininity lead many women in the weight room to "just hold back." While seemingly consistent with research that emphasizes the "doing" of gender or of difference (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987), one cannot ignore that studies of embodiment in sport and fitness also highlight the need to place the relationship between sex and gender itself under more intense scrutiny. If men are free to pack on thick layers of muscle while women carefully negotiate the upper limits of their muscle gains, this symbolizes the gendered nuances of everyday power and privilege but also highlights the construction of sexed materiality itself. Such insights should urge researchers to consider whether and how a continuum of overlapping bodies and performances by gender (Kane 1995) is

masked or uncovered within various social arenas. As women increasingly flock to fitness sites, daring to cross into the previously male-only territory of the weight room, we must ask whether a contained and "held back" musculature for women is now the heterosexy standard that simultaneously creates "new" womanhood as it re-creates "true" womanhood.¹³

NOTES

1. Heywood describes how third wave feminism shakes hands with many of the goals of second wave feminism but also emphasizes the complexities, contradictions, and dynamism of the social world (e.g., Heywood and Drake 1997).
2. Lloyd (1996) and Markula (1996) study women in aerobics classes only.
3. Clearly, field-workers' personal biographies are relevant as they fundamentally shape their feelings and theoretical, interpretive, and analytic frameworks (Emerson 1983; Lofland and Lofland 1995).
4. Indeed, there may be an age skew that somewhat excludes college-aged students in the sample, as local universities provided facilities for numerous college students in the area.
5. I have carried out a separate pilot study on fitness and lesbian and bisexual women. The sample of twelve lesbian and bisexual women is too small and preliminary to make any definitive comments on the relationship between sexuality and fitness choices.
6. Definitions of these categories were developed from how women identified themselves and an analysis of how often, how long, and how hard women performed weight-lifting activities. Nonlifters did not currently lift weights and moderate lifters lifted weights from 15 minutes to 75 minutes two to four days a week.
7. Another article currently in process focuses on how interactions between fitness participants helped to shape women's bodily negotiations with muscular allowances. This was particularly the case when women transgressed into male-dominated free weight spaces.
8. However, it should be noted that while heavy lifters might be assumed to "break through" a glass ceiling, they also shared intriguing negotiations in narratives regarding an upper limit on strength and size with non- and moderate lifters. Heavy lifters' narratives and practices are analyzed in another project.
9. African-American women and Latinas in the moderate lifting category offered some strands of thought that revealed that ideals of thinness were not embraced. This was particularly evident when transcribing portions of interviews that included discussions of media images from fitness magazines. However, describing the icon of the female bodybuilder as despised and undesirable was consistent across race for women in the moderate lifting category, as was an expressed cautiousness about musculature and weight-lifting practices.
10. While it is true that interactions with others can and do affect women's bodily negotiations, it is also interesting to note the powerful hold that larger cultural ideologies can have on women's fitness choices. See Dworkin (forthcoming) for an example of a woman in fitness who describes how her boyfriend "wants" her to be larger but says she makes her fitness choices on the basis of what she perceives to be a "generalized other" gazing at her. How and in what context women make fitness decisions based on interactions with others inside or outside their social networks is a fertile area for future analysis. Another one of my works in process includes an analysis of fitness as an institution and reveals how personal trainers at fitness sites also play a role in the complexity of bodily negotiations. This is consistent with Schwalbe's (2000:781) vision

for studies of inequality in sociology whereby researchers are urged to ask "who is able to access, use, and create which resources, and how do they actually use them, to create and sustain certain patterns of interaction."

11. A gravitron machine allows a fitness participant to perform pull-ups and dips without having to lift all of the body weight up and down. That is, participants can specify the amount of weight to subtract from their full body weight to execute the exercise.
12. Furthermore, in the weight-lifting community, "maxing out" typically means how much one can lift in *one* repetition, not ten, so Carla's conception already held her back from knowing how much she could do.
13. I thank several colleagues and reviewers for noting that it may be the case that the Los Angeles area provides a unique cultural arena in which to examine gendered bodily negotiations. Los Angeles may provide a context in which women's muscle building (and therefore breaking out of the glass ceiling, or tilting the "ideal" more toward muscularity) is more supported than other geographic areas. Simultaneously, it may also be a place in which emphasized femininity is highly honored, and therefore there may be more ideological or interactionist social control and encouragement to "hold back." Adding other geographic sites to such analyses is a fertile area for future analysis.

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