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Review Essay – Bodymakers - A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Bodybuilding

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Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Bodybuilding. By Leslie Heywood. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 192 pp., \$48.00 (cloth), \$18.00 (paper).

Women of Steel: Female Body Builders and the Struggle for Self-Definition. By Maria R. Lowe. New York: New York University Press, 1998, 182 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

Building Bodies. Edited by Pamela L. Moore. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997, 247 pp., \$48.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

The practice of bodybuilding entices far fewer feminist academics than does the analysis of it. These three books pump the question of the female bodybuilder for all they can including discussions of capitalism, gender, advertising, beauty, sport, and patriarchy. Popular and scholarly books about men's bodybuilding already have been written, most notably *Muscle* by Fussell (1991) and *Little Big Men* by Klein (1993). The three new books reviewed here show us how the practice of building muscle matters to women, either the women making their careers around bodybuilding or those who are interested spectators, cultural analysts, sociologists of sport, or feminists struggling for a better world.

Leslie Heywood, an English professor and bodybuilder, tells us what she thinks women's bodybuilding reveals about feminism in our culture. *Bodymakers* contains no systematic research and rests solely on Heywood's own experiences with bodybuilding, which she has found integral to her feminism and sense of empowerment. She admits that she does not know how bodybuilding affects other women, but she hopes that it enhances their lives and fuels political action. Interestingly, she does not find any downside in the practice of bodybuilding, even steroid use, despite her own previous interest in obsessive bodily regimes. (Her previous book, *Dedication to Hunger* [Heywood 1996], also autobiographical in part,

and was about anorexia.) Although Heywood briefly mentions Bordo's (1997) criticisms of contemporary consumer culture's rhetoric of bodily control and agency, she brushes these aside (rather than providing any data that would support a counterargument) with statements such as the following: "I have to believe that, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or no, any babe who sports a muscle symbolically strikes a blow against traditional ideas about male supremacy and such practices of male domination as domestic violence" (p. 191).

Bodymakers is most ambitious in terms of its engagement with feminist cultural criticism and its unconventional scope. Heywood comments on films, novels, magazine pictures, popular criticisms of feminism, the J. Crew catalog, the concept of power feminism, and why she likes rock star Tom Petty. Ultimately, however, only Heywood's own experiences of bodybuilding and impressions of its image in our culture are captured in *Bodymakers*, as it presents a seemingly random set of issues that not always are clearly linked to the issue of female bodybuilding. For example, Heywood asks, "What is the relationship among rock

stars, female bodybuilding, female athletes, and male identification?" (p. 173). More interesting are her discussions of bodybuilding photography (much of which employs the formal conventions of pornography photography), her comparison between the discourse of women's bodybuilding and that of men's bodybuilding, and her passionate confessions about why girls like her (born during the mid-1960s) wanted to be boys (with the implied freedom, opportunity, and body sovereignty).

Maria R. Lowe, a sociologist, does not tell us what she thinks about different feminist debates and, unlike Heywood, cites neither Slavoj Žižek, Georges Batailles, nor Michel Foucault. Rather, in *Women of Steel* (originally her dissertation), she reports research carefully collected at bodybuilding competitions and through interviews with competitors, judges, and journalists. Lowe offers a comprehensive picture of what really goes on in the women's bodybuilding universe. Ultimately, it is Lowe's book that tells us the most about women's bodybuilding including how her interviewees see steroid use and its regulation, the industry's constraints on bodybuilders' appearance, and the money that bodybuilders can hope to make in this industry. Lowe's book does not engage feminist theory or the sociology of the body literature but attends to some interesting tensions for women bodybuilders over femininity, beauty, and muscularity as the bodybuilders, judges, and institutions (e.g., magazines, contests, corporate heads) negotiate and/or regulate these.

Lowe's book is more ambitious than Heywood's in terms of the thorough research that grounds its analysis of the world of female bodybuilding as a competitive sport. Heywood is a builder, and Lowe is a researcher. So, whereas Heywood speculates about the way in which consumer capitalist culture directs the discourse of women's bodybuilding, it is Lowe who shows us exactly how it happens through an analysis of the organizational ties that form the world through which the competitive bodybuilder must travel. Lowe explains, for example, that brothers Ben and Joe Weider (the founders of professional (men's) bodybuilding in 1946 and the men who sponsored and managed Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1969) own *Muscle and Fitness*, *Flex*, *Shape*, and *Men's Fitness* magazines, which advertise their lines of nutrition and exercise products, videos, and books as well as cover the bodybuilders they sponsor/market (pp. 66-72). Another gatekeeper, Lowe explains, is Jim Manion, who is president of the National Physique Committee (NPC), vice president of the International Federation of Bodybuilders, often a judge at the major bodybuilding events, editor of the monthly magazine *NPC News*, and owner of a photography company specializing in fitness and bodybuilding photographs (p. 61). In this way, Lowe tells us far more than Heywood does about how

the industry of competitive bodybuilding shapes the preferences for muscularity and overall look of the female builder, the informal rules builders must follow, and the cultural images associated with female muscle. As Lowe states,

There is an amazing interlocking power structure that is unparalleled in any other sport. Along with economic power, the power elite in this sport are also likely to wield political and ideological power. Because of this arrangement, there are a handful of men who virtually dominate the sport and its future. (p. 73)

Neither Lowe nor Heywood addresses recent body theories, so readers looking for feminist sociology of the body might prefer the essays in *Building Bodies*, edited by journalist and teacher Pamela L. Moore. Moore chose to focus on bodybuilding because she claims-falsely, in my view-that most of the scholarship on bodies remains naively centered around either power and social structure over flesh and blood or cyborgs existing in the head (rather than in flesh and blood) (pp. 1-2). Thus, whether or not a reader would believe

that this anthology really "breaks new ground" (p. 5) in body studies depends on her acceptance of the dichotomy that Moore establishes as the problem of body studies.

Some of the contributions were published elsewhere several years ago, but in one case Laurie Schulze edits her essay, revealing a new sense of what bodybuilding means. In such a case, the book is interesting for its inadvertent documentation of intellectual trends in body studies. Schulze, who in 1990 argued that professional female bodybuilders were controlled by the regulation of their femininity, now admits,

Were I to reopen an inquiry into professional female bodybuilding today, I would attempt to begin the work of mapping female muscle culture as a terrain of control. Further[more], rather than limiting my analysis to the textual structures of cultural products that take up professional bodybuilding ... , I would also investigate the meanings and pleasures made by members of the bodybuilding subculture and its audiences from the experiences, performances, and texts they enjoy. (p. 17)

Chris Holmlund's analysis of the *Pumping Iron* films, originally published in 1989, exemplifies the one trend that has remained consistent in feminist commentary on female bodybuilding: that feminists prefer the large bodybuilding ideal. Indeed, the books reviewed here praise the largest female physiques and reject the less muscular, more "feminine" image honored in the Ms. Fitness America contest and by some early bodybuilding competitors and judges.

Leslee Fisher's essay on how female bodybuilders understand themselves, published here for the first time, stands out for telling us about the very different investments the builders, most of whom are not feminists or academics, have in their projects. Feelings of inadequacy as well as negative stereotypes of women and of feminism can be seen in female bodybuilders' statements, despite the fact that these women also "supported equal pay for equal work in bodybuilding, access to information regarding results of their drug tests, and equal female versus male athlete treatment" (p. 149). Anne Bolin's ethnographic research on female bodybuilding culture, originally published in 1992, captures the bodybuilder's fixation with her diet. These essays, I think, prompt feminists to question just how different the female bodybuilders are from their male counterparts in the sport as well as from their anorexic sisters. In so doing, they prompt us to question and/or articulate better why feminists, as a group, seem to be so heavily invested in the project of female bodybuilding.

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