

# **Queer and Uncanny: An Ethnographic Critique of Female *Natural* Bodybuilding**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents an ethnographic critique of the corporeal experiences of women as self-proclaimed *natural* bodybuilders. Drawing on detailed ethnographic work and interviews with ten female *naturals*, a bricolage of multiply-gendered identities and affiliations is produced. The analysis questions how in working to a '*natural* ethic', while simultaneously desiring a 'deviant aesthetic', the female bodybuilder is paradoxically repressed by a 'natural gendered order'. The narrative draws reflexively on psychoanalytic theory and transgendered perspectives, to examine the cultural concept: *natural* as a 'queer' and 'uncanny' paradox in which gender and identity are made and simultaneously dislocated.

**Key words:** ethnography, female bodybuilding, Lacan, Butler, gender, identity.

## Introduction

The concept of competitive female bodybuilding is a relatively under explored area of qualitative inquiry both in the UK and elsewhere. Moreover, to date, no one has systematically documented the corporeal experiences of women as self-proclaimed *natural* bodybuilders, either from the perspective of their own multiply-gendered identities and affiliations or through the lens of their embodied experience of *natural* bodybuilding competition captured in situ. The desire to understand the nature of this apparent lacuna, and the associated paradoxes of gender, identity and truth, provides the theoretical and empirical focus of this ethnographic study. Throughout, the concept of the sport is 'queered' and its discursive practice interrogated as a doubly 'uncanny paradox' of the familiar and strange. A sub-culture that appears not only conceptually contradictory at the level of cultural text, through the uncanny juxtaposition of the terms: *natural* and *bodybuilding*, but also in a second significant sense, through the dominant corporeal and conventionally conceived female social imaginary.

Drawing on detailed ethnographic work, the narrative employs a bricolage approach, combining elements of female embodiment and corporeal reality with deep personal knowledge and experience of the sport. Thus, while it may seem curious to some standpoint feminists that, as a man, I should have the effrontery, if not legitimate authority to write about the embodied experiences of women with whom I cannot truly empathise, come to know or share an ontological platform to analyse the theme of female embodiment, hitherto no one has written about *natural* bodybuilders, let alone female *naturals*, and certainly not from the perspective of fellow *natural* competitor and champion, albeit now retired. Thus, I am attempting here something quite unique, to represent multiply entangled issues of identity, gender and truth at the nexus of a complex sub-culture: *natural* bodybuilding, through a reflexive narrative in which I am positioned simultaneously as 'outsider' and 'insider' within a liminal space that is itself queer, uncanny and resistant to ontological fixities.

In addressing the hitherto un-researched question: what are the cultural characteristics and practices of female *natural* bodybuilders, the analysis encourages consideration of how in working to a 'natural ethic', while desiring a 'deviant aesthetic' (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995), the female bodybuilder remains paradoxically repressed by a 'natural gendered order', in which the term *natural* expresses a double logic of normative and meta-ethical meaning and prohibition. The narrative draws reflexively on psychoanalytic theory (Lacan, 1977), transgendered and transfeminist perspectives (Enke, 2012; Sullivan, 2003; Butler, 1990), in order to reveal hybridity, where gender and identity are made and simultaneously dislocated. Nowhere is this more salient than within the paradoxical frame of *natural* competition, where notions of 'truth' and the 'real' are radically unsettled, 'queered' and further inescapably deferred.

### **Female *natural* bodybuilding: the concept and ethics**

*Natural* bodybuilding, as distinct from its more mainstream counterpart, is a minority niche sport and sub-culture, whose quest is to build the body free of performance enhancing drugs. Contemporary research around female bodybuilding is relatively limited, but has, over time, emerged in relation to a range of overlapping themes, including: the connection between muscle, sex and sexuality (Chare, 2012; Aoki, 1996); contradictory idealisms in female bodybuilding (Ian, 2001; Lowe, 1998; St. Martin and Gavey, 1996); the social construction of gender (Grogan, 2004; Johansson, 1996; Obel, 1996); and the experiential dimensions by which the female self and body become meaningful ethnographically (Bunsell, 2013; Bolin, 2012). However, despite this range candid examples of research and contemporary scholarship addressing the theme of performance enhancing drugs, and their increasing prevalence within the female aspect of the sport, are still relatively rare (see Lowe, 1998; Grogan et al., 2006; Bunsell, 2013, as notable exceptions), and hitherto none have spotlighted the pharmacological issue and its implied suspension at the nexus of *natural* bodybuilding.

Women's use and abuse of androgenic anabolic steroids, exogenous testosterone and human growth hormone deployed to build the body to a level of perceived excess, creates the anatomy of the body's 'inside worn on the outside' (Ian, 1995, p.82): hard, striated vascular muscle taut beneath translucent skin. This is where the deceptive lure and enigma of the hyper-real and hyper-muscular conspire to produce the trauma of the abject within the female *natural* subject. The very thing that is at once marginalised and excluded but within whose enigmatic quality lays the nature of an undisclosed embrace: 'I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself' (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). For the female *natural* bodybuilder, the abject is the locus of identity poised at the juncture of a dubious culture of pharmacology and bodybuilding competition:

'Body building is perhaps unique as a sport in that most competitors in mainstream amateur body building competitions take steroid drugs in the lead up to competition ... anabolic steroids are so much a part of body building culture, that "natural body building" competitions have been set up specifically for those body builders who choose not to take steroid drugs ...' (Grogan et al., 2006, p.846).

From a Derridean (1989) perspective, however, the attempt here to displace the seemingly 'vulgar' (i.e. the pharmacologically enhanced), in order to separate 'the pure from the impure' (Young, 1986, p.3), can be interpreted as mere 'theatricalization'. The idea of a naturally inspired culture thus inexorably slips the term: "natural body building" into inverted commas creating an illusion. Discursively, the mimicry of the 'figment' - *natural* bodybuilding, produces a simulacrum of a naturalised corporeality, a copy without an original, whose logic of identity and community is predicated on a 'paradise lost' (Bauman, 2000). The potential for the associated, yet unintended consequence of re-inscribing drug use beneath a veil of secrecy, thus creates the impression that in awakening 'ghosts: [*naturals*] must believe in them to expend so much energy trying to get rid of them' (Derrida, 1994, p.137).

The pervasive use of anabolic steroids in female bodybuilding has produced a 'dark side' and 'double deviance' (Bunsell, 2013, p.86) in which the consumption of pharmaceuticals challenges not only 'cultural representations' of women and men but further elicits 'actual *physical* transformations' (p.87). This has served to produce a conspiracy of silence around female *naturals* who while presenting as one thing - (the 'pure' counterpoint to the pharmacologically enhanced 'Other'), are apt to practise another (assisted bodybuilding masquerading as *natural* bodybuilding). In such circumstances, the presence of 'deviance' occasions a third dimension: the ethical, in which the veil of secrecy intensifies, becoming obfuscated by the ethics of *natural* bodybuilding, whose moral signification defers to the essentialised category: *natural*. The 'imposed essentialised immanence' (Ian, 2001, p.71) of the female form coupled with the presumed interior essence of the concept: *natural* are, in theory, assumed sufficient to ensure the consumption of pharmaceuticals is strictly prohibited. In practice, however, for many years I paid witness to a marked duplicity and dubious culture of performativity in *natural* bodybuilding: of *naturals* claiming purity, on the one hand, while furtively practising 'deviance', on the other. The point is that transgressions are rarely, if ever spoken about explicitly, but instead shared through a surreptitious culture of nods and winks, whispers and coded silences ( [REDACTED] 2014). This argument has further relevance in light of many gaps in the ethical frameworks governing the sport.

In the UK today, there are currently three organisations promoting natural bodybuilding: Natural Physique Association (NPA); British Natural Bodybuilding Federation (BNBF); United Kingdom Drug-Free Bodybuilding Association (UKDFBA). The NPA is the only organisation to promote the concept: 'natural for life', where competitors are subject to a blanket prohibition of performance enhancing drugs. However, while the organisation employs a professional polygraph and World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) regulated urinalysis, it does so only on a selective and arguably ad hoc basis, in which *some* but not all athletes are tested in *some* but not all competitions. Therefore, whether an athlete can be counted *natural* or not rests on the assumed, yet quite unsubstantiated premiss of an individual's personal integrity. Athletes competing with the BNBF and/or UKDFBA are required only to be seven

years drug-free, subject to a polygraph and urinalysis. The BNBF presents by far the most comprehensive testing protocol, testing all class-winners across all qualifying competitions through urinalysis, and by ensuring that all finalists are polygraphed prior to contesting the British finals.

However, the authenticity of the polygraph is somewhat questionable, since the process lasts only between ten and fifteen minutes for each individual, compared with reports of other certified tests lasting anywhere between ninety minutes and two hours duration

(<http://www.europeanpolygraph.org/faqs.htm>). The UKDFBA institutes a mix of authentic polygraphing and selected urinalysis. Nevertheless, in practice the concept: *natural* has become synonymous with the equivocal term 'drug-free', where the latter, at best, can mean no more than 'clean on the day' or, indeed, considerably less, in cases where limited resources prevent blanket testing<sup>1</sup>. In any event, the polygraph test is far from wholly reliable, as evidenced by reports, in numerous courts of law, of its inadmissibility (Ben-Shakhar et al, 2002). The corollary is the imposition of a normative construct of reality: the ideal of the universally 'good and ethical' in which *natural* bodybuilding institutes a 'public regulation of fantasy' (Butler, 1990, p.185). This creates much idle speculation about who is 'good, clean and proper' in relation to the pharmacologically enhanced 'Other' and hence provides the opportunity to examine the associated paradoxes of identity, gender and 'truth'.

### **The twin paradoxes of female *natural* bodybuilding**

In Lacanian (1977) terms, the source of ambivalence inherent in the ethics of the sport produces the theme of the double, a 'queer' and uncanny paradox of the familiar and strange. *Natural* bodybuilding, as distinct from the pharmacologically enhanced 'Other', presents a clean counterpoint to chemically-assisted sport. Yet the absence of a universal testing protocol produces the possibility of deviance and unopposed transgression. This potential is further supplemented by the juxtaposition of the terms *natural* and *bodybuilding*, mirroring a putative doubling of the normal and hyper-real. The imposed immanence of the *natural* female body is simultaneously seduced by the image of the hyper-real, a desire to become a hyperbolic representation of it-self. That which is *natural* so-called is thus made

irreducibly contingent on the hidden object of a hyper-muscular self, a realm of excess without dissonance (██████, 2014). This is the first paradox at the conjunction of the ethical and hyper-real, and poses the following question: to what extent can the embodied *natural* subject become the object of her repressed desire? That is, where desire represents a fixation on the Imaginary of the narcissistic self, through an accumulation of the internalised images of the ideal ego. A forgery deriving from Lacan's mirror stage (Lacan, 1977), this is the image of the self, reflected back which produces a mental permanence yet also, in being just an image, further arouses psychological distortion that simultaneously reflects the subject's *méconnaissance* (██████, 2014). This misrecognition, the product of an accumulation of one's self-satisfaction, poised at the locus of the Imaginary, produces dissonance between the subject's desire (*jouissance* expected [Lacan, 1982]), and her inevitable disappointment (*jouissance* obtained), through the Law of the Symbolic imposed upon the self. This is the cultural order of the ethical: the will to be morally scrupulous, 'good, clean and proper', the person 'she is supposed to be', according to the spoken ethic of the sub-culture: *natural* bodybuilding. The surplus of the 'Real', the enigma of feminine hyper-muscularity, is a residue that resists symbolization. Opposed to the Imaginary and outwith the Symbolic, it represents a symptom of desire to which the female can readily point but never truly embody; the everything that is *not* female *natural* bodybuilding, but within whose elusive concept its alterity is inescapably enclosed. This is the 'queer moment' (Sullivan, 2003, p.191), simultaneously 'disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic', not merely a label but a practice to be dis-covered for its 'queer content' (p.193), a lived contradiction resisting symbolization: a paradoxical hyper-real reality.

The second paradox at the nexus of the hyper-muscular and hyper-real and social imaginary of dominant female gender norms has been well documented in the sociology of sport and feminist cultural studies literature: that women who desire the hyper-muscular and hyper-real are perceived *de facto* body, gender and muscle dysmorphic (Ian, 2001, pp.82-83). Thus, in failing to conform to a conventionally conceived *natural* aesthetic aligning with the Symbolic Order, female bodybuilders may



be stigmatised 'gender outlaws' (Shilling and Bunsell, 2009, p.141). This is where the 'antilogy of the image of the woman and the image of a man' (Aoki, 1996, p.61) invokes the pathological 'Other', a 'freak' of *nature* in a process transgressing the boundary of the normative feminine ideal (St Martin and Gavey, 1996; Bordo, 1993). The corollary questions how this impasse likely impacts the female *natural* bodybuilder on which the essentialised categories *female* and *natural* are conceptually premised. In theory this produces a surface appearance of harmony and mutuality through the elision of *natural* and *feminine* ideals. Yet in practice a conflict ensues, raising the ontological question: how should the female *natural* avoid transgressing the boundary of physiological normativity in order to preserve the gender order of femininity, while simultaneously adhering to the ethical within a desire and appeal to the Imaginary and Real of the hyper-muscular?

### **The research and methodology**

Adopting a post-structural approach, the research moves on the impulse to unsettle and displace the logic of identity through the invocation of multiplicity and *différance*. 'Truth' is renounced in preference for a state of complexity and heterogeneity, and the concept: 'queer' is deployed as a deconstructive strategy to denaturalise *natural* bodybuilding and its presumed normative identities. A messy, uncertain reflexivity ensues challenging the reader to question the very concept of a unified-self (Pillow, 2010). Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) concept of the 'indivisible atom' (for which we can read 'individual') is especially pertinent. Since the female *natural* cannot exist apart from the culture of which she is part, the idea of singularity refers to an 'impossible interiority' (p.4) and logical impossibility. She is rather constituted through her intrinsic relation with others: 'there is no singular being without another singular being' (p.28). In *being-with*, and hence ontologically conjoined through the *natural* community, her identity has no 'absolute immanence' (p.4), but exists only in respect of its compearance: the co-appearance that constitutes the being-in-common of the *natural* community<sup>ii</sup>. This assists our understanding of the relational pressures that bear upon *naturals* to engage in the use of performance enhancing drugs, where common-sense understandings of the *natural* community, as essentially prior

and 'ascriptive' (Phelan, 1994) are radically unsettled, with corollary implications for the logic of community and Symbolic Order.

A bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) approach is used to assemble a narrative of hybrid subjectivities and self-Other interactions: international *natural* bodybuilding champion, judge and head judge, report writer, spectator, personal trainer, routine choreographer, and member of some twenty-plus 'hard core' and corporate gyms over the last thirty years. The narrative draws reflexively on ethnographic work and observations of the 'natural scene' spanning a period of fifteen years, as well as internet 'forum talk', social networking 'chat', and personal anecdotes and conversations with competitors, officials and fans of the sport, documented over a period of more than a decade. This bricolage is supplemented with a series of in-depth interviews with ten, self-proclaimed female *natural* body builders and trained figure competitors<sup>iii</sup>, competing within the BNBFB, NPA, UKDFBA and World Natural Bodybuilding Federation (WNBF). Within the ethnographic frame, but utilising elements of a life history approach (Bale et al., 2004), the interviews probed at important life-events and personal biographies, to discern the phenomenological detail of the sub-culture. This mélange of perspectives, in turn, produced a series of overlapping concepts and themes: identity and body-image; ethical conflict; competitive motivations; and corollary impact (on notions of 'self' and family). Since it is beyond the scope of this article to address the full range of themes *in toto*, however, the narrative will limit its engagement to examining the imbrication of identity and body image in the ethical context of female *natural* bodybuilding.

### **Paradoxes: queering gender and identity**

*"Competitor number eighteen, training out of Better Bodies gym in 'Pecsville', please show your appreciation for twice former ANB (Association of Natural Bodybuilders) champion: Nicola Jones", boomed the portly emcee, his voice echoing back through the crackle of the oversized microphone. Pushing aside the heavy curtain, she emerged from the rear of the stage to a*

*discordant mixture of screams, whoops and rapturous applause. Then, gliding balletically, she 'pranced' on the balls of her feet in a manner reminiscent of a gala pony, groomed, preened and choreographically polished. Taking her mark in full spotlight centre stage, she posed statuesque waiting for the cue of her music. A momentary twinkle glistened behind mascara-laden false lashes. A fake smile fixed the gaze of the anticipating audience. The subliminal grace of movement, light and floating, belied the contrived stasis of hard, striated flesh. A paradoxical kind of gender-posturing: feminine-masculinity or masculine-femininity? Rhizome-like vascularity featured prominently across shrink-wrapped skin. Pumped up, and full fit-to-burst. Every sinew of every muscle flexed to its maximum. The effort and strain dissipating, only momentarily before again resetting, perceptibly pulling in her abdomen, and gently exhaling while desiring to appear relaxed at all costs. From head to toe, she was comprehensively 'beautified'. Dark mahogany Dream Tan complemented with speckles of stage 'glitter' added sparkle to the effect of her finely honed, hyper-muscular 'show' body. Heavy make-up, hair extensions, and brightly polished false nails provided all the necessary accoutrements, along with breast-implants squeezed into the briefest sequin-sown bikini. More and less than a woman, for sure she presented an exaggerated ideal of femininity jostling with an overt and vaguely masculine corporeality?<sup>iv</sup>*

Curious of the ambiguity in *appearance of her corporeal reality*, I asked Nicola whether she thought the act of 'glamming-up' is overdone, and whether women who appear on stage wearing sequins, body sheen, false nails and elaborate hair extensions are actually debasing to a form of hyper-femininity to compensate the alterity of a perceived masculinity:

Yes, and some girls take it too far and you just think if you'd have toned it down a bit, you'd have probably looked a lot better (laughs) ... you know like the big scrunches in the hair ... big wig extensions, big fake eye-lashes. Yeah they do try to push the femininity bit which makes them look a little bit overdone ... I would normally just put on a bit of jewellery. Obviously the

usual: the fake tan, the glittery eye shadow, pale lip-stick, wash my hair for a change (laughs) and that's about it really. Just glam myself up as though I were going for a night out on the town. Rather than as if I was going to Vegas or something. Adding a little bit extra than what I already have. (Nicola, toned figure Miss Universe competitor)

The notion of 'adding a little bit extra' is intriguing for it aligns with Lacan's (1977) concept: '*l'objet petit a*'. This is the surplus of the unobtainable *cause* of desire, a leftover or remainder of the Symbolic in the Real, perceived from within the athlete's 'gaze', where 'gaze' refers not to the physical act of 'looking' at an object, but rather the disassociation of the self from the self (Ian, 2001). It is a moment of impossibility in which the regard of a non-observable self is imagined as desire from the viewpoint of 'Other', in this case the regard of male judges around which the Symbolic Order is organised. In Žižek's (1996, n.p.) terms, this appears as: 'a hole at the center of the Symbolic Order, the mere appearance of some secret to be explained', which serves as a meaningful exemplar of what Lowe (1998, p.129) has described the 'feminine apologetic'. In Aoki's (1996) terms, it is an inverted male hyperbole: a man-made femininity, reflecting the need for bodybuilders to reinforce normative femininity drawing on overt cultural elements, while, at the same time, openly participating in a 'traditionally unfeminine sport':

You know you get the fancy bikini and you get thongs ... I still would love to see the guys in thongs (laughs). You know, make-up and hair ... you do what you'd do on a very big night out, except you're on stage, under stage lights, so people put a whole lot more make-up on than you would a work do ... There are girls that come in with like an entourage, like they're Mariah Carey (laughs). I was changing with a girl once and there was no room because she had her hairdresser, her make-up artist, her ... but I do make an effort, I am going to get a pedicure ... I practise my walking as well, and you do try to walk [on stage] in a more feminine way, with more confidence. I would certainly not walk like that anywhere else in a pair of heels. I wouldn't pay attention and walk consciously like that. (Helen, world trained figure champion)

Despite the ambivalence, and obvious contradiction of appearing to 'mock' others for what seems eminently self-justifiable: the symptom at the *cause* of desire and very quality that drives passion towards an aesthetic forever beyond her reach, is a remnant resisting symbolization. This is exacerbated by what counts as ontologically *natural*, where such women are constrained by normative physiological boundaries, for female *naturals* are supposed not to look like men who look like women. This tension is at the heart of the relationship between the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders: the relation between the *appearance* and *signification* of gender (Butler, 1990). In the event, *natural* women are unable, in most cases, to achieve a state of hyper-muscularity in the absence of anabolic steroids and/or exogenous testosterone. While endogenous levels of male hormone *will* allow for limited changes in muscularity and female physical appearance, even among women who are more favourably disposed to muscular hypertrophy still they are unlikely to achieve muscularity on a par with those under the influence of performance enhancing drugs. As one athlete remarked:

I think what you're doing is only enhancing your own femininity. Without taking any drugs you're not building your body beyond what it's capable of doing. ... Some girls might have a better hormonal system that allows them to develop better muscles. Someone like Mandy, for example, who's been training for years and years and years, but she's still feminine. You see her and she's still got the curves. (Tracey, WNBF professional)

The implied physiological limitations noted here, present an important corollary: that in actuality there should be little, if any discernible difference between the physical appearance of female *natural* bodybuilders and trained *natural* figure competitors, by virtue of the intervention of the Symbolic and essentialised category *natural*. As one remarked, on a popular internet UK-muscle forum:

My goal is to do a natural fed competition ... there seems to be so many people with different opinions on things; I wanted to do figure but some people have told me to do physique. I like

the idea of figure and I have seen some figure athletes with still quite muscular physiques so quite confused on [the] difference? (DCBear9, female member)

The occasion to confuse and conflate categories within the *natural* scene, is perhaps less apparent in the ranks of non-tested female bodybuilding/trained figure competition, where the latter is reported as becoming the increasing preference of women who do *not* wish to engage in the illicit practice of bodybuilding pharmacology but rather appeal to the 'somatic contours' of a more 'culturally compliant' (Bolan, 2012, p.29) and hegemonic femininity (Lowe, 1998; Grogan et al., 2004; Bunsell, 2013). At least this is according to the rhetoric and politics of the sport. However, personal anecdotes and experiences suggest otherwise: that many who opt for trained figure categories do so in order to *limit* and reduce their use of performance enhancing drugs rather than *eliminate* them completely.

Somewhat paradoxically, the extant criteria for bodybuilders competing within the Natural Physique Association, are the same both for women *and* men, and so concur with Aoki's (1996, p.68) point that 'female bodybuilding aesthetics are largely derivative of the male bodybuilding aesthetics that both preceded them and co-exist, often uneasily, alongside them':

Round one ... judges are looking for the best combination of shape, symmetry, balance and proportion, with aesthetic qualities ... Round two ... judges are looking for the best combination of mass, separation, muscularity, shape, symmetry, and condition. (NPA, 2014)

Here, the appeal to a surplus is again striking, where the impossibility of first 'looking for' and then realizing the 'best combination' invokes an unstable aesthetic that resists symbolization. The insoluble nature of the 'figment', the elusive *appearance* of mass, separation, muscularity, shape, symmetry and condition, is further pronounced by the partial elision and conflation of the *signification* of bodybuilding and trained figure categories within the *natural* context:

The Trained Figure competitor should show a toned, balanced, shapely body, with aesthetic qualities, exhibiting signs of training with weights whilst always retaining her femininity. The muscle groups should be round and firm in appearance, and the body should have a small amount of body fat, neither being too muscular or too lean. The competitor should be free of deep muscular separation and striations. The skin should be of a smooth and healthy appearance. Poses displaying muscularity are not allowed. Although females are free to compete in whatever class they wish, competitors displaying excessive muscularity and condition will be marked down in the Figure class (NPA, 2014).

The resonance between both sets of criteria – particularly round one of *natural* physique and female trained figure, is perceptible. However, the application of Derrida's (1982) concept *différance*, gesturing towards particular oppositions in the production of meaning through the interplay of categories and differences *within* criteria, is especially pertinent. While such terms defer absolute meaning and determination they allow inference from their reciprocal relation with other signified terms. In this respect, *naturally* trained figure competitors, as depicted above, are expected to exhibit 'signs of weight training', where such 'signs' point to the event of weight training but also indicate the probable presence of something else: the event of *limited* weight training, or, indeed, the *absence* of excess, where such excess meets the injunction that the female trained figure competitor should be mindful of 'always retaining her femininity'. The body should 'have a small amount of body fat', yet not be 'too muscular or too lean', lest the female 'display excessive muscularity'. This prohibition is in contrast with the earlier affirmation of 'muscularity' exhibited within the criteria of the NPA's female physique category. In this sense, the term 'excess' positioned in relation to 'muscularity' produces a play of *différance* and deferral, and the indefinite suspension of agreement on the signified: 'excessive muscularity'. Thus, the key question for judges and female competitors alike is how to interpret when muscularity becomes excessive in order to untangle the essentialised categories of 'physique' and 'trained figure'? More

significantly, when does the presence of muscularity produce an absence of femininity, such that any putative lack disturbs the normative conception of the female gender order?

The ambiguity and deferral of excess may be troubling for some *natural* competitors, who while being inclined to displace the pejorative ascription: 'gender freak' in order to comply with the heteronormative logic of *natural* competition, will nevertheless assert their opposition to such norms of traditional femininity away from the stage. When Tracey was asked whether femininity was important to her, for example, she responded somewhat emphatically:

No! (laughs) I'm probably the least feminine female around. I hate the glitz and the glamour of figure. The only time I ever wear make-up is when I'm on stage myself. And that's only because I need to put tan on my face. And I think a tan without a bit of lippy and mascara looks a bit daft. I never wear dresses, I never wear skirts. I'm always out in combat trousers and boots, so, I'm probably the least feminine person ever. (Tracey, WNBF Professional)

Yet while Tracey appears fully aware of the apparent incommensurability of her identity and corporeal reality as related to the cultural expectations of the dominant female gender order, in practice she proceeds *as if* blissfully unaware, where the conjunction *as if* becomes crucial in conjuring gender performativity (Butler, 1990):

I do the nails again because usually they stain with the tan ... and bright pink [hair] is my signature colour. Usually because it ties in with the strings on the bikini. (Tracey, WNBF Professional)

As Butler (1990, p.xv) argues, 'the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility'. This is exemplified below, where Nicola elaborates her understanding of the duplicity at work within the competitive frame of female toned (for which we can read 'trained') figure:



'Toned figure girls have to bend over, turn around and bend over. Show their backsides, it's like, well men don't have to do that, so why do the girls have to do it? You know, like thongs and stuff. Guys don't have to do it. So why do woman have to wear thongs? But yeah, there is a lot of pressure on women to look overly feminine and sexy ... One girl probably does it and gets first place. So it's like a knock on effect. She done it – bent-over backwards, you know, showed her bum to the judges, with the tiniest, tiniest little thong on, and she's got this big massive wig and fake eye lashes ... the judges love it then "ooo, look at her" (laughs)'v.

If one questions how the *'being-with'* gender is performed in this somewhat sexualised scenario, Butler (1990, p.59) suggests that 'to "be" the Phallus is to be the "signifier" of the desire of the Other and to *appear* as this signifier. In other words, it is to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire'. To the extent the Symbolic Order of female *natural* bodybuilding is organised around the paternal authority of the male gaze, the regulation and surface politics of the female body can be viewed either as an act of self-displacement or gender performativity.

Regarding the latter, the hyperbole and theatricality of female *naturals* 'doing' hyper-femininity can be related to the politics and pleasure of performing 'camp'. Playing on 'parody' and 'exaggeration', such performativity is often exhibited as an 'ironic or aesthetic strategy' (Sullivan, 2003, pp.193-194). This is to work through the lived contradiction of the dominant female gender order enframed by culturally specific expectations, on the one hand and the appeal to a so-called 'deviant aesthetic': hyper-muscularity, on the other. Resisting the social hierarchy of binary gender norms (Enke, 2012, p.5), this produces a more agentic form of transgendered posturing, defying the 'notion of an original or primary gender identity' (Butler, 1990, p.187). Performing 'camp' can thus be regarded transgressive in the Bakhtinian (1941) sense of 'carnival'. By contriving an *appearance* that is simultaneously 'clown-like' and grotesque, a parody of excess, female *naturals* create the possibility of an inversion of power of the

Phallogocentric gaze, disturbing, denaturalising and challenging heteronormative conceptions of identity, while also displacing the seriousness of the theme of subordination with light-hearted frivolity:

I mean someone said once, when getting ready for a show, she was talking about getting the big finger nails on, the make-up, the fake eye lashes and things like that, anyway she said it takes bodybuilding to *bring out the woman in me* (laughs) ... all the girls get the boob jobs ... and they put you in a pair of heels and you wear high heel shoes, which is ridiculous itself really. (Helen, world trained-figure champion, emphasis added)

### **Queer and uncanny: denaturalising female *natural* bodybuilding**

Competitive *natural* bodybuilding is an arguably 'queer' concept, both in appearance and its illusion, for the female body 'is not a "being" but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated' (Butler, 1990, p.189). Indeed, the appearance of a pure, interior essence capable of representing the 'good, clean and proper' is illusory even when performance enhancing drugs are signified present in their absence. To build the body to a level of perceived excess deliberately, beyond its *natural* state, is a thoroughly denaturalising process on a number of different planes and identity-based ontological axioms: kinaesthetic/phenomenological, physiological and transgendered.

Kinaesthetically and phenomenologically, for example, there is profound recognition of the requirement that female bodybuilders devote significant energy and commitment to the ritual of weight training in pursuit of achieving the much coveted, but often elusive hyper-muscular body:

'is it natural for any human being to go and spend a day, two hours a day every day, several days a week lifting heavy weights and getting stronger and increasing the load every time and doing it over and over and over again, and taking the diet and nutrition and supplements, it's not really natural is it? ... Nothing really approximates it. It's not a natural activity, is it? (Helen, world trained figure champion)

'At the end of the day, I suppose, any form of using weights or using any form of exercise to *deliberately* build the body does go against that [being natural] ... to use weight to build the body is a bit of a paradox in order to enhance ourselves' (Dianne, retired multiple world natural bodybuilding champion, original emphasis).

The perception and subjective experience of hard training as 'not a natural activity' is further compounded as women who invest their embodied selves in preparing for *natural* competition often pay a huge physiological price. As Helen continued:

'I think they [naturals] look good, but they certainly don't look natural, you know, particularly when you're in the competition state, obviously your reproductive cycle stops and whatever, there's nothing natural about it, for a woman, you know ... it's just not what a woman looks like'.

Thus, aside from the aesthetic challenge of managing the interplay between the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders of normative femininity, and the insoluble tension between the *appearance* and *signification* of gender (Butler, 1990), the kinaesthetic demands of the sport may themselves further denaturalise that which is posited *natural*, by penetrating, much more deeply, the stability of the physiological, especially with respect to the issue of amenorrhea (cessation of the menstrual cycle; see also Bunsell, 2013, p.93). More than this, however, the project of female *natural* bodybuilding also highlights a number of important tensions and complexities at the site of gender-deviance and transgendered identification. This is true, in particular, of the invocation and construction of perceived butch-lesbian identities within the embodied experience of heterosexual female bodybuilders, read as transgendered policing:

'I've had people say it's not normal for a woman, it's not natural for a woman ... I mean I haven't been out and out accused of being a lesbian or anything like that, which I know some have ... it's like, oh, you know you're behaving like a man ... it's like ironic ... being accused of being a lesbian because they're involved in something that's supposedly 'mannish', so why isn't

the person asking them if they're a 'poof'? (laughs) ... you're accusing this woman of being a man and yet you're also accusing her of being a lesbian, that doesn't work to me and who are *they* to say that anyway?' (Emily, British *natural* bodybuilding champion)

In this respect, there *appears* nothing essentially pure about *natural* bodybuilding or its pre-inscriptive state around which the politics and signification of the sport is discursively organised. While positing the image of a naturalised identity, as that which logically proceeds community through the conjoined concept: *natural*-female, the precondition of a normative interior essence is rendered absent. The argument thus shifts away from an 'ascriptive model' of a *natural* community (Phelan, 1994, p.78) as ontologically prior, to the notion of a 'nonascriptive', created community, which attempts to naturalise a commitment to particular ethical and political ideals. The imposed immanence of female *natural* bodybuilding then becomes a representation of the 'reality' it points towards but can never reach: a naturalised identity infinitely deferred to ambiguity and ontological-insecurity. Characteristically, this is borne out in the tensions and complexities of practice, for bodybuilding is not sublateable to an imposed immanence of an ethical framework, but rather emerges through a naturalised compearance, the being-in-common of shared practice (Nancy, 1991). For example, in questioning the prevalence of a culture of drug-use in *natural* bodybuilding, Jane responded affirmatively:

Yes, definitely (laughs). And as I said previously it would be pretty naïve to think that in bodybuilding there's no drugs involved ... And I know some quite high profile winners in natural bodybuilding who take them. But because they're so high profile they're not gonna be outed because they promote the federation, so why smear mud on the federation by outing someone who's on drugs? (laughs) ... Of course, I've considered using drugs, I just don't think it's appealing, unless, especially at my age now [42], unless I stopped competing then I would. ... You find that, even the figure girls are, even the bikini girls are taking steroids, but do they look like men? No. You know, there's a lot of stigma with it. And I think natural bodybuilders tend to

be the ones that point the finger a lot at steroids, because they don't understand it, don't like it, they think it's cheating, so ...

In Foucauldian (1980) terms, drawing on Nancy (1991), that which counts as true is the possibility of fabrication and deceit, the acquiescence of a micro-politics of 'truth', ontologically deferred. This is where 'finitude compares' and exposes itself as the essence (Nancy, 1991, p.29) and hence, somewhat contradictorily, the symbolic *excess* of the *natural* community. Thus, it represents a form of discursive communication and practice that speaks into existence the co-dependency of a shared hyper-reality to which the concept *natural* defers relationally. For example, Jane suggests it would be 'naïve to think that in bodybuilding there's no drugs involved' and knows of some 'quite high profile winners ... who take them'. Yet 'because they're so high profile they're not gonna be outed because they promote the federation'; that is, paradoxically, a *natural* federation whose ethical remit purports to eradicate the use of illicit substances in order to preserve the very essence of the sport. Moreover, Jane also suggests that 'even the figure girls ... even the bikini girls are taking steroids' yet do not look like men. In suggesting that corporeal *appearances* can create an illusion that is apt to be misleading, the implied corollary intimates the consumption of bodybuilding pharmaceuticals does not *always* produce the perceived antilogy of a masculine woman, at least not in the presence of 'somatic contours' (Bolan, 2012) or where 'femininity' has become 'synonymous with sexuality' (Bunsell, 2013, p.47). In practice, it is thus possible to comply with notions of normative femininity, while transgressing the ethical code, yet simultaneously exploit gaps in the ethical frameworks so as to *appear* authentically *natural* on stage, before the paternal gaze of the Symbolic Order (Lacan, 1977).

In terms of *différance* (Derrida, 1982) and deferral, Jane's account is yet further intriguing, for it presents a number of interesting oppositions in the interplay of signs around the production in meaning of what counts as *natural*. A self-proclaimed *natural*, Jane denies ever having used drugs yet confesses openly to have considered it, presumably at an earlier point however, for she declares: 'I just don't think it's appealing ... especially at my age [42] now, unless I stopped competing then I would'. There are a

number of interesting slippages here, not least the uncanny framing of the blanket assertion: that pharmaceuticals are not appealing coupled with the curious contingency they might be if she stopped competing. In this context, entertaining the possibility of drug use can be seen to hinge on the ethical Law of the Symbolic, which *appears* to prohibit the consumption of illicit substances in the context of *natural* competition. All this seems perfectly logical except for two crucial incompatibilities: a curious empathy with pharmaceuticals which do *not* transform women into men but simply reinforces that 'there's a lot of stigma with it'; and, second, the implicit condescension and 'Othering' of *naturals* in the assertion: 'I think natural bodybuilders tend to be the ones that point the finger a lot at steroids, because they don't understand it, don't like it, they think it's cheating'. The latter is indeed a most striking and uncanny enunciation: that a self-proclaimed *natural* would implicitly 'Other' fellow *naturals* for finger pointing and outing cheats. Of course, if it were the case that Jane had *actually* transgressed the ethical code of *natural* bodybuilding, by using pharmaceuticals while *appearing* not to do so and thus masquerading as a *natural* bodybuilder, then this would at least help explain the signification of 'finger pointing' in the context of an ethical frame whose putative function is to mobilise a ubiquitous politics of scrutiny and surveillance.

## **Conclusion**

Methodologically and ethnographically, what sense can be made of the cultural concept of female *natural* bodybuilding, and what does all this mean for the interplay of signs relating to the formation of identity, gender and 'truth'? The discursive practice of the *natural* community, a fictive manifestation of an 'inoperative community' (Nancy, 1991, p.2) serves as a striking emblem of denial: 'an impotent resistance to the visible collapse of what it promised', where the 'visible' appears present in the embellishment of the corporeal and hyper-muscular female bodybuilder. Gaps in the ethical frameworks produce the possibility of risk through the *event* of a naturalised-compearance, creating the prospect of an *operative* deviance and corporeal excess. The regulative idea of *natural* authenticity thus soon unravels becoming dislocated at the conjunction of the pre-inscriptive with its hyperbolic opposite. The

nature of this uncanny juxtaposition creates the possibility of violation and unopposed transgression among female *naturals*. Simultaneously, it conjures a penetration of the Symbolic Order, breaking it down, changing its structure and thus transforming the very concept of what it means to *be natural*. Paradoxically, then, the putative *natural* is seduced by, and liberated from the cultural constraints of the Symbolic, now representing not the ethical Law of an assumed sovereignty and ontologically prior essence, but an altogether more dynamic and exuberant performativity, one whose '*appearance of substance*' (Butler, 1990, p.192, original emphasis) is but a mere fabrication. On this interpretation, the practice of female *natural* bodybuilding is arguably stripped of its ethical content and equated with a purely technical standard: the requirement to pass a urinalysis and/or polygraph test. The surface signification of the performative *natural* thus enables a negotiation of the constraints of power and physiological normativity in pursuit of the hyperbolic and hyper-muscular. Ultimately, what counts is how female *natural* bodybuilders *appear* and what they *signify* at the nexus of the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders. Accordingly, if *naturals* are able to succeed in breaching the ethical code they might similarly achieve corporeal *excess*, and simultaneously further disingenuously claim the ethical regard of purity and *naturalness*. Yet the ability to present discursively as one thing i.e. *natural*, whilst practising another, unopposed transgression, may itself be delimited by the normative convention of the 'natural gender order'. As Aoki (1996, p.66) notes:

'If no woman can become so huge and muscular by any "natural" means, an external limit to the building of the bodybuilding body is secured beyond which dwell only the druggedly perverse. Making the female bodybuilder a monster in this way safeguards the mainstream Symbolic/Imaginary formation that is thereby relieved of any pressure to accommodate her as a "real" woman'.

Within the context of *natural* bodybuilding, however, the appeal to any such safeguard is paradoxically repressed. The prohibition of pharmaceuticals imposes a physiological limit on the *natural* body, preventing, in turn, the inscription of the Janus-faced 'monster' lable and problematizing the default

Symbolic/Imaginary formation. This destabilisation cuts-across identity and further forces consideration of the female *natural* subject as an archetypally *real* woman. Somewhat paradoxically, then, it can be argued that it is neither exclusively a transgression of the 'physiological', nor the moral force of the 'ethical' which impose the greatest subversive threat to the Imaginary and Real of female hyper-muscularity, for both are susceptible to ontological displacement and performativity. Rather, it is the interminable tension of *appearance* and its *illusion* and *signification* in relation to the female bodybuilding subject. Thus, the imperative and stylised configuration of the sub-culture, situated at the nexus of the female gender order, produces a dictation of morals in which the bodybuilding subject should *appear* ultimately plausible, lest the *appearance* of the substance of that which is signified: *natural* come unbound from the spectacularized gaze of the corporeal. In actuality, what counts as plausible, occasions a different sort of hyperbole: that of the hyper-feminization of muscular women, in which the female gender order is radically displaced by enhanced muscularity compearing with a dubious ostentatious femininity. Paradoxically, this 'fusion' itself can be seen as a fiction and 'falsely naturalised' unity (Butler, 1990, p.187), whose dislocation, through the authority of the Symbolic Order and/or 'queer' encoding of a deconstructive parody, produces subversion of the conjoined binaries: 'truth'/falsity; masculine/feminine; ethical/unethical. Ultimately, then, the outcome is a contradiction in terms: 'queer'-*natural*, as this compears with the idealization of hegemonic femininity, ethics and physiological normativity. It is the very nature of this uncanny contingency and 'imitative structure' (*ibid.*), through which 'truth' is infinitely deferred, that the concept: *real* woman is inescapably consigned to the Real.

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<sup>i</sup> 'As the founder of the UKDFBA expressed via personal correspondence: "as an association we are realistic and honest about our testing programme and are clear that neither the polygraph and [sic] urinalysis methods of testing are a 100% conclusive way of proving drug free status; so even applying both of these methods to every competitor is not an absolute guarantee that a contest is "drug free" in accordance with the rules" (██████, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Reflexively, this point is hugely significant in explaining the possibility of my conjoined relationships with women, whom I come to understand in *being-with* the community and sub-culture.

<sup>iii</sup> The 'trained figure category' is supposed to represent a visibly 'softer' and altogether more 'feminine' corporeality in women, not as overtly muscular as the physique category but with evidence of 'somatic contours' and curves. In actuality, as



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personally observed, many genuinely *natural* female bodybuilders appear quite similar in tone, shape and muscularity as trained figure competitors and so the difference between the categories, in authentic *natural* competition, is often barely discernible.

<sup>iv</sup> This account represents narrative 'art' and artifice, a pastiche and reiteration of accumulated personal experiences, corresponding with actual observations, including one revisited here through interview.

<sup>v</sup> On many occasions, I have witnessed the 'ooing' and 'arriving' of women objectified on stage, where exposure to the gaze of male judges produces a posturing of crude titillation and debasement, or as one female *natural* bodybuilder put it: 'a milder form of stripping'. As a former judge, I often question whether I have contributed to this situation.

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