This paper aims to make a significant intervention into the ongoing debates about women’s bodybuilding as an anti-essentialist practice of resistance. The existing literature on women’s bodybuilding usually uses theory in a very general way to interpret the significance of this activity. Here I work within a more selective theoretical framework (concentrating on the work of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) to try and explain how the body of the woman bodybuilder becomes a successful counter-discourse. I explore the way power can become visible through the body, specifically through the body in pain. I then seek to explain how pain can be mobilised as part of a strategy of resistance against hegemony.

‘She’s so dull (come on) rip her to shreds
She’s so dull (come on) rip her to shreds’

Blondie

Blondie released their first album in 1977, which included the song *Rip her to Shreds*. The year was also a pivotal one for women who wanted to get out of shape, who wanted physically rather than verbally to rip ‘her’ to shreds. The United States Women’s Physique Association (USWPA) was founded in 1977 and began to stage bodybuilding contests for women. That November Gina LaSpina won the first United States Women’s Championship. Her exertions,
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and those of her peers, set the stage for the ‘ripped’ and ‘shredded’ body of the hypermuscular woman which began regularly to grace bodybuilding competitions in the late 1980s. Pioneering competitors like LaSpina and Lisa Lyon had physiques which have been interpreted as amplifications of mundane expressions of femininity rather than as the beginnings of a form of resistance/resistant form to dominant constructions of the desirable female body. Leslie Heywood reads Lyon’s body as ‘not so much a transgression of gender but its development’ and says of LaSpina that her

long-limbed, soft-stomached, stringy-muscled physique marked the characteristics of the first wave of women’s bodybuilding: skinny women with some scraggly muscle tacked on, women whose bodies did little to challenge accepted notions of masculinity and femininity.

This reading of the early women bodybuilders demonstrates Heywood’s belief that the indication of a successful counter-discourse is significant change. It could however be argued that the structures of representation within discourse that offer individuals selected modes of identification can only be altered gradually.

It is true that most of the first generation of competitive women bodybuilders do not look significantly different from the model’s body/body as model which decorated the covers of Cosmopolitan and Vogue at that time, the youthful, slim and ostensibly fit bodies displayed by women like Janice Dickinson, Patti Hansen and Beverly Johnson. These model bodies circulated as the ideal to be aspired to. LaSpina and Lyon are also only slightly more muscular than the toned bodies parading through the pages of Jane Fonda’s Workout Book (first published in 1981), a book which also contains a photograph of Lyon and describes her as an example of a woman who is both ‘strong and beautiful’. Such writing off of the first female bodybuilders is only justified if one holds the belief that resistance can only occur as conspicuous change. Is resistance always manifested by the marked contrast rather than the minor difference? Must it always be obvious rather than subtle?

To read resistance in terms of rupture – to interpret it as a break with what came before rather than a bending of the previous state – ignores its processual nature. The successful counter-discourse is
not characterised by sudden and spectacular change. Initially at least
it is more elusive – almost imperceptible – and only gradually does
it emerge as distinguishable from the existing discourse. Building
a counter-discourse is like bodybuilding: it is a slow process, not
an instantaneous transformation. To build muscle it is necessary
to tear it and then allow the body time to repair it. Successful
bodybuilding involves the measured damaging of muscles. If
an exercise workout is too strenuous then the degree of muscle
damage that the body sustains becomes too great and catabolism
(muscle breakdown) occurs. Successful counter-discourses mirror
this measured approach; they fissure the existing discourse rather
than rending it. The material of any counter-discourse is discourse
itself. You cannot construct a counter-discourse by entirely doing
away with the existing discourse, just as you cannot build muscle
by destroying it. Counter-discourse is careful injury. Resistance acts
not through destroying discourse but by distending it. This notion
of distension is an important one, emphasising as it does the way
that counter-discourse pushes at the boundaries of existing discourse
rather than somehow moving beyond them.

Bodybuilders like LaSpina and Lyon began to expand the
corporeal possibilities open to women through creating what might
be termed as an enabling ‘tear’ within discourse. This tear challenged
the regulatory hegemony controlling the accepted symmetry of
femininity. It broke (with) the outline of the sanctioned body, but not
violently. The tear could be said to have healed when such a level of
muscularity ceased to be noteworthy. For example, at the 1984 Miss
Olympia contest, Rachel McLish’s athletic frame, comparable to Lisa
Lyon’s, generated no discomfort amongst judges and spectators. It
was the Australian former power-lifter Bev Francis whose posing
posed controversy. She sported much more muscle mass than any of
the other competitors and her low levels of subcutaneous fat gave her
muscles far greater definition. Although Francis was clearly the most
muscular participant she was only placed eighth overall. It was not
until 1990 that someone of similar muscularity, Lenda Murray, won
the competition. Francis’ physique pushed the body’s boundaries
of possibility too far too soon. The enabling tear at this point was
produced by the eventual winner of the competition, Carla Dunlap,
whose physique was somewhere between the minimal muscle of
McLish and the massive Francis.

The docile body is roused by the creation of minor interstices
within the existing discourse which can then be worked and expanded. This tearing, that is the formation of the counter-discursive causes pain, like the pain involved in a productive workout when limits are pushed. I want to engage with this painful element in resistance later, but first I would like to consider some of the existing formulations of women’s bodybuilding as a resistant practice.

The current conceptions of resistance focus on the hypermuscular woman bodybuilder to a greater or lesser extent. This body is often contrasted with what might be called the aerobic body, an approach exemplified by Heywood’s relatively contemptuous description of Gina LaSpina’s physique cited earlier. There is seldom any effort to place the hypermuscular body in context and consider how the conditions arose which made this body a possibility, a reality. Resistance is granted no history. Without a proper understanding of resistance as process it is impossible to make sense of the dynamics behind the current backlash against women’s hypermuscularity. I have tried to elaborate this process in these opening paragraphs in order to demonstrate how the hypermuscular woman’s own body in some sense embodies the very processes which took place within discourse to make her possible.

Those theorists who recognise the potential resistance of the hypermuscular woman do so in several different ways. In their co-authored work *Feminism and the Female Body: Liberating the Amazon Within*, Shirley Castelnuovo and Sharon R. Guthrie interpret strength-building as a challenge to male physical dominance. They see strong women – elite female bodybuilders and women practicing martial arts – as wrecking-balls ready to demolish the physical dimension of male hegemony. They enact the ‘feminist liberatory strategy’ that Castelnuovo and Guthrie refer to as ‘Amazonian transformation’. These Amazons are women who live on the margins of patriarchal female embodiment and ‘who shape their own thoroughly contemplated existences’. For the Amazon resistance to patriarchy is enacted not only through discussion and thought but through exercise and physical transformation as well. Castelnuovo and Guthrie conceive of two forms of resistance, both of which derive primarily from their readings of Michel Foucault. They characterize these forms as those of ‘reverse resistance’ and ‘resistance as freedom’, otherwise called ‘care-of-the-self’. ‘Reverse resistance’ is resistance which emerges within power relations; it is an example of the productive as well as the repressive effects of power.
It ‘involves continual support of the power/knowledge discourse that links sexuality to identity’, whereas ‘resistance as freedom’ requires the ‘breaking out of this discourse’ and the ‘developing of a new notion of self that is not grounded in stereotypical notions of feminine and masculine’.  

The two thinkers conducted a case study of women’s bodybuilding structured around these two forms of resistance, and from the results they ultimately conclude that whilst the woman bodybuilder demonstrates aspects of a ‘care-of-the-self’ ethic she primarily performs ‘reverse resistance’. For this reason, and because of the individualistic nature of her activities, she is not a suitable role model for ‘Amazonian transformation’. Castelnuovo and Guthrie subsequently argue that a feminist martial arts dojo in Chicago provides a better paragon for successful resistance to patriarchal hegemony as it exhibits more of the characteristics associated with Foucault’s ‘care-of-the-self’ ethic. There are a number of difficulties with their arguments which cannot be summarised adequately here.  

Centrally, however, whilst advocating a resistance that breaks free from a discourse grounded in sexuality, Castelnuovo and Guthrie continually work to undermine their own position through a tendency to gauge the success or failure of potential practices of resistance according to their likeness to a monolithic notion of masculinity. Resistance as ‘care-of-the-self’ appears continuously to collapse into the form of the ‘reverse resistance’ to which it is supposed to be an alternative, such as when the martial artists are praised for ‘neutralising the physical power imbalances’ that exist ‘between the sexes’. Male and female are understood as stable categories in simple opposition, an opposition within which men are strong and women are weak and so must become strong to become equal.

In her contemporaneously published book Leslie Heywood reads the woman bodybuilder in more positive terms than do Castelnuovo and Guthrie. Heywood argues persuasively that although bodybuilding is often a highly individual practice it can have collective effects at ‘the levels of perception and consciousness’ and should be understood as a cogent form of activism. One body can turn a thousand heads and can change a thousand minds. Resistance does not reside solely in the individual but potentially also in the way that that individual is received and made sense of. Heywood also describes the interrelationships that exist between
women at the gym, and demonstrates that the bodybuilder forms part of a network characterised by mutual encouragement.\textsuperscript{13}

For Heywood the hypermuscular woman bodybuilder’s resistance resides in the contradictions she embodies: ‘so many contradictory cultural meanings are gathered that it is impossible to reduce the female body and the femininity associated with it to one particular, natural, unchangeable thing,’\textsuperscript{14} The woman bodybuilder’s body amplifies unresolved and irresolvable tensions that exist within all of us. Heywood reads ‘her’ as a corporeal neither/nor. Neither masculine nor feminine, s/he is both masculine and feminine; neither natural nor unnatural, s/he is both natural and unnatural; neither hard nor soft, s/he is both hard and soft; neither an attack nor a defence, s/he is both an attack and a defence. As an ‘undecidable’ the woman bodybuilder cannot be fixed within any of the oppositions or antinomies which are used to account for her. She resists and disorganises them.\textsuperscript{15} Heywood’s indebtedness to deconstruction remains implicit here but what she does make explicit is her belief that resistance resides in the appearance of these moments of neither/norism, moments within which the well-defined body resists definition.\textsuperscript{16} It might be argued that her later contention (during her discussion of bodybuilding as a healing process which helps women who have suffered some form of violence to recover) that the built body provides ‘a reassertion of presence, a suture, a demarcation between outside and in that you can rely on’ contradicts her previous claims for perceiving that body as an ‘undecidable’.\textsuperscript{17} Ultimately it seems that Heywood herself cannot decide what status to accord the woman bodybuilder; neither decided nor undecided, s/he is both decided and undecided.

Maria R. Lowe does not share Heywood’s ‘undecidability’ but similarly emphasises the capacity for the individual bodybuilder to impact upon collective consciousness. (Lowe’s book \textit{Women of Steel: Female Body Builders and the Struggle for Self-Definition} also appeared in 1998. The copious number of publications that year was perhaps responsive to and symptomatic of the crisis which had begun to affect women’s bodybuilding during the mid-1990s, a crisis which persists at present.) For Lowe resistance to dominant hegemonies usually occurs ‘at the symbolic level in everyday cultural practices’.\textsuperscript{18} Such everyday cultural practices would include the building of muscles in a back-street gym. Heywood and Lowe share a belief in the activist potential of the individual and their capability to
influence the multitude. This understanding of a collective resistance in isolation (individual women working separately together to actuate the many) mirrors the work of building muscle. Muscles are each worked individually, eventually producing an overall effect.

Heywood, Lowe, and other commentators such as Pamela L. Moore perceive the upsurge in the popularity of fitness competitions from the mid-1990s onwards as a threat to the resistance that is women’s bodybuilding. The fitness competition is ‘commonly positioned as a feminine alternative to bodybuilding’. It focuses on muscle tone rather than muscle mass. Competitors have much reduced muscularity and the contest falls somewhere ‘between a female bodybuilding competition and a beauty pageant’. The rise of the fitness competition is important because its gradual displacing of the bodybuilding competition also progressively renders invisible the female built body. The unseen body is an unknown body. Now that muscle a la mode has become muscle at rest (it is tempting to write that flex appeal has become ‘unflexy’) spectators never have to confront the possibility that women can accumulate significant muscular mass, and audiences’ preconceptions about women’s corporeal possibilities will never be challenged. This backlash against hypermuscularity has occurred because the counter-discourse as creeping resistance reached critical mass in the early 1990s, which was ‘an unprecedented period in the development of the female form when really big women were the norm’.

The existing discourse with its regulatory contours that delineate the acceptable feminine form responds to resistance by mirroring it. It does not respond by attempting to reinstate the status quo – a significant undertaking – but rather by seeking a middle ground. Counter-discourse is countered through compromise. The existing discourse accommodates change by degrees and only up to a certain degree, because if it were to go beyond that point it would in fact become indistinguishable from the counter-discourse and resistance would have become resolution. The moment the fitness competition became popular was the moment of compromise. The fitness competitors are not examples of fine bone china femininity; theirs are not delicate and fragile physiques. They have fit and firm but also untroubling bodies; they are not so large and unyielding as to cause surprise and consternation. By comparison the hypermuscular woman is made to appear as too much, as an excessive demand or a bulge too far.
The moment of compromise was an enforced moment with financial pressures brought to bear upon women bodybuilders. Fitness competitions offered and continue to offer greater prize money and occurred and continue to occur more regularly than bodybuilding contests. The profit margins of muscle are at their highest when muscularity is minimal and less muscle has become a more valuable commodity than more. The fitness magazine which promotes the merits of the physiques on display in the fitness shows also now offers lucrative possibilities for competitors, who can become the body that markets a particular brand of exercise product or vitamin supplement. There are fewer magazines devoted to women bodybuilders than there are fitness magazines. Money acts to reinforce the newly accepted contours: conform, and the financial rewards could be yours.

The role played by money in the reassertion of an acceptably ‘feminine’ shape is an unsurprising one. Money is capitalism’s chief negotiator. The relationship between the hypermuscular bodybuilder and capitalism is complex. The builder devotes a lot of time and energy to producing muscle, and these expenditures cost money. The more time that is spent in the gym, the less time there is to work to make that money. The bodybuilder is not really interested in making money but in making muscle, hence there is something unproductive about the production of muscle. The least effort possible is spent working to pay for the work out. The bodybuilder works so as not to work, except on her/himself, unwilling to give surplus value, perhaps because it is in the nature of building never to do too much or too little but just enough. Successful bodybuilding is founded on a good sense of balance.

It is of course possible to make a living out of muscle through prize-winning and product endorsements, to sell the body. The competitive bodybuilder may in fact be in some sense comparable to Walter Benjamin’s ‘whore, who is seller and commodity in one’, both producer and product. But whilst being understood as the commodity par excellence, the prostitute still produces nothing outside of her/himself other than the fleeting orgasm. Prostitutes produce transient pleasure; bodybuilders produce products which only they themselves can possess. Both are paid to create things that cannot be owned in any simple sense of ownership. However, the person who works out to become a similar shape to the fitness model needs to devote less time to the gym and can spend more
time at work. Fitness is part-time whereas bodybuilding is full-time. The fitness turn was not solely motivated by the desire to restrict women’s contours but also to free up their time, to make them more obviously productive, more amenable to the temporal aspects of capitalism: time is money.

The pain of the financial penalties for women bodybuilders that arose with the turn to fitness (the return of the aerobic body) points towards the important and under-theorised relationship that exists between pain and power. Pain regulates. The acceptable contours of feminine symmetry are painful to disrupt/displace. Power is preserved through pain. The fitness competition is painless; it signals a return to fixed borders and sanctioned shapes. The fitness competitor aims to get in shape whereas the woman bodybuilder works herself out of shape, breaks with the shape she inherits within discourse. Power manifests itself in the discomfort that we encounter when we reach the limits of what a given discourse holds to be permissible. Pain is that which delineates and prohibits experiences. It is a pain to have limits.

Elaine Scarry writes extensively about the relationship between pain and power in her book *The Body in Pain*, describing how ‘physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of ‘incontestable reality’ on the power that has brought it into being’.

Scarry is keen to separate pain and power, whereas I would like to suggest that pain is power. Pain is the moment when power appears, when it becomes visible. This is pain not just in the sense of physical injury, but conceived more expansively as the discomfort encountered by occupying certain positions in discourse. The ‘regulated process of repetition’ which is signification, the repeating performance through which subjects signify, is a series of operations which becomes painful if the position the performer decides to take up within discourse is one which is perceived negatively.

Bodies only exist through the power that is at work within them, a power that provides them with their contours and determines how they are to be perceived, a power that literally makes the body perceptible. Power enables bodies to be perceived as either good or bad. The good body, the beautiful body, the acceptable body, requires the bad body, the ugly body, the unwanted body, in order to be. The unacceptable body functions as a constitutive outside for the acceptable; it is needed but disavowed and made abject. This is the body of the hypermuscular woman, not outside discourse
but at its edge. This body is a performance without ending. Judith Butler explains that gender ‘is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process.’

Similarly, the abject body of the hypermuscular woman bodybuilder, although currently marginalised, must be abjected continuously in order to remain so. This body retains the potential to reappropriate the unacceptable contours assigned to it. The shape of the body is always provisional.

The process by which a body can reappropriate its shape and endeavour to free it from negative connotations that have accrued around it, are painful. Judith Butler explains the dynamics of this kind of struggle (which works from within the space of abjection) to achieve a form of positive rearticulation in her discussion about the way the term queer has been ‘taken back’ by the lesbian and gay community. She describes how a negative term has been turned into a positive one, into a source of pride. Butler reveals how the ‘occupation or reterritorialisation of a term that has been used to abject a population can become a site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political resignification’. A term that was degrading can come to signify a different set of values through its adoption and adaptation by those who it was originally designed to injure. The power the term has to wound has been diminished, although it has not entirely disappeared as no appropriation can ever be complete. There will also always be the potential for new negative terms to emerge, but these too can then become sites of contestation, can be queered and redirected in positive ways.

The hypermuscular woman bodybuilder is often described in terms which signify a negative position in discourse. Some of these terms could provide a source through which to articulate opposition to the current acceptable contours given to women’s bodies by hegemony (language is, of course, part of the hegemonic process through which dominant culture maintains itself). However the woman bodybuilder does not want to produce a counter-hegemony through contesting the terms by which she is described and produced. She seeks a material resistance at the level of the body itself. The body is the term she wishes to ‘reterritorialise’. She wants to write herself on her own terms, to find new words in the flesh rather than reconfiguring old ones.

This might seem an impossible project in the sense that our
bodies are always already not our own, not ours to own. You can only work (out) with what you inherit. Any body is already decided by discourse – formed in discourse – and emerges within discursive practice. The non-discursive (whatever that may be) is not and can never be the body, although the body in pain (as a socially abjected body and more pertinently here as a body pushing itself to its physical limits) does approach the non-discursive. Scarry states that ‘pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeelable in death’. The dead person falls outside discourse, falls into the most radical non-discursivity (although obviously, the living experience that person’s death within discourse). As the closest experience to death, pain is at the edge of discourse. The woman bodybuilder cannot create a new language – a new body – but she can learn to work against the body she inherits from within that inheritance. Through pain she can trouble the discourse which forms her body and also puncture the linguistic element which forms part of discourse. Her physical pain has the ability to ‘destroy language’.

The capacity for pain to destroy language requires further elaboration, especially as Scarry, who suggests that pain is language destroying, is writing about pain in the context of torture. This is obviously immeasurably different from the pain that is experienced bench-pressing heavy weights or repeatedly lifting dumbbells. Pain during a workout can, however, also destroy language, if in a different way, a way proposed by Kathy Acker in her beautiful and recondite essay ‘Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body’. In the essay Acker explains that in the gym ‘language whose purpose is meaning occurs, if at all, only at the edge of its becoming lost’. She describes the importance of counting for the bodybuilder, whose ‘language is reduced to a minimal’ and ‘to one of the simplest of language games’. This is ‘a language game which resists ordinary language’. It is the repetition of numbers. These repeated numbers are breaths, not figurations of breathing but breathing. Number is breath, breath is number, indistinguishable. ‘In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one’s way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path.’ This is language without meaning, language only as matter. The workout – the gradual amplification of pain – is a gradual destruction of meaning. The focus on repetition is a focusing away from that growing pain. Repeating is forgetting, a forgetting of pain.
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and a forgetting of meaning, the two go together in that meaning is a limit, and as such, a form of pain, the pain of delineation, the pain of purpose and intention. Pain, in this sense, acts to prevent the move beyond meaning. Pain, however, in traversing the limits of meaning also acts to disrupt and trouble it. It is at once meaning’s guarantor and a means to ‘unmean’, pain opens the way for a breaking with with the contours of sanctioned meaning.

It is this meaning-destroying side of pain that holds promise. It is this pain that returns the bodybuilder to matter, to what lies beneath the injury of meaning and beyond the mediation of discourse. Paul de Man wrote of the ‘prosaic materiality of the letter’ in his essay ‘Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant’.\(^{37}\) That which is prosaic is plain. It is without beauty and without ugliness. It just is. J. Hillis Miller identifies two main features that characterise de Man’s ‘prosaic materiality’: one is ‘a disarticulation of language equalling the disarticulations of nature and the human body [that] de Man has found in Kant’s dynamic sublime’.\(^{38}\) In Immanuel Kant’s text the dismemberment of the body which occurs during the ‘nonteleological apprehension of nature’ is mirrored by ‘a dismemberment of language, as meaning-producing tropes are replaced by the fragmentation of sentences and propositions into discrete words, or the fragmentation of words into syllables or finally letters’.\(^{39}\) De Man also uses the writings of Heinrich Wilhelm von Kleist as an example. The materiality of the letter in this instance becomes evident through a process of separation. A sentence means, a word on its own means less, a letter even less. A letter is almost only itself, almost meaningless, or rather ‘outside’ of meaning.

Part of the pain of bodybuilding is a similar dismemberment, this time of the body as language rather than language as distinct from the body. The body is broken into body parts by the workout; from arms to forearms, from legs to thighs, from muscle groups to individual muscles, from triceps to biceps to deltoids, the body is pared down and fragmented. The body is reduced to one of its parts, to one of its muscles. Muscle alone is not meaning but matter. Muscle is outside meaning. It is not even ‘undecidable’, it simply is. The muscle worked in isolation – worked until the pain becomes too much, worked until it can no longer work – is a muscle that is not doing anything other than becoming itself, expanding itself. It is no longer the background to a process – caressing, carrying, kneeling, standing, walking, writing – but the foreground. That which permits
things to be done becomes the doing. Through the focus and exertion of the builder the muscle as it is worked towards its own failure begins to feel itself for the first time. A part of the body is returned to itself, made matter rather than means and meaning.

The other feature of the materiality of the letter is ‘repetition of words and word parts that call attention to the absurd and unmotivated echoes among them at the level of syllable and letter’.\textsuperscript{40} De Man writes that ‘the play of the letter and of the syllable, the way of saying (\textit{Art des Sagen}) as opposed to what is being said (\textit{das Gesagte})’, is decisively determining in Kant.\textsuperscript{41} The materiality of the letter emerges in similarities of sound, in alliteration, assonance, shared sibilance, in puns and rhymes. The muscle in repeated action, in continual controlled movement, this muscle in motion enters into a rhythm without reason. The counting that Acker described as an ‘aural labyrinth’, the repeating of numbers over and over again until the sound detaches from the sense and the matter that shapes the figures replaces the figures, also exemplifies this returning materiality. Matter that is usually a dull discomfort beneath thinking and writing becomes an itch and then a scratch until a point is reached when matter overwhelms meaning. This is the moment of possibility.

Pain then should be understood as both the guardian of power, the source and force of regulation, and the origin of its undoing. The body in pain undoes the body as pain, which is the body as meaning, the body as permissible or prohibited shape. To be in pain is to be within the body as matter, a body beneath prescribed and proscribed meanings. Access to this ‘beneath’ provides the insight that the body, whilst always already given to us, is not a given. Its surface gives the illusion of fixity but its substance exposes every fixing as appearance, as provisional and contestable. We return from pain with this knowledge, and the belief that we can attempt a positive rearticulation of the body from within a form of that body which is classed as abject within current discourse.\textsuperscript{42} Any experience of abjection is a painful one (although occasionally not without elements of pleasure). Julia Kristeva describes it as a ‘gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire’.\textsuperscript{43} Although here Kristeva is describing the experience or seeing or touching the skin on the surface of milk, this description could quite
easily express the experience of a strenuous workout at the gym.

To move from being an abject body to a body beautiful, to renegotiate the terms of socially accepted somatic symmetry, the hypermuscular woman must first learn from the experience of abjection. This is an experience Kristeva pictures as causing a ‘sight-clouding dizziness’, a dizziness we should understand as not dissimilar to the dizziness Hillis Miller describes in his exegesis of de Man, the ‘dizziness the reader reaches in the emptying out of meaning’ when s/he is granted a ‘glimpse of the materiality of the letter’.  

The glimpse of the before of shape – for the bodybuilder, the chaos of the corporeal – is a glimpse of the fragility of any shape. Abjection is caused by that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’. It is at the edge of the unidentifiable, the unsystematic, the disordered.

It enables access to what lies beyond our constitutive outside without causing our dissolution. We glimpse chaos but do not embrace it. Earlier I mentioned the proximity that exists between pain and death. For Kristeva, the corpse is the utmost of abjection, ‘death infecting life’. Death as the end of discourse, as its impossible outside, is momentarily seen through pain. Death is matter without meaning. It is this ‘form of death’ which Acker claims to come face to face with whilst bodybuilding. It is meanings failure. Death is beyond our control and it is only when we are out of control that we can truly see ourselves. The body is the undiscovered country from whose bourn the bodybuilder returns.

The insight pain grants us about our own provisionality is also an insight into our own possibilities. The hypermuscular woman bodybuilder lives within pain, pain as the regulatory contours that exclude her from the realms of acceptability, but her experience of pain whilst exercising shows her those contours are contestable. She can reappropriate the body she has chosen and seek to resignify it, to use it to challenge the status which it has been accorded. A woman bodybuilder performs reps and sets every day, but not every repetition is a variation. A variation is a tear in repetition, it is doing something different, it is pushing at the limit of what can be done. When Foucault suggests that power in some way breaks down through its encounter with the body – ‘power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counterattack in that same body’ – he does not mean that power disappears, but that it is resisted, that the pain of power is both endured and enjoyed. Pain becomes productive as well as repressive. Of course no power can
exist without resistance, but here what is different is that resistance takes a highly visible form and causes power to do likewise. Power ‘finds itself exposed’. When we come to notice our own body we come to see power as well. This exercising of power at a micro-level, at the level of an individual’s own body, also becomes an invitation to engage with power at a macro-level and seek to renegotiate the terms by which that power operates. Bodybuilding as a discourse ‘transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’. Discourse carries power through the body but this transmission of power can be, if not interrupted, then turned back upon itself, reappropriated. Freedom is the freedom to reappropriate, and the hypermuscular woman bodybuilder should be understood as a buffed up embodiment of Delacroix’s *Liberty leading the People* and celebrated rather than chastised. As previously mentioned, several theorists have recognised the potential embodied by the woman bodybuilder, but these readings do not pay close attention to the actions that exist behind constructing bodies, the pain that is a necessary component of any effort to break with permissible contours.

The resistance the woman bodybuilder articulates takes the form of a gradual process of construction which is designed to build what could be called a ‘radical politics of muscle’. This is a politics designed to reveal the contingency of traditional models of the ideal female body. The hypermuscular woman bodybuilder, as a body that is currently excluded from what is considered to be the proper representation of femininity, automatically becomes a candidate for possible future inclusion in the ‘discursive domain of the political’ (a domain which currently constructs this body as aberrant). Here I am drawing upon the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe for my analysis, in particular their concept of antagonism. An ‘antagonist’ is an opponent or adversary, and also any muscle that opposes the actions of another. For Laclau and Mouffe antagonism is the ‘limit of objectivity’. It is the absence of a totality, when ‘the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself’. This reliance upon the other in order to be oneself parallels the way muscles rely upon each other. Muscles work in pairs: no muscle can stretch itself; each must be stretched by its antagonist. For example, the biceps and the triceps partner each other. They are mutually interdependent. Each one cannot function without the other.
Antagonism manifests the incompleteness and uncertainty of any sense of identity. The ideological formation of men’s and women’s bodies is constructed through the antagonism between those bodies, an antagonism that is then concealed through (amongst other things) the operation of language. Language is one of the processes designed to fix that which antagonism subverts, to give the object (in this case the body) clear and stable borders. Through the agency of her own body the woman bodybuilder produces something that is unsayable in language, something which language rejects, which language exists to reject. It is that which blurs the boundary of the subject and exposes its lack of unity. As I have discussed, the experience of abjection is a painful one. Scarry explains that pain ‘takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable’. The experience of pain opens the way for a ‘critique of the category of a unified subject’. Foucault declares that the body is ‘the locus of the dissociation of the Me (to which it tries to impart the chimera of a substantial unity)’. We might read women’s bodybuilding as one means of banishing this ‘chimera’.

Once identity is recognised as contingent, as the repeated ticking of one box amongst the many which constitute identity’s perpetual multiple choice, then what Laclau and Mouffe call a ‘radical and plural democracy’ becomes possible. The potential for a space in which a number of identities – a plurality – can have equal validity ‘without this having to be sought in a transcendent or underlying positive ground’ can emerge. The hypermuscular woman bodybuilder should thus be seen as an important participant in this making visible of the contingent. But this workout is not over, nor can it ever be: democracy is a permanent working out.

Notes

I would like to extend my thanks to the anonymous peer-reviewer and the editorial collective at Limina for their invaluable advice and comments which have helped to make this paper what it is.

1Lyrics taken from Blondie’s 1977 song Rip her to Shreds from the album Blondie.
2The terms ‘ripped’ and ‘shredded’ are from the language of bodybuilding. To be ‘ripped’ is to have muscles where some cross-striations are visible. To be ‘shredded’ means to have cross-striations which are easily visible. For a short glossary of bodybuilding terms see Maria R. Lowe, Women of Steel: Female Body Builders and the Struggle for Self-Definition, NYU Press, New York, 1998, pp.179-181.
3Lisa Lyon won the first Women’s World Bodybuilding Championship in Los
Angeles in 1979. She was famously photographed by both Robert Mapplethorpe and Helmut Newton.


6 There were, of course, women with more muscular physiques competing at this time, such as Laura Combes who won the NPC National Competition in 1980, but I think that had all the competitors shared Combes’ figure there would have been a backlash against the increasing muscularity of women bodybuilders much earlier than was actually the case.

7 Francis decided to retreat and tone down her muscularity later on in an effort to win competitions. As with Combes before her, Francis did not create a significant backlash against women bodybuilders because in the mid-1980s she was singular in her physique.


9 Castelnuovo & Guthrie, p.51.

10 A major problem is their inadequate formulation of ‘care-of-the-self’ as a form of resistance. Castelnuovo and Guthrie concede that Foucault left many unanswered questions about his ‘aesthetics of existence’. These questions might include ones such as: How can this aesthetics emerge out of the power relations that govern everyday life? Against what norm will the beautiful and the ugly life be judged and from whence will it originate? Just how promising for feminism is an ethic which in its previous incarnation was only open to men as a way of life? No efforts are made to address any of these questions.

11 Castelnuovo & Guthrie, p.81.

12 Heywood, p.57.

13 Ibid., p.59.

14 Ibid., p.11.

15 For an authoritative analysis of an example of ‘undecidability’ within the realm of visual culture, see the chapter ‘A Different Kind of Beginning’ in Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, Reaktion Press, London, 1994, pp.89-146, and in particular pp.145-146.

16 Heywood does acknowledge the heavy influence Jacques Derrida has had on her thinking in her earlier book *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, University of California Press, London, 1996, p.xv.

17 Heywood, p.16.

18 Lowe, p.142.


20 Lowe, p.152.

21 Heywood, p.29.


23 The distance between the two activities in fact sometimes becomes blurred – prostitution develops into the way to pay for working out. Alan M. Klein has discussed this in terms of male bodybuilding in his chapter ‘The Hustler Complex: Narcissism, Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and Authoritarianism’ in Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, SUNY, Albany, 1993, pp.194-233.

24 Katie Arnoldi, a former competitive bodybuilder who won the 1992 Southern California Bodybuilding Championship, includes a scenario that involves a woman bodybuilder who works as a prostitute in her novel *Chemical Pink*, Forge, New York, 2001.

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27 ibid., p.231.
28 In a sense change may be said never to occur here. Discourse might be read as a finite series of terms within which conflicts are fought over the positive or negative investments in them at a given historical moment. To paraphrase Carly Simon, ‘Nothing changes, but if you’re willing to play the game, you can reconfigure something again’.
29 For an alternative formulation of the way bodybuilding can act as a form of resistance to hegemony see Lowe, pp.141-161.
30 It must be pointed out that this is not to deny that a material resistance can occur within language in the narrower sense. Language is itself material.
31 Scarry, p.31.
32 ibid., p.54.
34 Acker, p.23.
35 ibid., p.23.
39 De Man, p.89.
40 Hillis Miller, p.194.
41 De Man, p.89.
42 The visceral reaction which some women had to the physique of Bev Francis is an example of this abjection. For an account of this see Gloria Steinem, *Moving beyond Words*, Bloomsbury, London, 1995, p.109.
44 Kristeva, p.3; Hillis Miller, p.196.
45 Kristeva, p.4.
46 ibid., p.4.
48 A rep (short for repetition) is the number of times that a bodybuilder lifts weights in a set. A set is therefore comprised of a group of reps.
53 Laclau & Mouffe, p.125.
54 Scarry, p.55.
55 Laclau & Mouffe, p.166.
57 Laclau & Mouffe, p.167.
58 ibid., p.167.