

## **Women's Climbing Physicalities: Bodies, Experience and Representation**

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This article considers gendered physicalities, specifically in relation to women's bodies in the context of climbing. Women's experiences will be discussed alongside an exploration of representations of women's climbing bodies. My approach is essentially a feminist one, informed by research from the fields of sociology, cultural studies and gender studies. I will be drawing on Bartky's (1998) and Bordo's (1989) appropriations of 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995), and exploring Butler's (1990) and Grosz's (1994) deconstructions of mind/body, gender/sex and identity. Whilst the deconstructionist project has been critiqued by some feminists, producing tensions for both projects, it has been recognised that these tensions can be productively utilised. This is particularly the case when considering the questions I want to explore; questions concerning the significance and centrality of the body in relation to gender, identity, subjectivity and power.

It is perhaps worth noting from the outset that theories of the body often centre on sexuality, and whilst this has been a productive endeavour, elucidating the culturally constructed body and the power play at work, it has often been pursued to the exclusion of other areas of study, particularly, for example, physicality. Bartky (1998) and Bordo (1989) do consider physicality in terms of ideals of feminine beauty, yet there has been little mainstream feminist research concerning the physicality of the active woman in the context of the body<sup>1</sup>.

The use of the term physicality in relation to women has been problematised by some feminist writers, as historically it has been associated with male muscularity and masculine physical power (Hargreaves, 2000; Mackinnon, 1987). However, as McDermott (1996) has argued, if physicality is understood in the broad sense of an individual's embodiment and physical engagement with the world, it can be used in relation to women when a particular context and situation is specified. The term physicality includes the concept of embodiment, meaning the subjective experience of having a body, living in it and through it. In addition to this, the focus of physicality is

specifically concerned with physical perception, physical experience and the sense of self as a physical being (Smears, 2001).

It is with women's climbing physicalities that my research is concerned. The question of whether lifestyle sports, including climbing, have the potential to challenge and redefine some aspects of the existing order through the creation of new subversive behaviours and values is beginning to be explored (Beal and Weidman, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). With regards to gender, masculinities have started to be discussed in relation to different lifestyle sports (Beal and Weidman, 2003; Kusz, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). Here though I focus on women, considering both experience and representation, in order to centrally explore the 'cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity' (Cahn, 1996: 41). The potential for women climbers to perform 'subversive bodily acts' (Butler, 1990) will be considered, and in the process I will question whether these can re-inscribe the 'sexed' body in a way that exposes the fallacy of the 'natural' body.

Climbing, as an example of a lifestyle sport, has been chosen as the site of study partly because of the beliefs held by some participants active within the subculture, that lifestyle sports can create alternative spaces and values. Conversely, academic studies of traditional mainstream Western sports have argued that traditional sports conform to and strengthen oppressive societal structures, such as racism and hegemonic masculinity (Spraklen, 2001; Whitson, 1990). Whilst the delineation between lifestyle and mainstream sports is not as clear-cut as is often thought (Rinehart and Syndor, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Wheaton, 2004), climbing does have its differences. Most climbing is not formally codified, regulated or organised, and for many it is an individualistic and expressive activity. It is associated with ideas of risk and commitment, and the natural landscape, in which most climbing takes place, provides a key source of meaning.

This article will partly be informed by my previous research with women climbers, which focused on forms of resistance and collusion to gender norms (Dilley, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Nine women took part in individual semi-structured interviews. These lasted between one and two hours and took place mainly in the women's homes, but also at their place of work.

All of the women in this previous study were white and middle class. This can be explained by climbing participation, which is currently predominantly white male and middle class (BMC, 2003; Allin *et al.* 2003), as appears to be the case with other lifestyle sports (Kusz, 2003; Wheaton, 2004). It included women who were members of mixed clubs, women's clubs and those who climbed independently. Eight were employed, working in administration, business, health, academia and outdoor education, whilst one woman was studying for a PhD. Although all were living in Scotland, only one was Scottish. The others were English, German and Dutch. Ages ranged from 24 to 60. Two were single mothers. None were married, two were living with their partners, four had partners but were not cohabiting and three were single. Whilst I will draw on some of the commonalities amongst the research participants, it is important to note that they were not a homogenous group and there were variations in experience.

Physicality emerged as one of the themes in this study, but one which now requires further exploration of women's lived embodiment and identity in climbing subcultures. Nevertheless, I will be drawing on this work to discuss some of the key points in relation to the body and physicality. I will also be drawing on the climbing media, including UK climbing magazines, particularly *On the Edge* and *Climb*, and online forums such as UKClimbing.com (UKC), to consider how women's climbing physicalities are represented.

### **Theories of the Body**

In feminist theory the body has emerged as a key issue in questions of identity, agency and subordination. Women's bodies have been conceptualized as both a source of oppression and potential liberation. Within mainstream feminist theory however, the focus has been on oppression. Binary identifications of man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, rational/irrational (emotional), strong/weak, are seen to underpin constricting notions of the body (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). Women have been aligned with their bodies, at least in part, due to the belief that women's reproductive capacity binds them to nature. As Grosz explains:

'Women's corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes. By implication women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions and unpredictabilities.' (Grosz, 1994: 14)

Socio-biological theories of white women's reproductive capacity have been used to explain all manner of so called feminine characteristics, such as frailty, passivity and irrationality<sup>3</sup>. Patriarchal oppression has thus justified itself through essentialist notions of 'natural' inequality based on the body (Grosz, 1994; Thornham, 2000).

In the 1970s, women's bodies were a central issue in second-wave feminist struggles. Women began to explore the ways in which their bodies had been exploited, violated, objectified and ultimately controlled by patriarchy. Sexual violence, the medicalization of reproduction, the fashion-beauty complex and the control of women's sexuality were all seen to have alienated women from their bodies. The rallying call was for women to 'reclaim' their bodies in order to free themselves from the constraints of patriarchy. The idea was to return to a 'natural' feminine state and women's active sexuality was thought to be the key. This feminist discourse which claimed to speak universally for women was ultimately exclusionary, particularly for black women and prostitutes, whose active sexuality had never been questioned. Indeed, this was the very notion which in the nineteenth century marked their 'Otherness' as 'primitive' and 'diseased' (Thornham, 2000). Attempts to universalise women's experiences have effectively operated 'to erase the cultural, historical and political differences between women's bodies - black, white, working-class middle-class, young, ageing, ill, disabled, maternal or infertile' (Thornham, 2000: 163).

The problem is with the notion of a 'natural' feminine body, a body that is pre-cultural, unitarily sexed and ultimately essential. The stability and naturalness of the body has been questioned by Foucault (1995), who has argued that there is no authentic ahistorical or pre-cultural body. Through the genealogy of the body he explores the ways in which history and culture inscribe bodies, identifying a significant shift in the eighteenth century when the body became the object and target of power. What was different in this era was the scale of control of the individualised body,

which had 'exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body' (Foucault, 1995: 137). This imposed a relation of 'docility-utility' on the body; as it becomes more obedient it becomes more useful. Foucault calls this process 'discipline/s'. There are different forms of disciplines, but it is with the coding of activities, the prescription of movement and the imposition of exercises, that some feminists have appropriated Foucault's theory of 'docile bodies' to explore the feminine body.

Bartky (1998) has used the concept of 'docile bodies' to consider the maintenance of the feminine body through the daily routines of make-up and moisturising, toning and tanning, diet and exercise, facial expressions and bodily gestures. Bordo (1989) also uses the concept of 'docile bodies' to explore the power struggles that are played out on women's bodies. She focuses on the temporally and culturally located feminine pathologies of hysteria in the nineteenth century, agrophobia in the 1950s and 1960s, and anorexia in the 1980s and 1990s, each of which she argues are temporal ideals of femininity taken to the extreme. Both Bartky (1998) and Bordo (1989) recognise the complexities of productions of power on the body. It is not simply a case of oppression and subordination. Internal disciplines are a form of self-surveillance that become a part of the self and its sense of self-mastery (Bordo, 1989; Bartky, 1998). These studies have sought to understand the disciplinary practices involved in maintaining the feminine body in order to disrupt them.

Sexuality has been identified as central to disciplinary practices of femininity. It is essentially the heterosexual matrix which governs the construction of gender/sex in the form of the binary masculine/feminine and man/women (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994). In dominant discourse heterosexuality has been naturalised; it has been treated as essential, unitary and monolithic. Through an examination of Wittig's work on compulsory heterosexuality, Butler (1990) exposes the fallacy of the 'natural', arguing that there is no pre-given pre-cultural sex or sexuality. In her critique, Butler demonstrates that the heterosexual matrix cannot be transcended by the universal lesbianism that Wittig advocates. The idea of universal lesbianism is potentially as constrictive and limiting as compulsory heterosexuality. By dichotomising sexuality in order to transcend the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, Wittig's argument is

premised on the very power structure she is trying to subvert - the binary constrictive thinking of the straight mind - thereby reinforcing it. Moreover, Butler argues that lesbians and gay men are cultural, in that there is no pre-cultural homosexual identity, as there is no pre-cultural heterosexual identity. They are therefore also constituted by the heterosexual matrix and other societal power structures.

Butler (1990) also highlights the problems of universalising women's identity by tying it to ideas of the sexed body. She shows how binary cultural assumptions concerning sex are implicated in androcentric biological and genetic research which tries to re-theorise variations in sexual categories, such as the 10 per cent of the population who do not fit the XX or XY categories, either because of differences in sexual anatomy or unparalleled sex alignment, back into the same binary categories they disrupt.

The existing binary categories of man-woman as they are currently culturally constituted and defined are clearly problematic. The deconstruction of binary understandings of sex moves towards recognising the fluidity and diversity of the subject, but raises the question of how to reconcile this with the material realities of gendered structural inequalities such as low pay and domestic abuse, and experiences of embodied gendered specificity, such as menstruation and lactation (Aslop *et al.*, 2002). If we reject the category 'woman', it has been argued that a woman-based politics then becomes superfluous and self-defeating. Yet the very real social inequalities at the same time demand some form of organisation around shared experiences.

Butler herself however, does not draw a dichotomous distinction between the cultural and material spheres. Gender performances are also regarded as material practices, as Aslop *et al.* (2002) explain:

'The performances whereby gender is produced do not simply carry meanings about what it is to be male or female; they are themselves material practices which serve to constitute the economic and legal frame.' (p. 111)

If the material and the cultural are therefore understood to be entwined, then it is possible to use Butler's idea of gender performance alongside a material analysis of

social reality which recognises that social structures, such as gender, sexuality, 'race', class and dis/ability, frame our existence. From this perspective it is possible to utilise notions of cultural constructionism and deconstruction without forgoing the possibility that theory and knowledge are somehow linked to the empirical material world and actual experience.

This does not necessitate a return to essentialising notions of identity, as identity can still be understood as culturally cultivated and policed. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is neither true nor false, instead it is constituted by the 'stylized repetition of acts', which means that these acts can change and diversify in their repetition. Butler identifies a need for change, as in the current system those who do not conform to gender/sex norms are marginalised, punished and reprimanded, usually through shame. If individuals are constituted by the very power structures they want to transform, then strategies for change need to be reformulated, as ideas of 'liberation' and 'transcendence' fall by the wayside. Butler's reinterpretation of power understands it not only as volition, but also as constricting and constituting the possibilities of volition. It is through a redeployment of power that this is envisioned; using parody to widen the possibilities available to the embodied subject. It is argued that some forms of parody can deconstruct the idea of naturalness by intermeshing identifiable masculine and feminine features, thus creating 'subversive bodily acts' (Butler, 1990).

Much of the literature on the body focuses on representation, treating the body as text. Whilst some theorists talk of the embodied subject their work can also read as though it is indeed treating the body merely as text. Grosz (1994) has tried to avoid this pitfall by deconstructing the Cartesian dualism of mind/body. The body is central to her reconceptualisation of the subject. In her exploration of the lived body, she uses the model of the mobius strip to explain the inversion of the inner (psyche) and the outer (body) becoming one another to explain the lived corporeality of the sexually specific social body that is both signifying and signified. Although Grosz's work is not based on empirical research, theories of the body can be productively engaged with research exploring the lived experience of embodiment in order to increase knowledge of cultural and social understandings of the body for the individual, and to re-centre the individual in theory.

Theories of the body discussed so far, centre on sexuality, but say little about physicality. Cahn (1996) identifies that the two are invariably linked, as she argues, 'The image of women athletes as mannish, failed heterosexuals represents a thinly veiled reference to lesbianism in sport' (Cahn, 1996: 41). She continues, that lesbians in sport have become powerful yet unarticulated 'bogey women', which has formed 'a silent foil for more positive, corrective images of women athletes to resolve the cultural contradiction between athletic prowess and femininity' (Cahn, 1996: 41).

By researching lived experience and considering theoretical standpoints in specific settings, new questions can emerge and be posed to develop knowledge, in this case, of gender, identity, the body and subjectivity. I will therefore be exploring further these 'cultural contradictions' embodied in the female athlete and the 'corrective images' in relation to the physicality, comportment and representations of women climbers. In so doing I will appropriate the theories outlined above to engage them more broadly in lived, embodied, and sexually specific physicality. I will also be posing the question of whether these contradictions constitute 'subversive bodily acts' (Butler, 1990).

## **Women Climbers' Physicalities**

### *Reaching Out: Movement, Space and Embodiment*

One researcher who has considered women's movement and comportment specifically is Iris Young. In her original work *Throwing like a Girl* (1990) she explores how women internalise disciplinary practices that restrict movement and women's physical social engagement with the world. She found that women do not engage their whole bodies in physical activity, movement and motion, arguing that this is because they are surrounded by a limited space in the imagination. Women are hesitant to move beyond this space and reluctant to reach, stretch and extend their bodies. This constricts posture and the general style of movement. She concludes that women are far more restricted than men in both movement and spatiality.

Climbing requires women to move outside the constrictions of imaginary space. A climber must stretch, reach, push, pull, balance, wedge and contort the body in order to move on the rock. This requires a certain level of physical competence and

skill. Indeed, all of the climbers I interviewed felt they had increased their physical competence through climbing. They had learnt how to use their bodies in different ways. Lindsey, a 49-year old climber who had become physically active in her 20s and started climbing in her early 40s, explained:

'It was your whole body you were using...it's like a really good upper limb workout ...the climbs are working on your balance ...you're stretching your hips and then your trunk and it's just different, you feel like everything works.'

Catherine (60), who had been climbing for 27 years, commented:

'There's something I feel about moving all four limbs in some kind of sequence, it just feels like poetry, it's very harmonious.'

Here, the climber is alluding to a sense of lived embodiment, where subjectivity is experienced as a unitary whole through engaging a combination of problem solving, technical knowledge, physical agility and assessing risk against ability, strength and skill. Catherine continued to explain,

'I want to climb with the least effort, I want to climb very smoothly and I want to feel like I'm poetry in motion.'

Helen (38) found that climbing enables the brain and the body to 'get in sync' and Kirsty (44) stated that whilst climbing 'body and mind are in harmony'.

Through their interpretations of climbing experiences these women were able to conceptualise their subjectivity as something other than the mind/body dichotomy. Whilst the language in which this unity is espoused often relies on the dichotomy itself, the sense of wholeness and well-being that they then went on to talk about in relation to these experiences indicated that their subjectivity was not only understood, or experienced in terms of the mind/body dichotomy (Dilley, 2002).

The women climbers engaged with, and encompassed space to a far greater extent than Young (1990) observed in her study. Nevertheless, their physical

engagement with the rock, the acquisition of climbing skill and ability has not gone unchallenged. All the women I spoke to had been involuntarily 'instructed' by male climbers. This 'instruction' took the form of telling women exactly where the route goes, where the next hold or ledge is and how to do the move. They found this to be both perturbing and frustrating. It could potentially eliminate the problem-solving element of the climb, diminish their sense of achievement and undermine their climbing abilities. It also ignores and tries to control different styles of climbing by attempting to dictate and regulate movement on the rock. However, the women I spoke to tended to ignore 'instructions' or verbally rebuff them (Dilley, 2002).

### *Muscularity, Strength and Femininity*

All of the women found that climbing had impacted on their physicality. Most had greater upper-body strength and increased flexibility. They had become more muscular and, for a few, their overall body shape had changed. The muscularity and strength was largely regarded positively. Zoë (27) had been climbing regularly for one and half years and had noticed significant changes in her body over that time. In the following description of her handshake she positively reflects on her shoulder and finger strength:

'Sometimes when you go to shake hands with someone and you're just really aware that you've got this grip and it's not a very ladylike handshake because you do feel, and the more kind of definition around your shoulders, like I definitely feel a lot more muscle definition than what I have had. Some people might go 'ooh I didn't expect that', but it's just me and that's my sport and it's quite nice to be reasonably compact but strong as well.'

As Zoë identifies here women's climbing physicalities can clash with normative ideas of femininity. The women described themselves and other climbers as 'unconventional', 'eccentric' and 'non-conformist'. They were not always specifically referring to gender, but nevertheless, the 'cultural contradiction' between the muscular climbing body and femininity is apparent.

This is made explicit in a caricature of Airlie Anderson, one of Britain's most prominent women climbers, which appeared in the first edition of *Climb* magazine in March 2005. The article is presented as a tongue-in-cheek piece in search of the new Don Whillans<sup>4</sup>. Airlie is depicted with an oversized head, large breasts, very muscular biceps and forearms and skinny legs. She is standing with her foot on a flattened male character, a boxing glove on one hand, raised to mid-height, with the other hand on her hip striking a triumphant pose. The caption beside it reads

'Pros: Direct, loud, splendid right hook. Cons: From Bishop Stortford; been known to burst into tears on jamming cracks. Model agency advice: "Requires marginally more body hair and a bit less lip from you thank you very much young lady" ' (Anon., 2005: 27).

It is important to contextualise the development of Airlie's persona to fully understand the implications of the caption.

Airlie was the first woman to climb Grit E7, Master's Edge (6c), which was considered one of the hardest routes of the 1990s. She has a muscular physique and her skill and ability are recognised throughout the climbing community. She also engages with feminine disciplinary practices such as plucking her eyebrows and using make-up. She is outspokenly critical of 'traditional' macho climbing cultures, as in the film *One Winter* (Slackjaw Film, 2003) she explains that she does not like 'Horrible young Alpinist men who are all testicles'. Airlie is also known for expressing emotion when she climbs, a trait that within the macho culture is seen as a loss of composure. It is thought that climbers ought to 'manifest qualities of coolness' (Donnelly and Young, 1988: 228). In the normative binary dichotomy of rational/irrational, the latter equating to emotional, the physical show of emotions through tears and facial expressions, is considered feminine, and thus, a sign of weakness. There is a clear cultural contradiction within Airlie's persona, which the caricature embodies in a derogatory way by challenging the authenticity of her femininity. The insinuation being that if she had 'marginally more body hair' she could be a man. In this way Airlie is being reprimanded for not accommodating the normative discourse of sex/gender.

Sportswomen's muscularity and the cultural contradictions that it poses for femininity are also discussed in Goodey's (1997) article on female climbing icons published in the UK climbing and bouldering magazine *On the Edge*. She explains:

'We live in a shallow society that makes obscene demands of women and nowhere else is this illustrated better than in our society's iconography. Unfortunately our female sporting stars are few and far between, but that hasn't stopped us, we have invented Gladiators so we can idolise gorgeous sports women who have failed to make it in their own field. As I stare at their overly made up faces on Saturday night wondering if fuchsia pink lippy really helps one battle with a pugil stick, I wonder if our world has gone mad. Our desire for iconic inspiration has trapped our sports women in a Catch 22 situation; they must have the physiques to win but remain feminine. The end result is some women make it and some end up looking like drag queens. And the saddest fact of all is that we are starting to value beauty above success; better be a beautiful second than an ugly winner.' (Goodey, 1997: 60)

However, Goodey continues by making the very same 'obscene demands' of women climbers that she has begun to critique; valuing feminine beauty over and above climbing achievements. She disparages the physiques of muscular climbing women by asserting the need for beautiful, glamorous, (hetero)sexily feminine, bikini-clad climbing icons who are not 'so ripped that they look like blokes or so skinny they look like young boys' (Goodey, 1997: 61). The 'unfeminine chiselled body' of American climber Robyn Erbersfied which exudes 'hard work and dedication from every pore' (Goodey, 1997: 61), is the antithesis of the feminine climbing icon she seeks. Here, Goodey identifies the cultural conflict between muscular physicality and feminine heterosexual identity, but rather than challenge this argues instead for the 'more positive, more corrective images of women athletes' (Cahn, 1996: 41) with their homophobic undertones.

### *Physiology and the Sexed Body*

Belief in 'natural' physical differences between sexed bodies is seen to be legitimised by biological/physiological discourse. In climbing, this oscillates between denigrating women to the level of second rate climbers, to a position where women's physiology is seen to be the very explanation for their achievements. To expand on the former point, which treats women's physiology as homogeneous, women's corporal specificity is not only used to justify women's different social and cognitive abilities as Grosz (1994) has recognised, but also women's different (interpreted as lesser) physical abilities. Grosz continues, 'By implication women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements' (1994: 14). Indeed, some climbers, both male and female, believe that men have an 'evolutionary' advantage over women, specifically with regards to height and strength. This was clearly the case for most of the women in my previous study, as they felt that men were able to climb harder routes than women (Dilley, 2002). This was attributed to men's greater upper body strength; a belief which Sandra, a 24-year old climber who worked in outdoor education, thought could undermine women's confidence:

'If you always compare yourself with blokes you might think, oh I'm not sure I'm strong enough.'

This presumed physical superiority of male climbers has resulted in women's achievements being treated with scepticism and disbelief. Some form of 'cheating' is often insinuated, whether it is that the route has been climbed in a different (interpreted as easier) style, such as the report of Dalvinda Sodhi using a heel hook<sup>5</sup> on 'Brad Pitt' ([www.betaclimbingdesigns.com/news.shtml](http://www.betaclimbingdesigns.com/news.shtml)), or that the climber has prior knowledge of the climb through headpointing<sup>6</sup> (a common practice among many elite climbers male and female), which was used by some to undermine Lisa Rands, one of America's top boulders, who recently climbed E7 on Yorkshire gritstone (Ryan, 2005).

Returning to the second point, women's physiology has also been used to explain their achievements, and this explanation too, often entails insinuations of cheating in the form of an unfair 'natural' advantage. Again, women's physiology is

largely treated as homogenous, but with some anomalies to account for the specific 'natural' advantages of certain climbers. This is illustrated in discussions about the US climber Lynn Hill freeing the Nose on El Cap<sup>7</sup>. Whilst Lynn is a hugely admired climber worldwide, it is often suggested that the only reason she was successful was because of her small fingers. Commenting on Beth Rodden and Tommy Caldwell's recent free ascent of the Nose, Lynn stated:

'I've heard many times, "Lynn could do the great roof because she has small fingers." Tommy is missing the tip of his index finger on one hand and even though it would have been easier with all of his finger tips, clearly he was able to find a way to make it work. He proved my point that one's attitude and spirit is more important than one's physical make-up.' (<http://lynnhillblobs.com>)

Focusing on Lynn's fingers has distracted those within the climbing world from more fully acknowledging her skill, ability, strength, perseverance, dedication and commitment to climbing (Ryan, 2005).

Discussions about weight-to-power ratios dominate much of the debate about physiology in climbing. UKC's online forum discussions<sup>8</sup> concerning the accomplishments of Spanish climber Josune Bereziartu, who was recently the first woman to climb F9a+, can be used to illustrate these contradictory positions further. One forum poster wrote:

'I think climbers have long known that women can excel in the sport. The steeper routes get the more weight becomes a disadvantage, the more a woman's physiology becomes the optimum.'  
([www.ukclimbing.com/forums/t.php?t=129720](http://www.ukclimbing.com/forums/t.php?t=129720))

Conversely, another writes in response to learning of Josune's F9a climbs:

'Josune is leagues ahead of other women based on those stats. Is she really a woman...?' ([www.ukclimbing.com/forums/t.php?t=94264](http://www.ukclimbing.com/forums/t.php?t=94264))

These opposing statements are underpinned by a similar unitary understanding of women's physiology. The first quote suggests that women's perceived difference to men accounts for Josune's achievements, whilst the second suggests that difference ought to limit her ability, therefore she must be a man. Ultimately, both arguments try to reinforce binary understandings of sex/gender.

### **The Subversive or the Exception?**

It appears that some women climbers do unsettle binary understandings of sex/gender. As this article has shown women climbers do not fit neatly into normative dichotomous understandings of masculine/feminine and man/woman. These climbers have been reprimanded for their elusiveness in this context. Their (hetero)sexuality and femininity have been attacked by insinuations that they are in fact men, the authenticity of their achievements questioned, media coverage has been limited and sometimes biased. Ultimately, these are all attacks on women's self-mastery and self-identity. Yet, the presence of this counter-discourse suggests that normative understandings have become problematic, otherwise they would not need to be defended so fervently. However, whether or not the fallacy of 'natural' binary sex has been undermined is another issue.

As Butler (1990) demonstrates in her critique of John Page's genetic research into the 'master gene' (the male sex determining gene), unsound theories are not necessarily abandoned when they are problematised. When the 'master gene' was found to be in both men and women, rather than reconsider the *a priori* presumptions of binary sex that the research was based on, Page simply readapted his theory to accommodate this discovery by asserting that the 'master gene' must be dormant in women.

To some extent a similar situation has arisen to account for women's achievements in climbing. Two prominent theories have emerged, in the first, the biological/physiological argument has been adapted to maintain a unitary understanding of women's biology/physiology, but also to reconceptualise women's climbing achievements in the language of 'natural' advantage. The dominant discourse can be seen to accommodate women's presence through a rhetoric of containment that fits them back into existing restrictive binary categories. Women who excel in

climbing have also been explained as the exception to the rule. This has particularly been applied to elite women climbers, such as Lynn Hill and Josune Bereziartu, who consistently climb as hard as the top male climbers. These women are treated as an anomaly, which may therefore annul the threat to binary conceptualisations of sex/gender.

Nevertheless, the reprimands experienced by women climbers and the attempts to confine the multiplicity of their lived experience and subjectivity do not necessarily go unchallenged. For example, Goodey's (1997) article, which was discussed earlier, prompted an articulate and angry response from some of Britain's best women climbers. Celia Bull, who appeared on the Llanberis scene in the 1980s and has continued to climb hard and bold routes ever since, replied:

'...is that (as sex symbols) how women really want to portray themselves in climbing? Haven't women been striving for multifaceted identities? ... more and more women (are) on-sighting harder grades on natural pro and bolts; all done for the love of climbing and not without effort, hard graft, sweat and tears. This is what we should be promoting, real women with real minds doing real things, not the new-look wonder woman whose vital statistics have changed slightly to incorporate the '90's lust for the sporting body beautiful... let's celebrate women climbing and set our own agenda.' (Bull, 1997: 80)

Glenda Huxter, one of a few British women who have climbed grit E7, continued:

'These media icons are pure fantasy which wouldn't be so bad if they weren't so limiting for women. The continuous perpetuation of the female stereotype in society denigrates women and ultimately makes it harder for them to set their own agendas and achieve their ambitions.' (Huxter, 1997: 81)

Furthermore, at the International Women's Climbing Symposium, held in 1998, Dr Rosemary Cohen presented a paper on an article from 1838 entitled the 'Thwarted Maiden Lady', which depicted women who climb as spinsters who could not find a man to marry them, the insinuation being, 'You must be climbing because your real

life as a woman is not complete' (Moran, 1998). As I have shown, such attacks on women's sexuality are still common today. Nevertheless, the women at the symposium were defiant, as Moran articulated:

'What is the image of the woman climber? She is anything and everything, she is always the same and never the same. She can make a difference and she will if given the chance. Whatever you may think, I believe it is safe to say we do not see ourselves as 'Thwarted Maidens'. We see ourselves as elusive in identification as the adventures we seek.'

(<http://pweb.jps.net/~prichins/womand.htm>)

## **Conclusion**

This article has considered some of the embodied 'cultural contradictions' between the climbing body and feminine heterosexual identity. It has been proposed that the deconstruction of binary cultural categories, particularly masculine/feminine, man/woman, mind/body, can be engaged with alongside a materialist understanding of social structures, in order to destabilize different forms of 'cultural domination' (Bartky, 1998). The intersection of the cultural with material controls and forms of resistance has been explored through discourse on women's climbing bodies and the experiences of women climbers.

The parody of entwining identifiably feminine and masculine characteristics does appear to have the potential, in some circumstances, to demonstrate the fallacy of the 'natural'. Indeed, many women climbers embody this intermeshing of normative notions of femininity and masculinity through the combination of different forms of movement, muscularity and physical self-mastery with identifiably feminine markers such as clothes, beauty regimes, breasts and physical shows of emotion. These 'subversive bodily acts' are both constituted by, and constituting of the cultural domain, as well as being lived embodied experiences situated within material societal structures.

What I have shown is that the notion of gender as 'naturally' dichotomous is a contested terrain where hegemonic ideas are being resisted through lived experiences, where the gendered identity of some women climbers is diversifying and

changing with the repetition acts. Whilst dominant discourse has worked to contain and marginalise such challenges to hegemonic norms, there is an ongoing struggle as the cultural possibilities available to the subject increasingly diversify (Butler, 1990).

I have tried to stress that along with the theories of deconstruction and multiple identities that have focused on representation, it is also important to understand how these can be embodied and lived. When exploring parody as a form of subversion it is important to consider such lived embodied experience and I would argue perhaps now is the time for the individual and material everyday experiences to be re-centred in theory.

### **Notes**

1. With the exception of some innovative work from sport and leisure studies (Scruton, 1992; Hall, 1996; Gilroy, 1997; Choi, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000).
2. This research was undertaken as part of my MSc in Gender Studies at Edinburgh University.
3. For example, in the 1860s, Herbert Spencer's widely accepted theory of the conservation of energy argued that the reproductive system absorbed the vast majority of women's energy. Education and vigorous exercise was thought to deplete the energy reserved for reproduction, negatively impacting on fertility by reducing breast milk, possible infertility and even death. The underlying premise being that a woman's primary role is to become a wife and mother.
4. Don Whillans has become a semi-mythical heroic figure in climbing history, essentially epitomising the working-class, beer-guzzling, trouble-making, violent, misogynistic, hard man of climbing.
5. The act of hooking your heel over a hold or ledge and using your legs to pull yourself up.
6. Having climbed the route with a top rope first before completing the climb traditionally, either placing protection (gear that can be placed in the rock which the rope clips into for security and the 'second' climber then removes) or soloing (without any ropes or protection).

7. Lynn Hill is an American climber who in 1993 free (traditionally) climbed the Nose of El Capitan, a route that had previously only been aid climbed; where pieces of gear are pulled on to make the ascent.

8. UKClimbing.com (UKC) first came online in 2000. UKC has established itself as the most popular climbing Internet site in Britain. It contains climbing news, events listings and feature articles, user profiles and photo galleries, as well as hosting many chat rooms, some of which are climbing focused, whilst others are more general 'Down the Pub' chats. Colin Wells has said that exchanges in the chatrooms, 'often resemble a playground full of school boys taunting each other, interspersed by intermittent interjections by earnest adults' (October 2005: 83).

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