Moving Beyond the Image: Theorising 'extreme' female bodies

Since their entry onto the competitive scene in 1977, female bodybuilders have been the subject of sustained debate among scholars from a range of disciplines. Within this body of literature, discourses are polarised and offer two opposing representations of the female bodybuilder; one of resistance and one of compliance. This bifurcation of discourse, we argue, is symptomatic of a more general occularcentric tradition within theorising on 'extreme' or transgressive female bodies. In this article, we unpack these disparate perspectives and by drawing on research relating to anorexia and fat studies we advocate for an alternative theoretical space, premised on the affectual relationality/co-constitution of materiality and representation, from which to approach female bodybuilding as a corporeal practice. Moreover, we propose that by developing an interdisciplinary approach to female corporeality (muscularity, thinness, fatness etc.), we can dismantle unproductive and ontologically redundant divisions which segregate and silo feminist writing on embodiment.

Keywords: Embodiment, occularcentrism, female bodybuilding, fat, anorexia, theory.

Introduction

During the past 30 years, in conjunction with the 'corporeal turn' in sociology and associated disciplines, feminist philosophies of the body have significantly advanced theoretical understandings of the interplay between materiality, subjectivity, representation and identity. This cache of research has been instrumental in problematising ideologies regarding the 'naturalness' of bodies, particularly in relation to sex and gender, in addition to integrating the corporeal into areas of scholarship where the body was previously an 'absent present' (Blackman 2012). Within this growing field, research on visually transgressive modes of embodiment has proliferated. As Dworkin argued at the start of the 21st century, '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, and anorexics on the other' (2001, 335).

Female bodybuilding, as an 'extreme' mode of embodiment, has become an exemplar case for thinking about the potential for female bodies to materially and symbolically disturb phallogocentric binaries, such as that of nature/culture, masculine/feminine, mind/body, and so on (Johnston 1996; Witz 2000). Similarly, due to what Warin refers to as 'the spectacle of thinness' (2004, 93) research on anorexia has held public and academic fascination since the colonisation of eating disorders by the medical sciences from the 1970s onwards (Bordo 1993). More recently, 'fat studies' has become an independent field of study in and of itself. This collection of literature comprises interdisciplinary works on the phenomenology of fat as a lived experience, as well as the role of social, cultural, historical and political realities on representations of fatness. For fat scholars, living as fat is seen to produce a 'unique epistemological perspective' (Nash 2008, 3). In this regard, fat studies literature, which intersects with political movements such as fat activism, seeks to establish a discourse around fatness as a marginalised category of identity. Crucially, these three fields of study have historically shared a concomitant tendency to privilege visual metaphors for knowledge (Brain 2002; Probyn 2008). This bias is formally termed 'occularcentrism'.

In this paper, we argue that literature on female bodybuilding, as an 'extreme' mode of embodiment, relies on representational cultural scripts as the point of entry and as a result remains contained and constrained within the binary logic of resistance and compliance. By drawing on literature from postfeminism, anorexia research, and fat studies, which have encountered and overcome similar challenges, we discuss the potential for dismantling polarised constructions of female bodybuilders. In doing so, we explore the ways in which discourses on visually transgressive female bodies offer interdisciplinary frameworks through which to ontologically shift the focus in bodybuilding research and scholarship on female embodiment more broadly. In what

follows, we begin by presenting a review of the extant literature on female bodybuilding, drawing attention to the ways in which occularcentric readings of this corporeal practice bifurcate and become framed in terms of resistance/compliance. After identifying and outlining this problem within the female bodybuilding literature, the second half of the article is dedicated to potential theoretical solutions. First, we consider the merits of applying postfeminist thought to the dual framing of female bodybuilders. Specifically, we highlight the value of postfeminism in theoretically integrating cultural/representational critique, subjective experience, and embodiment. We then turn to literature from anorexia research and fat studies to highlight the ways in which other visually transgressive modes of embodiment have negotiated, and overcome, similar challenges. Finally, in an effort to 'move beyond the image' and develop an interdisciplinary space for thinking about visually differing subjectivities, we draw on theoretical concepts proposed by scholars of postfeminism, anorexia research, and fat studies and apply them to female bodybuilding.. Further research is needed to apply these frameworks within an empirical context.

Female bodybuilding

Female bodybuilders have been extensively written about by feminists and social theorists since they were permitted to compete at the elite level in 1977. In a 1998 *Lingua Franca* article, Emily Nussbaum suggests that literature on bodybuilding has become a field of study in and of itself. She writes, 'bodybuilding and weightlifting studies fit right into several current academic trends: the hot new field of sports history and sociology, body studies in general, and queer and feminist explorations of androgyny and gender bending' (Nussbaum 1998, no page numbers). In particular, the well-muscled female body has attracted attention from feminist scholars, who remain

fascinated by the semiotic transformations made possible by women harnessing strength and muscularity.

The visual spectacle created by these muscular bodies divides feminist scholars in such a way that two oppositional understandings and discourses on the female bodybuilder have emerged. For some, the 'cult of muscle' (Mitchell 1987, 161) represents a damaging assault on feminine embodiment, with proponents of this discourse drawing attention to the problematic practices of ritual and regulatory self-surveillance observed by women within this sport. This approach reflects a concern for the inscription of hegemonic power on (and through) women's bodies and is heavily derivative of Foucault's (1977) work on docile bodies and governmentality. In this conceptualisation, female bodybuilders are enslaved by a panoptic desire to discipline their bodies and do so by compulsively weight training and ridding themselves of fat. Due to its privileging of discourse and exterior determination, we refer to this narrative as 'poststructuralist' throughout.

However, for others, female bodybuilding is lauded as transformative to the feminist project, with Gloria Steinem, boldly claiming, 'I've gradually come to believe that society's acceptance of muscular women may be one of the most intimate, visceral measures of change' (1994, 97). This counter-discourse depicts female bodybuilding, then, as an empowering, subversive, and positively feminist activity. This narrative seeks to reclaim embodied agency within feminist depictions of the female bodybuilder and identifies the transformative potential in this visually transgressive mode of corporeality. We refer to this discourse as 'self-determinist' throughout, due to its emphasis on autonomy and agency.

Significantly, the juxtaposition of these two disparate readings of female bodybuilding continues to frame debate on this topic. Some important feminist analyses

in this area have, for example, been titled, *The paradox of pumping iron: Female bodybuilding as resistance and compliance (*Shea 2001), *Women's Bodybuilding: Feminist Resistance and/or Femininity's Recuperation?* (St Martin and Gavey 1996), *Flex-rated! Female bodybuilding: feminist resistance or erotic spectacle?* (Richardson 2008), reproducing this polarised discourse in which female bodybuilders are portrayed as resistant or compliant, empowered or controlled, activists or slaves (Boyle 2005; Johnston 1996). Underpinning both discourses is an overreliance on the visual spectacle of muscularity and the visceral response it elicits from various audiences.

There is also a wealth of literature on male bodybuilding, which has contributed significantly to understandings of the sport (for both sexes) and its place in contemporary culture (Klein 1993; Monaghan 2001). Often written in conversation with theories of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Carrigan et al 1985), this literature explores bodybuilding industry (Vallet 2017), steroid use (Monaghan 2001), body image and eating disorders (Mosley 2009). While this work offers important insights into bodybuilding from a male perspective, the resistance/compliance framework, which is a significant focus of this article, does not frame debate in a similar way to work on their female counterparts. This is perhaps because male bodybuilding is not immediately considered transgressive, and instead aligns with a version (albeit extreme) of the hegemonic physical ideal for men. Because of this, female bodybuilding will be the focus of this article.

It is noteworthy that we refer to image, the visual, representation and semiotics interchangeably throughout. In doing so we seek to convey the scholarly fascination with what non-hegemonic bodies 'look like' and the concomitant tendency for researchers to use this visual information to infer meaning regarding how bodies are subjectively experienced. It could be argued that this is particularly prevalent within

literature on bodybuilding, due to the inherently aesthetic nature of the sport and the relationship between competitive success and the body's appearance. Thus, an audience-spectacle dynamic is reproduced within scholarship. However, this becomes problematic when subjectivity and embodiment are at stake, particularly as competitions are one moment in the lives/careers of a bodybuilder. Embodied sensations such as the mingled pleasure and pain of muscle soreness, gym clothes sticking to the body, the heady buzz of pre-workout, and the rushing of endorphins are rarely touched upon. In this sense, while much of the literature on bodybuilding utilises interview and ethnographic methods to understand subjective experiences within the sport, there is a tendency to slip into theorising about what muscles represent/signify over how they are built. We contend that attempting to understand affectual aspects of experience by reading off the surface of the body is a thoroughly disembodied line of enquiry. The aim of this article is to shift the focus away from what bodies look like and towards how bodies *feel.*

In what follows, we demonstrate that by focusing on the visual spectacle produced by the female bodybuilder's muscularity, feminist discourses bifurcate and reproduce poststructuralist/self-determinist modalities. We discuss this divergence in relation to three key themes, which we have identified within the extant literature. These are 1) bodywork and self-surveillance, 2) aesthetics, and 3) agency. Finally, we articulate some opportunities for divergence from the phallogocentric duality presented here, by turning to literature on postfeminism, followed by anorexia and fatness.

Bodywork and self-surveillance

Female bodybuilding can be characterized as a 'body technology that involves the building of muscle through hard work lifting weights' (Wesely 2001, 162), and a toned, muscular body cannot be achieved through any means other than strict dietary and

exercise practices. In this respect, bodybuilding is characteristic of what Shilling (1993) refers to as a 'body project', in the sense that engagement with the sport reflects 'attempts to construct and maintain a coherent and viable sense of self-identity through attention to the body, particularly the body's surface' (Gill et al. 2005, 40). As a result, muscularity is often perceived to represent discipline, self-mastery and continuous work.

Poststructuralist and self-determinist discourses differ in their reading of female bodybuilding as an inherently self-regulatory sport. Feminist poststructuralists make sense of the symbolic asceticism associated with female muscularity by drawing on Foucault's (1977) concepts of governmentality and panopticism. These scholars reflect a concern for the female bodybuilder, whose practices of bodily self-surveillance appear problematically similar to women with eating disorders (Bordo 1993; Marzano-Parisoli 2001, Mitchell 1987). Mitchell, who describes female bodybuilding as 'a kind of "macho" anorexia' (1987, 160), posits that the sustained and unabating self-regulation required within this sport are pernicious manifestations of patriarchal power, which seek to subjugate and control women's bodies. It is noteworthy that scholars within this tradition frequently mobilise the 1970s Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*, whose concern was, as Kruks puts it, 'less on the "care" of the self than on the "anatomo-political" production of the self' (2001, 54). In this regard, feminist poststructuralist readings of female bodybuilding, while persuasive in their critique of the panopticisms of the everyday, lack any sense of an interiority of the self. Thoughts and feelings relating to the performance of (and compliance with) these acts of self-discipline are problematically omitted from this narrative.

Conversely, self-determinist literature frames female bodybuilders' engagement with self-surveillance in terms of its subjective significance. Tate writes, 'if a woman is

for herself, she has power to control nature, to define herself, within her own personally defined boundaries ... she rejects the phallus and actively challenges the gaze of the other' (1999, 46). In this interpretation, agency and subjective attribution of meaning are central concerns, and while 'the gaze' remains manifested in practices of self-regulation, its origin is not patriarchal discourse but the feminine subject herself. However, as has been noted by many bodybuilding scholars, the body imaginary being pursued by women within this sport is heavily influenced by competitive judging standards and sub-cultural ideals, which centralise normative femininity (Lowe 1998; Obel 1996; St Martin and Gavey 1996). Indeed, many female bodybuilders take a Beckarian 'career' approach to the sport (Coquet et al. 2016; Roussel & Griffet 2000), under such circumstances, feminine presentation is a professional necessity. In this regard, creating the ideal physique is a process which is, at least in part, directed by the patriarchal institutions that govern the sport's aesthetic standards (Bell 2008; Obel 1996). It is noteworthy to add that there are other sports that require the development of 'extreme' bodies for competitive success, such as sumo wrestling (Kanezaki 1991) or ultra-marathon running (Hanold 2010). Examples of such extreme sports can perhaps lend weight to Anderson's (2009) notion of sport as a 'near-total institution', whereby the focus is on glory, patriotism, corporeal discipline, and therefore individual agency is suppressed. The 'win at all costs' sporting ethic may be in part responsible for athletes in extreme sports being prepared to push their bodies to the limits and in doing so creating bodies which do not fit within wider cultural and gendered norms.

Aesthetics

Much like the dual framing of self-surveillance, feminist analyses of the aesthetic components of female bodybuilding are equivocal. As St Martin and Gavey observe, 'muscles on women clearly have meaning, but exactly what they mean and how they are

valued is not agreed upon even among feminists' (1996, 47). Muscularity in excess of what is considered normatively acceptable for women transgresses social boundaries, and as a result, stigma and shaming from partners, family, colleagues and the public, are common themes that arise from empirical research and writing on female bodybuilding (Felkar 2015; Lowe 1998; Shilling and Bunsell 2009; Tate 1999). However, itis suggested by many poststructuralists that a built body is no longer transgressive of gender boundaries, to the contrary, they suggest that a toned, athletic, muscular female body is exemplary of the modern feminine ideal (Dworkin and Heywood 2003; Marzano Parisoli 2001). Moreover, ome authors within the poststructuralist tradition go as far as to suggest that the female bodybuilder's seemingly uncritical consumption and reproduction of hegemonic representations of beauty is pathological in nature (Marzano-Parisoli 2001; Mitchell 1987). They posit that bodybuilders' desire to act upon the body, mirrors that of individuals with anorexia, differing only in its practical and visual manifestations. In this regard, Bordo argues that women with anorexia and female bodybuilders are 'united in battle against a common platoon of enemies: the soft, the loose; unsolid, excess flesh' (1990, 90).

For self-determinists, however, bodybuilding occupies a space of feminist resistance, with the transgressive potential for women to subvert gender norms and beauty ideals by embracing muscularity and occupying traditionally masculine modes of physicality (Bell 2008; Shilling and Bunsell 2009). In this regard, Tate writes, 'in challenging the phallus directly through the creation of bodies which incorporate and eroticize "the masculine", women go some way towards transforming the beauty model' (2001, 34). Additionally, Obel contends that, as well as challenging traditional gender structures, female bodybuilding disrupts nature/culture binaries and has the power to 'bring about changes in perceptions of the "nature' of bodies"' (1996, 196). In this

logic, by unequivocally framing the female bodybuilder as resistant, her body becomes an ideological tool through which binaries and aesthetic ideals are disturbed and challenged.

Both poststructuralist and self-determinist perspectives, though, offer overly simplistic accounts of the aesthetic components of female bodybuilding. On the one hand, poststructuralist claims that female bodybuilders are unthinking victims of the latest fads in female beauty, fail to account for the affectual and embodied dimensions of muscle building, such as visceral and interoceptive experiences of strength. On the other hand, self-determinist narratives reductively position muscularity as an inherently subversive corporeal expression. However, there is a wealth of research into female bodybuilding (and women's sport more generally) which documents women's careful negotiation of the 'glass ceiling' of muscularity, which prohibits athletes from becoming 'too' muscular (Choi 2003; Dworkin 2001; Wesely 2001). Therefore, the picture painted of female bodybuilders within this narrative, as women flagrantly transgressing gender norms and unashamedly taking up space, too uncritically accepts the female bodybuilder to be exemplary of radical feminist embodiment. In both instances, poststructuralists and self-determinists project meaning onto female muscularity, in service of their differing political and theoretical agendas. Crucially, neither sufficiently engages with bodybuilding as a consciously and subjectively mediated activity and identity.

Agency

The most significant and yet under acknowledged theme that underpins the bifurcation of poststructuralist and self-determinist discourses, is scholarly attempts to 'read' agency and resistance off the surface of the body. In this regard, the

discourse mobilised by poststructuralists is contained and constrained by what McNay refers to as 'the negative paradigm of subjectification' (2003, 140), whereby the feminine subject is passively, symbolically and discursively constructed. In the poststructuralist view, external determination is overemphasised, and the subjectively mediated negotiation of discourse is overlooked. This theoretical disposition results in representations of the female bodybuilder as unconsciously responding to systems of values, devoid of agency, and totally unaware of her own imprisonment. The tendency for poststructuralist scholars to reproduce these narrow visions of women's agency, is referred to by Cairns and Johnston as 'the Foucault machine tendency', whereby authors take a feminine embodied practice such as wearing make-up, working out, dieting or body hair maintenance and 'churn out pre-set governmentality explanation' (2015, 157). It must be noted that this tendency within academic texts on feminine embodiment reveals a particularly shallow reading of Foucault's work on power and surveillance.

For self-determinists, female bodybuilding holds this empowering and liberatory potential. In this respect, female bodybuilding contains the promise of resistance, and divergence from normative feminine scripts into terrain which is radically new and unchartered. However, within this discourse, agency is overemphasised, and the female bodybuilder becomes tokenised and deployed in the furtherance of feminist ideology. Moreover, mobilising the body as an instrument of political and symbolic warfare against patriarchy in service of 'dismantling essentialism, deconstructing dualisms [and] emphasising fluidity' (Davis 2007, 54), problematically strips the body of its sensory and fundamentally human characteristics. The body as a sentient, feeling organism is entirely absent from this framing. In this regard, attempts to read the inscription of power and politics off the

surface of the body, renders the female bodybuilder static and disembodied (Davis 2007; Probyn 2008). Emblematic of this field of research is 'the displacement of the "creative role" from the subject to discursive systems, and the erasure of those emotional and affective aspects of subjectivity that are not easily amenable to discursive articulation' (Kruks 2001, 16).

Postfeminism and female subjectivity

Before moving on to the crux of this paper, which is concerned with bringing together literature from female bodybuilding, anorexia research and fat studies to 'move beyond the image', it is important to note the significant opportunities offered by post-feminist scholarship to overcome resistance/compliance frameworks. McRobbie defines of postfeminism as- 'an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined… while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism' (2004, 255). Significantly, postfeminist scholarship offers exciting opportunities for body studies, due to its engagement with how female subjects navigate and make sense of the themes discussed above (i.e. body-work, aesthetics, agency) (Gill 2007; Evans and Riley 2014;.Marshall et al 2018). For example, in their application of postfeminism to online female bodybuilding cultures, Marshall and colleagues write, 'through consciously critiquing the (self-)surveillance being enacted over their bodies on Instagram, female bodybuilders are able to make negotiations which involve simultaneously conforming to the ideal body of (hetero)normative femininity while maintaining a sense of strength, independence, and empowerment through muscularity' (2018, 18). By focusing on self-representation and the strategic engagement with discourse, postfeminist work ties together a nuanced account of embodiment, subjectivity and discourse, without overemphasising either structure or agency.

When considering applying a postfeminist lens to female bodybuilding to address the problems we have outlined above, it is worthwhile to reflect on other examples where this integration of both agency and structure has advanced feminist thinking (Gill 2007). In our view, debates regarding the sexualisation of women in contemporary culture have particularly benefitted from such an approach (Evans and Riley 2014; Gill 2012). By interrogating, not only representation and its visible 'effects', but also the subjective attribution of meaning, Gill (2012) and others have developed an understanding of how specific discourses (such as that of 'empowerment') function in the reproduction of a specific kind of sexualised self-representation. In this regard, postfeminist scholarship often asks questions such as; how do women situate their own lives and experiences in relation to wider cultural forces? This line of enquiry, which places a greater emphasis on the interiority of the self than the surface of the body, is successful in being critical of broader cultural forces that may guide action, whilst also refraining from positioning women as passive or subjugated 'cultural dupes'. This approach is sorely needed within scholarship on 'extreme' female bodies. However, with the notable exception of work by Marshall and colleagues (2018), there is a dearth of research which applies this line of thinking to the embodied process and practice of female bodybuilding.

The visual spectacle (bodybuilding, anorexia, fatness)

Much like literature on female bodybuilding, feminist research on anorexia and fat studies is often preoccupied at the level of cultural inscription (Brain, 2002; Probyn, 2008; Warin, 2004). Questions frequently asked, directly or indirectly, include; can these bodies be considered radical political projects? Is muscularity/thinness/fatness a form of embodied resistance? Do overtly muscular/thin/fat women pose a challenge to hegemonic femininity and patriarchal constructs? Alternatively, are muscular/thin/fat

women at the whim of patriarchal discourse, exhibiting either too much control, or not enough? It is these narratives regarding resistance and compliance which female bodybuilding, anorexia research and fat studies share, and which are intimately connected to the visual spectacle produced by these bodies. As Brain writes, 'this tendency to read meaning off the body's surface constrains debate around a series of polarised judgements based on the visual… whether figured as 'overconformist' as opposed to "deviant"' (2002, 153). In what follows, we critically examine the ways in which scholarship on 1) anorexia and 2) fatness contains similar challenges to those presented in female bodybuilding literature, and therefore offer mutual solutions.

Anorexia

While female bodybuilders' transgressive muscularity provides ample material for scholarly debate, a salient and almost eclipsing element within eating disorder research is what Warin refers to as 'the spectacle of thinness' (2004, 95). Since the colonisation of eating disorders by western medicine from the 1970s, anorexia has garnered seemingly inexhaustible attention from academe, and cultural feminist scholars in particular (Ferreday 2012; Warin 2004). While anorexia is certainly a serious illness, worthy of thorough exploration, it is telling that despite being the least prevalent eating disorder in the UK (behind eating disorder not otherwise specified [EDNOS], binge eating disorder, and bulimia) it has been subject to the most active and sustained interest from cultural theorists (Solmi et al. 2014).

This fascination with the emaciated body is not new or specific to the current socio-cultural climate. Warin (2004) has written on the public's fascination with thin bodies, dating back to Europe's carnival and circus culture. Additionally, Gooldin (2003) details the spectacle created by 'living skeletons' and 'hunger artists' of the 18th and 19th centuries, who were said to symbolise religious piety and extreme self-control.

To liken self-starvation of this kind to modern presentations of anorexia would be to reductively extract the practice of non-eating from its socio-historical moment, which is not our intention and belongs to a discussion outside of the remit of this article (Brumburg 1985). What is clear, however, is that 'extreme' thinness has held the attention of public discourse and academic writing for a sustained period and to a greater degree than other eating disorders (Malson 1998; Squire 2003). Moreover, in the present, the mass media is complicit in feeding cultural appetites for the emaciated female body, by inexhaustibly producing images designed to provoke reactions of 'simultaneous horror and fascination' (Warin 2004, 96).

Feminist theorists have dedicated a great deal of energy towards deconstructing the meaning behind the thin body and the drive for thinness (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006). Bordo's (1993) *The Unbearable Weight* is perhaps the most prolific of these accounts. However, there is a problematic tendency within feminist scholarship to paint anorexic women as emblematic of western women's struggles with patriarchal conditions. As Brain describes, 'feminist cultural theorists' arguments about anorexia as a metaphor for the condition of Western women, and feminist corporeal theorists' readings of anorexia as a synecdoche for gender oppression, privilege the visual body at the expense of the affective and sentient aspects of embodiment' (2002, 2). In this sense, much like the female bodybuilder who is often ideologically constructed as a beacon of feminist resistance; with a few notable exceptions (for example, Brain 2002; Fox et al. 2005; Rich 2006; Warin 2010) the anorexic woman has been positioned as the ultimate victim of modern patriarchal power, and too often anorexia as a sentient, lived experience is overlooked.

Moreover, representations of anorexic women as victims of culture have real, embodied effects. For example, Rich's (2006) study on the lived experience of young

women with anorexia theorises the extent to which 'discursive constraint' serves to alienate and isolate women who suffer from this illness. In this sense, the problem of representation is not an abstract one, nor a theoretical quibble to be debated and resolved within the walls of the academy. Representation is lived and its effects are felt by those whose bodies and experiences are discursively constructed.

Fat studies

Paradoxically, while fatness is often positioned and understood to be antithetical to anorexia, fat bodies too are frequently caught between alienating representations. On the one hand, as Probyn argues, 'fat becomes objectified as a mode of resistance' (2008, 402) as well as tokenised and deployed in activist projects that seek to facilitate greater acceptance of fat bodies. On the other hand, there exists a desire within more positivist and biomedically-inclined factions of scholarship to 'fix' or eradicate obesity as a social ill and, much like poststructuralist literature on female bodybuilding, construct fatness as a form of pathology. As Yancey and colleagues (2006) note, discourse on fatness/'obesity', which traverses across theoretical and epistemological boundaries, is often fraught and leads to dialectic impasse. This dualistic framing of fatness, much like discourses on female bodybuilding, is caused by the fixation on static images (Probyn 2008). Problematically, this positions fatness as 'something that is image but not feelings, emotions and affects, as something untouched by economics, class and ethnic positioning' (Probyn 2008, 401).

In her critique of feminist approaches to fat, Probyn contends, 'an over-reliance on a simplistically framed notion of representation has produced a body of argument that can only focus on the body as image' (2008, 402). Here, then, Probyn suggests that simplistic visual representations of 'fat' women, which centralise the transgressive, non-hegemonic female body, limit the frames within and through which women's 'fatness'

can be explored and invisibilise women's embodied experiences. For Probyn, such simplistic visual representations act as tools through which to drive the agenda of acceptance of transgressive 'fatness' which, again, skirts over the embodied and conscious experience of inhabiting a larger body.

A recent and salient example of this fixation is plus-size model Tess Holliday's cover appearance on Cosmopolitan magazine's 2018 October issue, which sparked a great deal of debate within public and academic discourses (Cosmopolitan 2018). While some celebrated the inclusion of this underrepresented body type within a mainstream women's publication, others perceived the cover image to be promoting unhealthy lifestyles. In particular, Piers Morgan (a controversial conservative British journalist and television personality) claimed the cover was 'celebrating morbid obesity' (Good Morning Britain 3rd September 2018). While we find this statement to be problematic and in need of deconstruction, analysis at the level of an image (which necessarily objectifies fatness) is destined to result in bifurcation. As Probyn suggests, 'the focus on image and fat acceptance reduces woman's image to that of "fat woman". Whether she is a proud fat woman or not, this is a sad way to understand human subjectivity' (2008, 403).

Much like the dualistic framing of female bodybuilders as 'feminist crusaders or aspiring muscle barbies' (Boyle 2005, 136), the visual spectacle of fatness and the level of critical engagement it incites, tells us little about the *experience* of fatness. Nonetheless, this is not to say that representations of fatness, such as Tess Holliday's cover, do not have an impact on individuals in their everyday lives. There is still much critical work to be done within corporeal feminist scholarship to understand the relationality of image and subject. In what follows, we mobilise some of the important research that has been completed in this regard and demonstrate how these

interdisciplinary theoretical ideas offer useful insights for literature on female bodybuilding.

Moving beyond the image: lessons from anorexia research and fat studies

Our intention, then, is to explore how bodybuilding, and indeed anorexia and fatness, can be moved beyond their visual representations and understood as conscious and embodied experiences. Here, we call upon Witz's definition of embodiment as, 'a mediate fleshiness— in short, an embedded sociological sense of the body as the condition and constituent of action' (2000, 11). How might we understand female muscularity/thinness/fatness in this way? While research on female bodybuilding remains constrained by polarised imaginings, in recent years fat studies and anorexia research have made significant strides in overcoming these limitations. This has been achieved by expanding on and developing theoretical frameworks for thinking about 'mediate fleshiness'; the 'phantom', affectual, neither material nor immaterial, in-betweenness, which integrates and connects the interoceptive body and the representational (Blackman 2012; Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017). In this final discussion, we demonstrate that by exploring the embodied relationality between image/corpus and engaging with female subjects as the point of entry, one is able to develop nuanced and interdisciplinary theoretical models for understanding female embodiment in its multiple and diverse forms.

Within fat studies and anorexia research, exploration of the impact of discourse and representation on lived experience is opening up new possibilities for thinking about embodiment (Lavis 2014; Williams and Annandale 2018). For example, Williams and Annandale (2018) articulately and convincingly demonstrate that affectual responses to weight stigma become embodied by those who are clinically labelled 'overweight/obese'. Their study (which takes place in UK weight loss groups) found

that, upon reflecting on breaking the rules of their diet, participants 'had come to embody the stigma associated with such behaviours and their presumed consequences: they quite literally felt the effects of stigmatised ill-discipline' (2018, 12). Similarly, in her study of a UK inpatient eating disorders unit, Lavis describes the ways in which fat, both temporarily external (in food) and internal (in the body), takes on threatening and pernicious qualities where 'to informants, fat is at times cloying, lumpen, and static, as in donuts. At others, it is mobile and seeping, as in melted butter' (2014, 2). In one account Lavis reports that, after being required to eat a cupcake, an inpatient with anorexia becomes agitated by the deeply tangible effects of this act of consumption. She reflects, 'Abigail explained how she could feel it in her body, expanding and moving through it; the cupcake breached her boundaries, forcing layers of fat to appear under her skin, stretching it outward' (2014, 102). These studies create an empirical grounding for understanding the relationality/co-constituency of the representational and the material, a method which could be adopted for research on female bodybuilding.

Fat studies scholars Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) have taken on the important work of theoretically bridging the material and the image through their concepts of 'phantom' and 'liminal' fat. These concepts, which capture the embodied stigma of lived fatness as well as the persistent threat of fatness, attempt to better explain the 'relationship between or mutual constitution of experience and representation' (2017, 101). With reference to phantom fat, they write, 'mainstream media images of fat bodies make fat into a removable, threatening, continuously disappearing and reappearing, almost haunting entity. As such, these images produce an ideal viewer who is expected to fear and reject actual or potential "fat" parts of their bodies, whether "fat" exists in the concrete now or in the imagined future' (2017, 101). 'Liminality' is conceived of as 'the transitional phase of the rite of passage that marks a move from one

social status or identity to another' (2017, 103). However, rather than being transient or temporally sensitive, liminality is an often stable or continuous sense of being 'in between' two embodied states (Turner 2002). Though speaking specifically about fatness and the threat of fat, these ideas translate and map onto conceptualisations of muscularity and thinness, creating new avenues for empirical and theoretical work.

In relation to female bodybuilding, success within the sport is predicated on women's ability to mould their body to their own design. This necessarily involves scanning one's body for unsymmetrical musculature, stubborn muscle groups in need of further development, and angles that do not flatter the overall physique. This routine relies on the metaphysical existence of a body imaginary, which becomes infused and incorporated into one's own self-image. When the female bodybuilder looks in the mirror, she sees multiple bodies; her own material self and a multiplicity of representations, some of which she fears and some of which she desires (Brabazon 2006). Much like Baudrillard's (1990) concept of simulation, whereby models and maps take precedence over reality, representations of ideal bodies, feared and past selves disturb and disrupt an objective or strictly material surveying of the body.

In order to be successful in her sport, the female bodybuilder must view herself in relation to a '"latent" inner image', not yet realized or attained (Tate 2001, 33). In this respect, Kyrölä and Harjunen contend, 'the ideal viewer's body image contains fat as a phantom limb of sorts, resembling the way in which a lost body part can remain a part of a person's affective body and body image, feeling as-if-real, although not existing in the flesh' (2017, 101). Similarly, the ideal female bodybuilder is willing to subject herself to a vigilant and highly self-conscious form of 'body work', by imagining muscularity and working to produce it. In this regard, phantom and liminal

fat are theoretically useful for thinking through this state of ‘mediate fleshiness’ (Witz 2000, 11).

This ‘liminal’ metaphor for female embodiment has also been mobilised within anorexia research. Grosz writes, ‘anorexia can, like the phantom limb, be a kind of mourning for a preOedipal (i.e., precastrated) body and a corporeal connection to the mother that women in patriarchy are required to abandon’ (1994, 40). Brain connects and grounds this analysis within a material/representational framework, by going further to suggest the those with anorexia are ‘at some indeterminable point in an unfinishable transition, both “body” and “narrative” are the embodied culmination of past and future, trauma and recovery, melancholia and mourning, femininity and masculinity… reconciling flesh with future body imaginary’ (2002, 165). In this regard, anorexia, much like female bodybuilding, is a mode of embodiment experienced in a space oscillating between materiality and representation, in a process of transformation.

For female bodybuilders, the purpose of their eating and exercise regime is to turn what was once soft flesh into visible and solid muscle. Through the practice of bodybuilding, the mutability of the body is intentionally realised and a process of transformation takes place. The very nature of the sport requires the body to be in some manner of ‘becoming’ which (when combined with a competitive ‘sporting ethic’ or career approach that requires continuous progress/improvement) means constant bodywork is demanded. The desire for muscularity as well as the perpetual phantomized threat of fat drives this sustained labour. As Kyrölä and Harjunen write, ‘for those who do not currently live as fat, phantom fat still becomes a part of their body images as potentiality: threatening abstract flesh which can grab onto them materially anytime without continuous rejection and management’ (2017, 101). In this sense, the body can be conceptualised, as Budgeon proposes, ‘as events that are continually in the process of

becoming — as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade' (2003, 50). Thus, the constant bodywork required of muscle-building suspends female bodybuilders in a liminal state of being.

In this regard, fat studies and anorexia research are adept at mobilising affectual metaphors to understand female embodiment. Affect, in this case, being 'those registers of experience which cannot be easily seen and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational, incorporeal and immaterial' (Blackman 2012, 4). In many ways, this focus on feeling and the subjective attribution of meaning is an act of rebellion against medical models which pathologise and render illogical states of being which do not (visually) meet with hegemonic gendered expectations of healthy, beautiful, or 'normal' bodies (Ferreday 2012). Female bodybuilders too are subject to this gaze, however further research is needed to understand the affectual experiences of women who experience the world through (and in relation to) the pursuit of muscularity.

Conclusion

In this article, we have highlighted a concomitant tendency within feminist philosophies of the body to privilege occularcentric approaches to visually 'extreme' modes of embodiment. As a result, much of these discourses remain trapped within the binary and objectifying realm of representation. While literature on female bodybuilding is constrained within the oppositional framework of resistance and compliance, fat studies and anorexia research have developed methods of overcoming 'the tyranny of the image' (Moola and Norman 2017, 261). Crucially, their concepts and articulations, which focus on affect and the ambiguous boundaries between material/immaterial selves, can be applied in an interdisciplinary manner to female bodybuilding.

Moreover, the privileging of the visual creates ontologically negligible divisions between subject positions in relation to muscularity/thinness/fatness. The interdisciplinary mode of theoretical engagement advocated for in this paper is largely unexplored; however, in recent years some scholars have sought to deconstruct and challenge barriers between visually differing modes of embodiment. For example, Moola and Norman conducted a study which compared the embodied experiences of anorexic and 'obese' women. At the core of their paper, is the argument that 'it is the reliance on images of fat and thin bodies that is— at least in part— responsible for the continued examination of the two embodiments as though they are separate and distinct' (2017, 261). It is this method of critical engagement with visually differing styles of embodiment which will enhance scholarly understandings of subjectivity on a more affectual human level.

While our critique is premised on the notion that occularcentrism strips female subjects of agency and renders them disembodied, it must be noted that we by no means seek to decry the visual as an object or means of academic analysis in a broader sense. In postmodernity, the proliferate production, modification and communication of digitally mediated images demands an understanding of the role of visual culture in social life. However, we argue, approaching women's *embodiment* through an occularcentric lens leads to the objectification of bodies and reproduces a voyeuristic audience-spectacle dynamic within scholarship.

In this regard, rather than asking whether a visually transgressive mode of embodiment is resistant or compliant, empowered or disempowered, more truth is revealed regarding subjectivity and agency when a different line of questioning is pursued. For example, what mediatory concepts might help us understand the relationality or co-constitution of representation and experience? How do individuals

strategise, give meaning to, or reinterpret their embodied circumstances? What metaphors do they draw on? These questions, we believe, aid in dismantling unproductive and ontologically redundant divisions which segregate and silo feminist writing on embodiment. In addition, they facilitate a line of critical inquiry which seeks to connect modes of corporeality based upon experience and subjective interaction with the social, cultural and environmental landscapes in which people live. In this regard, we unreservedly support Kyrölä and Harjunen's proposition that within feminist research on corporeality 'more comparative or multi-sited studies are needed' (2017, 102) which embrace affectual understandings of bodies and traverse across disciplinary lines.

Postfeminist approaches too offer vital frameworks for approaching these questions and our reflections here align well with the work of postfeminist scholars. By shifting the focus to the entanglement of bodies, technologies, self-representation and practice, postfeministism offers a more refined understandings of subjectivity and discourse which do not rely upon, or reproduce, binary distinctions between agency and culture. Moreover, mobilising Foucauldian frameworks that focus more on the care of the self and less on the anatomo-political production of subjects, could be another fruitful line of enquiry (Kruks, 2001).

It must be noted that, from a public health perspective, the emergence of 'critical weight studies' does hold exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary projects which examine differing forms of embodiment alongside one another. Though a fledgling research area, critical weight studies is premised on the idea that a weight-centred paradigm may 'divert attention away from addressing more complex issues of power, equality and relationalities of the body which come to shape/restrict opportunity to engage with particular health practices' (Monaghan et al. 2017, 504). Principally this

literature seeks to challenge weight stigma, the 'obesity epidemic' rhetoric, the mobilisation of disease metaphors, and the culture of shame surrounding body size and weight (Monaghan et al. 2017). In this respect, we argue that the program of work advocated for by this paper has much to contribute to this emerging research, with regards to a theoretically grounded understanding body ethics on the individual level.

It is our intention that this theoretical article acts as a position piece that can be used to inform future empirical research in the field of body studies. In particular, we advocate for a more affectual approach to research into female bodybuilding, taking into account feminine subjectivity and the strategic navigation of discourse. It is suggested that a postfeminist framework could be useful in accounting for this nuanced interplay between resistance and compliance.

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