

# CHAPTER TWO

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## Feminist Bodybuilding



As outlined in the introduction, I borrow Michel Feher's conceptualization of the modes of body construction as a framework for understanding the ways that the body is conceptualized in feminist discourse. The female body has been "built" within feminist discourse in several different ways; in the course of this essay I draw on three domains of feminist body work: (1) scholarship that investigates the *ideological* construction of the female body in the history of women's sport; (2) *semiotic* analyses of media representations of female athletes; and (3) a *cultural* interpretation of a filmic narrative about technologically reconstructed female bodies. More specifically, the first section reviews historical studies of women and sport to illustrate how the physiological body is culturally redefined according to dominant beliefs about women's proper and moral responsibilities for human reproduction. The second section focuses on media representations of prominent female athletes to examine how ideals about feminine beauty are being revised to include signs of muscularity and vigorous health. While these representations highlight the athletic capabilities and power of the female body, they also show the ways in which that power is symbolically recuperated to a dominant cultural order through the sexualization of the bodies of athletic "stars." The final section offers a reading of the film *Pumping Iron II: The Women*, which examines how it stages a symbolic contest about the proper definition of femininity; as a winner of the filmic bodybuilding contest is announced, so too is a preferred form of female embodiment. Each section addresses one form of feminist bodybuilding; they all illuminate the way in which the "naturally" female body is culturally reconstructed according to dominant codes of femininity and racial identity.



*The Ideological Treatment of the Sporting Woman*

Lynda Birke and Gail Vines, two feminist sport sociologists, identify both science and sport as cults of masculinity marked by a belief in the superiority of the male body.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, historical research on the cultural construction of the female body illuminates how sports experts continued the quest to locate woman's inferiority in her "physiological body" after the "science" of craniology failed to prove that her inferiority resided in her brain. In a similar line of analysis, Helen Lenskyj explains how reproduction became a defining characteristic of female athletes, regardless of whether or not an individual woman in fact menstruated or became pregnant. Her research documents how woman's gender identity became intimately tied to her reproductive physiology. The physiological "facts" of her reproductive system establish the biologically sexed female body as the "natural" emblem or guarantor of female identity. Quoting from medical textbooks of the early nineteenth century, Lenskyj describes how the medical profession emphasized the fact of "reproduction" when prescribing safe and appropriate sporting activities for women.

Both women's unique anatomy and physiology and their special moral obligations [disqualify] them from vigorous physical activity. Women have a moral duty to preserve their vital energy for childbearing and to cultivate personality traits suited to the wife-and-mother role. Sport wastes vital forces, strains female bodies and fosters traits unbecoming to "true womanhood."<sup>2</sup>

Encumbered as they were with the burdens of menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause, women were thus instructed to forgo athletic activity in favor of less strenuous pursuits. According to this passage, both a woman's physiology and her moral obligations tied to that physiology combine to disqualify her from vigorous sporting activity.

Patricia Vertinsky describes yet another way in which women were discouraged from participating in sports because of what we now understand to be culturally defined "facts" about the female body.<sup>3</sup> These facts asserted that women were "eternally wounded" because they bled during part of their reproductive (menstrual) cycle. This popular myth—again supported by medical knowledge of the time—defined women as chronically weak and as victims of a pathological physiology. Two things happen here: not only is the female body irrevocably tied to a culturally constructed obligation of reproduction, but also, through the association

between femininity and "the wound," the female body is coded as inherently pathological. Limiting women's participation in sport and exercise functioned both to control women's unruly physiology and to protect them for the important job of species reproduction.

These historical studies illuminate the process whereby one set of beliefs (about female physiological inferiority) is articulated with another discursive system (concerning women's athletic practices). Through their feminist analyses of the historical discourse on women and sport, both Lenskyj and Vertinsky show how physiological characteristics come to count as definitive emblems of female identity. Their body scholarship involves "rereading" the female body as it is inscribed in one discourse from within another textual/sexual system. The textual system they use to read the female body "against the grain" is informed by feminist cultural theory and, as such, it provides a perspective from which to document the process of cultural recoding of the female body—first as a "gendered" body, and secondly, as one in need of special protection from the rigors of physical exertion. In this sense, their analyses provide a way of understanding the process of transcoding, where the "natural" female body is taken up as a cultural emblem of the reproductive body with the consequence that women were often discouraged from participating in athletic activities.

*The Sexualization of the Transgressive Body*

Lenskyj's and Vertinsky's analyses suggest that historically the properly feminine body was considered to be constitutionally weak and pathological. To be both female and strong implicitly violates traditional codes of feminine identity. Thus women who use bodybuilding technology to sculpt their bodies are doubly transgressive; first, because femininity and nature are so closely aligned, any attempt to *reconstruct* the body is transgressive against the "natural" identity of the female body. Second, when female athletes use technology to achieve physical muscularity—a male body prerogative—they transgress the "natural" order of gender identity. What we discover through an analysis of media images of female athletes is that representations of their bodies often highlight their transgressive nature.

For example, a recent *National Enquirer* article featured a photo of bodybuilder Tina Plackinger accompanied by a headline that reads: "Prizewinning Bodybuilder Quits Taking Steroids Because . . . Drugs were







decorated with Hawaiian scenes, including palm trees, birds and the moon. The fingernails on her right hand were multicolored with a variety of rhinestone designs, including a cross. It took her three to five minutes to do each nail. By the way, it took her nowhere near that long to run the 200 meters Friday night. In fact, it took her less time than any American woman in history, (21.77 seconds, .04 sec. faster than the American record).<sup>5</sup>

The problem with such accounts is not that her flamboyant outfits discredit her athletic ability — she is widely recognized as a talented athlete — but rather that her appearance invokes the production of stereotypical comments about her sexual attractiveness. Given her own penchant for highly stylized athletic outfits and the fact that female athletes cannot easily escape the cultural fascination that objectifies the female body, “Flo-Jo” was recognized as much, if not more, for her sexual desirability as for her athletic ability. Tony Duffy, a sports photographer, had this to say about Griffith-Joyner’s media popularity:

She was one of the sexiest girls at the 1984 Olympics . . . She has this Polynesian look and an exotic feeling about her. I did a photo shoot of Florence eight weeks ago, in body suits and bathing suits on the beach, and I couldn’t give the pictures away. In the past two days (after her Olympic trials record), my phone has been ringing off the hook. *Playboy*, *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, *Life* — everyone wants pictures of her.<sup>6</sup>

This quotation describes the construction of Flo-Jo as cultural icon of exotic otherness. Accompanying newspaper images of Flo-Jo foreground corporeal markers of erotic identity: long thick curly hair; lean arms and torso; thick, muscular legs; and dark skin. Without much coaching, we read in such newspaper images the construction of Flo-Jo as an idealized female body. But she is more than simply a body — she is identified as an attractive, *exotic*, female body. Her transgressive identity is as much a product of the color of her skin, “her Polynesian look,” as it is of her athletic accomplishments. As such, these physical transgressions contribute to her construction as an object of desire. In contemporary U.S. culture, nonwhite racial and ethnic identities function as signs of cultural difference; skin color, hair texture, and facial features are among the more familiar physiological markers of the cultural construction of “otherness.” Much in the way that the biological “facts” of a woman’s reproduc-

tive system are used to define her as a gendered body, so too are certain body “facts” invoked to construct Griffith-Joyner as an eroticized “other.” In this way we see how the athletic female body is also inscribed within other ideological systems of meaning, including those of race, ethnicity, and physical ability. This analysis describes the way in which the black female body is constructed as a sign of transgressive cultural difference and as a “natural” sexual object.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Technological Construction of the Ideal Feminine Body*

Analysis of media representations of the female body shows quite clearly the way in which that body symbolizes cultural ideas of “natural” femininity and erotic beauty. But the *symbolic* transformation of the female body is only part of the story. Through the practices of bodybuilding, weight training, and powerlifting, many female bodies are *technologically* transformed into material embodiments of such ideals. Because the form and quality of the bodies of women who participate in bodybuilding activities directly contradict traditional beliefs about the inherent pathology of femininity, female bodybuilding appears to be one arena in which the culturally constructed “natural” attributes of femininity could be redesigned in a more empowering fashion. But upon closer examination, we see how technologically recreated female bodies are delegitimated as cultural markers of proper femininity.

During the decade 1980–90, an entire subculture grew up around female bodybuilding. The annual Miss Olympia contest was first staged in 1980. By 1989 there were dozens of annual competitions, ranging from the World Professional Women’s Bodybuilding Championships to amateur contests sponsored by local fitness centers. In 1989, the number of female competitors at the amateur level was estimated at 16,000, a significant increase from the 40 to 150 women who competed in 1980. The *Hardcore Bodybuilder’s Source Book* lists several products specifically designed for female readers: training courses and routines, cookbooks, foods, jewelry, posing wear, posters, skin and hair care products, and bodybuilding horoscopes.<sup>8</sup> This subculture includes glossy magazines such as *Muscle and Fitness* as well as special workout books such as Rachel McLish’s *Flex Appeal* (figure 11).

The film *Pumping Iron II: The Women* gained wide acclaim as a cult classic among female bodybuilders and gym participants. The film unfolds



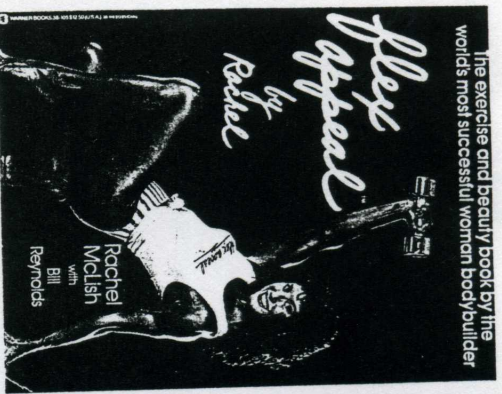


Figure 1.1. Cover of *Flex Appeal* by Rachel McElish with Bill Reynolds (New York: Warner Communications, 1984).

a cultural narrative about the “natural” definition of femininity as it applies to the technologically reconstructed female body.<sup>9</sup> In an early scene, the head judge instructs other judges about the rules of competition and describes the ultimate purpose of the contest:

We hope that this evening we can clear up the definite meaning—the analysis of the word femininity [by] determining what to look for [in these women competitors]. This is an official IFBB analysis of the meaning of that word.<sup>10</sup>

In an unambiguous address, the audience is told that the (film’s) contest will determine with perfect clarity the “definite meaning” of the word “femininity.” Apparently, the quality of feminine muscle definition is an ongoing concern for the judges of female bodybuilding contests. As reported in *The Hardcore Bodybuilder’s Source Book*, judges are given the following instructions about judging female competitors:

First and foremost, the judges must bear in mind that he or she is judging a woman’s bodybuilding competition and is looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape, a feminine shape. Other aspects are similar to those described for assessing men, but in regard to muscular development, it must not be carried to excess where it resembles the *massive muscularity of the male physique*.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)

In fact, judges are instructed to look for certain faults in women that are not usually seen in men: stretch marks, operation scars, and cellulite; they are also directed to observe whether female competitors walk and move in a graceful manner, which seemingly is not a concern with male competitors.<sup>12</sup>

The film stages a contest between competing forms of female embodiment personified by two well-known female bodybuilders: Bev Frances, a muscular powerlifter, and Rachel McElish, a beauty-girl bodybuilder.<sup>13</sup> But members of the film’s audience know that the film isn’t a documentary at all; it is really a fictional account of a staged competition, the Caesar’s Palace World Cup Championship. The film relies on several techniques and genre conventions to establish its documentary “look”: the camera records spontaneously delivered (nonscripted) interactions between characters; contestants are interviewed by an offscreen voice; conversations are filmed up close. And although the film uses “real” bodybuilders, this pseudo-documentary lists them in “starring roles” to compete in a contest that was elaborately scripted.

The film records the reaction of judges and other women contestants to the embodied differences between the two stars. Symbolically, Bev represents the negative image of female bodybuilding: women who look like men. Rachel symbolizes the positive image of female bodybuilding: women with muscles who still look feminine (soft, curvy, and sexy when dressed in a bikini). Beginning with the sequences that introduce Rachel and Bev, the film visually constructs a system of differences between these two types of female bodies. Their differences concern not only the muscularity of their bodies, but also the type of clothes they wear, their local gyms, and their countries, cities, and families of origin. Narratively, the contest between Rachel and Bev structures the film’s plot, so that at one level the film is about the competition between these two female bodies, but at another level, it is a film about ideologies of femininity.

The first shots of Rachel show her dressed in a black-and-white, zebra-print bikini, wearing a feather headress and gold chains around her neck and belly. She is posing for a photo session for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine. Back in her home gym in Los Angeles, Rachel’s posing coach wonders if her non-bodybuilding activities (commercials, posters, a beauty book project) diminish her status as a world-class bodybuilding champion. “Don’t you think all this has made you a little soft, a little powder-puffish?” her coach inquires. “I’ve always considered myself a powder puff,” draws Rachel, “a really strong powder puff.”



In contrast, Bev's introductory sequence opens with a shot of the rocky, rugged gray landscape of Melbourne, Australia. We meet Bev as she walks sideways up the walls of a hotel corridor. The next scene shows her competing in a power-lifting contest; she's just been introduced as a former ballet dancer who is now the strongest woman in the world. Bev, shown wearing a wrestling suit and sleeveless T-shirt, successfully deadlifts 510 pounds. Relaxing after the contest, Bev talks with her family (and presumably the film's interviewer) about the upcoming competition in Las Vegas. She ponders the reaction she'll receive from an American audience who until now have seen only one type of female bodybuilder — skinny women with little muscles.

As the drama of the film unfolds, these two female bodies face off against one another. Side by side on stage, Bev and Rachel are the first pair of competitors judged in the first round of compulsory poses. While the other competitors pose, the audience is visually treated to several trillating shots of Rachel: the camera caressing her with a long, slow take that moves from her ankles to her thighs to her face. Bev is not treated so kindly by the camera, rather we witness her in the dressing room sitting hunched over, elbows on knees, talking with her trainer. "Did I look like a girl?" she asks sarcastically. "How was my feminine quality?"

At the end of the contest, Bev's name is announced first; she finishes last of eight finalists. Her last-place finish symbolizes the significance of her body transgressions when a judge explains: Women with "big, grotesque muscles" violate the natural difference between men and women (figure 12). However, neither is Rachel's physique simply elevated as the ideal female form. Portrayed throughout the film as a petulant "bad girl," Rachel actually finishes third in the contest. When Carla Dunlap is announced as the winner, the film abruptly jags away from its narrative predictability (figure 13). Carla, a former Ms. Olympian, is clearly the best candidate in terms of overall athletic ability and bodybuilding sophistication. In terms of the film, however, her victory comes as a surprise because she is never constructed as a featured competitor in the way that Bev and Rachel are.<sup>14</sup> In fact, we learn very little about her personal body history or her philosophy about bodybuilding. Several times throughout the film she functions simply as a narrator, first to introduce Bev and the significance of Bev's participation in the contest, and later to interpret for the audience the meaning of the judges' struggle over competing definitions of femininity.

Yet Carla is an interesting selection as the winner. She is the only

featured competitor who is not associated with a male trainer/husband/father. Instead, her "real life" companions are a sister and mother who serve as a surrogate audience for her explanations about the significance of Bev's and Rachel's participation in the contest. She is the only contestant to be shown doing non-bodybuilding physical activities: synchronized swimming and dancing. In choosing Carla, the film works hard to achieve a compromise position on the issue of femininity versus muscularity. Carla has neither the massive muscle-bound physique of Bev Francis nor the powder-puff figure of Rachel McLish.

But is Carla's winning a compromise or a cop-out? Carla is the only black contestant. Although her racial identity is not discussed explicitly within the film, by promoting her as the compromise between two technologically reconstructed forms of female embodiment, the film implicitly engages a host of body issues that invoke different forms of body transgression. Carla's victory signals a transgressive body posture through the identification of her as a black woman in a filmic world populated by white women. The meaning of Carla's victory is subversively significant, not with respect to the issue of muscularity versus femininity but with respect to her racial identity. If this indeed was a contest to determine the proper meaning of the word "femininity," how do we interpret the answer we've been given? What can it mean that a black female body is offered as a compromise between ideologies of muscularity and of femininity?

For Annette Kuhn, the film *Pumping Iron II: The Women* raises several issues regarding visual representation and feminist politics. Kuhn argues that Carla's victory merely sidesteps the film's central question:

The issue of the appropriate body for a female bodybuilder is not actually resolved: rather it is displaced on to a set of discourses centering on — but also skirting — race, femininity and the body, a complex of discourses which the film cannot acknowledge, let alone handle. Carla's body can be "read" only as a compromise: other major issues are left dangling.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, Carla's success as a bodybuilder is only one of many athletic achievements of black women. She, along with Florence Griffith-Joyner, are only the two most recent black female athletes to achieve media popularity in U.S. culture. The reading that the film promotes suggests that it is not unusual (or noteworthy) for a black woman to succeed as an accomplished athlete in U.S. sports; such a reading purports to be



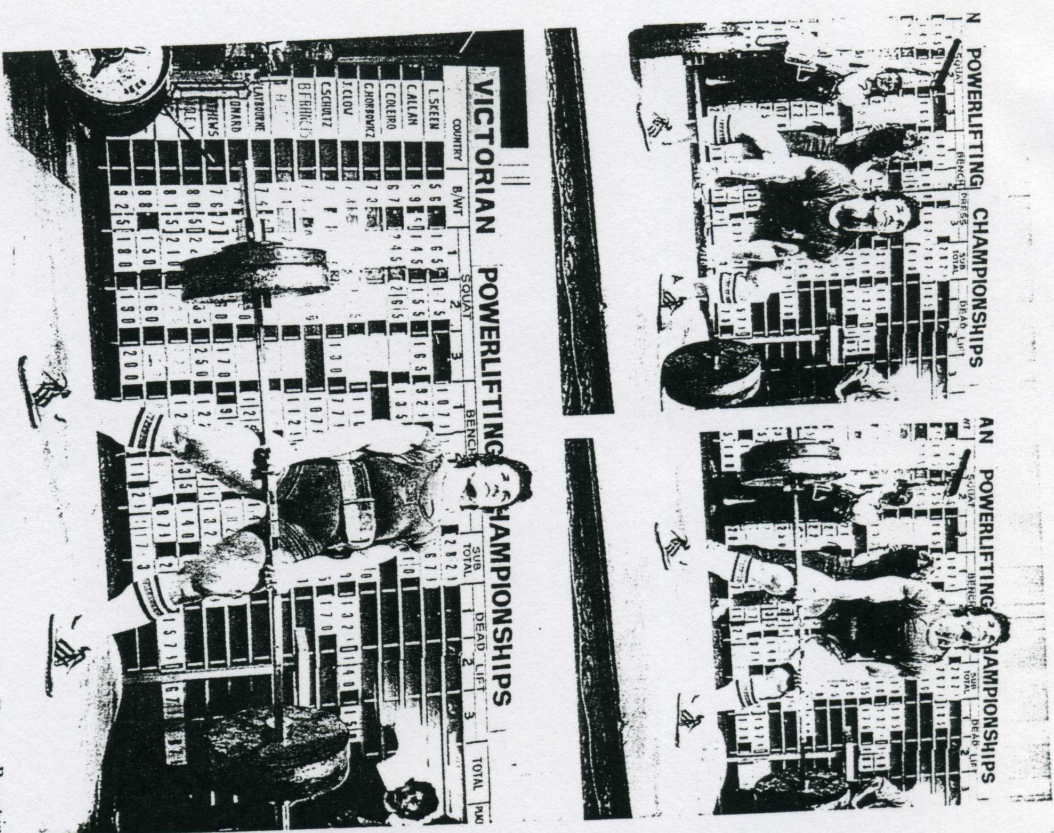


Figure 12. Bodybuilder Bev Francis deadlifting 500 pounds. From *Pumping Iron II: The Unprecedented Woman* by Charles Gains and George Butler (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 157.

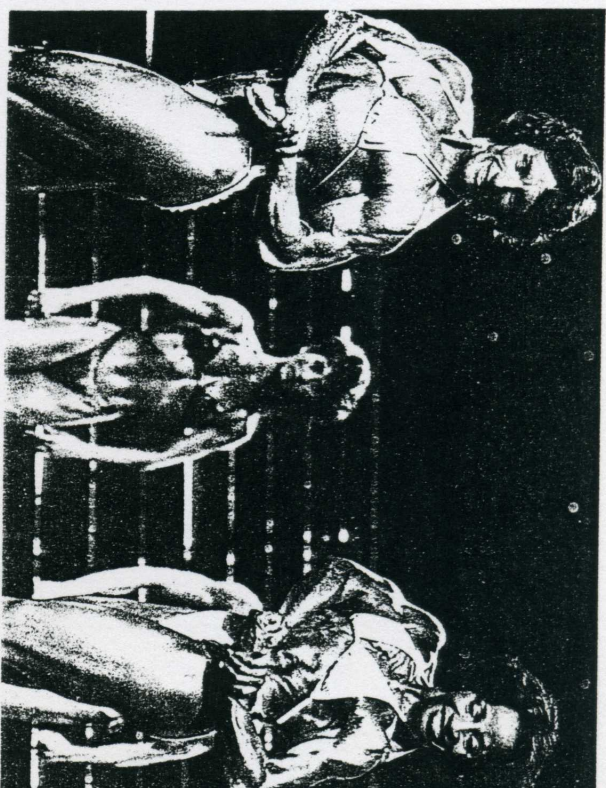


Figure 13. Bodybuilders Bev Francis, Carla Dunlap, and Rachel McLish. From *The Hardcore Bodybuilder's Source Book* by Robert Kennedy and Vivian Mason (New York: Sterling, 1984), p. 161.

"color-blind" by purposefully forgoing any mention of her racial identity. On the other hand, Carla's victory suggests that racial distinctions are somehow less disturbing of a natural order than are the gender transgressions that Bev's body symbolizes.

But according to bell hooks, such an interpretation is constructed within a discourse of white racism:

Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women play in the maintenance and perpetration of that victimization.<sup>16</sup>

Informed by hooks's analysis, we can look again at Carla's role in the film. Although she is never portrayed as a victim per se, she is constrained in many ways. We see her constructed as an interpreter and guide to help the audience make sense of the meaning of the contest between two white



women's bodies. She, herself, is not featured as a competent, accomplished professional bodybuilder. She is not empowered to elaborate her own identity as a bodybuilder. In this sense, Carla's narrative, repressed throughout the film, emerges as an emblem of the film's sexist and racist agenda. In the end, the film sidesteps the issue of technologically constructed gender differences and opens onto the issue of racial difference, only to end without addressing either issue or the interaction between them. By denying Carla her own story, the film teaches us that the only stories that count are those about white bodies. Scripted in this way, Carla's victory enables the racist fiction that asserts that white bodies are the bodies that matter, even if black bodies win from time to time. But it also points out that when white female bodybuilders engage in transgressive body practices, they enjoy a greater range of possibilities for reconstructing their corporeal identity in opposition to a traditional notion of white femininity—defined as weak, pathological, and passive. Black transgressive bodies cannot as easily escape a “naturalized” race identity that codes the black body as “naturally” powerful. The efficacy of this power is recuperated as Carla is also shown to be “naturally” subservient to white bodies against whom she competes.

Thus, by sidelining Carla's story, the film sidesteps a much more potent challenge to the ideological contest playing out on the fictional stage of Caesar's Palace. What is much more interesting about Carla's story is that it is populated by supportive women and female relatives; men simply don't figure in Carla's narrative. In failing to offer a fuller account of her “woman-centered” athletic life, the film reveals how the debate that preoccupies most of the contestants, judges, and audience, about proper femininity and improper female masculinity, is constructed within a dualistic logic that privileges the ideal-type distinctions between masculinity and femininity as the most significant markers of cultural difference. The repressed elements of the film, Carla's racial identity and her connections to other women, suggest some of the other submerged discourses that also structure the organization of technological body practices, but which are rarely acknowledged in media accounts of technologically transgressive female bodies. In this case, we can begin to get a sense of other factors that influence the meaning of transgressive body practices—namely, those of racial identity and of homosocial relationships.

What I discover, not surprisingly, is that despite appearing as a form of resistance, these technological body transgressions rearticulate the power relations of a dominant social order. This is to say that when female

bodies participate in bodybuilding activities or other athletic events that are traditionally understood to be the domain of male bodies, the meanings of those bodies are not simply recorded according to an oppositional or empowered set of gendered connotations. Although these bodies transgress gender boundaries, they are not reconstructed according to an opposite gender identity. They reveal, instead, how culture processes transgressive bodies in such a way as to keep each body in its place—that is, subjected to its “other.” For white women, this other is the idealized “strong” male body; for black women, it is the white female body. A closer study of the popular culture of female bodybuilding reveals the *artificiality* of attributes of “natural” gender identity and the *malleability* of cultural ideals of gender identity, yet it also announces quite loudly the *persistency* with which gender and race hierarchies structure technological practices, thereby limiting the disruptive possibilities of technological transgressions.