

Autonomous Bodies, Autonomous Selves: Resistance and the Politics of the Body

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the theoretical and political implications of interpreting the body as a tool of resistance, especially with regard to dominant gender norms. In considering the various dimensions of embodied practices of resistance, I consider two “types” of bodies. First, I consider examples of “pathological” bodies that are interpreted by some commentators as signifying resistance, such as eating disordered bodies and addicted bodies. In this case, the individuals who “occupy” these bodies may not view themselves as engaged in such resistance. Second, I consider bodies that we see as willfully expressing some kind of resistance – self-constructed or at least self-interpreted bodies. I focus in particular on athletic or muscular bodies. I argue that although the resistance attributed to the pathological body does not usually accord with the intentionality of the subject, for the purposes of recovery and consciousness-raising, the *ascription* of autonomy to these bodies may prove to be resistance-generating in the future. Autonomy, I contend, is not only a capacity or set of capacities, but also a status which, warranted or not, carries with it certain benefits and opportunities. With regard to the second category of bodies, I argue that although there are risks in turning to such bodies as tools of resistance – objectification, sexualization, and increased impetus for constraining bodily regulation – these potential dangers can also be interpreted as opening up space for the contestation of naturalized categories of gender and sexuality.

I. Introduction

An anorexic body expresses its “pathology as embodied *protest*”; it must be “read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender.”¹ A heroin-addicted body “refuse[s] to modify [its] own desires to fit into systems that reproduce race-class-gender oppression.”² Once “oddities, goddesses or monsters,” female athletes’ muscular bodies now grant them access to a world of “bravery, competence, and strength,” subverting old ideas of “female incompetence and physical weakness.”³ “Though [female athletes’] bodies have been meticulously cultivated, their bodies aren’t the point: the point is their ability to perform,”⁴ Spectators of a women’s bodybuilding competition take pleasure from the activity’s “construction of the female body not only as strong but also as capable of being shaped and defined by women themselves.”⁵

The body speaks: each of these statements seems to envision the body as articulating, representing, or subverting some kind of claim. It is not necessarily the individual *person* whose agentic behaviors or decisions come to generate meaning, it is instead the jutting of bones, the needle tracked arms, the curvature of muscles, or the glistening of suntanned skin that speaks to us, the spectators: scholars, cultural critics, and People Magazine readers alike. Yet these examples of “vocal” bodies are quite different: should we interpret the “voice” of the emaciated body of the anorexic in the same manner as we interpret that of the body of the arguably healthy female basketball player? If the anorexic’s body is to be interpreted as article of resistance, yet she is deeply enmeshed in the very norms and ideals that her body is said to be resisting, what do we mean by “resistance”? What is the relationship between an autonomous body and an autonomous, or not, “self”?

In this paper I consider two dimensions of embodied practices of resistance. First, I consider examples of bodies that are interpreted by some commentators as signifying resistance, while the individuals who “occupy” these bodies may not view themselves as engaged in such resistance. Second, I consider bodies that we see as willfully expressing some kind of resistance – self-constructed or at least self-interpreted bodies.

In the first case, I argue that the ascription of autonomy (exercised in the form of resistance) to the pathological⁶ body is useful in highlighting the cultural and political significance(s) that such a body has, yet is problematic insofar as it may reinforce a separation and hierarchy between mind and body that may replicate some of the factors that contribute to the pathology to begin with. Despite this possible pitfall, I contend (with other theorists) that autonomy is partly ascriptive: it is a status produced by recognition. In turn, recognition as an autonomous individual, whether or not one has the capacities that such autonomy entails, may imbue some individuals with the opportunity to develop capacities for autonomy. Even if the resistance attributed to the pathological body does not actually accord with the intentionality of the subject, for the purposes of

¹ (Bordo 1993 169)

² (Friedman & Alicea 2001 169)

³ (Heywood 1998 3)

⁴ (Brubach 1996 3)

⁵ (Kuhn 1997 198)

⁶ The term “pathological” is, of course, not without problems; I use it here to refer to bodies that I think are compromised in their physical or mental wellness, or both. I recognize that what is considered pathology is up for debate, but I think the cases I use are relatively clear-cut, or at least lean clearly in one direction.

recovery and consciousness-raising, such ascription may prove to be resistance generating in the future.

In the second case, the problem of the lack of intentionality on the part of the carrier of the resistant body does not exist to the same drastic extent; though she may not explicitly seek to resist gender norms through her bodily practices, she is less likely to view her activities as pursued in the service of conformity to these norms. The notion of such bodies as engaged in resistance is not nearly as paradoxical as in the first case. However, even where an athletic woman, for example, sculpts her body into the perfect entity for her particularly sport, there are potentially negative consequences of looking to this body as a tool of resistance. In many instances, the female athletic body in our culture is both commodified and sexualized. With the objectification of women so vastly prevalent in our society, the use of the body as a tool of any kind may be a precarious route to follow. Moreover, the notion of self-constructed bodies calls to mind the regulatory mechanisms, both overt and implicit in many aspects of our daily lives, that women are subjected to by a masculinist and sometimes misogynist culture. Is the rigorously crafted muscular body, for example, simply generating another unattainable ideal for average women to aspire to, inserting themselves in the now familiar practices of disciplining and regulating the body? I argue that these cases are not clear-cut; it is not the case that any bodily regulation, and even any objectification, is constraining to women's autonomy. Rather, we need a more nuanced understanding of the use of the body as a tool of resistance in such cases. Despite the cases where bodily self regulation and objectification genuinely rob the athletic woman of autonomy, in other cases ascribing autonomy to such "resistant" bodies in our analyses may enable us to press on categories taken to be natural, including those of gender and sexuality. In this sense, the body as a tool of resistance remains plausible and useful.

II. *The Pathological Body as Resistance: Narratives of Conformity*

Strikingly, in these disorders the construction of femininity is written in disturbingly concrete hyperbolic terms: exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentations of the ruling feminine mystique. The bodies of disordered women in this way offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter—a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender. [...] It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner, waiting at the horizon of 'normal' femininity. It is no wonder that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied *protest*—unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless.⁷

Susan Bordo is clear in her analysis of the symbolism and significance of the (eating) disordered body; though she reads these bodies as embodying protest, she emphasizes that such protest is "unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive," lacking "language,

⁷ (Bordo 1993 169,75)

voice, or politics.”⁸ Yet, even as we acknowledge the paradoxical nature of such “protest,” I want to argue, its identification as such does important work in conceptualizing both notions agency and autonomy of the body, on the one hand, and those of resistance and protest, on the other. In this section, I consider the paradox of conceiving of the pathological body as resistant in the context of a gendered notion of mind/body dualism.

Some scholars have noted that understanding resistance as enacted by subordinated groups – including women in a still sexist society – requires attention to subtle details that may not immediately appear as resistance. James Scott cites to two sides of the discourses of the subordinated and the dominating.⁹ The public transcript, he explains, is the discourse that occurs between the subordinated and the dominant, as well as among the subordinated in the presence of the oppressor; it is, he writes, “the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen.”¹⁰ Moreover, “it is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule.”¹¹ In the context of the gendered construction of the ideal female body, for example, we might consider narratives that naturalize the self-sacrificing character of woman, highlight the supposed health benefits of the slender body, and situate, as Bordo notes, the practices of constraint and consumption regarding food in the context of appropriate market behavior. The hidden transcript, Scott argues, “represents discourses—gesture, speech, practices—that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power.”¹² In the context of the hidden transcript, at sites where the subordinated experience relative autonomy from the sources of their subordination and are able to more freely articulate their anger, frustration, and despair, the possibility for resistance to emerge is most plausible. Moreover, Scott notes, at times political discourse emerges at junctures wherein the public and hidden transcripts collide, where the line between them is ruptured. However, even where the public transcript is intact, a space for a subtle form of resistance may materialize.

Pointing to the tactical nature of performance in the face of power, Scott argues, “when the script is rigid and the consequences of mistake large, subordinate groups may experience their conformity as a species of manipulation,”¹³ Here, even if the performance of conformity is one of cooption of the master’s norms to serve one’s ends, this conformity is not without complication. Scott writes, “the appearances that power requires are, to be sure, imposed forcefully on subordinate groups. But this does not preclude their active use as a means of resistance and evasion. The evasion, it must be noted, however, is purchased at the considerable cost of contributing to the production of a public transcript that *apparently* ratifies the social ideology of the dominant.”¹⁴ Although other writers understand such conformity as exemplary of “false consciousness” rather than any kind of resistance, Scott claims that such an interpretation overlooks the agency of the subordinated. When the subordinated engage such

⁸ (Bordo 1993 175)

⁹ (Scott 1990)

¹⁰ (Scott 1990 18)

¹¹ (Scott 1990 19)

¹² (Scott 1990 27)

¹³ (Scott 1990 33)

¹⁴ (Scott 1990 33)

manipulation, Scott argues, “this attitude requires a division of the self in which one self observes, perhaps cynically and approvingly, the performance of the other self.”¹⁵ This splitting of the self is crucial: “our tactical self exercises control over our emotional self, which threatens to spoil the performance.”¹⁶

What does this mean for the “text” that is the eating disordered body or the addicted body, enacting forms of embodied resistance according to some commentators? A preliminary look at Bordo’s characterization of the eating disordered body seems to depict a type of conformity: “Anorexia could thus be seen as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression to desire (the work ethic in absolute control); obesity as an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control).”¹⁷ Moreover, the practice of self-starvation conforms to the cultural preoccupation with “containment of female appetite”: “the notion that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing *others*, not themselves.”¹⁸ Yet, at the same time, her conformity to these norms suggests a transcendence of the body that can also be seen as a transcendence of femininity – of the gendered notion of woman as overcome by the body. Bordo explains the manner in which the “slender, fit body” comes to be seen as “a symbol of ‘virile’ mastery over bodily desires that are continually experienced as threatening to overtake the self.”¹⁹ In conforming, on the one hand, to cultural expectations of feminine *behavior*, the anorexic body also transcends – resists – the cultural understanding of feminine embodiment; she is no longer the needful, animalistic “body,” but instead, in the disciplined and contained body her pathological behavior produces, she is rational, independent “mind.”

Yet, despite this surface level congruence between Scott’s notion of resistance through performance of conformity and Bordo’s description of the anorexic’s apparent capitulation to expectations of feminine behavior whilst also transcending the feminine body, there are a number of ways in which the two fail to correspond. First, one of the crucial aspects of Scott’s model is the “splitting” of the self. Whereas the resistant-conformer, as we might refer to her, is able to at once meet the demands of the dominant and observe herself as manipulating the situation for her own ends, the eating disordered woman does not, on most accounts, have such an experience. Rather, the splitting that occurs if we impose such a model is one of the self as mind and the self as body. However, though the bodily self *may* be read as engaged in the “self-management” that aligns her with “male” values of “self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on,” and as therefore resisting the feminine attributes that are attributed to her, the self as mind does not experience it this way.²⁰ As Bordo explains, “Women may feel themselves deeply attracted by the aura of freedom and independence suggested by the boyish body ideal of today. Yet, each hour, each minute spent in anxious pursuit of that ideal... is in fact time and energy taken from inner development and social achievement.”²¹ Though experienced as illusory power, this bodily conformity is interpreted by the anorexic as powerful not because it is resistant but because it is

¹⁵ (Scott 1990 33)

¹⁶ (Scott 1990 29)

¹⁷ (Bordo 1993 201)

¹⁸ (Bordo 1993 118)

¹⁹ (Bordo 1993 15)

²⁰ (Bordo 1993 171)

²¹ (Bordo 1993 160)

conforming; the splitting of the self is not “cynical” or “approving” as in Scott’s description of such resistance, but decidedly and tragically *uncynical*.

The heroin-addicted body is not a very plausible case of resistant-conformity. It more closely approximates an instance of the rupture of the public transcript; there is little that conforms to prescriptive femininity about such a body, save maybe the passivity the drug induces. Nevertheless, its interpretation as a *non-conforming* tool of resistance points to a splitting between mind and body rather than a self-reflexive sense of resistance in a similar sense to the uncynical splitting of the anorexic subject. Although Friedman and Alicea view the addicted body as “visibl[y] challeng[ing] patriarchal domination by engaging in what is perceived by the public to be masculine, rebellious behavior,” the ethnographic evidence they present suggests that the intention of their subjects is often not to transgress gender norms.²² In some cases, the addicted body’s transgression of norms of femininity is indicative of an *escape* from disciplinary requirements: “ ‘you don’t bother to put makeup on. You don’t bother to curl your hair, just get the dope get the money.’ ”²³ In other cases, the addicted body enables passive *acceptance* of the demands of femininity: “I didn’t feel right. And I started looking to things that made me feel...and I started using drugs... What happened was that the dope was filling in the emptiness that I felt in my marriage. [...] I mean the void was being filled so well that I just kept going at it.”²⁴ What may be interpreted as bodily resistance is, in the first case, a tool of obviation and in the second case, a way of enabling conformity. While this case is different than the eating disordered body insofar as drug use is more obviously a countercultural practice that challenges societal norms, the women Friedman and Alicea interview do not for the most part interpret it this way; they manipulate and moderate their bodies in order to achieve certain goals, but they do so not in the spirit of resisting external demands, but in the spirit of something closer to retreat.

Returning to the disordered body, we see a second way in which it fails to align with the narrative of the resistant conformer; that is, the excess of the anorectic’s conformity. Her conformity is indeed tightly linked to cultural expectations, but, in its pathology, it goes well beyond the norm (albeit a borderline pathological norm itself). What is key here is that the anorexic (and the obese) woman is *not* culturally acceptable. Thus, her conformity, if it is in the service of manipulating the dominant culture to serve some of her own ends, fails, because in its extremity it is no longer conformity.

The key distinction, then, between Scott’s notion of resistant conformity and the interpretation of the pathological body as expressing resistance lies in the autonomy of the subject. In the case of a subjugated person actively resisting, though doing so in a context of conformity, we can broadly conceive of her as autonomous – that is, she is not, obviously, *independent*, but within the constraints of her context, she is able to be autonomous: self-directing and determinative of her own path. However, this is not the case for the anorexic: though we may interpret her body as resistant, her intention is not one of resistance to dominant norms. It is risky, moreover, to interpret such bodily-inscribed resistance as autonomous; as Bordo notes, “Conscious intention, however, is not a requisite for females seen as responsible for the bodily response of men, aggressive as well as sexual... Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the

²² (Friedman & Alicea 2001 90)

²³ (Friedman & Alicea 2001 90)

²⁴ (Friedman & Alicea 2001 91)

opposite), their bodies are seen as ‘speaking’ a language of provocation”²⁵ (6). If this is the case, the notion that we might perceive the intentionality – and autonomy – of the anorexic as residing in her body alone, mirrors a problematic cultural perception of the powers – insurmountable and overcoming – of the female body. Moreover, it perpetuates a division between mind and body that has traditionally been opposed by feminists. As Nancy Mairs describes the dominant manner of undermining expression of embodiment: “I *have* a body, you are likely to say if you talk about embodiment at all; you don’t say, I *am* a body.”²⁶ The splitting of mind and body replicates a trivialization of embodiment. At the same time, the attribution autonomy solely to body fails to capture the “I *am* a body” sentiment Mairs refers to; when she counts herself as *being* a body, she is referring to an integrated notion of the self, not one that misattributes autonomy to the body as a distinct entity from some other self.

Perhaps most importantly, it is not only that autonomy is misattributed to the anorexic because of the un-self-conscious nature of her conformity. It is also that, for both the anorexic and the addicted subject, in a very real and embodied sense, the ostensibly resistant activity compromises autonomy insofar as it radically limits the range of activities the body can partake in. It is a mistake to ignore the physical barriers that both eating disorders and addiction pose to autonomy.

This is not to say that interpretations of the anorexic body as resistant or the addicted body as resistant are entirely problematic or of no use. Indeed, I now want to suggest the ways in which such an interpretation can be a useful tool of resistance. It is not that we should abandon an *interpretation* of the body as resistant, but that we should be careful to clarify the underlying assumptions about the mind/body relationship and the limits of resistance that follow from such an interpretation. To be fair, Bordo is very careful with such matters. (Friedman and Alicea, however, are less so.) Here I seek primarily to clarify the reasons for and importance of such clarity. Given such clarity, I argue, this interpretation creates space for the development of some notion of ascriptive autonomy.

III. *Ascribing Resistance, Part I*

Leaving aside the question of whether the anorexic body or the addicted body or any other “pathological” body *ought* to be interpreted as a symbol or tool of resistance, the implications of conceiving of it as such are, I argue, important. That is, I suggest that in conceiving of the anorexic body or the addicted body as in some way engaged in practices of embodied resistance, scholars, cultural critics, and other commentators contribute to a politics of the body that is engaged in significant theoretical work. In this section, I consider how the ascription of autonomy to the pathological body may provide a space for the *generation* of future resistance.

I understand autonomy to be a *capacity* that is developed in the context of social relations.²⁷ That is, oppressive relations or relations of domination may and often do impede the development and exercise of autonomy, whereas other enabling and

²⁵ (Bordo 1993 6)

²⁶ (Mairs 1997 298)

²⁷ For further elaboration of this “relational” theory of autonomy, see, among others, (Friedman 2003, Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000, Nedelsky 1989)

supportive relationships (between individuals or between individuals and institutions) may foster autonomy. In addition to this notion of autonomy as a capacity, however, there is another way of conceiving of autonomy for which actual capacities may initially be of little importance. As Mika LaVaque-Manty describes, “Autonomy is [...] at least partly *ascriptive*: I am autonomous if someone ascribes self-authorization to me.”²⁸ The experience of being recognized as an autonomous individual, he argues, whether or not one actually has the capacities we conceive of as necessary for autonomy, is actually itself an element of autonomy. Indeed, on both a material and social relational level, such ascription may be key to granting access to some of the most basic requirements of an autonomous life. Moreover, ascriptive autonomy is also intimately linked to the development of the actual *capacities* necessary for autonomy. LaVaque-Manty writes, “There is a complex interaction between acquiring the capacity for responsible agency and coming to be recognized (in one’s closer and wider social environment) as capable of being responsible.”²⁹ That is, if others – especially those in positions of power – recognize me as autonomous, even if I lack some of the requirements associated with the capacity for autonomy (for example, self-esteem or a sense of self-worth), the very ascription of autonomy may cultivate these requirements. In turn, if others refuse to recognize me as a self-governing individual, I may be utterly incapable of conceiving of myself as such, and therefore lack (or continue to lack) the psychic and institutional resources necessary for the development of autonomy.

Given the (at least partially) ascriptive nature of autonomy, then, I argue that even if the attribution of autonomous resistance to the body of the eating disordered or addicted woman raises problems of intentionality, body/self integration, and extremes of conformity discussed in the previous section, it may well be worthwhile. Simply by conceiving of these bodies as resistant, we might open alternative avenues for both thinking about the body from a feminist perspective and providing services to disordered or addicted women that enable subsequent resistance to dominant and oppressive forces. In their analysis of the available treatment programs (methadone maintenance) for the women they interview, Friedman and Alicea are critical of the programs’ medicalized approach. On their interpretation, “A therapeutic and medicalized approach toward female heroin users functions to adjust them to traditional gender norms and power structures, thereby reproducing systems of domination.”³⁰ ³¹ Moreover, they claim, “Their bodies and minds become colonized by the language of medical ‘experts,’ for within these institutions, there is little place for a discourse of resistance.”³²

Similarly critical in her investigation of a treatment program for eating disorders, Helen Gremillon describes how treatment teams seek to motivate clients to strive for “health,” overcoming what program staff refer to as “pseudoautonomy,” the false sense of control that anorexia and other disorders may generate, and creating a health-based

²⁸ (LaVaque-Manty 2006 369)

²⁹ (LaVaque-Manty 2006 369)

³⁰ (Friedman & Alicea 2001 145)

³¹ I find Friedman and Alicea’s analysis of methadone clinics to be quite problematic and I do not agree that all “medicalized” approaches to addiction are inherently flawed and/or act as oppressive disciplinary regimes. However, I do agree that the ways in which these programs tend to be administered in North America contributes to reproduction of oppressive social relations – perhaps for a more complex set of reasons. For the purposes of this paper, I think Friedman and Alicea’s emphasis on the problematic nature of these programs and their constraining effect on resistance applies regardless of the other problems in their argument. See also, Ben-Ishai. 2007 HR Paper.

³² (Friedman & Alicea 2001 205)

autonomy itself. The treatment teams view “resistance” to the treatment program as a sign of such burgeoning *genuine* autonomy. The young women Gremillion interviews articulate the narrative that holds this pseudo/genuine autonomy dichotomy in place: “she [a young anorexic woman] had learned in therapy to attribute her difficult with this treatment strategy to a deficiency of ‘self,’ a deficiency that had led to adopting anorexia as a ‘superficial identity,’ or a ‘false sense of self.’”³³ Gremillion emphasize the ways in which patients resistance comes to be oriented toward medical discourse and some the difficulties therein with notions of fitness and health.

Though in the latter case, Gremillion identifies patterns of resistance that undermine, to some degree, the imposition of dominant medicalized visions of health, the cooption of this resistance as a part of “treatment,” on my reading, limits the possibilities for broader resistance, especially to norms of feminine beauty and behavior. Gremillion writes, “In the clinic, at the very moment when ‘objective’ psychiatric representation of health explicitly naturalize dominant cultural norms, these norms produce problematic embodied effects: fitness, sickness, and health converge in anorexic bodies.”³⁴ Thus, both the medicalized/psychiatric discourse of eating disorders and that of heroin addiction come to mute, in some ways, resistance, here particularly to prescriptive gender norms. I suggest that the ascription of autonomy (as resistance) to the disordered and addicted body can play a role in pushing on the boundaries of such discourse in order to highlight the need to cultivate and make space for resistance, not necessarily against the clinic or the treatment program (something that is noted in Friedman and Alicea’s account to), but in a more deeply political sense. By highlighting the ways in which the bodies of these women, if not the women themselves, seem to “vocalize” resistance to dominant gender norms, such analyses may contribute the space necessary to actually develop the capacities for resistance and autonomy.

IV. *Ascribing Resistance, Part II*

Given both the problems and the possibilities with ascribing resistance or autonomy to the pathological body, highlighted in the foregoing analysis, I now shift to what seems on the surface to be a less fraught site of bodily resistance: bodies that are constructed or interpreted as resistant (at least in significant part) *in accordance* with the intentionality of the subject whose body is in question. Here my primary case will be the athletic body. On the borders of this case, I look at a more controversial type of athletic body, that of the female bodybuilder. Some feminists and other scholars have interpreted the body of the female athlete as subverting “old ideas of female incompetence and physical weakness, the woman’s place is decorative and is in the home”; rather, her body inserts her into “the athlete’s world—defined by bravery, competence, and strength.”³⁵ Rejecting passivity and embracing activity, the female athlete upends the boundaries of normative femininity. Moreover, her body is her own construction: it is “custom built for athletics.” Yet, Brubach points out, unlike the anorexic’s emaciation or the “fashion

³³ (Gremillion 2002 404)

³⁴ (Gremillion 2002 410)

³⁵ (Heywood 1998 3)

models' slenderness," which are similarly products of considerable labor, "here the mean is not abstinence but exertion."³⁶

Yet, despite this somewhat rosy picture of the empowered athletic body, understanding it as a tool of resistance raises some of the same problems as the pathological body, and still others, too. First, how different is the rigorously cultivated muscular body from that of the anorexic? Quoting Sandra Bartky, Shari Dworkin and Michael Messner ask, "is this bodily agency resistant and/or empowering, or is the fit muscled ideal simply the latest bodily requirement for women, a form of 'self-surveillance and obedience' in service to patriarchal capitalism?"³⁷ The focus on the individual, particularly on "toning muscles can easily transfer energies [...] away from collective organize to change institutions that disadvantage all women."³⁸ "Will the tyranny of the body built for sports be any less punishing – or any healthier – than the tyranny of the body built for fashion?" asks Brubach.³⁹ Unlikely, she concludes. Second, though its admirers tout the power and grace of the female athletic body, equally if not more often it is not (only) the competence or the skill of this body that is admired, but its sex appeal, couched in heterosexual norms of feminine attractiveness. Women's bodybuilding here is a particularly poignant example; though the body of the athlete in this sport breaks through what Dworkin and Messner refer to as "a glass ceiling on women's musculature" imposed by standards of heterosexual attractiveness, it is often presented in highly sexualized forms, representing what Heywood refers to as "pornographic eroticism."⁴⁰ This latter issue calls into question whether it is worthwhile to focus on the female body as a site of resistance at all, when the tradition of objectification and eroticization of the female body threatens to co-opt ostensibly resistant or liberatory measures at every crossroads.

The scope of this paper does not allow extensive response to the problems raised above; here, I only sketch the beginnings of an analysis of these two dimensions of the athletic body as resistant – discipline or regulation of the body and sexualization or objectification of the body. I argue that neither complication negates the value of ascribing autonomy to the (in this case) non-pathological body. Rather, both aspects of the representation of the athletic female body point to a need to both broaden and specify our notions of resistance where it is located in the body. While regulating the body – disciplining it – can be autonomy constraining, it may also be autonomy-enhancing, in particular where the practices of bodily regulation themselves challenge the accepted notions of appropriate femininity and where the subject herself is cognizant of such resistance, leading to a sense of bodily integration: to *being* a body, not just having one. Moreover, while objectification and sexualization largely work to limit autonomy and hinder resistance, it's useful to consider the occasionally liberating effects of such engagement with the body.

In a 1996 article in the New York Times Magazine, Holly Brubach highlights the tensions existing in the representation of athletic bodies and (what appears to be) the experience of participation in sport by women. Brubach marvels at the construction of the athletic body – both figuratively and literally. First, one of the markers of the athletic

³⁶ (Brubach 1996 2)

³⁷ (Dworkin & Messner 2002 22)

³⁸ (Dworkin & Messner 2002 22)

³⁹ (Brubach 1996 4)

⁴⁰ (Heywood 1998 4)

body is that it is built to use: “the bodies aren’t the point: the point is their ability to perform.”⁴¹ But, one assumes that Brubach means the *aesthetic* of the bodies is not the point, for it is precisely that the bodies are the point: the body as manipulated by the individual, as utilized by her, as engaged by her in competition or pursuit of higher goals. Second, the physical construction of the athletic body highlights the ways in which the female body gains power as it gains substance, takes up space. In its muscularity, the athletic body, then, not only performs but presumes to take for itself what women have traditionally been excluded from: power.

Brubach compares this muscular encroachment on (male) space and power to the practice of “padding” the body of Queen Elizabeth I (and other contemporaries) in order to achieve “substance,” to “‘make[] everyone take notice and listen to what you have to say and pay attention to your existence.’”⁴² Yet, in distinguishing between the two practices, Brubach’s commentary transitions into the realm of sport as bodily regulation: “We wear clothes that expose our bodies, and so the only acceptable way for us to add mass is to add muscle.”⁴³ Here, the possibilities for the autonomy-enhancing construction of the body seem to highlight a more restrictive realm, or at least one that excludes certain types of bodies, whether or not they are skillful or can perform. Thus when Brubach refers to the “tyranny of the body build for sports” later in her article, she acknowledges that the bodily self-regulation required for achieving the athletic physique may not be within reach of most women. “As it turns out, the athletic ideal, like the others, is beyond the grasp of all but a few.”⁴⁴

What lengths will athletes go to in order to achieve this bodily ideal, and are these practices conducive to autonomy, or do they discipline in such a way that the autonomous body of the athlete begins to take on the same “split” nature as the anorexic body discussed above? In writer and sport scholar Leslie Heywood’s memoir, *Pretty good for a girl*, she describes the rigors she subject her body to in order to achieve the highest level of performance possible as a distance runner.⁴⁵ She describes her 4AM morning routine in college: “By the time I pull back up to those concrete stairs with the shaky railings where the iron shakes and squeaks at every step, I’ve hit two thousand [sit-ups] and my stomach feels toned and tight and my lungs worked up and my legs awake and looking for more. I give them that later...”⁴⁶ But pages after she describes her toned stomach and even her muscular hands – “thin like cords of muscle with no protective wrappers, strong hands” – Heywood describes the panic of having to take time off to recover from an injury: “It’s my swollen stomach, yawning like a mouth. All over my legs, big as trunks. I grab a handful of flesh from my thigh. So soft. A sweet sickness twists in my throat [...] How did this happen? [...] Fat. Dough. There it is.”⁴⁷ The “tyranny” Brubach describes, seems deeply entrenched in these scenes. Furthermore, other accounts suggest that though Heywood is describing her experience as an elite athlete, recreational athletes or fitness enthusiasts aiming to replicate the aesthetic of the muscular body are also subject to this apparent tyranny.

⁴¹ (Brubach 1996 3)

⁴² (Brubach 1996 3) quoting Hollander.

⁴³ (Brubach 1996 3)

⁴⁴ (Brubach 1996 4)

⁴⁵ (Heywood 2000)

⁴⁶ (Heywood 2000 153)

⁴⁷ (Heywood 2000 157)

Is the female athletic body, then, an oppressive construct, theoretically and materially? The body of the female body builder seems to occupy space at one extreme end of the range of athletic, muscular, bodies: like other athletes, the bodybuilder cultivates a particular physique that enables her to perform to her highest capacities in her sport. However, the sport is deeply entangled with notions of aesthetics and femininity, even while it generates figures of women that drastically subvert many of our conventional notions of femininity. Camilla Obel's analysis of women's bodybuilding sheds light on how, for her the bodybuilder, but for my purposes a range of athletic bodies, set out to complicate our notions of the construction of gender. Obel argues that because, on the one hand, bodybuilding women, in their muscularity, are depicted as unnatural or challenging gender norms, and on the other hand, they are seen as reinforcing conservative notions of femininity via the "aesthetic" aspects of the sport, "women's bodybuilding can highlight the complex construction of bodies, gender and sexual identity."⁴⁸ It is the stark rupture of the nature/culture dichotomy produced by the body, sculpted and crafted by the builder or athlete to serve particular ends, that may "potentially bring about changes in perceptions of the nature of bodies, masculinity and femininity, thus facilitating new readings of how subjectivities can be negotiated through body work."⁴⁹ It is through the disciplinary practices that athletes subject their bodies to that those bodies come to challenge or open up for contestation the "natural" body.

Obel's analysis suggests that "disciplining" the body serves important theoretical and political ends; it is not solely social control mechanisms that operate to encourage bodily self-regulation, but also (sometimes more or less self-aware) endeavors to challenge the natural body – both theoretically and physically, pushing it to its "limits." Finally, insofar as the muscular body may open up space to subvert notions of the natural (gendered) body, it may also contribute to the bodily integration described by Mairs in Section II – the notion that "I am a body" rather than "I have a body." In the preface to *Pretty Good for a Girl*, Heywood quotes journalist Joanna Cagan:

[I]n a lifetime so full of fluctuating self-esteem and crippling body image, sports have facilitated the few times when I am too happy and preoccupied to run my normal painful analysis of my body and how it rates on the old sexy-meter that drives Hollywood and New York City... If I pick up a glove, a bat, a basketball, I am judged on what I do with them—not, for once, on how I look using them.⁵⁰

Just as Cagan describes this pleasure – this freedom from the confines of prescriptive femininity – found in the unself-conscious midst of *being* a body, Brubach attributes a sense of self-esteem to the athletic women who "exude competence; [who] can carry their own suitcases."⁵¹ What is striking, Brubach writes, is "the athletes' evident pleasure in her own articulate body."⁵²

Nevertheless, as romantic as this sense of self-ownership and empowerment found in the functionality and capability of the muscular athletic body sounds, both Brubach's account and Cagan's ruminations give way to something else: is this

⁴⁸ (Obel 2002 247)

⁴⁹ (Obel 2002 250)

⁵⁰ (Heywood 2000 xx)

⁵¹ (Brubach 1996 2)

⁵² (Brubach 1996 4)

“articulate” body not only capable but beautiful, and does it matter? It does. Writes Brubach of the muscular body: “Muscles also impart a sense of self-possession – a quality that is unfailingly attractive. This is not sex appeal conferred on a woman, as it’s conferred on supermodels and sex goddesses. The athlete has come by her powers of attraction honestly.”⁵³ For Cagan, who describes the refuge she finds in the athleticism of her body, standing apart from aesthetic ideals of femininity, the media attention bestowed up American soccer player Brandi Chastain after she tears her jersey on the field to celebrate the team’s world cup victory demonstrates to her that this refuge is illusory: “in the end, I was forced to witness one of the painful lessons of high school come true on the world stage: the pretty girls always win.”⁵⁴ It is not only that beauty is celebrated on the terrain of the athletic muscular body; that body is also sexualized, objectified, treated not as primarily competent, but as an object of heterosexual fantasy, conforming to a new, more robust, ideal of the object of masculine desire. Though Brubach describes this “kind of fetishism” as a “healthy one [...] that has taught us to appreciate women’s bodies in detail,” does it work to celebrate the strength of women’s bodies or simply to replicate the trivialization of their power while limiting the acceptable aesthetic boundaries of the muscular body?⁵⁵

One possibility for an analysis of the sexualization of female athletes is to return to Scott: the sexualized athletic body could be a tool of resistance insofar as the muscular woman who command sexual attention is “manipulating” the dominant culture to serve her own ends – to render her strong and capable body desirable and acceptable in our society. I think this analysis is plausible insofar as the subjects engaged in this “manipulation” are cognizant, rather than somehow unconsciously subversive, as with the bodies described in section II. Yet, this may not always be the case. Another way to explore the implications of the sexualization of athletic bodies is to take a closer look at what is entailed in this sexualization: is all sexualization of the athletic body the same? Is it ever legitimate, not because of a subversive manipulation of this form of objectification, but in and of itself? Here, I turn to Heywood’s notion of athletic eroticism and Martha Nussbaum’s exploration of objectification. This is indeed a slippery terrain upon which we might consider these types of social relations innocuous, or even occasionally autonomy enhancing; here, I offer only the beginnings of such an analysis, recognizing that a more thorough weighing of implications is necessary.

Heywood is critical of the depiction of female bodybuilders in the muscle magazine *Flex*. She describes one photograph in the magazine: “Minna sprawled with her head upside down, corkscrew curls cascading down, open-mouthed, eyes closed, on her back across a stool with a base like a corkscrew to mirror her hair, wearing the requisite satin briefs and heels.”⁵⁶ This image, she argues trivializes the *sport* of bodybuilding, with the sexualization of Minna far overshadowing her strength and skill. She writes, “as long as there is pornographic representation of female bodybuilders and fitness competitors within the bodybuilding magazines, the sport’s main outlet for media exposure...mainstream acceptance will remain compromised and bodybuilding will not be taken serious as a sport.”⁵⁷ Heywood acknowledges that the strategy of “using sex to

⁵³ (Brubach 1996 4)

⁵⁴ (Heywood 2000 xx)

⁵⁵ (Brubach 1996 4)

⁵⁶ (Heywood 1998 1)

⁵⁷ (Heywood 1998 1-2)

sell” may have at one point been strategically useful, but in the current context – one that she says is “enthusiastically embracing the female athlete” – such a strategic approach may no longer be appropriate. Yet, despite this criticism, Heywood does not reject all eroticism in sport as damaging, or autonomy hindering.

Rather, Heywood argues that it is *pornographic* eroticism that denies the autonomy of the body and the subject. This type of eroticism, she explains, operates synechdochically. It “takes sexuality, which is one part of humanity and human experience, and makes it stand for the whole of that human being and experience, [it] makes sexuality the primary characteristic of the person represented.”⁵⁸ This reduction of the athletic body to (solely) the sexual body is deeply problematic; if indeed this was the only type of representation of the athletic body one would indeed question the value of turning to such a body as a tool of resistance. Nussbaum similarly describes objectification as autonomy-hindering and demeaning when there is an *equation* of the individual with her sexuality. Explaining this, Nussbaum describes a picture of a tennis player in *Playboy* with her skirt hiked up to reveal her underwear, captioned “Why we love tennis.” She writes, “[t]he message given by picture and caption is, ‘whatever else this woman is and does, for us she is an object for sexual enjoyment.’ Once again, the male reader is told in effect that he is the one with subjectivity and autonomy, and the other side are things that look very sexy and are displayed out there for his consumption, like delicious pieces of fruit, existing only or primarily to satisfy his desire.”⁵⁹ Like Heywood, this synechdochical form of eroticization is taken to be unacceptable.

But both Heywood and Nussbaum do not want to reject all sexualization and/or objectification as not conducive to individual autonomy. For Heywood, the notion of athletic eroticism, which instead takes sexuality as “one dimension of human experience, as a quality that emerges from the self-possession, autonomy, and strength so evident in the body of a female athlete,” accounts for a form of representation of the athletic body that, while highlighting the sexuality of that body, does not negate the resistant and empowering aspects of it.⁶⁰ Consider again the attention paid to Chastain’s defined and muscular torso, revealed after she ripped her jersey off in celebration of victory, which for Cagan symbolized the reduction of sport to a hierarchization of (hetero)sexualized aesthetic value. While certainly some of the ways in which this image was taken up by the media may have had a reductive effect, there may also be ways in which the image comes to combine the power and strength of Chastain’s victorious body with an element of eroticism that does not dehumanize. Instead, where women’s sexuality has so often been a tool for others enjoyment – as depicted in Nussbaum’s *playboy* example – here sexuality is, as Heywood notes, inseparable from autonomy, written on the body, and displayed in action – in being a body that can perform (and win). For Nussbaum, “if [objectification] does not take place in a larger context of regard for humanity, it is a central form of the morally objectionable.”⁶¹ But while the *Playboy* caption narrates a story of reductive sexualization, an image of the athletic body that is both powerful and sexual may be expansive instead, opening up the category of the sexual to reinterpretation without negating the other aspects of the subject whose body is displayed.

⁵⁸ (Heywood 1998 5)

⁵⁹ (Nussbaum 1995 283)

⁶⁰ (Heywood 1998 5)

⁶¹ (Nussbaum 1995 289)

Of course, the commodification of the athlete's body as a sexual object in the service of corporate profit is alive and well in our society. But, my argument is that ascribing autonomy to the athletic body is worthwhile both in the sense that I argued for with regard to the pathological body – opening up space for future resistance – and in the sense that, in this more self-aware realm, it pushes on the boundaries of gender categories (even if through regimen's of bodily discipline) and sexuality (even where objectification occurs). Despite the contradictions and complications of turning to the body as a tool of resistance, the possibilities found both in the actual representation and cultivation of the athletic or muscular body, and emerging from the practice of *ascribing* autonomy to these bodies in scholarship and commentary, are promising.

V. Conclusion

Feminists have long sought to bring the body to the fore in political thought, countering the masculinist tendency to theorize as though human beings are disembodied actors, perhaps *having* bodies, but certainly not being bodies. Feminist analyses of bodies that can be conceived of as pathological have thus sometimes emphasized the extent to which such bodies “vocalize” a language of resistance in both their extreme capitulation to feminine norms and ultimate subversion of these norms at the height of such extremity. While such conceptions of the body as resistant potentially bypass the splitting of self and body that is entailed by the pathological practices of bodily discipline or escapist practices of narcotic dependence, I have argued that there is still something to be gained by ascribing autonomy to such bodies. Even though the subjects themselves may actually lack the intentionality necessary to render such classification of autonomy appropriate not only to their bodies but to a more integrated self, the practice of ascribing autonomy to these bodies may open up spaces for future resistance and consciousness raising.

Less fraught on the surface, when read as resistant, the athletic or muscular body also raises questions about the implications of such an interpretative move. Though critiques of potentially oppressive bodily ideals that lead to further regulation and discipline of the female body are worth taking serious, I argue that we should not dismiss all self-imposed regulation of the body as indicative of social control mechanisms that hinder autonomy. Rather, as the example of extreme muscularity in women's bodybuilding shows, the practices that lead to the construction of such bodies, dependent on a high degree of bodily discipline, open up possibilities for challenging naturalized categories of sex and gender. Similarly, while the sexualization of the athletic body threatens to subvert the emancipatory possibilities of such a body when there is an absolute identification between the athletic body and the sexual body, where the eroticism of the body is but one aspect of it's human potential, we may again open up space to challenge an expand gendered categories.

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