

**Long Version**

## **Testy and Docile Bodies:**

**Her-stories of Compliance and Defiance in Women's Bodybuilding.\***

By

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## **Introduction: The Athletic Aesthetic**

The women's movement of the 1960's conjoined with Title IX and the subsequent fitness revolution gave impetus to alternative ideals of feminine beauty whose scope was widened to include an athletic aesthetic of toned and taught muscle. The athletic aesthetic was reproduced in diverse popular discourses. This included fashion magazines that described the 1970's somatic ideal for women as the "Action Beauty," **(slide skater)**; and in the inauguration of the sport of women's bodybuilding. Women bodybuilders pushed the parameters on femininity even further **(slide)**. Their bodies argued that muscles are not the exclusive domain of men. These athletic contours were culturally unruly and contained elements of subversion that challenged the patriarchal hegemony of the Western bio-reductivist gender order.

Research suggests however, that by the new millennium, a bodily backlash in ideals of feminine beauty had occurred (cf Faludi 1991) The body backlash, initiated in the early nineties and gaining momentum into the new millennium, has begun to undermine embodied trends representing women's corporeal power. **(slide skinny)**. I will argue that this discontent is culturally debated on the bodybuilding stage through three women's physique sports: bodybuilding, fitness, and figure competitions. In contrast to women's bodybuilding, the fitness and figure competitors somatic contours are much more culturally compliant than those of women bodybuilders; buttressing a paradigm of what Connell terms "emphasized femininity," "an accommodation to the interests and desires of men that dominate Western models of femininity/beauty. **(slide fitness women working out) (slide Lenda and Kim)** My remarks today are a surface presentation of a lengthier research project based on sixteen years of ethnographic research **(slide backstage bb and fitness)** in bodybuilding subculture, where I have more recently shared my posing oil and mirrors with fitness competitors since 1992 and figure competitors since 2000.

## **Backlash: The Fashion Industry and Media**

Consider the timing. Professional women's bodybuilding in the Ms Olympia, the zenith of women's bodybuilding titles, took a turn for mass after 1992 **(slide Cory 1989, Lenda 1992)** just as the athletic aesthetic in wider discourses such as fashion began to wane after a fluorescence in the 1980's. My research has situated 1992-1994 as watershed years for the decline of the athletic aesthetic and the reintroduction of a more conventional corporeality for women emphasizing slenderness in the fashion media. This backlash embodiment has gained momentum and dominates the first half a decade of the new millennium as a "hegemonic" form of femininity in rhetoric of beauty. The "Stepford" wives are indeed back in vogue today. **Slide**

**Bodybuilding.** In contrast to men's bodybuilding that reproduces and amplifies Western bioreductivist beliefs essentializing gender difference, women's bodybuilding represents a different cultural agenda. The female bodybuilders' somatic contours are

transgressive and disruptive to the gender order wherein muscularity embodies power and privilege as the natural purview of men and hence masculinity. Women bodybuilders challenge the Western view of women as the weaker sex; instead they live and embody a femininity that includes strength and power. They are indeed “testy” bodies. **Slide**

Since its inception in the 1975, the sport of women's bodybuilding has been transformed from one in which the competitors wore high heels and rarely performed the muscular poses such as the iconic front double biceps with closed fists, which was discouraged as too masculine. The first Miss (now Ms.) Olympia, regarded as the zenith of women's bodybuilding titles, was held in 1980 and set the standard for women's international and professional titles that continues today (**show slide**).

The women competitors have, over time, achieved degrees of muscularity, symmetry, and definition once believed impossible for women to achieve. Nevertheless, since its beginnings, women bodybuilders have been involved in a debate over the issue of muscularity and femininity that has reached elevations of a “moral panic” at various times in sporting industry of bodybuilding. The debate over masculinity and femininity has plagued the sport of women's bodybuilding from its inception. The basic question is: how muscular can a woman be and not forfeit her femininity? The response of women bodybuilders has been to redefine notions of femininity to include strength and muscularity. In 1979, after winning for the first major women's bodybuilding competition, Lisa Lyon stated, “women can be strong, muscular and at the same time feminine.” And women bodybuilders today still echo this concern. Kim Chizevsky, the 1998 Ms. Olympia, declared that “People need to start changing their views about women bodybuilders. We're strong muscular women, but we're beautiful feminine women too.” Such a strategy may indeed be a form of “physical feminism,” in which the physicality that lies beneath bodybuilding in the hardcore gym is expressed in the desire and pleasure of strength and power (McCaughey 1997). However as representation, such an approach is easily subverted into “glamour jock” and a hegemonic mandate for “emphasized femininity” that equates the “doing of gender” with the “doing beauty and sexiness; “and it supports the bi-polar gender order as well. Although the debate over femininity and muscularity has been inflamed by anabolic steroid use among women competitors, this debate was well underway prior to the reported use of steroids among women competitors that came into use in the latter part of the 1980's. Time has shown that virtually any activity that threatens the hegemonic gender order will call into question the gender authenticity of its participants.

I have identified four watersheds in the physique sport of women's bodybuilding. Following Hochschild (1994:4) and Messner (2004: 88), these watersheds may be regarded as “magnified moments...; episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of ...unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, usually elaborate and often echoes [later]” (Hochschild in Messner 2004:88). As magnified moments, these four watersheds foreground women's bodybuilding as a stage for symbolic debate over the borders of corporeal femininity. As such, the magnified moments registered theoretical issues of personal agency and structural containment as women bodybuilders performed gender and did indeed influence judging standards in bodybuilding. Yet, paradoxically, their transgressive bodies were simultaneously constrained by masculine systems of power and labor including the hegemony of bodybuilding sporting organizations, specifically the International Federation of Bodybuilders and National Physique Committee that establishes judging

standards and protocols, and access to industry sponsorships, endorsements, appearances, media coverage and other industry careers (Messner 2004; Connell (1987). These, as Lafferty and McKay (2004) argue regarding women boxers, are the “formidable structures of patriarchy” that are very difficult but not impossible to resist.

I have identified the four watersheds of women’s bodybuilding as:

- 1) The 1992 International Federation of Bodybuilding Ms Olympia Contest (the zenith of professional women’s bodybuilding titles);
- 2) The adoption of new guidelines in 2000 for judging women’s bodybuilding by the International Federation of Bodybuilders (the IFBB) and its amateur arm in the US, the National Physique committee (NPC), the largest and arguably premier bodybuilding organization in the world;
- 3) The introduction of fitness (originally pageants ) competitions (1992) and the inauguration of the Fitness Olympia in 1995 as the apex of fitness titles;
- 4) The introduction of figure competitions (2000) and the inauguration of the Figure Olympia in 2003 as the apex of figure titles.

By 2000, the backstage of a bodybuilding contest was getting crowded; it could include women bodybuilders, fitness competitors and figure competitors.

These watersheds represent somatic debates and a politics of gendered corporeality as women bodybuilders encounter masculine hegemony in the industry and compete for media attention and resources with fitness competitors and more recently figure competitors. I will follow a rough chronology of events, arguing that bodybuilding as sport is a paradoxical gender regime that incorporates disruption and reproduction at the symbolic, representational and structural level of embodiment and agency and cooptation at the interactional level of analysis.(cf Lafferty and McKay 2004).

### **1) Watershed: The 1992 International Federation of Bodybuilding Ms Olympia Contest: The Turn to Mass**

Between 1980 and 1989, the sport of bodybuilding as epitomized in the Ms. Olympia contest deferred to more conventional notions of femininity. The judges selected athletic, slim, and graceful women, reflected in the embodiments of Rachel McLish and Cory Everson, **Slides** as opposed to the more muscular physiques of competitors such as Bev Francis. **(Slides)**. This embodiment reproduced without challenging the borders of the “fashion” of the athletic aesthetic popular in the 1980’s.

When Cory Everson retired after 6 straight wins of the Ms Olympia in 1989, it was an open question as to what the direction the question of muscularity would take in women’s bodybuilding. Would the judges reward another whose physique was very much like Cory Everson, not known for having a great deal of muscle mass but plenty of “emphatic femininity” or would a more muscular ideal reign? **(slide Cory and Lenda)** The period of 1990-1992 may be interpreted as a period of uncertainty in which the debate over the direction of the sport was tossed about through interpretations of the winners and losers physiques **(Slide 1992 Olympia with Anja)**. Various groups had vested interests in the direction the sport would take, from the sports organizations (especially the IFBB/NPC that

was eclipsing all other bodybuilding organizations by the 1990's) and their promoters, the producers of services and products, the industry sponsors, the media, the judges, the competitors and audiences from the health and fitness consumers to the hardcore subcultural bodybuilding audience. Each of these sectors had interests and avenues in which to influence the somatic debate.

In 1990, Lenda Murray won the Ms. Olympia over Bev Francis, known as a woman whose muscle mass had been way ahead of its time. Francis, who had the year before trimmed her physique down to be competitive with Everson, lost to the heavily muscled Murray because she was not ironically muscular enough. **Slide** The following year Francis muscled up again but came in second to Murray in the 1991 Olympia in what has been considered a highly controversial by two very big and very muscular women. By the 1992 Olympia, it was clear that the debate had been resolved in favor of muscularity. Lenda Murray **slide** won yet again and remained undefeated until the even more muscular but also ultra-ripped (lean) and hard, Kim Chizevsky claimed the title in 1996 and continued to hold through 1999; subsequently retiring in that year from bodybuilding to go into fitness competitions, which I shall turn to momentarily. (**Slide**)

During the period of Kim Chizevsky's reign from 1996-1999, professional women bodybuilders have shown they were willing to take their physiques up a notch, getting even bigger and harder in the course of just three years of Ms Olympia contests. As Bill Dobbins, advocate of women's bodybuilding and social critic states: "Lenda Murray ...surpassed all other women competitors with her display of muscularity, shape and symmetry. Then Kim Chizevsky entered the picture... and proved to be bigger and harder than anyone else, looking as somebody said recently [as] "carved out of ice," and everyone has been chasing this new standard since (Dobbins "The Evolution..."). Despite concern by the industry gatekeepers, the women bodybuilders resisted admonitions regarding their extreme muscularity, offering the judges the choice of large and extra large; providing impetus to the small scale muscle rebellion taking place within bodybuilding that had been on a roll since 1992. Their bodies dared the judges and assaulted wider North American notions of traditional slender embodiments of women that had gained ascendancy since 1992 when Kate Moss first offered women the "waif look" and an embodied backlash of slenderness dominates feminine body ideals in the fashion industry.

In addition to the agency of the women bodybuilders in influencing the judging standards, the bodybuilding subcultural fans also influenced the trend for the increasing muscularity of the women over the last ditch desire of the IFBB/NPC for a more marketable model that women in wider society could identify with at the end of 1992. As one of my collaborators states: "the bodybuilding audience wants to see freaks—women or men. You don't go to go-cart races when you can see the Indianapolis 500." The bodybuilding industry including organizations, promoters, sponsors and media have had to contend with ways to make this enhanced muscularity more widely marketable to the broader health and fitness consumer that represented a huge market share—how to do that? Several avenues suggest themselves.

### **Glamour Jock: Issues Underlying the Women's Bodybuilding**

I am not arguing here that women's bodybuilding is an entirely resistant or transgressive gender regime but rather that it is a paradoxical one in which resistance is countered by systems that promote conformity to the "doing of beauty" as a core feature of heterosexual femininity. Elsewhere I have presented this impetus as one of "beauty and the beast" (Bolin 2004). Bodybuilding is a paradoxical gender regime whose corporeal nexus contains both resistance and cooperation. (Lafferty and McKay 2004; Connell 1987). Despite trends for enhanced muscularity, women bodybuilders must default to maintaining an essence of femininity that is never clearly articulated but which underpins access to financial rewards and survival as a professional through the bodybuilding media, sponsors, vendors and promoters. Despite their agency in developing phenomenal muscularity, women bodybuilders feel the tug from this cultural mandate for an emphasized femininity.

From its inception, and throughout its history, women bodybuilders have been plagued by demands to be feminine and to do beauty in order to succeed in the body marketplace. They do this by neutralizing their muscles with superficial insignias of femininity and heterosexual beauty for their public and media personas as this slide testifies with breast implants etc. (slide)

However, the women competitors are self-aware manipulators of their embodied presentations and they know that "femininity" lies beyond muscle. Competitors will deliberately offset hypertrophied muscles with attributes associated with conventional femininity and beauty: pink posing suits, highlighting and dying their hair blond, long and fluffy hairstyles, long fingernails and other glamour jock insignias (also Bolin 1992 and 1998). However, a third wave feminist stance does not regard these attributes of conventional femininity as neutralizing the power and strength of women bodybuilders. Their bodies are not insignias of a passive femininity by any means, which brings us to the second magnified moment.

## **2) Watershed: The Adoption of New Guidelines for Judging Women's Bodybuilding by the IFBB in 2000.**

On January 5, 2000, the IFBB offered new rules for judging that would include the women's face and makeup (Manion 200). **Slide** In addition, they would be judged on "symmetry, presentation, separations and muscularity but not to the extreme" (January 5, 2000). In the IFBB Rules for Bodybuilding section 1.4 judges are reminded:

"First and foremost, the judge must bear in mind that this is a women's bodybuilding competition, and that the goal is to find an ideal female physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape---a muscular yet feminine shape. The other aspects are similar to those described for assessing the male physique, but muscular development must not be carried to such an excess that it resembles the massive muscularity of the male physique... Competitors shall also be assessed on whether or not they carry themselves in a graceful manner (IFBB Amateur Rules (2001). In directives for "Assessing the Female Physique (Appendix D, IFBB "Technical" Professional Rules: 52): judges are cautioned that the bodybuilders "should not be too thick or bulky or depleted or emaciated..."

Bill Dobbins argues that women bodybuilders are victims of their own success; that is, they are just too good at building muscle; Kim Chizevsky set what could be perceived by the IFBB as a dangerous precedent achieving a size and hardness that had never been equaled on

a bodybuilding stage. Just as threatening to an emphasized femininity is that it didn't take long for the other professional competitors to begin matching Kim Chizevsky's new standard of muscularity established in her Ms Olympia win in 1996 that prevailed through her reign and retirement in 1999.

To buttress the new direction for women's bodybuilding in 2000 that emphasized the beauty contest elements of face and hair, and not too much extreme muscularity, the IFBB reorganized the Ms Olympia to include both a lightweight and a heavy weight title in 2000, and in 2001 introduced an overall title pitting the light and heavy weight winners against one another. From 2000 to present, the impact of the new judging standards has been represented in the physiques of the winners. In the 2001 Ms Olympia, Juliette Bergmann came out of retirement after her last competition in 1989 to win the overall title with an aesthetic and softer look than her competition. And in 2002 Lenda Murray returned to the Ms Olympia stage after a five year hiatus to capture the crown and win her 7<sup>th</sup> Ms Olympia against Juliette Bergmann, with a repeat performance in 2003. Murray is known for having the complete package of muscularity, symmetry and proportion as well as the "cover girl" beauty that guarantees the endorsement success of so many women athletes in the contemporary world of commodification.

Certainly Murray is a much bigger and harder competitor than Juliette Bergman, although she was unable to match the sheer size and hardness of Kim Chizevsky. And her physique is indeed far more extreme than the prevailing ideals of femininity writ large in the fashion magazines and other popular discourses. However Murray's physique is an embodiment that includes the cultural and industry mandate for beauty. Indeed she is known for her facial beauty as well as her proportions, conforming to the 2000 IFBB guidelines for judging women in terms of "overall appearance, attention to face, makeup, skin and a healthy appearance." (Manion 2000)

Bill Dobbins in an article titled Kim Chizevsky "the Best Female Bodybuilder of All Time" argues that no other woman bodybuilder can match her in terms of her spectacular size, symmetry and sheer crispness of her definition. However, unlike her Ms Olympia predecessors like Rachel McLish, Cory Eversen, and Lenda Murray, Kim Chizevsky she was not conventionally pretty and hence marketable in industry terms. In addition, she tended to get very heavy and large during the off-season bulking up to over 180 pounds, again challenging notions of emphasized femininity, not to mention a regime of gender that conflates femininity, slenderness and beauty.

On a cautionary note, women bodybuilders continue to be proactive in increasing the level of muscularity, density, and definition offered. I do not see women bodybuilders downsizing in the future. Since the beginning of the sport the women's body weights have continued to escalate. This trend for increasing muscle mass is illustrated in the increasing body weights of the competitors; in 1983 the average weight of the Ms. Olympia contenders was 121 pounds while in 1997 it was 155 pounds. Kim Chizevsky competes at 165 lbs on her 5'7" frame.

The NPC weight categories for women have been climbing gradually over the years reflecting the women's increasing muscularity. A comparison between the four weight categories of 1984 and of 2004 reveals this trend.

Year

Weight Category	1984 Weight in Pounds	2004 Weight in Pounds
Lightweight	Up to/including 105 $\frac{3}{4}$	Up to/including 115
Middleweight	Over 105 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 116 $\frac{3}{4}$	Over 115 up to /including 125
Light-heavyweight	Over 116 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 123 $\frac{3}{4}$	Over 125 up to/including 140
Heavyweight	Over 123 $\frac{3}{4}$	Over 140.

Between 1985 and 2004, the NPC had three weight categories for women. These weight categories also gradually increased over time at three different junctures: Prior to 1995, NPC weight categories were as follows: lightweights were less than 114  $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds, middle weights were over 114 $\frac{1}{2}$  to 125 $\frac{1}{2}$  and heavyweights were over 125  $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. In 1995 the weight categories were increased so that lightweights were up to and included 118 pounds, middle weights were over 118 and up to and including 132 pounds with heavyweights over 132 pounds; in 2004 contests with 3 weight categories also ratify this trend for increasing weight categories, so that lightweights are up to and including 125 pounds. This represents a 9 pound increase over the pre 1995 weight of less than 114 $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. Middleweights in 2004 are over 125 pounds and up to and including 140 pounds. This represents a 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  pound increase at the light end and an fourteen and half pound increase at the high end of the middleweights; heavyweights are now 140 pounds and over compared to pre-1995 weight that started heavyweights at over 125 $\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. The NPC had implemented these changes in responses to the increasing weights of the competitors in order to create more balance in number of competitors in each weight category, e.g. as women were getting heavier this led to too few competitors in the lightweight category. The bodybuilder also preferred a more equal balancing of competitors in the three weight categories as well. Thus, this data buttresses what our eyes can see; women bodybuilders have been increasing their muscle mass since the sport began in the mid-1970's.

### **3) Watershed: The introduction of fitness competitions (1992) and the inauguration of the Fitness Olympia in 1995 as the apex of fitness titles.**

Fitness competitions have their origin in Wally Boyco's Fitness Pageants of the early 1980s, followed by Lou Zwick's Fitness America Pageants and the Ms Galaxy introduced in 1993. These contests combined elements of beauty pageants with aerobics competitions often including evening gown, bathing suit rounds and a fitness routine. **(slide)** The IFBB grew the sport of fitness from the amateur to the professional level so that by 1995 the first Ms Olympia Fitness was offered. It is argued here that the bodybuilding industry, including the IFBB, came on board with fitness contests because the fitness corporeality is a much more docile one than that presented by bodybuilders and hence offers the bodybuilding industry a more appealing and hence marketable bodily ideal.

At the amateur level IFBB/NPC, fitness competitors are judged by three height classes; short, medium and tall, but at the pro level there are no height class. At the pro level, the competitors are judged on their appearance in two rounds: in a one piece bathing suit and a



two piece bathing suit (**slide**); and in two performance routine rounds: a 45 second mandatory moves routine that must include six prescribed flexibility and strength moves and a two minute routine that is choreographed with three music changes and incorporation of flexibility and strength moves (**slide**). Fitness competitors must demonstrate strength, flexibility, dance, gymnastics, aerobics and cardiovascular endurance in the routine rounds. In addition, they are judged on their costumes including the fit and style of the one piece, two piece suit and the costume (**slide**) worn during the performance of the fitness routines IFBB Professional Rules 2003:39). The four rounds are added together. (**slide**) In contrast to the barefooted women bodybuilders, the women fitness competitors must wear high heels for the physique rounds.

As one IFBB official stated: "the Fitness Olympia is about appearance, performance, and feminine grace. We don't want women thinking they have to build muscle to win this" (Clive 1997:88-89). " "Judges will be looking for the best toned body (not the most muscular)...[for] total tone and shape," while "overt muscularity will be marked down" (Kindela 1996:163). Fitness judge and former competitive bodybuilder, Carla Dunlap-Kaan, maintains that the primary rationale behind women's fitness competitions is to "create a forum to choose a spokesmodel for the fitness industry, with marketability of physique and face chief among our focus." (Dunlap-Kaan 1994 :6).

IFBB judges "are strongly reminded that they are judging a woman's FITNESS competition and not a woman's BODYBUILDING competition. The type of muscularity, vascularity, muscular definition, and/or dieted leanness displayed by a female bodybuilder will not be considered acceptable if displayed by a fitness competitor and therefore, must be marked down. According to IFBB/NPC guidelines the physique should show a "small degree of muscularity with separation, no visible striations, and again it is reiterated there should be no extreme muscularity (IFBB Amateur Rules for Women's Fitness 2001: 31). Competitors are assessed on their overall appearance from head to toe including skin, proportion, and degree of athleticism. The degree of athleticism includes "assessing the degree of firmness, symmetry, proportion and the overall physical appearance including complexion, poise and overall presentation" In scoring the judges include face, makeup, skin tone and costume in the athletic routine. Again "facial beauty is attended to and there should be smooth and tight skin without the presence of "cellulite." (No I am not kidding) (IFBB Amateur Rules for Womens Fitness 2001 Appendix 2). Thus these rules clearly establish the distinction in physiques between bodybuilders and fitness competitors. An emphatic femininity is at play here selecting for pretty, athletic but not too muscular women and this is built into the judging criteria where facial beauty is articulated as part of the winning package.

Although the NPC guidelines proclaim that one need not be a gymnast to compete in fitness because the "Routines may include aerobics, dance, gymnastics or other demonstrations of athletic talent and that judges will be looking for style, personality, athletic coordination, strength moves, endurance and overall performance." However, in the ten years since fitness first appeared, the fitness standards have not remained static. Women fitness competitors have upped the ante on the routine round. Initially this routine round was more akin to an aerobics presentation for many, however, fitness soon began to reward women with gymnastics ability and this skill has come to dominate the judging and the wider discourses on fitness both as a competition and within the bodybuilding media in magazines such as *Joe Weider's Flex*. One Flex writer states: " The Fitness Olympia by 1999 has become more gymnastically orientated as Monica Brant gets 4<sup>th</sup> place and as Kelly Ryan and Susie Curry

tumble their way to victory with gymnastic routines as second and third place respectively (Flex, 1999). Susie Curry, (**slide**) known for her extreme gymnastic ability won her first Fitness Olympia in 2000 and then continued to claim three more wins against her arch enemy Kelly Ryan (**slide**) known as “flyin Ryan” for her gymnastic abilities. The bar on Fitness Olympia’s has clearly been moved up in the direction of gymnastic ability from the first Ms Fitness in 1995 (Dobbins, [www.bilddobbins.com/PUBLIC](http://www.bilddobbins.com/PUBLIC)). In 2004 Susie Curry retired from fitness and switched to the new figure competitions after four straight wins of the Fitness Olympia. I will return to the introduction of figure competitions shortly.

By emphasizing gymnastic capability in the routine rounds, small and petite fitness athletes are selected for, just as gymnasts in the Olympics have become smaller and lighter over time (Burstyn 1999: 158-159). The height classes substantiate this: 5’2” and under, 5’2” up to and including 5’4 ½”, over 5’4” tall ; if there are only two categories then these are demarcated at above and below 5’ 3” (NPC Rules USA Fitness). In counteracting the infantilization that tiny and slender gymnastic bodies animate, fitness athletes, like women bodybuilders and figure competitors, have become active consumers of breast implants. Because physique athletes must keep a low bodyfat level to be competitive, they found their breasts lost substantial size as their fat levels were reduced. By 1994, at the cusp of fitness competitions, this trend was readily visible on the stages of the incipient fitness and bodybuilding venues (cf Burstyn 1999: 155).

Although the fitness competitors and the somatic ideal is a more diminutive and culturally compliant aesthetic in comparison to the rambunctious muscle of women bodybuilders; they are indeed athletes as their gymnastic routines demonstrate. And like Olympic gymnasts they command awe for their aerial expertise, although it is clearly framed as a feminine regime in terms of emphasizing dance, costumes, beauty, and grace. Fitness does not challenge or subvert the gender order as does women’s bodybuilding.

However, the conformity of fitness physiques with current somatic ideals of femininity and the attendant privileging of fitness competitors over bodybuilders in terms of media and industry visibility, combined with the escalating muscular size of professional bodybuilders has taken its toll on the sport of professional women’s bodybuilding. The 1999 Ms Olympia was nearly cancelled due to lack of sponsors and tickets sales and was only salvaged by the efforts of the IFBB. And now women’s bodybuilding must add figure competitors into the industry mix in competition for power, labor and capital.

#### **4) Watershed: The introduction of figure competitions (2000) and the inauguration of the Figure Olympia in 2003 as the apex of figure titles. Slide**

More recently a new form of physique competition has been added to the bodybuilding venue. Figure competitions are fitness competitions without the required fitness routine; thus one is judged only on presenting the appearance of an athletic physique. Figure competitions, also referred to as body fitness by the IFBB, was introduced at the amateur level in 2001 in the NPC and the professional level in 2003 with the inaugural Figure Olympia. Figure competitions are arguably the fastest growing sector of the three physique competitions with the most number of competitors. Figure competitors, like fitness competitors, draw into their ranks women with aspirations to model/promote/endorse/act, and otherwise succeed in the beauty and fitness sector where athletic aesthetic is needed for

selling industry products. The figure competitions are far less physically demanding than fitness since figure does not require the performance of an increasingly gymnastically oriented routine. Nor does it draw women of the sheer size and muscular development of the professional women bodybuilders, although women bodybuilders at amateur and pre-national level do occasionally cross over. As one official stated: “Quite simply, [figure competitions] are a ‘fitness’ contest without the routine. It is not a contest for ‘fitness models,’ or even looking for a ‘softer’ body image than our current crop of fitness competitors. It is the same look. Plain and simple“ (Skita 2003: 60-71).

Figure competitors are judged in terms of an overall athletic appearance. The judges are asked to “take into consideration the hair and facial beauty; the overall athletic development of the musculature, the presentation of a balanced, symmetrically developed physique, the condition of the skin and the skin tone; the athletes ability to present herself with confidence, poise and grace...The muscles groups should have a round and firm appearance with a small amount of body fat. The physique should neither be excessively muscular nor excessively lean and should be free from deep muscle separation and /or striations. Physiques that are considered too muscular or too lean must be marked down. The skin tone should be smooth and healthy in appearance and without cellulite” (IFBB Amateur Rules Body Fitness 2002). In addition to the judging criteria, an emphatic femininity penetrates the attire; like fitness competitors the figure competitor are also required to wear high heels in both the one piece and the two piece round that must be in the “classic stiletto pump, of no more than 5 inches tall (IFBB Amateur Rules Body Fitness 2002. One cannot overlook the resonance to Cinderella here.

The response of women to the new figure competitions was phenomenal and soon the NPC and IFBB added additional opportunities to this new physique sport. Initially in the 2001 inaugural pro qualifying National Figure Championships, the top two in each of three height classes received pro cards. By 2002, more opportunities to turn pro were created so that at the second annual National Figure Championships, the top 3 in each of 3 height classes qualified to turn pro in anticipation of the first professional championships beginning in 2003 (this ruling was made retroactive to 2002 to allow even more women to compete as professionals.)

By 2003 the IFBB/NPC increased the number of height classes at the amateur level in pro qualifying events from the three established in 2001 to four height classes. By increasing the height categories this increased the number of possibilities to turn professional so that in 2003 seventeen pro cards were given. In 2004 the IFBB added two more height classes for national level figure competitions for a total of six height classes, increasing the number of pro cards to 25. **(slide)** One can only conclude that these measures were a response to the dramatic popularity of this physique sport over a very short time frame. The incremental increase of categories and opportunities to turn professional facilitates judging as well as serving the interests of the consumers who want to compete at the professional level. This compares to the fifteen pro cards given in a year to fitness competitors whose professional debut was 9 years ago, and to 6 pro cards offered to women bodybuilders whose pro competitions debuted in 1980 ( Manion NPC Fitness Rules NPC News On-Line 2001).

Figure competitions can draw on a much less specialized niche of expertise than either bodybuilding which requires a certain genetic potential, extreme discipline and an extraordinary workout ethic not to mention a willingness to use illegal pharmaceuticals at the

professional level; or fitness which requires not only beauty and an aesthetic physique but gymnastics and a dance background . Fitness competitions, like bodybuilding, are incredibly demanding and more mature bodies are prone to injury and possible accident from the extreme training required by the fitness routine. Figure physique competitions have attracted fitness competitors such as Monica Brant **(slide)** who found themselves unable to meet the demands for gymnastic expertise that increasingly have permeated the routine rounds (Dobbins Fitness and Figure Competitors: The Struggle...:3-4). Suzie Curry, **(slide)** four time fitness Olympia Champion retired from fitness in 2003 and has made the switch to figure competitions which according to *Muscle and Fitness* writer Schmaltz (2003:5)) “would save her body from the savage beating it takes from tumbling, twisting, bouncing and rolling all over stages around the world...she wants to save her joints.” Wayne Demilia, IFBB Vice President of the Pro Division notes (his words) that “About 25-30 percent of last years Fitness girls switched to Figure. I estimate that there are about 50 Figure girls so we’ll have more than enough to field a competitive and diverse contest lineup [in the 2003 professional figure division contests]” (Wilkins 2003, 2).

Ben Wider, President of the IFBB regards the addition of figure as “yet another way to promote the sport of bodybuilding and fitness worldwide” (Wilkins 2004:1-2). The success of the NPC in promoting the figure division at the amateur level paved the way for the establishment of a professional division under the IFBB by bringing in “more competitors, sponsors, fans, and money into the sport” (Wilkins 2004:1-2). Some writers have seen figure as a means to attract a more mainstream crowd to bodybuilding’s more marginalized muscle cult.

Figure competitions have begun to eclipse both fitness and bodybuilding in just three years of existence. In a report to *Southern Muscle* (2004:50) regarding the 2004 Junior USA Contest, Peter Potter noted “... the growing importance of the women’s Figure athletics, they accounted for slightly over 62% of the entire contest entries.” To verify the claims by promoters and reporters of the increasing popularity of figure competitions,, **(Slide)** I collected data using a convenience sample of twelve issues of *Southern Muscle Magazine* from June 2002-May 2004. I used *Southern Muscle* because this magazine lists the names of all the competitors for a competition whether they place or not, as opposed to other magazines such as *Joe Weider’s Flex*, *NPC News* and NPC/IFBB internet sites that list only the winners, not the total number of competitors in a systematic manner. The number of women bodybuilders, fitness and figure competitors from 59 shows was assessed. This data indicates the astounding popularity of figure competitors in contrast to the other women’s physique sports of bodybuilding and fitness. The total numbers of competitors from June 2002 to May 2004 from 59 shows are as follows: Women bodybuilders numbered 383, compared with 66 fitness competitors and 707 figure competitors.

Fitness and figure competitors are a far more docile embodiment than the testy corporeality of women bodybuilders. And their more compliant physiques are taking their toll on women’s bodybuilding in the competition for attention and resources of the industry, not to mention taking a toll on fitness as well. I would like to turn my lens to bodybuilding, fitness and figure as somatic debates illuminated through these four magnified moments. My theoretical compost continues to incorporate a Connolesque ( 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002) approach that attends to the representational, the structural and the cultural context of the gender order as well as to the opportunities for play and agency.

## Bodybuilding, Fitness and Figure as Backlash and Debate

We are in the midst of somatic history where muscle density is debated by athletic beauty contests and where glamour and sex emerge as the championship qualities. The athletic prowess of the fitness competitors remains entrenched within the paradigm of beauty and femininity. In many fitness competitions and defacto figure, the athletic domain is clearly subverted by the sexual. For example, the Taj Mahal Fitness Pageant (**slide 10 Taj Majal**) offering the first 1994 Ms. Exercise title to its winner included a bathing suit competition in thong bikini bottoms and high heels. In this respect, Debby McKnight, professional bodybuilder, notes "Fitness competitors try to fit more into societies norm. They try in a toned-down way to be physical but be acceptable--a lot more T and A (**slide 11 T and A**). Underlying this is a subtext of beauty as heterosexual sexiness.

Fitness competitions began drawing into their ranks former bodybuilders such as Raye Hollitt who stated " 'I... want to get smaller. I don't want to have such a hardcore image anymore. I want to be toned and fit, like Rachel and Cory. Big and bulky just doesn't get it anymore' " (Dayton, 1994 : 73). It also doesn't get endorsements and appearances either. In reflecting on fitness competitors, Melissa Coates gives voice to the continuing double bind of women's bodybuilding, all the more critical with the emergence of fitness and figure competitions. "When I saw the type of girls who were winning at the Arnold Classic, I thought I would have to compromise myself and get bigger and thicker. That would make me less marketable for the magazines; you are damned if you do and damned if you don't... Sometimes people would come up to me and ask me if I was a fitness girl. I used to take it as an insult, but now I realize it's a compliment. The fitness girls get more work because they spend more time presenting themselves as a mainstream look. More people can identify with the fitness look" (1997: 121).

In 1999 Kim Chizevsky retired from bodybuilding after four straight Ms Olympia titles; wearing an unofficial crown as 'the best woman bodybuilder of all time' in terms of muscular development, proportion and definition (Dobbins "The Best Female Bodybuilder of All Time 2004:1-2) and turned to fitness competitions. According to interviews in *Flex*, several motives were suggested; she was ready for a change after ten years of bodybuilding, the prize money for the Ms Olympia title had been reduced from \$115,000 to \$60,000 in 1997 and from \$50,000 in 1998 to \$25,000 in 1999 with near cancellation in that year as well; and she was uncomfortable with how large she had to get in the off-season in order to present a competitive look for the stage, climbing to over 180 pounds and some have hinted at more. This switch allowed for lively magazine discourse (*Flex* 2000 and 2001) with before and after photos, replete with an emphasis on her transformation from "the beast" to the beauty" in which she dropped thirty pounds of muscle (**Slides**) including the following discourse: "Earlier, in making her way to the backstage area, a fan had gasped, 'Is that Kim? That's not Kim. My god, it is Kim—she's beautiful.' When she was dominating bodybuilding, nobody ever called her beautiful. Awesome, freaky, massive—all accolades within the sport—but never beautiful" (Gardner 2001:188). This rhetoric reproduces a dominant metaphor of fitness and figure as beautiful, diminutive, compliant and contained while bodybuilding women are larger than life, visible and intimidating in their heroic and Amazon proportions (cf Thomas 2000: 88-99).

The metaphor of debate between bodybuilding and fitness has been articulated since

fitness first shared the bodybuilding stage in 1995. Not only is the debate presented through the stories of individuals such as Kim Chizevsky who makes the switch from the beast to the beauty, but other forms and representations abound. For example, Australian *Ironman Magazine* asks “Whose Sexier: Women Bodybuilders or Fitness Women?” (Redden 1996:52-63) ; Bill Dobbins posits “Muscle...or Fitness? (1997: 158-161, 239), and a *Flex* “Power and Sizzle” sponsored contest asks “Who is the sport's sexiest fittest woman? **slide cover** Not only do you get to sort through the hottest array of shots we've ever published, but you can vote for the winner (*Flex* 1998). **slide Cory** Presented as a debate in the media industry, women bodybuilders and fitness/figure competitors are positioned to in fact display their sexuality as the sine qua non of their physique sport. Presenting a media discourse on women's bodybuilding as a competition with fitness physiques provided an opportunity to continue to sexualize women bodybuilders at the expense of an athletic image. As the editors of popular bodybuilding magazines admit-it sells magazines. It isn't too much of a leap to argue that the wider institutions that sustain a gender order in which emphatic femininity sustains hegemonic masculinity, transgressive bodies are tamed by exposing their sexuality for the male gaze, commodified and objectified and this serves the interests of the industry in terms of women's access to labor and capital (**slide 31 Joe Weider**).

The pared down physiques of fitness pageant competitors and more recently figure competitors do offer a renewed and emboldened somatic challenge to women bodybuilders. Will the fitness and figure physique overshadow that of the hypertrophied muscle of the competitive women bodybuilder? The fitness and subsequent figure soma as a backlash embodiment to women's bodybuilding is far less testy and more compliant with the wider asymmetric social hierarchy of hegemonic gender order. Women bodybuilders' extreme muscularity and their quest for largesse is subversive to the gender order of empathic femininity that includes the intersection slenderness, smallness and conventional beauty (Bolin 1992 and Bolin 1998). Despite the agency of women bodybuilders in pushing the border of femininity; the structures of patriarchy, specifically those of the primary bodybuilding organizations the IFBB/NPC, the media, promoters, vendors and fitness related business that form a financially prolific array of interested parties conspire to contain women bodybuilders in various ways. As discussed, one avenue is through judging standards which women bodybuilders can resist somewhat successfully. Other efforts at containment are not so easily resisted.

For example, the industry media, specifically the major bodybuilding magazines have been accused of reducing their coverage of women's bodybuilding at the expense of fitness and figure. Kim Chizevsky maintains “Fitness competitors have taken over the pages [of *Flex*] we used to fill. My main concern is that it seems to have been decided that the magazine can only promote one, not both streams of the female sport.” *Flex* magazine responded that “magazines are in the business of selling magazines, and the change in emphasis---featuring fitness competitors in pictorials rather than women bodybuilders---was made for that reason (Bernal 2000:106-107). This of course begs the question of hegemonic masculinity.

Curious as to this claim by women bodybuilders and denizens of hard core bodybuilding culture, and interested in historical trends, I undertook a grounded content analysis of the covers of *Flex* magazine from 1983 to 2004. I compared the number of times images of women bodybuilders appeared on the covers of *Flex* with those of fitness/figure competitors and models. Large cover photos as well as smaller photographic inserts, usually about a fourth the size of the cover were included. **Slide** The data from 259 covers fell easily

into three categories which I have labeled as follows: **Slide** Golden Age of Women's Bodybuilding is April 1985 through -March 1994. Here 27 women bodybuilders grace the covers of *Flex* with only 1 fitness/figure competitor model shown. As you may recall the NPC/IFBB did not incorporate professional fitness into the bodybuilding venue until 1995.

I have categorized the period spanning April 1994 through March 1998, as the Transition Phase since it includes the introduction of fitness and an increase of fitness images from the previous period. Women's large cover photos are reduced from 27 to four during this era. Certainly an intervening variable is that *Flex* adopts a new photo strategy of including smaller photo inserts, but this does not impact the relative trends. These inserts illustrate the gradual increase of women fitness and figure competitors into *Flex*. The period 1998 and continuing to today, I have regarded as the Decline of Women Bodybuilders on the covers of *Flex* as the number of images indicate. In this next **slide** I have summarized the totals and offer a graph illustrating these historical trends in the images on the cover of *Flex* magazine. The numbers are compelling. The images of women bodybuilders have been all but replaced by fitness competitors on covers and/or in the inserts.

In a related piece of evidence that also documents the disappearance of women's bodybuilders from bodybuilding magazines, I found that *Joe Weider's Flex Magazine* that had been routinely running two distinct departments for the reigning Mr and Ms Olympia to offer tips and advice dropped the "Ask Ms Olympia" in the February 2001 edition.

In obtaining further evidence of industry trends regarding the three physique sports, I searched *Muscle and Fitness*, also a Weider production representing the IFBB and NPC. This research was aimed at the issue of power and labor, as was the research of *Flex Magazine* covers. Media coverage for competitors is an avenue to capital through endorsements, promotions, modeling and access to other career opportunities in the beauty fitness arena of products and services. This research addressed how often the names of the respective winners of the Bodybuilding, Fitness and Figure IFBB Olympia Championships contests were mentioned as these respectively represent the zenith of professional titles. The data is presented in two year increments to reflect delays in magazine publication of contest reports as well as pre-contest media hype for the oncoming year. **Slide** This table suggests some clear cut trends, the Ms Olympian are mentioned in decreasing numbers since 1994, while the Fitness Olympians names are mentioned increasingly more often than the bodybuilder Olympians; although the Figure Olympians are in their infancy, their names are still mentioned more than those of the bodybuilders. The following **slide** illustrates the trends using totals and a bar graph.

In another unobtrusive measure of the industry, I turned to the issue of number of competitors. Promoters of bodybuilding, fitness and figure competitions, make a profit through the entry fees of competitors. The organizations such as the NPC or IFBB in turn benefits from the dues the competitors must pay to compete in sanctioned shows. Vendors also profit from the production of a show since they may provide various opportunities for fans and competitors to purchase products such as apparel, equipment, supplements, protein bars, and an array of products geared to diet, nutrition and muscle building. Guest posers also earn fees to entertain fans and sponsor products for vendors. The following table **slide** is a comparison of 2003 and 2004 bodybuilding, fitness and figure contest activity reported in the May/June issues of *NPC News* magazine. This table suggests trends for an overall increase in total number of contests for all three physique sports from 2003 to 2004 at the local, state and regional contest level. All three physique sports increased with figure showing the largest

increase. At the national level figure competitions are in a growth mode, possibly at the expense of fitness. For example, GNC, the sponsors of a major professional bodybuilding competition known as the GNC Show of Strength have decided to eliminate the women's bodybuilding component, claiming that ticket sales wouldn't be high enough to justify including them in the program. And according IFBB Professional Lisa Bavington, GNC added insult to injury by the replacement of the women's bodybuilding show with a figure competition, and will they retained the fitness competition portion of the show (2004:1-3).

## Conclusion

This analysis focuses on the physical self as it is culturally constituted in terms of metaphor and embedded in social structure. These data combined create a grim picture for women bodybuilders in terms of their access to power, labor and capital in an industry that sustains the dominant gender order that privileges men first and offers opportunities to those women whose embodiments animate and reproduce an emphatic femininity. No matter how much the grand bodies of women bodybuilders are adorned with insignias of femininity, the transgressive bodies are regarded as less marketable than the docile and compliant embodiments of the fitness and figure physique competitors. In this presentation, I have discussed bodybuilding as a paradoxical body regimes, that transgresses yet sometimes sustains the gender order. I have also approached the subject relationally, regarding bodybuilding as a corporeal nexus that responds and relates to historical processes, in this case embodiments in the physique competitions of fitness and figure competitors. I have argued that the latter represent bodily backlashes to the testy and unruly bodies of women bodybuilders. Amidst processes of commodification, power and labor that attempt to sustain hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, is resistance and agency, embedded in specific moments in history and culture, and in the unruly and heroic bodies of women bodybuilders.

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