

# Introduction

*Jo Malin*

I've lived for a long time with one kind of strength. Now I've developed a taste for another, for power and for perspiration. And I am not alone.

—Anna Quindlen, “The Irony of Iron”

As I was completing my work on the *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography* with my co-editor and dear friend Victoria Boynton, I began thinking about this collection of women's life narratives that would describe and reveal the writers' participation in feminist-influenced communities that are grounded in bodywork and quietly exist at local gyms, fitness centers, and community pools; in dance or yoga studios and at skating rinks; and on neighborhood streets and mountainous hiking trails. At the end of each of those hectic days, as I do on most workdays, I would eagerly look forward to lifting weights or doing aerobics with my women friends at the gym, women who form a warm and sweaty community. However, at no time did I bring these two experiences together, that is, consider adding a topic entry or entries to the encyclopedia that would honor or privilege this equally important part of my life. Why didn't we have entries such as women's sports narratives, exercise diaries and journals, or memoirs of the gym? Why did we, as editors and also subjects of our own personal narratives and poetry, not see these particular types of stories of the body as important parts of women's life narratives and

their autobiographical subjectivity? The life-writing texts by women that do exist mostly describe the lives of near-professional athletes, dancers, or competitors on collegiate athletic teams, written since the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 drastically changed sports for young women by focusing attention and funding on their pursuits in sports.<sup>1</sup>

Very often, my own workouts are the best part of my day. As soon as I sit down at my desk in the morning, my muscles are poised for my class at the end of the day. By mid-afternoon, I can't wait to get there; my body craves the exercise. And, finally, at the end of the workday when I leave my office, I'm humming some of the tunes my favorite class instructors play. The moment I enter the gym, I breathe differently, wear a different expression on my face that matches my comfortable gym shorts, T-shirt, and sneakers. I eagerly anticipate the movement, the burn, the "play" of it. I also look forward to the feeling of shared enjoyment among the women I work out with and the teachers who have become models and mentors for me and my bodywork.

Somewhere along the line of my nonlinear career and "life," my work as a writer and an editor became the close companion to *my life at the gym*. As I sit at my keyboard and do my most abstract thinking, my body provides a simple, undeniable foundation for the work. If I ignore its muscles and bones for too long, I start to feel stiff and sore as well as isolated with my thoughts. I miss the muscle sensations, the body *work* but also my companions in *my life at the gym*. We are there to *work out* and to feel the results of the workout in the following days. Yet amid this physical working is a pure sense of play, the fun of throwing off professional identity for that short time with the women who move in and out of the communal space at my gym.

Susan Bordo published in 1993 *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Following more than a decade after Kim Chernin's *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, Bordo focused the attention of feminist theory and criticism on a deep cultural fear of women's power in Western society and the growing evidence of eating disorders associated with an ever-shrinking ideal of female beauty. Bordo's study drew irrefutable parallels between these two forces: as women gain power, expectations for feminine beauty and the pressures for women to be ever thinner increase. Today, however, women are actually growing larger, and "starving to be thin" eating disorders affect a very small minority of women in developed nations. Most current studies show that the occurrence

of anorexia in adolescents is only 1 percent and that bulimia, although more secret, can be estimated at 4 percent. Despite Bordo's brilliant work and her predictions, women are not getting smaller. We have in fact grown ever larger since 1993.

The problem of obesity is at crisis levels in the West and spreading to the less developed nations of the world. Women today face a shocking future in which our daughters may not live even as long as we do. Yet recognizing this crisis, along with an acute awareness, as feminists, of the cultural messages women are bombarded with that narrowly define acceptable feminine body image and that may govern our attempts at body "work," many women are finding comfortable and healthful spaces that allow them to take care of the physical needs of their bodies for some form of exercise. Throughout our lives and especially as we age, physical exercise is essential for our hearts, bones, muscles, and mental health. This book focuses on the found spaces for this activity as places of community with other women. Though very diverse, the essays, personal narratives, and poems all portray everyday lives in which women have found ways to move their bodies and to gain meaning from the sites of this movement and the companions with whom they move. Many of the selections contain emerging voices revealing thoughts that may not always find their way into scholarship.

The feminist acceptance of wisdom in *The Tyranny of Slenderness* and *Unbearable Weight* and the acute consciousness of why we as women seek to be small and slender may have also ushered in the sometimes dangerous illusion that healthful exercise is unfeminist and may, even today, cause some feminists to hide their regular "gym" attendance or, at a minimum, segregate it from their activism and scholarship. The worlds of their regular exercise and their feminist theoretical writing have not overlapped unless they are sport or dance theorists. Despite this segregation of experience, there is a quiet and underground movement of women who have made the healthful routine of exercise a very important part of their lives. Many of us are participants in a steady, even daily, routine that includes membership in a "gym" culture, often shared with a community of women that can be found in multiple sites: dance studios, weight rooms, swimming pools, ski slopes, lakes, and even streets and sidewalks.

What makes this trend and the narratives of it so important is that today, at the start of the twenty-first century, women can no longer ignore the effects of an inactive lifestyle. A modern life that does not include regular exercise predisposes one to cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, and even depression.

Science has shown that the brain as well as the body is influenced by increasing the heart rate in aerobic activity. In her article "Fitness Is a Feminist Issue," Tara Brabason sees "fitness-based communities of women as a positive force" and draws particular attention to the benefits of exercise to the strength of women's bones:

The health situation has grown so problematic that any movement should be rewarded and encouraged. . . . For women, this movement is particularly important. It has been shown in a study of 10,000 that active women were 36 per cent [*sic*] less likely to break a hip in later years than the inactive. (Brabason 2006, 68, 72)

Writing for the Associated Press on February 20, 2008, Marilyn Marchione described a study of strokes among middle-age women in the United States. She concludes: "Women's waistlines are nearly two inches bigger than they were a decade earlier, and that bulge corresponds with an increase in strokes" (1).<sup>2</sup>

The contributors to this collection, many of whom are academics and writers, describe ways in which inclusion of regular physical exercise in their otherwise cerebral lives is enriching and very basic to their health and their identities as aware feminists. They have also found a sense of community with those with whom they exercise, change in locker rooms, and nurse sore muscles throughout their life spans. Their ages range from twenty-nine through seventy-five, and the volume thus speaks to the possibilities of fitness and exercise throughout the aging process.

The voices in this book may appear tentative to some and perhaps they are. Is this because our culture trivializes women's physical activity as leisure, while men who "work out" are participating in sport? Or because our culture also trivializes women's physical activity as only associated with diet/weight loss and appearance? The writers here are moving for the sake of their health and longevity but also for the joy and pleasure of kinetic engagement and the enjoyment of feeling their bodies grow stronger, bigger, and more muscular.

Also, many are voices of women over forty for whom life before Title IX included elementary and secondary schools with meager and poorly funded opportunities to participate in physical activity. This history of prejudice is also reflected in the fact that many write about and have participated only in dance, running, or swimming, all activities that require less funding than football, for example.

Feminist consciousness of the body is not what it was in 1993 when Bordo's important book was published. Despite more than a decade of our awareness of the constricting of the female body to a young and slender anorexic ideal, those of us who write of women and women's lives have mediated these limited cultural norms with the realities of our own need for physical activity and our enjoyment of it. Even Bordo told her reader that through a national weight loss program she had achieved a major weight loss. She defends this loss as perhaps hypocritical, given her scholarship:

In 1990, I lost twenty-five pounds through a national weight-loss program, a choice that some of my colleagues viewed as inconsistent and even hypocritical, given my work. But in my view, feminist cultural criticism is not a blueprint for the conduct of personal life. . . . Its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture; . . . simply becoming *more conscious* is a tremendous achievement. (Bordo 1993, 30, emphases in original)

As feminist scholars mostly in the fields of literature and women's studies, we all are women with bodies that need the exercise that will help us thrive and even live longer. In addition, those who ignore exercise not only lose an avenue to improving or sustaining health but also one for enjoyment and community.

I came to this community at my gym late in life. As part of my evolution as a feminist, I started to explore this traditional masculine space as a middle-age woman. I didn't move into it directly, through sports or through youthful recreational pursuits. I entered, rather, through the dance studio. When I was five years old, my mother took me to my first dance lesson. The class included tap and ballet lessons and was made up entirely of little girls dressed in black leotards, transported there by our mothers. I don't remember the day of the first class or how I felt. I do know, today, that it was the beginning of my lifelong identity as a dancer. This first dance experience was also my first membership in a community of women and girls, but I was far too young to understand the uniqueness and value of its female-centered character, as well as the fact that it was an expected space for many young girls. In retrospect, I can see a lot about both the wonders of a female-centered community and the downside—the "charm and grace" that dance purports to teach girls, the constructed

nature of the feminine in dance, and the emphasis on the body as object, in this experience.

By age twelve, I came to the painful conclusion that I did not have the talent to be a professional ballerina, though I knew I was a dancer. I enrolled in a ballroom dance class at my school. It was for both boys and girls and met on Saturday nights and fulfilled my pre-adolescent need for more heterosexually-based dance. I also started going to school dances. In high school, I continued "social dancing" and added modern dance to my life. I was so accustomed to the structure and choreography of tap and ballet that I found it challenging to step outside the moves I knew and begin creating with any freshness in modern dance. But I was a dancer and loved this *women's* community of dance class as I did as a younger girl. In college I continued with this form of movement and added synchronized swimming, which felt a lot like dancing. These were also classes that attracted only women. After college, as a young wife and mother, international folk dancing absorbed some of my attention, and eventually English and American country dancing became my favorites. Since that time, I've added Cotswold Morris dancing and step aerobics to my repertoire.

For sixteen years, I have been a member of a women's Morris team. Morris dancing is a very old English traditional dance related to fertility and good fortune. Membership on my team, the B. F. Harridans, means weekly practices, which are demanding and strenuous, and performances at public festivals and local events in the spring and summer. This dancing on the team also provides an identity that coalesces around physical activity and women's community. All of these years of varied dancing have been central to my identity as a woman, among other like-minded women, devoted to female physicality.

My first experience at an actual gym or "fitness club" began about eighteen years ago. I started with classes in basic and then "step" aerobics. Brief sessions of lifting free weights also were part of these classes. I now go to my gym five or six days a week, depending on my Morris practice schedule. I attend classes rather than use the treadmills or other equipment. Sometimes I attend step aerobics classes, but more and more I choose "PowerFit," which is a group weight-lifting session using barbells and dumbbells. I am finding it extremely satisfying to be able to lift heavier and heavier weights and to watch and feel my muscles growing. The instructors obviously work very hard at creating a supportive environment, and the other students are almost always women. These classes provide a model of a feminist community based on physical exercise, as does my Morris dancing.

I have written articles and books as a feminist literary scholar, especially in the area of women's autobiography. I also write grant proposals and work in a grant-supported university position. The subject of my writing has never been about my gym and my fitness and this community of women with whom I move. Up until now, the gym simply has been where I go at the end of my work and writing days and also during my weekends. As I turn my attention to theorizing this experience, the muscle work and the community, I've entered a body of feminist critique that addresses women and sport, women and fitness, and women and recreation. The essays and poems brought together in this book begin to describe an experience of community and connection that women build and have built through their bodies and the often happy work of keeping them in motion.

Lynda Johnston wrote in 1998, "Historically, entry by women into gyms—an exclusively male environment—was not easily achieved" (250). The high school experience I had with "physical education" did little to make me feel welcome in the world of the gym and the world of women's sports. I always felt uneasy and inadequate on the court or in the field and with a ball in my hands. The pool was a welcome milieu, but even there I moved away from team competition and toward water safety classes and synchronized swimming rather than competition. I'm sure that larger cultural forces in the pre-Title IX world I grew up in prevented me from even dreaming about athletics as a path. In fact, I didn't hold a dumbbell or a barbell in my hands until ten years ago. My preference for the more "feminine" movement of dance was reinforced at every turn.

Now that I am in the gym, though interestingly I still choose the group exercise studio within the gym, I am there so frequently that it has become almost a second home to me. Shari Dworkin calls it her second home in her article "A Woman's Place is in the . . . Cardiovascular Room?? Gender Relations, the Body, and the Gym" (2003, 135). It can also be described as a "third place," neither home nor work, a community space that mediates the gap between the two (Trebay 2006, 1). In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg bemoans the loss of neighborhood diners or general stores where one is known and welcomed among old friends in an easy, ongoing community. I share my third place mostly with women. This gym space has the intimate feeling associated with sharing the body and its many "stories"—tales of injury, illness, food, and the changes of age. The space is still a fragile, new space of feminist support for me and for many of the women who exercise there and share the connection of moving together.

This book focuses on some of the spaces feminists have found for exercise, as places of community with other women. Though very diverse, the essays, personal narratives, and poems all portray everyday lives in which women have found ways to move their bodies and to gain meaning from the sites of this movement and the companions with whom they move. The dialogue they engage in with other women through their bodies is clearly very meaningful. The contributors' feminist, and mostly scholarly, prisms inform their gym and studio experiences. "The gym" is representative not only of the dance studio but of the pool, the weight room, and the skating rink. Women also take their gym experiences outside and on the road, the lake, and the slopes.

Part 1 of *My Life at the Gym* is called "The Dance," and thus this collection begins where I began my life at the gym—in the dance studio. My own participation in dance, from ballet to ballroom to Morris, has always crossed the line between art and athletics. The contributors in this section dance on that line and around it in a complicated verbal narrative that is quite similar to choreography. The complicated issue of body size and shape in dance has been treated in feminist criticism very thoroughly and is not overlooked in this section. Young girls (and boys), particularly those who study ballet and gymnastics, are subjected to pressures that may lead to eating disorders.

In chapter 1, "An Elegy for Dancing," Christina Pugh describes the contrast between the kind of thinking she does while dancing and the thinking she does when she swims laps or plods ahead on a treadmill. Her essay is also an elegy for that part of her life lived as a dancer and her loss of that identity and community because of a painful back condition. She describes the studio in physical, evocative language. In her words, "I had dancing in the blood." Yet she goes past the physical to write of what she misses most, which is the experience of movement along with using that part of her brain that used to "light up" with complete Heideggerean presence. She writes that when she swims laps she cannot escape from her "self," the self that is identified with her work: "As I swim laps, I am certainly 'working out,' in the common parlance; but I am working out my schedule, my responsibilities, my preoccupations." In the dance studio she was able to escape from this self because complete kinesthetic engagement was required. Also, her description of the feeling that some dancers have—"if we simply keep up the practice, we can do it all our lives"—will seem quite accurate in its simplistic yet clearly flawed logic to anyone who loves to dance. Pugh concludes with a conversation at an artist's colony with an athlete who has similar

chronic pain problems. This talk and the very act of writing her elegy bring her some perspective and self-consolation.

In chapter 2, “Kaleidoscope Dances,” Anne Mamary describes these as a “set” of several short dances of different tempi, timbres, rhythms, textures, and feels. It grows out of her experience as a member of a women’s Morris dance team and is structured around lyrics of traditional English folk tunes. Her contribution, she writes, “dances into being bodies kinetic, audacious, and libidinous; it sets in motion a poetic vision, one that takes space yet makes freedom.” Her “set” of dances is accompanied by photographs of the B. F. Harridans Morris team.

Susan Young, in chapter 3, “From Ballet to Boxing: The Evolution of a Female Athlete,” examines her journey from professional ballet dancer to professional figure skater to novice boxer. The three identities coincide with three decades of her adult life and, as such, they represent distinct phases in her eventual rejection of traditional and current ideologies defining female physicality. She also describes her gradual understanding that escaping body-image tyranny is not a matter of revelation but evolution. For her, a crucial factor in this evolutionary process was the presence and encouragement of other women—from ice-dancing coaches to personal trainers—who presented her with “dazzling, powerful models of female athleticism and physical strength.”

Young also reflects on the profound ways in which her evolution as a woman athlete has strengthened her connection to other women outside of the studio, rink, and gym. She then addresses the more general issue of athletic empowerment for women, from both personal experiential and broader sociological perspectives.

Part 1 concludes with Virginia Corrie-Cozart’s poem in chapter 4, “The Women’s Dance.” The poem grew out of the experience of attending her stepson’s wedding and remembering or conjuring up all the myths and images of women that have evolved for such events. Women’s historical community, movement, and physicality are celebrated during the brief time of the “ladies dance” that sets the bride and the women at the wedding apart from the groom and the male guests.

In part 2, “The Gym, Weight Room, Studio, and Pool,” six essays plus a prose and poetic “piece” explore and theorize within these varied interior spaces where women exercise their bodies and find community. In chapter 5, “You Spin Me Right Round, Baby: Resistance, Potential, and Feminist Pedagogy in Indoor Cycling,” Kristine Newhall writes that she became an avid indoor cyclist or “spinner” because she likes

many aspects of the workout. However, when she first started, she often found the instructor's comments or the lyrics of the music sexist and degrading. Her eventual defense was to become an instructor herself instead of continuing to work out while attempting to ignore the musical and vocal messages about how she should eat, exercise, and just *be* a woman. During her first year as a spinning instructor, she was also engaged in research on feminist pedagogy and sports studies. She became acutely aware of alternate methods to encourage her students: emphasizing the individual challenge over any aesthetic result and carefully choosing her playlist to avoid songs that reference the idealized female body of mass media.

Newhall's essay makes use of feminist pedagogy, sports scholarship on group exercise and empowerment, cultural theory on gender and space, and personal narrative to explore how group exercise instructors can begin to dismantle gender norms of health and fitness. Newhall concludes that instructors have the potential for disruption when they create an environment and a workout that attempt to counter the newly hegemonic ideal of the toned, but not bulky, female musculature.

In chapter 6, "Beyond the Lone Images of the Superhuman Strongwoman and the Well-Built Bombshell toward a New Communal Vision of Muscular Women," a sociohistorical analysis of the development of women's bodybuilding in America, Jacqueline Brady looks skeptically at the current celebration of the muscular female. She argues that in elevating these strong women to the status of rugged individuals and feminist icons, our culture has created representations that erase the sometimes unhealthy work that goes into the making of such bodies. But even more unfortunately, these celebrations of individuated muscular bodies remove the female bodybuilder from her community of other women bodybuilders. In so doing, they take her out of the communal space of the gym where she actually operates most of the time and where she engages in a process of female community formation that can lead to real social change.

Brady writes that women's bodybuilding actually brings together a variety of women in small groups for an activity based on changing the body and, more generally, on changing cultural styles of self-representation—changing the ways women see themselves and the ways the general culture sees women. She feels that it is this communal aspect of physical and psychological transformation that holds out the hope of creating new meanings. As an example she sees some of the more promising results of female strength not in the depictions of lone women flexing their muscles but in the vigorous collective

efforts of women using sport as a context for social change in efforts such as a walk to raise funds for breast cancer research.

Catherine Houser, in chapter 7, "Enduring Images," writes of the older women she looks to at her gym as models for aging instead of unrealistic media images but also because she lost her "lifelong model for perseverance and endurance" when her mother died shortly after Houser turned forty. In her personal narrative here she describes the loosely knit community of women at her gym who come together in the early morning hours. Many are in their seventies and eighties and of the age her mother would have been today. She writes that as an academic she is surrounded by examples of how to go through her fifties and sixties professionally but, as Houser says, "in the physical world those powerful, positive images have been more difficult to come by—until I began noticing those women at my gym." She narrates an experience of easy community where she is constantly learning how to age from the women she works out with.

Marcia Woodard's humorous personal essay "The Gymnastics Group," chapter 8, begins with her elementary school experience of "failing" at tumbling. She draws in the reader with her vivid descriptions of childhood physical education classes that are funny and very accurate for many women. She writes of finally finding a measure of athletic success in high school on the cross-country team, where her ability to run "slow and steady" put her at an advantage.

Woodard's contribution ends with her current, fifty-year-old athletic pursuit of leisurely walking around Greenlake in Seattle, where she feels comfortable and at home. She meets her friends there, and the focus is "more social than sweat." They walk and talk, and she participates in a supportive women's community based on physical exercise. What she finds in this community is central to the theme of the entire collection and echoes all of the other voices, as they circle around issues of women's health and the escape from the centuries-old constraints of daintiness, with the help of like-minded others.

In chapter 9, "Gym Interrupted," Myrl Coulter describes herself as a veteran of hundreds of workout classes who possesses a strange assortment of exercise clothing that mostly lies hidden in the dark recesses of her closet. Her humorous essay tells the tale of twenty-five years of experience at various gyms and fitness centers with short bursts of energetic participation and long interruptions. Motivation is her constant challenge, and she writes of a struggle to stay engaged. Finally, though, the "gym women" always draw her back, and at the end of the essay she is comfortable with her trips to the gym to walk on the treadmill.

Lynn Z. Bloom's "Naked Truth," chapter 10, describes her own exercise experience, which is without the interruptions that Coulter struggles with. It is a series of short vignettes connected by the daily rhythms of her lap swimming and the conversations that literally come to the surface and continue in the locker room. This watery ritual has come to be one of the most important and unchanging elements of Bloom's life. She writes of the use of the simple query "How are you?" and the attendant responses, in this space, which often reveal feelings of nakedness not experienced in the other spaces of daily life. She calls her friends from the pool "veterans of the deep."

Part 2 concludes with Victoria Boynton's "Women's Yoga: A Multigenre Meditation on Language and the Body," chapter 11. In her piece, she uses meditative prose, academic reflection, and poetry to discuss how the physical exercises of yoga change the relation of the mind and body. Boynton asserts that these ancient yoga practices can alleviate the contemporary focus on "mentality" and the resulting stress in women's lives. She argues that in this physical practice, thought takes on a different character, relieving the taxed mind of its usual overactivity. The yoga studio space in which hyperthought falls away through exercise serves as both a material locale and a metaphor of containment and protection for "losing one's mind," so to speak. Boynton's weaving of genre parallels the way the mind shifts gears as the body comes into focus through yoga practice in a safe studio space.

Part 3, "On the Road, the Slopes, and the Lake," begins with Shannon Smith's "'Messing about in Boats': Rowing as *l'Écriture Féminine*," chapter 12. She takes part of her title from Kenneth Grahame's Edwardian children's novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1933 [1908]). In it, the self-assured character Rat sings the praises of sculling to his riverbank friend, Mole: "Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing*—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats" (8, emphasis in original). She compares this description of a feeling of movement free from the linear constraints of an origin and a destination to Hélène Cixous's description of *l'écriture féminine*, a mode of creative expression that contrasts with the standard model of "male writing."

Smith's essay originates in her experience of a conscious adoption of this model by her women's crew team composed of faculty and graduate students from the Department of English at Queen's University who also engage in collaborative writing. She explores the ways in which these models challenge both the Romantic ideal of the individual author and the archetype of the male athlete.

Chapter 13, “Women Who Ski with Dogs,” by Grace D’Alo, chronicles an annual trip over the President’s Day holiday weekend in February by eight to twelve female friends, between fifty and sixty years old. As they have for twelve years, the women leave their homes and jobs in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and drive to a cabin in Ontario, where they relish the opportunities inherent in a frozen environment. They ski, often with their dogs, skate, build fires, cook, and talk for four days. D’Alo writes: “Despite ankle reconstructions, knee replacements, and frozen shoulders we have nurtured our physical selves without competitiveness or pressure.” Her personal narrative, accompanied by a copy of a painting of the same name, by Patricia Walach Keough, details this unusual annual trip that binds these women together.

Wendy Walter-Bailey, in chapter 14, “If These Roads Could Talk: Life as a Woman on the Run,” describes herself as a lifelong athlete who began running competitively in sixth grade. But here she writes about the change in this life-of-running when she decided to join a women’s running group to train for a half marathon. She says, “My life changed when I started running with women.” She describes a feminist fitness community that she has found to be even more powerful than the feminist scholarly community she discovered earlier as an academic. Her narrative echoes some of the previous tellings in this collection in that it extols the experience of finding a women’s community through an exercise choice. She writes, “Running is not a glamorous sport, and the hours on the road often elicit the deepest secrets.”

Marlene Jensen is a newspaper columnist and her contribution, chapter 15, “Walking Is an Exercise in Friendship,” began as a column about her walking group, the Holly Hill Hiking Group. Here she chronicles her walking experience with women in her suburban Upstate New York neighborhood. For them, walking is “the basis, backdrop, and cement of their friendship.” When I contacted her about including her column, she told me then that she was leaving my area and that saying good-bye to the women she walks with was proving to be very difficult. I asked her to extend the column and bring it up to date after she moved. Her subsequent essay tells the story of that move and her relationship to the women in her old and new walking groups. She writes, “Walking alone is exercise. Walking with friends, especially women friends, can be an enriching and transforming experience.”

The final contribution in part 3 is the poem “Marathon,” chapter 16, by Beth Widmaier Capo. It describes the process of training for and running a marathon with a friend. Capo’s poem reaches toward

the personal experience of sharing a physical and an emotional connection with another woman through an athletic act. She writes, "Should we look at this distance, this race run, as summarizing our lives?" and in this line, perhaps, gestures toward the meaning of the sharing of physical exercise among women in all of the essays and poems in this volume.

*My Life at the Gym* brings together women's narratives, meaningful life narratives that need to be heard as part of a feminist project to describe and deconstruct the lives of women today. Scholars from the humanities, education, law, and women's and literary theory, as well as poets, writers, and visual artists, have sought and are finding meaning and community in diverse sites of physical movement and fitness: gyms, dance studios, skating rinks, boxing rings, and more. Their contributions are multidimensional and diverse and can speak to many other women who seek health and long life in the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. An excellent example of a competitive female athlete's autobiographical text is Leslie Heywood's *Pretty Good for a Girl: An Athlete's Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

2. Led by Amytis Towfighi, M.D., at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles, the study used the National Health and Nutrition Surveys for the period 1999–2004 and compared the data to the previous survey from the period 1988–1994.

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