



An Autoethnography of Bodybuilding, Visual Culture, Aesthetic Experience, and Performed Masculinity

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines the social history of bodybuilding along with personal testimonies of those with experience in weight training and bodybuilding to raise awareness of aesthetic experiences found within the culture of physique. The author explores aesthetic experiences in both the formal and performative sense as frames for reflecting on his adolescent pursuits as an amateur bodybuilder in order to deconstruct the visual archetypes of bodybuilding and their impact on his formative notions of maleness.

Keywords: aesthetic experience, bodybuilding, body image, performed masculinity

My Childhood Constructions of Masculinity from Visual Culture

My earliest fascination with what I called “muscle men” stemmed from my childhood interest in copying and creating my own comic book heroes. I had just entered the second grade and was awestruck by the drawings of my older cousin who lived across the street. He apparently found inspiration in *Marvel Comics*, but was heavily invested in creating his own characters and mythologies. He sometimes brought his sketchbook to our house, where I sat in the living room and eagerly followed the development of his masked muscle-bound heroes and monstrous villains.

When I was around eleven years old, another teenage cousin invested his summer earnings in a new Olympic weight set. It seemed instantaneous at the time, but it took a few months for his chest and shoulders to protrude well beyond everyone else’s boyish frame. The competitive spirit of my older brothers took over. They quickly assembled a weight room in our basement. I was eager to get started but not yet old enough for free-weights, so I diligently exercised while waiting to come of age.

Shortly after I entered high school, I joined the YMCA with my brothers. We trained there each day after school and became part of a community of serious weight lifters. The “Y” was energized with pounding music and full of just about any kind of weight or lifting machine that one could imagine. I watched men train and walk about the gym, assessing their bodies. The walls were covered with mirrors and photographs of bodybuilding champions. In addition to looking at these images for inspiration, I emulated their poses and aspired to have a similar physique. By my sophomore year in high school, I began competing in regional amateur bodybuilding championships.



Figure 1. The author, at age 14, stands in the “Relax Pose” in preparation for his first bodybuilding competition, 1989.

Bodybuilding became a process of defining criteria, setting goals, and pushing my own physical limitations, but it was also a process of keen looking. I spent a lot of time engrossed in physique magazines, but I spent even more time assessing my own body. In addition to studying the images I discovered in magazines, I fixated on media-constructed male physiques. I thought about my body in reference to the images I saw in the 1980s popular culture, including the *He-man* cartoon series and *The Incredible Hulk* television series, featuring Lou Ferrigno, and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s blockbuster films. These images and characters had a significant impact on my formative notions on masculinity during elementary school. Since second grade, the world of muscles to which I was exposed became increasingly complex—compounded by romance, dating, and sex—as I became more aware of related imagery from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood; yet, I still wanted to be a “muscle man,” and my quest shaped my earliest notions of masculinity.

Aesthetic Education of Bodybuilders

Hicks (2005) noted that “[aesthetic encounters] are not limited to the formal, institutional realm of art, but are integral to our daily undertakings and interactions with the world” (para. 9). Our aesthetic experiences are formed and reinforced by our values, many of which are socialized. The aesthetic experiences found within the culture of physique have changed significantly over time and certainly have implications for how society has defined and revised notions of masculinity. Several scholars advocate for multiple/critical readings of art and visual cultural experiences through various social, cultural, and political contexts (Ball & Lai, 2002; Carpenter, 2003; Hicks, 2005; Tavin, 2000). In addition to discussing the formal aesthetic applications and the immediate visual properties of physiques, bodybuilding promotes discursive aesthetic experiences with strong implications for gender and popular culture.

Through the culture of physique, bodybuilders learn to appreciate and acquire a particular kind of body. The aesthetic experiences found within this culture, in part, include the process through which bodybuilders learn poses and articulate criteria and nomenclature related to visual information (specifically anatomy/characteristics of the body and its movement in space). Incidentally, much of the vocabulary of bodybuilding is almost identical to the formalist language used in art and design. Terms and concepts including form, mass, line, balance, symmetry, unity, positive/negative space, and movement are used with regularity. Criteria are learned through rigorously studying bodies through posing and engaging in exchanges about value judgments. Bodybuilders are like sculptors, who sculpt their frames in response to various visual influences—their own bodies, other bodies, magazines/fitness advertisements, media images—through intense weight training and exercise (Moore, 1997). Bodybuilders self-assess mass, symmetry, and balance in an ultimate quest for muscularity (Schwarzenegger, 1991). Competitive bodybuilders additionally look critically at their abilities to self-present through posing and instigating comparisons. They showcase their strengths, conceal their weak points, and expose the weaknesses of their competitors. However, the aesthetic experience of these bodies is not limited to the weight room or the stage.

While anyone with access to weights and equipment can engage in bodybuilding, muscled male body archetypes are most often situated in popular cultural contexts. Bodybuilders sometimes expand their imaginations to find affinities with the enormous, the powerful or the inhuman so they can channel super strength or endure unimaginable pain in the gym (Schwarzenegger, 1991). They conjure and connect with useful images in realizing their fitness goals, but their imaginations and behaviors can be influenced by the prevalent popular visual culture of muscled forms. Several historical and popular cultural images inform the stock of references that bodybuilders use to envision themselves as achievers of feats that others deem impossible (Fussell, 1991; Kubistant, 1988). Built bodies and the associated visual culture influence the social realm as well (Hicks, 2005). The aesthetic encounters these muscled bodies evoke outside of the context of the weight room or bodybuilding competitions are continually informed or skewed by the ubiquitous constructions of masculinity found in popular visual culture. Male bodybuilders might interpret or receive their own bodies in proximity to these macho constructs, many of which can be violent, patriarchal, or misogynist. In what follows, I unpack the visual influences and social needs that shaped the esteem, or lack thereof, that I had for my body as a boy in the 1980s. I also revisit some of the ideas I had during my short-lived amateur bodybuilding career in the early 1990s. Additionally, I discuss some of the cultural and aesthetic factors that might shape the regard which other lifters have for their bodies.

Navigating Societal Structures of Masculinity as Power Relationships

By the time I completed middle school and began to invest time in the weight room, I was already consumed by the male dominant heterosexual culture and more likely to perpetuate its conventions than to question them. This autoethnography provides a platform for deconstructing heteronormative¹ values and other gender constructs as I reex-

¹ Heteronormativity refers to normative heterosexuality and the various social structures which compel us to conform to hegemonic and, therefore, heterosexual (sometimes misogynistic) values and standards (Nielson, Walden, & Kunkle, 2000).

amine my lived history as a heterosexual male and aspiring bodybuilder. I reflect specifically on the culture of manhood, masculinity, and physique from the point of view of the author (who is male). This study does not discuss the extent to which women's bodybuilding affects women's notions of the gendered self. However, the culture of bodybuilding presents various contexts through which all people could articulate a range of aesthetic experiences, social patterns, and power dynamics.

Some describe the muscled body as a bodily fortress (Butler, 1997; Hicks, 2005). This description implies that the physical presence of such bodies presents a line of defense that one could use to ward off physical threats. This perceived physical power could be used on the football field, for example, but can also serve to deter physical confrontations (bullies) in the social arena. Moreover, just as the bodily fortress can keep people physically at bay, it might also enable some to hide their feelings and emotions, rendering them emotionally inaccessible. Their physical armor enables them to conceal attributes and qualities that when honed in the social realm are useful. As a result, some muscled bodies use their fortress as their first line of physical and emotional defense, and the actions and interpretations of these bodies can sustain superficial connections with others (Fussell, 1991). Both men and women perpetuate these notions.

With five older brothers and four older sisters, most of who were courting while I was in elementary school, I was already negotiating heteronormative values and was full of romantic curiosities about girls as early as first grade. My notions of masculine power and the muscled body were confirmed by the words and actions of my older sisters. They favorably responded to muscled male bodies on television, dated or married athletic men, and seemed to be pleased with their brothers, whose physical presence garnered the respect of other men who presumably treated them honorably for this reason. From these observations, I concluded that women generally appreciated muscled male bodies, and I came to believe that in order to get a girl and protect her honor, I needed muscles.

In *Unmasking Masculinity: A Critical Autobiography*, Jones (1990) described his understanding of the body as an instrument of social and physical power. He noted:

Because of my culturally learned view of my body as inadequate, I urgently wanted to see it in a new way—as a potential “instrument of power”—and to develop a virile physical presence that would help me hold my own in the street and the playground. So I was ready to strive for a swaggering physical presence and put in hours and hours of routine practice to try and achieve such an end. (p. 209)

Foucault’s (1988) term “technologies of the self” refers to ways in which people navigate structures within society with a specific focus on truth, power, and self.

Technologies of self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Foucault offers historical examinations of relationships people have to others through “strange strategies and power relationships” (1988, p. 15). The rules, prohibitions, duties, acts, feelings, and desires may change depending on the social or historical context.

Through the examples set by the men and women around me and the supporting visual culture, I concluded, as a boy, that men gain respect through their physical achievements (power) and/or through attaining the appearance of being fit or muscular (looking powerful). If I did not work to acquire this “power” then other males who sought to gain it would physically test me with regularity. I was led to believe that if I did not have an athletic presence, then I would constantly have to prove myself. Therefore, like Jones (1990), as a boy I invested significantly in bodybuilding because I was convinced that accepting that I was a skinny kid would result in constant struggle and anguish in school and on the playground. From its inception to the present, the technologies of the body, within the context of bodybuilding, have been driven by vanity, peer pressure, fear, and competition as well as by health and spiritual wellness (Fussell, 1991; Klein, 1993). In navigating these societal structures of

power, physical aggression (or the presence of a physical threat) became my technology of self, and muscles were my first line of defense.²

Bodybuilder as Participant Observer

To contextualize my autoethnography, I formally interviewed 10 lifters³ via phone, Skype, and email using a general list of questions (see Appendix A). We discussed the impact of weight lifting and bodybuilding in and out of the gym, aesthetic experiences, and notions of power. Initially, I sought to collect and construct narratives by way of the testimonies of my interviewees; however, through my own endeavors in the gym, I became re-immersed in the sport and was able to informally collect the insights of other lifters as well. By conducting semi-structured interviews with seven middle-aged men (three heterosexual White males, a homosexual White male, a heterosexual African American male, a homosexual African American male, and a heterosexual Hispanic male) and three middle-aged women (two heterosexual White females and a heterosexual African American female), I examine various perspectives from bodybuilders and weightlifting enthusiasts, including my own perspective, in order to explore the following research questions:

What is bodybuilding’s associated visual culture?

What challenges/perceptions/discoveries/sensations do bodybuilders have in common?

What role does bodybuilding play in one’s ability to see, imagine, and embody aesthetic experiences?

What impact does the culture of bodybuilding have on notions of masculinity and power?

After a few weeks of conducting interviews, I became motivated to increase my hours in the gym, which compelled me to sometimes

2. The scope of this study does not discuss the influence of plastic surgery, steroids, and other genetic altering or performance-enhancing drugs, which have changed and evolved considerably in the past 50 years.

3. Pseudonyms are used in this study to protect the privacy of interviewees and participants.

work out in the evenings. I discovered that the most intense weightlifters showed up after dinner. Young men grunted, paced, and sometimes butted heads in order to “get psyched” before heavy lifting. They socialized and seemingly showed off for those who ran on treadmills on the other side of the room. In this hour, the gym possessed a totally different energy and it seemed to affect all those involved. I opted to work out in the evenings more regularly and began to embrace the notion that I became a participant observer in this study. Inside the gym, I worked to shape a different kind of conversation than those with my interviewees. I consciously developed “a way of talking and asking ... [to] allow narrative to flourish in this congenial moment for stories,” and the more I accomplished in the gym, the more communicative lifters became (Clandinin, 2007, p. 30).

Over the next several months, I began training in various weightlifting facilities including a university gym, a national fitness center chain, and a local facility known for its serious power lifters. I gained 10 pounds of muscle mass and was confidently lifting alongside amateur competitors. I talked informally with bodybuilders about their training programs, aspirations, and anxieties. I also became reacquainted with the jargon of the sport. My transformation into *one of them* positioned me to extract candid and unique stories many of which I recorded and interpreted in my daily journal. As a participant, I struggled to maintain a balance, as I also endured a physical and psychological transformation myself. I became increasingly competitive. After exceeding my own goals, I began to size up others. Most of the associative practices/visualizations I employed to increase my strength and endurance involved aggression or violence. In the gym, anger or frustration was my natural state. I reflected on troubles or complex work-related or personal issues that I otherwise found burdensome. I even went as far as to envision myself protecting my wife and children against male predators in order to channel unearthly strength. Outside of this context, the idea might seem morbid, but in the gym I typically envisioned nightmarish or stressful circumstances to push myself over the edge. I worked through a range of issues to relieve stress, and I utilized anger and fear to hone strength that seemed beyond my capabilities. According to Foucault (1980), as one invests in power of the body through acquiring knowledge and meticulous control, “after

investing itself in the body, [power] finds itself exposed to a counter attack in the same body” (p. 56). Thus, I was compelled to reconsider the current social/psychological implications of my training.

When asked about the visual language (slang) within the culture of bodybuilding one lifter stated: “When I am on top on my game in the gym, I feel like a god on earth amongst mere mortals” (M. Halburt, personal communication, September, 30, 2011). Martin exclaimed, “Get pumped! Like a rooster! Ripped, big, monster, machine, guns, wheels, tanks, etc.” (M. Halburt, personal communication, August 6, 2011). Another interviewee described himself as a silverback gorilla. In listening to their associations and inspirations I conclude that gods, heroes, monsters, and machines are the most commonly referenced bodybuilding archetypes. Despite the various reasons for which lifters build their bodily fortresses, these references travel through their imaginations and are commonly referenced in the gym.

While in some regards bodybuilding can promote health, wellness, and stress relief, many people do not enter the sport for health reasons. Martin, an avid weightlifter and artist, stated, “When I was 12, I asked for a weight set ... I thought that I would become tough and able to stand up to bullies if I lifted weights” (personal communication, August 6, 2011). In this discourse, muscles are valued and marketed as assets in many arenas. Muscles are regarded for their ability to protect, assault, and seduce (Jhally, 1999), but these bodies can bring forth a gamut of aesthetic experiences depending on the social or cultural context. Western culture promotes a particular kind of masculinity designed to isolate women and homosexuals and sustain heterosexual privilege (Jackson, 1990).

Autoethnography and Experimental Ethnography

An autoethnographic research methodology affords me a platform through which I can reflect on my own lived experience as an aspiring bodybuilder (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This methodology uncovers insights into my experiences as well as factors affecting the mind/body dichotomy of my research subjects. Autoethnography assists me in charting “moments of clarity, connection, and change” particularly with regard

to changes in values and associated visual culture related to the muscled male body (Jones, 2008, p. 764). In many regards, this autoethnography deconstructs binaries such as beauty/beast, hero/villain, and god/monster that emerge within the culture of physique.

As part of his “experimental ethnography,” Wacquant (2004) trained with amateur boxers in an urban setting in order to understand the experiences of African American amateur boxers on Chicago’s South Side. Wacquant (2004) articulated the necessity of experiencing bodily transformation, posing queries of and from the body. While his study focused specifically on boxing, my study also employs his notion of “the body as a tool of inquiry and vector of knowledge” (Wacquant, 2004, viii). I observed and interviewed bodybuilders, but I also noted my own physical and psychological transformation resulting from my achievements in the gym.

According to Klein (1993), bodybuilders’ “formidable bodies are responses to shaky psyche,” and some enter the sport as a “way of working out a range of personal issues” (p. 3). As a result, bodies can become social tools and psychological weapons as well as sites for critique. In addition to my increased muscularity, I felt an increase in confidence outside of the weight room. At times I felt physically aggressive. I eagerly awaited a physical test. I wanted an excuse to unleash my newly acquired weapons. While working in the public schools prior to my new workout regiment, I was subconsciously intimidated when navigating the hallways of crowded urban high schools. I contorted my body to make way for masses of students who rushed between classes. After a few months in the gym, I established a physical and psychological presence. I felt heavier and more physical. I plowed through the hallway and forced the crowd to navigate around me as if to say, “Get the hell out of my way.” Henderson, who was an avid lifter, shared this sentiment. While she didn’t take an aggressive position, she did feel that weight training somehow prepared her emotionally for working in the schools. She stated, “As a short small person in the classroom, I felt intimidated physically by many of my larger male students. Weightlifting gained me muscle and confidence in the classroom” (L. Henderson, personal communication, July 27, 2011). For the once lanky Sam Fussell (1991), bodybuilding became an escape. He returned home from college and built his body as a suit of

armor that he hoped would ultimately protect him from the many fears he harbored as a newly minted New York City resident in the 1980s. Fussell (1991) describes:

By making myself larger than life, I might make myself a little less frail, a little less assailable when it came down to it, a little less human. In the beginning I planned to use bodybuilding purely as a system of self-defense. It wasn’t until later, 80 muscle-crammed pounds later, that I learned to use it as my principle [sic] method of assault. (p. 25)

Fussell went from one extreme to the other, emotionally and sometimes physically pushing away those who cared for him most as he aggressively charged down a path of self-destruction paved with obsessive training, treacherous dieting, and lethal enhancement drug use (Fussell, 1991).

In addition to the socio-cultural complexities that may emerge within this culture, bodybuilding has been historically connected with several mythologies and popular cultural influences (Klein, 1993). After a brief discussion of the relationship between bodybuilding, masculinity, and performance, I will unpack some of these influences with a particular focus on how they shaped the esteem that I had for my body as a boy in the 1980s and during my short-lived amateur bodybuilding career in the early 1990s.

Masculinities and Performing Masculinity

While professional bodybuilding certainly made its mark on popular culture well before my childhood, it was the young men in my family that made me self-aware of my physique long before I reached puberty. Some of them were interested in high school sports but dropped out to join local labor unions. Yet these young men still trained, showed off their physiques, and boasted about their physical dominance. They also sized one another up and staged “pose offs” on many occasions. Younger boys, including myself, emulated these behaviors.



Figure 2. High school aged elder brother and cousins prepare for a “pose down,” 1986.

According to Garoian (1999), the socially constructed behaviors that the body performs represent “an expanded, heterogeneous field of cultural work” (p. 8). Alexander (2006) described cultural performances as expected behavioral norms one carries out in order to gain or maintain membership of a particular group. In order to advance beyond social roadblocks, males are oftentimes expected to enact cultural performances and must psychologically and physically navigate or contend with various constructs of masculinity (Jackson, 1990; Klein, 1993). Thus, “masculinity comes to designate a whole range of cultural forms and practices” but is invariably influenced by other identity constructs (Stecopoulos & Uebel, 1997, p. 4). According to Stecopoulos and Uebel:

The term [masculinity] brings into play the recognition of the profound multiplicity and conditional status of the historical experience of male subjects. Masculinity becomes not the defining quality of men, of their fantasies and real experiences of self and other, but one coordinate of their identity that exists in a constant dialectic relation with other coordinates. (1997, p. 4)

Various masculinities exist among different cultures and social forces can result in shifting definitions of masculinity within the same culture (Anderson, 2009; Connell, 1995). According to Uebel, “Racial

and gender identities emerge as dynamic performances scripted, rehearsed, and (re)enacted in the presence of one another” (1997, p. 6). Exploring the dialectic between race and gender could merit an additional study. However, men irrespective of race may have to reconcile the expectations of numerous arenas, orders, memberships, and brotherhoods, all having their own unique hazing rituals, initiations, and rights of passages (Alexander, 2006). Here I reflect on “masculinity” as a constructed set of behaviors stemming from social interactions, imaginations, and the media (Goins, 2004). While the experiences shared by males of other (nonwhite) racial or cultural groups might yield different kinds of behaviors and performances, a prevalent male cultural production exists. In order to disentangle it as a categorical label or archetype, Anderson (2009) revised the more cumbersome term *hegemonic masculinity* to coin the term *orthodox masculinity*. He describes *orthodox masculinity* as a social process where men relinquish their agency in favor of the homophobic, anti-feminist, dominant heterosexual peer group (Anderson, 2009).

As a boy, I was socialized to perform a pre-defined maleness. These socially constructed male behaviors were common and enacted, in one form or another, by all the boys during my young life. In order to gain the acceptance of the males of our communities, many of us perform masculinities (Alexander, 2006). According to Goins (2004) the body can allow us “to view human behavior, gender in particular, in light of the social signs and codes, roles and identities that the performer’s bodies represent” (p. 1). As I shaped my boyhood notions of maleness, I intentionally marginalized anything that could be remotely associated with women and girls (Chodorow, 1999; Klein, 1993). During childhood, I obviously had no idea of the complex dynamic that dictated my notions of gender. Yet I performed—flexing and emulating other typically male behaviors—in order to earn the favor of other males and to connect with the world of *Marvel* superheroes.

The term “performing masculinity” often refers to the actions of homosexual males who wish to mask their sexuality by impersonating, sometimes misogynistically, “male behaviors” (Goins, 2004). In my experience, performed masculinity is a cultural performance that can also be adopted by heterosexual males of any age. “Hey, little man. Slap me five. Let me see your rock [bicep] lil [sic] man.” Random men (young

and old) would often request these performances of me even before I entered elementary school. Like the other boys, I obligatorily flexed my bicep (see Figure 3). I performed this symbolic act for men in my community throughout my childhood. These ritualized behaviors essentially affirmed my interest in gaining membership in the male order (Butler, 1993). “Right on!” or “Check him out!” was the typical response to my masquerade. These kinds of performances served as currency for paying tolls as I traveled through the social landscape of formative manhood (Alexander, 2006).



Figure 3. The author, at age 12, emulates his older brothers and flexes his bicep, 1986

Young males often perform masculinity as they negotiate and/or conform to the perceived expectations of maleness (Alexander, 2006). Butler (1993) noted that gender is “constructed through relations of power” (p. x) and normative constraints that are stabilized through ritualized repetitions (performances). The male membership within my family and neighborhood compelled me to “live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas” (Butler, 1993, p. xi). Anderson (2009) describes these performances as males publicly aligning

“their social identities with heterosexuality (compulsory heterosexuality) in order to avoid homosexual suspicion” (p. 8). I did what was expected of a young urban boy in fear that I might be shunned or teased for behaving otherwise (Jackson, 1990).

Due to intense pressure from the older men in the neighborhood, younger boys were regularly compelled to participate in impromptu competitions. We competed in many physical events: sparring, wrestling, push-ups, arm wrestling, etc. I was already familiar with these competitions, as my brothers matched me against my cousins for as long as I could remember. I was often thrust into circles of spectators, like a gladiator, and forced to wrestle or fight with boys that I did not even know. By grade school, I was already versed in physical rigor and athletic well beyond most of my peers. After earning a level of success and respect for my physical achievements, I was motivated by the fact that I was regarded as a role model by the younger boys in the community. They looked up to me and I saw it as my responsibility to “toughen them up.”

Hence I became one of the ringleaders of these charades. According to Anderson (2009), “Those who do not learn the cultural codes and behavioral conducts of the sport (women, openly gay men and others), do not impress upon the masculine gatekeepers their worthiness of occupational performance” (p. 62). I became a gatekeeper, and I perpetuated a façade of toughness and never considered questioning it. I decided who was “in” and who needed more hazing before they could take their place amongst us. I now realize that I was nothing more than a bully who pushed others to become part of the same stressful spectacle that I dreaded as a young boy. Outside of this façade, I was a sensitive child with a passion for drawing and model-making, yet through my performances and my resulting inflated ego, I earned the reputation of a neighborhood bully.

By the time I entered high school, my older brothers had already proven themselves as athletes. Although they were not large men, they could both bench-press more than all of the linemen on the football team and everyone knew it. Although the pecking order changed when I moved on to high school, I was under their protection, so I never had to stand up to bullies. Unlike many young lifters, I did not train in preparation for self-defense. I lifted to maintain the image the men in my family

portrayed. As a result of their muscularity and confidence, the muscled men around me were also well received by women, and I aspired to get the attention muscles garnered.



Figure 4. My brother (at age 17 in 1989) demonstrates a side chest pose. He trained me each day after school. Our focus was on getting strong and getting big. He kept me off the streets and kept me out of trouble.

As an aspiring artist, I felt somewhat estranged from the men in my family, but weight training was one of the things that we all had in common. It provided us with invaluable bonding time. In high school, both of my older brothers had impeccable reputations as respectful young men who stayed out of trouble. Unlike many of the young men in their peer group, they never drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes or experimented with drugs, and they successfully avoided crime and teenage mischief. (See Figure 4.)

We grew up in a challenging urban environment. Lots of men, young and old, loafed on the corners and eventually fell victim to addiction or criminal activity. My brothers' self-discipline and intensity in the gym provided them with a much-needed focus during a troubling time in their lives and in our neighborhood. This kept them on the straight and

narrow. Although I was still a skinny 14-year old boy, they were known for their strength and their physiques. Many of my uncles and cousins also earned reputations in the labor union for their athletic ability. There was an unspoken expectation that I would follow in their footsteps and become a tough guy and a muscle man. (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5. An elderly gentleman smiles with approval while his great-nephew shows off his bicep to his younger cousins.

Artist Shaun El Leonardo and Performed Masculinity

Some contemporary artists use the muscled male body to challenge or critique gender constructs and social challenges of masculinity. Performance artist Shaun El C. Leonardo became enthralled in bodybuilding as a way to build mass and strength as a high school football player (S. Leonardo, personal communication, August 11, 2011). As an artist, he continues to develop his body for his performances. In *El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man* (2006) (see Figures 6 and 7), he assumed the role of his recurring muscle-bound masked alter ego, "El Conquistador." In

this performance, Leonardo engages in a “Steel Cage Match” with himself. This performance serves as a metaphor of the internal struggle many men



Figure 6. Performance artists Shaun “El C.” Leonardo as “El Conquistador,” ca. 2009.



Figure 7. Shaun “El C.” Leonardo performance, *El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man*.

face as they negotiate masculinities.⁴

Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* (1996) offers context for interpreting Leonardo’s work. In *Fight Club*, after experiencing extreme exhaustion from the daily grind of his corporate job, the unnamed protagonist falls into a frenzy and serendipitously makes a new friend, Tyler Durden. Together the two men attract numerous men with similar temperaments. They collectively share an interest in a violent underground where bare-knuckle fighting serves as a form of radical psychotherapy. It is later revealed that Durden is one of the multiple personalities that dwell inside of the unnamed protagonist. Throughout the story the protagonist is emotionally, socially, sexually, and psychologically competing with himself, in and outside of the ring.

Fight Club becomes a playground where men unleash their repressed anger and confront aspects of themselves they clearly could not in their daily lives. In his more recent performances, Leonardo organizes and partakes in caged “battle royals” along with other masked and muscled men. These men take on various personas, but all seem to bring physical presence and larger-than-life alter egos into the ring. Leonardo’s work is:

an internal investigation of the childhood role models, popular icons and cultural stereotypes that influenced how I perceive what it means to be a man ... I manifest the ongoing tensions between my desires to represent male virility and the vulnerabilities within my identity developed by these images of power. (S. Leonardo, personal communication, July 10, 2011)

Leonardo’s performances serve as vehicles for deconstructing masculinity in an effort to critique his own identity. The conflict he presents has resonance for me as I reflect on some of the social pressures I endured as a boy growing up in urban Pittsburgh.

Since childhood and through my subsequent experiences in the gym, I entertained and embodied the characteristics of superheroes and other muscled male archetypes. In the weight room, I have felt godly, I have felt sexy, and I have felt monstrous, and these feelings have aided

4. See <http://www.elcleonardo.com/videos.php>.

me in connecting and disconnecting with experiences and sensations inside and outside of the gym. What follows is a discussion of the various contexts (historical, social, popular cultural, and autobiographical) through which one might explore these physique archetypes and other aesthetic experiences shared by those involved with the culture of physique.

Greek Gods Aesthetics

The earliest bodybuilding competitions in the United States started as strongman contests in the late 19th century. What began as physical challenges later evolved into competitions where judges assessed the physique and overall appeal of men (Krasniewicz & Blitz, 2006; Siciliano, 1921). Charles Atlas' initial fame was attributed to his 1921 victory in the "World's Most Handsome Man" competition, where he was selected from a pool of over one thousand men (Siciliano, 1921). Both artists and medical doctors were often selected to judge physique competitions (Siciliano, 1921). Because of a mutual interest in anatomical studies and classical sculpture, artists and physicians have historically had affinities with bodybuilders. Thus bodybuilders like Atlas were often sought out to model for artists. Following Atlas's victory, local sculptors for whom he often posed referred to him as the "Greek god" (Siciliano, 1921). In that same year, Atlas published an article entitled "Building the Physique of a Greek God," which included nude images of Atlas with props in classical poses.⁵

Early 20th century fitness magazines like the *Grecian Guild Pictorial* also promoted the aesthetics of Greek classicalism but were largely regarded as homoerotic gay (Meyer, 2002). Despite the contextual and aesthetic shift of bodybuilding publications, fitness publications continued to indulge the curiosities of homosexuals and heterosexuals who share an interest in the male body (C. Fine, personal communication, July 10, 2011; C. Pope, personal communication, July 24, 2011).

The stock of historic muscular art, which includes examples of gods, gladiators, and kings, provides weight lifters and bodybuilders with an arsenal of images to embody and with which to associate.

5. See <http://www.charlesatlas.com/articleoc.html>

Incidentally, Atlas attributed his earliest interest in bodybuilding to his childhood encounter with a statue of Hercules at the Brooklyn Museum (Siciliano, 1921). By the mid-20th century, these influences were also perpetuated through the cinema when renowned bodybuilders like former Mr. Olympian Steven Reeves began accepting roles in "Sword and Sandal" genre films in the 1950s. These images can facilitate a lifter's interest in tapping into awesomeness, invincibility, power, or fearlessness, many characteristics attributed to gods and heroes (Klein, 1993; M. Hubbard, personal communication, September, 30, 2011).

Chumps into Champs: Self-Esteem and Perceived Heroism

When I was nine years old, I discovered a Charles Atlas advertisement in one of my comic books. In bold letters, the advertisement read, "Give me 15 minutes a day and I can make you a new man." I recall one ad that also featured a drawing of a small-framed teenage boy named Mac enjoying down time on the beach with his date when a bully confronts him. After a short exchange, the bully makes a demeaning remark, referencing Mac's physical inferiority, and kicks sand in his face as his date watches. Humiliated, Mac goes home and throws a tantrum before discovering an Atlas ad. Mac sends away for a subscription to Atlas's "Dynamic-Tension" program. In the next frame of the comic, Mac's body is transformed. The now muscular protagonist takes advantage of an opportunity to slug the bully to become the "hero of the beach." Mac's date returns to his side as several female onlookers marvel at his new and improved body. "What a man!" one female onlooker shouts. This cultural narrative has many manifestations in popular culture. This cultural narrative is repeated in films, books, and other media (i.e., technologies of self) of the day.

Despite the initial and ever-present homoerotic facet of the sport, Atlas rebranded the male physique for heterosexual consumption in his advertisements complete with heroic men and "damsels in distress." He perpetuated a hetero-masculinist status quo through his ads, and in doing so he became one of the most influential and successful businessmen of the century (Robertson, 1939). Atlas marketed his program with several versions of this story, but they all communicate the value of muscular

development with heterosexual social agendas.

This advertisement⁶ clearly inscribes many gender stereotypes which continue to impact our culture today. Atlas ads maintained a particular focus on restoring a man's honor in the presence of young women. Perceivably by regaining honor, an integral ingredient for constructing masculinity, a man will be socially transformed into a heroic figure (Sand, Fisher, Rosen, & Eardley, 2008). Atlas ads are consistent with many super hero mythologies in that it draws a relationship between physical dominance, honor, popularity, admiration, and eventual heterosexual romance. Jackson (1990) tells us:

The process of reading and rereading comics is a dynamic process of collaboration and dialogue between the codes and conventions of the comic story, and the particular personal and social history of the reader (a mixture of gender, race, class, age, location etc.). Readers don't just internalize the comic's hidden message in a docile, powerless manner but actively interact with the comic to produce a variety of meanings and pleasures. (p. 224)

By promoting Mac's story of triumph, Atlas reworked the macho heroism we read about in comic books into more believable narrative. Mac's seemingly more realistic transformation from a "wimp" into a hero, via Atlas' training program, seemed plausible.

According to Krasniewicz and Blitz (2006), men in the United States were becoming feminized before an athletic craze and an aesthetic shift took place in the 1920s. Prior to this era, "[U.S.] men who worked in offices or who supervised laborers did not develop muscles" (p. 29). When their masculinity was brought into question, they "compulsively attempted to develop manly physiques as a way of demonstrating that they possessed the virtues of manhood" (p. 29). As manhood was socially redefined, men quickly changed their mode of cultural production and aesthetic criteria and adopted a new form of performance. Instead of performing dominance through managerial influence and the business world, they adopted more primal methods of proclaiming their masculinity in their physical domination. As a result, millions subscribed

6. See the advertisement at <http://www.charlesatlas.com/classicads.html>.

to Atlas' program and truly believed that it prepared them to deal with physical, social, and emotional challenges.

Early 20th century advertisements perpetuated critical attitudes toward the body and "imagined a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural" (Schulze, 1997, p. 14). Initially, bodybuilding in the mainstream was associated with self-improvement, self-confidence, and self-control (Schulze, 1997). Atlas' advertisements fell on the heels of this era and promoted the importance of mental hygiene, healthy personalities, and the importance of being strong, standing up for women and protecting one's honor. His iconic ads have been in circulation worldwide for nearly a century and are some of the longest running advertisements in U.S. history, solidifying his place as one of the most influential figures in bodybuilding (Krasniewicz & Blitz, 2006).

Power, desire, and fantasy all factor into the heroic god image and these images marginalized the role of females in the sport for the better part of the 20th century (Hicks, 2005). Hicks (2005) states that bodies are constructed "within a complex and in many ways inescapable system of power relations" (para. 28). Even today, images of women in mainstream physique magazines typically feature subservient "bikini girls" "at the feet" of central male heroes.

Sexy Beasts

Outside of fulfilling physical goals, building self-esteem, and inflating the egos of narcissists, the gym can be a competitive arena fueled with envy, desire, and sexual tension. Muscle Beach immortalized bodybuilders as sex objects and exhibitionists in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s when they showcased their physiques and worked out in the public bodybuilding facility in Venice, California (Krasniewicz & Blitz, 2006). In anthropologist Alan Klein's (1993) study of bodybuilding facilities in Southern California, he noted that the gym "seemed caught up in one large orgasm, and in that first encounter [he] dreaded interrupting the erotic encounter between humans, mirrors and metal" (p. 20). Today, fitness facilities are still voyeuristic spaces complete with clanging iron, mirrors, and onlook-

ers (L. Henderson, personal communication, July, 27, 2011) and can function like a living gallery offering formal aesthetic sensibilities and erotic imagery. Some bodies are objects of envy, and others are objects of sexual desire (K. Martins, personal communication, August 6, 2011). Mirrors can reflect and mask lust in such a way that one never knows if or when he or she is being watched and to what extent.

Some men delight in the *Gaze* felt from voyeuristically preying on the unaware (Duncum, 2010). Men might ogle (one another or women) and/or they “size up” other men. An avid bodybuilder states: “I look for my competition. I wanna [sic] know what he has that I don’t. I want [to] see the biggest man in there cause I wanna [sic] dethrone the fucking silverback” (D. Brown, personal communication, January, 17, 2012). Male-on-male gaze is often charged with dominance or envy, but is sometimes charged with sexual desire as well (C. Pope, personal communication, July 24, 2011; J. Baker, personal communication, July 18, 2011). The aforementioned “gym body,” Sam Fussell, was entangled in a complex visual and psychological web that ultimately destroyed his ability to see himself or connect with others (Fussell, 1991). In Parsi’s 1997 essay, she offers a critique of Fussell’s 1991 autobiographical account, *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder* and discusses the impact of the Gaze on male bodybuilders. She notes:

becoming a bodybuilder involves both becoming a male figure that does not signify “something vulnerable” to a male gaze ... As a reaction to that male gaze, Sam’s self-alteration thus requires him to look upon his own body as well as upon other male bodies with the same gaze that looks upon him ... in order to learn exactly what that eye wants. (Parsi, 1997, p. 106)

The technologies of the body that led to Sam’s preoccupation with the perceptions of others and his eventual self-destructive actions are not uncommon in the sport (Fussell, 1991), and these behaviors are supported by animalistic male imagery in popular visual culture (Jhally, 1999).

While heroes and gods make up a significant portion of muscle archetypes, machines, monsters, and animals are also significant in mas-

culinity discourse. Some men invest in bodybuilding to cultivate a physically threatening appearance, and the visual language of these practices supports this. Their motivation lies in their desire to embody the characteristics of beasts and machines. “Bodybuilding, as an aesthetic and cultural form of athletic prowess strives to represent the other, the extraordinary, the monstrous” (Hicks, 2005, para. 33). The monstrous commands and occupies extraordinary amounts of physical and psychological space. “Built bodies are almost absurdly controlled, to the point where flesh is no longer flesh but metal machine, as when builders refer to their arms as guns and their legs as pistons” (Moore, 1997, p. 2). As Hicks (2005) notes, the culture of the gym can be interpreted as an aggressive, crude, imposing, and territorial experience.

In this male-driven climate, some men see bullying as a way of gaining the admiration and respect of like-minded boys/men. “The weight room can be intimidating for some. Men use threatening and offensive language. The guys can be quite primitive and sometimes downright brutal” (K. Martins, personal communication, August 1, 2011). Lifters perpetuate the aggressive gym atmosphere when they push their bodies to the limit while swearing, grunting, and screaming. Their interest in attaining perceivably invincible physiques affect the relationships men have outside of the gym as well (Fussell, 1991). While social anxieties may drive some to bodybuilding, athletes effectively utilize these aggressions in the gym to embody “the beast” or envision themselves as such. Former professional bodybuilder Mike Katz (2003) shared his inspiration to enter the sport in the *Pumping Iron* film. Katz was teased for wearing glasses and for being one of the few Jewish boys in his class. The bullying Katz endured compelled Katz to vengefully channel his aggression in the weight room. Katz recalls:

I think it affected me more than most ... When I got into high school football I wanted people to fear me. I want to be perceived as an animal that needed to be put in a cage. I wanted them to want to run off the field when they saw me coming. (Butler & Gary, 2003)

Physical fitness was perceived as a solution to many male challenges. It is no coincidence that Atlas featured his advertisements in

comic books alongside heroes, villains, and beasts of all sorts. Popular culture has always had an influence on our ideas regarding the moral, physical, and visual attributes of our heroes, villains, and monsters (Jackson, 1990; S. Leonardo, personal communication, August 8, 2011) and our ideas about health, wellness, and body image are certainly skewed by these notions (Jhally, 1999).

As a result of the success of professional bodybuilder turned action hero, Arnold Schwarzenegger brought 1980s bodybuilding into popular culture. Popular films regularly showcased awesome physiques in the context of heroes (*Conan the Barbarian*, 1982),⁷ gods (*Hercules*, 1983), monsters (*The Incredible Hulk*, 1978-1982)⁸ and machines (*The Terminator*, 1984).⁹ This era marked the rise of more massive physiques (i.e., bodybuilders exceeding 280 pounds) in the sport; and this imagery became commonplace in popular media including television, films, studio wrestling, cartoons, and children's toys (Jhally, 1999). (See Figure 8.) Bodies like Schwarzenegger's permeated popular male culture in the United States. With each decade, popular culture showcased muscled male bodies with increased mass and muscularity and in more violent and physically threatening contexts. Consciously and subconsciously, these bodies continue to impact many of our notions of dominance, strength, violence, sexuality, and manhood (Krasniewicz & Blitz, 2006).



Figure 8. "He-man" action figure Made in Mexico. 1981.

Current Perspectives and a Father's Revelation

Whether one participates in order to conceal one's insecurities or in pursuit of health, wellness, romance, or sex, the culture of bodybuilding spawns diverse aesthetic experiences. The associated language of bodybuilding offers formal and informal aesthetic experiences for lifters to negotiate. Bodybuilding played a significant role in cultivating my and other lifters' abilities to see and embody aesthetic experiences of masculinity. We also experienced the advantages and disadvantages of embodying the sensations or perceived qualities of gods, heroes, monsters, and machines while in training (K. Martins, personal communication, August 6, 2011; S. Leonardo, personal communication, August 8, 2011). Body-

⁷ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082198/>

⁸ http://www.imdb.com/media/rm1289603328/tt0077031?ref_=ttmd_md_nxt

⁹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088247/>

building's complex visual culture has historically impacted men's values, self-esteem, motivations, and relationships in and out of the gym. These archetypes have shaped popular representations of men throughout U.S. history, perpetuating orthodox masculinities and influencing notions of sexuality, gender, romance, and manhood.

My 25-year commitment to weightlifting and bodybuilding has aided me in finding a necessary balance. Despite the hurdles and transitions associated with college, graduate school, marriage, and parenthood, my studio work and training regimen have remained consistent throughout my life. While admittedly much of it is still driven by vain aspirations, it serves to relieve stress, and it is a relatively positive outlet. As a father of two growing boys, my wish is that I can resituate this practice in health and wellness and not vanity, competition, and mindless male aggression. Traditions run deep, and habits diehard, but this is a paradigm that I hope to combat.

The testimonies in this study give voice to the challenges one faces in an effort to construct or deconstruct gender "norms" while responding to cultural and visual phenomena. The constructs and contexts of bodybuilding culture provide a glimpse into myriad circumstances that sharpen awareness of complex social and aesthetic experiences. While the culture of bodybuilding is one arena where various socio-cultural elements shape our perceptual experiences and identities, I urge educators to broaden the socio-cultural contexts through which we examine and interpret aesthetic experiences to include encounters with unique forms of popular culture and art world practices.

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APPENDIX A

About the Author

Bodybuilding/Physique Culture Questionnaire

1. How did you get your start in weightlifting and/or bodybuilding?
2. Are you formally or informally involved in fitness education?
3. What are your thoughts on the gym as a space for learning?
4. How would you describe the education you received from your trainers or the community of lifters and exercise enthusiasts in the gym? Were there particular models for teaching and learning that you observed? Which were the most or least effective?
5. From your experience, what are the associated terms or visual aspects/language of bodybuilding?
6. What are your thoughts on the gym as an aesthetic space?
7. Did you subscribe to or read Fitness magazines? What role do they play in your process?
8. Do you look critically at your body as your train or otherwise? What do you look for as you develop your body?
9. How do you 'feel' when it is apparent to you and others that you are reaching the goals you set forth in the gym?
10. Do you recommend training within a community facility or in a private gym? In your experience, what are the advantages or disadvantages of each?
11. How do you feel about the gym or weight room as a social space?
12. What are your thoughts on gyms that are adorned with various posters and photographs of body-types and physique icons? Do you respond (or have you responded) to the various images one can find in the gym? Is/was that a motivating factor for you?
13. Do attribute your experience as a weightlifter/bodybuilder with cultivating your ability to see or look?
14. In what way have your experiences in the gym informed other aspects of your life?

Sharif Bey is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Syracuse University. He earned his Ph.D. in Art Education from The Pennsylvania State University. As a doctoral student, Bey was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to conduct research on post-socialist art education reforms as a scholar and artist in residence at The Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Slovakia. Bey's writing offers revisions of personal and institutional art education histories through archival research, interviews, narrative inquiry, and ethnographic studies. Bey has published articles in publications such as *Studies in Art Education*, *The Journal of Curriculum & Pedagogy*, *The Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, and *The Journal of Power in Education*. Dr. Bey is editor of *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* for years 2013-2015 and serves on the editorial boards of *The Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, *Studies in Art Education*, and *Visual Arts Research*. Bey is an internationally exhibiting studio artist. He has been an artist-in-residence at the McColl Center for Visual Art in Charlotte, Hunter College in New York City, the Vermont Studio Center, and at the John Michael Kohler Art Center/Kohler Plumbing Company.

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