



CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY



The Ponytail

Icon, Movement, and
the Modern (Sports)Woman

Trygve B. Broch

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Cultural Sociology

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Trygve B. Broch

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To my father

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Trygve Broch has written a singular work of cultural sociology, deft and original in its theorizing, richly insightful in its empirical interpretation. Reading such a powerful book wakes us up; we look at social life afresh. We see new meanings; we feel new aesthetic forms; and by understanding how meaning and form are intertwined we conceptualize in new ways.

Broch's empirical topic seems at first glance thoroughly mundane. A mere object, the ponytail is, in material terms, a mere clump of dead hair. But the premise of Broch's radical rethinking is that this object is thoroughly alive in a cultural sense. Material and symbolic at the same time, the ponytail icon has an aesthetically shaped sensual surface, like a painting or sculpture, that contains a depth filled with myths, codes, and narratives. The ponytail is a material symbol that inspires passion, compels new meanings, and changes social life.

As an iconic object, the ponytail is a cultural structure whose meaning and feeling imposes itself upon social actors—women and men, children and adults, athletes and fashionistas—from the “outside.” Broch unfolds this structure in exquisite detail, displaying its multiple meanings. While he persuades us that the icon contains vestiges of archetypal myth, his research makes a persuasive case that the ponytail has also been a carrier for the striking new discourses that have emerged from the cauldron of contemporary feminisms.

Broch argues that the ponytail is not only a symbolic structure, but that it must also be *performed* if its symbolic power is to be maintained. Describing icons as an “ongoing social achievement of polyvocal objects that speak to and shape situations,” he conceptualizes women and girls as

social *agents*. They *wear* ponytails, fashioning themselves as women athletes, executives, and intellectuals who “sport” a certain style of hair.

It is by emphasizing the agency of the ponytail’s self-fashioning that Broch conducts a highly illuminating dialogue with “critical theories” of sport. He argues that in subordinating material meaning to power—gendered, economic, political—such critical theory diminishes the agency of women. Material symbols have relative autonomy from social structures. When active women style their hair in a ponytail, they reach beyond putatively deterministic social structures to engage independent, supra-structural, “transcendent” meanings, which they shape into a material form and perform to social audiences.

How do we know that such meanings actually exist as relatively independent cultural structures? Here Broch displays his hermeneutical skills as an empirical cultural sociologist. From the last seven decades of Western symbolic life, he has culled 4000 pages of written and visual material, from the sports pages of newspapers, fashion magazines, style columns, advertisements, television, song, and film. Wading into the thicket of interpretation, he has reconstructed the shapes and meanings of the ponytail in its fantastically polyvalent forms. Rather than reading the meanings of the ponytail off social structures of power, Broch has let women speak for themselves.

In *The Ponytail: Icon, Movement, and the Modern (Sports) Woman*, Trygve Broch has set a new standard for studying materiality in social life. He has conducted a master class in cultural sociology.

New Haven, USA

Jeffrey C. Alexander

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On the day of my PhD defense, I was asked what projects ensued. Having spent numerous hours observing youth sports and watching elite events, my natural answer was “the ponytail.” About four years later, a small search through Norwegian media for ponytails in Norwegian sports—and my presentation at the 2019 European Association for Sociology of Sport Conference, which drew kind, critical feedback from Professor Holly Thorpe—exploded into a wider pursuit for the ponytail in all kinds of contexts in Norwegian print media from 1945 to today.

This project would not have materialized without support from numerous people at the Inland Norway University, Faculty of Social and Health Sciences, especially Dean Ingrid Guldvik, Dean of Research Anne Stine Dolva, and Mari Rysst, the program coordinator of Child and Youth Participation and Competence Development. Thanks for providing moral support and the needed time to wrap up this project and start new ones. I am also grateful to all friends and colleagues who shared ideas about *the ponytail*. Ingeborg Barth Vedøy shared a news article of the ponytailed exerciser at a fitness studio; Martin Haugen brought Tiril Eckhoff’s “magic ponytail” to my attention; and in the last phase of the project, Amelia Haile provided critical assistance in preparing the manuscript. Thank you. Thanks also to the Inland Norway University Library at Campus Elverum, and Cecilia Black Fylking for always helping out and for providing access to the media database for this project.

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Introduction: Imagining the Ponytail

You see them everywhere today (Fig. 1)—the ponytail hairstyle. There were the Barbie dolls and movie stars Sandra Dee and Brigitte Bardot, then popstars Madonna and Beyoncé before influencers Kim Kardashian West and Kylie Jenner. On the cover of *Time*'s 2018 special edition, “Women Changing the World,” Oprah Winfrey is wearing one, and the magazine’s cover announcing its 2020 most influential people displays rapper Megan Thee Stallion with her plaited ponytail sailing above her head like a bull-whip. Tennis star Serena Williams often sports a ponytail, and among women World Cup soccer players: countless. You see them in product advertisements, too, on the heads of women in their 20s that are kickboxing for sure. The ponytail is iconic, everywhere, and imbued with codes, narratives, and myth that allow its wearers to access public culture in deeply personal, even existential ways. Its half-life radiates with symbolism.

What makes the ponytail iconic? A good place to look for answers may be in sports, where the ponytail is a hallmark of the female athlete. So, I began searching media for ponytails in Norwegian sports, but quickly discovered that the sportswoman’s style overlaps and intersects in intended and accidental ways with women’s hairstyles elsewhere. I expanded my search for the ponytail into all kinds of contexts in Norwegian media from 1945 to today. At a glance, hundreds of newspaper articles show the ponytail in many shapes and lengths, swinging side to side, a quite practical hairstyle that has endured historical shifts and spread through diverse settings. From a closer look, however, the ponytail emerges as an icon with



Fig. 1 Imagining the ponytail. (Picture credit: martin-dm via Getty Images)

the symbolic agency that journalists and interviewees have imbued it: a physical-cum-cultural aesthetics of movement. In this book, I explore these meanings to formulate a cultural-sociological explanation of the ponytailed (sports)woman.

As an icon, the ponytail is not simply a thing,¹ but a meaningful object that shapes social life through combinations of material and symbolic forces (Alexander, 2008, 2010b; Bartmanski & Alexander, 2012). It has qualities that connote something larger than itself—its dramatic, lasting public presence and the expression of sacred meanings that make it contagious and attractive (Sonnevend, 2012). Consider the clip-on platinum plaited ponytail that 1990s popstar Madonna wore, which recalled the femininity of earlier wearers, but which was dramatically adapted to female empowerment and copied by her many fans (Whitaker, 2018). But iconic experiences also can be intimate, personal, minuscule moments. The ponytail brushing the skin can awaken anticipations and memories of movements. As it distinguishes between those who wear it and those who do not, the ponytail can make someone feel socially powerful or powerless. A ponytail might consist of shafts of hair that are biologically dead, but myths, codes, and narratives animate it with iconic forces.

To be sure, no study of the ponytail, let alone hair, can be done without thinking through issues of gender. In December 2018, BBC News journalist Helen Whitaker declared the ponytail an iconic hairstyle for women—one with a “feminist undercurrent, implying ‘I’m busy, I’m working, and need my hair OFF my face.’” Yet such a declaration is not without irony. Comparing the sweet sense of relief that a woman derives from “taking down a scraped-back ponytail” to the what she experiences when taking off her heels or her bra the very “second [she] get[s] home,” Whitaker alludes to the ponytail’s incorporation into women’s fashion as part of women’s perceived public duty to be beautiful. Although she goes on to trace the ponytail’s historical recurrences in pop culture, Whitaker never explains how or why the hairdo came to materialize these fundamental feminist/anti-feminist paradoxes.

Critical theory provides two ways to look at the feminist/anti-feminist paradoxes of hair. Looking at the few studies that mention sportswomen’s hair, this is an obvious choice of perspective.² Undoubtedly, hair is linked with intersecting social power structures of gender, race, and class that reproduce social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989). In the contemporary West, long, straight hair recreates the hegemony of a White heteronormative femininity (Prince, 2009; Simon, 2000; Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004).

Second, in today's neoliberal world, marketers deceptively use feminist narratives and images to sell women's fashion as self-expressions of empowerment (McRobbie, 2009; Toffoletti, Francombe-Webb, & Thorpe, 2018). An up-to-date analysis could show twenty-first-century ponytailed feminism as devoid of any real stance against neoliberalism's global and local injustices (Gill, 2016). From this critical viewpoint, a fashionable ponytail cannot be feminist since real (second-wave) feminism is antithetical to neoliberalism and to all that is feminine (Lazar, 2013, p. 38). Therefore, the ponytail's feminism must be a myth, untrue—paradox resolved.

Although the obvious approach to a study of sport, gender, and the ponytail is critical theory, this book adds an interpretive provocation to the literature. If we see cultural practices as mere reflections of metanarratives, we tend to pass over, in silence, the symbol systems that allow people to deal meaningfully with inequalities and ideologies (Geertz, 1973b). If we define myth as untruth, functioning only to reproduce social inequalities and ideologies, we fail to see myth as a powerfully enduring variable of social explanation.³ This study requires an examination of how meanings—myths, codes, and narratives—may materialize in ponytails as a response to the spirits of our time. Then we can explore how journalists and interviewees use metanarratives of solidarity and conflict, feminism and neoliberalism, to reshape and critique the ponytail icon. Therefore, this study consists of intersecting symbolic layers as I show how myth and democratic ideals that charge the aesthetic of the ponytail evoke gendered expectations, ideals of health and modern living which need democratic, neoliberal, feminist, and practical interpretations.

Put differently, this book foregrounds interpretation. I look closely at women's experiences with the ponytail and how they meaningfully maneuver what Durkheim ([1901] 2014, p. 21) called "social facts": laws and rules; pragmatic necessities; demography and the economy; emotional currents and crowd behavior; norms and sentiments (Lukes, 1973, p. 12). These material and nonmaterial "facts" are external to individuals, but, whether we wish it or not, they "impose themselves upon" us. Thus, how do ponytailed women maneuver the social facts of their everyday work, family lives, and the economy? How do they balance laws and rules with current psychological currents, norms, and sentiments? To answer these questions, we need to leave behind the early empiricism, realism, and positivism of Durkheim's ([1901] 2014) *The Rules of Sociological Method* and

start at his later work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1995). The ponytail, then, becomes a “total social fact” imbued with answers to many material and nonmaterial questions of the day. This path forces us to come to terms with the deeply emotive, semiotic, and sacral elements of modernity and how meaningful actions, such as wearing a ponytail, may shape and root our lives in the material, social realities (e.g., Alexander, 1988a, 1988b).

The meaning of hair varies among groups, individuals and situations, and thus, a study of the ponytail begs for a multidimensional analysis. Returning to the classics of cultural theory, I show that this path is ready to take, if only with an updated toolbox crammed with diverse ideas about hair. First, however, we must begin with the question: Where does the ponytail come from and how did it acquire its name?

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE PONYTAIL

“A flamboyant head of hair is neither feminine nor masculine, it is *human*,” wrote Morris (1987, p. 21) in *Bodywatching*, adding that “the busy fingers of humanity” have rarely left hair in its natural condition. From ancient myth to contemporary pop culture, long hair, bound or free floating, is imbued with meaning. World religions set guidelines for how we groom our hair (Sandin, 2019), and fashion trends introduce “new” gendered signals for hairdos. While graying and loss of hair are biological markers of old age or ill health, the sign of mythical-physical vitality is long, healthy hair (Hallpike, 1969). Examples include the myths of Medusa’s snake hair, and the immensely strong Babylonian, Gilgamesh, as well as biblical accounts of Esau, the hunter (Gen. 25:23–27), King Nebuchadnezzar’s animality (Dan. 4:33) and Samson’s immense power (Judg. 16:17–19). The words *caesar* and derivatives *kaiser* and *tsar* mean “long haired,” titles fit only for leaders. Women who sell their hair online today emphasize not only its length and quality, but the healthy lifestyle that energizes it (Tarlo, 2017, p. 36). Today health performances are crucial to embodying proof of good morals, diets, and training regimes, or simply their stylish renditions (Crawford, 1980; Weitz, 2004). In July 2018, *Vogue* magazine posted online pictures from Kim Kardashian West’s Instagram feed showing her morning exercise regimen on a sandy beach, with “a bevy of girlfriends, and the partial updo that is fast becoming her signature hairdo”:

West set off on a seaside jog, an undertaking featuring bare feet and exposed abs, along with half-up hair ... What makes a worthy seasonal sweat session? A social, outdoors-y approach—and a memorable mane. (Paris, 2018b)

The dictionary definition of a ponytail—or West’s “memorable mane”—is “a hairstyle pulling the hair together and usually banding it at the back of the head to resemble a pony’s tail,”⁴ which, according to Wikipedia, is often worn in informal office settings or when exercising. The ponytail is popular among school-aged girls because flowing hair is associated with youth and simple to accomplish unassisted, at least when not braided or accessorized. A practical choice for keeping hair restrained, the ponytail is also the hallmark of long-haired athletes and others who are physically active in play or work. Sometimes long hair is even required to be tied up for safety reasons in wood shops, labs, sports, and hospitals. As a fashion statement, a high ponytail may connote a sporty person, a low one a chic personality.⁵

According to Sherrow’s (2006, p. 310) cultural history, *Encyclopedia of Hair*, the earliest depiction of women with ponytails is found on fresco paintings from ancient Crete, thousands of years old: “These images show women wearing their hair pulled up away from the face and secured high on the back of the head.” Women dancers in ancient Egypt and Rome wore similar hairstyles, Sherrow wrote, but most historical accounts of ponytails are about men.

The “queue” (meaning “tail” in French), which was a single long ponytail, often braided, worn at the back of the head with the forehead shaved, is often associated with the Manchu people prior to their forming of the Qing Dynasty that ruled from 1644 to 1912 (Whitaker, 2018). By curious geopolitical circumstances, these and other queues were cut and marketed in Europe to the affluent who needed these extra “rats” of hair to bind their grandiose hairstyles (Tarlo, 2017, pp. 54–59).

Ponytails also were required for European soldiers in the eighteenth century as a convenience to tie the hair at the nape of the neck (Chertsey Museum, n.d.). French soldiers wore queues, while British soldiers and sailors wore their hair pulled back into greased, powdered, or tarred ponytails (Whitaker, 2018) held with a ribbon or a strap. A rite of passage for a British soldier was to have his ponytail forcefully yanked so hard that he “didn’t think he’d be able to close his eyelids afterwards” (Krulwich, 2015). In 1800, the British army initiated short haircuts, but the navy kept a shorter “pigtail” until about 1820 (Whitaker, 2018).

Early in the twentieth century, the ponytail entered the world of women's fashion, following the 1920s short bobs, the flappers' emancipatory statement against patriarchal norms of long hairdos (Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004). In the 1950s, the first Barbie doll, wearing a perky pony, was introduced, and film stars like Sandra Dee made the girl-next-door a commodity (Whitaker, 2018). Dee's iconic ponytail signified a young "good" girl, comically captured in Rizzo's song in the musical production, *Grease*: "Elvis let me be, keep that pelvis off of me, *Look at me, I'm Sandra Dee.*" Another "good girl" of 1960s pop culture, Barbra Eden, star of the television comedy show, *I Dream of Jeannie*, added to the ponytail's popularity, before Brigitte Bardot, "the epitome of sexy, insouciant French chic," showed that cool, hot girls could wear the style, too (Whitaker, 2018).

Entering the 1990s, Madonna, the queen of the MTV generation, revamped the pony, telling her audience to "express yourself." In her *Blond Ambition World Tour* attire, Madonna gave the pony a triumphant, confident swagger that, in conjunction with a cone-shaped bra, oozed fashionable ideals of female empowerment, which according to *Vogue* (Kim, 2015) "long conveyed strength and tenacity in the women who wore it." Madonna figures in the midst of Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Kate Moss, Janet Jackson and later Beyoncé, Christina Milian, and Venus Williams, who remade and retained the iconic ponytail in its many forms throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Wilson, 2013). Also at this time, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team, a "homogenous group of mostly White women in ponytails" who "conveyed the combination of femininity and athleticism that is inherent" in the style (Schultz, 2014, p. 3), won the World Cup. And sports was not the only male terrain women with ponytails entered. In 2001, Angeline Jolie as Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, rose out of the water, slinging her pony through film scenes reminiscent of an Indiana Jones quest.

Contemporary myth-making aside, in 2021 the U.S. army recognized that wearing the hair in a bun interfered with the fit of a helmet and, therefore, eased regulations to allow women soldiers to select a number of hairstyles in combat, ranging from buzz cuts to short or long ponytails (Philipps, 2021). In Norway, the police force is about 45 percent female, which means plenty of ponytailed women are out enforcing the law. Also, the Norwegian military has progressed to "gender neutrality," recruiting equally among men and women, which means protocols for *men's* hair have changed as well, and males are allowed to sport a short pony swinging from under their berets or helmets (Kristiansen & Brustad, 2013).

In 2018, French *Vogue* declared the high ponytail to be the new look. “Forget midi ponytails and super-slicked, nape-of-the-neck knots—this summer’s most palatable updo is all about buoyancy. Whether worn partially pulled back or entirely tied-up,” the pony transforms any casual moment—at school, work, or in exercise—into a glamorous affair (Paris, 2018a). In 2018, on Instagram, #ponytail brought 2.3 million hits. The public eye was fixated on the “gloriously thick, perky ponytail” of popstar Ariana Grande, who noted that her pony brings joy, surprises, a “true love” as well as pain and tarnish (Whitaker, 2018; Xue, 2019). Evidently, Grande’s fans freak out if she dares to abandon her trademark ponytail. On Grande’s 26th birthday, *WMagazine* paid tribute to her hairdo with 18 photographs showing her waving it “in all its glory” (Marine, 2019). Also in 2018, Kim Kardashian West accepted the Council of Fashion Designers of America’s first Influencer Award wearing her “dark lengths whipped into a taut, sky-high ponytail” with “thick, wispy waves trailing down the back to buoyant effect, putting a fresh twist on the bombshell ponytail famously popularized by Barbara Eden in ‘60s fantasy sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie*” (Valenti, 2018).

Worn by both men and women, boys and girls, the ponytail comes in many shapes and sizes and may resemble a pony’s tail, a tightly braided queue, or a rat’s tale. When Kylie Jenner, an American media persona with more than 160 million Instagram followers, posted her 2020 “seriously long braided ponytail,” she drew fan comments like “You got a tail,” “Rapunzel, Rapunzel let your hair down,” and “Truly the year of the rat” (Rendon, 2020). In this book, I narrow the focus to examples of women’s ponytails, long and short, braided and rats alike, found in Norwegian news media.

BODIES AND HAIR AS MULTIDIMENSIONAL

This brief cultural history of the ponytail indicates that the human body is not merely an object of nature, a vessel for a free mind, or a machine preset by DNA.⁶ Instead, it reveals how bodies are shaped by culture, how culture shapes our thinking, and how cultures shapes the ways our bodies—including those with ponytails—enter and recreate social life (Douglas, 1970). In sociology, performance theorists show how individuals can use their bodies to display notions of the self that conform or rebel against situational (Goffman, 1959) or broad social norms (Butler, 1990, 1993; Goffman, 1976; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Critical theorists argue that

social or institutional conflicts alone shape the body and are shaped by it (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Post-structuralist analyses of discourse and repetitive drills highlight how docile and machine-like bodies abide social power (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Phenomenologists discuss the body as the ground from which we engage the world (Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2012), a starting point for recreating the existence of others and other things (Csordas, 1990; Turner, 1995). Thus, as we manage these several sociological dimensions, hair as a bodily entity can become a multidimensional medium for constructing societies (e.g., Shilling, 2004).

In his article “Magical Hair,” Leach (1958) distinguishes between private and public meanings of hair.⁷ He proposes that growing and cutting hair are social acts, performances that demonstrate how others should think about us and situations, regardless of one’s inner emotions. He makes a Durkheimian ([1912] 1995) claim that cultural forces reside in objects. Hair, like fingernails, consists of dead material growing from a living human body and with the ability to hold shared culture and to be part of the living subject at once. Hair is a private symbol and a public object, and hair performances are emotionally charged, fusing hair with collective representations to connect actions to public culture and to allow audiences to identify with the various meanings.

Underlining the social power of hair, Synnott (1987) stated that hair’s symbolic functions exercise social distinctions. His article “Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair” is a direct reference to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and an historical elaboration of gender dichotomizing. Hair fashion is always relational and should be understood in light of individuals relating to changing social contexts. To understand this process, Synnott suggested three intersecting binaries: men’s versus women’s hairstyles; head hair versus body hair; and the opposing hairstyles of opposing ideologies. For example, heteronormativity shapes hair customs for men and women: short hairstyles for men and ungroomed body hair, with the opposite for women, according to Synnott’s 1987 study of British and North American cultures. Yet, there are always rebels with opposite ideologies who shape their hair in opposing or unconventional ways, such as hippies, punks, and feminists. To Synnott, hair displays a deeply private commitment to moral and social distinctions about shame and glory (1987, pp. 409–410). Social divisions develop and are expressed in meaning-making about hair growth and cuts and in individuals’ biological-political lives.

Obeyesekere (1981) argued that hair should be “related to the life experiences of the individual and the larger institutional contexts in which

they are embedded” (p. 13). Shared and personal culture belong in an interdependent system; although personal and shared myths and narratives differ in content, they are organized by the same modalities. The content of a personal myth is often an altered version of the public myth, amended to an individual’s biography. For individuals to appropriate public culture then, a myth or narrative must be deeply felt and imbued into one’s own biography and motivation. Personal myth about hair can reshape public hair myths, and vice versa, with favorable institutional contexts and sociopolitical and economic factors.

As a bodily entity, hair is part of how enact social life, how we respond to social inequalities and how we recreate our own and others’ positions in the world. Hair is a deeply personal means to display and shape the dramaturgy of a situation or the policing of our social power relations. It positions us *within* and orients us *toward* the creation of our life worlds. These dimensions are well addressed in the theorizing of hair and in the sociology of bodily performances, social power and phenomenology. Therefore, as we take a cultural-sociological perspective of the body, we can study how journalists and interviewees imbue the ponytail and actions surrounding it with meanings used to maneuver these social dimensions, and the ponytail materializes as a total social fact, an agent itself, with solutions to several aspects of social life. Before presenting my multidimensional approach to the ponytail, I review how critical theorists view the hairstyle.

A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF (SPORTS)WOMEN’S HAIR

Hair can undoubtedly divide society along power structures of gender, race, and class to reproduce social inequalities. In the contemporary West, long, straight hair can reflect a capitalist, patriarchal hegemony in the form of a White, heteronormative femininity (Prince, 2009; Simon, 2000; Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004). Many argue that marketers fuse this toxic femininity to images of feminism to sell consumption as self-expressions of empowerment (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; Pickren, 2018; Rutherford, 2018; Toffoletti et al., 2018).

In her study of hair, Weitz (2004) argued that “if, in a religion-driven world, men gained status by having a wife who appeared modest, in a market-driven world, men gained status by displaying an attractive wife” (p. 6). Today, young women’s self-esteem “comes to depend more on appearance than any other factor, including their social lives, academic achievements, or athletic abilities” (p.72). This White, heteronormative

feminine ideal also forms disparities of race and class. From the nineteenth century in the United States, Black and Native American women faced severe constraints in styling their hair either in obedience or opposition to the norms of White culture (Weitz, 2004). Natural Black hair still falls low in a beauty paradigm celebrating White straight hair (Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004), making the daughter of comedian Chris Rock ask “Daddy, why don’t I have good hair?” (Prince, 2009, p. 140). Although the counter-currents of the 1960s slogans “Black power” and “Black is beautiful” brought more acceptance to Black hairstyles, in many ways White hair norms persist and make curly styles subordinate (Bagalini, 2021; Simon, 2000). Weitz (2004, p. 27) argued that “although the feminist movement improved women’s lives in many ways, it freed few women from fashion norms” (p. 27). With more complexity than can be recounted here, these important studies crystallize how a White capitalist patriarchy is reflected in heteronormative hair.

In the book *Qualifying Times: Points of Change in U.S. Women’s Sport*, Schultz (2014) used the compelling example of (sport)women’s hair to combine critical theory with insights into how hair can reproduce inequality. Schultz asked, “Consider U.S. women’s sport without its ponytailed participants. It is difficult, for the ubiquitous style has become a hallmark of female athleticism” (2014, p. 1). At the 1999 Soccer World Champions, the U.S. women’s team, was dubbed the *ponytail express*, and their fan club, *the ponytail posse*; argued that the ponytail icon conveys “the combination of femininity and athleticism that is inherent in putting your hair up in a ponytail.” However, that image of athletic empowerment is false, Schultz concluded because the hairdo only reinstates women’s oppression through heteronormative patriarchy.

Similarly, in *Ponytailed and Polygendered*, Daniels (2009, pp. 143-144) argued that the ponytail is key for women athletes who seek to present themselves as hetero-sexy females. Both Daniels and Schultz noted the ponytail’s usefulness. Daniels cited a quote from Weitz (2004, p. 63) in which an interviewee said wearing a ponytail makes her feel most like herself, a sporty girl, “always ready to play, energetic, running, and willing to do things. I can’t do that if it’s not in a ponytail.” Yet these critical theorists describe the ponytailed female athlete as a “product and producer of gendered ideologies” (Schultz, 2014, p. 2), “the feminine presentation of self” as, sadly, the best way for women athletes to garner social acceptance (Daniels, 2009, p. 145), and young women as identifying with pursuits of appearance rather than sports (Weitz, 2004, p. 72).

Apart from the notable exceptions mentioned above, the very visible actuality of sportswomen's hair usually only figures as sidenotes in sport and gender analyses. The ponytail is an example of "the homophobic agenda" in sports and schools in which coaches and peers encourage players to wear their hair long and in a ponytail to reinforce a heteronormativity (Blackburn, 2007, p. 44; Lenskyj, 1994, p. 359) through "an impression of conventional femininity" (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 14). Indeed, the ponytail allows long-haired women to perform multiple femininities, to satisfy the medias' search for "babes" as they let their hair down outside the arena (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008, 2009). Still, the vast number of ponytailed athletes in North America and elsewhere seems to indicate that this polygendered hairdo is as mandatory for participation as a team uniform (Daniels, 2009, p. 153). Physical education textbooks in Sweden systematically depict boys with short hair and girls with ponytails (Alsarve, 2018, p. 846), and in Norway, elite women athletes in unisex or shapeless uniforms find long hair to be a vital expression of their femininity (Kolnes, 1995).

The major trend in sport and gender research concludes that femininity recreates gendered inequalities and depletes athleticism of empowerment (Broch, 2016; Bruce, 2015; Musto, Cooky, & Messner, 2017). Accordingly, the obvious way to study ponytailed sportswomen would be to carry on with critical theory to show how neoliberal-cum-patriarchal ideology makes women athletes consumers who defy outdated forms of patriarchy in politically correct ways, "yet fail to dislodge the devaluing and commodification of women's physical pursuits" (Toffoletti et al., 2018). Although much can be gained from critical theory, I seek a wider focus than ideology and social power alone. Crucially, I propose a study of sport and gender that stress the multidimensionality revealed in the cultural history of the ponytail and the many ways that cultural theorists have dealt with hair. From biblical and mythological sources to sportswomen's athletic prowess and Kim Kardashian West's memorable mane, hair is imbued with animality, strength, asceticism, and heterosexuality in ways that can mediate and overwhelm social power. To limit the meaning of any symbol, let alone hair, to social power or ideology alone, is to deprive it of its rich symbolic associations. Therefore, it is not enough to recognize that hair involves bodily performances, phenomenology, and biographies if we explain away these dimensions as the results of patriarchy and neoliberal ideology. Any plausible interpretation of how the ponytail became iconic, how it *entered* and *shaped* social life, must examine the ponytail's performativity in cultural contexts and situations.

THE POLYVOCALITY OF A TOTAL SOCIAL FACT

My search of Norwegian newspapers from 1945 to the early twenty-first century for when, how, and why the ponytail is portrayed generated data rich with contextual, individual, and social variation. As a result, I do not try to explain the performativity of the ponytail icon in light of one significant event, one dramatic representative, or one historical period alone. Rather, this is a study of the polyvocality of a total social fact.

I argue that the ponytail is used to maneuver social facts, namely, a collective conscience outside of individuals that constrains social life (Durkheim, [1901] 2014, p. 27). Social facts can be material objects, like architecture and bodies in a crowd, but also nonmaterial beliefs and morality internalized as norms, emotions, and expectations. Social facts may involve the authority and sanctioning of legal rules and customs, or procedures followed out of pragmatic necessity, like language or currency. They range from objective factors such as the economy and the demography of a recession and migration, to the psychological compulsion and currents in collective movements.⁸ In 1901, Durkheim stressed that social facts constrain us (Lukes, 1973; Smith, 2020), so to get to how the ponytail became a meaningful object in social life, we need to move along.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim ([1912] 1995) shifted the viewpoint from *constrained* to *active* individuals engaged in meaningful construction of social life through rituals and totemic worship (Alexander, 2005). These actions allow individuals not only to maneuver social and natural facts, but to do so with a cultural force that “weighs on its members with all its authority,” leading them to “suppose that they are not without foundation in the nature of things” (Durkheim, [1912] 1995, pp. 17–18). At the core of this meaning-making process are culture structures, codes that separate sacred from everyday, and the sacred pure from its impure forms (Kurakin, 2015). Long hair in mythology, whether Samson’s powerful mane to Medusa’s snake hair, is storied with existential fears and awe. To be able to maneuver social facts, powerful, long hair, must be practically *handled* with the care and control that a narrative professes.

Although Durkheim’s ideas allow us to see the ponytail as imbued with meaningful answers to social facts, he was too insistent on ritual causality and moral consensus (Alexander, 2017; Smith & Alexander, 2005). In today’s complex and fragmented modernity, we must underline how actors imbue objects with *multiple* meanings and how *polyvocal* objects guide experience.

Drawing on the idea of social performance (Alexander, 2004), I examine how journalists and interviewees interpret, criticize, and praise the ponytail in multiple and diverse ways as they consciously and unconsciously use macro-culture to display and shape the meaning of situations and actors.⁹ The ponytail icon is imbued with meanings and mediated by *hermeneutical power*: “the understandings and evaluations offered by independent interpretation” (Alexander, 2012, p. 27). In contrast to the rituals Durkheim (1912) studied in assembled worship, my focus is on *performances* in which journalists and interviewees interpret, contest, and use ponytails in multiple contexts with polyvocal affects and effects. Even so public interpretation still has ritual-like qualities and aims, via the text, to project meanings that persuade and create emotional connections between performer and audience (Alexander, 2004, 2017, 2021). We still use macro-semiotic structures to bring objects and micro-cultural settings to life with codes, myths, and narratives that portray and shape situation’s broader existential and moral verisimilitude.¹⁰

Therefore, my study of the ponytail goes beyond common sense ideas that icons are unambiguous or simply highly recognizable—admired or despised—with great influence in a specific sphere. Rather, I view icons as the ongoing performative achievement of polyvocal objects that speak to and shape a multitude of situations. With their own performativity generated by multiple symbolic layers, icons can be used to maneuver both our affection for and aversion to social facts (Smith, 2008). To tease out these symbolic processes, I follow culturally oriented sociologists who define objects as composed of an aesthetic surface and a discursive depth.¹¹ Neither the ponytail nor hair itself are simply pure material objects imbued with meanings by journalists and interviewees, but are composed of two layers:

The surface is form and shape, and its texture is sensually experienced via the five senses, sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. “Inside” the aesthetically formed surface are discursive meanings—moral associations, collective beliefs, socially shaped emotions. They are inside metaphorically, in the sense that discursive meaning is invisible to the senses ... The invisible depth meaning and visible surface form are analytically separate, yet, at the same time, they are, in a concrete empirical sense, wholly intertwined. (Alexander, 2020, p. 384)

With “icon theory” the ponytail’s meanings are contingent on how we experience its surface and sense its cultural depth. In material form, the ponytail is a symbolic condensation (Alexander, 2010b, 2012) that helps us grasp the “essence” or “deep meaning” of a situation (Sonnevend, 2016, 2020).¹² Moreover, the ponytail’s joint aesthetic surface allows both the wearer and the viewer to see, touch, and sense how its symbolic depth exerts performative power in their lives of social facts (Alexander, 2008, 2010b, 2020). It is a bodily object, deeply personal yet culture structured, that can be used to display, enter, and sustain our affective options and constraints in social life (Champagne, 2018, forthcoming).¹³ As the ponytail allows us to maneuver social life through a blend of material and nonmaterial sources, I suggest it is “total” phenomenon (Mauss, [1950] 1966, pp. 36–36) that generates aesthetic emotions tied to our interactional expectations and desires (e.g., Mauss, [1950] 1966, p. 77). Therefore, a cultural sociology of the ponytail icon shows how journalists and interviewees thread a multitude of *symbolic layers* through the materiality of hair, how this symbolic process is sensed through its aesthetic surface, and how the ponytail’s meaningful materiality shapes our experiential maneuvering of social facts.

A NOTE ON METHODS AND OUTLINE

The aim of this book is not only to document the many meanings of the (sport)woman’s ponytail across historical times and cultural contexts, but to map out the codes, myths, and narratives imbued in this hairstyle’s performativity. Drawing upon documentation of the ponytail in the Norwegian press, I show how this hallmark of women’s sports shapes and is shaped by meanings outside and inside sports. Much more than a sporty hairdo and a signal of heteronormative femininity, the ponytail is a “total” phenomenon that answers to our expectations of gendered life in felicitous and upsetting ways. It incarnates myth-like ideas of health and youthfulness, yet allows its bearer to maneuver work and family life with the speed and gusto of a modern woman. The ponytail is a total social fact that roots experience in the material culture of hair.

The data for this project consists of newspaper articles in which the ponytail appears in passing or as a major part of the story. On the about 4000 pages of public discourse from 1945 to the early twenty-first century, the ponytail condenses and elaborates the cultural dimensions of news articles. Beyond reading the sentences in which the ponytail is

mentioned, a culturally oriented analysis of this data required that I read the whole text to grasp how the ponytail was related to micro- and macro-cultural contexts. Thus, it is important to note that many critical theorists who analyze glossy magazines and ads for the beauty industry often accumulate data well suited for a critique of neoliberal and patriarchal ideologies. I, too, have made a strategic sample of the Norwegian news press to see if the public sphere holds femininities different from those that critical theorists study. If I am successful, the vast array of femininities discovered might allow me to create a complimentary, meaning-centered approach to the study of gender symbols. As symbols are polyvocal by definition, a symbol analysis should question ideological clarity. Through the notion of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973a), I aim to show how multiple landscapes of meaning are brought to bear on action, materiality, and events (Bordo, 1999; Reed, 2011; Small, 2009; Spillman, 2014). This makes for a good abductive starting point (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) to study the mostly taken for granted presence of the ponytail and to use these insights to theorize about gender relations as multilayered.

Encountering something as ubiquitous as the ponytail, a sociologist applies one of the oldest tricks of the trade—to make the familiar strange. In the search for new insights into the ponytail as a hallmark of sports-women, I map out in the first four chapters the symbol systems that critical theorists tend to pass over in silence. By first exploring the ponytail’s aesthetic surface and moral depth, then mapping three codes and a set of accompanying symbolic layers, I show that the ponytail can be understood as a total social phenomenon. This is no old-fashioned functionalist argument or claim of consensus, but one that describes how symbolic codes operate to make the ponytail publicly meaningful and, at the same time, allow different points of view (Spillman, 2020). The ponytail’s material form displays performativity in codes (1) of expectations, health, and practicalities that (2) intersect with symbolic layers expressing diverse viewpoints. Ponytailed women express their individuality in deeply cultural ways as they maneuver the ideological realities of their social lives through deeply private yet public culture.

As a foundation, in this introductory chapter, I have described how the long-haired men and women of ancient and popular myth exemplify zomorphism. In Chap. 2, I depart from Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) theory of ascribing animal traits to people and human characteristics to animal life to create “objective” or “natural” realities. The cultural creation of the natural through analogies, resemblances, and inductive reasoning makes

symbolic work disappear from aesthetic surfaces, yet survive in an invisible cultural depth, reappearing in Freudian slippages and affective snippets of text. I show how meaning moves through the sensual materiality of the ponytail, and how this aesthetic surface awakens a cultural depth to mediate social relations. The ponytail, or horsetail, as it is called in Norwegian, exudes kinetic energy, recaptured on the catwalk of global fashion capitals. Like a horse's tail provides balance for the animal, the ponytail balances the wearer's stride and allows a feeling of movement, being moved and passionately moving others. The ponytail moves to move us.

Chapter 3 explores how the ponytail maneuvers gendered expectations. Although this hairdo can be long or short, it undeniably demands a certain hair length. Critical theory tends to equate long hair with expectations of capitalist, patriarchal ideology, this chapter stress the many ways that women may use ponytails to meet a multitude of expectations. I argue that codes of fashion and customs permit women (and men) to wear this hairstyle to display gendered expectations in amplified and sober ways (Goffman, 1976). This dynamic process generates a half-life of the ponytail in which its many forms and imitations are manifest in a diversity of situations (Mauss, [1934] 1973). According to Tarde (1903), imitations that intensify and condense customs are what makes fashion and that imitations of fashion in turn recreates customs. Hairstyles signal community norms and may be worn proudly. In my data, men with ponytails were depicted as creative, deviant, rebellious, bad-boys, or downright criminal. On girls and women, ponytails signaled confident, heterosexual, creative, assertive, morally good females on the move, exiting femme fatales, or ordinary girls next door. What directs the ponytail's performativity are the codes that define the ways we meet fashion and customs: as commercial ploys or with altruistic intentions, as normal or deviant in diverse situations.

In Chap. 4, I show how myths of youthfulness and vitality, but also hope, courage, and willpower give the ponytail a democratic half-life. As human hair grows fastest in healthy youth and during recovery from illness, slowing in old age, illness, pregnancy, and cold weather, it is no wonder then that cultural constructions of health are shaped by observations of hair. Throughout history, the ways we act regarding biological health is shaped by culture and myth (Alexander & Smith, 2020; Crawford, 2006; Martin, 1991; Zola, 1972). Thus, I show that the ponytail's performativity of youthfulness energizes females of all ages in democracies. For example, ponytailed girls participate at summer camps and sport tournaments that pioneer gender equality and multiculturalism. Adult women

with ponytails retain their youthfulness. They move as soft as sap and with a feminist vigor. Some are right-wing politicians professing neoliberal equalities. Others speak social democratic justice. The ponytail's youthful half-life provides vitality when modern women steadily enter new domains and challenge old conventions. The iconic charge is so powerful that it not only gives youthfulness to elderly women, but retains the democratic vitality these women sported as young, mature, and now aging feminists.

In Chap. 5, work-life pressures on the modern woman are explored to shape hair fashions and customs. The ponytail binds hair in practical ways that naturalize women's presence in male-dominated jobs and roles. Although Whitaker (2018) noted that the ponytail radiates the social progress of former feminist generations, some women today believe they live in a post-feminist reality, even as others remain on the barricades, fist raised, ponytail waving. Ponytailed women are at times loud youthful, bold, and unapologetic; other times, they perform bold body politics: positionality, presence, and existence. Clearly, the ponytail is iconic, a total social fact used to feel, see, and enact a meaningful relationship with complex modern society. As modern women navigate their practical lives, a new code emerges: a code of movement that fuses the corporeal and practical with the social and feminist environments in which they reside. This code gives the ponytail—itsself an embodiment of movement—a performativity of movement: a cultural kinetics that is never apolitical.

In Chaps. 6 and 7, I explore how the codes outlined heretofore shape ponytailed experiences in the realm of sport, a specific operative context with its own cultural dynamics. In sports, the ponytail's cultural kinetic—and its accompanying symbolism—is accentuated, elaborated, and condensed. Chapter 6 highlights how sports accentuate a symbolic dimension that has charged the ponytail icon throughout the analyses: movement. Chapter 7 shows how body movements evoke the moral depth of gendered expectations, health, and practicalities as the ponytail swings in athletic endeavor. Together, these chapters reveal how sports are shaped by and shape social life as the woman athlete's movements are imbued with broadly available folklore, codes of democratization and myth—to make the ponytail an icon of progress.

A ponytail icon does not create consensus but allows its wearers to join and recreate social life with a multitude of symbolic options. Materiality is critical to this process as it makes moral and mythical codes tangible. However, although a ponytail carries shared meanings, it is not felt alike by all who wear it, nor is it understood in the same way in all contexts.

Symbolic codes operate and intersect to make the ponytail publicly meaningful and, at the same time, allow different points of view (Spillman, 2020). Ponytailed women express individuality in deeply cultural and aesthetically tangible ways. Not equally charged at all times, the ponytail's iconic power is strongest when it materializes multiple symbolic layers—to be revealed as a total social phenomenon. This book therefore highlights our ability to adopt to diverse situations and shows that we need a multi-dimensional tactic to grasp the material meanings of the ponytail.

NOTES

1. Mere objects indeed shape social life: Speedbumps decelerate our driving (Latour, 2005) and clocks can accelerate our hurrying along (Fine, 2015).
2. See (Alsarve, 2018; Blackburn, 2007; Cox & Thompson, 2000; Daniels, 2009; Kolnes, 1995; Lenskyj, 1994; Schultz, 2014; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008, 2009; Weitz, 2004).
3. For a discussion of the relative autonomy of culture and the use of cultural structures as explanatory variables see, (Alexander, 2007, 2021; Alexander & Smith, 2003; Peterson, 1979; Sewell, 1992; Spillman, 2020).
4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ponytail>. Retrieved March 21, 2020.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponytail> or [https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hestehale_\(frisyre\)](https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hestehale_(frisyre)). Retrieved March 21, 2020.
6. A social constructionist analysis of the body defies the binaries of nature/culture, body/mind, and structure/agency that stifle sociological analyses (Smith & Riley, 2009, p. 279).
7. Leach's (1958) article deals with the differences and possible complementarities between psychoanalytic and anthropological ethnographic analyses. Although he concludes that these perspectives are very different, Leach does not find the perspectives to be in actual conflict. The psychoanalyst "provides the anthropologist with a plausible explanation for the fact which he knew already but could not fully understand" (p. 162).
8. See also Lukes (1973, p. 12).
9. See (Broch & Skille, 2018; Mast, 2006; McCormick, 2017, 2020; Villegas, 2020).
10. For research on how semiotic structures, or landscapes of meaning, form understandings and actions, see (Geertz, 1973a; Reed, 2011, 2012; Sewell, 1992).
11. Some of the culturally oriented sociological thinkers who inspire me include (Alexander, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Bartmanski & Alexander, 2012; Greenland, 2016; Sonnevend, 2012, 2020).

12. Alexander (2008, 2010b) argued that we need to think with Freud and Durkheim to see the material as a symbolic condensation and as making moral values tangible.
13. In regard to how hair allows us to enter and sustain social life, see also (Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Schultz, 2014; Synnott, 1987; Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004).

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Object

To understand how the symbolic layers of the ponytail thread through experiences of the practical and the material, we need to fathom the ponytail in its most “elementary” form. For this matter, we cannot think of our modern selves and societies as sharply distinct from traditional societies (Alexander, 2021), nor can we dismiss the fact that theatrical forms, myth, and symbolism of the sacred generate contemporary ideas of rationality and modernity.¹ To grasp the social processes that enable us to weave meaning into existence, we need frameworks and concepts that allow us to see how meaning itself can move.

TOUCHING CULTURE

“Every human body harbors an interior being, a life-principle that animates it; and that principle is the soul,” argued Durkheim (1912/1995, p. 242). Of all spirit beings, the soul is prototypical. Its form, Durkheim continued, can take the external appearance of the body or be held in a grain of sand to pass through the smallest opening. It can reside in animals. “Its form is essentially unstable and indefinite; it changes from moment to moment to suit circumstances and according to the demands of myth and rite” (p. 244). Durkheim’s notion of the soul is associated with collective life, totemic forces, and *mana*. Because the soul resides in things and bodies, its sociocultural origin is unseen. A soul is an almost magical power with supernatural forces holding taboos, ritual protections, and charismatic prestige that provide a person with both sacred and

profane attributes (Smith, 2020, pp. 51–52). When the soul or life-spirit inhabits the body, it exists in a distinct bodily viewpoint in time and space. A person is shaped as culture, the body, and biography fuse:

Even if all the consciousnesses situated in those bodies view the same world—namely, the world of ideas and feelings that morally unify the group—they do not all view it from the same viewpoint; each expresses it in his [*sic*] own fashion. (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 273)

Durkheim’s notion of the soul makes the abstract concrete and allows us to study how collective meaning threads through materiality and the body. We can see how the emotive, sacral, and semiotic dimensions of culture can enter the body to shape it and be shaped by it. Soul becomes a form of “heat or electricity” that any object receives from outside and can therefore retransmit to the surroundings (p. 327). Any sacred being, spirit, or object that radiates with this force, called *mana*, “permits the production of effects that are outside the ordinary power of men [*sic*], and outside the ordinary processes of nature” (p. 59). These forces are animate and conscious, usually invisible to the human eye, but through *animism* suggest that humans live a kind of double life. The most telling example perhaps is the being awake and asleep:

When he dreams of having visited a far-off country, he believes he really has gone there. But he can have gone there only if two beings exist in him: one, his body, which remained stretched out on the ground and which, when he awakens, he finds still in the same position; and another, which has moved through space during that same time. Likewise, if while he sleeps, he sees himself talking with one of his friends who he knows is far away, he concludes that his friend, too, is composed of two beings: one who is sleeping some distance away, and another who has manifested himself through the dream. (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 47)

The soul and a spirit are two different things, according to Durkheim; however, the issue at hand, is Durkheim’s explanation of how shared culture travels through and settles in materiality. Meanings have an “extreme fluidity, they can go inside bodies and cause them disorders of all kinds, or they can increase the bodies’ vitality” (p. 49). The soul, in other words, is the totemic principle individualized. To be a person is to contain a

relationship with the often unseen social source that shapes personhood. This totemic principle or *totemism*, Durkheim (1912/1995, pp. 141–157) explained, is a process in which social meaning flows through objects and energizes anything the object touches. The meaningful object, or totem, becomes an archetype and a tangible reference to the accomplished forming of social life and persons coded as sacred and profane.² The totem “sits at the heart of culture insofar as it is part of a classificatory system” (Smith, 2020, p. 48).

As the source and force of an object’s power, culture vanishes to reappear in aesthetic and sensory experience. In the societies Durkheim explored, a community’s and a person’s soul could reside in and move through animals. Communities actively shaped their worlds as they joined their similar experiences in the practical and the material with abstract moral frameworks. Among the Arunta of central Australia, frogs were associated with the gum tree, because they were often found in the trees’ cavities. Kangaroos were linked with a kind of parakeet that often flew around them. If two nearby communities wanted to establish moral boundaries, the moon was associated with the one and the sun with the other, the black cockatoo with the former and the white cockatoo with the latter. Once these contrasts were socially replicated as binary codes, their oppositions extended to the community and its persons. An internal tie then bound persons to the group and its system of symbols.³ All things within this meaningful ecology, all that attaches to it and all that it touches, are part of and share in its aura by a “latent totemic nature” that is felt as soon as circumstances permit or require it (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 152).

How then do abstract realities settle in daily hair-styling practices and how do we draw upon the aesthetics of hairdos to recreate symbol systems? Energizing this deeply affective process is the potential to condense our social hopes and fears into images that we can then reinsert into real life, real places, and real time.⁴ Today, we are all interpreters “drenched in culture” (Jijon, 2019, p. 143), well aware of other places, interpretations, and criticisms (Alexander, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). I argue that the ponytail is an icon that allows us to “feel” its association with these other ideas and things in a tactile way (Alexander, 2008, 2010). Therefore, let us explore how journalists and interviewees use hair to describe and interpret the life events that form them as persons and societies.

NORWEGIAN HORSETAILS

The ponytail's presence is unmistakably visual, but not always in a straightforward manner. It blends with a myriad of real-life details, and, therefore, is seen when its iconicity is allowed to break through all the surrounding noise and redundancy. As we know from myth, details and variations make it hard to pinpoint a story's meaning with exact words, but these real-life quirks make the myth's morals recognizable and reassuring (E. Leach, 1969, p. 9). The cultural logics of *the ponytail* enter and leave numerous situations, on a multitude of differently shaped bodies, and with a vast variety of colors and lengths. Ponytails may be curled, straight, or braided, with or without ribbons, and its siblings are pigtails and rattails. What can be said about a picture is also true for the ponytail: Not only does its visual presence speak more than a thousand words, it sets words in motion.

The Norwegian word for ponytail is *hestehale*, literally “horsetail.” My search of representations and references to the ponytail in contemporary Norwegian newspapers yielded quite a large amount of data because the results included non-human animals that also wear a *hestehale*. You guessed correctly—mostly horses. While these references to actual horsetails initially felt like a dead end, the Durkheimian conceptions the soul and totemism make them quite useful. We have to ask if “Western moderns” might understand the ponytail in somewhat similar ways as the Arunta understood the frog's relationship to the gum tree and the kangaroo's to the parakeet. In a rapidly transforming modernity (Alexander, 2017; Smith & Alexander, 2005; Stang, 2009): how do people use inductive reasoning and analogies to position the ponytail in a meaningful ecology? How does the ponytail answer to *spiritual* and *corporal diversity*?⁵ For starters, the ponytail hairstyle and an actual horsetail bear a striking visual resemblance (Fig. 1):

They ride, in a straight line, to the riding hall. Small girls in clothes of many colors. Straight backs. Stine rides her horse named Frisko. I watch them ride away, one light horsetail [ponytail] under her helmet and a black tail just below. (*Bergens Tidende*, February, 5, 2001, p. 19)

In fashion, the horsetail is recreated in the fabrics paraded on the fashion runways of Paris where the latest “strangling tight satin and velvet dresses” are on display. “Tight as a spear, strapless, with two half-pleated shawl-breadths running from the chest, obliquely down the to the back, under the belt, where they finally burst [bruser] á la ponytail” (*VG*, January 9, 1953).



Fig. 1 One horsetail under her helmet and one just below. (Picture credit: fotokostic via Getty Images)

But it is not simply that the ponytail hairstyle and horsetails are aesthetically alike, they can also feel alike and elicit similar sensory experiences. According to a report in the Norwegian national newspaper, *VG*, police on horseback tried to control the crowds in Oslo who had taken to the streets to get a glimpse of the royal family during festivities on May 8, 1946, one year after the country was liberated from German occupation:

Short horsetails tickled people under their noses, as slick-groomed horse butts pushed the crowd onto the sidewalks before, in seconds, the streets where full again. (*VG*, May 9, 1946)

Safe to say, it is easy to imagine a very different situation in which a police horse's tail, might whip rather than tickle a street mob. Indeed, most of the time (and this sole incident of tickling horsetails is testimony to this claim) the journalist did not consider the whereabouts of horsetails as significant enough to mention. Why then include mention of the horsetail? These are the poetics of an 8th of May celebration, the condensation of a moment. In other words, the spirit of the moment moved through in the horsetails felt by those they brushed. Surely, a sober Norwegian journalist might find it more appropriate to report on such tickles when humorously covering a human stampede in the streets than when writing about women's hair. After all, this was news coverage, not simply entertainment. Here, the tail entertained the noses of a festive crowd, perhaps adding to the joy of an event in which some rules were already broken, or bent, in effervescence. The horsetail's aesthetic form provided a rewarding tingle in the taken-for-granted logics of the situation.

There is of course not a causal relationship between public and personal culture (Lizardo, 2017; Obeyesekere, 1981) so a horsetail's sensuous surface, its tickle, is made meaningful as we deal with public culture in personal ways (Kurakin, 2019; Mast, 2019). For example, Ørjan, a boy who is mute with other disabilities, is "one big smile when he sits on the horseback, safely leaning on his trainer." His favorite activity is spending time with the big animals:

[He] smiles from ear to ear as nurse Ragnhild Aanderaa brushes a horsetail against his cheek. That is when the boy feels what is in store for him ... His body language is not to be mistaken. The smile powerfully expresses how much he appreciates being on horseback. After a ride he comes to life and to happiness, and gets to work out his legs too, says nurse Aanderaa. (*Aftenposten*, May 12, 1988, p. 2)

Ørjan's relationship to horses through the feel of their tails brushing his chin as he anticipates the ride arguably has a lot to do with personal meaning-making, habits, and practices (Lizardo, 2017). At the same time, the horsetail is an iconic construct that fuses the nurse's sensory pedagogy, her being with the boy and the horse, their moving together and being moved together as they ride on horseback. Within this exchange with the horsetail, emotional energy is generated in ways that form Ørjan's and the nurse's meaningful interaction.⁶ As the horsetail transmits these meanings and elicits an emotional display on Ørjan's face, the nurse is reassured that their being together is positive and should be continued. Not only is the horsetail an affirmation of their shared being, but it represents their friendship and helps us feel it—right there, in the social heart.

For sure, the meaning of a tickle or a brush of hair is manifold and contingent on the context and social composition of our encounter (Geertz, 1973). Nevertheless, aesthetics, the sheer materiality, also appear to us and shape our perceptions (Alexander, 2010). For example, in humans and horses, hair can hide and veil. To keep our attention and suspense, skillful writers may use the horsetail as a meaningful materiality to let us sense what has not yet been said. In the twists of prose, a secret love is confessed in one of Grande Estate's stable booths, as two lovers find themselves separated by one last obstacle, the horsetail. Jan Jørgen "gathers his eyebrows" and looks at Karen Sofie "behind the horsetail" to finally "loudly and fervently" shout out, "Because I love you" (Drangsholt, 1944, rendered in Raumnnes, February 8, 1950, p. 3). Here, not only does meaning move through the horsetail, but as an icon, it serves to maintain suspense behind its veil before uncovering what lies behind.

GENDERING ANALOGIES

As an object or an icon, the ponytail meets gendered expectations (Goffman, 1976), distinction-making (Veblen, 1899/1994) through materialization of social life and the whims of physical attractiveness (Daloz, 2010, p. 88). The ponytail evokes ideas about human relations and our discipline (or lack thereof) in a biological form that shows how we enter or leave society (E. R. Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Synnott, 1987). Reporting on young adults in 1968, a *VG* newspaper reporter argued, "... Ponytails are back in fashion in a hair-happy time, and this might be a good thing, allowing us to, once again, look people in the eye." Hair may hide the windows to the soul, and apparently, the writer

thought ponytails provided some civility to the longhaired hippie wearer. However, for real discipline, the horses of the United Kingdom's Queen Elizabeth set the best example, it is said. Not everyone has "the opportunity to get a *real* horsetail [hestehale]" like the Queen's horses. These four-legged royals have ribbons making their tails "stand out and swing throughout the parade." In a time when hair had become the "most attractive adornment of both [human] sexes," the *VG* reporter concluded, "a real horsetail is hard to find" (*VG*, September 18, 1968, p. 23). Yet the high ponytail, on a woman's head, with all its parading swing was not hard to find. While fashion trends may fool us with novel designs, the ponytail is nothing new. Reports from the 1950s note that a ponytail is "not just a ponytail," but can be straight or braided, floating freely or "tightly fixated in a way that makes it stand out like a veritable whip. Refined, jolly, and rude" as its wearer traverses busy shopping streets of the city (*VG*, July 14, 1956, p. 6). Like Queen Elizabeth's four-legged royals gallantly striding through the city, with ribbons making their tails "stand out and swing throughout the parade," so does this ponytailed woman walk the city.

Controlled or set free, the ponytail is a way of interacting with the world by making analogies that create anticipations and community. Analogies and imitation, in creative play, for example, is a common way to draw inspiration from animal behavior to define human relationship norms (Hamayon, 2016). To be sure, this meaning-making process succeeds only if it seems to work itself out independently of anyone's performative design; however, this is no whim of imagination, but involves process of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, seeing human relations in animal behavior and animal relations in human activities. It is a meticulous approach of joining recurrent observations and abstract theorizing in social life.

To a horse, the tail is more than mere ornament, a flag parading discipline, or a glorified flyswatter for that matter. The animal uses its tail for balance and for communication, mostly among horses, but also between horses and humans. If you know the language, the horsetail can tell you about the horse's mood, health, energy, and locomotion, according to King (2006/2020) writing in *EQUUS*, a horse breeders' magazine. As an expression of aggression to frighten invaders, a stallion will lift its tails and prance. Horsetails demonstrate friendship, too. Standing head to tail, horses swish flies from each other's faces. Frisky foals set off to enjoy games and races, their tails held high, a sure sign of excitement and high spirits, King writes, noting that subordinate and shamed horses tuck their tails

between their legs. No wonder, then, that when a thief broke into a stable and stole seven horsetails in Romerike, Norway (*NTB*, August 18, 2005), the owner was quite upset as his horses had lost one of their most important tools and means of communication. Even worse, he had to spend that summer spraying down his horses to keep away the flies.

Human beings also feel the annoyance of summertime insects, even losing one's balance and cool in a frustrating attempt to swat away irritating mosquitos and aggressive warble flies. For example, let us revisit a media account (*Aftenposten*, July 27, 1984) of a honeymoon at foot:

Go bike riding on your home field for your honeymoon, the priest told May Ellen Hartting and Knut Kudsén. However, our Olympic gold medalist Knut [professional cyclist] and his May Ellen, parked their bikes as they travelled to Valdres. It was time to use their feet. Long hikes with Knut-made “*matpakke*” and coffee in a thermos.

A honeymoon does not get any more Norwegian than that—majority ethnic Norwegian, that is, the husband making a lunch of bread with various spreads (usually dry ones) packed in that delightful Norwegian sandwich wrap. Coffee too, of course, the everyday brew of ontological security that fills a kitchen with its aromas and warms the throat on a gusty day.⁷ The reporter meets the newlyweds at Kervaasstølen in the Reinfljellene mountains, where they are enjoying a pit stop in the summer pasture among well-fed cows. No rain today, and unfortunately, not much wind either. Cows lazily whip their tails to keep away the mosquitos and warble flies.

“You want the full recipe for a walk in the mountains,” May Ellen asks while waving at an aggressive heel fly, “Mosquito bites and blisters.”

“I met May Ellen while I was out jogging,” Knut tells us. He was kind of lazy and plump at that time, about to break the 100-kilo barrier. Today the weight's scale-pin stops at 83.

“Not if you keep eating like you do here in the mountains,” May Ellen teases Knut.

“My wife is as fast a talker as she is a runner,” laughs Knut. May Ellen is a sprinter.

“I can talk for myself,” May Ellen replies, and whips her ponytail. “I started cross-country skiing. Now I prefer running. However, after this vacation I will chase a job. I am done at the Department of Business Economics.”

“Do you favor Grete Waitz or Ingrid Kristiansen? the journalist asks. [Waitz and Kristiansen are Norwegian long-distance runners.]

May Ellen cheers for Grete, because she has Waitz-calves herself, says Knut. Knut roots for Ingrid, because she has given birth, May Ellen parries.

“How long will you keep being a celebrity, Knut,” asks the reporter.

“Others are welcome to take my place. I have made the priest’s words my own: ‘Dare and win on the home field.’” (*Aftenposten*, July 27, 1984, p. 15)

Returning from the polluted city to enjoy nature’s many trials and pleasures is most notably a vital part of public culture in Norway, and can indeed be gendered,⁸ as this account of May Ellen and Knut shows. With blisters on their feet and smiles on their faces, they perform a healthy active tourism, good for the soul *and* for the waistline—you can even have another piece of bread without feeling bad about it. At home in the mountains with food and drink and amid fly-swatting cows, May Ellen used her own ponytail to whip Knut back in place, asserting that she can surely speak for herself. She is a modern woman maintaining her romantic relationship as she chases mountaintops and new job opportunities. For Olympian Knut, life in the limelight is over. He has vowed to shine on the home field where he makes the “matpakke” and together, he and May Ellen, practice gender politics.

Grete Waitz or Ingrid Kristiansen? Two of Norway’s most renown sport heroes of all time seem to raise questions of embodied politics. Waitz, a celebrity athlete with a ponytail, is a pioneer in the sports world, as is Kristiansen, who also symbolizes motherhood. What are the stakes in this zoomorphic play of gender relations between Knut and May Ellen? For this woman depicted on the newspaper page, ponytail deals is both personal and political, as she uses it to maintain the balance that threads meaning through social life, which the journalist relates.⁹ From the work force to the very initiation of family, culture affects how our bodies enter and shape social life (e.g., Martin, 1991). The ponytail can surely signify heteronormativity, but, on this 1984 woman, it is far from synonymous with a passive, dichotomous opposition to her husband (Connell, 1987, 2005). Nor is this a glossed-up Hollywood gendered relationship, or what some Norwegians may call “plastic fantastic.” This story is a glossy representation of hegemonic Norwegian-hood in which outdoor life reinvigorates urban dwelling and a modern woman launching from the Department of Business Economics. In this honeymoon story, with no words and flick of the neck, the ponytail, as culturally natural as can be, whips flies, men,

and semiotics into place. Maintaining embodied appearances of gender equality amidst economic and normative constraints on work-family life remains difficult. But with the ponytail, the quest and hope for equilibrium continues.

The longhaired ponytail becomes gendered in obvious, but surprising ways. As its embodied symbolism intersects with interpretive schemas (Butler, 1990, 1993; Champagne, 2018, *forthcoming*; Friedman, 2013) hair assume performative power in multiple ways (E. R. Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Synnott, 1987). For example, on Women's Day, March 8, 2021, the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* published an article about elderly women's wearing long hair. A couple days prior, a commentator had asked whether elderly women should choose the short-haired look of "the old lady" or the longhaired style of "the witch." Long-time leader of the political party Left, Trine Grande (who is 51 years old and short-haired), replied, "The long hair is our culture's hijab" (*Aftenposten*, March 8, 2021), emphasizing that for her, a short style was a statement of emancipation from the longhaired beauty ideal. With a humorous twist, fashion writer Ander Kemp replied that short hair is practical and has been *the* normative public sector style for decades, that is, for women passed a certain age. Short hair worn by Erna Solberg, the 2021 Norwegian prime minister, as well as by some of her most powerful political colleagues showed that short hair is "... the hair you need for authority!" Short hair can signify emancipation from a longhaired norm, but also a transition into an adult sexuality, authority, and practicality (Gimlin, 1996; Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004). The twenty-first-century power woman portrayed in the stereotypical Claire Underwood [Robin Wright] in the *Netflix* series *House of Cards* illustrates how physical appearance, attire, race, and short hair convey many meanings within this long- and short-haired power spectrum.

PONYTAILED PRIDE

Both long and short hair can hold power, and therefore, the ponytail's force is reliant on the affective codes we use to shape its charge. In my search for the invisible meanings of myth, which is a powerfully enduring variable of social explanation, the anthropomorphism and zoomorphism documented thus far indicate how journalists use inductive reasoning to draw analogies between animals and humans. If Durkheim and contemporary thinkers like Hamayon (2016) and Stang (2009) are right,

resemblances between animals and humans are a significant source of an imitation's iconic force.¹⁰ Pride emerges as a recurrent theme in this chapter, depicted in Queen Elizabeth's horses on parade and the ponytailed woman fashionably promenading Oslo's busy shopping streets with an orderly clip. We see this theme in the way a woman may use her ponytail to "swat" men into place, or in the fashionable dress, fresh off the runways of Paris, that bursts with a spirited horsetail. For the many observers, the ponytail is telling of movement, an energetic mood, high spirits, willingness to act.¹¹ Like with those frisky foals described EQUUS magazine (King, 2006/2020), there is a lively spirit in the ponytail.

These accounts and others show how folklore and myth are rewritten in the material realities of modernity. In politics and myth, "universalism is most often articulated in concrete" (Alexander, 2006, p. 49) and objects retain both spirit and function (Jung, 1972/2003, p. 132): The horsetail is fly swatter, communication tool, and the means to connect to other horses. If we are to believe the reports, for Ørjan, the boy with disabilities, the tickling horsetail signaled a pleasurable ride to come and a connection with his caregiver. For May Ellen Hartting and Knut Kudsén, the horsetail was likely a preferable hairdo for a hike and to show an unmistakable pride and meaningful approach to their relationship. As for the fly-swatting abilities of a horse's tail or a woman's ponytail, a comparison may indeed seem remote to our ideas about woman's fashion. But perhaps that is because our ideas of fashion are too limited by quick surface analyses of ideologies and social power. Apparently, imitation and myth can cause these many mental concepts of form and function to transform into signs that, in turn, can fuse with a believer.¹² This is a multidimensional process. Not only is animal form given to humans and human forms to animals, but beliefs about animals' social lives meld with ideals of human life.

In *Aesop's Fables*, the fox is always cunning, the lion bold, the wolf cruel, the bull strong, and the horse proud. What if the ponytail had a different name? We know that similar fashions have been called rat tails, for instance, and a hairdo that collects hair into two braids close to or just above the ears is called pigtailed in English and *musefletter* [mice braids] in Norwegian. Those names have quite a different ring. Horsetail or ponytail, on the other hand, conjures the image of a galloping foal with tail high, or a mare whose chiseled body is balanced by a memorable mane and tail, a familiar silhouette of powerful grace against the landscape. According to Franz (1964, pp. 175–178, 220), the horse, as other animals, is associative of instinctive natures and connectedness with our surroundings, which is why many myths and fairytales include helpful animals.

When saddled, animals evoke the imagined disciplining of these forces. When rider-less, roaming the plains, climbing a hillside, the animal evokes notions of unconscious forces escaping a disciplining consciousness and society. The blend of spirituality and body technique, the ways in which meaning threads through the ponytail object and surfaces in its bound yet longhaired aesthetics, steer our focus moving on. The ponytail involves a long and dutiful practice, not just as horses stand head-to-tail, but as humans—mothers and daughters, sisters, friends, and stylists—stand fingers to head to recharge the individual with hair belonging to a world of social power, inequalities, and ideologies.¹³

This book explores how semiotic systems, and the idea of symbolic layers, make objects' meaning transformable and multilayered. The ponytail's iconic power shapes social life, but not without ideological contests. In a contemporary ideological terrain, neoliberal ideals, for instance, may pervert and destroy minds and bodies.¹⁴

A journalist wrote an engaging piece in *Dagbladet* (July, 2, 2016, pp. 26–30) on Karoline Bjerkeli Grøvdal, female track and field athlete in a neoliberal world, who relates her challenge to overcome past eating disorders. The journey, Grøvdal admits, has been tough, but today “There is not much that can break my stride, I have regained control and now I am clinging onto it.”

The journalist writes:

She assembles her light-blond hair in a tight ponytail. She looks like a chiseled, well-built thoroughbred, as she toe-hops down the stairs. Well out in the sun, she is ready to thrust down the white mountainside.

High performance sports, the fitness craze, the glorification of youth and compulsive ideas of progress are part of the modernity Grøvdal must maneuver. Her biography, along with the journalist's poetics, create an avalanche effect, the paramount force of contemporary crazes washing over them and us. The ponytail, with its animalistic and instinctual freedom to move, is not only a forceful ally of social and gender movements, but also a destructive enemy if shored up by ideology. The journalist endows Grøvdal with the power of this mythical thoroughbred that can both roam free, silhouetted on the horizon, yet saddled to exhaustion and confined to the stable of sport. The ponytailed athlete regains a freedom once lost, to move in and with this freedom, to materialize it and feel its force and its loss yet again. The distinctive content of Grøvdal's iconic

salvation through the mythical logics of the ponytail grant freedom from the physical, psychological, and social suffering of modernity, and she is able to transcend the senseless treadmill and transitoriness of life as such.

This deeply cultural and aesthetic experience narrows our attention to how the journalist's observation of the ponytail conveys Grøvdal's inevitable imperfection. In an individualized society, some might conclude that Grøvdal has not managed to stay strong and resist the forces of elite sport. Although the journalist indeed emphasizes Grøvdal's individual struggle and victory, the way the narrative depicts, enacts, and recasts the ponytail object allows us to see, feel, and at least unconsciously, recognize the social powers and ideologies surrounding her. Contaminated by a record-crazed sport that almost made her robotic, Grøvdal became entangled in the murky, mechanistic confusions of modernity.¹⁵ She was shackled in the worst thinkable way, through mental illness, but was able to break free, with all the powers of the well-built thoroughbred escaping to a cultural idea of the natural. Who has ever thought that kinetic and social movements were free from toil, obstacles, and pain?

Fair enough, the everyday poetics and romantics of these cited newspapers articles are surely a stark contrast to the many gender challenges and inequalities that persist in Norway. Grøvdal's story of an unhealthy sport culture in which dieting and competition almost destroyed her body—and mind—and other accounts are, if we allow them to be, examples of gender problematics in today's Norway and reports of injustice and democratic hope. In lay terms, we sometimes think of icons, of totems and meaningful objects, as providing easy and faulty escapes from the hard facts of social power and inequality. Grøvdal's storied horsetail shows us that this is a mistaken simplification. Indeed, the ponytail provides an answer, but one that is continuously questioned and challenged in a modernity in which the ponytail must be fused with meaning time and time again. The hair must be assembled in a "tight blond ponytail" again and again. This is not merely a theoretical argument, but an empirical inclination to see the meaning systems that shape, reshape, and challenge ideologies as we understand social life as imitating natural life. Also, this understanding not only has to do with the name for this hairdo—a ponytail in English or a horsetail in Norwegian—but with the imaginative and now mostly unconscious reasoning for its naming.

The ponytail is indeed a hairdo of practical necessity; however, short hair is far more practical. Thus, the ponytail's practicality has been meaningfully shaped through performance and an iconic consciousness of its

visual and sensuous actuality. With Durkheim, we can say that practicality might be the easy way to explain why this hairdo is often chosen, but the semiotic processes outlined here are generated by very important deep structures that are not necessarily viewed as the true “social” cause of the icon.¹⁶

The short vignettes described in this chapter show how much meaning can reside in the brushstroke of a tail. The horsetail is an aesthetic parade of kinetic energy which can be recaptured on a fashion runway or in a bursting horsetailed dress. The horsetail is a means to keep one’s balance in stride as life moves. It is not just an object that swings and moves, but contains also the feel of moving, of being moved, and of moving others. The ponytail icon is existential. Just watch as Ørjan feels the horsetail on his chin or as Grøvdal escapes the social facts of modernity by thrusting proudly down the mountainside.

This analysis is a stark contrast to the social theorizing that frames modernity as the triumph of mechanism over meaning, of rationalization over myth, and of commodities over meaning. From that viewpoint, we would likely assume that the ponytail must *really* be *the* rational choice of the modern woman, a practical style when she works or works out. If anything, its visual should shine with capitalist ideology and have a touch that sustains hierarchies. But counter to this intuition of critical theory, this study shows that through performance and icon, we can make sense of the existential twists of fate in the justice and injustice surrounding social power and ideologies in a deeper and cathartic way. This is no conservative analysis or neat or abusive way to mask agency and real injustice; rather, I seek to describe why, how, and when the ponytail can contest injustice and sustain gendered paradoxes and options.¹⁷

What makes the ponytail fashionable? The answer lies in the ever-changing spirits of our times and how landscapes of meanings materialize in a ponytail that is moved by its wearer but also itself moves through social facts that surround us. Here, the ponytail object materializes both the abstract ideas and empirical realities shaping our far from perfect or complete life projects.

NOTES

1. Despite the weight sociologists give to social power and rational actors in modernity, I follow the strong program in cultural sociology that draws on and updates theories on how social dramas and theatrical forms (Barthes, 1957/2009; Goffman, 1959, 1976; V. Turner, 1982) shape social life and ideas about what is rational (Alexander, 1995, 2004, 2017; Larsen, 2016; Smith, 2008; Spillman, 2012).

2. Durkheim described this process (which I translate as one that makes the classified another aspect of the classifying aspect) as “the gods that govern things are but another aspect of the things they govern” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 145).
3. “All the beings classified in a single clan—men [*sic*], animals, plants, inanimate objects—are only modalities of the totemic being ... Moreover, the adjectives applied to them are the same as those applied to the totem” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 151).
4. Myth is a process that makes abstract realities settle in our daily life and that draws on a selection of empirical life to make moral abstractions (E. Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1967). Myth transform wishes, fears, and hopes into condensed images and reinserts these images into real life, real places and real times (Franz, 1964; Jung, 1972/2003). Through processes of myth, hair allows communities and individuals to condense their own life events, challenges, and changes and to reinsert themselves into social life with this symbolism (E. R. Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Synnott, 1987).
5. Durkheim (1912/1995, pp. 141–157) and the study of animism in myth and play (Benedict, 1934/2005; Franz, 1964; Gregor, 1977; Hamayon, 2016; Jung, 1972/2003) has a long history. I aim to keep Durkheim’s focus on ritual consensus at a distance by drawing on Stang (2009, p. 60) who explored spiritual and corporal diversity in transformational worlds. Stang argued that the Mehinaku she visited in the early twenty-first century recounted many myths about humans and animals, but mostly defined these myths as “old stories.” There is no one true reality, but many. Perspectives ranging from a state of wilderness to gentleness are not simply prototypes of relationships between human and non-human, but also a continuum that allows many entrances into natural and social reality.
6. Bodies let us to join in social life and to recreate other bodies and objects, and to give and drain us of emotional energy (Collins, 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; T. Turner, 1995).
7. Harald B. Broch (2014, 2020) showed how coffee, as the ontological security that fills a kitchen with aromas and warms the throat, can be used to create the feeling of home elsewhere (on a boat), or simply a familial outdoor event.
8. Ideas of pristine nature are important in Norwegian public culture, which is concerned with political management and ideational work of sports, leisure, and urban life (Goksøyr, 2013; Gurholt & Broch, 2017; Slagstad, 2010). We also find these ideas in children’s literature from Nordic writers, such as Astrid Lindgren’s (1981) book on Ronja Røverdatter and Maria Parr’s (2009/2017) *Astrid, the Unstoppable*.

9. Throughout the post-WWII era, Norway has prided itself as a champion of gender equality and women's emancipation, but by no means is the country rid of gender inequality. In fact, feminism is deeply institutionalized in Norwegian political and institutional life with ongoing criticism and debate (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019; Mjøset, 2017). For exciting reads about the death of the breadwinner and life of the two income-family, as well as the gendered reality of the double-shift working woman, see (Hochschild, 2003; Aarseth, 2011).
10. The purpose of ceremonial ritual can be "to transform the social body into an animal, bird, or other such extrasocial body, and thereby to transform the embodied subject from an ordinary social actor to an agent endowed with the creative powers of the mythical beings who first instituted the relations and cultural forms the celebrants are ritually engaged in reproducing" (T. Turner, 1995, p. 160).
11. The ponytail is telling for the *Vogue* journalist reporting on Kim Kardashian West, for the U.S.A. women's soccer fan club rooting for their team dubbed The Ponytail Express (Schultz, 2014), and for those Weitz (2004, p. 63) interviews about hair symbolism.
12. See Csordas (1990), Durkheim (1912/1995), Mead (1934/2015), and Tarde (1903).
13. See the many powerful recounts of how daughters and mothers, sisters and friends connect through grooming in Prince (2009), Simon (2000), Tarlo (2017), and Weitz (2004).
14. See Gill (2016), McRobbie (2009), and Toffoletti et al. (2018).
15. In his *Sociology of Religion*, Weber (1922/1993, p. 149) argued, "The distinctive content of salvation in the world beyond may essentially mean freedom from the physical, psychological, and social suffering of terrestrial life. On the other hand, it may be more concerned with liberation from the senseless treadmill and transitoriness of life as such. Finally, it may be focused primarily on the inevitable imperfection of the individual, whether this be regarded as more chronic contamination, acute inclination to sin, or more spiritually, as entanglement in the murky confusion of earthly ignorance."
16. See Smith (2020, p. 51).
17. In mapping out *the elementary forms of place and their transformations*, in an article by the same title, Smith (1999, pp. 33–34) made an inspirational case for seeing the transformative and dynamic potentials in Durkheim's theories. In studying how institutional strains become social crises, Alexander (2019) showed how Durkheimian theorizing clarifies the cultural mechanisms behind social endangerment and change.

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Expectations

Among what Durkheim ([1901] 2014) called social facts, culture—or expectations in the form of internalized beliefs, wants, and feelings—is part of the collective consciousness that shapes our actions.¹ Across history and cultures, both short and long hair have been gendered in arbitrary ways. There is nothing natural about women having long hair and men having short. Long tresses have been the crowning glory of both genders, and hair as symbol interweaves with culture, from Medusa, Gilgamesh, and Samson to Mia Hamm, Oprah Winfrey, and Beyoncé. On Polynesian Tikopia prior to European colonization, females wore long hair only through unmarried adolescence, but males always wore long hair, which was sometimes bleached golden with lime. After colonization, these norms reversed,² as many Western cultures followed the Saint Paul, who declared in his letter to the Corinthians that it was *natural* for men to have short hair and women to have long (Morris, 1987; Sandin, 2019; Synnott, 1987; Weitz, 2004).

In the twenty-first century, it is tempting to consider Saint Paul's guidelines as outdated. On the European soccer pitch, men sport hair buns and half-lengths. In the National Football League, athletes tackle and dive with hair flowing from their helmets. Women's hair fashion, too, is quite diverse, but in the research literature and data compiled for this project, the expectation for women to have long hair seems very much alive.³ Perhaps it is true, as critical theory might indicate, that long hair represents a beauty myth, and the women who literally and figuratively buy into

that myth, regardless of intent, reproduce their own and other women's oppression. Or is long hair a means to meet expectations through an active process in which we match experiences of social facts with our *many cultural options* (Alexander, 2004; Raud, 2016)? The ponytail icon is widespread, but considering its wide variation and flexibility, it must permit agency.

We now start a slow-moving study of how expectations for long hair are utilized in a wide variety of contexts and how this variation may explain the deeply emotive, semiotic ways in which we come to terms with the modernity's social facts. On our road we will meet glossy pop stars and the toy industry's dolls that some say portray our ideals. We also will see women who seem equally norm-abiding, even though they can be quickly passed off as critical superstars, anti-heroes, or boringly healthy, conventional girls next door. This combination of ponytailed antagonists and protagonists becomes this study's center as we delve into how, when, and where the existential and moral binaries of ponytailed desires and beliefs appear. Ponytailed expectations that express certain stands to social facts must be scattered within our "natural" geography, everyday economic life, and social organization. Here, custom and fashion allow the ponytail wearer to engage in a bricolage of seeing, revealing, and using hair to anchor the spirits of the time in real life experiences.⁴ Here, the ponytail receives and exerts its polyvocal and performative power and materializes and roots our personal and group stands among the social facts of a collective.

The gendered ponytail is an aesthetic expression, a codified femininity, and fashionable display of women's so-called nature.⁵ In stressing polyvocality and symbolic dynamism, I see this process as contingent on how performances generate the ponytail's highly varied uniformity. While Chap. 2 showed how meanings move through objects affect us as hermeneutically sensing individuals and communities, this chapter examines more closely the cultural pragmatics of the ponytail (Alexander, 2004, 2017). How do actors imitate beliefs and desires when they adopt a ponytailed uniform as *the* fashionable response to social settings? The answer resides in the feedback loop in which actors imitate custom to make fashion and imitate fashion to remake customs (Tarde, 1903, p. 206). Social change, then, is the result of culturally structured imitations in which we intensify, weaken, and rearrange the mythical, narrative, and aesthetic shape of material and biological life. Therefore, we need to study how the ponytail shifts via its fashionably gendered interpretations from a practical costume to a custom that meaningfully commands a generation.⁶

THE MATERIALITY OF EXPECTATIONS

The ponytail is a small, but vital part of the gendered fashions and customs that attract and repel us. Reporting on July 25, 1953, from Paris, the City of Love, for the newspaper *VG*, Aage Friis spotted a soldier in boots that were undeniably tormenting him on the warm summer day. The young soldier partly reads a newspaper and partly gazes at “a small mademoiselle with her hair shaped like a ponytail. She shyly looks down at her own shoes that below her red-painted nails are made of two flat soles with laces climbing all the way up her calves.” Gendered expectations like this one often come in oppositions: A French soldier with tormenting boots; a ponytailed woman with laced sandals. They perfectly fit and describe our expectations of young heteronormativity. In this landscape of journalistic poetry on gender expectations—tormenting and attracting to some—anticipations materialize in hair.

Despite the obvious gendering of long hair, to limit the symbolism of the ponytail to a constraining social fact such as heteronormativity masks its performative potential. The ponytail can maneuver gendered expectations in democratically constraining and empowering ways as it comes in and out of fashion. On July 5, 1954, *VG* noted, “For the blond, a ponytail with a small ribbon is very modern,” and on June 4, 1955, *VG*’s Lilleba Brynildsen wrote, “The beloved ponytail stays a horse head length [a marginal lead] ahead of the Jeanne d’Arc ... and the Audrey [Hepburn] hairdo.” Reasonably, not all 1950s Norwegian women and men were familiar with the dramatic, unfair, and gender-biased trial of Jeanne d’Arc⁷; however, many would have recognized her as a champion of freedom and gender equality, and therefore, equally considered her short haircut as a stance against everchanging oppression and constraints.⁸ Thus, in the 1950s, the Jeanne d’Arc hairdo became a deeply felt statement of women’s emancipation.⁹ Nonetheless this stance-making short cut trailed “a horse head behind” the ponytail in 1953 Norway, if we take Brynildsen at her word. Should we then, perhaps, equate short hair with empowering the few bold and long hair with constraining the masses?

In a Calcutta barbershop, Norwegian tennis star and journalist Finn Søhol (*VG*, January, 21, 1956) witnessed a man receiving a tonsure, but who kept a “powerful ponytail on the back of his head,” which plays a specific role in Hindu religion. When a believer walks the liminal space between the profane and the sacred worlds, “God will get a solid grip to pull him up. Maybe Norwegian girls’ ‘ponytail fashion’ is of Hindu

origin,” Søhol pondered. Although his wondering might be unrefined, even downright wrong, Søhol linked this snippet of hair ethnography to the spiritual sphere. Just as Jeanne d’Arc’s hairdo can signify democratic ideals, Søhol saw how the ponytail remained transcendental amid a hair-cutting ritual that signified purification, gratitude, humility, and rebirth.

Similarly, the act of cutting women’s hair is imbued with beliefs and desires of rebirth and renewal,¹⁰ which is somewhat paradoxical, considering long hair’s enduring association with feminine beauty, sexuality, and a conspicuous vanity. For example, take the song from the Broadway musical (and 1958 movie) *South Pacific*, “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair,” and the statement from a 1990s woman, “I had to get rid of everything that he likes, and I started with my hair” (Weitz, 2004, p. 108). Women’s displays of tradition and renewal, submission and empowerment, generate an oscillation between the irreconcilable opposition of existentialism and quite tangible social facts.¹¹ Hair by its very growth allows new starts and ongoing transformations in our social lives that can be tied to a multitude of public and personal symbols of purification, transcendence, and social power.

The ponytail’s materiality of expectations anticipates its cultural power to maneuver social power. Through the 1950s, the hairdo became a symbol that subsumed images of an active, privileged leisure time and leisurely state of mind, representative of those fortunate enough to engage in an intellectual exploration of the temples of Calcutta or to go on a “well-deserved” summer vacation. With a humorous take on the city slicker and summer guest “that belongs to the ponytail-class,” *VG* ghostwriter EDITH (July 7, 1956) described the visitors to the warm, lazy towns of Norway. They “thunder down the entry door” of the shop, and completely disregarding norms of politeness, stampede over the civil queue of regulars:

Dancing into [the shop] are three of the summer’s young women with—yes; you guessed right—ponytails ... “Let me see that one. No, not for me. God that is awful. No one can seriously wear that!” they loudly declare and bounce back towards the exit with shorts tightly hugging their tails and pale thighs. Grabbing the door, they fire a last shot, “So tiring, seriously. God how tiring it must be to live in a small town.”

As an icon, the ponytail sways with its wearer, gains its own movements, and moves us into recognized social positions.¹² Whether the wearer bangs

down the doors of a local shop or walks with a whipping gait down the big city pavement, the ponytail snaps our attention to the aesthetics of a woman's leisurely stride. To some, this ponytailed state of mind might be taken for granted; others might be aware of its privilege. Long hair demands time, energy, and resources to stay groomed within a distinct social, gendered, and healthy class.¹³ Hair's codes of shame and glory can, therefore, naturalize disparities in consumption and health (Daloz, 2010, p. 91). We do not really know these women, but the ponytails' visual aesthetic catches our attention and allows us to sense how they engage with their social life. The ponytail projects forces that are independent of the actor and allows us to read these invisible meanings from its visual existence (Alexander, 2012; Sztompka, 2012). Its iconic power radiates without the apparent aid of the woman who wears it or the journalist who depicts it.

Although some of the ponytail's iconic power resides in allowing the wearer to meet gendered expectations, it materializes multiple anticipations in a woman's whole way of life. In *VG*'s "movie corner" on June 13, 1960, Margaret O'Brien, one of Hollywood's most beloved child stars, discussed becoming 22 years old and the problems she faced as an adult actor. "Only sex sells in today's movie industry," she said. "I don't want to play those kinds of roles. I don't want to act as something I am not."

O'Brien had plenty of money in the bank, and there was no need to rush into an unwanted job, the reporter rather sarcastically wrote: "With her ponytail, big eyes and cute voice she earned about 3,000 dollars a week at the top of her career as a child-star."

The ponytail evokes and condenses our notion of a girl child, much the same way as big eyes and a cute voice. O'Brien's horsetail elaborates a lost childhood and the pressures and expectations of young heteronormative adulthood in the movie industry.

As the Danish-Dutch calypso duo, Nina & Fredrik, pursued alternative career options, they too told of the ponytail's semiotic limitations. Their heyday was over, and they admitted there were many singers out there who probably had better vocals.

It was simply "not enough to have a ponytail. People soon get tired of that," Nina declared. "I cannot risk a long-term commitment [to music]; I might have children and if so, I want to dedicate my life entirely to the child" (*VG*, October, 51,960, p. 7).

If this meant Nina was chasing alternative hairstyles, too, we are not told. Seemingly, the early 1960s ponytail radiated youthful expectations; in another instance, it is a dead object. In both cases, expectations of a

woman's way of life materialize in hair. The expectations these longhaired women face and the journalists describe are more than constraining. Even though hair is a dead materiality, it grows and moves. In meeting heteronormative expectations, the ponytail's multitude of contradictions and symbolisms provide existential grounding and shape anticipations of social life.

FASHIONABLE PLOY OR DEMOCRATIC CREDIBILITY?

Hair expectations are many and overpowered by existential moods. Hair loss can make us feel fatigued. "Dead hair" can make us feel dead. We can keep hair snippets to retain the life spirit of our youth or of someone who has passed away (Tarlo, 2017). The meanings that we fuse in the materiality of hair enable us to sense the existence of individuals but also social spirits.

As Hjalmar Söderberg's 1906 play "Gertrud" was made into movie by Denmark's acclaimed director, Carl Th. Dreyer, it received a dismal welcome. Critics found Dreyer's *Gertrud* to be "cold and distant." Although the critics did not mention anything about Gertrud's hairdo, Dreyer made this defense of his work: "One has to consider the circumstances these people [depicted in the movie] were living in. They didn't walk around with their hearts on their sleeves." The critics were blind, Dreyer argued, and could not "see Gertrud for all the ponytail-girls of today ... We walk past the girls from good homes with long traditions of good manners ... I feel Gertrud still exists today. What happens in the movie still happens today" (VG, January, 14, 1965, p. 11).

In frustration, Dreyer claimed the audience could not see the profound existential dilemmas he was depicting. Perhaps the movie was too old, yet too provocative all at the same time? Is it better to be overwhelmed by a ponytailed display of social feelings of "sexual emancipation," than thinking that women, regardless of their hairdos, struggle emotionally and relationally? To Dreyer, the ponytail seemed to depict an "emancipated" woman, but that in this news article, a totem of his bewildered contemporaries who were blinded and confused by the stark impressions of the latest fashion: the pervasive emotive register of the ponytail.

Under the heady spirit of second-wave feminism, boundaries between the public and the private exploded to emancipate women from traditional gender roles, capitalist and state-governed injustice, but not from fashion norms (Weitz, 2004). Fashion reports through the mid-1960s to the early

'80s steadily included the ponytail, and short hair trends were replaced with longer styles, either loose or ponytailed (*VG*, August 11, 1966, p. 12).

American actor Candice Bergen proved to all skeptics “that not all hippies are ungroomed, on LSD, and with wide-legged pants, but can be groomed movie stars with ponytails” (*VG*, December 12, 1967, p. 24). Long hair can be free or bound, like the horses of fairytales—saddled and disciplined or unsaddled and free (Franz, 1964). Fashion writers describe the ponytail as “a fashionable add-on on the catwalks of Paris” (*VG*, November 1, 1968, p. 16) and “a natural extension of the darkhaired” American movie star, Kathryn Leigh Scott (*VG*, June 25, 1969, p. 14). Plenty of silver-screen heroes were wearing the style, as well as Norwegian urban-dwellers like Gryne Movig, an actor living in culturally exciting, cosmopolitan, up-tempo Stockholm (*VG*, October, 20, 1973, p. 38), her jeans, light-green nail polish, and ponytail indicative of her own creativity.

In the 1960s, jeans occupied a central position in a more androgynous, mobile attire that symbolized freedom of choice and a challenge to traditional gender norms.¹⁴ In a 1989 interview in *VG*, Clint Eastwood said he not only like to play tough guy movie roles, he also liked, independent and tough women:

He does not like the silent and halfhearted woman that dwells in the home and keeps her mouth shut. He wants mature, independent girls with guts, like his ex-wife Maggie, whom he divorced straight after their silver wedding. “Personally and professionally, I am attracted to the independent girl. In the '70s, they ran around in jeans, sweaters, and ponytails. They found conflict and left their husband sitting alone with all his problems,” says Clint. (*VG*, February 18, 1989, p. 28)

Eastman waves goodbye to the woman homemaker and greets a new expectation of woman’s liberation in a pair of jeans and a waving ponytail.¹⁵ In this public discourse of the 1980s, to be and dress like a “liberated woman” was fashionably sober and a practical custom.

As with Dreyer, fashionable emancipation can be deeply upsetting when it tweaks traditions and expectations in feedback loops of change. One journalist of the 1980s found great joy in vividly reporting on the vacation attire of Katharine, Duchess of Kent:

What was left of the British imperium has been shaken, to its very foundations by an event beyond comparison in the glorious history of its Kingdom.

A member of the Royal family, the Duchess of Kent, appeared in a very tight-fitting dungaree. Observers with an appreciation for tradition can inform us that never have we seen such an outfit, by a member of this circle, in public. Fair to say, the Duchess is an in-law. (*VG*, March 19, 1981, p. 18)

The Duke and Duchess had returned from Barbados with lovely tans, and the Duchess with “sun-bleached hair in a ponytail” and, yes, those dreadful dungarees.

The Duchess was not alone in enjoying the fashion. As the summer of 1987 moved on, the whole first half of the nineteenth century seemed to return with “inspiration from the ‘50s, wide young-girl-skirts with stiffened petticoats. On to Bardot’s high ponytail and pale pout” (*NTB*, September 2, 1987).

Indicative of the times, the beauty myth and heteronormative expectations were tweaked into an “agentive” maneuvering of a specific female form and a seemingly endless array of attires.¹⁶ A prime example of the many possible women included in the beauty industry’s contraction of the public sphere, is the one-sized plastic Barbie doll, which was 30 years old in 1989 and had more than 450 million sales worldwide. Ruth Handler, Barbie’s creator, said the doll was intended to give girls the opportunity to role play:

Slim, long legged, but curvy. Characterized by a super slim waist and sprightly breasts. Obviously inspired by ‘50s ideals of womanhood ... standing on her toes (waiting for those high heels), with a bathing suit, sunglasses and a ponytail ... The teenage girl Barbie was thus soon placed in new contexts, with matching outfits and proper accessories ... She has been a flight attendant, an astronaut, a veterinary, ballerina, waiter, singer, and doctor, to fit every possible “dream of the future” that girls might have. (*Aftenposten*, December 9, 1989, p. 18)

Another example—perhaps a makeover of Barbie—is the tougher, stronger, smarter, and more independent (she has no Ken) Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider*, the lead protagonist of the video game’s second launch in 1997. With multiple identities, Lara Croft is an archeologist, bestselling writer, world-class gymnast, expert shooter, and avid motorcyclist. She embodies an untouchable and unachievable male sexual fantasy that can be interpreted, imitated, and used in as many ways as all of the uniforms and traits she possess.¹⁷ This electronic “Barbie” with slightly more muscles, bigger breasts, and a very long, brown ponytail was portrayed by

Angelina Jolie in several movie productions. In the new game, a newspaper critic said, “Lara has gotten some new outfits, a longer and more agile ponytail, an expanded range of weapons” (*Dagbladet*, November 21, 1997, p. 10).

By the end of the ‘90s, this commodified woman archetype was efficiently split into five versions—the Spice Girls. Emma Lee Bunton, aka “Baby Spice,” is not all that kick-ass, but she has a ponytail. She is “the youngest, most childish and most blue-eyed in the group. We are told that she awakens the mother instinct in the rest of the Spice girls. When it comes to flirting, she smiles, waves with her eyelashes and gently, coquettishly pulls her ponytail” (*Aftenposten*, October 30, 1997, p. 19). “Sporty Spice,” aka “Mel C, is the least glamorous of the Spice Girls bunch. She “thrives in a ponytail and a sport suit,” and “does not spend much money on makeup. She is much more of a tomboy than the rest of the spices. ‘Pay attention—the best pickup line is to invite me out for a football game. I am not much into restaurants, romance, and all that stupid stuff,’ she says in the official Spice-book. ‘I like to be sporty. It feels good to be able to move well in my clothes’” (*VG*, February 21, 1997).

Critical theory explains that these molds and “spices” both shape and are created by beauty ideals in specific, quite constraining ways. The vast array of Barbie’s and Lara Croft’s attires and skills, nor the five possibilities of the Spice Girls, are not totally convincing because the range of feminine identities they offer are highly stylized and commercial. They create expectations and role models that patriarchies and neoliberal capitalists plausibly find quite useful.¹⁸

Nevertheless, expectations can be met and made meaningful in various ways. Line Strange, a 13-year-old Norwegian girl from Hoksund, agrees with Spice Girl Melanie C, that sporty clothes are best. Enjoying the skills of imitation, she was selected as Norway’s “Melanie C” and said, “Mom thinks I fit [the description of Melanie C], because I usually walk around in sports apparel and a ponytail. It is because I do gymnastics and work out all the time” (*VG*, August 2, 1997, p. 49). This pleasant unity the ponytail’s form with its depth of meanings confirms Strange’s enactment of “Sporty Spice” as a true signification of her performed being as a girl.¹⁹ Her audience—at least a selection committee and her mother—agreed upon the similarity of Mel C and Strange. They both perform feelings about an active lifestyle.

The fragmentation of the female ideal into five categories allows a wider range of ordinary girls to become extraordinary. Are Spice Girls an empty commercial ploy or a democratic recovery and proliferation of the word “girl”?²⁰ You can gently, coquettishly pull the ponytail, or let it swing during sports play and gymnastics. It can make an iconic “Spice” normal and allow the girl next door to embody its charge. Seemingly, the ponytail defied the idea that only short hair could challenge old, uniform gender relations. Its beauty ideal and gendered expectation was highly profitable as it not only allowed girls more images to choose from, but also made them available for purchase.

Advertisers and commercial interests jumped on these new fashionable notions of femininities, full of vigor and social force, and stretched them farther along the age continuum to target both young and old consumers (Tincknell, 2013; Wolf, 2002). In the late ‘80s, adult women commonly wore ponytails (*Aftenposten*, September 2, 1989, p. 33). Fifty-five-year-old Brigitte Bardot appeared on French television “with her long, blond hair in a ponytail and a simple brown shirt dress ... insisting that her fellow countrymen (and women, we assume) help save France’s stray dogs and cats” (*NTB*, October 21, 1987). Sixty-year-old Audrey Hepburn, the woman who “infatuated the world” with her short cut, wore her hair “brushed back in a simple ponytail, more refined than ever” (*Aftenposten*, May 3, 1989, p. 40). And 51-year-old Jane Fonda was bouncing with life, “looking as impolitely fit as she does on the cover of her fitness videos. In the morning, she has had a 15k run. Her ponytail is wild, makeup is absent, no face lift done. We can see the crow’s feet around her steel blue eyes,” the charmed reporter wrote (*Aftenposten*, May 24, 1989, p. 57), recounting Fonda’s tales of Røros, where she was starring in a rendition of Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House” with a feminist vision.²¹

Wearing ponytails, these fashion icons and conventional embodiments of the beauty myth, sing a different tune. Bardot promotes animal rights, Hepburn children’s rights for UNICEF, and Fonda women’s rights. At the Cannes Festival, Fonda promotes the movie “Old Gringo” and wants nothing less than to unite her artistic, commercial, and feminist capabilities: “I am driven by a compassion for my sisters. Women are still supposed to be caring, attentive and patting our tired men on their shoulders. We make half the money, but do not have half the power and influence we should” (*Aftenposten*, May 24, 1989, p. 57). Feminism initiated a civil repair of the destruction made by male dominance and aimed to reconstruct women’s status (Alexander, 2006, pp. 235–264). Not only did

first- and second-wave feminism mobilize social power and legal rights, it also attempted to redefine womanhood and better incorporate women-centered issues into the public sphere through recognizing and honoring women's voices (Alexander, 2001). Media portrayals show Hepburn, Bardot, and Fonda as iconic women fighting injustice with their hair pulled back into ponytails. Plausibly, feminist *and* capitalist narratives of emancipation have changed ideas of women's freedom by creating distance from tradition and state-governed rule, and by transforming emancipation's idealistic expressions and responsibilities in health and social life (Crawford, 1980; Fraser, 1990; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Riley & Evans, 2018).

Too many fashion reports lead us to believe that the ponytail simply has a pop cultural magnetism, inspiring the fashionably aware or the fashionably duped. This is hardly the case. Celebrities like Hepburn, Bardot, and Fonda are not the only feminist and human rights fighters. Some might argue that there are not enough, in contrast to those championing the beauty industry, but I found quite a few. Far away from the pop culture industry, 23-year-old Siri Martinsen works at the Norwegian Animal Rights Organization in "a Spartan office with a phone that never goes silent. Everyone is concerned with animal rights these days. Martinsen runs from one call to another. Chemically free from makeup, and her hair tightly collected in a ponytail, it is obvious that she is concerned with other things than her morning reflection in the mirror. She has a burning passion. She wants people to have the right idea about how animals suffer in captivity and under the knife at research labs, in cosmetics. She works for animal rights, to better their life" (*Dagbladet*, October 4, 1997, p. 6).

Another example of the justice fighter is the political rookie who became a major name in Norwegian politics for the Progress Party (FrP) and served as Minister of Finance from 2013 to 2020. Siv Jensen, after only a month in the Parliament, had become a prominent and "furious" actor in the political play, "appearing at the end of the hall with her easily identifiable turquoise dress jacket and a waving ponytail" (*Dagbladet*, November 17, 1997, p. 8). Some critical scholars might think it is a shame that such media accounts reduce democratic work to the ideological swing of ponytailed consumerism and longhaired normativity. However, if we see the ponytail as an icon that materializes a woman's maneuvering of gendered and capitalist expectations, then we can stop painting these women with the same brush and recognize how ponytailed women—and the ponytail

itself—steadily relocate themselves in relation to ideology. The ponytail icon indicates that women have entered the scene of public power. Whether she professes neoliberal or social democratic politics is not the issue. Then the ponytail can represent a commercial ploy or democratic credibility, and therefore, allows both commercial and democratic agency in the specter of the conventionally attractive woman’s multiple femininities.

FASHIONABLY EXTRAORDINAIRE AND DECEPTIVELY NORMAL

We find role models beyond the polished pop culture industry. This is common knowledge, but it nevertheless seems important to make this explicit if we are to understand the full range of options that the ponytail’s expectations allow.²²

When Norwegian Princess Märtha Louise entered Nijmegen College in the Netherlands at age 23, the Norwegian press came to visit. At the media’s request, the Princess displayed some of the tricks she had picked up in her physiotherapy studies. She asked a fellow student to play her patient and then requested that she undress in front of everybody, laughing so hard of her own joke that “the Netherlanders almost fall of their chairs.” The Princess caused a stir and “the Netherlanders gape ... obviously surprised by how cute and normal she is with a pair of jeans, a ponytail, and funny comments” (*VG*, April 21, 1995).

The ponytail fashion not only holds a fashionable sway, but commands customs of fashionable (hetero)normalcy. The ponytailed body is a body that matters (Butler, 1993) as it conceals its social and imitative construction under the category of a “natural fact” of normalcy (Butler, 1990, p. 95). The ponytail commands social life through an aesthetic surface that in embodied and culture structured ways organizes social life (Douglas, 1966). The longhaired fashion so prominent of power in religion and myth, is surprisingly normal, and makes the Princess seem normal too.

We can observe both how the ponytail icon normalizes extraordinary women and, in contrast, gives quite ordinary, “natural” women exceptional qualities. The ponytail oscillates between normative and quite spectacular expectations of gender. Consider media accounts of Norwegian Crown Prince Haakon’s courtship of an ordinary, non-royal girl:

They could have been anyone as they walk around with a hidden smile on their face. Mette-Marit with a long, dark blue jacket, a big scarf, grey pants and a black band around the grain-yellow ponytail (*Aftenposten*, October 17, 2000, p. 3).

Mette-Marit, the crown princess-to-be, “is naturally beautiful with delicate skin and reminds us a bit of Grace Kelly ... She has hair like most young girls of today. Straight down and into a ponytail. Long hair is beautiful, but demands grooming and should be cut every sixth week,” an observant hair stylist announces in evaluating the prince’s fiancée. (*Aftenposten*, October 29, 2000, p. 19)

They make a lovely couple, “he is tall and dark. She is light and slim ... A pink top and a simple ponytail with a rose. Yes, she is still ‘just an ordinary girl.’ An ordinary girl who has made the prince fall to his knees and propose, and thus given all regular girls in Norway a renewed faith in the fairytale of Cinderella.” (*Dagbladet*, December 2, 2000, p. 4)

The ponytail remains fashionable at the turn of the twentieth century (Fig. 1).²³ Extraordinary yet ordinary, Super Sexy, yet down to earth might just be the perfect combo, at least a perfect arsenal of femininities. Super stars Naomi Campbell and Alanis Morissette sport “down-to-earth ponytails” and sunglasses to avoid too much attention (*Aftenposten*, March 10, 1996; *VG*, July 1, 1996, p. 43). Janet Jackson visits Oslo in a “cap, pulled down on her forehead, designer sunglasses on that little nose, and no diva behavior. Her long beautiful hair is tied back in a ponytail” (*VG*, March 8, 1995, p. 50). “Comely” Camron Diaz, “smiles prettily, has a rough laugh and a small ponytail” (*Dagbladet*, November 5, 1997, p. 54). Supermodel Cindy Crawford, in a minute of mundanity, is spotted running in and out of LA shops, wearing a ponytail (*NTB*, December 11, 1998). Renée Zellweger “is natural, no makeup, and a ponytail. She is evocative of everything else than a feted Hollywood star: She is liberatingly the real deal” (*VG*, July 15, 2000).

In addition, everyday women, the girl next door, has a ponytail. “Mother and daughter. Both with red, long hair gathered in ponytails. So alike, so natural in their colors and posture. They belong together, but also tell a story of two generations” (*Aftenposten*, March 15, 2000, p. 12). The ponytail bridges generational clefts and is still iconic of the early rock and roll and Grease era (*Aftenposten*, May 30, 1998, p. 29). When *Grease, The Musical* premiered in September 1999 in Lillehammer, Norwegian youth were encouraged to “get out those leather jackets, empty that grease in the hair, and put on those swinging skirts and ponytails” (*NTB*, January 1, 1999). Rock girls, with the “‘60s still clinging on to their rhythms and outfits, still have those dotted skirts and dipping ponytails that we suspect

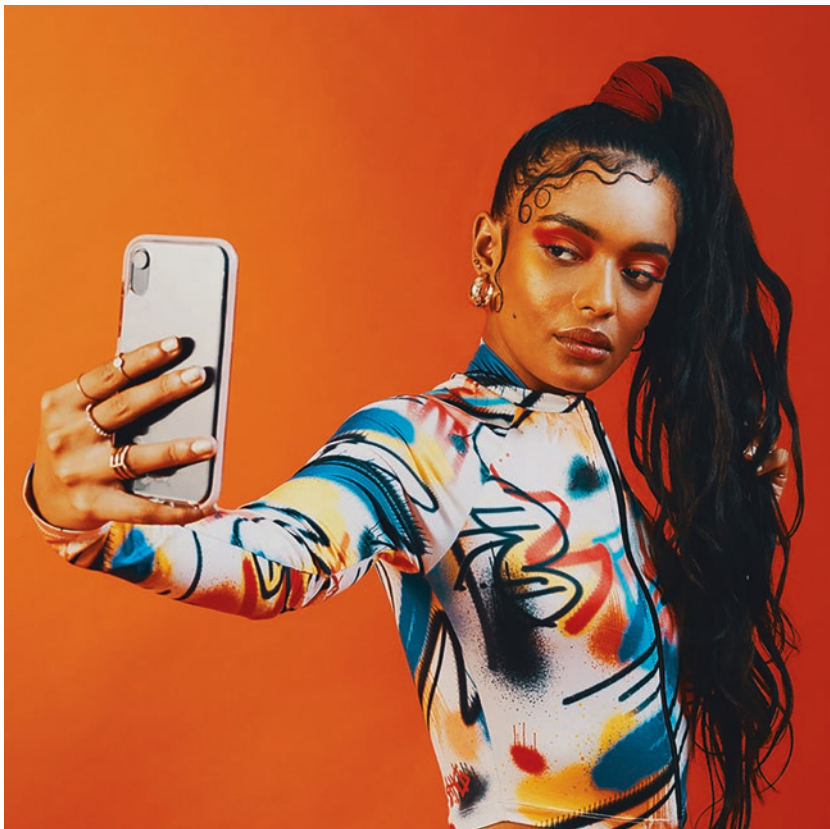


Fig. 1 Fashionable ponytailed expectations. (Picture credit: fotokostic via Getty Images)

have been hanging onto since, well, the ‘60s” (*Aftenposten*, July 14, 2001, p. 21). There is a clear cultural link between the “rock music area” and the ponytail in Norwegian media. But journalists also recall the ponytailed, “preppy” and intellectually assertive Nancy Drew in a trench coat (*Dagsavisen*, September 7, 2002, p. 20) and of “raunchy” Madonna of the 1994 *Bedtime Stories*, her tight ponytail and Gaultier metal bra (*Bergens Tidene*, July 9, 1998, p. 10). Other accounts include:

Norwegian popstar Lene Grawford Nystrøm, aka Aqua Lene, “looks fresh with shiny, dark hair in a ponytail and signal red mouth and sunglasses matching her outfit.” (*Dagbladet*, August 20, 2001, p. 54)

Christina Aguilera, who leans towards an African style, wears needle thin braids in her long light hair ... that under the MTV Awards were joined in two thick braids. Kylie Minogue chooses a more classic hairdo with braids that wreaths her crown and ends in a small ponytail, while her remaining mane hangs loose. (*NTB*, March 14, 2002)

And who can forget the platina-blond kick-ass punk-musician Gwen Stefani who “slings her ponytail.” (*Dagbladet*, July 5, 2002, p. 8)

In the new century, “shoes from Jimmy Choo, worn-out grey sweatpants from Nike, a white Dovre singlet (a Norwegian down-to-earth undergarments company) that is just a little bit too big, Swarovski jewels and Tiffany diamonds in my ears, hair in ponytail” will make you “street glamorous to the fullest.” (*Dagbladet*, September 6, 2002, p. 8)

The woman cast in these accounts is emblematic of mythical duality. Actors’ ponytail imitations can transform the customary to the fashionable, the polite to the naughty, the coy to the kick-ass, and back. Immobile Barbie and animated Lara Croft, “preppy” Nancy Drew and “raunchy” Madonna, naturalize longhaired, gendered expectations and a fascination with the maintaining the polyvocal ideal. From 1945 and into a new millennium, ponytailed women are imitated by daring fashionistas who in turn inspire routine life. Better put, heterosexual normativity expands, constricts, and proliferates through custom normalization, fashionable intensification, and daily imitative bricolage. Therefore, the ponytail’s iconic charge can be used and seen as we feel and enact both mundane gender expectations and amplified versions of heteronormativity.

The ponytail shapes social life with an iconic radiation that pulsates—sometimes highly charged, sometimes barely recognized—looming in our side view. How does its owner feel it shapes her own social life? We know that a horse’s tail can give a feel full of anticipation and community, like when Ørjan prepares to ride horseback with his nurse Aanderaa (Chap. 2). The idea of a ponytailed community is so pervasive that the hairdo itself can represent belonging. In an interview about isolation and bullying at school, an adult woman shared a poetic recollection of school-girl loneliness and her image of breaking free from alienation involved a dream of joining a moving body, a fish-school of children, with “laughs and ponytails swaying from side to side” (Sarpsborg Arbeiderblad, February 9, 2012, pp. 22–23). Similarly, Simon (2000, pp. 2–3) described herself as a curly-haired daughter of straight-haired parents whose frizzy curls among a class of 20 sleek-haired elementary-school girls made her feel like “a stranger in the straight-hair world.” Her only wish was for “a neat facial profile backed by a separate knot of smooth, swingy hair.” The ponytail

allows meaningful belonging in a community who relates to specific gendered expectations.

We can also hide behind long hair, like Violet in the Pixar movie, *The Incredibles*, or any teenager with low self-esteem. Movie star Halle Berry reportedly said, “I find when I have short hair, I feel like I have nothing to hide behind.”²⁴ A ponytail has the same “uncovering” effect, as it pulls all, or most, of the hair away from the face and to the back or to the top of the head, revealing the face.

In a 1997 news article, Toni Andersen, a 23-year-old women, described her battle with low self-esteem. Despite the somewhat uncanny, gendered sensationalizing in this journalistic piece (not to mention the deeply troubling belief that biomedical techniques can restore more true “biological realities”²⁵), the article is illustrative of the ponytail’s effect as a personally meaningful technique to display a publicly recognizable character. Andersen has what she, her physician, and the journalist described as “extreme hair growth.” She has shaved her face since she was age 13 “in the morning, midday, and the afternoon, and her doctor confirmed that she has male hair growth.” Whatever that meant in 1997 or today, Andersen is offered laser surgery, for 10,000 NOK [1500 USD] to allow her a public face that “children and adults no longer turn and stare at,” Andersen said.

“Obviously, it causes a mental strain, having all that hair, but I have tried denial. I have told myself that it is just how it is. That was before I learned that I could do something about it,” Andersen said. She still shaves, but now only once a day. “After only five treatments, that is a huge improvement, and for the first time, she wears a ponytail and shows her face!”

“Now it is fun to dress up,” she said. “Now I can look like a woman instead of looking like a man” (*Aftenposten*, June 8, 1997, p. 34).

In many ways, the analyses in this book elucidate how social facts and expectations can be met in diverse, meaningful ways. In modern societies, technology plays a huge part in this cultural manipulation of “what is natural.” Despite the many sober and lively ways that girls and women employ to meet longhaired expectations, the ponytailed expectation is very real.

The ponytail pulls the hair back and reveals the face for all to see. Not only is there less material hair to hide behind, but the contemporary ponytail spirit—true or not—shows us, persuades us that its wearer “is not hiding.”²⁶ As an icon with performative power, the ponytail allows “the

crucial transformation of vision and hence of reality by change in emotional register” (Stang, 2009, p. 60). Therefore, the ponytail enters, changes, and leaves social realities with several options at hand. It is transient in and of itself. It can, at any time, be bound or unbound to allow change in diverse, yet deeply felt ontologies. Its code of normality and exception, condensed in a maneuverable binary of custom and fashion, both expands and constricts available affective communities of identity and belonging (Alexander, 2006).

Although the Norwegian press might be somewhat dissimilar to the “red-top” press elsewhere (Allern & Pollack, 2019), sex and violence sells in Norway, too. Not all ponytailed women are good, heteronormative girls next door. There are dangerous ponytailed women out there. In 1997, the Norwegian press reported on the difficult task the Danish police faced in proving that a 32-year-old female nurse had killed 22 residents at a care facility for the elderly. All the dead were cremated. The nurse was also suspected of having embezzled amounts up to 629,000 Danish kroner from the deceased and other residents. The nurse’s log showed evidence that powerful pain killers were distributed without any reported need, and despite physicians’ prescriptions. Notably, the patients’ health markedly improved whenever the suspected nurse went on vacation.

The accused’s attorney reportedly made quite an effort to convince the judge and jury that the nurse was no monster. However, the three judges “where not persuaded by a mild looking woman, with jeans, a pink sweater, thick-glassed glasses, and ruffled blonde hair in a ponytail” (*VG*, October 25, 1997, p. 18).

The ponytail is highly recognizable as *potentially* persuasive, and therefore, is subject to interpretation. Aesthetic shapes are always in the middle of semiotic processes (Alexander, 2010b) in which we criticize and interpreted cultural dualities. The woman cast, Beauvoir ([1949] 2011, p. 81) argued, allows her to become “queen of the heaven, a dove is her symbol; she is also the empress of Hades, she comes with a slithering, symbolized by a serpent.” Just like the ponytail shapes its wearer’s emotions and feelings, it creates her own and others’ social existences. The normative expectation of the ponytailed girl next door can easily fool you. If you stop to look, or do not use the shield of jurisprudence, her Medusa-like hair may turn you to stone.

If you are not alert, the ponytail can seductively persuade you to mistake the fashionable lure of custom—Nancy Drew for popstar Madonna. In late summer 2000, two “ponytailed and mild looking teenagers”

robbed a Norwegian clothing store of 25,000 NOK. The girls asked a gullible clerk for different-sized clothing, and the clerk left them alone in the store. They quickly acquired the keys to the safe and ran away with its content (*Bergens Tidene*, August 30, 2000, p. 5). By evidence of the senses, the clerk left the girls alone. By evidence of the safe, the clerk was fooled. The clerk's attention was not exactly turned to stone, but it was definitely not focused on the girls.

Another surprising report was of a mother and daughter who robbed a taxi driver. "The 14-year-old girl child had a stiff look as she drew a gun and threatened the cab driver. None of them wore masks, so the police had little trouble finding the little girl with a ponytail and her mother" (*VG*, February 27, 2000, p. 11). Who would have guessed ponytailed girls could commit such crimes?

Imitative capabilities can be used in attempts to persuade. Therefore, the ponytail icon is also charged by its deviations, fetishes, and evils that repel and compel us (Beauvoir, [1949] 2011; Katz, 1988; Smith, 2008). The two young women from Målselv, in northern Norway, who were featured on the cover of the men's magazine, *Vi Menn* [Us Men], are described as "two completely ordinary girls, no makeup, with ponytails and sweat pants" who "work as strippers" at night. Thus, the male reader is assured that any girl out there might be ordinary by day and exotic by night (*Nordlys*, March 28, 1998, p. 30). This existence of others who are different from or alike us is what allows identities. It generates an ambiguous magic and magnetism between fear and desire, repulsion and attraction.²⁷ This does not mean that an interior core of identity is a complete illusion, but that it is lived through a culturally formed fantasy of a fantasy, and that gender is itself an imitation generated by our human compulsion to repeat the code of custom and fashion—with a twist.²⁸

PONYTAILED MEN AND WOMEN

If identity is a product of difference, if imitation can be either acting like one's model or doing the exact opposite (Tarde, 1903, p. xvii), then who are the ponytailed men appearing in the Norwegian press? If we assume Norwegian journalists tend to think in gender binaries, what do they say about men with ponytails? To my big (prejudiced) surprise, during the '70s, '80s, and well into the late '90s, men with ponytails were the subject of news reports more often than women. In 1994, hairstylist Alf Johan Fjeld provided a history lesson and reality check. During the hippies' era,

ponytails for men were quite popular. Then the yuppies with ponytails, waving from their Mercedes convertibles, made the hairstyle common across social divisions. Fjeld stated that men with ponytails take better care of their hair, “Well, perhaps not the case for hippies.” The high point for men with ponytails may not be 1994, as the style is still popular for Norwegian men of all ages in many occupations, especially creative, artistic, and social service jobs. Museum curator Holger Koefoed eventually cut his hair based on his family’s popular demand telling him that he was not “the right animal to wear a horsetail.” Asked why he had one in the first place, he replied that he was advised to grow a ponytail because of his “weirdly shaped head” and that he could just as well “get outed” with a pulled-back hairstyle (*VG*, December 18, 1994, pp. 44–45).

The man with the ponytail performs a creative and rebellious masculinity; he shows us something about his inner “essence.” Yes, he may also be a bit crazy: like Marlon Brando thinking he can evade the press at Heathrow Airport (*VG*, March 9, 1971, p. 9); or like 71-year-old Duke Ellington wearing a “hair whip” accompanied by a “hippie outfit” as he conducts the jazz orchestra (*VG*, November 9, 1971, p. 23); or the male robber, looking kind of weird with a long ponytail, black ashes in his face and a black glove on his left hand (*VG*, September 20, 1974, p. 7). During the 1980s, the ponytail was considered fashionable for girls, but boys’ hair “should be short” (*Aftenposten*, April 11, 1988, p. 9). Bad boys, of course, can rebel against short hair and still be quite “popular with the young women” (*Aftenposten*, May 4, 1988, p. 14). Ponytailed men could be found as hippie musicians and artists on the summer streets of Oslo (*Aftenposten*, July 22, 1988, p. 9), and yes, as occasionally playing a pirate role in an amusement park (*Aftenposten*, August 30, 1988, p. 13). Others were simply a little off beat (*Aftenposten*, September 26, 1988, p. 6). Some men grow a tail to display creative spirit, but may not convince everyone: Reporting on an exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, director Morten Eid commented on all those men who walk around pretending that they understand art, you know, “especially those young men with a ponytail” (*VG*, August 3, 1995).

Even as part of what is often considered and criticized as a super-straight, masculine male sports milieu (Messner & Sabo, 1992, 1994), we find something a little bit out of the ordinary: Erik Kvalfoss, biathlon athlete who has “a ring in the ear and a ponytail. He stands out. ‘I just want to be myself, but I do not want to provoke anyone,’ he apologizes. ‘And I *do* take sports as seriously as all the others’” (*VG*, March 5, 1990,

p. 25). Thank heavens. In contrast to the many analyses of women's apologetic behavior, which uses heteronormative adornments and symbolism as evidence (Daniels, 2009; Davis-Delano et al. 2009; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009), Kvalfoss is quite explicit. Motorcyclists, however, need no excuse. "With the leather suit as armor, a head band covering up a mean scar, and a gust of wind ruffling his ponytail," the biker roars unapologetically down the street (*VG*, April 27, 1990, p. 40).

At this point in history, there is an impressive number of men in ponytails. "The frenetic guitar player Adrien Belew has been Bowie's mate since the '70s ... and still creates magic guitar riffs as whipping as his ponytail" (*NTB*, August 22, 1990). Even the rather boring Morten Harket of the world-famous Norwegian band Aha had one (*NTB*, October 14, 1991). Movie stars Val Kilmer, Al Pacino, Antonio Banderas, and Sean Connery in the *Medicine Man* (*VG*, February 17, 1992, p. 37–38), and Michael Jackson, too (*NTB*, July 14, 1992). Oslo's chic *Theatercaféen* draws an ensemble of "women in manly hats and men in womanly ponytails" (*Aftenposten*, March 20, 1993, p. 42). On the soccer pitch, there are Italian beauty Roberto Baggio, aka "the divine ponytail" (*Aftenposten*, May 6, 1993, p. 18), and England's prima bad boy, Paul "Gazza" Gascoigne (*NTB*, August 17, 1993). David Seaman, the Arsenal goalie, receives considerable attention for having a ponytail *and* for removing it (*Dagbladet*, March 25, 2001, p. 40; April 5, 2001, p. 24; *Nettavisen*, October 30, 2002, p. 30). Nevertheless, as museum curator Holger Koefoed discovered when his family disapproved of his ponytail, it's only the not-so-average Joes who wear them, like "that weird guy who stood up and played air-guitar at the Eric Clapton concert" (*Aftenposten*, April 2, 2001, p. 24).

Most notably, a vast amount of the men ponytails reported on in the Norwegian press through the '80s and '90s were worn by criminals.²⁹ These ponytails appear in the news as signaling descriptions of terrorizing rock throwers (*VG*, December 16, 1993, p. 14), thieves (*NTB*, August 29, 1988), and rapists (*VG*, September 13, 1994; *Aftenposten*, September 15, 1994, p. 6). Ponytailed men are true bad boys, at least some of them. A Norwegian man who attempted to rob a jeweler in Copenhagen, "can thank his own ponytail that his attempt at robbery failed"; the shop clerk grabbed his ponytail and held it tight until the police arrived (*NTB*, December 13, 1995).

The ponytail is such a vivid signifier of the White bad boy that statistics from the Norwegian customs office show that only 2 percent of the 9029

Norwegian citizens who were asked to strip for inspection in 1997 actually carried contraband. Attorney Ellen Moen is shocked by what she calls a ponytailed prejudice: “Whenever I am on a plane, the people stopped by customs are so easy to spot. I usually never get it wrong. If I were to ship drugs to Norway, I would use one guy with a ponytail and an earring, and one guy with a suit and briefcase. I would let the man in the suit carry the drugs since, rest assured; it is the man with the ponytail who is stopped” (*VG*, March 9, 1998; *Aftenposten*, March 10, 1998, p. 2). No wonder, perhaps, that male police officers who want the right to sport a ponytail face big problems. But in Norway, gender equality naturally triumphs (*NTB*, September 24, 1999) and male and female officers who want to wear ponytails can, of course, wear them.

The ponytail shows how bodies are subjectively experienced as objective carriers of meanings that shape how we sense, enter, and sustain social worlds.³⁰ Although the ponytail is a sex cue (Friedman, 2013), it is not, by any means, a univocal one. A quick peek at men who wear ponytails exemplifies this claim. A ponytail in and of itself does not make a body female, but it certainly shapes our being and thinking about women and men. Men with ponytails are deviant, rebellious, bad boys, creative, or blatant criminals; girls and women with ponytails are quite normal. In its sacred, pure form, a ponytail on a women signals a confident, heteronormative, creative, and assertive person, either the ordinary, morally good yet charming girl next door or the fashionista with a ponytail whip that commands our attention. In its sacred impure form, a ponytailed woman can be a femme fatal or a morally dubious woman in the disguise of the morally good girl. Read through the symbolic layers of altruism or commercial ploy, ponytailed women may be role models fighting for human or animal rights or a plastic mold shaped by neoliberal-cum-patriarchal ideology. Thus, the ponytail does not override polyvocality to subsume all men and women into some bad boy or Barbie doll ideal; rather, it can hold both evil and good. It crowns idealistic women who work in dingy offices, the liminal exotic dancer, and the downright criminal femme fatal. What directs the use and understandings of the ponytail’s expectations are its countless imitations guided by culture structures.

As the ponytail is used to maneuver gendered expectations, two concurrent forces generate its performative power and half-life: The ordinary ponytail can become extraordinarily fashionable and the extraordinarily fashionable ponytail can become customary. The ponytailed woman stripper and the criminal are, in (cultural) fact, simply ordinary females who

have stretched their imitative capabilities and the audience's identification of what is a "natural" custom into a fetish or an evil. The princesses of royal families and the super stars of pop culture stretch our iconic consciousness to let us see and feel that they are really just ordinary, authentic ponytailed women. They all reveal how femininity is made through imitations of untouchable fantasies and ideals that can materialize and therefore be sensed on a desirable (for some) aesthetic surface. The ponytail is felt as a social-cum-kinetic movement between custom and fashion. It performs a self-confident maneuvering of modernity through imitations and counter-imitations of beliefs and desires (Butler, 1993; Mead, [1934] 2015, pp. 166–167) that are under the control of fixed ideas and their theses and antithesis (Tarde, 1903, p. 159).

Fashion takes custom and amplifies it. As a process of myth-logics, images of the ponytail are elaborated and twisted (Alexander, 2004; Freud, 1950). Therefore, the ponytail can command attention and compel attractions as its silhouette communicates moral power and an archetype that allows affective participation in an imitative community.³¹ In a fragmented and conflictual modernity, multiple symbolic layers ensure that we can adopt the ponytail in varied contexts and with various intents. Wearing one becomes a performed choice, conscious and unconscious, that itself performs tradition and innovation, and like fashion itself, allows us to see and feel nostalgia without forsaking progress. "Under" the visible aesthetic surface of the ponytail are "invisible" codes and narratives (Alexander, 2010b; Champagne, 2018, forthcoming). Through the culturally structured options described in this chapter, we see how the ponytail's meanings can reflect normality and sympathy or dangers and deceit. Our ponytailed choices can therefore ignite joy, irony, anger, and resistance.³²

The ponytail is a floating signifier that allows us to stitch and restitch together cultural bits and grammars, allowing us to feel, show, and shape an existential oscillation between fashion and customs. It compels us as it holds possibilities both to operate a massive array of individual and social selves and to shape social life.³³ Ponytailed women, in style or simply by habit, can fight for democracy or represent commercial interests, and media critics ensure we see this wealth of prospective role models: some standing on the barricades and some imitating neoliberal and patriarchal ideals (Figs. 2 and 3).

Fig. 2 The codes and symbolic layers used to interpret and enact practical womanhood

Longhaired expectations

Custom | Fashion

Altruistic | Commercial

Normality | Deviance

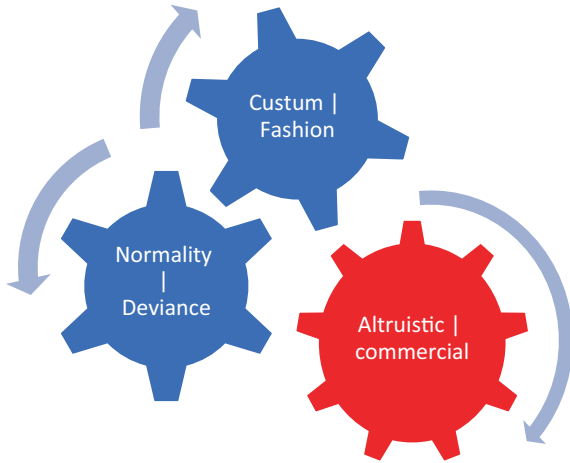


Fig. 3 The codes and symbolic layers of the longhaired expectation

NOTES

1. See also Lukes (1973, p. 12).
2. On tribal customs of the Tikopia Island in Polynesia prior to and after European colonization, see (Macdonald, 2004, pp. 886–887; Synnott, 1987; Weitz, 2004, p. xv).
3. (see Blackburn, 2007; Schultz, 2014; Simon, 2000; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009; Weitz, 2004; Whitaker, 2018).
4. I combine Alexander’s (2004) theory of cultural pragmatics with Lévi-Strauss’ (1966) notion of the “bricoleur,” a competent actor who shapes meaningful actions through symbols and symbolic systems. I also draw on theories about how myth is placed in the (sometimes aesthetically trans-

- formed) geographical, economic, and social landscape of its community (E. Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 1967).
5. According to Goffman (1976a), “women nature” is a social construction made up of iconic displays of femininity.
 6. “In fact, primitive custom obeys, whereas custom in its final stage commands generation. The one is exploitation of a social by a living form; the other, the exploitation of a living by a social form” (Tarde, 1903, pp. 253–254).
 7. At Jean of Arc’s 1431 trial, her short hairstyle was considered a heresy. Although her short hairdo and “cross-dressing” in a military uniform was a practical necessity in combat and prison, they did not fit the social expectations outside of brute, state-governed violence (Aquinas, *Summa* 44: 239 [2a2ae. 169, 2]) “The wearing of the clothes of the opposite sex is wrong ... It is expressly forbidden in the law ... However, it may be done without sin in case of necessity” (in Fraioli, 2000, p. fn. 130).
 8. Smith (1999) showed how the meaning of the somewhat consistent materiality of the Place de la Bastille in Paris has changed throughout history, due to transformations in the natural surroundings and in meaning-making.
 9. (Tarlo, 2017; Weitz, 2004).
 10. (Tarlo, 2017, pp. 64–65).
 11. Advertisers position women in various submissive and empowering stances to attract consumers (Goffman, 1976b). Harvey and Gill (2013) argued that the sexually empowered woman can be understood as a sales pitch that in its actuality disempowers through forced psychological dispositions and individual responsibilities to be attractive.
 12. Gender performances invite immersion in ideal settings through an iconic expression (Goffman, 1976b).
 13. Veblen ([1899] 1994, p. 105) argued that much extravagant women’s clothing and some women’s excessively long hair, are both expensive to keep and hamper the “wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion.”
 14. (Hillman, 2013).
 15. (see Lazar, 2013; Wolf, 2002).
 16. Some scholars have called it the phenomenon of multiple femininities (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Daniels, 2009) and others have made note that the ever-changing woman is therefore an ideal neoliberal actor (Pickren, 2018; Rutherford, 2018).
 17. Despite all of her “positive” characteristics, Lara Craft is an embodiment of an untouchable and unachievable male sexual fantasy (Greer, 1999 in Mikula, 2003). Nonetheless, Mikula (2003) argued that the Lara’s attrac-

- tion resides in the many ways in which she is interpreted, imitated, and used by individuals.
18. (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; Toffoletti et al. 2018).
 19. (see Alexander, 2010a, p. 327).
 20. Many have discussed whether the Spice Girls merely signify an empty commercial ploy (Banet-Weiser, 2018) or a reclamation and recuperation of the word “girl” (Gillis & Munford, 2004).
 21. Røros, a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its copper mines, was the filming location for Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, its authentic wooden buildings and a winter market called *Rørosmartnan*, drawing 60,000–70,000 tourists to the city of about 4000 inhabitants.
 22. Hair is multivocal (E. R. Leach, 1958; Synnott, 1987) and meaning is composed of a fusion of personal routines and habits (Lizardo, 2017) with deeply felt public culture (Mast, 2019; Smith, 2008) to display group belonging and personal moods (Obeyesekere, 1981; Weitz, 2004).
 23. *Aftenposten*, October 13, 1994, p. 56; *Aftenposten*, May 31, 1997, p. 46; *Aftenposten*, July 14, 2001, p. 21.
 24. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1285129>
 25. (Martin, 1991; Zola, 1972).
 26. (Alexander, 2004; Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1976a).
 27. Identities are the achievement of similarities and differences (Lawler, 2008). Difference is also what generates an equivocal magic and magnetism between fear and desire in the gendered relations between men and women (Beauvoir, [1949] 2011, pp. 170–176). These deep psychological and social landscapes of difference and similarities are put in play on the material surface of the body as an enacted fantasy (Butler, 1990, pp. 185–188).
 28. Butler’s (1990) brilliant and psychoanalytically inspired work unfortunately completely dismisses phenomenology (p.45) and gives a bit too much weight to social structures through Foucault and critical theory (p. ix). Nevertheless, Butler’s work is inspiring and useful as it gives much weight to a deeply felt ambivalence in social encounters.
 29. *Aftenposten*, April 5, 1991, p. 4; *Aftenposten*, February 24, 1993, p. 4; *Aftenposten*, August 27, 1993, p. 4; *Bergens Tidene*, September 14, 1994, p. 6; *Nordlys*, February 8, 1995, p. 11; *Aftenposten*, May 11, 1995, p. 9; *Aftenposten*, September 22, 1995, p. 12; *Aftenposten*, February 18, 1996, p. 2; *Aftenposten*, November 1, 1996, p. 3; *Aftenposten*, February 23, 1998, p. 4; *NTB*, May 7, 1998; *Dagbladet*, November 15, 1998, p. 14; *Bergens Tidene*, November 2, 2000, p. 5.
 30. (Csordas, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2012; Turner, 1995)
 31. Aesthetic surfaces communicate moral power and archetypes (Alexander, 2010a). Through cycles of imitation these surfaces, whether presented in

- magazines or on social media, allow us to make fashionable representations of ourselves and our communities (Surette, 2019; Weitz, 2004).
32. Greta Garbo ignites irony of an ephemeral yet enduring feminine ideal (Barthes, [1957] 2009). Fashion ideals ignite anger (Wolf, 2002) and resistance (Gill, 2016) in the ways it shapes toxic ideas about femininity and may deteriorate possibilities for solidarity.
 33. Individuality is constructed through an interplay of ideas and ideals (Mead, [1934] 2015); through processes of egalitarianism (Bellah et al. 1996) and social problems that are made into psychological dispositions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). A ponytail habit is therefore not merely the expression of its owner's soul and faculties, but habitualized meanings (Mauss, [1934] 1973).

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Health

“A flamboyant head of hair is neither feminine nor masculine; it is *human* and it sets us apart from our primate relatives as we evolved into a distinct species” (Morris, 1987, p. 21). As soon as we were sufficiently advanced, Morris continued, we set about snipping, curling, and shaving. The shaft, the visible part of the hair, grows about a third of a millimeter a day which allows a continuous grooming and surveillance of this highly malleable part of the human body. Growth slows down in old age, illness, pregnancy, and cold weather, and is most speedy between the ages of 16 and 24, in health, and in recovery from illness to compensate for impeded growth. A hair lives about six years on a healthy young adult head, and if uncut, will grow to reach roughly a meter in length, flowing from head to knees (Morris, 1987, p. 25). Thus, hair growing and cutting dialogues with and expresses biological life. No wonder then hair fashioning is vital to our understanding of life, birth, youth, aging, and death.

Moral ideas about hair growth and cutting may reflect existential threats of finitude and express a believer’s devotion to symbol systems.¹ Women who sell their hair online tend to highlight their healthy diet and lifestyle, stressing their hair’s “natural qualities” and the loving treatment they give it (Tarlo, 2017, p. 36). This meaning-making about biological hair naturalizes its symbolism. Hair becomes a material mediator of social facts and makes health a “paramount norm” of human life (Durkheim, [1901] 2014, pp. 4, 57). In youth-worshipping Western cultures, any sign of (biological or cultural) aging is something of a disaster. The drive is to

relentlessly keep the body “naturally young” through a blend of emotive, semiotic, and sacred actions that perpetually root health in hair. As we ceaselessly fuse youth and health, we construct a social fact that directs social life and is eminently visible in hair that grays, thins, or disappears with age. Displaying and sensing healthy hair is, in other words, part of how we enact and feel human history, common capacities and frailties, and moral youthfulness (Bordo, 1999; Prince, 2009; Shilling, 2004; Weitz, 2004).

Throughout history and across cultures, beliefs and desires regarding youthfulness vary yet persist. There might not be much truth to the fountain of youth, but its meaning has enchanted humanity from 3500 BCE, inspiring myths about historic figures like Alexander the Great and Ponce de León searched for its wellspring and alchemists attempting to recreate its brew (Olshansky, Hayflick, & Carnes, 2002). Today, medical professionals (Crawford, 2006; Zola, 1972), self-branded gurus, and social-media influencers fuse health and fit femininities within a landscape saturated with youthful images (Baker & Rojek, 2020; O’Connor, 2011). Meaning-making about bodies seems placed squarely with commercial actors or the hegemonic ideologists of big pharma. Our bodies have become props, only worthy as exchange value measured in money or followers, or as a means of medicalized surveillance. Yet humans are undeniably destined for an ephemeral existence, and aging is an impossible dynamic to reverse. Many also would agree that worship of youthful bodies is problematic and downright ageist.² Nonetheless, myths about youthfulness continue to resound. “Magic” anti-aging creams have made a modern alchemist revival. Even the rational world of science blows life into stories of old mice and men turned young again and of claims of research firms that (for a neat sum) slow aging.³

Apart from indicating a period before adult maturity when one is young, *youthfulness* also signifies growth, vitality, freshness, and little erosion.⁴ According to Jung (1967, pp. 235–236), the youthfulness of childhood, as an archetype, is suggestive of unconscious, instinctive happenings, a state of unconscious identity with parents, and therefore, an unconscious and animal state of life. This sort of freedom from responsibility and social control is lost with age, but the longing for this world endures and generates its symbolic landscape.⁵ Thus, the transitional years of youth, adolescence, represent both this imagined loss and long for childhood and the crises that ensue when we reach for and push away adult commitments, moral worlds, and ideologies (Hopkins, 1983; Kaplan, 1984).

Youthfulness is a cultural grammar of complex threats and promises. The public figure of youth often materializes in the moral standard-bearers of civil society. In Norway and Norden, youths have spearheaded youth political movements and national efforts for independence, unity, and progress.⁶ As a code, youth signifies hope, courage, vitality, and willpower, as well as a dangerous, primitive force in need of discipline. As youths are tempted by the “evils” of alcohol, crime, and “deviant sexualities,” the purity and democratic prospects they possess remain prominent, but fragile.

In this chapter, I explore how the ponytail through its aesthetic surface may make tangible the complex symbol systems of youthfulness. Employing icon theory (Alexander, 2010b, 2012), I show how the ponytail can hold and transmit youthfulness throughout a woman’s lifespan, from childhood and well into old age.

CHILDHOOD

An icon is about experience, not communication. To have an iconic consciousness is to understand without knowing, or at least without knowing that one knows. It is to understand by feeling, contact, and sensory evidence rather than the mind (Alexander, 2010b, p. 11). Some of the cheerful youthfulness of a sleek, straight ponytail echoes from its being the fashion of the young, White, heteronormative female.⁷ An October 22, 1956 report in the newspaper *Raummnes* concerning the vibrant Girl Scouts of small town Haga exemplifies this claim. A fine row of bikes welcomes the reporter, signifying that she is in the right place:

And well inside, *there it is*, the horde we are looking for. Dark [tanned] necks, light [blonde] excited ponytails, and short wagging backs [*bustesvanser*] bent over in a thrilled preoccupation” with their many tasks. These eight young women radiate “the most youthful of adolescence’s fiery glow and interest” for the cause. They play and study, embroider, and tie all kinds of knots. They sing. Then they put knowledge into action in the great outdoors. Blue-eyed perhaps, the girls fill the room with their “pure voices and focused wrinkles on the otherwise smooth foreheads”.

These young, ponytailed girls are poised and healthy, just like the 25 lively [*livsfriske*] kids in the summer of 1958 at the summer colony at Vennevold, an El Dorado for three-to-nine year olds who have come to

the countryside from Oslo (*Raumes*, July 23, 1958). The newspaper account paints a picture of ideal, healthy childhood, aswirl with energy and budding like nature itself, as the children excitedly surround the reporters' car, "with wild locks and ponytails in perfect harmony, light Nordic bangs, and many with the essential scar on their knees. Brown [tanned], well and healthy, fizzing with the joy of life."

Nature draws children away from the worldly world, to escape and challenge it while remaining in the mythical landscapes of childhood (Natov, 2011), a process apparent in these stories about Girl Scouts and summer campers, as well as in the cherished children's literature of the Nordic countries. Far from all girls in Norden grow up like ardent feminist and children's prose writer Astrid Lindgren's *Ronja, Røverdatter* [Ronja, the Robber's Daughter] who, with wild screams of joy (and sometimes fear) and an advanced moral sense, runs into the woodlands her wild, dark hair flowing.⁸ Similarly, Maria Parr's *Tonje Glimmerdal* [Astrid, the Unstoppable] with a big, red hair flowing in the wind, fears no challenges in conquering mountains, ski jumps, backflips, sled rides.⁹ Nor in amending broken relationships with compassion and empathy. That is, with a little bit of "speed and self-confidence," which is Tonje's catchphrase, these young girl femininities represent a central childhood narrative in this region of the world. In their struggle for independence and belonging, Ronja and Astrid never lose their love for a nature with its seasonal shifts, dangers, and joys. The ponytailed child with a tanned neck and scarred knees, as such, is a mythical character herself, in the flesh. Well brought up, she will roam free with immense potential.

On February 28, 1959, *VG's* Arne Skouen, a journalist well-known for his fight for the developmentally disabled and for institutionalizing the regular *VG* entry, the "Declaration," poetically narrated his visit with a special little girl at a childcare institution. Under the headline "Your little destiny," Skouen's article describes how the ten-year-old girl, fictitiously named Frida, was shoved out from her parents' "nest" that was home to 11 other little ones and onto the "dump." The only parting gift Frida received was the North Norwegian dialect from a folk song, which she practices repeatedly, letting her voice linger on the last intonation of its argot, "Your mommy-y-y" [*Mor di-i-i*].

Although Frida should have been in third grade, she is not able to collect her thoughts. "She shrieks in joy at the bird that flies above her, when she should be focusing on her drawing." At day, she absorbed all around her. Like "a talented artist with a startling maturity, but oh, so impatient,"

she looks at the sailboats on the water calling them “tents.” At night, in the dusk, “her voice is clear like a bell as she sings her dream of mommy-y-y.”

To cast Frida’s story, Skouen fuses social issues of family, state economies, and politics with the lack of caring for children like her. He describes “how she sings her Northlandish” and how “she toils, in the heat of the moment, with her rubber boots.” He lets us see with him “how her hair is bound in a ponytail that precociously spurts from underneath her red hat ... As she is out playing with the other kids, ... Frida is free like the foal.” Like the foal, we understand that Frida can move with a spirited ponytail only if she is cared for. The journalist pleads for politicians to see and care as well. To help the readers identify with the politics of Frida’s situation, he links childhood to an instinctive, creative play materialized in the healthy and youthful swing of the ponytail. A lack of love arrested Frida’s development at an instinctual childhood state in which she still calls out for her mother’s vow and is incapable of gathering her thoughts. As an archetype, ponytailed Frida is a negative instance. She disrupts the dull clockwork of our world. Who can be so cruel to deny committed love to such an innocent child?

Many times, the ponytail pops up when journalists poetically condense the image of a girl. In a play by Anne-Cath Vestly, girls with ponytails go to the theater and learn about the new, stressful consumer society (*VG*, September 3, 1965a, p. 7). A caring mom fashions a girl’s ponytail in front of the mirror with deliberation (*VG*, October 20, 1965b, p. 4). A ponytail with four rubber bands, one after another, and a horsetail brush at the tip is the chosen fashion of early primary-school girls (*VG*, August 25, 1966, p. 14). Josef Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana, was once a scrawny, cheerful 13-year-old with a ponytail and knee-high stockings (*VG*, September 6, 1967, p. 10). Nine-year-old prime ballerina, Anne-Mette Torp, wears two ponytails (usually called pigtails) as she sings the famous Norwegian children’s song “Du og jeg og vi to [You and I and Us Two]” (*VG*, April 21, 1973, p. 38). And then there is Nina Sand, the only child of her little town, who has no other kids to play with. However, with a long dark ponytail down her back, she enjoys the company of the boisterousness and confidence of Astrid Lindgren’s ([1948] 2015) character Pippi Longstocking, although Nina is a little shy herself (*VG*, November 11, 1978, p. 28).

This widespread presence of the ponytail among girls is most interesting, however, because of the ways in which it is *interpreted* and *felt*. For example, a 1985 story in *VG* contrasts Norwegian and East European gymnastics:

Of another world: competing in the same European Championship, but Norwegian Hanne Veiby and Gry Hansen do not come close to Maxi Gnauck other than when asking for an autograph. But the Norwegian girls are *having fun doing sports*.

[The Norwegian girls, 14 and 16 years old, admire the “majestic” moves of world star gymnasts, Maxi Gnauck and Natalia Jurtchenko.] Mouth and eyes wide open, with their autograph collection in hand, they [the Norwegians] watch their competitors perform series that they do not even dare to dream to carry out.

[At the final workout before the main event,] “strict East European coaches, wearing the mask of a heartless stoic, instructing their little ones in worn-out gym socks, ponytails, and magnesium-white hands. The girls themselves seem unaffected. They listen carefully and will not let their competitors, the press or the functionaries, steal their attention. When they finish their drills, they march straight to their coach. There awaits a pat on the shoulder for approval, or a scolding that makes their little heads bow in shame. They will become great gymnasts, whether they like it or not. During the practice, their focus is so intense that any teacher at Blindern [University of Oslo] would turn pale in envy. The opposite is true among some of the Western European nations, where the smile is steadily present on the girls. But then again, they get to collect autographs too.

Many might say that this shows why Norway is so far behind in international gymnastics. Obviously, Gry and Hanne could walk the hall like gymnast-robots. The smile could be washed away, and seriousness could take over, completely. No, it is better that we, the TV-audience, are satisfied with being impressed by the East Europeans. But do not forget as you watch them: Goodness how much these little ones have toiled for their success. (VG, May 11, 1985, p. 41)

Once more, as with Frida’s story, the ponytail marks the culturally contingent promise of a girl that might otherwise be hard to see. While the smile is missing amid adult authority and disciplinary regime, the girl is still there, as her ponytail provides iconic proof of her existence. At the same time, the ponytail—as a centerpiece of sacred and polluted dimensions of upbringing—can generate a stark contrast and reveal how youthful, instinctual prospects of play can be lost. Similar to Foucault (1977), the journalist frames the robotic East European girl as emerging from a militaristic surveillance culture. Indeed, she has a child’s ponytail, but she is stripped of childhood’s freedom. It is not that Norwegian sports have no adult authority and no robotic athletes; rather they are coded differently, and therefore, are seen differently. Youngsters are protected in ways

that allow them to be another type of children. This contrasting story of the East European other is one of a Norwegian identity that is anti-hierarchical and antiauthoritarian.¹⁰ Thus, the iconic image of the girl gymnast and robot-athlete with a ponytail seems to be a useful one for the Norwegian journalist: She reappears two years later inside the confines of a military hall in Seska Moscow (*Aftenposten*, May 23, 1987, p. 6) as a perfect illustration of the opposite of a healthy Norwegian childhood.

Childhoods are cultural constructs. In Norway, sports are the country's largest voluntary organizations and social movement. They provide an arena for youths' moral and physical development, which represent the country's health. At arms' length distance, the Norwegian welfare state endorses this civil contribution made by sports. The key symbol of 'the joy of sports' [*idrettsglede*] that is responsible for the stark contrast in between Norwegian and East European gymnastics can be found in the Norwegian public sphere and are associated with health, voluntarism, equality, communion, and democracy. Adult volunteers commit to help the local sports club, and thus, also commit to the local community's youth, at least in principle (T. B. Broch, 2022).

Of course, Norwegian sports are not without problematics. Recurrently, sports are called out as overly competitive, sexist, and racist, and civil actors steadily attempt to repair the notions of Norwegian sports as a safe haven for the nation's children and youth.¹¹ With great success, sports continue to be a leading provider of afterschool activities. Therefore, youth sports in Norway are a prime site for the interpretation of healthy youths and where the vitality and health of youths can be performed. The contrast of the very skilled, but sadly subdued East European gymnast makes a good case of this debate.

According to the Norwegian press, the sporting health of Norwegian girls is quite different from that of the East Europeans. A good example is the Norway Cup, one of the world's largest soccer tournaments for children ages 6 to 19. From its 1972 inauguration, this competition welcomed female players, although the Norwegian Soccer Federation did not do so until 1976. As an international tournament, it has won the 1995 UNICEF-Norway prize for building bridges between children and youth across cultures.

No other team has a more pressing time schedule than the pack of young girls from the club that hosts the tournament. They get up early in the morning to remove litter, candy bar wrappings, paper cups, and left-behind programs. And, these troopers are not among the most serious of



Fig. 1 The healthy ponytailed child. (Picture credit: Lorado via Getty Images)

footballers either, a journalist reported, after asking them about their positions on the pitch. Most of them are fully unaware and careless of their position. Three games into the 1986 Norway Cup, Jeanette's team had scored zero and let in 20. "They scored again. Silje, how many goals have they scored? Little Jeanette (8 years old) looks at her teammate, puts her fingers to her mouth, wondering, and throws her light blonde ponytail to her back" (VG, July 31, 1986, p. 30). But, as with many other stories of archetypal positive youth, no one (at least not the journalist) can neglect their enthusiastic play and voluntarism, on and off the pitch, in making the prized Norway Cup (Fig. 1).

Embodied youthful identities, should not reflect merely toil, discipline, and achievement. And when it does, the toil should be a form that is prized, such as in voluntarism and democratic participation. However, youth should indulge in unserious play, not drills and authoritarian sport regimes. When asked "Why do you dance ballet?" May Linn Viker said, "Because it is fun! She puts both her hands in her mouth, looks at mommy and giggles so much that her dark ponytail jumps. She has been on stage with almost 300 ballet students and thinks it is just fun" (*Aftenposten*, December 12, 1990, p. 40). That is how children sports should be!

With its many positive and negative aspects, and charged with archetypal myths, the ponytail is an iconic signifier of “the girl,” who participates in “instinctual play” but also needs democratic guidance. Her healthy environment and upbringing should not lack authority figures, but those authorities should be democratically concerned with the child’s healthy development. When not properly cared for, or socialized into guilt and constrained by social power, the ponytailed girl still contains the form of the girl child, but we feel the painful loss of her content: her normal, healthy childhood, and the child herself. The aesthetic surface of the ponytail presents this dualistic presence of the archetypal girl. When she roams free, with scars on her knees and a healthy tan, her ponytail swings happily like the horsetail of a frisky foal. When it is “simply there” as a discharged signifier of a girl, we sense and fear its death.

When a residential block collapsed in Turkey, Muztaffer Yarla was thrown from his balcony onto the sidewalk. Lying on a stretcher as rescue personnel frenetically searched for survivors, he feared for the lives of his family members. Only God knows. “A picture of a girl with a ponytail falls undamaged from the jaws of a bulldozer” removing rubble from the scene and suddenly the machines stop as a naked pair of lifeless feet are revealed (*NTB*, August 17, 1999). Like the snippets of hair kept to retain the life spirit of our youth or of someone we love now passed away, the ponytail holds the half-life a healthy childhood that never was (Fig. 2).

Healthy Childhood Hair

Freedom to roam | Socially constrained

Instinctual play | Socialized guilt

Democratic guidance and care | Noncommittal parenting and scorn

Fig. 2 The symbolic layers used to interpret and enact healthy and unhealthy childhoods

YOUTH

The ponytailed girl, roaming about with healthy scars or putting in the long voluntary hours in her sports club, will eventually become a teenager with an altered physical-cum-social body.¹² Thus, the iconic ponytail is amended to the scripts of young adulthood.¹³ While the ponytailed girl jumps into play, youth never seem to make up their minds. As shopkeepers in 1956 brace themselves for the last fervent Norwegian Christmas shoppers, the clerk with best-selling items like the ponytail clip, kindly asks a reporter, “Please tell the young women that come to get that 40 cent lipstick not to arrive five minutes before closing” (*VG*, December 24, 1956).

Youth is a time to sample caricatures of our societies, and every so often, we retain those that we only meant to try on (Kaplan, 1984). In the 1950s, a new generation of youth tie up their ponytails “with a prosaic stocking-band around the ‘tail’ as clips and bands grow ever more popular” in Norway and the United States (*VG*, January 22, 1957a). At a rock music competition, girls “with ponytails, pigtails, and long hair [*dåre-hår*]” abound. One of them “took her shoes off and was using them as ammunition, throwing them at the referees” who had declared the champion (*VG*, August 22, 1958). Similar styles reappear a generation later. “Leather jackets, tight dungarees and slick hair on the boys. Ponytails, small dark sunglasses, and boots on the girls. These were the important ingredients for many” of those who still rocked around the clock, even though they were not even born “when legendary Bill Haley in 1954 rocked his way into the world” (*VG*, June 18, 1979, p. 36). Generation after generation continued to rock hard at concerts, so hard “that ponytails were shaking and dungarees got drenched” (*VG*, June 6, 1980, p. 45). The rise of “the teenager” coincided with the rise of rock and roll, and never really seems to have settled. Rock girls in all ages even survived the transition to Y2K with the “‘60s still clinging on their rhythms and outfits, dotted skirts and dipping ponytails that we suspect have been hanging on since, well, the Sixties” (*Aftenposten*, July 14, 2001, p. 21).

Many of the stories collected for this book reflect White, Norwegian heteronormativity a social status, arguably, achieved through trials observed by journalists out for a stroll. The journalist sees all those cool boys on their phones, and all those “small girls in white, tight pants that totter on their high platform shoes. They look like newborn foals, struggling to stay on their legs as they walk the cobblestones. Ponytails wave

above eyelashes that are black like the spider's feet. Fingers with glued on nails gripping bottles with unidentifiable drinks. Girls with cell phones glued to their ears. Girls meet boys. They chew gum. Giggle. And flirt" (*NTB*, April 6, 2000). The roaming, high-spirited foal, representing the healthy girl child, is replaced with a foal barely able to stay on her feet, recalling Disney's young Bambi barely getting a foothold on the ice. These teenagers' ponytails sway as they try to manage fashionable high heels and skirts that constrain their stride and attention (Rich, 1983).

Hair allows us to play with potential racial, sexual, and class identities and to assert who we are and whom we want to become (Weitz, 2004). These cobblestone wobblers present many identifiable stereotypes that indicate how youths seek to shape their own futures, and, as archetypes, the future of the collective (Berggren, 1997). As they try on these cultural archetypes (some of which their parents would prefer they did not), many will deem their stumbling a natural part of youth.

As a hallmark of the land of individuality, McDonalds conquered Norway and is in 2000 the country's largest employer of youth between 16 and 25. In press reports about the non-unionized youth working at McDonalds, such as "May Elise Skauvik (19) is sweating behind the cash register, her ponytail sticking out from underneath her dark blue cap with that big M in yellow" (*Adresseavisen*, July, 17, 2000, p. 10). The reporter is critical of the company, but finds little disapproval among the young employees, who would rather spend their money on *things* than a union.

Adolescence is a time of cultural promises and dangers. While some work the grills of McDonalds, some face other prospects. Thirteen-year-old Jannicke Boug delivered the May 17th speech in 1988 at the wreathed tombstone of poet, social debater, and proponent of the Independence Day celebration, Henrik Wergeland. While McDonalds' young women chose not to unionize, Borg-like the many young men and women that perform this annual speech—urged her generation to join in solidarity with those who fought for their country's independence and for those who are less fortunate today. True to the genre of Independence Day speeches, many in 2022 honored Ukraine's fight for independence as well as their Norwegian ancestors. In 1988, Boug will ask all to "Join in!" As she practices her speech "she encourages all her fellow students in Oslo and swings her ponytail to accentuate her message" (*Aftenposten*, May 16, 1988, p. 4).

ADULTHOOD

As described in Chap. 3, adult fashionistas demonstrate that the ponytail is not limited to any specific age group, and as we trace it across the social categories of age, there is much to learn about its iconicity (Pugh, 2014). The ponytail seems to carry with it a transcendent symbol system that makes it iconic. For example, when 22-year-old actor Kari Sundby received a stipend in 1957 at the National theatre [the National Theater], a reporter wrote, “With her long ponytail, no makeup on her face, and wide vividly playful eyes—no one could possibly envy her the 5000 kroner prize. After six years of toil, she had earned the praise” (VG, December, 11, 1957b), although she does not know how she will spend the award. “Like a breath of wind she vanishes” from the journalist’s eyes and notepad, “out the door. Small, slender and smiling. Ponytail waving goodbye.” As Sundby is awarded for her extraordinary effort, her ponytail indicates she is in a work mode and needs to get her hair off her face, just like pop culture critic Whitaker (2018) argued. At once, her long ponytail, no makeup, and vivid eyes depict the “natural truth” of her energetic effort—a union of matter and spirit.

In 1983 as Oslo New Theatre’s puppet theater celebrated its 30th anniversary, 40-year-old professional puppeteer Kjertsi Gemeten sought to dramatize Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Seal,” in which the young seal, Kotic, experiences an adventure, “life itself, where animals are at peace.” Gemeten explained to an *Aftenposten* reporter, “I do not want to make it into a play about war or politics. What I want to show is that a richer life is possible if we break our patterns, not only in combat or opposition. Like that little seal, we can all experience that adventure.” Having the adventure within, feeling it, is vital for both adults and children, the puppeteer advised. “With a long, light colored ponytail she [Gemeten] looks like a child marveling in a land of puppets herself” (*Aftenposten*, December 3, 1983, p. 25).

Although these adult women inarguably are enacting the expectation of longhair, the journalists’ iconic consciousness for the narrative of healthy youthfulness charges the ponytail with sensuous energy. The sacral elements of this code do not infantilize the women in ways that constrain their energy and movements (like the ponytailed teenagers’ high heels as they navigate cobblestones). The symbolic layer of ponytailed youthfulness generates narratives of excitement, high spirits, and kinetic, creative energy. The issue is not whether the ponytail exposes these women’s

energetic youthfulness to the journalists or their vitality highlights the ponytail, but rather how some meanings remain and others change as the ponytail moves along a continuum of age. As the hairstyle travels from an idealized childhood into the rational, disenchanting adult world, the ponytail's full symbolic capacity for vitality, growth, and promise remains.

Leach (1969) argued that such movements, from a sacred to a profane landscape, allow the vitality of the sacred to enter the real world. One of the adult's greatest life challenges is to see and understand the child's world reality from the child's perspective. To do so, we have to reconfigure our worlds into symbolic landscapes (Erikson, 1937; Winnicott, [1971] 2005). In turn, this very re-creation of childhood and youth travels into adulthood where adults re-experience and interpret life through this symbolic imaginary (T. B. Broch, 2020). Therefore, the ponytail serves as both the compass and the pole as we traverse Norway's social terrains.

Objects can retain history and shape potential futures (Hilmar, 2016; Lønning & Kohli, 2021), and a ponytail can put these symbolic worlds in motion. Ponytailed adult men and women can be full of creativity and artistry. Gerdi Jacobs, a women artist in her eighties, is "still going strong, light bodied, like a young girl, she retrieves the pictures she wants to show us, while her ponytail swings happily" (*Aftenposten*, May 9, 1992, p. 43). Jacobs' biography is imbued in her body as was ballet dancer Anne Borg's. A dancer since age 11, she was the very personification of Norwegian Ballet, head of the Norwegian Opera, and rector of the Statens Ballethøgskole. She had performed at most venues in Norway, in London, Leningrad, and New York:

On a casual weekday she wears her hair in a ponytail and dresses in clothes most 50-years-olds rarely build up the courage to wear, but that look great on her. Tight blue jeans and red shoes today. Her silhouette is a straight line [rank]. As if an invisible ballet maestro was in the room with us. (*Aftenposten*, September 27, 1986)

Through this symbolic imagery of a healthy and vital youthfulness, Borg's choice of fashion and the way she bodily enters and sustains the world is shaped as her identity as a dancer meets the public codes of ponytailed health. Her aesthetic surface evokes an iconic consciousness in the journalist who poetically recaptures her meaningful materiality.

Borg is not alone in shaping social life in this way. Eighty-four-year-old activist Ingeborg Brekke, who occasionally wears a youthful ponytail, “believes in the feminist potential in religion” and gets “furiously pissed when men preach in ways that take all dignity from women.” She owns Bekkestranda Fjordhotell, designed by architect Bjørn Simonnæs and known for its rustic appearance, sod roof, and not one straight angel. The hotel’s shape—the way it shapes its inhabitants and visitors—is “a monument of her willpower,” as Brekke also goes against the grain and any straight line. Her feet are strong, and despite her age, they carry her body through the furious tempo of her life, the twists and turns on the roads she takes, her ponytails “standing straight out as the woman storms passed us” (*Bergens Tidene*, March 3, 1992, p. 42).

We are painting broad brush strokes here, moving swiftly over historical time, jumping from context to context, touching briefly on condensed images of a symbolism of health in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. That is how myth is established. It is what myth does.¹⁴ Like myth, the story of the ponytail is organized around a central character—an archetypal woman protagonist—who endures challenges and changes, experiences mistakes and successes.

Consider, for example, a journalist’s depiction of internationally recognized Norwegian actor and director Liv Ullmann, the 1971 Golden Globe Award winner for Best Actress in a Motion Picture Drama, a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, and co-founder and honorary chair of the International Rescue Committee’s Women’s Refugee Commission. The journalist describes the 57-year-old Ullmann as “slimmer. Confident. Modern. More satisfied. With two major movies and a TV series in the rear view. Moreover, leaving her home and husband Donald. Meet ‘the new’ Liv Ullmann, full of dreams and visions for the future. She arrives for her interview on the tram from Skarpsno. Wild bangs, rain in the hair, wind in her ponytail. Soft as sap [sevje] and slender like a teenager. Now she will direct and produce her own movies. Now she will take control herself” (*VG*, November 24, 1996, pp. 26–27).

The enduring presence of the ponytail does not allow us to reduce all its appearances to a mere echo of childhood or a longing for that time. As a collective representation of existential abstractions storied into our lived realities, myth allows us to bring ideas of the past into the present and future. Childhood, as a personal experience and collective idea, never lives on in its original form. Rebirth, vitality in sap, winds of change, and regenerative rain stand in for the ability to create life (Jung, [1972] 2003).

Thus, Ullmann might have youthful qualities and vitality materialized in a ponytail, but she is not infantilized. She has matured. She is confident, independent, and in control.

As we consider the ponytail wearer from girl child to woman, the code of youthful health is challenged and refined. A healthy childhood is symbolically created by the interplay of cultural ideas of the child's raw biological and psychologic potential *and* the adult's caring and loving democratic guidance. It is the adult's task (and adult society, if we ask journalist Arne Skouen, cited above) to ensure the child is ready and equipped for democratic participation. Therefore, in this landscape of archetypes and symbolic role models like Liv Ullmann, Anne Borg, and Ingeborg Brekke, we also find concrete and real down-to-earth helpers in children's lives. For example, Julie Alfstad, who for 40 consecutive years has taught kids to swim. In the Norwegian village of Toten, Alfstad watches as the wind leaves the lake rippled and the children pulling "their shoulders to right up under their ears, as they adjust their helpful Styrofoam, and dive in. It is about 18 degrees Celsius and a good day for swimming." Alfstad stands in the shallow waters "with platina hair in a ponytail, pink lipstick, a pink windbreaker jacket over her swim suit, pink ear rings, and indeed a pair of pink bathing shoes as she directs about a dozen rascals, white as a snowstorm [no tan yet], from Toten" (*NTB*, July 28, 1986).

Despite the cold, this is a much better place to practice swimming, Alfstad argues. After all, accidents that require swimming and survival skills usually occur in the outdoors. What better place to practice than in nature's sometimes chilly, goosebumps-inciting milieu! Here Alfstad—high-spirited and pink from her lips to her toes, with her ponytail swaying—trains the youth of tomorrow.

In all this clutter of children, teenagers, young and mature adults, the ponytail might seem to be a quite random symbolic form that at best is conventionally fashionable. We could perfectly well end and settle our argument right here having made this commonsensical finding: the ponytail is the product of ideologies and power relations that have repositioned the hegemony of beauty culture at the apex of a neoliberal femininity.¹⁵ Western cultures are brimming with myths of the healthy, youthful body, and the attempt to reverse aging has become an individualized and medicalized responsibility and self-branding opportunity. Beauty, fitness, and health have fused with images of youthfulness to make countering the aging process a display of personal control and self-investment.¹⁶ Is the

material feel for the ponytail's youthfulness only a false consciousness? Is it controlled and surveilled by a neoliberal ideology equaling empowerment to a consumption of youth, or are there other truths hiding in the clutter and symbolism of the texts assembled here? What are the ponytails' emergent meanings, and how does it instantiate broader cultural patterns across contexts and ideologies?

The ponytailed landscape is made up of a multitude of female wearers that are all bound by the same existential dimension, aging. Myth allows experiences and observations of aging to leave our everyday reality and enter a landscape of abstract answers. In a feedback loop, myth's answers can be placed back into and resolve our irreconcilable realities (Lévi-Strauss, 1967). Aging, childhood, and adulthood are cultural and biological realities at the heart of our existence. Traditionally, adolescence is a liminal life stage resolved by rites of passage, but in modernity, prospects of a predictable adult life are more difficult. This does not mean that meanings about childhood and adulthood, and all in between, have vanished; rather, adjustments, adaptability, and youthfulness have become sacred themselves and rites of passages are differentiated and diversified over longer periods of time.¹⁷ In every myth, as well as those of modernity, follows a mediator, an instrument, a middle ground, or an abnormal category with special powers.¹⁸ Hair has a liminal existence itself, as a growing yet dead materiality, and therefore, is well qualified as the mediator that allows youthfulness to oscillate between the poles of childhood and adulthood. The ponytail materializes the instinctual play and freedom of an ideal childhood and can seem to reverse or slow the aging of adults who long to return to the ideal of youthfulness. This is myth: a dream-like landscape where our collective unconsciousness answers questions about our shared existence. The plot and the biological reality of aging are unchanged, but the myth provides a story that aging with youthfulness can be achieved in an experience of freedom and instinctual play guided by democratic actors.

This chapter started with examples of ponytails on girl children. Some stories where cheerful tales of healthy girls; others were melancholic accounts of a lost childhood. The ponytail lets us see and sense the girl in both instances, but with contradictory meanings surrounding her aura. In an ideal childhood, Norwegian girls participate in the play of democracy, in tournaments like the Norway Cup that pioneered gender equality and multiculturalism and allow children to volunteer in this democratic movement. This ideal image contrasts with Frida who was left by her parents at an institution and with the East European gymnasts who had become

robots in an authoritarian regime. In these cases, their societies stole their “childhood.”

Adolescence makes for a transitory stage in which the dangers and joys of childhood and adult life are tried out. Norwegian youths struggle to find out what to believe, desire, and imitate. They can unionize or keep the change for themselves; they can spend the night out wobbling the cobblestones or stand straight as speakers and bearers of civil virtues on Independence Day. Some do both, and much so more.

In adult life, the ponytail remains charged with a youthfulness that is first lost, yet continues to reverberate with myth as the wearer enters and sustains her communities. Adult women with ponytails retain their youthfulness and move as soft as sap. Many of them are activists for women’s rights who speak for humanity and social justice—feminists revered for their efforts. The youthfulness imbued in their ponytails—vitality, hope, courage, and willpower—is their democratic weapon.

The ponytail icon allows opportunities for absorption, imitation, and a chance to revitalize meanings that fascinate us (Alexander, 2010a, p. 327). The ponytail is a mediator that negotiates youthfulness until its inherent contradictions are settled perpetually. It dominates and resolves our longing for an imaginary youth, creativity, and vitality. The ponytail simultaneously materializes this loss and keeps it alive through a youthfulness that eventually is lost again—twice lost.¹⁹ This melancholic oscillation between youth and adulthood is a potent feedback loop energized by folklore, existential dilemmas, and processes of democratization. Absorption in its melancholy generates uplifting and draining energies coded as youthfulness. *Ponytailed health* is about this iconic consciousness of youthfulness: experiencing without necessarily knowing that one knows. To forget about death and finitude, paradoxically, we must embody health and youth, and hide this cultural process of naturalization deep beneath the surface of a swishing ponytail.²⁰

With this iconic charge of the ponytail in mind, it is easy to argue that commercial and state interests can capitalize on the symbolism of health and make the ponytailed women an instrument of their ideologies. Yet, they can do so only up to a certain point and only if their ideology is truly taken for granted, hegemonic, and unquestioned. Analytically, this can only be so if we choose to bracket out ponytailed youth’s sacral dimensions and see the ponytail as solely signifying social constraints instead of freedom, merely socialized guilt instead of play, and docile conformity instead of democratic participation and caring. If that is the case, the

ponytail will likely lose its many potentials and become perverted by an ideological system of our time. This has happened before; bobs and flappers are still out there, ready for an iconic recharge. We are active drama-producing agents with bodies that sense and enact our collective hopes and anxieties through myth (Alexander, 2017; Belting, 2012). For the ponytail to remain iconic, it must offer us leeway to maneuver and oscillate between existential hopes and fears (Figs. 3 and 4).

Ponytailed Health

Freedom | Constrain

Instinctual play | Socialized guilt

Democratic participation | Noncommittal conformity

Fig. 3 The codes and symbolic layers used to interpret and enact healthy and unhealthy womanhood

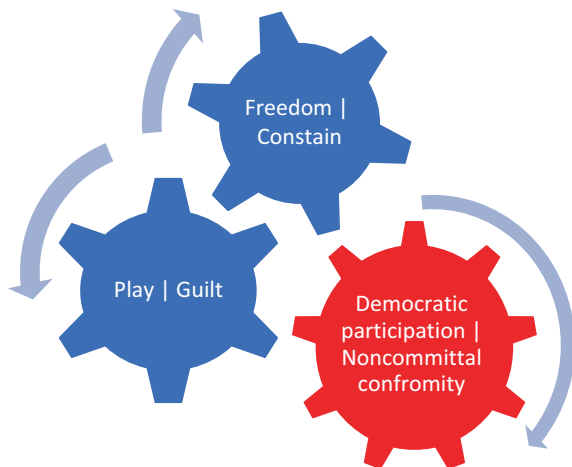


Fig. 4 The codes and symbolic layers of the healthy hair

NOTES

1. Moral meaning and actions, whether aligning, countering, or providing an alternative, are two sides of the same coin and tightly interrelated (Weber, [1904–05] 2009, [1922] 1993).
2. Awakening the sense of myth as falsity, Shilling (2004, 2008) argued that the *healthy body norm* is a mythical creation of the appealing, functional youthful body and an appalling, dysfunctional old body.
3. *Forskning.no*, December, 27, 2016; *Independent*, September, 6, 2019; NRK.no. December 17, 2019.
4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/youthful>; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/youth>.
5. Predominantly in the Western world, perhaps.
6. For more about how youths have figured as moral standard-bearers of civil society in the United States and globally, see (Alexander, 2006, pp. 347–358; Smith & Howe, 2015, pp. 157–161), and in Norway and Norden, see (Berggren, 1997; Nielsen, 2005).
7. The ponytail is often imbued with notions of a White, heteronormative female fashion (Blackburn, 2007; Prince, 2009; Simon, 2000).
8. See Astrid Lindgren's (1981) book on Ronja. Perhaps best known outside of Scandinavia for her iconic Pippi Longstocking series, Lindgren is revered in Scandinavia in much the same way Roald Dahl is in the United Kingdom. She wrote 11 separate series and 25 stand-alone books that have topped 165 million sales and been adapted for film 53 times. Her works in translation rank fourth in worldwide children's book sales and can be read in 100 languages (King, 2020).
9. Parr ([2009] 2017).
10. Identities are created in contrasts of who we are and who we are not (Lawler, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2000; Woodward, 2002).
11. The meanings of childhood are contingent on culture (H. B. Broch, 2002; Dyck, 2012), and in Norway, sports have had an intimate relationship to the ideational practicing of childhood and youth. Norwegian sports have always been committed to the moral and physical discipline of youth and became an anti-Nazi movement during WWII (Goksøyr & Olstad, 2017). Today sports are held by the state apparatus to contribute to the population's social and physical health (Helsedirektoratet, 2010, 2018) and to maintain the image of the committed adult who cares for the local community's youth by volunteering to spending time in practices and events (Archetti, 2003; Lesjø, 2008). Sport represents the largest voluntary organization in Norway, and about 90 percent of the population's youth has participated (Bakken, 2018). Of course, this dominant position has spurred many debates about and challenges to this very positive depiction, and the "inclusive and solidary nature" of organized Norwegian sport competitions is steadily questioned (Helle-Valle, 2008; Skille & Broch, 2019).

12. See introduction: the physical (Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2012; Turner, 1995), the performed (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959, 1976; West & Zimmerman, 1987), the social (Bourdieu, 1984; Foucault, 1977, 1980), and the meaningful body (Champagne, *forthcoming*).
13. See Alexander (2004) about how background culture is amended to scripts.
14. (Franz, 1964; Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1967).
15. (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; Tincknell, 2013).
16. (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Maguire, 2008; Pickren, 2018; Rutherford, 2018).
17. (Alexander, 2017; Eisenstadt, 1962; Silva, 2012).
18. (Douglas, 1966; Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1967).
19. Butler (1990, p. 66) wrote beautifully about melancholy by drawing on Lacan and Freud's work. She argued that refusals of love are resolved through "the incorporative strategy of melancholy, the taking on of attributes of the object/Other that is lost, when loss is the consequence of a refusal of love." Refusals are themselves refused through "a double negation that redoubles the structure of identity through the melancholic absorption of the one who is, in effect, twice lost."
20. Beauvoir ([1949] 2011, p. 181) argued that woman must embody health and youth to make man forget about death and finitude, and paradoxically, hide this cultural process of signifying naturalness. This is not a process that merely happens, but an active meaning-making carried out at the interstice of agency and structure (Jacobs & Spillman, 2005; Spillman, 2020).

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Practicalities

Technological advances and changing practicalities form our bodily experiencing of social life (Shilling, 2004). In late eighteenth-century France, the advent of the bicycle greatly affected women's fashion as they embraced the convenience of pants and underpants that “spared them of raising their skirts and gave them a taste for costumes in which they could sit, walk, or lean back more easily—let alone pedal” (Weber, 1986, p. 102). Centuries later, as the US Army depends increasingly on female soldiers, women are no longer restricted to wearing long hair in buns, which can compromise their identity and also interfere with the fit of helmets. Whenever a soldier wearing a bun gets down in a fighting position, the bun will push the helmet forward, making it impossible to see. Therefore, women are now allowed to wear a combination of hairstyles ranging from buzzcuts to short or long ponytails (Philipps, 2021). Thus, social and technological changes not only transform our practical realities, but cause us to reorder our very sense of what is practical and what are useful bodily practices (Mauss, [1934] 1973; Sahlins, 1976).

Meaningful identities, in other words, shape how we maneuver what Durkheim ([1901] 2014) called the social facts of demography and the economy.¹ For instance, the increase in dual-career households creates new practicalities and pressures in family life (Hochschild, 2003; Aarseth, 2011). In this chapter, we will see that for many “working women” who must move back and forth between office and home, paid and unpaid work, and the constraints of workplace safety and the backstage of family

life, ponytailed hair remains a practical choice. Yet if we state that simply practicality and rationality order social life, we miss the semiotic structures: Although over time symbol systems have disappeared from much deliberation and can seem ostensibly forgotten, they are still what gives an icon its force.² With this multidimensional analysis, I set out to understand feminist ontologies—their codes, narratives, waves of democratic progress, and setbacks—as cultural structures.³ I ask when and how ponytailed women—and those who portray them—use feminist codes and narratives (Alexander, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Which feminist narratives, each offering its own path to emancipation, are manifest as ponytailed women maneuver and seek to change modernity? Two competing narratives are vital in this regard: a (neo)liberal feminism that cheers women leaders who maintain social domination relationships and a radical feminism that fights structural oppression and neoliberal capitalism.⁴

To answer how symbol systems and feminist narratives fuse with long-haired femininities and materialize in ponytails, we must welcome an approach that does not reduce myth to notions of falsity. Instead, we need to explain the archetypal “woman” as multifaceted. To this effort, I combine Beauvoir and Jung. As an archetype of the second sex, “woman is devoted to magic,” Beauvoir ([1949] 2011, p. 187) said. “Woman” is an object charged with fluids. She is not an agent but an effect. Today, critical theorists say that a woman embodies neoliberalism, making her embrace and reproduce a myth of female empowerment through consumption. She distracts from democratization and leads us to social injustice, to a work and family life deprived of existential meaning.⁵

Yet there is more to myth than this univocal delusion. Archetypes are complex and multilayered, with negative and positive sides, and a whole register of characteristics, Jung said ([1972] 2003, pp. 14–15). Many know of the Statue of Liberty, and some might have heard of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare, or Frøya, the Norse goddess of fertility and war. The woman archetype is not only an effect, but also an agent made up of this variation. In myth, she is both object and subject, both a substance and a symbol that grind reality into moral abstracts. To the category of the figurative woman also belongs the goddess, the goal of our longing for redemption, forces of fertility, protection, sympathy, and a magical authority:

The magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcends reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign; all that

cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The places of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. (Jung, [1972] 2003, p. 15)

Archetypes aside, what about the lived moral and political realities of women today? We often think of myths and fairytales as providing clear images of a protagonist and her rival—the good opposed by pure evil in neatly differentiated characters. Yet myth and the hero's moral character are equally full of contradictions and ambivalence.⁶ As we enter the public sphere of democratic struggle, where universalism is most often articulated in concrete language of practical life and its material objects (Alexander, 2006), we find the ponytail at the contradictory interstice of myth, real life, and feminist narratives. Within this sphere, the pressures and practicalities of the dual-career household sometimes extend and sometimes constrict our solidarities, and are often negotiated with codes and hopes of gender equality (Hochschild, 2003; Aarseth, 2011). Here, hair can be a means to affectively maneuver injustice and equality (Prince, 2009; Synnott, 1987; Weitz, 2004) as civil heroes with ponytails—some representing official women's movements and some the media's social commentary—criticize unhealthy ideals. The pro-civil state of Norway holds plenty of actors with women-centered capacities to “work the binaries and invent master symbols that structure social feelings and delineate lines of solidarity” (Alexander et al., 2019, p. 9) as they wear and observe the ponytail.⁷

Social life involves contests and alliances expressed through codes and narratives about how moral goods and evils can be allocated in our societies, and then changed or repaired.⁸ Well accompanied by its Nordic neighbors, Norway is known for the ways in which its national identity is entangled with feminist narratives that position gender equality at the heart of the nation's idea of what a democracy is and should be (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019).⁹ Some refer to this institutionalization of the feminist movement as “state feminism” (Mjøset, 2017), and at the onset of the twenty-first century, Norway had a higher percentage of female political leaders than any other nation, and by virtue of the power and influence they wielded they were rated as global leaders (Birkelund & Petersen, 2012).

Notably, this peculiar union has not eradicated gender difference and inequality by far. Norway has a highly gender-segregated employment market and “a gender equality paradox” that begs the question why women (and men) with a high degree of freedom of choice often make

conservative decisions (Holst, 2009).¹⁰ Therefore, Nordic social democracy is far from the “immaculate conception” that some might think,¹¹ and a simple notion of a progressive, pervasive universalizing discourse of gender equality in the Nordic countries is not only naïve, but dangerous. It is most useful to explore the moral codes used to interpret, criticize, and guide sociopolitical life despite conflict and divisions (Alexander, 2006).

While critical theorists warn against reconstructing myths and semiotic systems that only sustain and naturalize an unjust status quo (Bourdieu, 1990; Fraser, 1990), I explore what happens if change, transformation, and repair of injustice are inherent to the code. If so, and if these codes materialize in the ponytail, then this icon becomes a means to do things with words and grammars beyond the play of semiotic stasis.¹² If the woman archetype is a controlled other and a controlling energy holding the beautiful and sublime, tradition and progress, then her body and hair must be capable of holding beliefs and desires of (in)justice and its repair. The fashionable hairstyle of the ponytail, distinctly popular two decades into the twenty-first century, is likely full of ambivalence. Can the ponytail icon materialize a desired gender equality and a belief in women as full partners in social life?

DENATURALIZING INEQUALITY AND NATURALIZING EQUALITY

Speaking up against injustice and inequalities is a regular part of democratic life and feminist living (Ahmed, 2017). Whether feminists or politicians, citizens of democratic societies must deal with—oppose, agree with, reshape—these feminist processes of democratization.¹³ Feminist thinking and individual decision-making also prompt us to grapple with what is natural and unnatural mundane living (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

On June 29, 1959, a local Norwegian paper, *Raummnes*, took a conscious stance in warning that “marriage is no life insurance for young girls,” and young women need “an occupation to fall back on.” The writer argued powerfully that boys and girls too often “strive to live up to the roles that society expects them to play. Making boys consider whether they should become mechanics, carpenters, doctors or engineers. Making girls look for temporary work and use nail polish and ponytails to up their attraction.” Looking to Sweden, the writer suggested increasing women’s enrollment in higher education. “If this recruiting is to be successful, it has

to open up for promotion opportunities for women within business and let women students get an equal chance for practical training. If all this is done, we will see many competent women technicians emerging.”

Culture is at play and gender is the stake. Educational paths and careers might have been open to them, but women were not encouraged to take them. To this 1958 writer, the ponytail was a signifier of a young femininity capturing the ambivalence and “confusion in the enduring and short-minded debate about women’s place [in society]. A debate in which one still talks about an either-or binary and the decay of the home. One should never make such a generalization. This debate is mindless, since the circumstances in our many homes are so different, women’s abilities and energies so strongly discrepant, and their economic needs so diverse.” There is a dramatic stake here. What once seemed natural has now become downright unnatural. Living a consciously gendered life prompts the individual to invent new traditions and ideas of what is natural in a diversified society.

As the ponytail oscillates between fashion and custom, childhood and adulthood, in ways that are important to gender issues, the 1980s ponytail appeared in a quite different version than the one in the 1958 *Raummnes* article. As a fashionable custom, the hairstyle was found on many young adult women entering male-dominated occupations, and as such, the ponytail not only signified heteronormativity, but embodied gender diversity. It showed that women were entering new and *a priori* gendered ground¹⁴ and was *inconsistent* with normative practicalities of the material and symbolic context, as well as predominantly male bodies that inhabited them.

On Monday January 31, 1983, *VG* asked readers if they were on board the recent Widerøe Twin Otter propeller flight, and if they believed they “caught a glimpse of a ponytail in the cockpit” (p. 11). If so, *VG* can confirm that they were right. Copy that. “However, if you have spent the weekend writing a complaint” about the male airline pilot’s hairdo, the writer continued, “there is no need to pay for postage. The ponytail belongs to Tove Frenal Fagerhøy (27) from Hakadal, and you had the honor of riding along on her debut behind the Widerøe levers.”

To readers who might have believed (or feared) Fagerhøy to be a pioneer and a (woman) rookie, the journalist pointed out that Fagerhøy had thousands of hours in the air. Educated in the United States to fly DC7s and DC4s working to extinguish wildfires, she studied alongside Siri Skara, the first female student in Norway’s air force academy. Fagerhøy reckoned

she would be stationed in Hammerfest, on the Russian border in the very north of Norway, and fly up and down the northern coast, “undoubtedly one of the toughest routes along our coast,” the journalist explained. This woman has plenty of backbone, or “a solid nose-bone,” as we say in Norwegian. Even more fascinating than her toughness is the way she does gender.¹⁵ Not only is she a trained wildfire extinguisher and propeller flight veteran, she dares to challenge the airline’s masculine, male-dominated conventions.

None of these deep matter-of-fact issues are conveyed explicitly in the newspaper text, but they resound beneath its surface as a feminist undercurrent. Our iconic consciousness of this depth makes this pilot’s ponytail fascinating, daring, and telling of cultural change. Although the hairstyle might have caused complaints if it had figured on a man’s head (sexist as that is), on Fagerhøy’s head it becomes a signifier of egalitarian femininity—daring and spirited, declaring, “Here I am, a highly skilled and competent woman.” This social performance of a heteronormative, long-haired woman meets expectations, but conflicts with an institutional context dominated by men and heteronormative masculine practicalities. The ponytail reproduces heteronormativity, but in a way that makes it perfectly clear that the female sex has entered this new terrain. To the journalist, the ponytail is welcome, with all its diversifying social effects and affects as traditional notions of gender are wed with modern behaviors and progress. What is more, Fagerhøy is a woman pioneer, as naturally bold, daring, and practical as her male colleagues.

It is perhaps tempting to suggest that Fagerhøy must be exceptional, but this book shows that this is far from the case. Expectations of long hair and moral dictates like heteronormativity leave room for meaningful choices. The notion of lived moralities is, in some respect, more usefully understood as plural rather than singular,¹⁶ which better captures the human predicament of somehow being responsible for yet without control over one’s life.¹⁷ Under the headline *Norwegian Housewife’s New Leader: Equality, Equity, and Choice*, Ingunn Birkeland is introduced in *Aftenposten* in 1958 as the newly elected leader of the Norwegian Housewife Foundation (NH). As she attended various classes to learn about taxes, social security, and insurance, issues concerning housewives’ lack of rights came to her attention.

[Birkeland] quickly reveals great mastery of the laws of marriage, tax and social security. The long, light blond ponytail swings energetically back and

forth while the 50-year-old mother of four and new leader of NH picks up case after case. ‘I have never felt that my work was inferior, but it is necessary to increase the value of unpaid work. Since we do not receive a salary, we will not achieve more than the absolute minimum rights of the Folketrygden [Public insurance]. We do not collect a pension. Nearly 75 percent of all women become minimum pension earners.’ Birkeland and NH promote an equal share in the taxes and benefits, within marriage, to promote equity of work within and outside of the home. (*Aftenposten*, September 16, 1985, p. 8)

Wearing a ponytail, Birkeland fights for a meaningful equality and to destroy a code that devaluates the private sphere and unpaid labor. Practicalities and politics are contextual, Birkeland demonstrates, by drawing attention to the many ways to deal with gender (in)equalities and power.

While some women with ponytails are considered spirited in their fight for equality and conquering men’s terrain, others struggle with the image of being a little bit too spirited and thus lacking that “masculine” seriousness of male-dominated contexts. After 22 years as a news reporter, Guro Rustad cut her ponytail, perhaps to attract more “masculine” or “adult woman” respect.

But the woman absolutely does not hide at Marienlyst [the center for Norwegian television broadcasting at that time], even though the leaders are all men. Guro is still cheap with her smiles, but is as kind, sincere, and skilled as she will appear on the evening news tonight. She reads the news and comments on political events with great knowledge and authority. There is no fooling around when Rustad is on the air. If she is fed up with the good girl image, we do not know, but the label has followed her. (*Aftenposten*, 24.11.1987)

And now she abandons the ponytail. The half-life of the ponytail has a powerful charge. Its presence demonstrates that Rustad is an energetic young woman. Some might not take this signification seriously, and therefore neither does she. To meet this gendered challenge, Rustad cut her ponytail. Reasons for these choices arguably vary around the axis of progress. If the horsetail slows you down, cut it. If you are on the move, let it accentuate your pace.

The ponytail’s iconic charge resides in its varied imitations that naturalize its symbolism. Critical theorists might suggest, and Tarde would agree, that imitations have a close relation to hierarchies and social power.

However, Tarde (1903, pp. 229–233) was quick to note that majorities have prestige in democratic societies, and public opinion inspires us to imitate people or ideas that hold a superior morality. Beliefs in transcendental aims and a never fully realizable democratic ideal influence how we draw boundaries between and within communities (Alexander, 2006), and icons condense irreconcilable oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, of hierarchal and democratic power. Imitations then take the positive psychological and biological realities of democratic actors, naturalize these cultural ideals through embodiment (Mauss, [1934] 1973, p. 73), and make our understanding of social power and moral form our bodily view of the world (T. Turner, 1995).

Imitation forcefully naturalizes new and progressive meanings—and conservative meanings, too—by fusing “traditional representations” to new problematics in ways that generate affective answers to new and old challenges. In 1988, Kari Hauge Rasmussen, the guerilla leader of a teacher’s strike in the east coast city of Stavanger, was battling for women’s rights, recognition, and emancipation through better pay and security. She declared the government’s suggested pay raise “a shame,” and noted that without proper actions, “we risk ending up with a school where only old women like myself are left teaching.” The 57-year-old woman is “no nonsense,” and seldom bereft of speech. She adds color to Stavanger where she “on the 17th of May can be observed with a swinging ponytail happily participating in the children’s parade, and on any given weekday riding her bike” (*NTB*, March 3, 1988).

Not only does Rasmussen fight for women’s rights, she takes part in the May 17 Independence Day celebration in which teachers semi-voluntarily and by convention walk with their pupils in the children’s parade. Streets are draped with the national flag, and women wear local variations of the national costume, the “bunad.” The holiday celebrates the finalization of the Norwegian constitution, national identity, and democracy (Buxrud & Fangen, 2017). Here, in this quite sane and rational modern nation, myth, utopias, and democratic hopes are highly prevalent. Norway’s Independence Day and the children’s parade celebrate humanism and egalitarianism, a mythical defense of and hope in the weakness but promise of children, as well as a celebration of mothers, who reproduce life (Witoszek, 1998, p. 151). Despite not being paid for her efforts, Rasmussen, seemingly, with her spirited and long-haired ponytail, is not one to shy away from her democratic duties of representation and criticism. We are primed to be

receptive to such civil and evocative narratives by virtue of our belief in civil society's discourse, "that it is sacred and that its ideals should be protected from harm" (Alexander, 2019, p. 13). In the story of Rasmussen we are also primed to recognize the archetypal woman—long-haired and wearing bunad—as a natural bearer of democratic values.

In another example, the bunad guerilla was born in 2019, as Høyre, the Norwegian liberal right-wing party, promoted its neoliberal downsizing of the Norwegian welfare state, suggesting, among other things, closing down or moving local hospitals into bigger, more efficient facilities.¹⁸ Women in traditional Norwegian dress, colored and embroidered according to local community traditions, arose, fists raised, to protest the destruction of safe, local, well-functioning birthing options. These bunad-clad women, some with ponytails, protested the impracticalities of both the welfare state and neoliberalism. They were women, seemingly by biology, psychology, and culture, who in various ways stood up against the inability of the state and capitalism to meet the real life demands of the modern woman.

In Norway, gender equality is a sacred ideal, enmeshed in the state and civil sphere. Rasmussen and the bundad-guerilla are not odd cases, but examples imitated by other women, wearing bundad or otherwise. We already know, through the story of Joan of Arc, that the embodied democratic ideal can be short-haired. We now know they can be long-haired and ponytailed as well. There is plenty of evidence in the public sphere that the ponytail can convey an undercurrent of feminist awareness; furthermore, it is reasonable to argue that this awareness draws meaningful energy from a set of deep cultural structures. The ponytail can materialize a solidarity that regenerates desires for a democratic resolve by the force of a naturalized womanhood. The authority of this performed archetype is one of wisdom and spirit that cherishes, sustains, and fosters growth, justice, and rebirth in the form of transformation or progress: biological-cum-cultural in all social places of transformation and rebirth (Jung, [1972] 2003, p. 15). In a poetics of the civil ponytail, the 1980s women who entered the workforce in great numbers were on the move. They were brave and "strong-willed like the statue of liberty." They kept their ponytails regardless of "tailwind or headwind" to "gallop in new ways" (*Aftenposten*, April 20, 1988a, p. 12), proudly. They denaturalized inequality and naturalized equality through imitations embodying egalitarianism.

MOVING WITH PRACTICALITY

The practicalities of the dual-career household and its many “tailwinds and headwinds” force a reevaluation of our plausible limits and prospects of modern living. Such interpretive work can kindle social movements that stir deep antipathies and sympathies, producing personal reactions that weave biographies out of public culture (Kurakin, 2019; Mast, 2019; Obeyesekere, 1981).

At the advent of the twenty-first century, women’s confidence had become fashionably sexy. Cooking, too, we are told, “if you just make a meal out of whatever is in the fridge.” The ponytail is hot, “but just for women. Women who attend the sport activities of their sons are sexy. A man that is able to converse with a three-year-old is sexy, too” (VG, August 29, 1995). Women are on the move, and dinners need to be served quickly, before or in the aftermath of the family’s second shift, as the modern woman rushes off to exercise or taxi her young ones back and forth to the soccer pitch. The material swing of the ponytail swiftly moves through time and space to attain a half-life filled with movement. The diversity of its movements portrays a uniform variety of identities that imbue and are imbued by a myth of the epic battle for equilibrium in social-cum-personal equality.

The run-of-the-mill, long-haired woman travels the many “rush hours of a family with kids.” Practically minded, she wears a practical ponytail. She may not be a pioneer like the pilot Fagerhøy, exuding public bravery, but she feels at home managing the humdrum rush hours of everyday life that “extend from bathroom preparations to breakfast consume. Then off into the rush traffic to rest at work for a while,” working up the energy to return to a second shift that ends not a second before the lights are out. When the kids are down, the parents are down. Amid the gridlocks and rushes, women consider whether “this is a day for skirts, or a day for pants and a ponytail with a yellow or a red ribbon?” (*Aftenposten*, June 22, 1988b).

By far, sports are not the only context of strenuous physical activity; there is also family life. In the fashion magazine *Allers* the red-haired Beate is given advice for a “fun make-over.” When it comes to hairstyles, Beate is open to just about everything, but considering her very active lifestyle, “she has to be able to put it [her hair] in a ponytail” (*Allers*, October 2, 2017). No doubt Beate is one of those woman moving quickly through Norwegian work and family rush hours.

With all this ordinary daily stress and the compulsion to be active and keep kids active and healthy, what is the value added by all these pony-tailed girls and women? That depends on your outlook. Put differently, an article in the newspaper *Bergens Tidene* asks: What is the value of all these sour socks?

Mom's car is loaded with children, back and forth to practice. The only thing she is left with is a load of sweaty clothes. Even so, Sylvi Ebbesvik thinks that she is going to miss all those clammy socks. Every week she does about fifteen loads in the washer. Sour football socks, soaked handball jerseys, and dirty shorts. 'I have no idea about how many hours I spend on the sports of my four children. I have no interest in knowing.'

Sylvi is always at the ready.

When Helen broke her leg at a tournament in Sweden, both she and I were happy that Mom was around to give some comfort and care. We have a big car, so we are often encouraged to come along. 'I do not mind,' Sylvie says while putting a wild lock back in the ponytail of her game-ready daughter, Maylinn. Sylvie knows what she is doing; she used to be an athlete herself. (*Bergens Tidene*, October 4, 2000, p. 25)

In Norway and many other Western nations, the purported benefits of being physically active and the gains made by girls and women entering sports is *the* value added by ponytails and sour socks. Fathers and mothers with the privileged opportunity to support their children's leisure activities do so with the idea that this is socially and physically healthy.¹⁹ The Norwegian government supports this idea, as long as competition does not undermine sports' healthy mission.²⁰ As discussed in preceding chapters, a healthy girl or woman is one who enjoys the energy of freedom of movement and the consequent power to create and participate in democratic renewal. This power may be found in the ordinary woman's humdrum navigation of mundane rush hours, or in the remarkable movements of the pioneer who breaks new barriers and helps us make political sense of equality.

In the late 1980s, *Aftenposten* (June 27, 1988c) described Iona Brown, lead violinist in the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, as follows: "With eminent play, electrifying leadership, a ponytail with a ribbon, cascading dresses, and a touch of English boarding school, [Brown] plays Mozart three days to the end. She is about to make a career in the U.S.A. The career that so many dream of, but seldom live."

Later that same year, this ponytailed virtuoso is back in the news, now at the Mozarteum (Mozartiana) in Salzburg.

The ambiance is intense, focused. On the stage are the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra and Iona Brown, on their until now most important tour. Salzburg on a dark November evening. Only the lights over the podium are lit in the Mozartium, a revelation of a concert hall in ivory, yellow and gold. Shiny mirrors and gleaming chandeliers. About twenty tired strings [strykere], some in concert uniform, others in ruffled sweaters and sneakers. In the middle of the half circle, Iona Brown, the world-renowned orchestra leader. Energetically throwing her ponytail. Dynamic strokes on her Stradivarius [violin]. Her eyes are dark, she is dark underneath her eyes, so fatigued, her whole body is sore. They are in Mozart's city of birth. Music lover's mecca. (*Aftenposten*, December 17, 1988d, p. 13)

The orchestra has practiced for days on end, and when the show begins, "Iona Brown plays as if she summons the devil into the rock [Per Gynt conjured the devil into a nut]. She lures the fairytale prince from his hiding." The audience is appreciative, but there is no wild applause, Brown confesses. Her colleagues nod. "They value her because of her emotional and engaging music—and that she never, ever, takes the easy road."

Some days later, the Norwegian orchestra must wait to enter and prepare for their concert, as the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra occupies the stage. Iona Brown, too, is barred from the dressing room: "King Karajan is resting." Herbert von Karajan, one of the greatest conductors of the twentieth century, is napping in the dressing room. "Iona Brown stands with her red dress in her arms, waiting. For half an hour, she waits to dress and for Karajan to leave the room, drowsy" (*Aftenposten*, December 17, 1988d, p. 13).

That night, the concert is a great success. This time an avalanche of applause washes over the orchestra. A new "king" is born, one who is never drowsy and never rests. One who has the magnetizing power to conjure the devil, attract the prince, and unleash an avalanche. This new king is a ponytailed woman who moves through rhythms of progress and in the romantic genre of the hero, straight into the very heart of the music mecca itself.

Institutional settings also shape the meaning of hair.²¹ Sport and music events, for example, call for different self-expressions and interpretations than experiences at a restaurant or the hospital. In the case of the

musician, this virtuoso violinist, her expressive performance sparked an animated interpretation of her “musical self,” her “musical community,” and social life (McCormick, 2009, 2017). A ponytail, racing through fashion, youthful play, “gendered progress,” and music venues, prompts the intersection of gender with all these operative contexts. Brown’s ponytail, interpreted by the journalist, is charged with broad social meanings concerning gender (remember, men have ponytails too) and musical performance.

Brown’s perseverance is twofold. Her ponytail, center stage at the Mozarteum, resolutely waves a polite but spirited effort against patriarchs and old kings, a war waged with a violin as weapon that can trigger an avalanche of change. If the journalist is successful, a civil imitation spreads through our psychological identification with Brown, setting off magnetic vibrations. These pulses are made as the aesthetic surface of Brown’s swinging ponytail, her violin, and red dress fuse and allow us to see her spirited toil and fight against the social facts of a dying monarchy as beautiful, morally prestigious, even useful and rational. The ponytail becomes an admired object, and its imitations magnetize through the gestures that accompany the imitator who achieves its respect.²² This prestigious imitation is about hierarchies and hegemonies that in democratic cultures are open to criticism and the democratic spirits of their time.²³

Whether Brown’s myth-like and transformative power is deemed feminist or not, it is hard to disregard that its dramatic force is propelled by a deeply felt egalitarian undercurrent. Ahmed (2017, p. 3) described feminist actions and imitations with similar imagery, as “ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching.” Despite the many feminist waves to ride and feminist narratives to consider, the agitation made by the old kings of injustice and the surge of a spirit of civil repair—frightening as these might be to some—makes the ponytail a deeply felt materiality in the public sphere. In a music hall event, the ripples of everyday democratic ambitions and social progress take on a dramatic and reinforced baseline.

Thirty-year-old Jun Elin Wiik from Oslo’s eastside, Ammerud, provides yet another ponytailed success story. She is the first Norwegian woman in 25 years to earn a master’s degree (hovedfag) in theoretical astrophysics. In 1993, she became a

French docteur ès sciences. An astronomical accomplishment; studying the temperatures on the sun's corona for years. Theoretical physics is not just an immensely time-consuming discipline, but also one of the most difficult. The young woman with a bouncy ponytail and informal jeans nevertheless seems undaunted after light-years of studies, leaning over thick books and patiently standing behind telescopes while she is trying to give us a very, very popularized version of what this is all about. 'When I meet people outside my milieu and they hear about what I do, they usually reply quickly "Ah, OK," and then move frenetically on to another topic, like cars and such.' (*Aftenposten*, May 22, 1993, p. 24)

After defending her thesis in Paris, Wiik moved on too, with a stipend, to the Netherlands to work for the European Space Agency on a new project that Norway also participates in. A reporter asked, "How is it being a woman in what must surely be a male-dominated clique of Kepler's and Copernicus' heirs?"

"Here in France, women are in fact more accepted than at home [in Norway], at least where I am,' confirms the *docteur* with sparks flying from her eyes" (*Aftenposten*, May 22, 1993, p. 24).

For anyone knowledgeable about the seemingly motionless work of the researcher, the subtle intersection of the symbolic layers of the ordinary girl in informal jeans with those of the active, moving girl with a bouncy ponytail might appear obvious. However, this meaning-making process also links codes of everyday life to the abstract moralities of Wiik's accomplishments. Her social drive to be the first woman in 25 years to earn an advanced degree in theoretical astrophysics must surely have clashed with gender barriers. Her achievement ignites a spark in her eyes, glaringly visible to those present and to those who read the journalist's account of how her performance oscillates between the poles of immobile traditions and moving breakthroughs to magnetize our lived myths. It is not for everyone, yet quite impressive when achieved with gusto and a sigh of relief blowing those wild bangs that escape the practical ponytail that holds her hair together.

Culture may blow health and life into hair, meaningful practicalities may induce a ponytail to swing, and social progress may cause it to wave, but unlike other animals, humans cannot make the hair on their heads stand on end. Human hair lacks "feelers," or *vibrissae*, and strong enough muscles, or *arrector pili*, to accomplish this feat. According to Morris (1987, p. 26), a cat's whiskers are tactile, and many animals can bristle with rage. The best we can do are goosebumps. Nevertheless, as the accounts in this book demonstrate, humans can be moved by hair and its

movement. The ponytail materializes a cultural kinetics whose discursive forms we can sense in its aesthetic surface. Meaning-making processes imbue the ponytail with a fusion of observed social life and experienced material, social, and individual movements. Our feelings regarding the tightly secured ponytail's swing can therefore be poetically recaptured; so can the anticipation of its release.

Gender barrier breaker Ann-Kristin Olsen served as Norway's first female police inspector, then first female police chief, and then first female governor of Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen. In an *Aftenposten* interview, she was asked to characterize the average Spitsbergen resident.

They are explosive, temperamental, kind of like the Nordlending [those living in northern Norway]. Right-from-the-gut type of honesty. One of my first days out shopping for shoes, the clerk evaluated my choice and told me that 'those shoes are not bad, even for someone with such big feet.'

Those big feet have carried her through challenge after challenge. But what did she want to be growing up?

[Olsen] releases her ponytail and tells us with a smile that can melt an iceberg: 'I wanted to study art and psychology and become an important critic. So I traveled to California, with all my ambitions.' However, it was law that eventually was her place in the world. (*Aftenposten*, December 24, 1995, p. 17)

Olsen's hair seamlessly weaves together biography, social expectations, health, and practicalities. The release of her hair symbolically and materially displays the two sides of her natural, untampered self: bound and unbound, like the ponytail itself. Her hair release not only allows her to join in social life in another way than her ponytail, it changes the context and the audience. The ponytail's iconic charge is drawn not only from its progressive power, fashionable spirit, and youthful customs, but also from what the ponytail is not, where it seemingly comes from, and where it may soon return. This is its performative half-life.

Atop Olsen's head, well-balanced by her physically strong and progressively resilient body, swings a ponytail, that when released also spurs "a smile that can melt an iceberg." Her visage should serve to meet the rugged, icy nature of Spitsbergen and its forthright, candid inhabitants. In other words, the ponytail is reducible to neither the visual or immediately sensory, nor the verbal. This icon materializes a symphony of deeply contradictory anticipations. While the ponytail binds hair to free movement, its release frees hair to enable and bind the actions of the wearer and of those who watch, like Medusa's hair. The movement of putting long hair into a ponytail is a meaningful practicality with a feminist undercurrent that implies "I'm busy, I'm working, and need my hair OFF my face." At

the same time, its release assures us that the woman archetype can, at any time, break out and release another true and natural self.²⁴ Moving with practicality, the “modern woman” oscillates to generate the forces that root practical and social movements in the movements of her hair.

CONSTRICTIONS AND EXPANSIONS IN IDEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

We are swimming in meaning now: long hair bound and released on the heads of pioneers and everyday heroes. If we think of the ponytail simply as conventional, and ignore its symbolic structuring, its proliferation across society will seem random (Spillman, 2020). But when we reveal its mythic structure, we see that this object “haunts consciousnesses” even though it “fluctuates so much and is so contradictory that its unity is not first discerned” (Beauvoir, [1949] 2011, p. 166).

Actually, this noise is comforting and makes the myth’s symbolism deeply felt through the everyday chaos of our natural and social landscapes (Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1967). It roots myth in the conventional ponytail and charges it—as a total social fact—with a half-life that can maneuver our moral, natural, and economic realities (Mauss, [1950] 1966). Like myth, the ponytail does not have a life of its own, but must be performed: condensed and placed into current social life in ways that draw some in and push others away from its truths (Alexander, 2004; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Sonnevend, 2016, 2020). As the ponytail haunts our consciousness through the totality of its movements and meanings, it easily becomes a practical means to maneuver gender power.

By the early 1990s, many gender barriers had been broken, yet many others had been revealed. The women, a young reporter announced, who promoted the youth culture that shunned all over 30 are now almost 50, “but they have not parked in a museum. They are still part of a trend-setting generation. And are again wanted by the fashion and model industry.” Forty-nine-year-old Kristij Krüger is one of those women “born into rebellion” who “refuse to stay invisible.” She is at once “girly and mature. Her dark hair that was waist long when she was a top model, is put up in a short ponytail. Her skin is smooth and her eyes are just as expressive as they were in her days as a top model. She looks a little bit less shallow, perhaps, her gleam is stronger.” Krüger, who now makes a good living, fought many battles on the women’s liberation front at a time when models were deemed to be complete idiots (*VG*, September 26, 1993, pp. 29–31).

Economic success is an easy way to story achievements in modernity.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, economic success also influences how we understand the

practicality of the ponytail. Under the headline, “Double Shift-working X-supermodel,” *Dagbladet* reports on Vendela Kirsebom Thommessen’s take on motherhood, her career, her book, and her future plans that do not include putting her career on hold (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 The practical businesswoman. (Picture credit: jacoblund via Getty Images)

Her book is ready and she is planning her very own Vendela-collection with products for both mother and child. Her book is about how women can deal with the difficult combination of being a mother and a career woman. ‘We should be sexy, skilled in homemaking, good mothers, good wives, and have a great career, too. The pressure is huge. I struggle every day,’ Vendela declares, before adding that the book will also be about how to get in shape after pregnancy, and that the book is going to be funny. ‘My career is important to me, even though the kids comes first. I try to work in the evenings, that is, if I do not collapse in the bed of one of the kids. I would really like to continue my career at the same time as spending time with my kids, and thus a nine-to-four-job is no good. Now I can make my own schedule,’ she says. The 34-year-old is sitting in her favorite café at Vindern, Oslo, and knows the chef and the waiter. Her hair is in a ponytail and her world-famous face is free from makeup. Last year Vendela Kirsebom Thommessen earned 23 million Swedish kroners which places her on top of the high-earners list. She is soon about to pick up her mother flying in from Sweden. Vandela also takes care of Julie who did not feel like going to the kindergarten today. Then there is the fact that her fridge stopped working. ‘The home is a mess,’ she admits. (*Dagbladet*, April 11, 2001, p. 26)

Part of the appeal of some of these gendered success stories resides in the idea of strong and powerful women who owe their success to the progressive work of earlier generations. Proponents of second-wave feminism often label this story as post-feminist (McRobbie, 2009). There is no longer the same need, or any need at all, for feminist reform or state support as women can now support themselves in “pursuing self-transformation via consumption, self-help, and the continual ‘making over’ of the self.” (Pickren, 2018, p. 577; see also Rutherford, 2018; Tyler, 2013). For example, journalist Ingeborg Heldal, a program host for the Norwegian broadcaster NRK, depicts a post-feminist narrative that takes a clear stand against “the old” second-wave feminism of her mother’s generation.²⁶

She is 178 centimeters slim and with a black-colored hair in a ponytail. ‘My mom tells me I am pushing the women’s movement back 150 years. I think most girls are feminist, in some way, but I think the wrong persons represent feminism. I cannot identify with the feminists participating in debates. They are too extreme. I am much more for a sexy feminism. Girl Power!’ She punches a hole in the air with her fist. ‘We must have equal pay, and I am not that naïve that I do see how important the women’s movement has been, but that should not turn gender roles into something negative,’ Heldal says. (*VG*, June 25, 2000, p. 19)

Filippa Kihlberg, director of the fashion fairytale Filippa K womenswear company, started out in 1993 and made 1.7 million Swedish kroners that first year. The 1996–1997 season had revenues of over 60 million.

[Filippa wears] black cotton jeans, simple short-sleeved top and New Balance shoes. Her light [blond] hair is put in a small ponytail. No makeup. In the room next to us, her three-and-a-half-year-old is chattering. Her company is an adventure. ‘It is growing. Everything is growing fast. Extremely fast. Nevertheless, even though fashion is a lifestyle, we still maintain control and an overview.’

And kids, the journalist states.

‘I would never put family to the side because of fashion success,’ Kihlberg answers. ‘All the girls at Filippa K value family and children, very highly. We are not fashion-idiots trapped for life in a materialist grinder.’

While Filippa gives off a surface impression of simplicity and normalcy, this new Swedish fashion queen radiates pride and strength. (*Bergens Tidene*, May 3, 1998)

Filippa seems, in many ways, to represent a modern self-made femininity; she is bright and beautiful, a leader and nurturer, autonomous and still connected to her family.²⁷ The modern obsession with growth is balanced by a criticism of the “materialist grinder” that can, if you are not careful, turn natural childbearing women into capitalist femmes fatales who leave behind their natural, no-make-up, simplicity and the normalcy of long-haired expectations. Paradoxically, this consciousness that Kihlberg represents is enabled by a privileged control and overview in a company and family that is growing and growing. Undoubtedly she faces struggles and her house, just like Thommessen’s, is probably sometimes a mess. By no means do the economically privileged perform anything else than other hard-working, natural women.

However, the post-feminist narrative clearly is not equally available to everyone and can be utterly unhealthy to those who overly conform to its ideals of self-regulated health (Arruzza et al., 2019; Crawford, 1980, 2006). Not everyone can skip a day of work just because their daughter does not feel like going to kindergarten, and most of us do not have chefs and waiters at upscale, chic places that call us by name, like Vendela Kirsebom Thommessen. Not everyone has a lifestyle or the resources to keep their 50-year-old complexion as smooth as when they were 30, like Krüger. While “state feminism” may be more boring than the glossy covers of post-feminist magazines, not all women in Norway’s highly gender-segregated employment market can afford to be neoliberally exciting. Nevertheless, they carry out some of the most demanding, least valued

jobs of our society. Their work supports the healthcare system, steadily downsized by new public management (Ingstad, 2010). We applaud them for fighting COVID-19, but fail as a society to economically reward them (Sonnevend, 2020). As we trace the ponytail's intersection with feminist narratives, we see and feel this hypocrisy that celebrates past feminist accomplishments while refusing to take its many lessons to heart. Through interpretations by journalists and their interviewees, the ponytail is imbued with post-feminist intents and senses, as well as social-democratic gusto, a process of symbolic layering that both constricts and expands the ideological boundaries of our lives.

Changing gender norms also constrict and expand how we think about women's public success. Ask, for instance, Beathe Hals, the Norwegian top chef and first woman champion in the gender-mixed chefs' competition, who "is a humble champion with smiling artistry and a tight ponytail." Like in other Norwegian journalistic reports, Hals was asked about gender barriers in her work life and why women seldom reach the elite level of chef artistry.

Women do not show up. There is a tenacious myth that only men are master chefs. Girls must dare to take the field and not be afraid to compete with the boys. There are many girl chefs out there, but it is only the boys that show off. (*Aftenposten*, October 10, 1998, p. 37)

The ponytail opens an existential realm with the power to simultaneously constrain and diversify the practicalities of the modern woman. In this complex landscape, we apply our critical interpretive capacities.²⁸ Elly Joys, age 29, for example, is a market director for the record label PolyGram, in Norway, who "wears a ponytail, tights and a long, knitted sweater over her jeans shirt." Asked if she feels she has to dress in clothes that are "not really you" because she works in a male-dominated occupation, Joys says the business is relaxed, dress-wise anyway, and that she is "a chameleon." But as she needs to keep her distance from the groupie identity, "fishnet stockings under a miniskirt is just out of the question," she says (*Dagbladet*, March 12, 1996, p. 8).

The ponytail does not eliminate workplace boundaries and negotiations that require maneuvering double standards of tolerance and shaming.²⁹ Are hyper-feminine women less credible as leaders? the reporter asks.

"It should not be that way," Joys replies. "Intelligence does not drop as adornments go up. To me, they [hyper-feminine women] have less credibility simply because they exude something that I am not familiar with" (*Dagbladet*, March 12, 1996, p. 8). The sexualized stereotype of the

groupie is nothing the ponytailed Joys wants to be linked with as she maneuvers a male-dominated profession.

Despite feminist waves breaking, even clashing in the natural and social landscapes of Norway, the ponytail stays afloat. Joys shows us that it transcends varied femininities and, along with Hals, demonstrates that the icon can persevere amid the winds of male bravado—despite the commodification of girl power and its post-feminist enactment by the likes of broadcaster Ingeborg Heldal, and despite social life becoming individualized and personhood considered an individualized achievement of choice-making.³⁰ Skillfully maneuvered by Filippa Kihlberg, a non-commodified, lived girl power and ideas about democratic femininities also exist alongside those that are economically hierarchized. Feminist literature can help us evaluate these various femininities that are not always explicitly feminist. The men and women described in this book are not all loudly declaring their stance or being feminist killjoys (Ahmed, 2017). They are living lives in feminist-influenced times in which they deliberate conscious and unconscious ideas of justice, some of which are boldly second-wave feminist.

With a twist of imagination, we follow millennial youth at the annual March 8 procession commemorating International Women's Day.

March! Red socks, women emblems, bold grins on our way to school on a sunny March 8th in Trondheim. Three girls with an attitude, with springy ponytails in their necks. No tight band can restrain these strands of hair. Here are loose manes and free thoughts. We are 17 and our mothers' daughters. A couple of teasing looks from our schoolmates are parried with a modern women's posture. Does anyone think, in their wildest mind, that we are gender equal in this country? Not to say the world! Statistics, research, and politics are smashed down on the table. You go live with your 364 days, you men. This day is ours and we are budding as fast as the willow. Out of the classroom marches three pairs of boots. Into the ladies room. Up goes the cork in that wine bottle, and a pleasurable giggle too. Hooky. Go home. Write on banners. Go to town. Fighting fit women. Parole and banners. Hard housewives and soft men. Equal pay. International solidarity. We carry the legacy of our grandmothers on a pedestal. The world is bigger than our streets and equality is as young as we are. As we march, we playfully catch the man of our dreams out the corner of our eyes and laugh. We are girls and we like it. Freed from almost all. From vanity. From expectations, and prejudice; from ourselves and from others. Before the night is over, one has left the crime scene. Another has fled the country. The third has left her boyfriend. March. (*Nordlys*, March 10, 2001, p. 45)

Not everyone holds the banner high, but being present is political in positionality, and “existence as such becomes a form of political labor” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 113). “Creative women” who advance into new terrain, a male-dominated terrain, that is, steadily draw media attention.

- Berit Svendsen, who has a leadership position at the multinational telecommunications company Telenor, participates in the committee that distributes the European Union’s funds for information technology research. In both roles, she is “guaranteed to turn heads with her contagious laugh and long, light blonde ponytail” (*Aftenposten*, April 7, 2002, p. 31). She is described as a real tech head, educated in hard math and physics.
- Unni Eriksen, program host for *Newton*, the science television show for children on NRK, hopes she will be a visible example that “not only boys can do natural sciences! In chemistry, the ratio is about 50-50. But in a lot of the other natural sciences it is much worse, she says and worriedly shakes her dark ponytail” (*Adresseavisen*, September 13, 2002, p. 7).
- Trained hairdresser Bente Otterstad, 19, from Rena chooses to put away her scissors and pick up an assault rifle. Among 500 applicants for a spot in the military police division trained at Sessvolmoen camp, she is one of 170 women who want to try out, which means demonstrating the ability to run, swim, do push-ups and pull-ups, and also display leadership abilities. After she makes the cut, a journalist asks if she thinks there is an additional pressure on girls in this boy’s world. “Not really,” she says. “We know we have made it without any form of quota. Some might think we are not strong enough. Fine, we do not run as fast as some boys, but those attitudes just provide extra motivation to show that we can handle the same situations as well as the boys. I get to show some other sides of myself, some sides that might not have been so visible before.” She throws herself on the well-made bed and loosens her ponytail, and says, “Mom is pretty shocked about how neat and tidy I have become” (*Østlendingen*, September 21, 2002, p. 10).

The media introduces these white majority women with ponytails to the public sphere as female role models for young women and girls. Although the women presented in this book all wear ponytails, few will disagree that the range of women personalities and occupations is diverse and diversifying. It seems somewhat deceitful, as a society, to first ask for

women role models and then criticize women pioneers for not being a second-wave ideal feminist who opposes long-haired femininity.

It seems pressing to underscore that the ponytailed women of Norway, dating from 1945 to the early twenty-first century, are to a large extent majority white. This does not mean there are no other ponytailed women in the Norwegian public sphere, but they are harder to find and perhaps their bodies matter less in the construction of the civil core or normativity (Alexander, 2006; Butler, 1993). There might be many explanations for this observation, but when it comes down to the wire, diversity and diversification (among other practices of representation and recognition) are missing. However, processes of “diversification” and inclusion, Lund and Voyer (2019, p. 198) argued, are not politically neutral, but tend to reinforce dominant civil ideals that can extend and constrict the civil sphere “from the view that there is one superior way to enact values.” This counts for the practicality of the ponytail as well, and for how the Norwegian press depicts ethnic minorities in Norway, not to say how minority women see, feel, and story themselves.

For instance, Soudabeh Alishahi is a writer who fled Iran and its censorship. “When I started writing in Norway, without being censored, I could not believe it,” she said. In her writings, she included women characters without a hijab, which the Iranian censoring committee demanded be revised and deleted. In opposition, Alishahi and colleagues tried to fund an independent literary union. Two of her accomplices were shot, and many more, like Alishahi, were arrested and tortured.

Her life as a leftist thinker and writer was not safe in Iran, and she fled the country. In the Norwegian winter,

without a hijab, the snow settles in the dark hair that Alishahi has loosely assembled in a ponytail. The camera is directed at her just before the dark winter night swallows the day. ‘It is very nice not to wear a hijab. I think 95 percent of the youth in Iran hates wearing a hijab. They do not use it at home and all the youth drink alcohol. Almost no Iranians in Norway use a hijab,’ Alishahi explains. (*Klassekampen*, December 7, 2002)

With white snow in her hair, ponytailed Alishahi relates both a symbolic and geographic journey. She (and the journalist) normalizes Iran to the Norwegian public, showing them she is not so different from the majority in Norway. The Iranian youth value free speech, do not wear a hijab, and drink alcohol, not unlike those teens that we encountered in Chap. 4 about ponytailed youth. Alishahi’s civil capacities are assessed according to

her ability to perform adequately in a civil society defined by a majority core.³¹ The ponytail is iconic as it draws us into the heart of this particular Western world.

Considering the inequalities that surround journalists, it is tempting to suggest that their often positive depictions of the ponytail conspire to mask injustice. A critical reader might claim that I conspire with them. But my aim is to show what makes the ponytail iconic and how feminist undercurrents possibly charge and shape its many meanings. While feminists residing in various camps and riding different feminist waves may disagree on the actual and preferred content of the women's movement, I study how the practicalities of the sometimes not so practical ponytail are shaped by and shape processes of gendered democratization and justice. In the Norwegian public sphere, it is a point of honor to place gender equality at the basis of democracy. Like all utopian scenarios, this mythic construction enthalls as much as it provokes annoyance at gender-blind idealism. However, idealism and criticism are nothing less than foundational to democracy. Norwegians might—with a hint of “racial superiority”—celebrate equality and self-righteousness one day and, in their own peculiar way, self-loathe and criticize themselves the next (Witoszek, 1998, p. 151).³²

Therefore, myth is not a falsity that depletes social life of meaning; rather, myth places the richness of mundanity at a distance and holds it at its disposal. Myths are nourished by this tamed richness (Barthes, [1957] 2009a). Myth hides and comes to life in this richness. It finds a third way out. Myth becomes *the compromise*. “Driven to having either to unveil or liquidate the concept, myth will *naturalize* it” (Barthes, [1957] 2009a, p. 154). Thus, a ponytailed practicality naturalizes the presence of the long-haired young woman in male-dominated occupations, in maintaining a dual-career home, and in pioneering new gendered grounds. The ponytail can radiate progress and social movement as its wearers break through old traditions, sometimes in bold, unapologetic ways and sometimes in verbally quiet ways that are loud with the body politics of positionality.

We use feminist codes and narratives to interpret and fuse these symbolic layers of the women's physical, organizational, and social movements. Some see ponytailed women as living in a post-feminist reality. Others take their place on the barricades, fists raised, ponytails waving, urging progress toward social justice. As a total social fact, the ponytail becomes an icon to feel, see, and enact meaningful oscillations between this complex totality of modernity (e.g., Mauss, [1950] 1966). Therefore, it is never apolitical, but evokes and materializes a set of civil virtues and

social boundaries seen from the viewpoint of a core group (Alexander, 2006, 2008; Alexander et al., 2020).

The progress or standstill of gender progress is evaluated and felt according to majority Norwegian ways: through the ponytailed woman in that Twin Otter plane and other women entering male-dominated occupations; through the everyday hero oscillating between the public and private spheres; through the ponytailed women out hustling kings backstage at the Mozartium to create an avalanche on stage and in society. The ponytailed other can experience this success—sometimes measured in the economic gains of women entrepreneurs, sometimes in the social hustle of guerilla leaders on a teacher’s strike—if only she allows its white snow to settle in her dark hair (Figs. 2 and 3).

Ponytailed Practicality

Naturalized progression | Denaturalized barriers

Movement | Standstill

Neoliberal growth | Socialist reform

Fig. 2 The codes and symbolic layers used to interpret and enact practical womanhood

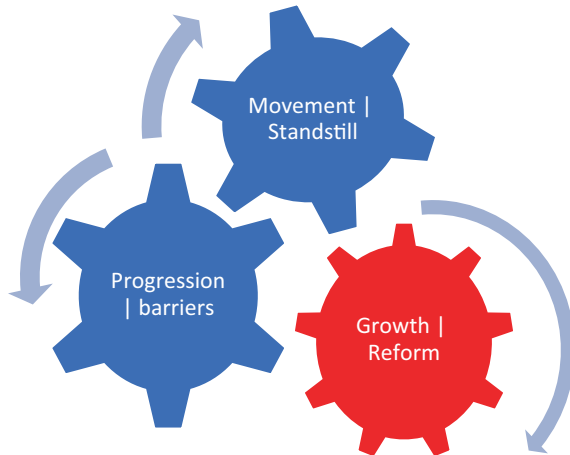


Fig. 3 The codes and symbolic layers of the practical hair

NOTES

1. See also Lukes (1973) and Smith (2020).
2. Deep meanings are felt through successful performances (Alexander, 2004, 2017; Goffman, 1959; V. Turner, 1982) and objects that attract and repel (Barthes, [1957] 2009b; Goffman, 1976; Smith, 2008). Ideas of rationality itself are the results of meaning-making processes (Alexander, 1995, 2006; Larsen, 2016; Spillman, 2012).
3. First-wave feminism focused on overturning legal inequalities and increasing public visibility and power (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). The second wave disclosed how cultures oppress women and exposed capitalism's androcentrism (1960s and 1970s). The third wave continued with a heightened emphasis on emotions, individualism, and diversity (1990s and early 2000s). Since 2010, a fourth wave keeps the idea of diversified inequality, but embraces new social media for activism (Dean & Aune, 2015).
4. Arruzza et al. (2019); Fraser (2013); Gill (2016); Gill and Scharff (2013); McRobbie (2009).
5. Today, some critical scholars see women—especially young women—as ideal neoliberal subjects (Pickren, 2018, p. 577). Rutherford (2018) argued that the discipline of psychology has fused with neoliberalism to equal emancipation with consumerism and personal responsibilities in a post-feminist modernity.
6. It should be mentioned that critical scholars have pointed out that a double entanglement of positive and negative aspects is central to the false experience of freedom and a mental resolve that destroys women's feminist awareness and action (Arruzza et al., 2019; Butler, 1990; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2009).
7. In Norway, the state is a strong facilitator and locus of civil rights, autonomy, and debates about the moral society (Sciortino & Stack, 2019). Norwegian news media, if such a generalization serves a purpose, ranges from a variety of news desks, tabloid to leftist, that contrast sharply with the liberal media model of American media. The Nordic version is typified as a democratic corporatist media model (Allern & Pollack, 2019) that prefers consensual solutions and cooperation between its key stakeholders which are the state, media, communication industries, and the public (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Of course, increased digitization, deregulation, and neoliberal forces have reshaped Norwegian media, as well as their legitimacy as democratic agents that inform, educate, and entertain. Nonetheless, newspapers are still considered a collective good that preserves diversity in information by combining the liberal, social democratic values worthy of continued financial state support (Engelstad & Larsen,

- 2019; Larsen, 2010). Although the media receives state and private funds, it keeps its highly valued autonomy to criticize both the state and the market, with the state acting only as a helper in this “semi-autonomous civil public sphere” (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019, p. 45).
8. Political life is a process of contests and alliances played out through performances (Alexander, 2011, 2015) and colored by dramatic narratives (Smith, 2008; Smith & Howe, 2015) about moral goods and evils.
 9. After a first wave of feminist reform in formal rights and suffrage in the early twentieth century, a second wave of feminism formed in the early 1970s. Worldwide currents of radicalism empowered this surge as well as huge incomes from the oil industry that greatly expanded a welfare state that fused feminist movements and state power in ways crucial for equality (Hernes, 1987; Schiefloe, 2012). The welfare state’s explosive growth also bred new occupational opportunities for women as antidiscrimination and employment policies promoted gender equality in the public sector and in public committees (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019, pp. 53–54). Extensive expansions in family policies and social security, as well as a proliferation of kindergartens, schools, and retirement homes, provided work opportunities in occupations that came to be typically dominated by women (Birkelund & Petersen, 2012; Petersen et al., 2014; Vike, 2001).
 10. In Norway, many of the most demanding and least rewarding jobs, like health care, are still dominated by women. About 10 percent more women than men study at the nation’s universities, and women make up 70 percent of the public sector workforce and dominate health and social work. The opposite is true for the private sector and construction, where men dominate by equally lopsided numbers (see SSB, 2020; Vike, 2001).
 11. Alexander et al. (2019); A. Lund and Voyer (2019); S. Lund (2019); Skille and Broch (2019).
 12. To do things with words involves performances and the use of performatives. Austin (1957, p. 133) argued, “The performative should be doing something as opposed to just saying something; and the performative is happy or unhappy as opposed to true or false.”
 13. Giddens (1984, p. 284, in Larsen 2019, p. 34) speaks of a double hermeneutic process, and feminism as a great example, in which sociologists end up studying the societies that they have partly changed through public criticism.
 14. Organizations and institutions are gendered spaces (Kvande, 2007).
 15. The concept of doing gender is inspired by West and Zimmerman (1987).
 16. Archetti (2003); Howell (1997).
 17. Post-structural ideas (often tied to Foucault) have their strength in revealing how technologies, surveillance, and schooling direct moral self-regulation, but tells us little about “the human predicament of trying to live a life

- that one is somehow responsible for, but is in many respects out of one's control" (Mattingly, 2012, p. 179).
18. <https://bunadsgeriljaen.no/>.
 19. Anderson (2008); Dyck (2012); Johansen and Green (2017); Knoppers and Anthonissen (2003); Skille (2011); Strandbu et al. (2016).
 20. Broch (2022); Helle-Valle (2008); Helsedirektoratet (2010).
 21. Goffman (1959, 1986) argued that understandings of situations and frames are key to interpretations of meaningful micro-actions. Institutions, with specified goals and aims, shape meaning-making in more stable ways than what we can observe in everyday encounters (Broch, 2020; Spillman, 2012; Swidler, 2003). In studying hair, Obeyesekere (1981) argued that institutions, or the "operative context," are key to understanding the meaning of hair.
 22. Tarde (1903, p. 78).
 23. Tarde (1903, pp. 229–233); Tocqueville (1945).
 24. For another dramatic example of hair movements, see the 2019 *Captain Marvel* movie by Marvel Studios. First, as her superhero hood morphs off, her hair blows out and down in a dramatic release. Second, Marvel Studios enacts the symbolic relationship between identity and hair as Captain Marvel's hair digitally ignites and rises in an aura as Carol Danver regains her true self and true hair (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LHxvxdRnYc>).
 25. Economic success and the idea that the accumulation of capital is available to everyone is one of our major forms to demonstrate achievement and designate rewards based on merits (Piketty, 2014, p. 334).
 26. Gill (2016); McRobbie (2009); Scharff (2013).
 27. Budgeon (2013).
 28. Alexander (2006); Boltanski and Thévenot (2006); Jackson and Vares (2013).
 29. Gendered boundary work and negotiations of gendered ideals is an active accomplishment of narration and action (Grundetjern, 2018; Jones, 2009). Often such maneuvering involves a double standard that in sexually liberal cultures often include declarations of tolerance and gender equality, as well as shaming and symbolic polluting of certain femininities (Fjær et al., 2015).
 30. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002); Giddens (1991); Pickren (2018); Rutherford (2018).
 31. Civil capacities are "primordialized, and the ability to perform adequately in civil society is understood as restricted to those who possess the particular qualities of the core group" (Alexander, 2006, p. 460).
 32. In Norway, narratives and self-presentations of conspicuous modesty and gender justice are prominent in shaping inclusion and exclusion dynamics (Broch & Skille, 2018; Daloz, 2007; Gullestad, 2001; Skille & Broch, 2019; Witoszek, 1998).

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Movements

For Norwegian biathlon skier Tiril Eckhoff, the winter of 2020–2021 was magical. She won 12 world cup races, best Norwegian woman ever and equal to the male national hero, Ole Einar Bjørndalen. In the 2021 world championship in Pokljuka, Russia, she won four gold medals, one silver, and one bronze out of seven possible races. That winter, a spectator noticed a small stylistic detail coinciding with Eckhoff’s every win: a free-flying ponytail. Confronted with this detail, Eckhoff admitted to being a bit superstitious, thanked the viewer, and said she would sport a ponytail the rest of the season (NRK, March 21, 2021; VG, March 12, 2021).

In the world of sports, “winning” connotes charm and captivation, but magic, ritual, and superstition also are characteristic of this realm of chance (Broch & Kristiansen, 2014; Gmelch, 2004/1971). Spectators may not easily detect some competitors’ rituals—like always eating pasta on race day, wearing the same pair of boxers, or repeating the same words at the pre-race meeting (VG, March 12, 2021)—a free-flying ponytail is conspicuously magic.

Bearing in mind the many social constrains, power relations, and injustices existent in sports (not to mention the undeserved stereotype of “the dumb jock”), to begin a look at sports with the notion of magic might seem unfair; however, I proceed with utmost respect for the athlete and serious cultural sociological intents. In the previous chapters, we have seen how the ponytail answers to gendered expectations, health issues, and the practicalities of the modern Norwegian woman, a process in which the

deeply emotive, semiotic, and sacral elements of society can be imbued in the ponytail object. Not only is social life rooted in the materiality of hair, but hair's otherwise dead materiality has a half-life that directs our bodily existence and experience (Alexander, 1988a, 1988b, 2020). Therefore, as I have proposed, the ponytail icon is a total phenomenon that allows us to sensuously maneuver the experiential totality of social facts (e.g. Durkheim, 1901/2014; Mauss, 1950/1966).

The ponytail object can be a cosmological compass. A magician can only use her art on things that belong to her symbolic ecology, and totems can only be charged if they are positioned at the core of a symbol system (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 150–151); therefore, magic reveals the social constraints we encounter and the codes, narratives, and myths we use to maneuver them.¹ In this sense, a magic ponytail—its aesthetic surface and moral depth—tells how individual and public cultures intersect. It makes perfect sense that a ponytail can hold magic, which is why mapping the symbolic layers of the ponytail is important. Now I can show how the codes of youthfulness, custom, fashion, and progress are used to maneuver material and non-material social facts. Rooted in the ponytail, these meanings generate a prospective half-life. With a free-flying ponytail, Tiril Eckhoff is herself free-flying as a healthy, normative, and moving woman. The ponytail shows us this.

Culture is dynamic and swift-moving. It changes historically, varies across cultures, and moves in and out of material and non-material facts. We do not always notice, but culture like a cosmology is always in motion, as we view the same world through shared codes, narratives, and myths, but from different social, bodily, and biographic viewpoints, to create a multitude of expressions (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 273). In fairytales, Jung (1972/2003, pp. 102–105) said, we sense a spirit consisting of a phenomenology that is antithetical to, but still resides in nature and the material. Spirit is a vehicle of psychological phenomena, or of life itself. To a Durkheimian (1912/1995) scholar, spirits are folkloric, moral, and ideational renditions of will, memory, creative power, and hope. Cultural spirits are evocative of “the wind” or a primordial vivifying essence that moves through objects, individuals, and historical time:

In keeping with its original wind-nature, spirit is always an active, winged, swift-moving being as well as that which vivifies, stimulates, incites, fires, and inspires. To put it in modern language, spirit is the dynamic principle, forming for that very reason the classical antithesis of matter—the antithesis, that is, of its stasis and inertia. Basically it is the contrast between life and death. (Jung, 1972/2003, p. 105)

We have seen culture move like spirits in the many examples of ponytails among gendered customs and fashions, in its oscillations amid young and adult heteronormative womanhood, in democratic tales and hopes motivated by social (in)justice. None of these swift-moving codes are entirely new, but are part of a trajectory of imitations that reinvent the ponytail's mythical half-life. In sports, an aesthetics of body movements and poetic anticipations of what comes next (Gumbrecht, 2006), *spirit* appears as social meanings (Alexander, 2004) join with sport aesthetics and symbolism (Broch, 2020). Thus, sporting ponytails can materialize a winning version of the practical, healthy, progressive, longhaired expectation. This iconic power is not typically achieved through explicit deliberation, but built up over time by "invisible accretions" that make the icon a performer with a half-life (Alexander, 2012, p. 34). In sports, the moving body is at the center of attention, and therefore, paramount to its construction of icons.

The magic of Eckhoff's ponytail is situated in a Norwegian cosmology in which skiing and other winter sports are fused with narratives of health, courage, and the winter landscape. Winter sport is to Norwegians what soccer is to the English and hockey to Canadians, an affirmation of natural and mythical landscapes (Barthes, 2007). We see this in Nordic children's literature, in the feminist stories of Astrid Lindgren and Maria Parr, who created female characters who jump rivers and run the mountainsides,² but also in the primordial and ethnic-majority history of a Norway in which overcoming nature and being outdoors has a long tradition.³

To master nature's trials and pleasures, a mountain girl must have a solid backbone, it is said, As Ildrid in Mustrøen's (1915/1992) story of the *Mountain Girl* who peers through her window glass, awaiting her boyfriend in the cold winter night. Suddenly, she sees something that brings her to her knees, to a whispering in the name of Christ and then, up she jumps. Her father hears only barely a pair of skis caressing the snow outside. It is Ildrid, who with staff in hand, speeds toward the roaring river and the roaring wolves that surround her boyfriend. She thinks it will be worse if *he* rather than *she* fall prey. With the mountains blue of night, burning like doomsday, with stars scorching, falling behind the peaks, Ildrid climbs the hillside to jump the valley and death at the same time. The snow so hard and the skis so fast, she is flying. Her blood is frozen, and the abyss over which she jumps rumbles. A wolf skin and her staff are still found on the farm as reminders.

Tiril Eckhoff's skiing and courage, as well as her swinging ponytail, are not unique. Mid-winter, on January 31, during the 1956 Cortina Winter

Olympics, *VG*'s reporters attended the action. Their presence was not neutral. Norwegian journalist Arne Skouen drew upon a full supply of cultural background representations to fuse Norwegian ethnicity with skiing. In one report, he recapped the day as “focusing on those other nations that have learnt to use skis and skates as well as us. In this Olympic spirit and in the joy of showing modesty at the medal ceremony, we [Norwegians] urge an era when Norway no longer played ‘first violin’ [in the Winter-Olympic orchestra]. It was health and kindness in every word we uttered.” Skouen wrote with a conspicuous modesty, as Norway dominated.⁴ In the women’s slalom slopes, Norway seized all top four positions. In this case, the journalist recounts the prior Olympic champion American Andrea Mead Lawrence, who competed alongside and even beat Norway. This year she skied “con amore with her waving ponytail, but finished fifth.” Even so, Norwegians should not pound their chests in joy of domination. What is key, Skouen “modestly” said, is not the medals:

It is that girls like Astrid Sandvik and Inger Bjørnebakken have embodied the right type of slalom. They do not control the skis, but allow all movements to develop in a play of equilibria. The skies have become a compliant function of the body’s dance through the gates, the very watermark of the intriguing rhythmic and almost musical talent needed to master this sport. They are, in all honesty, worthy of a song. For they competed amongst the best with such an effortless playfulness. (*VG*, January 31, 1956)

Like the sirens’ song of Greek myth—a song never recounted as the sailor who heard it never returned from its lure—the musicality of the women’s slalom is a mythic idea that never fully materializes in its aesthetic rhythms. It leaves traces in the snow, yet escapes like a gust of wind to move us, to put us in motion, and to escape materiality yet again. But we can feel its rhythm and poetically recapture it.⁵ The aesthetics of sports become myth-like when we push the athletic performance at a distance, yet holds it at our disposal to evoke the cultural elements that shape its full musicality.⁶ As an example, Andrea Mead Lawrence’s waving ponytail is iconic because it holds a condensed image of the ponytail’s many symbolic layers imbued in her body movements.⁷ Her waving ponytail recasts her swaying motions down the slalom hill: The women body in slalom motion; the long and quick entering of the gates; bursts of energy when leaving gates that can shoot a skier off track if she is not in balance. The ponytail’s aesthetic movement fascinates as it draws our attention to an effortless play and rhythmic force evocative of practicalities, health, gendered expectations: a pride of mastering sporting and social movements. As the myth tells, a good skier does not run her skis, but lets the skis run for her. She glides, flies, *con amore*, with love, devotion,

and zest. The ponytail accentuates a culture whose spirits hold beliefs and desires recast in the poetics of slalom. Thus, sports can indeed shape gender and meaningful body techniques birth new imitations of the fashionable customs of the spirited, moving woman (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 The materialization of movements. (Picture credit: technotr via Getty Images)

Spirit, then, consists of the existential narratives and codes that vivify the material world. Spirit is manifest in the girl and woman skier who jumps the death of the valley, who dares the blistering cold and the mountainside burning with the winter's azure darkness. Its aesthetic sensations resound, almost like magic, the historical times and cultural creation of bodies, communities, and natural life.

BODILY MOVEMENTS AND NATURALIZED PROGRESSION

The power of nature to form social life and bodies, of skis to impart tracks in the snow and strengths in the legs, are familiar to the writers of prose and composers of national identities.⁸ The "nature of sport," too, meaningfully sculpts bodies through rhythmic movements and brings these bodies into the public sphere through a dramatic staging of mastery, strength, and agility. When sporting bodies enter the public realm on TV screens, in prose, and as work colleagues, they do so sculpted through the materialization of meaningful movements. Women's sports often provide especially good examples of this process.⁹

In 1991, the newspaper *Aftenposten* (April 27, 1991a, p. 25) introduced Kari Fasting, the Norwegian track and field gold and silver medalist, a 800-meter runner, and the country's first women sports professor and first women rector at a sports college in Norden. At a high tide of the gendered sport revolution, the journalist depicted life around Fasting's college located by beautiful lake Sognsvann, bordering the forest of Oslo:

Spring is budding and the whole of Norway is running. Tears are running, noses are running, and sweat pearls are pouring. Is it the allergies? Then, there are the joggers. They sprint, jump, rove the streets, parks, woods, and fields. In flock or all alone with their pulse. Sognsvann is theirs and the college's play area. Here they run past you with their wildling hair and ponytails, in psychedelically colored tights. As the birds tweet and the duck turn their rears, they run with one finger on their pulse and one thought on their mind: lactic acid. After five laps around the lake [5 times 3K], they still have not seen the flowers by the budding birch. You must be quite courageous to say no to jogging in this milieu. Rector Fasting is daring.

Jogging is healthy, but boring, Fasting admits. She is skilled, in sport biology, law, pedagogy, and management. She can do a split-jump over a log and a triple jump in the mud without causing a splash, according to the report. "She is the professor, rector, and ruler of the temple" known

as the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. This 1990s woman is asked what it takes. “Well, work life has been consuming. And multifaceted,” she says. Fasting practices jazz ballet, slalom, cross-country skiing, tennis, and golf. “She even grinds her teeth for the occasional jog. But no more than once a week!” Also her intellectual capacities are vast. She is a “very popular speaker at national and international counsels, and in committees on children and women sport.”

Looking back on it all, at her life, Fasting admits that at the age of 48 she feels old:

From the time that I was standing there at the starting line, in the ‘50s, a revolution has taken place. At that time, marathon for women? Unthinkable. Until Grete Waitz. Women’s soccer? Nonsense. Not even possible to dream about. Today, there are hardly any barriers left to brake. Almost all disciplines are open for women. This year, the triple jump was added to the [Olympic] program. Next time it will be pole vault and hammer throw. Today a women’s gold medal is, on most occasions, considered as valuable as one won by a man.

When asked if being rector will crown her career, Fasting emphatically answers no:

[Fasting is so] damn energetic that she might just reach the peak behind the peak, blowing with the wind. She has a mouth that is big, red, smiling, and full of dexterous words. She is a woman and has no concerns about being one or showing it. Women athletes have become more feminine, Fasting tells us.

“The Norwegian cross-country girls are so fashionable that they have been used as mannequins and models in Paris. That has to be a new trend. They no longer have to remove their lipstick before a run, as we had to back in the days. That is the face of something new, of a more accepting perspective on women. Today, the healthy woman is an ideal. Women can have muscles on the conditions of the women body. That is an extremely valuable progress. When young women understand that it is possible to combine elite sports with femininity, it will be easier for them to start doing sports, and to continue,” Fasting says. (*Aftenposten*, April 27, 1991a, p. 25)

In this moment of enthusiasm, with a spirit that can carry her to the peak behind the peak, Fasting looks back at her own career and a time when women athletes had to remove markers of femininity. She cheers the new possibility that muscularity and femininity can fuse. Later, in moments

of second-wave theorizing, Fasting's script seemingly flipped. Feminine agency became a false consciousness persuaded by patriarchy.¹⁰

Let's say, for the sake of the argument, that sports—not alone, of course—has changed social life to make new and sometimes quite constrained ideals of how muscularity and femininity can fuse. Sports-active women in Norway almost doubled from the 1950s into the late twentieth century. Forty percent of sports club participants are women, and the gender gap in time spent on physical exercise and sports has almost vanished. Gender politics and economic freedom have transformed the Norwegian leisure landscape.¹¹ Sports participation is now normative for ethnic-majority girls.¹² The ponytail of the 1950s and '60s female athlete reappears in a wholly new social terrain, where it has been all along—among young schoolgirls, among women of leisure, and among fashionistas on busy city streets. The ponytail that was fashionably sexy for “women who attend the sport activities of their sons” (*VG*, August 29, 1995), also waves for women who are not just watching but doing sports themselves. They are informed watchers. Some of them are coaches. Some of them are rectors.

Others are admired role models to be imitated—Grete Waitz for example. Unlike Ildrid in Mustrøen's (1915/1992) the *Mountain Girl*, Waitz was no poetic image of a female ideal flying across hard snow and jumping a river—she was a real, living woman. Pounding the asphalt, her calves strong, her step light, Waitz jumped the abyss of women's inabilities and passivity.

However, she could not command weather. On a day with heavy rains, the participation rate of the Oslo run dropped 30 percent, but nevertheless, a fair share of enthusiasts showed up for this materialization of the women's and the fitness movements. In the newly launched 5K event, women outnumbered men by 670 to 404. “Who knows how many of these participants will try to double the distance next year?” pondered *Aftensposten's* gender observant journalist, Mette Bugge (June 10, 1985a, p. 10).

A new material social fact was being forged in “the form of crowd behaviors, in the movement of bodies in the street” (Smith, 2020, p. 23). A symbolic system of freedom, movement, and progress generated this shared psychological current, and in the very middle of it all stood an icon, Grete Waitz, both feet firmly planted on the ground. She “got a pretty wet ponytail as she guided the littlest participants on an easy 5K path. The children, of course, 7 years-old at the youngest, were very excited to have

such a prominent guide” (*Aftenposten*, June 10, 1985a, p. 10). The role models of sports and sports communities shape our relationships and imitations of embodied empowerment through active democratic learning and imitation. This is not a simple viewing of body ideals, but a *doing* of ideals in ways that contrast with a mere consumerist’s gaze.¹³ A meaningful ponytailed health involves democratic participation through imitation.

A few months later, in the heyday of the world-renowned long-distance runner, Waitz caused “a fish school of followers and quite a racket just by showing her face in the streets of New York” for the city’s marathon. Waitz had become a superstar. “She has met with Royals and Presidents, received gold medals and great silver cups. Been on TV shows, too.” On September 14, 1985, she met long-distance runner Bjørn Nordheggen, who “has been wandering the forests where silence whispers and breathes to body and mind. Will this talented young man take the torch when Waitz retires?” the journalist asked. As the first sex of this interaction, Waitz loudly protested at the mention of retirement: “Stop running? Never!” Grete Waitz looks up, dismayed. She is not sitting, but flat out laying on her chair, feet up. “Totally relaxed, but with a fully armed pair of eyes.” She would turn 32 on October 1st, but this would not be her last New York Marathon.

Twenty-four-year-old Nordheggen said, “Grete ranges on the top of his list of idols.” Although he has never trained in the very organized manner that Waitz has, Bjørn said, “I have walked the forest, a lot. With dad, mom, and four siblings—or alone—from the time I was little.” Both he and Waitz shared a love for the forest, but “it is not that I run around admiring nature,” Waitz said. “It is quiet, no humans, and no cars. Pure, fresh air.” The forest does you good, Nordheggen and Waitz agreed.

She had just published the book *World Class* and had been featured on the cover of *Woman* magazine, with “a soft red mouth and mysterious blue eyes.” Not a fan of makeup and hair styling, “She tells about attending a TV show, wearing a ponytail,” that is better. Waitz “bubbled with irony” as she painted a picture of herself besides “Jackie Collins, from *Dynasty* [TV series], and the ex-wife of Vidal Sassoon, that guy with world-class hair salons. And Emmanuelle, she with the scantily dressed movies. And then me, Grete ...” (*Aftenposten*, September 14, 1985b, p. 23).

From time to time, sports have it all in terms of female role models—from the often passive “tennis” star, Anna Kournikova, to the in-your-face style of a sexually empowered Serena Williams and mixed-martial artist Ronda Rousey, who loudly opposed the idea of sculpting a body to attract

wealthy men's attention.¹⁴ Waitz is a role model of a different kind. Urban Grete Waitz enjoys abstract nature and the rational training regimes that made her the perfect pioneer and spokesperson for the women's (fitness) movement.

The ponytail has an aesthetic surface charged by narratives of movement in sports and society. As the 13th Grete Waitz run was held in Oslo in 1996, *Aftenposten* reported:

Miss Marathon runs on home court and Norway's most famous ponytail will fly in the wind. Behind her runs 48,500 companions. Girls with punch and grit. With courage in their chest, sweat on their foreheads, and sneakers on their feet. When this caterpillar train [of women bodies] thunders through the streets, the Richter scale will pick up on its impact!" (*Aftenposten*, May 14, 1996, p. 38)

Not only had a new material social fact been formed, the very symbol system that was forming it, which kept it moving, could be sensed by its visual presence in the streets, detected on the Richter scale. The 1990s had been the time of Grete Waitz, "the women with a ponytail and an athletic suit. That obligatory everlasting Adidas" (*Aftenposten*, May 12, 1991b, p. 32). Even before, in 1984, a shared psychological current had materialized on the city streets: Waitz immortalized in a statue, two tails of hair flying behind her resolute and democratizing stride outside Bislett Stadium in Oslo.

The power of sports to shape social life and bodies are indeed familiar to many. Sports sculpts bodies through movements and presents them in the public sphere through dramatic stagings of mastery, strength, and agility. This presentation includes not only elite professional athletes, but also those whose leisure involvement in sports carries the iconic ponytail into new contexts.

In the corridors of Domus Medica at Oslo University, a journalist spotted Thea Bjerkestrand Bøe, a former handball player and now a medical student. Her "ponytail dances just like it did when she sprinted across the hardwood floor," noted the journalist, either remembering well or simply imagining an iconic memory evoked by the ponytail. "Her handshake is just as forceful as you would expect of a former handball girl." Her smile is broad and there is no question that she enjoys her new life as a medical student. Bøe said she "went to a couple of handball practices last fall, but after a couple of sessions I just had it up to here." (*Tønsberg Blad*, March 1, 2014).

While Bøe has had enough of handball, her sporting spirit has a half-life that radiates through the ponytail in this new context where movement, progress, and self-confidence are equally important. Her feel for the game, of sports, and of being physically active have continued beyond the gym and the sports arena into social life—at least if we are to believe the natural sciences about muscle memory and cultural theories of experienced bodily functionalism. When sporting bodies re-enter the public, they do so having been sculpted through the materialization of a set of meaningful movements.

KINESTHETIC FREEDOM AND WOMAN NATURE

The 1990s was a time when the Norwegian roster was full of women's sport talent. Like “the 18-year-old [soccer star] Gro Espeseth, from Sandvika, young, light blonde, and nimble. Underneath her long ponytail there was hiding a talent of an unusual caliber” (*VG*, May 24, 1991, p. 29). Not simply athletic, this hidden talent also held an imagery deeply rooted in a Norwegian cultural history, although not always articulated. The character of an 1857 Bjørnsjerne Bjørnson novel is Synnøve Solbakken, who represents goodness and light and hails from the sunny side of the valley, the “Sol-bakken,” or Sunnyhill. Some Norwegians still associate these meanings with light blond and the morally good. Of course, in the twenty-first century, Synnøve Solbakken is as much a humorous relic as a sacral ideal of majority ethnic, rural womanhood. But if and when she materializes, she has long light blond hair, sometimes a swinging ponytail, and perhaps wears a bunad, or a work uniform, or is on cross-country skis.

Many examples of this myth-making tradition of perfect, ephemeral women archetypes appear in Norway.¹⁵ Sometimes they are explicated. When the Norwegian women's cross-country skiing relay team won gold in the Salt Lake City Olympics, the gold medalists were named four Synnøve Solbakkens (*NTB*, February 26, 2010). One of them, Therese Johaug, became one of the biggest names in Norwegian sports history and a favorite to corporate sponsors as the very personification of the amiable and blond-haired Synnøve Solbakken from the countryside, with “bigger potentials than her superstar colleagues of both genders, Petter Northug and Marit Bjørgen” (*VG*, March 6, 2011).

In 2010, the year of her decisive breakthrough, Johaug won the 30K distance at the world championship race in Oslo. By custom, the

champion was to shake hands with the Norwegian king, but instead she jumped into his arms, moving the royal family and a nation from awe to charm (*Aftenposten* July 9, 2011b; December 24, 2019; *Dagbladet*, July 15, 2012; *VG*, February 23, 2013). This 21-year-old, from a farm in the little village of Dahlsbygda, we presume on the sunny side of the valley, had “risen from nature. Beautiful, predictable, like a birch tree in May” (*Aftenposten*, March 6, 2011a). When she won the world championship, Norwegians heard “the same old tune” about a “Synnøve Solbakken of the race tracks” who “throughout her childhood loved to ski” and had the “heartfelt support of her parents [thought they] doubted that the scrawny little girl would ever make a sports star.” On skis, rising from a rhythm of energy, full of life spirit, flying rather than gliding on the ski tracks, Johaug was

a manifestation of one of the founding myths of the cross-country sport. The one about an ancient power that is built by heavy labor such as lifting hay and by walking the cattle to the mountain pastures in the summer. Of the morality that arises due to the fact that work, work, and more work is the pulse that allows life on a farm. (*Aftenposten*, December 24, 2019)

Johaug, the elegant mountain goat and lightweight climber of the steep slopes of any contest (*VG*, August 8, 2015), was a national treasure, the embodiment of a distinct ethnic majority and Norwegian identity. So powerful an icon of a naïve, morally good femininity was Johaug, that when she tested positive for doping, Norwegian’s own naiveté was strained. Later she enjoyed record sales of her line of a fashionable, highly lucrative clothing line for elite athletes and exercisers on skies, hikes, and runs (*Bergens Tidene*, February 15, 2017; *Nrk*, October 27, 2017; November 7, 2018).

In sympathy? Norwegians still wanted to sport like Johaug. In sports, bodily movements and gendered expectations fuse. Not only Johaug combines the elegant moves of the mountain goat with archetypal femininity. Norwegian Jorunn Horgen, too, “surfs the crest of weaves and past the world’s best,” according to a report in *Aftenposten*:

She is a modern mermaid, Formula 1 class. She dances over the regatta court as a prima ballerina driven by the power of the winds—a recipe for gold. And gold indeed, she has served us: five world cups, today the fourth European cup, one Asian championship and various Norwegian titles. The

Olympic gold is missing. Steady as she goes, with a ponytail [waving] in the wind and both her legs [sjøben] firmly planted on the Lechner board. She is Nedre Eiker's [district] Synnøve Solbakken. The nimble, light [blond] haired and blue-eyed girl that has both smarts and legs. (*Aftenposten*, June 13, 1992, p. 27)

What do all these women have in common? Synnøve Solbakken of Bjørnson's novel signifies all that which is good and light as opposed to darkness. As a child, Synnøve and her friend Ingrid ran around so fast and so much that everyone called them "the grouses." As she came of age, "Synnøve grew tall and slim, had yellow hair, a nice and shiny face with quiet blue eyes. When she spoke, she smiled, and people said it brought a blessing" (Bjørnson, 1857/1998, p. 21). Through the 1990s, the gendered spirit was not the same as that of Bjørnson's 1857 novel, but the belief in the morally sacred, light of color, of good and bad spirits, had not vanished and still poetically shaped social life. Like in myth and fairytales in which a tiny detail or the littlest among us changes the course of life, the ponytail holds the powerful spirits of a fashionably folkloric, youthful, forceful, longhaired feminine archetype.

Something changed in sports during the 1980s. A national repertoire of ideal female types and heroes recast the sacral active woman in a new healthy, active way, perhaps extending Kari Fasting's analysis of the possible. Theoretically, we know the use and feel for the spirits of our ecologies, these swift-moving winds that vivify, stimulate, incite, inspire. We should be able to find them as they travel through social landscapes and institutions with folkloric and shared renditions of will, memory, imagination, creative power, and moral aspirations.

In 1986, the Norwegian women's handball team broke through to become national heroes and started a long Norwegian sports success story. Among the players on the team that won the 1986 World Cup bronze medal, almost all had short to medium-length hair (*Aftenposten*, November 26, 2016), but entering the twenty-first century, almost everyone had long hair, enough for a ponytail or a bun. For example, Susann Goksøyr (24) is the new big thing in Norwegian mid-90s handball. She is funny and energetic and loves to play tricks and joke around, as she has done her entire life:

She has kept her smile and laugh. The only place Susann looks a little grim is out on the handball court. When she shoots the ball, her lips curl inwards

as she presses her mouth shut. Her eyes shoot lightening. A fervent “rrr!” releases from the grip of her lips as the ball shoots towards the goal. At least 418 times, she has lit up the arena with a big smile only seconds after. That is how many goals she scored in her 165 games for the national team. During games, the whole of Susan dances. Legs and arms changes direction in a lightning fast tempo. Her face communicates the message better than any word could, “Throw me the ball. I am right here. Attack. Yeees!” Even as she now sits still behind the desk [talking to us], her ponytail and hands dance in the rhythms of the handball games that Susann is talking about. (*Nordlys*, September 17, 1994, p. 40)

Goksøyr’s spirit is naturalized, individualized—a vivifying force she carries with her from childhood through life’s various stages and institutions. Susan Goksøyr along with Kari Fasting, Grete Waitz, and Jorunn Horgen embody the aesthetics of their sporting rhythms. Indeed, critical theory reveals that the drills, hard labor, and practice of sports that strengthens bodies can strip a person of creative spirit.¹⁶ Norwegian journalists writing about the young girl robots of the Russian gymnastics team warned about this danger. But sports also can shape creative and spirited bodies, like the play of the two light-colored, flying “grouses,” Synnøve Solbakken and her friend, Ingrid, roaming the countryside. The musicality of sports is composed of smarts and legs, laughs and grit, and *rrrs*. The ponytail becomes a composite of these primordial and spirited powers in women’s cultural-cum-kinetic movements. If Tarde (1903, p. 34) and Mauss (1934/1973, p. 77) are right, these beliefs and desires are not simply poetic, but pulse through habitualized imitations. They give the ponytail a half-life, an object with its own capacities of performative power.

If we bear in mind the symbolic layers of ponytailed health, it seems reasonable to argue that kinetic freedom and emancipation are linked to the existential depths of youthfulness. Children and youth sports communities are believed to provide—or at least add to—a healthy, democratic participation in Norwegian society. Here ponytailed girls do a little bit of sports, a little bit of volunteering, and have a whole lot of fun. For example, eight-year-old Stine Vatne Hansen, a third grader at Gullfjordungen Elementary School, has played soccer for a year and a half and attends a soccer summer camp to hone her skills:

“I am a better player now,” she says. “Look, I can hit my water bottle!” She misses but gets another try. That is how it is at camp. You try repeatedly, until you get it. Stine knows she can kick both high and low.

“Darn it! Missed again. I will try a high kick instead,” she says and drops the ball to her foot for yet another second try. Practice makes champions. The ball rockets into the air with full thrust. Stine has not practiced a lot of headers before, but she is not the type of girl that backs down from a challenge. [Kind of like Pippi Longstocking saying, “I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do it.”]

She practices and after a couple of minutes, she makes headers forward, backwards, and upwards. The best player Stine knows is her sister, [who] has played soccer for 10 years now.

“My hair is really soaked in sweat now,” Stine suddenly exclaims. She runs to the closest tree and shakes it so that its raindrops fall on her light ponytail. (*Hordaland*, July 8, 2002, p. 11)

While Astrid Lindgren’s Pippi Longstocking had some magic tricks up her sleeve, so does Stine Vatne Hansen. She knows that drills make for a good sweat and that sweat poetically dramatizes drills. She might not be able to verbalize this cultural fact, but she can definitely feel it. Good thing there are raindrops on the trees surrounding the field. The reporter too feels this landscape of ponytailed magic, as natural as the dew on the birch.

Hansen’s hair, well hair in general, is also about belonging,¹⁷ a means to feel one’s individual participation and to show community.¹⁸ Hansen’s hair magic only works in a culture that knows how families inspire sports participation and “agrees” that sports can provide a pristine, healthy engagement with nature and society. These societies, uniform as they may look, still provide us with the bafflement of social life in poetic form. When comedian Sigurd Sollien stepped in as voluntary handball coach for the 13- to 15-year-old girls team in Harstad, he encountered expectations that experienced players would take for granted to be surprising as a newcomer to the sport: “Putting up hair in a ponytail or braiding hair. Putting on sports tape to stabilize fingers and knees. A handball practice is about so much more than throwing a ball, bouncing and shooting it” (*Harstad Tidende*, March 8, 2018). What do you do in the half time break of a handball game? “Get your friend to style your hair perhaps” says the teenage handball girls attending the handball cup in Aurskoghallen (*Indre Akershus Blad*, January 16, 2017) (Fig. 2).

Sports girls’ hair is about longhaired practicalities, but also about familial and friendship communities that put bodies in movement. Like horses that cheerfully swishing flies from each other’s faces, humans also demonstrate friendship as they stand in a line, fingers to hair, making ponytails



Fig. 2 Ponytailed belonging. (Picture credit: South_agency via Getty Images)

and braids for each other, and passing on styling techniques—a ritual of caring and sometimes some painful tugs, too (Prince, 2009; Weitz, 2004). The ponytail can signify solidarity in a community’s many voluntary identities put in motion.

These girl and women bodies in movement and their women’s movement is fast paced and full of vitality, like the self-proclaimed “Turbo-girls” from the small town, Nordby, south of Oslo. This group of pre-teen soccer players received a two-page coverage of their game against a team of boys of their same age from Bjørndalen. Under a huge picture, the caption reads: “Ann-Kristin Nystøl Nicolaisen dribbles so her ponytail jumps to the sky and the Bjørndalen boys fall on their butts” (*Østlandets Blad*, May 3, 2011). With the high spirits of a frisky foal off to games and races, Nicolaisen holds her ponytail high and really turns on the turbo. Moving past the boys with sturdy legs and good balance, Nicolaisen is so fast that her ponytail barely catches up with her moves. The boys certainly do not. Her cultural kinetics, too, echo a fashionable young girl hairdo, a youthful spirit unleashed, and the social opportunity to embody movement. Nicolaisen is a child that perhaps in the eyes of the journalist and some of the adult audience is gender normative, but all the same should not be

constrained by this social fact. The ponytail resolves this puzzle with an aura of movements.

Mother and father coaches applaud the girls, and the journalist, too, salutes them: “The girls are so eager. ‘We love playing soccer. It is fun and good exercise. We make so many friends,’ the girls say. The Nordby girls boldly attacked with zero respect for the boys” (*Østlandets Blad*, May 3, 2011).

These sporting freedoms and the folkloric ideal of girls’ bodies in motion are many, with many small variations. Norwegian girl handball players are portrayed with ponytails “dancing when they jump and shoot,” (*Agderposten*, April 17, 2010); and youth badminton player Helle Sofie Sagøy plays with a “high tempo” and her “ponytail dancing” behind her act (*Allers*, September 5, 2016). U.S. sports culture comes to Norway in the form of a cheerleader with “waving ponytail and hot pants,” (*Aftenposten Aften*, May 31, 2012) and “soft sneakers, shorts, and waving ponytails with ribbons” (*Fanaposten*, April 13, 2012). These girls are full of grit, spirit, and courage, Norwegian journalists report. After the cheer, after the game, ponytailed girls and their audience know what their effort should look like: “With red cheeks and roughed-up ponytails,” visibly and verbally happy about their effort, the girls report: “It was fun” (*Smaalenes Avis*, November 24, 2010).

Beneath this plethora of examples drums a myth of natural and sacral movement. The sporting girl and woman materialize motions, both physical and cultural, in the form of a cultural kinetics that capture the spirits of their time and are starkly visible in their ponytails, moving with them and imbued with this movement.

NOTES

1. All the beings classified in a single clan—men [*sic*], animals, plants, inanimate objects—are only modalities of the totemic being ... Moreover, the adjectives applied to them are the same as those applied to the totem (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 151).
2. Astrid Lindgren’s (1981) *Ronja Røverdatter* and Maria Parr’s (2009/2017) *Astrid, the Unstoppable*.
3. The myth of a Norwegian majority-ethnicity is of course gendered. In the making of Norway’s proud men on polar expeditions, on the home front during WWII, at the Olympics, and at the expense of Sami claims to the invention of the ski (Broch, 2012; Goksøyr, 2013; Klausen et al., 1995;

Skille & Broch, 2019). However, in the late twentieth century, both the public and commercial interests partly reinvented this gendering of skiing. With the adventures of national women sport heroes, and with modern-day explorer-heroes like Cecilie Skog and Tonje Blomseth. Skog, mountain climber and adventurer, summited Mount Everest in 2004 and unassisted crossed Antarctica in 2010—to be dubbed the Fairytale Queen. Not as a fairytale queen that is the prized reward of some man, but as the powerful protagonist queen of daring fairytales. Blomseth a master of social media, North Calotte traveler, and controversial explorer of Canadas wilderness too. Both women commodified. Both having their face printed on skis. Skog engraved with her long, wild, and curly hair reminiscent of Ronja and Tonje Glimmerdal. Blomseth wearing Roald Amundsen-like apparel and an unprecedented ponytail.

4. From politics to sports, the code of modesty is highly valued in Norway (Broch & Skille, 2018; Daloz, 2007; Larsen, 2016; Skarpenes, 2007).
5. Sport is an aesthetic performance for audiences to sensuously interpret (Gumbrecht, 2006) and for athletes to maneuver in ritual chains charged with emotional energy (Collins, 2004).
6. (Barthes, 1957/2009b, p. 141).
7. This rhythm can neither be credibly understood simply with reference to the body techniques that put it in motion nor the meaningful imitations that recapture this movement as an idea (Mauss, 1934/1973).
8. For studies on children's prose, see (Natov, 2011) and on national identities, see (Slagstad, 2018; Spillman, 1997).
9. Women sports is perfect example of how boundaries of women muscularity has changed (Butler, 1998). The woman athlete's body, at least some, has become a body that matters (Butler, 1993).
10. Studies from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences show that, after all, women athletes could not be too muscular (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009) and that constraints of traditional femininity, in fact, seemed to outweigh progress long into the 1990s (Fasting et al., 2004; Scraton et al., 1999).
11. For sports club membership data, see (Fasting & Sand, 2009). Regarding the gender gap in time spent on exercise and sports, see (Green, 2018; Green et al., 2015). For gender politics in sports and economic freedom and expenditures on sports, see (Breivik, 2013; Goksøyr, 2008; Skirstad, 2009).
12. (Strandbu & Bakken, 2007; Strandbu et al., 2017).
13. Gendered role models for embodied empowerment shape how we see and act on our opportunities, McClearen (2018) showed in a study *Ultimate Fighting Championships* (UFC) and the mixed-martial arts champion Ronda Rousey. Not only as a primary agent of socialization, but also the

sometimes wispy and ephemeral communities of sports model felicitous relationships and shape social life from the sporting ground on up (Fine, 2012; Fine & Corte, 2017). Sports provide active scenes for learning about democracy through participation (Anderson, 2008) and contrast with the mostly passive consumerist gaze of the spectator and sport-body consumer (see Azzarito, 2018).

14. Anna Kournikova (Messner et al., 2003); Serena Williams (Cooky, 2018); Ronda Rousey (McClearn, 2018).
15. Women ski-heroes are to be found in the somewhat dusty piles of historical evidence (at least in comparing it to the shiny mantle on which the nation has put its men heroes), but women heroes have nevertheless always been and now, to an even greater extent, are very much part of the spotlight ignited by the sport/media complex (Goksøy, 2008, 2011). Sport women have become a significant part of the reinvention of tradition (Hobsbawn, 2010) through imitations of an archetype, perfect and ephemeral (Barthes, 1957/2009a) for a new Norwegian landscape of meaning (Reed, 2011).
16. (Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 1977).
17. (Prince, 2009; Synnott, 1987; Tarlo, 2017).
18. (Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981).

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Experience

For the ponytail to evoke meaningful experience, its materiality must be enmeshed in culture. Its material texture—touch and sight—must hold public culture in ways that reflect hair as an iconic source of gendered expectations, health, practicalities, and movement. In today’s fragmented, complex societies this iconic power is hard to sustain. Contestations of ideals and ideologies are many, frequent, and sometimes surprising (Jijon, 2019; Raud, 2016; Smith & Alexander, 2005); therefore, the ponytail’s iconic power depends on how it is perpetually enlivened and presented in the public sphere, as well as how we experience, explore, and feel (come into contact with) this object’s surface and moral depth (Alexander, 2012, 2020).

Icons’ symbolic force is polyvocal. Their meanings are dynamic and contingent on our ability both to attach their objects to narratives, codes, and myths and to imbue their forms with these culture structures. Therefore, the ponytail as an icon is reused and altered, but still bears sensory and affective traces of its earlier forms and the cultural codes it holds. Some ponytailed women embody second-wave feminism and speak up against systemic injustice; others represent third-wave feminism and speak of feminine empowerment. Some do both, and some neither.

Some like Kari Traa are at “one and the same time a reincarnation of Synnøve Solbakken, a true badass, and a highly successful sport fashion clothing entrepreneur” (*Bergens Tidene*, March 1, 2003, p. 35). Traa

started out as an Olympian and mogul skier with a ponytail, well known for giving it all on the slopes:

You see, it is not only her two-colored ponytail in black and white (that she very much liked until she saw a goat in Zermatt with the exact same color combination) that gives color to this girl from Voss. Her accomplishments are decorated, too. She either wins, or she does not make it to the finish line.

“That is just how I am, I have to give it my all. I believe that is how I will improve the most. And it is fun. Most fun of all is to take a chance, give it my all, and succeed. It is a great feeling. To play it safe is no fun. I won’t win unless I give it my all.”

[Well into her career, Traa struggles with a bad back, and the journalist wonders if that might possibly affect her approach to the slopes.]

“Perhaps,” Kari laughs so that her black and white ponytail shakes. (*Aftenposten*, November 22, 2000b, p. 40)

Kari Traa is one of those women who by the end of the 1990s had reclaimed the color pink as she launched her top-selling winter, training, and fashionable garments for “nuns and knock-outs.” With the national broadcaster NRK, she made a television series about “Cool Girls” to train teenage girls in mogul skiing and toughness. In Norwegian, the English word cool is “kul” and can also mean “a bump;” thus, mogul skiing is “kule-kjøring,” which translates as “racing bumps.” These girls not only look cool, they are *being* cool as they actively race the bumpy mogul slopes. A true hard-hitter, Traa exemplifies and is an exemplar of the women’s empowerment of third-wave feminism (Dahlén, 2008).

“Although the feminist movement improved women’s lives in many ways, it freed few women from fashion norms” (Weitz, 2004, p. 27) At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the confident Florence Griffith Joyner wore a ponytail and the official uniform of the United States, rather than one of her signature, custom-made tight suits. “‘I do not want to get kicked out of the team because of some piece of clothing,’ she said ... the make-up, a ponytail and sunglasses relaxing on her head, and those long nails. Red as of today” (*Aftenposten*, September 19, 1988, p. 3). These individual women control their lives, bodies, and health in shiny Lycra, which allows “women to wear their own bodies. Lycra® became the second skin for a new life in which self-confidence would be rooted in women and their bodies, not in rules ... and especially not the girdle” (O’Connor, 2011, p. 125).

In 1990, 22-year-old high jumper Hanne Haugland won a Norwegian championship medal “in the most daring uniform of the Norwegian track-and-field team. A special order from England. Hanne has let her light [blonde] hair grow and put it up in a teasing ponytail. À la FloJo, she gets track-and-field Norway to pay attention. ‘I know people are watching from the stance and are evaluating me. They make comments on appearance. The audience is as concerned with how I look as with how high I jump,’ says Hanne, and thinks it is all OK” (*VG*, August 6, 1990b, p. 25) as she exudes confidence.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, ponytails abounded in Norwegian sports media. Monica Seles, 17 years old, ruled the tennis court. She made big bucks, too, about half a million dollars when she cut her trademark ponytail and signed a sponsorship deal with the cosmetics firm, Matrix Essentials (*Aftenposten*, June 2, 1991, p. 1). But her ponytail grew back by the following summer when Seles’ on-court moans became the next big thing (*VG*, July 1, 1992, p. 30, 31).

In Italy, athlete Stefania Belmondo stands 157 centimeters tall (a bit more than five feet) and weighs just 44 kilograms (97 pounds), but she is big in the cross-country skiing world:

To the great pleasure of thousands of the Italian supporters that had travelled to Mont Blanc, she took the lead on the 30k already with the first thrust of her staves. With the dancing, bleached ponytail as her trademark, little Stefania had a big group of fans as she held off against the Russians and was crowned world champion. (*Aftenposten*, February 22, 1992, p. 29)

Other reports spotlight 13-year-old Morgan Presser, who hits her first hole-in-one at the U.S. Open and is likened to Tiger Woods, and “turns her ponytail around a finger” as she meets the press (*VG*, May 31, 2001, p. 30); and on the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics tennis court,

Henrieta Nagyová is normally dressed in a white tennis shirt with Slovakia’s Olympic emblem and a red band around her ponytail. (*Aftenposten*, September 20, 2000a, p. 42)

Hair is, of course, not *everything* in the spirited competition of sports. During the 2000 Olympics women’s basketball showdown, Australian player Lauren Jackson suddenly found herself holding U.S. player Lisa Leslie’s long hair, apparently a hairpiece, in her hand. “Keep the hair,”

Leslie said, “I want the gold!” (*NTB*, October 1, 2000). While few are free from fashion norms (Weitz, 2004), such norms are not uniform. After ponytailed figure skater Michelle Kwan scored poorly because she lacked makeup, her coach, Frank Carroll, defended her, noting that not all bodies have to be “smeared with the products of big capitalism,” and that not all bodies have to look like they are from the United States (*VG*, February 18, 1998, p. 44).

Of course, sportswomen are not the only inspiration for ponytailed fashions, although the aura of the athlete and the active lifestyle she radiates surely make her an important contributor to the trend. While ponytailed sportswomen can be neoliberal sex symbols, in the Hollywood sense, in Lycra®, they can also be fully dressed in baggy wool clothing as outdoorsy femininities, with their ponytails as the only obvious gender identifier. A ponytailed identity is contingent on the operational context. At the fitness center, a demonstration of big capitalism’s huge success in profiting on physical activity, women and girls can feel their individuality, together (Fig. 1).¹ Observing the copycats at her local gym, Trude Ringheim writes with a twist of irony:



Fig. 1 Copycats at the gym. (Picture credit: yoh4nn via Getty Images)

The girls look exactly alike. Regardless of whether they are 17 or 27. They are slim and fit. Nine out of ten wear black tights. Seven out of ten have white singlets. Seven out of ten have earplugs with music. Eight out of ten have long hair in a ponytail. Half of these women have bleached their hair. The most poignant characteristic of our time is individualism and indefinite options of choice. (*Aftenposten Magasinet*, October 1, 2011, p. 77)

The ponytail comes to signify a moving and active body. Even Norwegian supermodel Eva Sannum, who dated Spain's crown prince, is "dressing *sporty* with a simple ponytail and blue pants" (*VG*, December 12, 2000, p. 33, my emphasis). In fact, her favorite hairdo is the ponytail (*Dagbladet*, May 16, 2001, p. 18), which is unmistakably sporty, thanks to the custom of ponytailed athletes.

DEMOCRATIC HOPES AND SETBACKS

In Norway, soccer is the most popular sport for females, although they have long remained in the shadows of their male colleagues (Persson et al., 2020). A journalist documenting the spirited play of girls' soccer notices Carina Nordby from Enebakk, who "played so her braid was singing," on the soccer pitch of the Kanari Cup for seven- to ten-year-old girls and boys. Nordby is easy to spot with her 42-centimeter-long horsetail-braid:

"I am saving for one meter," the girl with number 13 on her back smiles. Carina plays defense, midfield, a little bit of theatre, but mostly striker. If she can choose herself, she prefers playing with the boys.

"The boys are better passers," Carina says.

Do not the girls pass?

"Just Hege."

... Carina is about to run along, but says, "Write down that I was a goalie too, when I was younger. AND, that Eric Cantona is a football genius." Carina yells before she disappears in a crowd of braids, ponytails, and short girl's hair. (*Aftenposten*, January 30, 1995, p. 16)

Nordby does it all: plays all positions and with the boys, too. The journalist sees her confidence, but questions a lapse in this story of opportunistic play. Do not the girls pass well? Nordby's experience of being a long-haired girl soccer player is shaped by ideas of male "football geniuses." Her imitations are a form of social memory that settles in her body. She can do it all, no doubt, but she prefers to do soccer like the boys. Her

body is a site of remembrance that does not change overnight, but the ponytail icon allows her and the journalist an iconic consciousness and to feel a ponytailed self that enters soccer.² Ponytailed progress is not only dynamic and contested, it also holds a contradictory capacity to expand and constrict, include and exclude.³ Nordby and her many soccer compatriots in Norway and internationally spur conversations about conflicting, changing, and contested bodies. Spirit is not all that travels like a wind; shared morals move through our social landscapes to shape the way we see, feel, and deliberate social movements.

Many gender battles are left to fight. Despite the fact that the national women's soccer team has been more accomplished than the men's team, males still outnumber females by two-thirds in Norway's biggest sport. As the 1999 World Cup for women approaches, an *Aftenposten* journalist tracks down some 14-year-old girls and asks them about their favorite players and teams (June 9, 1999a, p. 36):

"Is there a championship?" one girl replies.

"No, I don't think I know the name of any women soccer players at all," another answers.

"Well, yes, I have heard of Marianne Pettersen and Linda Medalen," one finally admits and "yes, I know about the championship, but David Beckham is my role model!"

"And John Carew is mine" another cheers.

One of the coaches is not surprised at these responses. "Our [top] women's team is not allowed to exercise on the pitch where our men's team practices, and therefore, it is the men they see and identify with. But when they get a little older and are called to play on the county's recruit-team they will get better acquainted with women soccer and women elite sports," he says.

"Very few of the girls at this age read the newspapers," another coach replies, as if this is a good source for knowledge about women sport stars.

The reporter notes that the 14-year-old MVP on the field that day bears a remarkable resemblance to Norway's best striker, Marianne Pettersen: "Both being attackers, both with number 11 on their jerseys, and both with ponytails. But today's MVP has never heard of the latter."

About a month later, U.S. player Mia Hamm, the world's best woman soccer player, creates pandemonium at the World Cup:

“Magical Mia!” ... is named among the top 50 most beautiful women in the world, and teenage girls in the USA make a complete ruckus when they see Hamm (27). On this day of the tournament, all the USA hopes that Mia will hoist the cup. As she, in the 17th minute of the game against Denmark received a crossover pass, pulls the ball past goalie Katrine Pedersen and shoots it with her left leg, the World Cup party was on. That was Mia’s 110th career goal. She next danced over the field to assist the 2-0 goal, 15 minutes before the end signal, and the fans got just what they wanted: A playful, dancing, explosive, intense, warrior athlete with a ponytail as victory banner waving from the top of her determined face. In the stands danced hordes of girls with the same ponytail and the same number 9 on their T-shirts. The idol had done it again. Mia Hamm offers teenage girls far more exciting challenges than Pamela Anderson’s silicone implants. More than 7 million girls are already in full sprints across the pitches of the USA. “I know I am a role model, and I take it very seriously,” Hamm says. “I only had men athletes as role models. It is important that girls get women role models, and that they know they can do what I have done,” she continues. (*NTB*, July 2, 1999)

Hamm was born in 1972, the same year that the United States passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in any educational institution receiving federal funds. Hamm says soccer gave her confidence, discipline, and motivation. She claims an amazing list of on-field merits, sponsors covet her image, and even the Barbie doll has—with Mia’s blessing—a number 9 U.S.A. jersey, and of course, a ponytail. The screams from the World Cup audience resemble nothing ever heard before as “teenage girls dominated the stands, with parents tagging along. The World Cup president jokingly named them the ‘ponytail hooligans’ and [a U.S. reporter was] said to be reporting from ‘a stadium packed with Spice Girls on steroids,’ in awe of the loud crowd” (*NTB*, July 2, 1999).

Despite national Norwegian women team’s fourth place win, back on the Norwegian pitch, 15-year-old Marianne is mostly concerned with men’s soccer. She thinks “Ronaldo is overrated,” as she “rolls her eyes and throws her ponytail.”

Again, the Norwegian journalist is curious: *Why is this so?* Why are there so few spectators in the stands for women’s games in Norway, when stadium after stadium sells out in the United States during the World Cup?

“The men’s game has more tempo, more strength, harder tackles. You cannot really compare,” another 15-year-old-girl responds.

National anti-hero and sports commentator nerd Arne Scheie weighs in, “We should stop comparing. We never compare Anita Moen and Bjørn Dæhli [cross-country stars], or men’s and women’s handball [unfortunately it does happen, but women have historically won the comparison]. I am really proud of what the Norwegian team accomplished in the U.S.A.,” he says even though he favors men’s soccer.

Presenting a democratic hope, the journalist notes that some things have changed at least:

In 1978 the national women team played their first game to harsh comments like “I am against women playing football. I have talked with a doctor that recommends [women] to stay away [from football], indefinitely.”

“All women players are gay,” someone proclaimed.

“Things have changed a lot,” sport sociologist Gerd von der Lippe testifies. (*Dagbladet*, July 4, 1999, p. 7)

Overnight, it seemed, the U.S. women’s team became superstars. “Sepp Blatter had declared that soccer’s future is feminine,” and he was right,” *Aftenposten*’s journalists agreed:

In a country used to seeing sport stars that only care for themselves and their money, these selfless, down-to-earth and well-playing women are a breath of fresh air. “We are enjoying every moment,” superstar Mia Hamm says. All those girls that we saw screaming at the Backstreet Boys concert are now at the game to cheer their new superstars. Mia! Mia! The competition-crazed America would probably not have embraced this team with such heartwarming devotion if they had not been the best. Nonetheless, girls need role models that resemble themselves. A ponytailed Mia Hamm is a perfect role model for girls aged 7 and up. She is a role model they can identify with. (*Aftenposten* July 8, 1999b, p. 29)

A ponytailed youthfulness starts in childhood and can carry into adult life. The performance of ponytailed Mia Hamm does not mask the gender barriers she has broken, which make her a good role model and archetypal example of a democratic woman.

Despite numerous challenges for sustained everyday interest in women’s soccer, the World Cup competition continues to grow in size and interest.⁴ So does the repertoire of women’s bodies that embody memories and spur conversations. Notably, the idea of imitation is as resonant as a lay theory as it is an academic one. As role models, women athletes are

not flawless, but hold a different “health” and spirit than Pamela Anderson’s engineered body or Barbie’s plastic shape. In fact, imitations of Hamm changed Barbie and gave room for a more human diversity (unfortunately, still highly uniform). Barbie had long had a ponytail, but with Mia Hamm, it was not simply a pragmatic choice or a stylistic expression; rather, it was infused with the star-power of a soccer-playing hero. Indeed, “Barbie Hamm” was not just playing professional soccer, but working in entertainment. Women sports had professionalized and its images multiplied.

Normalizing the ponytailed athlete is not without a cost to diversity. As we have seen, the ponytail is about being normative and fashionable, (white) heteronormative, that is. In 1986, as the Norwegian national women’s handball team made their decisive breakthrough, one or two players sported ponytails. A decade later, when soon-to-be Norwegian handball star Mia Hundvin entered the public limelight, she was (and would continue to be) described as “a tad bit crazy”:

She thinks Thor Heyerdahl is awesome, she goes to Garage [the legendary nightspot in Bergen city center], and cannot survive without licorice. She has tattoos, piercing, and neon red hair. Her new hair color caused a lot of talk some weeks back. In fact, more talk than when she, at eight years old, came to her Steiner-School with a new hairdo.

“It was my idea, but my whole family agreed that I looked adorable with a huge mouth, giant eyes, and short, purple-pink hair,” says Mia.

The description works just as well today. But Mia is fed up with hair talk. She does not get it. “What is so special about getting rid of a boring hair color?” Tertnes’ [Bergen team] color-pallet does not really think all that much about how her team colleagues slob around with ponytails, sweat pants and the television remote in their pocket.

“I watch TV, too. I have to watch *NYPD Blue*, but I never wear sweat-pants when I am home. Workout clothes are for working out,” says Mia. (*Bergens Tidene*, February 1, 1998b, p. 18)

Hundvin, the short-haired color-pallet rebel, describes the ponytail as conventional and boring, not just visually, but also as an emotional uniform. She says, “The handball girls are encouraged to present themselves as mom’s best child: We should be kind and good people. We should have ponytails and don’t get angry if we lose. I tell you, I am goddam pissed if we lose and if we played a shitty game. But that just does not look good on television” (*VG*, June 15, 2002, p. 29).

Indeed, Hundvin is right in many respects. The ponytail is so normative that some players have trouble getting credit for all the goals they score. In the record-crazed sports world, this is a problem.⁵ For instance, before the final game of the 2010 handball season, star player Heidi Løke was trailing 15 goals behind Linn-Kristin Riegelhuth's scoring record, although everyone believed she had already broken it. The explanation, according to Løke's coach, was:

There are many mistakes done by the game secretariat. *Moreover*, we have many blond girls with ponytails out on the field. Just since New Year's, the second half of the season, we know that Løke has not been credited for all her goals. (*Telemarksavisa*, April 2, 2011, p. 41)

The idea that the secretariat could not distinguish between blond players with ponytails makes little sense when the problem doesn't seem to exist for short-haired male handball players. Perhaps the ponytails were stealing all the attention?

The professionalization of women's sports did not end discrimination by far, and it should be perfectly clear that Norwegian journalists and their interviewees appear at some level to see long hair as a signifier of conventional heterosexuality. Perhaps this is why three women athletes from Halden in southeastern Norway were saluted for their courage to say "NO." Under the headline, "Girls Who Will Not Be Tempted" (*Halden Arbeiderblad*, December 30, 2015) the women unanimously proclaimed, "We want to be remembered as athletes with good merits rather than for some scantily dressed photos on the Internet." They are feminine role models, or as a sociologist might define them, role models that challenge ideas about conventional femininity as passivity and subordination.⁶

"When we visit our sport club's children athletes," these young women say, "the kids are really looking forward to seeing us. It would just be totally inappropriate if the last picture they saw of us was one in which we had no clothes on," an elite handball player laughs.

The three women exemplars want to be feminine and show that "athletes with waving hair are can-doers!" as sport sociologist Kari Fasting once advocated, and echoing the sentiment of UFC champion Ronda Rousey, who refused the very idea of sculpting a body to attract wealthy men's attention (McClearn, 2018).

One of the three who does road racing and rides a motor bike says she "loves to let the ponytail sail from underneath the helmet as I swoosh by

the boys.” She is hoping for another road-racing adventure in the United States, where “there is a whole different culture. The very few girls that do ride let themselves be taken advantage of. When I also have the guts to say no, our cultures collide,” she laughs (*Halden Arbeiderblad*, December 30, 2015). Like the male bike rider with a ponytail roaring “unapologetically down the street” (*VG*, 27.04.1990a, p. 40), so does this young woman, even riding past him in competition. We can wonder, what is more pleasurable than to feel oneself move past symbolic and very real gender barriers, waving to the competition with a forceful signifier of heteronormative femininity, the ponytail.

Foucauldian docility to patriarchy can grant economic gains, but these women are not preaching neoliberalism. Bourdieusian false consciousness causes perceived power to reproduce subordination, but these women are not persuaded to be heteronormative objects. The iconic feel of the ponytail indicates that meanings and codes of heteronormativity do not have to reduce a woman’s willpower, performative power, or corporal force. The icon is filled with ideals of democratization and an egalitarian consciousness about being in motion. Of course, the ponytail does not eradicate injustice, but it becomes a medium with which we can experience social progress, barriers, and setbacks. In Norway, this idea of democratic hair has folkloric roots and is part of a long prose tradition. Here, feminist ideas are institutionalized in the state and in the civil sphere in which the women’s movement, social commentators, and others have long criticized unhealthy ideals.⁷ In the act of performing gender equality, the ponytail bears an iconic consciousness of democratization.

Like any community, sports and being sporty are not equally available to all. The solidarity of a community in motion is far from perfect. In fact, it might move in a direction that makes some girls and women uncomfortable or at a speed beyond their pace. Nonetheless, the idea of a ponytailed community is so pervasive that the ponytail comes to represent it.⁸ In an interview about isolation and bullying, a woman shares a poetic recollection of her schoolgirl loneliness and how breaking free from alienation can involve joining a moving body, a fish-school of children, with “laughs and ponytails swaying from side to side” (*Sarpsborg Arbeiderblad*, 2012). Being able to move with a ponytailed community, therefore, depends on the cultural codes and myths that this hairdo possesses and how these codes include or exclude various bodies and movements.

Underneath the ponytail’s aesthetic surface lies a cultural depth with powerful codes of both democratic incorporation and exclusion. Making

ready for the Paralympics, a training session of Norwegian table tennis player Aida Husic Dahlen, “the Balkan powder keg” as her coach named her, is profiled. Dahlen was born in war-stricken Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1990 with no left forearm and has an amputated left leg below the knee. She lived her first three years at a medical center in Sarajevo before she was adopted and moved to Norway. Now “Aida is sweating. The long dark ponytail is dancing on her back, in the rapid rhythm of her body. The 21-year-old is moving swiftly on her toes behind the table” (*Fedrelandsvennnen*, January 28, 2012, pp. 8–14). Perhaps the ponytail’s swing can expand ideas of (able)bodiless? Arne Skouen (see p. 86) used the ponytail icon to show that differently abled Frida was as normally instinctive and playful as any other child and that her limitations were mostly due to a society that cared too little. Aida Husic Dahlen “never ever believed” that she would make it to the Paralympics. Her story is a fairytale in a grim world where “dreams do not always, but sometimes come true. It has happened before” (*Fedrelandsvennnen*, January 28, 2012, pp. 8–14). In Norway, this myth remains: Physical impairments cannot (at least should not) hold back a woman’s movements.

CHANGING RULES AND BOUNDARIES

The democratic women’s movement in sports was iconic, not only its powerful progress, but its many setbacks, too. Actors felt it and audiences saw it. Some tried to hide it and look the other way, but the Richter scale picked up its impact, and a new wave of bodily moralities steadily forced new questions. Sportswomen and other strong, emphatic, and courageous women (with solid backbones) were there all along. New undercurrents and spirits revealed them in a new, sometimes brighter, public light. Many had ponytails and many had bodies fashioned and molded to move against the grain. They moved to move us. A view on and from these bodies could look and feel democratic. Whether swayed by neoliberalism or socialism, they saw, entered, and recreated the world with new fusions of customs and symbols.

It is reasonable to argue that feminist undercurrents indeed power the ponytail’s iconicity, but not in a consensual and causal manner. Culture provides an ontology, a fellowship of souls, to use Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) ideas about spiritual unity and corporal diversity. Notably, a community does not constitute consensus, but holds codes that allow its members to make understandable claims from very different, even binary,

positions (Spillman, 2020). Today we are better off understanding culture as fragmented codes re-fused by actors and audiences aiming to shape social life in particular ways (Alexander, 2017). Therefore, the qualitatively different ways of seeing the world of substances, inequalities, and equalities, contain not only corporal diversity, but *spiritual* diversity as well, and comprise the determining factors for one's bodily and spiritual perspective on the world (Stang, 2009, p. 60). The multitude of symbolic layers revealed in this book show how feminist undercurrents and surface debates are felt and performed in many qualitatively different ways.

In modernity, the use of symbolic layers is often accredited to the character and soul of a person. Two years before the 1998 Nagano Olympics, an *Aftenposten* reporter wrote:

Few have started a longer and more difficult road towards the Olympics than the women's hockey team. They started out a couple of years back with just a few players, no traditions, and having to fight tons of prejudice. Now they are preparing by competing in the hockey league for men. Women and hockey might sound as natural as boys and knitting, but if someone snorts at the idea of women's hockey, they are mistaking these girls' will, determination, and commitment ... The core of this team works out seven to nine times a week. All year around. Their training sessions are cruel and ambitious. And no one should think that the boys they are playing are saving their energies just because there are ponytails and braids underneath their opposition's helmets.

"Oh no, no one feels sorry for us," Guro Brandshaug tells us. She is captain on the boys' team of Flatås IL in Trondheim. (*Aftenposten*, March 3, 1996, p. 16)

These ponytailed girls face off against boys, even lead them in battle, the journalist lets us see. They do strength training as often as possible, we are told; they are brought onto the rink by their fathers, and they change with the boys in the locker room.

The boys "treat me as they would treat anyone else. I do not think they think about me being a girl," Brandshaug says, adding that when it is time to take a shower, she finds a vacant locker room for herself (*Aftenposten*, March 3, 1996, p. 16).

This joint social (Alexander, 2004) and sports performance (Broch, 2020) meets long-haired expectations in the pragmatic ponytail, its feelings and visual significance oscillating between a deep social and a deep sports play. The very personal ponytail is an unconscious reminder of a

soul whose identity meaningfully maneuvers conflict and solidarity within the limits of symbolic layers. The journalist poetically recaptures the play of this two-sided icon as it waves across the ice. The journalist sees it along with the girls who she watches play. She dares the boys to come see the ponytailed performance from her side of the binary. As the journalist imbues the ponytail with determination and commitment in social and sport movements, the athlete becomes an object in democratic participation and a person with a deep consciousness of its many barriers. In the highly transformational worlds of modernity, the half-life of the ponytail allows our spirits and souls a material casing and surface that fluctuates and alters, not only to reproduce a recognizable gender identity, but to use this identity to change social life.

The world of sports is full of social facts like laws and rules that determine “the nature” of play and of those who are included (e.g., Durkheim, [1901] 2014). However, as rules change, sports journalists reveal that these are not simply game alterations, but transformations of the naturalization of gendered meanings. “You really have to excuse us,” says the impressed journalist interviewing Sigrid Lise Nonås, a ponytailed woman referee of men’s international hockey. “How can a cute, smiling lady of about 170 centimeters control a bunch of testosterone-bombes [aka men hockey players] armed with sticks?”

“When I had short hair, not many noticed that I was a girl until we were standing face to face at the puck drop” Nonås responds, “and, even now that I have a ponytail that gives me off, it is still not a problem being a girl referee.” The biggest challenge she insists is maintaining concentration “when the rink and the stands are boiling” (*Bergens Tidene*, January 30, 1998a, p. 17).

These journalists seem to be on a mission to show women’s progress, guts, and perhaps their lack of recognition, sometimes in places unfamiliar to most of us. Rollerblade hockey, for instance, is also a macho sport. With a humorous twist, journalist Bente Kalsnes writes about the roller hockey rink:

where the boys’ arms are as thin as their hockey sticks and most of them are about ten years. They even have a girl on their team. The light [blond] ponytail showing from underneath her helmet and necklace makes it possible to tell her apart from the team. Ida Zeline Lien (12) is the only girl in Bergen’s 1999 Inline Cup. She tackles as forcefully as her teammates. (*Bergens Tidene*, June 3, 1999, p. 23)

Fair enough, tackles are not allowed, but rules are made to be broken, at least if you are a dedicated player (and woman activist), the journalist declares:

[Ida] glimmers with pearls of sweat, big kneepads, and thick gloves.

“I tried figure skating too, but I think ice hockey is more fun,” Ida says.

She still uses some moves from figure skating to keep her balance. She is not sure why so few girls play roller skate hockey.

“I do not know, perhaps they do not know about roller hockey. But hockey is kind of a boy sport, it is a little bit tough,” Ida concludes.

Shania Twain’s hit song of the moment, “That Don’t Impress Me Much,” covers the arena. Ida too, is not impressed by the hockey boys. Yet, there are quite a few boys that are impressed by themselves and know very well why girls do not play hockey: “They don’t have muscles. They have some, but not a lot.”

Unfortunately, these boys do not know to whom they are talking to. This women reporter plays hockey.

Christian’s eyes open wide when I tell him that I play hockey.

“But you can’t possibly have any muscles!” he exclaims.

Christian himself, this journalist announces, has tons of muscles well hidden behind skinny arms and a big T-shirt. (*Bergens Tidene*, June 3, 1999, p. 23)

There is no biological reason why girls and women cannot compete socially with boys, but their hair gives their presence away to denaturalize the assumption that hockey is for boys. “That Don’t Impress Me Much,” girls and women are part of the game. They call the shots, make tackles and keep those testosterone bombs in place.

Are there any sports left that are exclusively male? Not if it is up to these fighting women players and journalist supporters who normalize women’s material presence in sports through the ponytail. They also are quick to pick up on other reformists and their gendered intent. For example, on March 27, 2017, Frøydis Sund, senior counsel at the Norwegian Center for Equality, called out the ruling that allowed only boys 12 and older to tackle in hockey—not girls. She sided with the girl teams of the Hockey Club Storhammar, who were disappointed in not being allowed to play “real hockey” (*Nrk*, March 23, 2017a). “The Norwegian Hockey Federation should listen to the girls and stop passively referring to international regulations and outdated biomedical discourses about the frail female body,” Sund said (*Nrk*, March 27, 2017b). On February 6, 2020,

the 11-year-old girls of the Bergen Hockey Club announced they would walk in the March 8 parade to protest gender inequalities in their sport. “It is just not a 100 percent hockey if we are not allowed to tackle,” they said (*Nrk*, February 6, 2020a). On March 8, they were pictured with hockey jerseys, banners, and a megaphone in the streets of Bergen and talking to SV (socialist left) politician, Audun Lysbakken, about sports discrimination (*Nrk*, March 8, 2020c).

Not only on the digital platform of Norway’s most influential media outlet, but also on the primetime evening news, hockey girls with ponytails from underneath their helmets recharged the democratic woman’s body as they questioned the male legislative and cultural sports hierarchy. To change the social facts of law, perhaps a youthful spirit is needed, not in the literal meaning of the word, but in signifying a ponytailed creativity, play, and freedom. Our shared imagining of psychological and biological freedom is pre-social, Butler (1990, pp. 18–38) argued. Perhaps the feminist undercurrent of social emancipation can draw power from a ponytailed health. Perhaps freedom, instinctual play, and the democratic participation of a long-haired femininity can change the social facts of law.

If there is a place to look for such long-haired answers to health in the Nordic countries, children’s prose and sports is a good place to start. Add some winter landscape and quite a lot of snow, and we are getting somewhere. On cold February afternoons in Glimmerdal, for example, the town of author Maria Parr’s character, Astrid, the Unstoppable, it is quiet and white with snow. Steep mountains run right down to the fjord:

But in the midst of this winter quiet, there is a black dot about to make some noise ... At the end of a long and quite rough ski track. The dot was none other than Astrid Glimmerdal ... “I let her out every morning and hope she’ll be back in the evening,” her dad, Sigurd, would say ... The Little Thunderbolt of Glimmerdal, that was what everyone called her. Below Cairn Peak, Astrid shifted her weight a little, pointing the tips of her skis down towards the crag known as the Little Hammer ... The run down to the Little Hammer was steep. So steep that Astrid really had to steel herself. But this was what Auntie Eira and Auntie Idun did when they were home for Easter. They’d start from the same place, and would set off at a furious speed, kicking up a flurry of snow behind them like a bride’s veil. They’d leap off the edge of the Little Hammer, flying sky-high. Auntie Eira did somersaults. “You need two things in life,” Aunt Eira would say. “Speed and confidence.” ... Now Astrid waved her arms to signal that she was ready. (Parr, [2009] 2017, pp. 15–18)

Gunnvald is Astrid's neighbor and best friend—an adult man living alone, and with some darn good binoculars to watch Astrid from his kitchen window. The silence of Glimmerdal's winter landscape is broken as Astrid sings her way down the mountainside. She hits the Little Hammer and flies:

If she'd known how to do somersaults, like Auntie Eira, then she would've had time to do three in a row. But I do not know how to do somersaults yet, Astrid thought to herself while in mid-air. Or maybe I do, she thought next, when she noticed that her head was where her legs were supposed to be, and her legs were where her head was supposed to be. Then, after flying quite an impressive trajectory, Astrid crash-landed like an upside-down jelly baby in a cream cake with far too much cream. It was white and cold, and she didn't know whether she was alive or dead as she lay there. Gunnvald was probably wondering the same thing, down at his kitchen window. Astrid lay still until she could feel her heart beating. Then she shook her head a little, as if to put everything inside it back in place. "Does that count as a somersault?" she wondered. (Parr, [2009] 2017, pp. 18–20)

This narrative represents neither the psychological notion of the pre-social or a lexical notion of youth, but the cultural significance of this youthful stage of life and how its symbolism is seen and felt throughout life. "Speed and confidence," as Astrid would say, are not simply a surface moving through air, but a depth of currents and felt forces of social movements. On an afternoon in October 2001 in Lillehammer, winter-sports athletes still await the snow, but, artificial turf allows the ski jumpers to fly early:

There she goes; her balance is good, loooong she goes! If the girls keep up the pace, they will likely get some attention and the breakthrough they deserve. When they are welcomed at the Olympics, they will definitely turn some heads.

"We are working on it. And we are working for an official World Cup for women," says Mette Jahr (43), part of the Girls Committee in the Norwegian Skiing Federation's Ski Jump board ..."

[Many nations—Switzerland, Germany, and Japan—are investing in their women ski jumpers, we are told.]

Who would have thought? Henriette Smeby has jumped 133 meters in Lillehammer and all the girls [on the Norwegian national team] have crushed their equal-aged boy peers.

“We know these girls are for real and that they will go the extra mile for their sport,” [says] Hroar Stjernen, their coach, who wants to build the world’s best team. He is surrounded by teenage boys from Elverum and one girl. It is just the light [blond] ponytail sticking out from underneath the helmet, which tells us that she is not exactly like the rest of the group.

“Ski jump is different,” Kristine says in her silver-colored suit. “The great speed is fun, and to fly. But it is difficult.”

Today the ski jumping team is made up of girls who are happy to now be able to compete in a sport that is to them new, but truth is that ski jump for women is an old discipline. Through the 1930s, Johanne Kolstad and Hilda Braskerud from the small rural community of Dokka competed in women’s ski jumping. Indeed, in 1896, at an event hosted by Asker Skiing Club, a local writer recommended that women jumpers should wear a tight-fitting suit with tight pants as it was not considered appropriate when a “lady” was sliding on her belly down the slope with her skirt hugging her ears. Ski jumper Johanne Kollstad broke the world record in USA [72 meter in March 6, 1938] and became the first women world champion in ski jump. (*Aftenposten*, October 7, 2001, p. 43)

Given the many women exemplars and the long strategic work of the gender-equity-minded state of Norway, the new generation of women ski jumpers are fighting a battle that has been repeatedly fought and won, but almost forgotten. Part of this puzzlement, it should be noted, is not a result of an uninformed public. Time and time again, the Norwegian public has heard or read about gendered injustice, and thus, their bewilderment is simply an argument for change. Asking “how can this be?” again and again reveals the blind side of a culture with gender equality at its heart as well as a master narrative actively used to revitalize that charge. Not all attempts are equally admirable and impressive, but that is not our concern here. What sustains our interest is how the social performance of equality is infused in those sporting ponytails and the possible implications.

In her 1992 New Year’s address, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Norway’s first woman prime minister (forever after dubbed “Landsmoderen,” loosely translated “the mother of the nation”), implicitly countered the idea that Norwegians should not think too highly of themselves. Representing the Norwegian Labor Party, she stressed that social-democratic success is possible only through a well-functioning welfare state founded on solidarity in sameness and equality. Using examples from the hierarchized world of sports, Brundtland argued for cultivating the values Norwegians are very good at:

The football girls, the handball girls, the cross-country boys, and the Oslo philharmonic compete among the world's elite. In the same way, we will show everyone that Norwegian industry can do well globally. Do we need a new slogan? It is typically Norwegian to be good. (Brundtland, 1992)

With her use of components of competition, sports, and industry, perhaps Brundtland managed to sneak neoliberalism into Norway's social democracy without its citizens even noticing (Stalsberg, 2019). This hindsight cannot detract from the many women who inspired Brundtland's spirited declaration. Anything less would be unduly un-Norwegian and, therefore, undemocratic.⁹

Beliefs and solidarity also move industry, interests, and economies (Spillman, 2012). The Norwegian idea of gender equality keeps ringing. On March 2, 2020b, the Norwegian public broadcast news program NrK's *Dagsrevyen* (19:23) reported on the Norwegian royal family's visit to Jordan where the king and queen put "gender equality on the agenda." The journalists reported that only 14 percent of Jordanian women were paid workers, and with a hint of racial superiority, they also noted that the Jordanian reception of the Norwegian king resembled a story out of *1001 Nights*. They even perfumed the negotiation rooms.

Film footage showed the Norwegian king surrounded by Norwegian women ministers, and commented, "With him, King Harald has only women in the most powerful positions of parliament, and a message of looking to Norway for [lessons] in equality." The Norwegian queen, in her ceremonial speech to the hosts, said "Women's participation in working life has had a greater impact on Norway's economy than our oil and gas revenues together. We are quite proud of that." The broadcast proclaimed, "One strong woman made a hard-hitting contribution to equality also in Jordan. Queen Sonja asked King Abdullah to step up his reforms to get more women into work by stating that 'Gender equality is not only a human right, it is also smart economics.'"

Time and time again Norwegians crown themselves as champions of gender equality, and some statistics and global rankings prove the point. Yet others are more problematic, such as the very fact that Norwegian sports is falling behind in the battle for gender justice. During the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, where Norwegian women medalists outnumbered their men compatriots, journalist Leif Welhaven commented on "the paramount women's revolution" in sport, arguing that of all that "Norwegian society has reason to feel proud about, equality

between men and women is what is [our] finest [achievement]. Not much can [therefore] beat the taste of women no longer being the weaker sex as we count our medals” (VG, February 21, 2018). A year later, in front thousands of spectators in Seefeld, Maren Lundby won the 2019 World Championship gold medal in ski jump, and *Aftenposten* noted, “It is hard not to think of gender equality and the women’s movement as Maren Lundby is screaming in joy” (*Aftenposten*, February 27, 2019).

As Norwegian women ski jumpers made small jumps in sports, they made giant leaps for women, at least, so the story goes. It is difficult to frame Maren Lundby’s feat any other way because a substantial part of the Norwegian press had been reporting and cheering this progress for many years. Perhaps because men sports had taken up a lot of viewing hours and many print pages, a woman’s accomplishments seemed more heroic, more daring. Maren Lundby joined a long line of pioneering women athletes in Norway, the newspapers reported (*Aftenposten*, February 27, 2019). Johanne Kolstad and Hilda Braskerud, Mette Jahr and Henriette Smeby, and perhaps best known to contemporary Norwegians, Anette Sagen, began championing for women’s right to ski jump in Norway long ago. These women, in various ways and in various rhythms, materialized several movements. Alongside them, images of Synnøve Sobakken, Ildrid the Mountain Girl, Astrid Lindgren’s Pippi and Ronja, and Astrid the Unstoppable were skiing, too. Like Andy Mead Lawrence and the Norwegian women slalom team, their movements developed “in a play of equilibria. The skies becoming a compliant function of the body’s dance through the gates, the very watermark of the intriguing rhythmic and almost musical talent needed to master this sport” (VG, January 31, 1956) Ski jumpers Sagen and Lundby were “blond, with braided ponytails under their helmets and a perseverance of steel. Perhaps there is Pippi power in those braids” (*FriFagbevegelse*, February 12, 2018), the reporter wrote. This was a story of gender equality, “of how women ski jumpers fought for all girls who wanted to fly on skis” (ibid.).

In 2021, under the banner of “equal possibilities,” Maren Lundby joined other top ranked Norwegian women athletes to fight for equal conditions in girls’ and boys’ sports. Minister of Culture and Equality Abid Raja saluted Lundby’s “merciless equality criticism” of Norwegian sports. This is “a fight she should not have to fight in the second most equal country in the world’s. Sports still lag behind,” he said (*Dagbladet*, January, 12, 2021). Raja had the statistics and global rankings to make this statement, yet, there Lundby was again, fighting. Perhaps they had

forgotten about the other gender injustices of Norway? On a very few occasions, meaningful materiality can move mountains and even make objects not meant to fly to soar above the slopes. More often, perhaps, spirits, beliefs, and desires can be performed in ways that echo between the mountains, vibrate throughout the concert hall, shake our ideas of corporeal possibilities, triggering avalanches that clear new terrain. This is no ritual causality, but a work of continuous and relentless efforts evoked by an iconic consciousness of injustice. No wonder then, with all those meanings and all that effort, that a ponytail experience can have a democratic charge.

Myths, not as a falsity, but as a cultural modality, are “living texts with which living people continue to write or narrate or perform their unique answers to basic human questions” (Leonard & McClure, 2005, p. 57). These answers are powerful because individuals intuitively match experienced, perceived, and available worlds with a deeper level of reality.¹⁰ It is not that an iconic ponytail lends humans the swinging tail of a proud horse or the high tail of a frisky foal, although *Vogue* called out Kim Kardashian West’s “memorable mane” and a Norwegian journalist noted the stark similarity of the two tails bouncing as the young girl equestrian rides her horse. Neither is the ponytail *the* chic statement of Norwegian state-feminism’s gender norms, which would make the hairstyle arguably less likable among Liberal and Conservative milieus than it is. However, we cannot ignore the poetic deliberation that ties the women’s movement to the fashionable braids of the athlete. Iconic instances are multilayered and situational. Feedback loops that oscillate between the codes of custom and fashion, between freedom and constraints, fuse in a belief and desire for materiality of balance, a ponytail. Its charge builds up over time.¹¹ Like Ørjan, his face tickled by a horsetail as he anticipates yet another ride, or the journalist noticing again and again the ski jumper’s ponytail braided with “Pippi power” and the women’s movement—tangible sensing, writing, speaking, and performing condense the many layers of a cosmology of democratic wishes that lend ponytailed imitations their mythological depth.

Butler (1990) argued, and many with her, that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desires of difference. There is no questioning this heteronormative, identity-creating fact of many Western societies. All the same, we must explore if and possibly how desires of sameness, equality, and freedom run parallel to constructions of difference. Imitations not only copy, but also alter. They do not always replicate uncritically, but call forth deliberation.

The ponytailed women athlete, never loves nor worships movement—she is movement. She and her audience can seek recourse to the empirical facts that will not only prove it, but also naturalize its identities and desires. She was like this all through childhood, through adolescence, and she still is. The ponytail’s empirical-cum-iconic “reality” is stored in bodies and elaborated by the hair’s aesthetic swing. If it is true that the ponytail of modernity rings a feminist tune and that it signifies a working, powerful, and busy femininity—at times too busy to consider the male gaze—then the ponytail has moved beyond the heads of girls playing and learning to women working and changing the world. This movement is historic and cultural. Its embodiment, the iconic consciousness it projects of the heterosexual matrix, safeguards and demonstrates this achievement to remake new and old barriers. Sporting ponytails are not easily pacified or compromised. They purify a healthy freedom and social movement in long-haired expectations in the practical settings of the modern woman (Fig. 2).

In the diverse world of athletic contest, ponytailed women reveal how sports shape gendered spirits in primordial ways. Fashion, youthfulness, and democratic spirits are not equally available to all. Historically, men



Fig. 2 To be movement. (Picture credit: Nastasic via Getty Images)

have dominated the materializing of sporting spirits in the public sphere, but more and more in the twenty-first century, women are changing that. Plausibly, both social movements and neoliberal ideas of emancipation have catalyzed and capitalized on this process.¹² Yet sport remains an existential realm in which we perform and interpret how and why spirits, social power, ideologies, and democratic movements shape gendered life. As actors and audiences thread the deep meanings of the ponytail through social and sport life, as they root their social existence in this materiality (e.g., Alexander, 1988a, 1988b), this total social fact allows us to see and feel the experiential totality of our maneuvering of material and non-material facts (e.g., Durkheim, [1901] 2014; Mauss, [1950] 1966). Here, the ponytail object becomes an inner compass of a cosmological terrain of democratic hopes and social inequalities. Depending on the codes and symbolic layers used for calibration, the needle will point in different directions. Sometimes its direction is logical and feels rational; sometimes its course will turn your stomach round and leave you cheering the path taken. Quite often, the ponytail icon is a powerful mediator that lets you enter and recreate a set of irreconcilable oppositions, wishes, and constraints, to navigate its pulls and pushes, to shape and challenge again and again the path taken.

NOTES

1. This imagining of the fit, strong, and healthy long-haired woman, also seeps into the curriculum of schoolchildren and school sports to shape ideas of young individual woman controlling life, body, and health in shiny Lycra® (Alsarve, 2018; Blackburn, 2007; O'Connor, 2011).
2. Immediate experiences are inserted into preexisting frameworks that generate embodied memories and conversations about the conflicting, changing, and contested bodies (Spillman & Conway, 2007, p. 99).
3. See Alexander (2006, 2015) on how the performance of symbolic boundaries expand and constrict inclusion and exclusion.
4. The women's World Cup has continued to grow in size and, if we are to take the journalist critics by their word, its level of play has grown along with it. On the other hand, sport sociologists argue that the spectacular interest in women's soccer is limited because the World Cup championship occurs once every four years, and everyday life in between this global mega event is filled with unsurmountable mundane barriers (Cooky, 2018; Kristiansen et al., 2014; Schultz, 2014).

5. Sports have moved from ritual to record, from meaning to bookkeeping, Guttman (2004) argued.
6. Dahlén (2008, 2013); Heywood and Dworkin (2003); McClearen (2018).
7. Alexander studies the #MeToo movement and the important contribution of the civil heroes of the women's movement (Alexander, 2019). In Norway, social commentators and politicians often use feminist and feminist-inspired criticism to assess the legitimacy of institutions (Broch & Skille, 2018; Engelstad & Larsen, 2019).
8. Simon (2000, pp. 2–3) described herself as a curly-haired daughter of straight-haired parents. With frizzy curls in a class of 20 sleek-haired girls, Simon said she was “a stranger in the straight-hair world” during her childhood schooldays and her only wish was for a silhouette with “a neat facial profile backed by a separate knot of smooth, swingy hair.”
9. Actor's uttered and practiced idealism and criticism is the deliberative foundation of democracy (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Larsen, 2016) shaped by codes and narratives (Alexander, 2011; Smith, 2005). In Norway, narratives and self-presentations of conspicuous modesty and gender justice (Broch & Skille, 2018; Daloz, 2007) are prominent features of this symbolic process shaping inclusion and exclusion (Gullestad, 2001; Skille & Broch, 2019; Witoszek, 1998).
10. Alexander and Smith (2003); Cohen (1969); Douglas (1966); Lévi-Strauss (1967).
11. We sense how aesthetic surfaces fuse with the discursive depths of institutional (Broch, 2020) and broad culture (Alexander, 2008). Materiality makes these meaningful layers tangible and evocative (Alexander, 2010; Smith, 2008, 2020).
12. Cooky (2006, 2018); McClearen (2018).

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Charge

In this book, I have explored when and how the ponytail is visible in the Norwegian press. Through this process, we can map the cultural landscapes that journalists and interviewees instill in the ponytail, which make it an icon. What is more, this process shows how icons are made and how an object like the ponytail comes to life or is imbued with a half-life that gives it performative power, an agency to shape social life. Narratives are fused in ongoing interpretations and observations, and with abstractions like myth and folklore to make the ponytail a medium that arises from and descends upon the lived realities, social powers, and ideologies that we parody, imitate, and perform with utmost honesty. The ponytail shows us, makes us feel, and is used to explain social motives, movements, and ways of life for the modern (sports)woman.

In answering to a number of social facts and ways of life, the ponytail is a phenomenon I call “total” (Mauss, [1950] 1966, pp. 36–36). Included in such total phenomena are the gender inequalities and social power relationships that critical theorists document, yet the ponytail’s polyvocality, its materializing of several symbolic layers, makes it much more powerful than a never-ending, distorted identity project to fulfill or reject patriarchy (Connell, 1987, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009) or neoliberalism (Arruzza et al., 2019; Fraser, 2013; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). The ponytail’s symbolic layering is not reducible to social power via a false consciousness (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), to a materialization of discursive ideology (Foucault, 1980), or to the rationality of a modernity emptied of

meaning (Foucault, 1977). Rather, the ponytail's symbolic capacity gives it a half-life, within the plausible limits of our cultures, that can be used meaningfully in diverse feminist and antifeminist ways to criticize and maneuver the social facts of gender.

In the critical theory literature about women's sports, long hair and ponytails are explicated as reproducing a (white) femininity that undermines women's agency and diversity across the West.¹ Supposedly empowered women athletes are really objects of a neoliberal economy that constructs "empowered agents, yet fails to dislodge the devaluing and commodification of women's physical pursuits" (Toffoletti et al., 2018, p. 8). Indeed, the women discussed in this book—the empowered Mia Hamm in the flesh or as a Barbie doll, as well as Grete Waitz and her "caterpillar train" of 48,500 women running the streets on Oslo—are commodities to be consumed while turning a blind eye to structural inequality. There is much truth to this critique, which warrants calling for empirical proof. Indeed, we find proof, and much more.

Gender as a social power relation alone, whether inscribed in texts, images, or bodies, does not exhaust culture and our capacity to feel and reflect on its injustices. Rather, we use gender, its axiomatic truths, and glaring falsities—feminist codes and narratives, too—to sense and criticize, to construct and deconstruct social actions.² We cause these codes and symbolic layers to intersect in ways that naturalize and denaturalize deep existential questions and lived gendered inequalities.

The examples in this book show how journalists and interviewees portray specific worldviews, some with which we might disagree and some salute. Starting with the codes and symbolic layers empirically observable underneath the ponytail's aesthetic surface (Alexander, 2007; Bartmanski & Alexander, 2012), I transferred explanatory control *from* the commanding social powers and ideologies of our time *to* the symbol systems that we use to create, sense, and criticize social power and ideologies (Geertz, 1973b). Thus, the way in which the ponytail shapes social life is revealed.

To answer the question "What makes the ponytail iconic?" I undertook a Durkheimian study to underline the enduring power of codes, myths, and narratives in modernity (Alexander, 2021). We are indeed restricted by social facts—legal rules, pragmatic necessities, the economy, collective movements, and expectations (Durkheim, [1901] 2014)—yet, we are active meaning makers who maneuver and shape these material and non-material constraints (Durkheim, [1912] 1995). In complex, fragmented modernity, meaning is not consensual, ritualistic, and totemic in the strict

Durkheimian sense, but relies on our performances (Alexander, 2004) to weave cultural structures into actions and objects (Alexander, 2008, 2010). In certain instances, the ponytail enters our messy, complex, and fragmented mundanity with an iconic power that condenses the everyday symbolic clutter into a generative grammar with its own performative power. Borrowing from Mauss's notion of a "total" phenomenon ([1950] 1966, pp. 36–36), I illustrated how the ponytail can be used to illuminate diverse situations, positionalities, and social facts, but also answers them. The ponytail is iconic as it offers a semiotic compass to navigate the meaningful poles of our many material and non-material facts.

To reach this conclusion, an important factor is the cultural structure and modality of myth, which show how the ponytail's condensed grammar relies on a mundane messiness and diversity reflecting cluttered "real life" (E. Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1966, 1967). Imitations of the ponytail, too, operate through a looping relationship in which fashion "attaches" to bodies to recreate—with less precision and greater diversity—the routine life, gestures, and customs they remodel (Mauss, [1934] 1973; Tarde, 1903). In rhythms of custom-fashion-custom imitations, and routine-myth-routine motivations, we distance the richness of our fragmented realities, and holding them at our disposal, weave their condensed form into imitations and objects that reshape these realities.

This forming of worldviews can be conscious or unconscious, but is neither true nor false, neither a lie nor a confession. Rather, the shaping of the ponytail into an icon and a mediator with a half-life can *naturalize* a compromise in the midst of irreconcilable options (Barthes, [1957] 2009, p. 154). Counterintuitively perhaps in modernity, this myth-like process creates a ponytail icon that is polyvocal, transformative, and performative. Symbolic layering gives the ponytail its power to maneuver and shape social life, but also to have a half-life that oscillates between customs and fashions, existential fears and hopes, injustice and justice, social facts and symbolic capacities.

Some readers may be suspicious of an analysis of gender transformation that relies on theories of semiotics, myths, and imitations. Scholars of gender have long sought to dismantle the cultural power of religious and cultural conservatives who reference traditions and myths as they obsess about status distinctions. In many ways, critical theorists argue that the reduction of discourse to semiotic systems and phenomenological worlds masks society's more important economic realities and social facts, and that structures of meaning and archetypes provide nothing other than a naturalizing core of "functional stasis" to annihilate diversity (Bourdieu,

1990; Butler, 1990; Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2009). To the contrary, this book shows how meaning structures like feminist codes and narratives hold the power to denaturalize axiomatic gender truths and barriers and, thus, naturalize transformation and social change. Far from masking economic realities and social facts, semiotic systems are tools to maneuver and shape affective interactions with constraints—an interpretative achievement sought by ideologues, conservatives, and progressives alike (Alexander, 2006; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Larsen, 2016). A ponytailed transformation—from the binding to the release of long hair, from the constraining to the emancipation of women—is one in which public and personal culture fuse in hair (E. R. Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Synnott, 1987).

As the ponytail oscillates between our historically dynamic and culturally varied social facts, it stretches far into a symbolic depth to materialize vitality and movement as a natural way of being. Biological hair itself grows, moves, disappears, and is easily shaped. The codes and symbolic layers that shape the ponytail go together with this and other body movements to make movement itself—progress, too, at times—part of this hairdo’s symbolic grammar. Change is embodied and naturalized while stasis is denaturalized within a symbol system of binaries that is also a framework for opposition and diversity. The binary codes of the ponytail icon do not imply consensus, “but the possibility of making understandable claims from very different points of view” (Spillman, 2020, p. 40).

Hair is personal and public, both a symbol and an object that allows us to work the binaries of our shared culture.³ As a material object, the ponytail’s aesthetic surface provides an experience (via the senses) of the moral associations, collective beliefs, and socially shaped emotions generated by three cultural structures: ponytailed expectations, health, and practicality. These codes allow men and women to interpret and perform “the modern woman” as meeting a heteronormative, long-haired custom, as exercising well-being in freedom and creativity, and as dealing with routine life in a continuous movement of naturalized progression and denaturalized gender barriers. Notably, we can re-interpret these three codes through a set of symbolic layers that tilt the modern woman in different “ideological” directions. The deep existential codes of expectations, health, and practicality are actively swayed by actors who demonstrate the joys and pains of altruistic or commercialized ideas of the practical, gendered self; of a freedom accomplished through democratic participation and lost in a

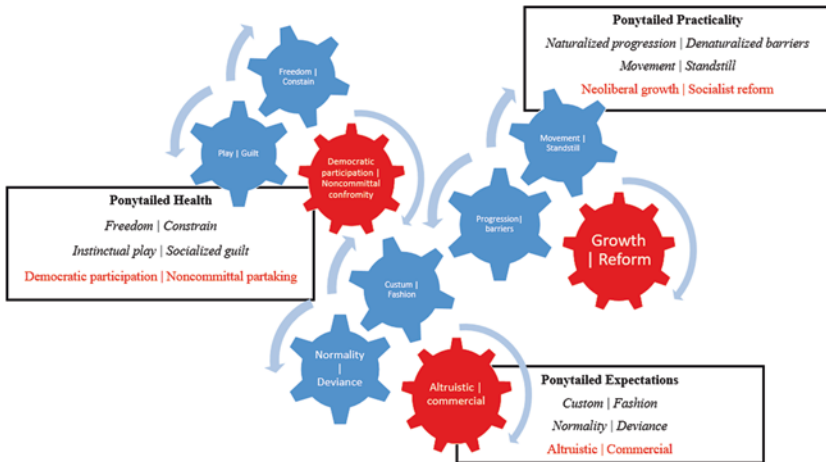


Fig. 1 The codes and symbolic layers of the ponytailed experience

noncommittal participation; of neoliberal success or socialist progress as the best strategy to meet ponytailed expectations (Fig. 1). Sometimes these layers of meaning snap into alignment to create a charged ponytail that, with its coded options, allows the cultural creation of individuality and exemplars with hierarchal and democratic aims. They can discriminate and draw boundaries, too, among ponytailed communities. Symbolic layering allows us to use the ponytail as a mediator as we, with deep affect, discuss the dark and bright, just and unjust, inclusive and exclusive sides of social life; who makes the better ponytailed role model; and how far a fashionable horsetail can be tweaked before it becomes dangerous. Via the senses, the ponytail can reveal when freedom goes astray and the many ways that gender equality can be achieved and challenged.

The invisible depth of cultural structures and the visible surface of the ponytail are analytically separate, yet empirically intertwined (Alexander, 2020). We sense, sometimes too late, that the seemingly ordinary ponytailed good girl next door is deceptively a femme fatale. In subtle ways, the ponytailed woman signals that she is subdued by social powers and the ideologies of her own and others' destruction, but can also break free like a thoroughbred roaming the mountains or a frisky foal at play. The half-life of the ponytail reveals that its wearer balances tradition and modernity, her ontological frames creating the warmth of solidarity and the cold of conflict.

This sensuous engaging with the cultural pragmatics of modernity should not cloud our critical sense to counter social inequality, the naturalizing of injustice, or reproduction that annihilates diversity. Yes, in the accounts explored here the ponytail is white heteronormative, but in ways that enable its wearer and societies to root the sacral elements of gendered expectations, biological health, and pragmatic necessities in a body that also enters and shapes social justice. It shapes collective movements, lines of sporting women who caterpillar through the streets. It bends and remakes legal rules about appropriate hairstyles and identities in the military and what body practices and identities boy and girl hockey players can carry out. In the Norwegian public sphere, long-haired femininities that are the creations of a male gaze—like Barbie and Lara Croft—do not outnumber the women who march on March 8 or those who challenge the potential threat of being unconscious dolls. Indeed, gender progress is found among Liberal Right women politicians, celebrities seeking a sexier feminism, and high-earning women entrepreneurs who put children and families first. Progress, not to say the continued push for progress, also arises among celebrities who leave behind material gains to speak out for human rights, among Social Democratic youths and adults seeking to expand the limits of the civil sphere and welfare state, and among woman athletes who combine social advocacy even as they fly down the slopes breaking barrier after barrier. The ponytail fashion is a gendered display, imbued with beliefs about women's health, that generates a myth-like femininity that fuses an energetic spirit in the embodiment of progress and emancipation. In public and private, its pragmatic value and utility accumulate in a social world of democratic hope for equality, allowing the modern woman-on-the-move to maneuver work and family life with speed and gusto. In these instances, the three symbolic layers of an altruistic versus a commercialized approach to gendered expectations, of a healthy democratic participation versus non-participation, and of neoliberal growth versus socialist reform shape different material-cum-democratic hopes and paths for the ponytailed woman.

While I set out to study the ponytailed woman athlete in Norway, any understanding of her social significance would be flawed without accounting for the ponytailed women who surround sports, enter sports, and emerge from sports. The sports and gender literatures indicate that sports-women can either reproduce or challenge the univocal meaning systems of myths and archetypes, that is, female athletes learn, sadly, that “the feminine presentation of self” is the best way to garner social acceptance

(Daniels, 2009, p. 145), and young women identify with pursuits of appearance rather than sports (Weitz, 2004, p. 72). For many, this might be true, but for others this analysis shows that the ponytail's multiple layers of meaning allow women and men, girls and boys, to feel and meet gendered expectations in many more ways. Despite the uniform hallmark of the woman athlete, actors can feel and use the ponytail to negotiate diverse ideologies and identities. A ponytailed experience is polyvocal (not just in the dual sense of reproducing or resisting one or two chosen ideologies), and sports are microcosms that provide an interpretive opportunity to aesthetically transform social life, immerse oneself in its reconfiguration, and return to it (Geertz, 1973a).

From critical sports sociology, we know very well how sports allow a deep play with gender inequalities and social hair. From this book, we also recognize sports as a deep play with gender equality through semiotic-cum-phenomenological hair. When multiple codes and layers of the ponytail snap into alignment and radiate its sacral dimensions, we sense a heroic narrative (e.g., Smith, 2005). The journalists and interviewees included here consciously and unconsciously seem to understand the feminist undercurrent of this dramatic narrative. I have empirically shown this. I have hermeneutically rebuilt a fourfold structure holding codes of customs and fashions, of constraints and freedom in health, and of naturalized progression that transcends mundane practicalities, and last, a code devoted to the experience of life's many fluctuations, progresses, and setbacks: movement.⁴ The ways in which these codes and layers are felt are contingent on context, actions, and symbolic interactions, and sports is *the context* in which movements are best brought to the attention of our sensuous engagement with social and bodily movement.

In various ways, the symbolic codes and layers of the ponytail involve movements in dealing with social facts through fashion cycles, aging, and social progress. These existential dimensions are enmeshed in deep cultural images of creation, vitality, and rebirth, as indicated throughout this book's analyses. Despite the many paradoxes in Norwegian society, narratives and myths about democratic progress and gender equality lie at the heart of public discourse and state management (Engelstad & Larsen, 2019; Holst, 2009; Mjøset, 2017). There, too, sports are criticized as the last bastion of male dominance (Broch & Skille, 2018; Matthews & Channon, 2020; Messner & Sabo, 1992; von der Lippe, 2010). In sports, we witness numerous healthy and practically oriented women who, sometimes with a ponytail, make it visually clear that they have entered new and

often male-dominated terrain. The ponytail brings various forms of women's movement into sports.

While I started the book exploring analogies between humans and animals, sport provides another site from which to inductively draw examples of women who with progressive, determined strides, and despite setback after setback and new barriers to equal participation, keep going. Sports, as aesthetic experiences (Gumbrecht, 2006), add their own movements and rhythms to accounts of women barrier-breakers. Sports embody movement and provide sites in which rhythms materialize in the female body and then re-enter the public sphere. Here kinetic and cultural energy can fuse. In sports, bodily rhythms and a romantic genre of the athlete's journey intensify boundary-breaking and progress as social battles take the shape of sport battles (Broch, 2020). We can see and feel it. With hermeneutic power, journalists work to show us and make us sense it (Alexander, 2012). Sports are emblematic of movement.

In sports, the iconic ponytail materializes, dramatizes, and intensifies the codes mapped outside of sports. Sports adds its own movement of dancing and prancing ponytails to infuse the ponytail's half-life with observable proof of cultural kinetic movements that challenge male athletic bastions and cultures of inequality elsewhere. Sometimes the movements imbued in the ponytail escape its materiality as fast as they appear, as we turn off the television or put away our smartphones. Sometimes sports leave their zig-zag rhythms in the snow and in our minds. The hard work, toil, and hustle of sports meaningfully remains in bodies to inspire some to take on new barriers and inequalities. Those who do are sometimes named heroes. And sometimes sport aesthetics moves to move us.

The ponytail is an object and a symbol of social and kinetic movement. As it waves in the wind, swings with a body in motion, or rests on a shoulder, it is an aesthetic object that allows bodily experiences with movement. We see this rendition of movement in the ponytail—an object resembling a horse's tail—as it balances the stride or communicates with others. We sense it as women move within the expectations of gendered customs and fashions, with a fashionable bullwhip extending from their heads. In health too, the ponytail accentuates the child's play, the teenager's wobbly chase for identity, and the adult woman's maintaining of the kinetic energy of her youth. In all its practicality, the ponytail sails behind the woman moving, through repeated setbacks, with hopes for social progress as she maneuvers the rush hours of the working family. The ponytail not only says more than a thousand words, it materializes and puts words into action. It moves and transforms as a biological and aesthetic object to symbolize motion and

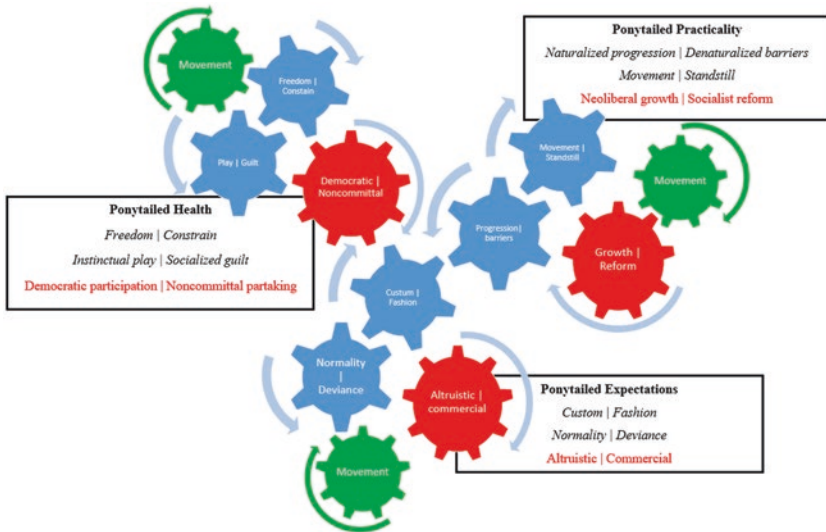


Fig. 2 The codes and symbolic layers of the ponytailed experience of movement

change as a part of a social life. As we *enter* and *sustain* our worldviews, tying up long hair at the top, midway or at the nape of the neck, the ponytail materializes and inspires movement (Fig. 2).

This looping relationship or oscillation between codes is critical for understanding how bodies in general and sportswomen in particular establish “types” with which to “feel” and associate ideas and things across multiple personal and social realms.⁵ As women and girls—many of them, too—shape their bodies in new ways that become custom (yet not free of negotiations of inequalities), they in turn reshape societies (Butler, 1998). The body is a concrete site for engaging with the world and our existential positions within it (Butler, 1993; Champagne, *forthcoming*; Csordas, 1990; Shilling, 2003, 2004; Turner, 1995). All things within a meaningful ecology, all that attaches to it and all that it touches, share a “latent totemic nature” that is felt as soon as “circumstances permit or require it” (Durkheim, [1912] 1995, p. 152). In modernity, meaning-making about bodies is fragmented and differentiated, and Durkheim’s notion of spiritual unity and corporal diversity is perhaps better dealt with as *spiritual diversity* and *corporal diversity* (e.g. Stang, 2009). We no longer view the same world from different bodily positions, but as many possible and symbolically layered worlds from varied body positions. When, in all its practicality, the ponytail moves into male-dominated spheres, it tells of both

the individual spirit and the spirits of our time. The iconic ponytail has become a performer with a half-life that can ignite anticipation and community in ways that recreate the democratic effort of females of all ages who are as spirited in their fight as their ponytail is whipping about. This force is generated in the affective feedback loops as multiple levels of social reality are in dialogue.

The ponytail's iconic power does not exist as a cultural phenomenon until it is called into existence in public culture and personal lives through careful movement and attention. A human "horsetail" requires hair to be fixed in a specific way. Its creation must be called out by an audience, in the mirror or elsewhere. Only then can we feel the semiotic "charge" that the ponytail receives from numerous interpreted observations of women's social and bodily movements and then retransmits to its surroundings. The ponytail presupposes the cultural fact that biological hair is already there and that it is long enough to be fixed in this particular way. It presupposes that we imbue its object—hair—with a particular movement through space, running, working, jumping, kinesthetic energy. When this is so, we see the ponytail swing from the head of the woman equestrian and from the horse below. It flies in the air from the head of a spirited athlete as it would from a frisky foal. We see it on the woman athlete as she disappears down the mountainside like a chiseled thoroughbred. It waves from underneath the helmet of a hockey player, a crystal clear sign that she is marching through the cultural and social landscapes of our institutions. Called into existence, the ponytailed sportswoman's victories and criticisms are twofold; fusing movements (or lack thereof) in sports and society (Fig. 3).

In this process, the bodily experience of movement is fused with cultural structures that also involve social movements, feminist narratives, and codes. To some, this fusion is situated in a post-feminist world. To others, the moving woman's body, condensed in a ponytail and empowered by an existential layer of expectations, health, and practicality, remains in a world of injustice and democratic hope. We hear echoes from across the Western world: from the French paper *Le Monde* (June 30, 2018), the declaration that "women's place in soccer is a democratic and a social issue"; from the UK's *Independent* (June 9, 2019), the argument that the 2019 soccer World Cup brought "opportunity to investigate broader gender inequality in sport"; from the United States where CNN, Fox, and CNBC alike report gendered records and barriers and *The New York Times* (June 10, 2019) records with a sense of honor that "the best women's soccer team in the world fights for equal pay." The ponytail is an iconic embodiment of hard-won freedoms and those yet to be won. While this



Fig. 3 The cultural charge of social and kinetic movements. (Picture credit: simonkr via Getty Images)

once customary hairstyle obeys practical concerns, its iconic custom commands a generation.⁶ Social injustice is marked with a waving ponytail.

NOTES

1. Alsarve (2018); Blackburn (2007); Cox and Thompson (2000); Daniels (2009); Kolnes (1995); Lenskyj (1994); Schultz (2014); Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009).
2. Not only gender, but also feminism itself, are codes and narratives (Alexander, 2007, 2019).
3. See Hallpike (1969); E. R. Leach (1958); Morris (1987); Obeyesekere (1981); Prince (2009); Sandin (2019); Synnott (1987); Tarlo (2017); and Weitz (2001, 2004).
4. I have chosen to rearrange Franz's (1964, p. 195) account of the fourfold structure of the anima to better fit with the chronology of this book's analysis.
5. Materiality is crucial in the organizing and construction of "types" that allows us to "feel" and associate ideas and things across multiple personal and social realms (Alexander, 2008, p. 6). This is also very much the case with the shaping of bodies and experiencing of bodies (Douglas, 1970, p. 93; Mauss, [1934] 1973, p. 77).
6. In the exact words of Tarde (1903, pp. 253–254), "primitive custom obeys, whereas customs in its final stage commands, generation. The one is exploitation of a social by a living form; the other, the exploitation of a living by a social form."

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