

Measuring Up

Comparing Bodybuilding, Weight Watchers, and Yoga

I enter a dank room in the basement of the old gymnasium building, noticing that it smells of chlorine. Clutching a plastic bag containing a black bathing suit and towel, I am ready to have my BMI (body mass index) measured accurately at the Sport and Health Assessment Centre on the university campus where I work. In the corner, a metal chair attached to a pulley mechanism hovers above a strangely narrow and deep swimming pool. A technician explains the procedure: I must sit in the chair and blow out my breath—every last bit of it—before she lowers me to the bottom of the pool, calculates the amount of water displaced, and then pulls me back out. I begin to have doubts as I awkwardly climb into the chair. My sense of alarm increases when the young woman places a heavy weight belt across my lap to ensure that I remain submerged, like one of Dexter’s body bags. I wonder if I should mention that I suffer from claustrophobia, but decide against it. During the first two attempts, I panic as soon as the water covers my nose, and the technician immediately yanks me out. I am terrified and shaking. The third time I rest briefly on the bottom before I freak out, waving my arms while trying to dislodge the chunky belt. This is getting embarrassing. Steeling myself, I finally manage to remain underwater and slowly count to ten. When I emerge, the technician reports that her readings are too high and decides I must be taking a small breath of air before going under. She is correct. Apparently, my body’s uncontrollable

will to live is thwarting the pursuit of science. Another lab worker then enters the room to suggest that I continue to take a shallow breath and then expel it into a measuring instrument—it looks like a breathalyzer—as soon as I break the surface. I am plunged into the water three more times, and finally the announcement is made: I have 16.2 percent body fat, which in addition to the results of my strength testing, puts me in the 95th percentile for women my age. I am ecstatic . . . until I remember that I probably must achieve an eight percent fat level for my figure competition in June 2011, just over nine months away.

When I describe this harrowing experience to my partner later that day, he compares it to the gruesome execution scene at the beginning of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, first published in English in 1977.¹ I laughingly protest, noting that my limbs are still attached to my body. I nevertheless realize that he has a point. The water torture I endured was a kind of disciplinary mechanism that transformed my body into knowledge, rendering it numerically legible. This normalizing process informed me that I have a lower amount of fat and higher amount of musculature than most women aged thirty-five to forty-five, rewarding me for conforming to the current ideal of the lean female body. Since my “above average” physical condition was produced by systematically lifting weights and consuming protein, I begin to wonder if bodybuilding is best understood as a disciplinary practice, creating docile subjects easily controlled by liberal forms of governmentality.² This Foucauldian interpretation of both bodybuilding and the contemporary fitness culture would hardly be novel. It is promoted in a range of scholarship, including that of Brian Pronger, who argues that sculpting the body through weight training can be considered a fascist act undermining opportunities for physical transcendence.³

At first glance, this claim seems applicable to my own regime. For the past eighteen months I have been lifting weights for about two hours almost every day, performing five sets of five different exercises for each body part: back, biceps, triceps, chest, shoulders, and legs. I have taken precisely timed rests of sixty seconds between each set or superset, and have ended my sessions with a cardio workout consisting of either a rousing spin class or an uphill march on the treadmill. I have also regularly changed aspects of this routine to “shock my body,” lest it become complacent and refuse to grow.

At the gym I have recorded my progress in a small booklet, while continually surveying myself in the mirror both to monitor my technique and to look for signs of improvement. My goal has been to achieve a visibly muscular X shape, with wide shoulders and lats that taper into a narrow waist and then flare out again with chiseled glutes and hams.

All the same, I reject the idea that bodybuilding can be fully understood in terms of discipline and self-surveillance. Maybe I am embracing conformity or else proving Foucault's point that "where there is power, there is resistance," albeit always from within regimes of power.⁴ All the same, accounts of self-mastery do not accord with my diverse experiences of lifting weights and working out, which have included exhaustion and a sense of triumph but have also induced muscle failure and sudden endorphin rushes. I decide to investigate further, inventing a research plan that ultimately results in this chapter. In the discussion below, I distinguish bodybuilding from other physical regimes that I have also used to transform my body, namely the Weight Watchers diet program and hatha yoga. My comparison is based on six months of naturalistic observation, unobtrusively undertaken from September 2010 through February 2011, while I worked out at the gym, regularly weighed in at Weight Watchers meetings, and enrolled in beginner hatha yoga classes.⁵ During this time I was attentive to how each activity approached, represented, and promoted the creation of particular kinds of bodies, though I should note that in keeping with my autoethnographic methodology I focused on my privileged, white, Canadian, straight, female, then forty-three-year-old body.⁶

As I performed my observations, I narrowed in on three main themes: visuality, epistemology, and sustenance. For the first theme I analyzed how each practice positioned the body in relation to vision, considering whether or not my body was produced as an object to be looked at or displayed, and how both I and other participants were taught to regard bodies in general. In terms of the second theme, epistemology, I investigated how the three activities portrayed bodies as sites for the creation of knowledge, addressing the roles of such authority figures as personal trainers, meeting leaders, and yoga teachers in this knowledge production. The third theme, sustenance, invoked nourishment and food, crucial topics for both bodybuilders and followers of Weight Watchers, but also could embrace the more

spiritual kind of sustenance central to the practice of yoga. In this case, I was concerned with how each practice understood the body in relation to concepts of energy.

Some of the findings I outline below will likely be unsurprising to readers. I insist, for example, that the Weight Watchers program is the most disciplinary practice in a Foucauldian sense, transforming my body into a manageable object in accordance with dominant values, and yoga the least so. Other conclusions might be less expected, for in the end I argue that bodybuilding had more in common with my yoga classes than the Weight Watchers regime. I found that bodybuilding was not entirely normalizing; it was in many ways an open and flexible practice. My sustained comparison indicated that bodybuilding could embrace unique bodies, exploring and even accepting their physical weaknesses. This conclusion is at odds with much previous scholarship that links bodybuilding with physical mastery and the pursuit of masculine dominance, or in the case of female bodybuilders, with either the acceptance or refusal of repressive forms of femininity.⁷ Thus in this chapter I move toward an alternative interpretation of the appeal of bodybuilding, even as I am careful to avoid minimizing its disciplinary effects.

Looking at Bodies

According to the March 2010 edition of *Women's Health Magazine*, 18 percent of women check themselves out in the mirror ten or more times a day.⁸ I find this statistic surprisingly low. Since I have begun bodybuilding in a serious way, I constantly gaze at my reflection, far surpassing that average. Every wall and support beam in my downtown gym is encased in mirrors, creating multiple images of patrons as they use the weight machines, replace dumbbells, or simply walk to the water fountain. The gym is a site of spectacle, arguably even more than it is a location for exercise. Yet there is a particularly intense kind of looking that bodybuilders learn. I was taught by my first personal trainer, a competitive heavyweight bodybuilder, to regard isolated muscles, ensuring both that they were working through the full range of motion and that my technique was proper, rather than liable to cause injury. This kind of seeing has now become second nature to me, like periodically glancing in

the rearview mirror while driving. When seated in the leg-extension machine, for example, I look in the mirror during every other repetition to confirm that my quads are noticeably flexing and that my straight back is resting against the chair, contributing little to the movement. When working out, I am attuned to the mechanics of particular parts of my body, not to my overall physique or appearance.

I regularly consider my body from head to toe, but not while in the gym proper. I pose secretly, behind closed doors in a small room with my new personal trainer, an amateur boxer. Every six weeks since I began working with her, I quickly change into my vintage 1950s pink bikini encrusted with rhinestones and stand against a blank wall while she uses my cheap digital camera to take four full-length photos of me as I make quarter-turns, discussed more in Chapter Five. We scrutinize these pictures, comparing them with the previous set, discussing any physical changes or improvements. We are looking specifically for increased mass in my lats and glutes, and more definition throughout my back. These pictures prove that I am growing my back and that my ass is “perking up,” to use the phrase employed by my young trainer. Such changes are difficult to see when I look at myself in the mirror, or gaze down at my body. In that sense, my (semi) built body exists only in photographs; it is other than me; it is objectified.

This objectification carries into the working areas of the gym, where I increasingly attract the approving gazes of both men and women, especially those who train regularly and can note my progress. Sometimes this looking is positive, and I welcome it. For instance, I once heard two male bodybuilders remark “she is strong” while watching me do multiple sets of deep walking lunges with a ninety-pound barbell on my shoulders. At other times, this looking sexualizes me. I do not like it when creepy men in jogging pants make kissing sounds as I pass by them on my way to the spin studio (though this rarely happens), but I enjoy it when hot potentially lesbian or bi women and straight or bi men give me the once over. I now take pride in my body and newly upright posture, something I have never done in the past. I also relish my newfound “body awareness” as I feel my engaged or sore muscles almost continually, having a sense of my physique both in motion and at rest. This awareness has influenced other parts of my life, for better or worse. I now

spend time applying makeup, arranging my long, dyed-blond hair, and paying for regular microdermabrasion sessions. I also notice the fatty deposits worsening my already pronounced eye bags, and wonder what to do about them.

Paying attention to every aspect of my bodily appearance is appropriate for an aspiring figure girl. Figure competitions involve creating not only the muscled and dieted body shape noted above, but include what advice books and online preparation guides refer to as “the whole package.”⁹ Presenting this package involves caring for skin, hair, and nails because figure girls are judged not only on the size, proportion, and ideal visibility of their muscles but are required to have healthy locks, a glowing complexion, and impressive poise as they strike the mandatory quarter-turn poses and walk while wearing regulation stiletto heels. These girls do not talk, giving their opinions about world hunger and childcare as do Miss America contestants.¹⁰ Nor do they adopt such standard muscular poses as “front double biceps” like the light-, middle-, and heavyweight bodybuilders of both sexes. You will not see figure girls do one-arm pushups or back flips on stage—though some of them probably could—in keeping with the routines performed by female fitness competitors. Figure girls simply display their bodies from all sides in a manner that resembles a beauty pageant as much as a bodybuilding contest.

One explanation for the relatively recent invention of figure competitions—the first National Physique Committee (NPC) Figure Nationals was held in 2001, and the first official contest sponsored by the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) was in 2003—is that they deliberately counteract the supposed masculinization of female heavyweight bodybuilding.¹¹ The larger and stronger those impressive women get, the more alternative competitions insist on conventional forms of feminine appearance and behavior. Yet even figure girls might be considered too muscular and thus potentially threatening to the gendered status quo, prompting the introduction of bikini competitions in which thin, large-breasted women skip across the stage and pose provocatively in distinction from the relatively wooden presentations of figure girls. While watching the first bikini contest at the 2010 Olympia in Las Vegas—the most prestigious event in bodybuilding, which includes the crowning of Mr. and Ms. Olympia as well as the Figure Olympia—I overheard serious bodybuilders assert that bikini girls were

not athletes who worked out and deserved recognition; they were just tanned young women with breast implants and glittery swimsuits, performing for a lucrative heterosexual male demographic.

The participants in both figure and bikini competitions are diverse, ranging in age, social class, background, and ethnicity, though these groups have not yet been studied by scholars employing either quantitative or ethnographic methods.¹² Online searches related to figure competitions in particular reveal that they are regularly held throughout North America, as well as in the Philippines, South America, Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Korea, typically sponsored by local organizations. My show, for example, was managed by the Alberta Bodybuilding Association (www.abba.ab.ca), in affiliation with the larger Canadian Bodybuilding Federation (cbbf.ca) and International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (www.ifbb.com), which helped to shape the contest's regulations. Though such recognized groups finance annual or biannual competitions with membership dues, entry fees, and ticket sales, most figure girls expend personal funds to pay for their training, posing suits, tanning regimes, and diet coaches. A few competitors attract some corporate sponsorship, but many aspiring figure girls accumulate debt in order to participate in shows. All the same, the competitions attract consistent interest, with over 50 figure girls and well over 100 bikini girls entering even the relatively small, local contests. These statements are, however, necessarily based on my personal experiences, as the demographic makeup and differing ambitions of figure girls remain largely unknown. I can report only that none of the aspiring figure girls who I met had relished the "beauty contest" aspects of the shows; they were instead committed to developing muscle mass before decreasing levels of body fat. More interested in the process than the result, they viewed the onstage display of their bodies as a challenging goal offering ultimate proof of their months and years of willpower and dedication, rather than a temporary revelation of beauty or poise. There is certainly a competitive aspect to the visible display of muscular development, the sole physical trait shared by all serious figure contestants. A standard view among figure girls, for example, is that those women who are new to the practice, or who cheat on their diets, are demoted to the level of bikini girls, the "lowest rung" of competition. All the same, it remains difficult for me to generalize about figure contestants, as

during my own training I might simply have encountered a number of particularly athletic and ambitious figure girls within specific settings—primarily at Canadian gyms and events—who engaged with me because they could identify with my embodied research project.

One thing I can say is that my experiences both at the gym and watching various kinds of competitions have taught me how to see bodies—those of others and my own—in terms of muscularity, leanness, and proportion. Various pedagogical experiences, including direct instructions from professionals, posing at the gym and at official posing workshops, consulting online resources, and attending local and international competitions, have immersed me in a particular form of visuality, a term increasingly used by art historians and other scholars. The study of visuality moves beyond biological understandings of seeing to examine historically and culturally specific ways of looking at the world. For the past twenty years or so, specialists of visual culture have explored the shifting nature of vision, ranging from medieval China to nineteenth-century optometry, to consider how looking has changed over time.¹³ Art historian Hal Foster encourages the investigation of modern culture in terms of “how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.”¹⁴ This approach reveals how looking not only changes over time and across cultures but also within them. Anthropologist Sarah Franklin, for example, recounts how she was unable to discern the nuclei of stem cells beneath an electron microscope until given extended lessons by embryologist Sue Pickering.¹⁵ In my role as a university professor, I regularly instruct art history students to regard visual culture by undertaking formal analyses of composition, line, and color, primarily interpreting images in relation to other images. This method of looking often takes years to develop. Bodybuilding also produces a particular way of looking that is painstakingly learned but eventually seems natural and can be applied to any body. It is now difficult for me not to see the world through the lens of muscular leanness and development. In fact, I entitled one feministfiguregirl.com blog entry “When Did I Become Such an Asshole?” because I found myself judging the skinny and obese bodies around me and feeling disdain for their weakness.

There is little overlap between the visuality produced in bodybuilding culture and that promoted by the Weight Watchers diet

program. Though I noted some distinctive features at the Weight Watchers meetings I attended in Canada, the United States, France, and England (more about that below), they all had at least one thing in common: a notable lack of mirrors. Visible self-appraisal is not a prominent part of the Weight Watchers doctrine, which is almost entirely focused on numbers. When members first register for the program, they are immediately weighed, and that number is written down in their official tracker. Each week, they bring the small pamphlet with them, step onto the scale, and see whether or not their number has changed. If it has decreased, they will receive praise and possibly a sticker, especially if they have lost a five- or ten-pound increment. If the number has increased, they will be encouraged to continue with the program, reassured that consistency will eventually produce results. Any bodily display at Weight Watchers meetings is inadvertent, produced when members strip off their heavy clothes and shoes to achieve the lowest possible number on the scale. Looking good is equated with weighing less and getting smaller; it has nothing to do with visible musculature, physical strength, groomed hair, or well-applied makeup.

The Weight Watchers program ostensibly improves self-esteem, with members gaining social approval through their weight loss. They generally strive to “fit in” and feel more comfortable in such social situations as high school reunions, weddings, and holiday parties. In contrast, figure girls work to craft an exceptional body that will stand out in every location, especially at the gym. After some visual training, it is easy to recognize the distinctively sculpted look of the figure girl, but there is no way to identify a fellow Weight Watcher outside of a meeting context, unless she brandishes a 10 percent goal award on her key chain, or has corporate food items in her grocery cart. There is no ideal body shape in Weight Watchers; any body that gets smaller and falls within the “healthy weight range” for its height is considered a success. As someone who is five feet four inches, for instance, I can choose a goal weight anywhere between 117 and 146 pounds; a body weight under or over this range is deemed both unhealthy and undesirable.

I first joined Weight Watchers in 2005, when I lived in another Canadian city. I signed up for the obligatory initial five weeks to gather information about the regime and to try its principles. Then I simply weighed in each week at my gym, with other women who

were following the program in a strict fashion. After about six months, I had lost thirty pounds and, in contrast to the experiences of most dieters, I have never regained them, likely because of my consistently intense workouts and altered eating habits. A few years later, I moved to the city in which I currently live and decided to lose another ten pounds. I rejoined Weight Watchers, explaining to the leader that my standards were now higher and selecting 125 pounds as my goal. This time, however, I attended the weekly meetings, getting to know the leader and enjoying the camaraderie of the regulars. Within a few months, I had reached my goal weight and received my lifetime membership card along with a silver star for my key chain. My body was on display when I was called to the front of the room to tell the story of my “journey” in true self-help fashion. Since I had begun bodybuilding in earnest, I happily showed off my “guns” by wearing a skimpy tank top to this awards ceremony. In order to retain my lifetime status, I was obliged to weigh in once each month, avoiding the \$16.20 meeting fee as long as I remained within two pounds of my goal weight.

Yet bodybuilding ultimately undermined my success at Weight Watchers, highlighting the conflict between the two practices. Shortly after achieving lifetime status, I began to increase my muscle mass. As I became less fat, I started to weigh more. My weight steadily increased from 125 to 140, and each month I paid the meeting fee as a punishment for my “failure.” On one hand, I found the situation amusing because I was far fitter and leaner than everyone else at the meetings I was attending, including the leaders. On the other hand, I was annoyed by the lack of recognition of my achievement, and by the rigid insistence on maintaining a static skinny-fat body instead of pursuing a muscular physique. My situation did not go unnoticed, however, and it even disrupted the corporate policies of Weight Watchers. I paste here an excerpt from my journal, written after I received an e-mail from the primary leader at my meetings:

I received an e-mail from the leader at WW who usually weighs me in at meetings. She had googled me and found my public e-mail listed at the university but was still tentative about contacting me because of the strict privacy policy at WW. She had seen me weigh in over my goal weight of 125 (today I was 134) and have to pay the meeting fee.

She asked to meet me for coffee, saying that she felt it was wrong that as I got stronger and built muscle I nevertheless had to pay the fee. She wanted to gain muscle and asked me for advice. I met her and liked her a lot. I found this exchange fascinating because I am in effect defying the WW ideology and am causing some problems for one of the leaders. I recommended that she eat more protein, find a good trainer, and lift really heavy weights, with fewer reps like I do. She said that as she gets older—she is now mid 50s—counting points alone is not working. Even as she eats fewer points she gains weight. She also bought a scale that measures BMI and was shocked that it measured her at 36% fat, which is quite high. . . . I weighed in with this leader this morning and she wrote down my increased weight but did not calculate the number of pounds that I was up. I see this as a form of resistance on her part.

In her examination of Weight Watchers meetings, feminist philosopher Cressida Heyes draws on Foucauldian theory to argue that they simultaneously produce an atmosphere of female solidarity and enforce mechanisms of self-surveillance meant to normalize behavior.¹⁶ Heyes is correct, and I discuss the solidarity of the meetings below, but my personal experiences revealed more wiggle room in terms of self-surveillance, indicating that even some leaders could doubt and challenge the official corporate program. I subsequently learned that the leader who contacted me began training with a former figure girl, lifting heavy weights, and eating increased amounts of protein, following a diet that was in no way based on the Weight Watchers points system. In this instance, my muscular body disrupted and contradicted the Weight Watchers ideal, suggesting that the disciplined eating and measuring of the diet program were distinct from the practices associated with bodybuilding.

In terms of visibility, yoga similarly has little in common with bodybuilding; nor does it accord with Weight Watchers. Yogic practice does not involve scrutinizing the muscles of the body, or looking intently at numbers on a scale. Just this morning, my yoga instructor insisted that we should avoid the distraction of vision, arguing that seeing interferes with our concentration. I was initially surprised when almost every hatha yoga class that I took in a mirrorless studio

a few blocks from my condo similarly began with the leader asking us to close our eyes and attend to breathing. We often remained with eyes closed for many minutes and were continually reminded to avoid looking at others, focusing only on ourselves. "This is not a competition," the teacher would say in a low, soothing voice. "Do not force your movements. Send your breath into any stiff or sore body part as you practice the poses. Just see where your body is today, and what it wants to do, which might not be the same as last time. That's fine." Any looking we did was interior, in the mind's eye, without picturing the body as an object of scrutiny or control. Instead, this interior vision encouraged us to become mindful embodied subjects, experiencing movement and stillness while grounded to the earth and infused with life-giving breath.

My personal trainer had advised me to enroll in yoga classes as a kind of antidote to bodybuilding. Whereas weight lifting shortened, tightened, and bulked the muscles, yoga would stretch, lengthen, and relax them, ultimately rewarding me with a more pleasing physique on stage. This understanding of yoga as a healthy stretch rather than a religious or spiritual endeavor is now commonplace in Western culture, encouraged by the increasing commodification of the practice since the 1960s.¹⁷ As yoga has become more popular, a wider range of adaptations have become available, including hot yoga and power yoga, forms that might scarcely be recognized as yoga by those with more traditional or "authentic" training. A number of scholarly studies have recently explored the expansion of yoga in the West, commenting on the concurrent appropriation and erasure of its spiritual and political elements, as well as on the commercialization of yoga as just another fitness option.¹⁸ Name brand yoga mats and clothing are among the most obvious signs of this contemporary culture, but participants can also strive to attain a "yoga body." This long, flexible, and supple body has itself become a kind of cultural capital, distinguished from lumpier or more rigid ones, especially when clad in Lululemon attire. In this sense, there is a visuality to yoga, or at least a yogic style, but this kind of looking was not part of my hatha classes, taken on my days off from training at the gym. Potentially more spiritual than power yoga, my hatha classes emphasized breathing, meditation, relaxation, and chanting, along with the technical mastery of such poses as the downward dog. Although I was initially convinced that bodybuilding and yoga were

entirely different kinds of activities, additional physical and intellectual engagement with each allowed me to perceive areas of overlap.

Knowing the Body

There are a number of ways to learn about the built body, including online resources, professional trainers, YouTube videos, and such books as *Women's Strength Training Anatomy*, currently resting on the shelf beside me.¹⁹ Yet in the end, reading and listening are not adequate methods of comprehending the practice of bodybuilding: it must be physically experienced, for the body itself is the primary locus of knowledge. The importance of participation and corporeal movement is embedded in the language of bodybuilding; weight lifters train their muscles, which acquire muscle memory in order to perform repetitions properly. This interaction with muscles is not unidirectional, however, and it is common to hear someone at the gym explain that their biceps or glutes are “talking to them,” making their presence known after an intense workout the day before. People new to bodybuilding will endure novel sensations as they strengthen their tendons slowly in order to lift heavier weights and grow larger muscles. After targeting individual muscles and muscle groups with increased weights, they will come to appreciate delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) as they rest to allow for repair while eating hundreds of grams of protein.

Even as I follow the standard regime of working out, resting, and eating, I am at this point in 2011 a bodybuilding neophyte, having trained seriously with weights for a mere three years, and consumed adequate protein for only one, relinquishing a seventeen-year-long vegetarian diet to pursue the allure of beefiness. Credibility as a bodybuilder requires a far more extensive period of muscle manipulation, often leading to participation in contests. According to my observations, bodybuilders are truly respected as athletes once they compete, and will likely not be acknowledged within the subculture until they have competed many times. This necessity is part of paying one's dues and demonstrating persistence but relates as well to the importance of extensive bodily experimentation. The results gained through trial and error with different kinds of workouts, food consumption, supplementation, dieting, and fat-loading

must be displayed on stage and judged by a panel of experts, themselves former competitors.

I recently purchased *Figure Competition Secrets*, a book written by figure girl Karen Sessions. She starts with a disclaimer: “the author of the provided material is not a licensed physician. The knowledge acquired has been obtained through years of extensive research and personal experimentation.”²⁰ It soon becomes clear that for Sessions research and corporeal experimentation are the same thing. She describes how over the years she has evaluated different supplements, diuretics, training programs, diets, and tanning creams by testing them on her own body and observing the results. Sessions’s body is essentially a science project, and she insists that:

I developed a keen interest in how the body works in relation to food and exercise. With that, I took my training to the next level and began entering bodybuilding contests. The constant challenges kept me on edge to keep building and reshaping my physique. This makes me uniquely qualified to help you meet your fitness goals.²¹

Her book explains what worked for her and urges serious figure girls to try the suggestions for themselves, making adjustments according to the unique requirements of their own personal flesh.

This emphasis on first-hand lived experience and empirical wisdom reminds me of the early modern period, when bodily knowledge was respected. Women could speak authoritatively about childbirth, for example, after having been pregnant and in labor many times.²² Those who had given birth to only a few children would be laughed out of the lying-in chamber; women who had never visibly demonstrated their fertility might be excluded altogether from the pushing, panting, wine drinking, and female-only conversation linked with reproduction during that era. One hopes those unfortunate souls would have at least had a phantom pregnancy or some kind of menstrual irregularities to compensate for their lack of bodily knowledge. Or maybe they could theatrically produce a few rabbits from their not-so-barren-after-all wombs, like the infamous Mary Toft, a prolific woman in eighteenth-century England who fooled more than a few physicians.²³

In figure and other kinds of bodybuilding contests, the body is likewise a crucial source of knowledge; it is scrutinized, tested, and to a certain degree managed. Yet the built body remains unpredictable and in flux, not perfected or conquered. Though there is a standard regime, each body is unique, and bodybuilders must pay careful attention to their particular physiques in order to succeed. They must see whether or not certain muscles grow faster than others—for instance, I have proportionately large traps, so I avoid doing weighted shoulder shrugs—and how their bodies react to carbohydrates, cardio training, and particular brands of fat burners. Even as the built body is considered a machine, becoming compartmentalized and objectified, it emerges as an individualized entity, with specific strengths and weaknesses. I have a naturally small waist and strong core, so my training is focused on my flabby glutes and relatively unimpressive back. Other shortcomings are related to my work as a professor who writes books and articles, resulting in serious tendonitis in both wrists. I also have boney fusion in both feet, a birth defect that regularly impedes my ability to do such cardio training as stair running and sprints, as does the longstanding Achilles injury in my left ankle. Instead of forcing my body into an ideal shape, I have learned to listen to it, both cursing and accepting its limitations. In the end, this kind of engagement in bodybuilding is commonplace because the goal is to discover what the body can do and how far it will go and responding to what you learn.

In this sense, bodybuilding overlaps with the practice of yoga, in which the body is not an object to be mastered but an essence deserving of respect. In yoga, every body is different, and these differences must be discovered, cherished, and challenged. Learning about yoga similarly requires embodied engagement and consistent practice, but such practice does not always take the form of physical movement. It can also involve philosophical reflection, listening, or meditation, both alone and in a group. According to yoga guru Kate Potter, host of the popular television program *Namaste Yoga*:

Yoga in the West has become overidentified with the physical, with the form, and with the fashion of the form. This is problematic. . . . The idea of yoga is to take care of our physical limitations and get beyond our self-obsession. We

learn that we can let go of this ego identification and have a glimpse of a much wider field of experience. If one is looking for progress, or results, then one is already off the path according to yoga. Even when we refer just to the physical practice, striving is not the route.²⁴

Potter indicates that taking care of physical limitations is key to yoga, an element in common with bodybuilding, but also notes that progress per se is not the point, for unlike the practice of weight lifting, yoga is not goal oriented.

Nor is yoga competitive. Comparing one's yoga practice to that of another is egotistical, whereas many forms of yoga—and there are so many different kinds that this generalizing discussion can in no way do justice to any of them—are about dissolving the ego and working to unify the mind, spirit, and body. Yoga emphasizes genuine effort more than results. When I dropped into a vinyasa yoga class at my gym the other day, I took note when the instructor ended by asking us to appreciate the opportunity we had had to practice together, and to acknowledge the effort that everyone had made. Although consistent effort is certainly admired in bodybuilding, that practice is driven by the goal of achieving larger, stronger muscles, or an improved appearance on stage. Bodybuilding contests involve the comparison of bodies, most obviously when competitors are called out in pairs and asked to do the same pose side by side, and during the theatrical pose down at the end of judging, when bodybuilders jockey for both space on the stage and the visual attention of an audience. Yoga practitioners are never subjected to this kind of judgment, given a prize, or ranked in order of ability.

All the same, like seasoned bodybuilders, yoga practitioners can become distinguished experts. Their authority may be based on a variety of factors and can change according to context, but it helps if they have had a longstanding commitment to yoga practice and meditation, have participated in yoga retreats, or been trained in an important ashram, especially one in India.²⁵ According to my rather limited observations, yoga instructors typically exhibit a certain demeanor, emanating an aura of peace and tranquility, and a generosity of spirit that involves listening to others and desiring to help them. Perhaps yoga authorities can be said to possess a kind of spiritual capital, in keeping with Bourdieu's notion of cultural

capital, although capital in relation to yoga might be offensive to some adherents.²⁶ Yoga authorities also display signs of self-care, as according to Cressida Heyes, “yoga is a somatic practice that is not about discipline or pain (though there are rules and it can be very hard work).”²⁷ There is no congruent disposition for a competitive bodybuilder, though of course generosity and kindness are always welcomed. To outsiders, the bodybuilding identity is visual rather than spiritual, revealed by cut musculature, tanned skin, and an upright posture. To insiders, it is a particular form of embodied labor and fleshly know-how, made visibly evident.

The Weight Watchers regime could not be more different from that of both bodybuilding and yoga. Adherents to the diet program learn about the body from designated leaders who explain what they call a “scientifically based approach to weight loss,” and hand out written instructions.²⁸ Clients are positioned as recipients of the research done by experts, and this information grounds a system that must be followed, with little room for experimentation. When members first join they must quickly select a goal weight, determined by measuring their current weight, height, and BMI, which can be done online at the official website (weightwatchers.com). When I recently entered my data into this program, it calculated my BMI at 24. This number is clearly too high, revealing the way in which all bodies are reduced to numerical entities within the normalizing operations of the Weight Watchers program, without regard for muscular development or such factors as age, class status, ethnicity, “race,” or disability.

The corporate program can produce a sense of disembodiment as those bodies reduced to numbers are treated similarly. The Weight Watchers regime assumes that every human body will respond to a calorie-reduced diet by shedding fat. The amount of calories consumed is established by a points system in which all food items are allotted a numerical value. These points have been designated by scientific experts and are both posted on the Weight Watchers website and available in printed booklets, but members can also use their “points calculator,” a kind of slide rule that combines number of calories, grams of fiber, and grams of fat per serving to produce a number. A fifty-calorie serving of nonfat yogurt, for example, would be one point. The number of points eaten by each adherent to the Weight Watchers system is based on his or her weight and height.

When I rejoined the program, I was allowed to eat twenty points worth of food per day, and was encouraged to measure and keep track of every single thing that I consumed.

The Weight Watchers mantra nevertheless touts its flexibility, a claim based on the fact that followers can choose which foods to eat instead of purchasing the prepared meals promoted by other weight-loss programs.²⁹ For lunch, a Weight Watchers adherent can decide to have a serving of low-fat cottage cheese and a lightly dressed salad topped with walnuts for six points, or a small, high-fat bar of chocolate for the same number of points. In both cases she is obeying the program and should lose weight. Though eating healthy food is encouraged, it is by no means obligatory. Another example of consumer choice is the thirty-five “flex” points that can be added to the weekly food allotment, either all at once (in what bodybuilders would call a cheat meal) or dispersed throughout the seven days. For even more flexibility, Weight Watchers can earn extra food by working out, using their “activity points” calculator to combine their weight with the length of time exercised and its intensity (considered high if sweating begins within five minutes) to arrive at a number indicating the food value earned. For instance, jogging for half an hour could be rewarded with an additional serving of low-fat cheese. The supposed flexibility of the Weight Watchers program is never experimental or personalized; it is formulaic and numerical, involving charts, graphs, and the implicit presence of scientific data.

I nevertheless noticed some variation within the system at the international Weight Watchers meetings I attended while travelling for research and conferences. The most striking difference was in France, where points were counted using a similar method, but bread, butter, and high-fat cheese were considered staples that could be eaten in moderation rather than avoided altogether. The meeting in Paris was held in the hastily converted breakfast room of a hotel furnished with juice machines and glass cereal dispensers filled with frosted flakes. Unlike in my Canadian town, where the mostly plumpish middle-aged women took turns sharing tips about such things as crustless pumpkin pie and Splenda-filled muffins or recounting all-you-can-eat buffet horror stories, the middle-aged women of Paris—there were actually two men, one of them clutching his wife’s hand as if he were participating in a grief support group—addressed three main topics: How much chocolate should

one consume? How much cheese with butter? and When should bread be eaten—in the morning, at night, or with all three meals? I was about to yell, “How about never!” in French, when the leader firmly noted that it would be both impossible and foolish to avoid these foods—the goal was not to eat 150 grams of them all at once.

Weight Watchers leaders can make such pronouncements because they are schooled in the program, and devoted to it. They must have experienced success as Weight Watchers and be lifetime members, weighing in within the requisite two pounds of their goal weight every month. The badges worn by leaders report both their first names and the total number of pounds they have lost. Regardless of location, all Weight Watchers leaders wore this badge and had a similar disposition, expressing themselves energetically and encouraging others while telling personal stories of engagement with the program. Unlike such bodybuilders as Karen Sessions, however, they did not promote experimentation with or modifications to their system; consistency and obedience were often key themes at Weight Watchers meetings. All the same, one particular leader stood out at a weekly meeting I attended in London, England, for she pushed the limits ever so slightly. As reported in my feministfiguregirl.com blog entry called “Piccadilly Circus of Sins”:

After surveying the tables spread with two-point packets of onion and cheese crisps for sale, I sat myself down with about 20 other people. Almost of all them were chubby middle-aged white women, though about two men resembling Mike Baldwin from *Coronation Street* before the dementia set in were also present. Oh, this will be exactly like a North American meeting, I pessimistically thought to myself, wishing I had remained in my executive suite hotel room with its daily free bottle of orange juice. But then a love-handled black female leader took the stage, and she was a breath of fresh air. In true self-help fashion, she immediately confessed to having eaten an entire apple pie in her car the day before. Audible gasps of horror echoed throughout the room. The fabulous “D” was not sorry. She defiantly explained that she had since done two spin classes to counteract her indulgent act. The energetic, pie-loving D was pro-exercise, cautioning everyone that food

discipline alone would not help them get fit. She also promoted a high-protein and veggie intake. I practically stood up and cheered, for that is not the usual message delivered by Weight Watchers. I pictured D savoring that cold pie by ripping open the box and eating it with her bare hands right off the dashboard. Obviously, I fell briefly in love with her.

This leader broke ranks by binging first and exercising later, instead of earning her extra snack as a reward, and by unapologetically discussing her passion for apple pie. She further diverged from the Weight Watchers doctrine by insisting that food control was not the primary means to ensure long-term weight loss, and by promoting protein-rich foods instead of exclusively emphasizing points values. Like a bodybuilder, the English leader spoke from personal experience, arguing that taking pleasure in both food and intense exercise had helped her to maintain her goal weight, a weight which she proudly admitted was at the upper end of her height category.

Sustaining the Body

It is already clear that food is a primary concern for both bodybuilders and Weight Watchers. Yet the role of food in the two practices diverges significantly. For bodybuilders, food is fuel that produces the body, sending energy and nutrients to muscles in need of repair after intensive weight lifting. Eating is encouraged, at least until one is “on season,” or within twenty weeks of a competition, when attention shifts from growing muscles to burning fat. Even while getting bigger during their off-season, however, bodybuilders strive to “eat clean,” which involves avoiding saturated fats and excessive amounts of refined sugar while drinking lots of water. Though opinions about proper nutrition vary, it is standard for bodybuilders to eat at least one or two grams of protein per pound of body weight daily. At my off-season weight of 138 pounds, I tried to consume between 150 and 170 grams of protein every day, ideally in the form of organic chicken breasts, lean buffalo steaks, protein powder, and egg-white omelets. I also ate “good” carbohydrates such as sweet potatoes, which have a low glycemic index, as well as asparagus and eggplant, among other vegetables. Yet in truth I regularly consumed whatever