

University of Alberta

When Knowing Better is Not Enough: Experiencing Bodies, Feminist Critique, and Foucault

by

Megan A. Dean

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Philosophy

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Fall 2012

Edmonton, Alberta

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Dedication

I come from a long line of strong women. Their character, compassion, and good humour are an endless source of pride and inspiration for me. It is my hope that this project helps me shake off some of what keeps me from being a similarly excellent human being.

To my family for your unending support, love, emails, and earnest attempts at Skype. To my friends, especially Arran, Laura, Patricia, Peter, Yasemin, Kristin, Cato, and Keith, for good conversation and plenty of laughs. To Mum for asking me what I'd like to study when I go to university (not *if* I'd like to go) and for supporting me in whatever I chose.

And to Joey, who came to Alberta first, for your unending enthusiasm.

Abstract

Motivated by the apparent ineffectiveness of feminist critiques to ameliorate my negative experiences of my body, this thesis investigates Michel Foucault's understanding of experience and critique in an effort to explain this inefficacy. Caught between intuitions that my "stubborn" experiences were failures of epistemic capacity or willpower, I argue that a Foucauldian re-framing of this problem generates productive alternatives for thought and action. I present Foucault's concept of experience as both historically constituted and open to intentional change through ethics. Using the notion of thought, I argue that critique can alter relations between the self and aspects of experience, making these aspects available to transformative ethical work. Given this account, I suggest that my original thoughts on "stubborn" experiences iterated a dominant yet problematic view of critique. To conclude, I bring these considerations to bear on the example of women's bodybuilding as an ethical practice targeting experiences of women's bodies.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank my committee for their time and support throughout this process. Thanks to my supervisor Cressida Heyes for helping me work through what she graciously called my “intellectual confusion,” and for humouring the audacity of my self-imposed deadlines. I am indebted to Chloë Taylor for her advocacy of my work and for inspiring my academic ambition. Thanks to Amy Schmitter for her enthusiasm and encouragement, and to Michelle Meagher for her participation and interest in my project.

I am grateful to Sussanne McDonald for her thoughtfulness and kind words, which always seemed to come when I needed them most. My appreciation also goes to Mélanie Frappier for her mentorship and for remembering to ask me how my thesis was going even amidst the busiest of semesters.

For academic support and engagement with my work I’d like to thank my colleagues in the Philosophy Department’s Publication Support Group and feminist reading group, and the participants at the 2011 meetings of the Foucault Circle, Canadian Philosophical Association (especially my commentator Stephen Theirman), and Diotima Graduate Conference. My appreciation also goes to Kristin Rodier, Yasemin Sari, Kristian Rafuse, Keith Underkoffler, Jonathan Short, and Arran Smith for their invaluable comments on drafts of this work.

Finally, my thanks to SSHRC, the Department of Philosophy, The University of Alberta, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, Pamela Hazel, and Tony Dean for their financial support of my studies.

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Introduction: Stubborn Beliefs, Stubborn Experiences

In *Reshaping the Female Body: the Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (1995), Kathy Davis recounts the story of her friend, who, despite her belief that “women in general should accept their bodies the way they are” (3), decides to undergo breast augmentation. Before undergoing the procedure, the friend made various attempts to accept her own body as she believed other women should. Davis explains: “she had tried everything (psychoanalysis, feminism, talks with friends), but no matter what she did, she simply could not accept [her breast size]” (1995, 3-4). Thus, it seems, the friend was left to choose between continuing to suffer from her unacceptable body and having cosmetic surgery. Davis asks us to see the choice for cosmetic surgery as an expression of agency, a choice which she argues is, “in some cases,” the “only option for alleviating unbearable suffering” (2003, 4).

In *Carnal Appetites* (2000), Elspeth Probyn criticizes a prominent political response to prevalent animosity toward the bodies of women and other marginalized groups. She argues that “pride” movements aim to re-signify marginalized bodies by “unequivocally posit[ing] that there is nothing to be ashamed of if your body is gay, black, disabled, fat or old” (Probyn 2000, 125). The full self-acceptance posited as the goal of these movements is “dependent on a subsuming of disgust or shame which are banished from any possible understanding of the body and its workings” (Probyn 2000, 127). The problem that Probyn, and later Michelle Meagher (2003), identify with this formula is that these negative feelings do not simply disappear upon their disavowal. According to Meagher, the prominence of pride movements has created a “mainstream political correctness” that inhibits individuals from admitting to the existence and persistence of disgust toward certain bodies (2003, 29). To be disgusted in such a context is politically repugnant – a sign of one’s enduring sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. Meagher argues that this equivocation compounds the disgust, generating a situation in

which “disgust itself has been rendered disgusting and shameful” (Meagher 2003, 29). This creates a bind: individuals are discouraged from admitting to their disgust because of its pernicious political implications, but this denial precludes them from effectively addressing the feeling and the ways problematic social and political systems continue to generate the conditions for this disgust. The disgust persists, the structures and forces that generate it remain in place, and individuals suffer it in shame and silence.

Given Probyn and Meagher’s concerns, we might appreciate the honesty that led Davis’s friend to choose cosmetic surgery. Instead of denying her persistent negative thoughts and feelings, she took action to improve her psychic well-being. This seems to be the conclusion that Davis is pushing us toward.¹ If, in light of a critical consciousness, we “try everything” to change our negative thoughts and feelings about our body and yet these painful experiences persist, what can be done? The choice appears to be between altering the body to conform to politically problematic norms – relieving pain and assuming the political consequences – and, as Susan Bordo puts it, becoming a “martyr to feminist ideals” (1993, 30) – accepting continued suffering in light of one’s principles. On this picture, the likelihood of a self-contented feminist appears rather dim.²

This thesis is motivated by this dilemma. What do we make of dissonance between personal convictions that are politically progressive, anti-sexist, anti-racist, etc., and thoughts and feelings that are stubbornly *not* so? What is to be done in a situation where one recognizes one’s experiences as

¹ The choice to have cosmetic surgery remains contentious, even if we accept this justification. Even if cosmetic surgery is an understandable measure to relieve real personal suffering, it may have pernicious effects that extend beyond the individual. Sandra Bartky (1990) argues that women’s practices aimed at approximating norms of femininity serve patriarchal political and social structures. Heyes (2007) argues that such practices are part of a system of normalization, which, among other things, means the relief from suffering allowed by dieting, cosmetic surgery, and the like is temporary and tenuous at best (121). Heyes provides an extended critique of Davis’s argument in Chapter 4 of *Self-Transformations* (2007).

² I am not suggesting that all feminists experience dissonance between their political beliefs and their experiences (considered broadly as thoughts, feelings, desires, and perceptions). However, the feminist work I have mentioned, as well as the work of others (i.e., Tessman 2001; Zerilli 1998), and personal conversations suggest that it is a common enough experience amongst politically progressive women.

harmful, untrue, and contingent, but these experiences stubbornly persist? How do we explain this situation, and, moreover, can we change it? Will explicit acknowledgement of persistent experiences help to change them?³ Finally (and not without a bit of exasperation), what is the point of critical thinking or philosophy if it can't make us think and feel differently about ourselves?

My intuitive approach to this problem started as an epistemological one. Probyn's work suggests that pride movements function upon a general assumption that one's bodily experiences – in a broad sense, one's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of bodies – are causally tied to knowledge about the body. If I believe—either tacitly or explicitly—that these bodies are unacceptable, then I will experience them as disgusting, repulsive, unnerving, or worthy of hate. Learning that there is nothing objectively disgusting about female, fat, homosexual, or old bodies and that any disgust one might feel is the result of politically problematic social forces *should* eliminate this disgust altogether.

If I continue to experience my body as unacceptable, perhaps something is preventing me from really knowing the truth about my body. Susan Bordo suggests that while people might know that, for example, media representations of ideal bodies are not realistic and that therefore they should not judge bodies in relation to such ideals, this is not a *meaningful* kind of knowledge: “I agree that on some level we ‘know’ this. However, were it a meaningful or *usable* knowledge, it is unlikely that we would be witnessing the current spread of diet and exercise mania across racial and ethnic groups, or the explosion of technologies aimed at bodily ‘correction’ and ‘enhancement’” (1993, 104 [original emphasis]). Thus the problem may lie in actualizing or translating what might be called “propositional” knowledge into a sort of “usable” knowledge that determines experiences and actions.⁴ On the other

³ Meagher suggests that the existence and persistence of disgust calls for recognition and interrogation. She proposes an “aesthetics of disgust,” inspired by the work of Jenny Saville, which she argues would “[offer] an opportunity to both acknowledge and interrupt disgust reactions” (2003, 30).

⁴ This might be thought of along Alexis Shotwell's (2011) distinction between propositional and implicit understanding. Working through this with Shotwell's sophisticated framework would likely have helped me avoid the problems I ran into by following my intuitions on the matter.

hand, perhaps I am simply a flawed knower. Contra Bordo, I may not know in *any* real sense that ideal bodies presented in the media are unrealistic. Perhaps I am too indoctrinated by social and cultural forces to fully recognize this truth or to think for myself, maybe I am mentally ill, or simply irrational.

On this view, the problem I am circling around can be construed as one of “stubborn beliefs.” Sexist, racist, ageist, fat-hating beliefs about bodies determine, or at least condition, experiences of bodies as unacceptable and disgusting. These beliefs and/or the hold they have on experiences and actions persist *even when* one consciously rejects their legitimacy. The problem, then, is figuring out how to effectively adopt true beliefs about bodies *or* how to undermine the power these illegitimate beliefs have on experiences and actions. With this in mind, one might argue that critiques revealing the politically progressive “truth” about bodies are ineffective in achieving either of these goals. Though I have read many such critiques, particularly those of the feminist sort, I still feel it necessary to make myself conventionally attractive, and am still disturbed when I see bodies (including my own) that transgress conventional norms. While I now feel ashamed of these thoughts, feelings, and actions, their continued existence suggests that my pernicious beliefs remain intact and influential. Feminist theorists Bordo (1993) and Meagher (2003) respond to implicit criticisms along these lines, suggesting that similar frustrations are common enough.⁵

While finding a sophisticated response to this problem of “stubborn beliefs” was my original plan for this thesis, I found that thinking with this framework caught me in a worrying bind. Two explanations for stubborn beliefs arose: either the subject with these beliefs was weak-willed, unable or unwilling to translate her knowledge into “usable” knowledge, or she had failed to accept the truth of

⁵ Bordo writes that, “feminist cultural criticism cannot magically lift us into a transcendent realm of immunity to cultural images” (1993, 31). Her imagined interlocutor assumes that critical knowledge should guard against undue influence by the cultural forces constructing these negative experiences. Meagher maintains that, “recognizing disgust as socially constructed or habituated does not mean that we are now able to opt out of disgust, or that we are now able to apply disgust selectively” (2003, 32), suggesting that the expectation (or at least vain hope) that critical knowledge can somehow “set us free” still needs to be addressed.

the matter despite convincing arguments to do so, and was therefore irrational. In both cases, the subject shouldered the responsibility for the stubbornness of her beliefs, and thus for the pain she suffered from them. Even if the stubbornness was imagined to be pathological, the cause was still located in the individual, and it was up to the individual to seek help for it. Imagining many women I know (including myself) to be weak-willed or irrational disturbed my feminist sensibilities. Further, I could not, in good conscience, countenance the possibility that feminist critique – or critique more generally – was useless, despite my own frustrations with what I perceived to be its ineffectiveness. As I suspect many philosophers are apt to do, when my way of thinking led me to a disturbing place, I decided to find a new way to think.

I restate my original thoughts on the subject here because this project has become a work of self-critique, a re-evaluation of my intuitions on this problem through the framework I will set out in this thesis. I undertake this project of self-reflection by rethinking the problem of stubborn beliefs in Foucauldian terms. I turned to Foucault because of a vague understanding that, for him, practices are linked to knowledge and therefore changing practices might lead to changes in knowledge. I had hoped that this link would allow for non-traditional strategies for changing beliefs. Further engagement with Foucault's work has revealed a much more complex picture, and one that, as I hope to show, allows for a productive re-working of the problem at hand.

The first two chapters of this thesis lay out the terms for the reframing of my question. This reframing calls for an immediate conceptual shift from a focus on stubborn beliefs to one on stubborn experiences. For Foucault, experiences are not directly causally related to beliefs, nor, more generally, to forms of knowledge or truth. The sort of experience Foucault's thought allows us to work with is desubjectivized experience, meaning that it is not any individual's experience, but a field of possible experiences for subjects in a particular time and place. This field is constituted and limited by forms of

knowledge or truth, but also by forms of power and self-relations. What any one subject accepts as truth has little bearing on this field of experience, and thus beliefs are inconsequential to this view. Thus I shift to “stubborn experiences,” features of the field of possible experience that are central to most subjects’ experiences of themselves and the world, and which continue to dominate subjects’ experiences even if their legitimacy, value, or “truth” is challenged or rejected.

In Chapter One I introduce and develop Foucault’s concept of historically constituted experience. I argue that experience is complexly constituted and maintained by forces outside the subject, yet contingent and open to change. Significantly, this view allows for the possibility of intentional transformation of experience through ethical practice. Chapter Two looks closer at the relation of experience and ethics, specifically the capacity for self-reflection that is both partially constitutive of historically constituted experience and the possibility for ethics itself. I argue that this self-reflexive aspect or folding of experience (Oksala 2011b) allows subjects to take up aspects of experience as objects of thought. Shifts in thought can happen unintentionally and, I argue, can also be intentionally cultivated by strengthening non-dominant problematizations. I argue that Foucault’s books can be read as attempting to do this, and suggest that feminist cultural critiques may be read in the same way. By bringing experiences of women’s bodies into question as contingent and politically pernicious (rather than as indicative of truly disgusting or unacceptable bodies, for example), these critiques open up the possibility of taking these experiences as objects for ethical transformation.

Chapter Three returns to my initial problematic of stubborn beliefs, critically restating it in light of the framework laid out in the first two chapters. I argue that the question of “stubborn beliefs” is the result of an attempt to alter problematized experiences of bodies based on an implicit (and dubious) understanding of rationality and critique. In other words, I had formulated the problem within the constraints of a dominant form of thought. Thinking within these constraints is problematic not only

because it engenders frustration and guilt, but because it hinders freedom and limits effective strategies for ethical transformation. I conclude the chapter by bringing my considerations to bear on Honi Fern Haber's (1996) claim that women's body building can interrupt the constitution of women's bodies and subjectivities (or more generally, women's experiences) by patriarchal power. I am interested in Haber's paper because I believe she conflates practices of the self and practices of power over others, obligating her "muscled women" to act as visible critiques. While these two forms of practice come together in what Foucault called "governmentality," I argue that body building can be a valuable ethical practice regardless of its critical value. While critique is one way to act on others' actions, namely others' thought, it is not the only way to ethically practice power over others.

In sum, when read as a contribution to Foucault scholarship, this thesis is an elaboration of Foucault's concept of historically constituted experience and critique as a tool for its transformation. From my perspective, however, this work is essentially an attempt to grapple with a problem that has preoccupied me personally and philosophically for several years. It is my attempt to re-conceive the problem of "stubborn beliefs" in a way that avoids blaming individuals for this stubbornness and to question the presumption of the primacy of knowledge and its causal relation to experience. It is also a challenge to my frustrations with critical feminist work for failing to grant me magical immunity from patriarchal social and cultural forces and for not making me love my body by providing me with the "truth" about it. With these aims in mind, I have found that thinking through this problem with Foucault has been fortuitously productive. As I hope to make clear throughout this work, taking on "stubborn experiences" of bodies with Foucault has helped me to reframe the problem, challenge my intuitions, and to generate strategies for changing my experiences that were largely inconceivable within my original terms.

Chapter One: Experiencing the Body with Foucault

In this chapter I begin to reconstruct the problem of stubborn experiences of the body in Foucauldian terms. My aim for this chapter is to show that Foucault's view of experience allows us to see experience as both constructed and open to change. I begin with Foucault's understanding of historically constituted experience as produced by complex interactions between historically particular forms of power, knowledge, and relations to the self. On this view, forms of action called practices are central to both the production of historically constituted experience and to its analysis. Feminists working within the Foucauldian framework argue that the forms of power contributing to dominant contemporary experiences of the female body are largely disciplinary and normalizing, and serve gender inequality and patriarchal domination. Practices like wearing cosmetics, dieting, and undergoing cosmetic surgery are linked to these experiences and their pernicious social and political effects. In the last sections of the chapter I introduce Foucault's views on freedom and resistance, which are integral to his understanding of power. I conclude by gesturing toward the practice of freedom through ethics as the possibility for intentional intervention into the construction of experience. This will be given further attention in Chapter Two.

Experience

Scholars often divide Foucault's views on experience into two sorts: historically constituted experience and self-shattering, transformative limit experience (Oksala 2004, O'Leary 2009).⁶ Generally, experiences of the body can be understood as historically constituted. This sort of experience is not the lived experience of a person, but a desubjectivized "field" or "matrix" of possible experiences

⁶ I discuss limit experience in Chapter Two.

for subjects in a particular time and culture (Oksala 2004, 109; Flynn 1997, 209). O’Leary describes this field as the “general, dominant background structures of thought, action, and feeling that prevail in a given culture at a given time” (2009, 77). As I will explain shortly, this matrix provides the conditions of possibility for the subject’s existence (Oksala 2005, 94-95) and determines “all possible ways to comprehend oneself and to act in a coherent fashion” (Oksala 2005, 1).

Experience is constituted by the interaction of historically particular forms of power, knowledge and self-relations. Foucault describes these constitutive “axes” in several different ways: “games of truth, relations of power, and forms of relation to oneself and to others” (Foucault 1997d, 117); “a domain of knowledge [*savoir*], a type of normativity, and a mode of relation to the self” (Foucault 1997e, 200); “fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture” (Foucault 1985, 4).⁷ These three axes are deeply linked but remain distinct from one another. Oksala explains that the axes are “mutually dependent on, but irreducible to, one another” (2011b, 210). Thus all three axes must be considered when studying a particular form of historically constituted experience. While contemporary experiences of the body, for example, may be greatly influenced by the “intelligible body” – the body insofar as it is defined by scientific, philosophic, or aesthetic discourses of knowledge (Bordo 2003, 181) – an analysis of these forms of knowledge will not, on their own, exhaust this experience. The study of a particular experience must take into account the power relations linked to these discourses of knowledge as well as the relations of the self to the self and the practices implicated by all these.⁸ To get an accurate account of a historically constituted experience, these three

⁷ I will mainly refer to them as knowledge, power, and self-relations.

⁸ This is why Foucault rejected accusations that he was reducing truth to power: games of truth, or knowledge, are not power, but they are linked in complex ways (2000d, 132). It is the relation between the two—and in his later work, between the two and self-relations—that Foucault was interesting in working out.

axes must be understood together, which is why O’Leary suggests we think of experience as “power-knowledge-self” (2009, 80).⁹

As Foucault noted, however, this mutual implication does not entail that all three axes will play an equally important role for each experience (1997c, 202). If we imagine that the field of possible experiences at a particular historical moment is a prism or matrix bounded by forms of power, knowledge, and self-relation (Flynn 1997, 209), if a particular experience is especially influenced by the knowledge axis, for instance, this experience is located closer to this axis within the prism. Changes along this axis might have more of an influence on experiences closer to it. Nonetheless, the locations of all experiences within the matrix are determined in relation to all three axes and thus cannot be entirely congruent with any one axis, however influential it may be.

Nevertheless, methodologically speaking, the differential influence of the axes allows for a focus on one axis in the investigation of a particular experience. In the second volume of *History of Sexuality*, for instance, Foucault investigates the historically singular experience of sexuality (Foucault 1997e, 199) by focusing on “practices of the self” and the forms of self-relations implicated by these during the historical period in question. His earlier works can be understood as attempting to study other experiences in a similar way, with a focus on either the knowledge and/or power axes. For example, Foucault describes *The History of Madness* as investigating the experience of madness and rationality through an investigation of the axis of knowledge (1991, 65).

In addition to the analysis of forms of knowledge, power, and self-relation, understanding a particular experience requires an investigation into the “historically and culturally specific practices” implicated by these forms (Oksala 2011b, 211). Rabinow defines practices as “different systems of

⁹ Oksala insists on the irreducibility of an individual’s experience to the power-knowledge axes, though these axes are inevitably the object of a (Foucauldian) philosophical analysis of experience (Oksala 2011, 210). She argues that even with an analysis of all the constitutive axes, an individual’s experience would not be fully accounted for. Lived experiences of bodies are complex and, Oksala argues, as a result, often transgress the boundaries or limits set by dominant discourses of the body (Oksala 2004). I will touch on this argument again in Chapter Two.

action insofar as they are inhabited by thought” (1997, xxxv). I discuss thought at length in the next chapter, so let me say provisionally that this means practices are ways of acting or behaving informed by the particular forms of all three of the axes constituting experience. They are forms of action that are made possible and intelligible given these forms. As such, practices are irreducible to subjective intention. Following Flynn, Oksala explains that practices are “shaped by a preconceptual, anonymous, socially sanctioned body of rules that govern one’s manner of perceiving, judging, imagining and acting” (2005, 105). In short, we can understand this body of rules as the structure of experience, making certain actions possible, necessary, and comprehensible. Furthermore, practices contribute to the constitution of experiences (Oksala 2005, 103), and thus create a sort of open looping effect with historically constituted experience. The key point for the moment, however, is that because practices reflect particular configurations of power-knowledge-self, they provide an entry into the analysis of experience so defined.

Feminists working with Foucault’s ideas, such as Sandra Bartky, have analyzed some of the practices contemporary Western women engage in to alter or shape their bodies and the particular forms of power they implicate.¹⁰ In other words, these thinkers have undertaken an analysis of historically constituted experiences of women’s bodies with a focus on the power axis. Before I sketch out some of this work, we will need a detour into Foucault’s thoughts on power.

¹⁰ I am not content with this spatial-temporal qualification (“contemporary Western women”), as broad and generalizing as it is, but given that the feminist works I am drawing from make no further distinctions (or do not even make one explicit), it shall have to do.

Power

Power has a very particular meaning for Foucault, referring specifically to what he calls “power relations.” Power is not a substance that can be held by some and not by others; power is, simply, the ways individuals interact with one another that influence each other’s actions. More specifically, Foucault defines power as “an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions” (2000d, 340). Power relations are thus “co-extensive with social relations” (Lynch 2011, 15). Where there are people, there will be power relations among them.¹¹ However, power can be enacted without any individual’s immediate presence. Lynch gives a definition of power that encompasses this possibility: “whatever in one’s social interactions that pushes, urges, or compels one to do something” (Lynch 2011, 19). For example, a teacher’s watchful presence in a room full of school children will compel the children to stay on task with their work. She organizes the children’s desks in such a way to facilitate this seeing. Likewise, a manager implements time cards to encourage her employees to arrive at work on time. These are both instances of power, using particular techniques and technologies, and effected with particular intentional goals. Power is thus not something to be avoided or rejected altogether; it is simply a social reality: “power is not evil. Power is games of strategy” (Foucault 1997j, 281).

Because power exists only insofar as it is exercised in these social relations, there is no sense in which we can study power “in itself” (Foucault 1998c, 452). A Foucauldian investigation into power looks at particular instantiations or mechanisms of power in certain historical contexts. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, Foucault was interested in the ways certain power relations and strategies of power, namely disciplinary power (which I will discuss shortly), stabilized into institutions like prisons and schools (Foucault 1997f, 169).

¹¹ Except in cases of domination, which I will describe later in the chapter.

In contrast to traditional views of power as something that simply forbids or punishes transgressions, Foucault understood power as versatile; it “incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely” (2000d, 341). In acting upon others’ actions, people go beyond forbidding or discouraging certain acts and can make use of a wide range of incentives toward certain actions. For example, I deploy power when I try to convince my friends to get sushi for supper by describing how delicious it is, emphasizing its health benefits, or offering to pay for the meal. Further, my friends will be more or less susceptible to my proposal and certain strategies I use because of the effects of other power relations on them. I will discuss this point in more detail shortly.

While individuals often deploy power with particular aims, power also has effects that are unintended and unknown to the actor (Lynch 2011, 23). Large scale phenomena, like forms of oppression, can be understood as the result of the “concatenation of many micro-events” (Lynch 2011, 23), an effect of many localized instances of power. One of the most significant effects of power is the production of subjects. Dianna Taylor explains that “subjectivity is not distinct from, but is rather formed in and through relations of power” (2011c, 173). Foucault understood subjects as constituted through their practices, and therefore, in part, constituted by the forms of power that influence these forms of action.¹² “Subject” is not simply a synonym for person or individual, but, as Cressida Heyes puts it, “captures the possibility of being a certain *kind* of person” (2011, 159). Depending on the

¹² Foucault describes his early work as investigations into “how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or non-delinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power, and so on” (1997j, 290). There may be multiple subjects located in one human being. Oksala describes the three axes of experience as three forms of objectification, generating practices by which humans become certain kinds of subjects (Oksala 2005, 3): knowing subjects (axis of knowledge), social/political subjects (axis of power), and moral subjects (axis of self-relation). These different subjects may be located in one person (because that person engages in all these sorts of practices), but Foucault understood them to be distinct: “undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject” (1997j, 290).

objects they relate to, different kinds of practices produce different kinds of subjects: practices of knowledge or truth produce subjects of knowledge, practices of power “constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others,” and, “in relation to ethics... we constitute ourselves as moral agents” (Foucault 1997c, 262). It is the activity of knowing that makes one a knower; by undertaking ethical work on my desires, for instance, I make myself a moral subject.

Through the production of subjects, power both enables us to be who we are and *constrains* us. While restraints are negative limits on behaviour or activity, constraints function in a positive way. Oksala explains that, “individuals literally incorporate the objectives of power, which become part of their own being: actions, aims and habits” (2011a, 88). The actions that appeal to me – or more, the actions I would even consider to be within the realm of possibility – are those that are within the constraints of power. As May explains, “one is not simply blocked from attaining what one wants; one does not even consider alternatives to what are presented as the available social options” (May 2011, 77). Further, power produces sorts of subjects that are susceptible to certain inducements or deterrents for action. Having been constituted as a “modern subject of food choice” (Coveney 2000, x), for instance, I value the authority of nutritional science to tell me what foods are best for me to eat. I thus may be more inclined to buy the “sushi is healthy” incentive when it comes to supper choices.¹³ This productiveness is what allows certain power relations to function so effectively. No one need enforce the aims of the power that has constituted our subjectivities; we do it ourselves. The things that we want, that we enjoy, the kinds of authority or influence we take into account, are effects of and work to perpetuate these relations.

¹³ This isn't a perfect example because food is problematized in many different ways in contemporary society, which may be why it is a source of anxiety for many people. Nonetheless, if I am constructed as a “modern subject of food choice,” I am likely to consider nutritional value when choosing what to eat; at least the relevance of nutrition to food choice is meaningful to me. Whether I do what nutritionists recommend or reject their advice is another question.

Much of Foucault's work outlines the ways in which disciplinary power, a particular set of techniques and strategies of power, gained prominence in various areas of European society, such as religious life, pedagogy, the military, and medicine. Disciplinary power is also one of the particular forms of power most relevant to contemporary experiences of the body. Generally speaking, discipline creates an experience of the body as "a thing to be worked on" (Heyes 2007, 36), something that can be trained and shaped. Disciplinary power uses a variety of techniques to increase the capacities of the body, while instilling obedience to its own ends. Discipline is "directed not only at the growth of [the body's] skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely" (Foucault 1995, 137-138). The capacities cultivated by discipline must be directed toward discipline's own ends. It would be dangerous and likely undermine military authority to teach soldiers how to kill people if that capacity were not restricted to military use. In other words, the capacities created by discipline must be kept within the disciplinary system to keep the system functioning and to avoid producing "resistance" to the system (Hoffman 2011, 29).

Disciplinary power is effective in achieving this combination of capacity and obedience, or "docility," because it produces subjects that internalize its rules, regulations, and ways of conducting oneself. It does so in part through the technique of observation or surveillance. Disciplinary subjects are made perpetually visible to disciplinary authorities – managers, guards, teachers – through various techniques like the arrangement of desks or architectural design of prisons. Disciplinary subjects also watch one another, as well as those who are watching them. Everyone observes everyone else, knowing the rules of conduct everyone should be following; those within the disciplinary system are,

“supervisors, perpetually supervised” (Foucault 1995, 177). Even when no one else is around to watch, the constant threat of supervision leads to self-surveillance or “self-policing” according to disciplinary rules.¹⁴

The technique of surveillance is one factor that allows for the diffusion of disciplinary power. Surveillance functions like a machine, “permanently and largely in silence” (Foucault 1995, 177). Disciplinary power is spread throughout networks and bureaucracies, and, as just mentioned, is exercised by subjects over themselves. There is no one person in particular exerting influence over others’ actions, no king giving orders and killing those who disobey. Disciplinary subjects police each other and themselves according to the rules they have internalized. As Sandra Bartky puts it, “the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (1990, 70).

Normalizing judgement is another central disciplinary technique. Normalizing judgement functions to evaluate and punish not only violations of rules, but also the failure to meet certain standards or norms. This “perpetual penalty” ranks all behaviour according to its relation to standards, rewarding and punishing accordingly: “all behaviour falls in the field between good and bad marks, good and bad points” (Foucault 1995, 180). Normalizing judgement homogenizes and individualizes a group by considering all members with reference to a particular norm and differentiating persons or “individuals” by their relation to the norm and to each other (Foucault 1995, 184). Indeed, the “individual” is a particular type of subject produced by disciplinary power and its normalizing function (Hoffman 2011, 28). This normalized ranking is understood to reveal something important about the self – “their nature, their potentialities, their level or their value” (Foucault 1995, 181) – not simply one’s actions.

¹⁴ Foucault links the production of self-policing subject to the production of the modern soul (1995, 23). Oksala notes that this internalization of power is a novel feature of modern disciplinary power (Oksala 2005, 98).

While early forms of discipline worked on bodies understood as machines (as per a Cartesian conception of body), disciplinary practices revealed something in the body that resisted training, something that could not be explained by mere mechanical limitations. This revelation made enquiry into the body as a set of processes possible, and in response, various fields of knowledge evolved to enumerate the “natural” norms by which bodies develop and the abnormalities or deviances from the norm that may occur. Drawing on this knowledge, disciplinary power was able to function more effectively to increase capacities and reduce resistance: “once bodies are conceived as temporally unfolding sets of functions it becomes possible to study these processes and learn not only how to influence them but also, and far more importantly, how to draw on their own inherent energy and power to do so” (McWhorter 1999, 155). Through this knowledge and the techniques developed to make use of it, certain norms become naturalized, understood as the intrinsic, essential, biological, physiological, or psychological way for bodies to function and develop. Disciplinary power and its normalizing function is thus able to claim that it judges in relation to and thereby helps to realize the natural potential of the body, rendering itself not only benevolent, but largely invisible (McWhorter 1999, 156).

According to Oksala, “modern power” is largely normalizing, and is very effective in constraining behaviours and creating docile subjects. She writes, “we modify our behaviour in an endless attempt to approximate the normal” (Oksala 2011a, 89). Any inability to meet norms reflects on the individual’s inadequacies or deviances, not the legitimacy of the norms themselves. Oksala notes that sex, for one, is a particularly forceful norm in contemporary societies (2011a, 92). Much work goes into realizing what is a supposedly natural sex, one that we may experience as central to our “true” selves. Heyes argues that the preponderance of normalizing power produces an experience of the self as having a natural, authentic, “inner” self and mobilizes the injunction to realize this self on the visible body (2007, 36). This serves to disguise the contingency of norms, as we feel they are natural to us, and

thus our realization of them is integral to “becoming who we really are.” Heyes explains, “the naturalization of contingent norms is achieved by deploying the perceived distinction between the inner and the outer: *inside* each of us there is an authentic self that must (and this *must* has both an ontological and an ethical force) be made manifest on the *outside*” (2007, 36). It thereby becomes difficult for people to refuse deployments of disciplinary or normalizing power because authorities can claim that they are simply trying to help people be who they are *meant* to be.

Experiencing Bodies

We can connect this account of power with analyses of dominant forms of knowledge about the body in order to get a fuller picture of contemporary Western experiences of bodies. Ladelle McWhorter, for example, notes the lasting influence of Cartesian dualism on experiences of the contemporary body, where body is defined as an “unthinking thing” in contrast to the mind (1999, 139-140). Bordo outlines a history of Western philosophical discourses on mind-body dualism, culminating with Descartes’s philosophy, which she argues generates experiences of the body as alien, confinement or limitation, enemy, and “the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*” (1993, 144-145 [original emphasis]). She also identifies a discourse of control, linked to dualism, whereby the self (identified with the mind) strives to take a dictatorial relation to one’s body (1993, 148-154). Additionally, McWhorter describes a Lockean conception of the body as one’s own property, which she contends largely determines how contemporary Americans experience their bodies and how they conceive of politics “as negotiation of struggle over property” (1999, 143). These discourses about bodies contribute to an experience of the body as “a historical given” (McWhorter 1999, 142), which we can and should control and may, in most cases, do with as we wish.

McWhorter notes that the experiences constituted by dualist and Lockean understandings of bodies do not cohere well with experiences produced by normalizing power. She argues that normalization produces an experience of the body as organism, a developmental entity with its own systems and mechanisms that function without intention or involvement of the mind (1999, 150). On this picture, our minds themselves are developmental, functioning according to biological and neurological norms of which we have little control or knowledge.¹⁵ The dissonances between these experiences undermine dualist accounts and experiences of one's mind and body, but nonetheless dualism maintains a hold on experiences of bodies. McWhorter links its persistence to its usefulness for dominant forms of power. Capacities arising from the "self-control" mandated by this understanding of bodies are taken up by dominant political and social forces – "being a nice girl only makes it easier for sexist pigs to insult and injure you... being a conscientious laborer only makes it easier for the bosses to pay you less and work you more" – and can be used to justify the utter (political, legal, physical) domination of individuals who do not properly "control" themselves (1999, 143-144). Thus she suggests that these understanding and concurrent experiences of the body need to be a target for resistance and counterattack.

While the aforementioned features can be seen as general to contemporary experiences of bodies in Western cultures, feminists have argued that significant differences arise when gender is taken into account. In her canonical work *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Susan Bordo argues that for contemporary women the general imperative to control one's body is largely aimed at managing "the appropriate surface presentation of the self" (1993, 170). Sandra Bartky (1990) contends that the practices undertaken to manage one's "surface presentation," such as diet and exercise, hairstyling, use

¹⁵ Rose (2007) makes a case for "neurochemical" selves (187-223), further undermining not only the separation of mind and body but the capacity of the mind to properly control itself and the body.

of cosmetics, and skincare regimes, are disciplinary practices that serve patriarchy (66). This “institutionally *unbound*” (Bartky 1990, 75) disciplinary network works to create a feminine “body-subject” (1990, 71) both useful and obedient to patriarchal social structures. This discipline functions in part through surveillance by the “male gaze,” the observation and judgement of bodies according to heteronormative, phallogocentric standards, instantiated by men and internalized by women: “a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment” (Bartky 1990, 72).

The patriarchal disciplinary practices of femininity are multiple, intensive, and, thanks to the normalization of femininity, nearly obligatory as an expression of “natural” gender and sex. The norms of femininity are, however, “impossible to realize, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature” (Bartky 1990, 80), generating an experience of perpetual bodily failure. It is not only the inevitable failure to meet this norm, but the practices of femininity themselves, supposedly meant to ameliorate this lack, that produce experiences of deficiency: “through these disciplines we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo 1993, 166). Rather than calling these norms into question, this experiential failure inspires further engagement in disciplinary practices, seemingly the only options to mitigate the suffering following from such failure. Hence, as Bartky says, “the compulsive or even ritualistic character” of the practices (1990, 72). The bind is that even if a woman managed to realize her “true” femininity she would attain little social or political benefit. Femininity is devalued by the very patriarchal structures that produce it: “even when the mastery of the disciplines of femininity produce a triumphant result, we are still only women” (Bartky 1990, 82).

In sum, feminist Foucauldian analyses reveal that women’s experiences of their bodies are largely negative: psychologically painful, disempowering, and limiting. Experiencing the body as

perpetually deficient and as a constantly visible object for the male gaze is not simply “imposed” upon women, but is created by the obligatory practices of femininity, in which many women willingly and even happily engage. Normalizing power insists on the naturalness and essential character of femininity and thus prevents women from imagining themselves as anything other than this: “the possibility of openness to self-creation—to thinking oneself differently than the norm predicts—is foreclosed” (Heyes 2007, 119). Bartky notes that without femininity, women may be unable to see themselves as humans at all: “any political project which aims to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation” (1990, 77). Because of the centrality of femininity to the subjectivity of women, no matter what else a woman may accomplish, the project of femininity supercedes it all: “whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please or to excite” (Bartky 1990, 80). Moreover, through the practices they inspire and demand, such experiences contribute to the production and maintenance of patriarchal power relations. It is through these “micro” instances of power, the make-up application, the calorie counting, and the nose job, that large-scale systems of patriarchal oppression are constituted.

Insofar as it seems nearly impossible to “outsmart” disciplinary power, it is easy to see why some have rejected this picture as too pessimistic. Foucault insisted, however, that his account of power and subjectivity was not deterministic. He claimed that this view does allow for freedom and resistance to various power relations and the subjectivities and experiences they produce: “I think there are a thousand things that can be done, invented, contrived by those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they are involved, have decided to resist or escape them. From that viewpoint, all my research

rests on a postulate of absolute optimism” (Foucault 2000a, 294). In the next section I outline a Foucauldian understanding of freedom and resistance. This constitutes the second part of my thesis that by Foucault’s account, historically constituted experience is open to intentional change.

Resistance

For Foucault, freedom is a fundamental correlate to power. Power relations are, by definition, open to alteration and modification by those implicated in them. Foucault writes, “one always has to think about it [power] in such a way as to see how it is associated with a domain of possibility and consequently, of reversibility, of possible reversal” (2007, 66). People are almost always capable of acting other than as power coerces and encourages them to do. Put differently, one would seek to influence others’ actions precisely because there are a variety of possibilities for action. Power “operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself” (Foucault 2000d, 341). The indeterminacy of action, then, can be understood as freedom. Oksala describes freedom in this sense as the “precondition and permanent provocation of power” (2005, 191). However, Foucault also distinguishes between possibilities for action that may be capable of reversing or altering power relations and those that may not. Thus we might discern between freedom considered abstractly – in the sense that there are many possibilities for action – and what I will call “meaningful” freedom. Abstract freedom is a state in which “individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of

behaviour are available” (Foucault 2000d, 342). Having possibilities for action that might actually alter power relations is what I will call meaningful freedom.¹⁶

According to Foucault, where there is no freedom there is no power: only domination (1997j, 283). Domination occurs when power relations are rigid, asymmetrical, and extremely restrictive of actions and possibilities: “the power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen” (Foucault 1997j, 283).¹⁷ Domination precludes manoeuvres that might open up power relations and create possibilities for action, or freedom: “in such a state [of domination], it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited” (Foucault 1997j, 283). Foucault gives the example of 18th and 19th century housewives as dominated by the conventional marital structure of the time (1997j, 292). While the housewives had various actions available to them, Foucault argues that none of these were sufficient to reverse or alter the (patriarchal) power relations that restricted them. He also notes that when certain patterns of behaviour become entrenched as religious imperatives or as medically necessary, a situation of domination can arise (1997g, 148). While individuals may “disobey” religious imperatives, for example, in certain contexts there may be few courses of action that would effectively undermine religious authority. Taking Oksala’s example mentioned earlier, where male or female sex and gender is understood to be an essential natural feature of human beings (backed up by scientific and medical knowledge and social norms), individuals may

¹⁶ Oksala (2005) identifies four distinct uses of freedom in Foucault’s work. First, she posits freedom as ontological contingency, the fact that things need not be as they are. Secondly, there is freedom as ethics or the deliberate practice or realization of this ontological contingency. Freedom is also the ethos of the Enlightenment, adopted as a value by Foucault. Lastly, she defines freedom in a negative sense as the “precondition and permanent provocation of power” (Oksala 2005, 191). This is freedom as, by definition, a feature of power relations. My distinction between abstract and meaningful freedom is not contrary to these. I simply make this distinction because of my focus on resistance. Abstract freedom, in a sense, pulls together ontological contingency and Oksala’s fourth sort of freedom, the “provocation” of power. Meaningful freedom can be practiced intentionally, through ethics, but I think it can also be unintentionally realized, as I will describe in the next section on resistance.

¹⁷ While this quotation suggests that domination is a power relation, elsewhere Foucault denies that domination is a power relation at all (Foucault 1997f, 167). I think this is a simple function of the definition of power relations as including freedom, and of domination as a situation without freedom.

be in a situation of domination insofar as they are unable to alter the injunction to be so sexed and gendered in order to be socially recognized.

It is because of freedom in a meaningful sense, having various possibilities for actions that may alter power relations, that intentional resistance to certain strategies and tactics of power, and more generally, certain configurations of power relations, is possible. By resistance I mean actions that refuse, exceed, or challenge the constraints created by particular power relations. We can break this general definition into at least two “types” of resistance (though it may be more helpful to think of this as a spectrum). First, resistance can be produced through practices or clashes between incompatible discourses and arise spontaneously and unintentionally, like the way the ‘natural’ body resisted early disciplinary training.¹⁸ This is an unavoidable consequence of what Oksala (2005) calls “ontological contingency.” Gordon explains that, “there is always something in the social body, and in each person, which evades or wrestles with others’ attempts to act on our own ways of acting” (2000, xx).

One example of unintentional resistance is that of 19th century hysterics, as described by Foucault in *Psychiatric Power* (2006). Though the hysteric was in no way intentionally opposing psychiatry or trying to undermine psychiatrists’ authority, Foucault “salutes” them as “the true militants of antipsychiatry” (2006, 254). He gives them this distinction because of the way the wildly various symptoms of hysteria undermined the ability of psychiatry to claim physical or organic bases for psychiatric illnesses. In other words, hysteria calls into question the legitimacy of psychiatry’s attempt to establish the reality of madness. Foucault writes,

¹⁸ I think this is also the sort of resistance Oksala (2004) locates in the “experiential body.” Because historically constituted experience is complexly created and further, because subjects have particular relations to these experiences, lived experiences of the body are not congruent with dominant discourses on (experiences of) the body and can thus these experiences, “can multiply, distort, and overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences” (Oksala 2004, 112). However, as Oksala points out and as I will argue, this sort of unintentional resistance is unlikely to alter power relations on its own. I argue in Chapter Three that we might harness these moments of unintentional resistance as sorts of counter-memories, to create a “place” from which to critique dominant discourses.

They were the front of resistance, because, what is a hysteric?... when one wants to fix her illness in reality, one can never manage to do so, since, when her symptom should refer to an organic substratum, she shows that there is no substratum, so that she cannot be fixed at the level of reality of her illness at the very moment she displays the most spectacular symptoms (2006, 253-254).

This kind of resistance may alter or reverse certain power relations, and certainly contributes to the transformation of power relations over time. However, it is also possible that dominant forms of power will modify tactics to absorb it, as early disciplinary power did with the resistance of the body.¹⁹ While unintentional resistance can work through individuals, as it did with the women suffering from hysteria, it was not the intention of these women to resist. The resistance simply arose out of their bodies. Nor, unfortunately, did it benefit these women or increase their freedom to resist psychiatric power in this way.

The second type of resistance is intentional resistance enacted by subjects with particular goals in mind. Given Foucault's definition of power, getting "outside" of power is nonsensical (unless we want to be in a situation of domination). Nonetheless, one can "escape" from particular configurations or relations of power (Oksala 2005, 177). One might not only refuse to do as one is being encouraged, enticed, or ordered, but act in such a way to minimize or destroy the influence of a particular power relation on the self. Foucault explains that "to say no is the minimum form of resistance" (1997f, 168). To resist in a *meaningful* way, in a way that effectively alters power relations, resistance must be more than a refusal. This is resistance as the "art of voluntary insubordination" (Foucault 2007, 47); the refusal to be constructed or subjected in a particular way and the work to make oneself otherwise. For this reason, McWhorter prefers the term "counterattack" to resistance for its positive, creative, and

¹⁹ Bordo argues that in the case of hysteria, this unintentional resistance did not succeed in altering power relations for the better (cf. "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," in Bordo 1993).

aggressive connotations (1999, 191). How, exactly, does one meaningfully, intentionally resist or counterattack particular power relations? More specifically, if simply refusing the normative injunction to realize our “essential” femininity is insufficient, how might we counterattack the patriarchal power relations that constitute experiences of women’s bodies? These questions bring us to Foucault’s ethics as the intentional practice of freedom.

Ethics

Foucault scholars have pointed to Foucault’s late work on ethics as opening up the possibility of intentional, meaningful resistance. According to Foucault, ethics can be understood as the actions of the self on the self with the aim of making, developing, or transforming the self to reach a particular state of being (1997j, 291). In other words, ethics involves the relationship of the self with the self and the practices which, in part, create and develop identities (Foucault 1997c, 263). In particular, ethical practices constitute the self as moral subject. Foucault also describes these practices as technologies of the self, activities which people undertake “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” (1997i, 225).

Like all practices, ethical practices are made possible and intelligible by historically particular forms of experience and are constrained by dominant forms of power. If we unquestioningly take up practices of the self offered by our culture, we risk making ourselves into the kinds of subjects that serve dominant disciplinary or normalizing power. For instance, many of the disciplinary practices Bartky (1990) describes—dieting, for instance—can be read as practices of the self aimed at constituting happy, self-contented feminine selves. Heyes argues in *Self-Transformations* (2007) that conventional

practices of self in Western culture presuppose an essential or true self that needs to be discovered, uncovered, and reflected on the surface of the body and through our actions. Thus individuals try to discover, uncover, or reveal their true selves through a variety of activities; popular practices include reading self-help books (a quick google of “self-help” and “true self” provides hundreds of examples) and weight loss (personal testimonials make constant use of the self-discovery trope). This obfuscates the contingency of the norms in question (Heyes 2007, 34), effectively “disappearing” normalizing power, and limiting possibilities for imagining and making the self otherwise. From a Foucauldian perspective it is the practices of discovery and attempts to make the self manifest that are creating the self – they do not uncover any prior authentic self: “rather than assuming that facing hardships allows me to *discover* my true qualities, my true self, I need to recognize that actively facing hardships is what *makes* me into a certain kind of self” (McGushin 2011, 129).

Foucault suggests that if we recognize the ways in which we are being made through practices of the self, we can intentionally and thoughtfully engage in practices that produce different sorts of selves, thereby avoiding reinforcing and reiterating dominant power relations. It is in this sense that we can understand Dianna Taylor's statement that, “freedom for Foucault is not a state we occupy, but rather a practice that we undertake” (2011a, 4). Freedom is not only having various possibilities for action, but the practices that take advantage of, and create more of, such possibilities: “freedom is not only a non-subjective opening of possibilities, but it can also be deliberately cultivated and practiced by subjects” (Oksala 2005, 12). In Foucault's words: “freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (1997j, 284). We may realize freedom (read as various possibilities for action, entailing possibilities for selves and experiences) by making ourselves in ways other than dominant power relations would make us, thus altering the way these power relations affect us and potentially alter the relations themselves.

What is needed, then, are ethical practices that would effectively challenge dominant power relations and the way they produce experiences of bodies. These practices will still be made possible, intelligible, and appealing with reference to the structures of experience, but may be strategically chosen and practiced in order to avoid reproducing dominant power relations. How are we to go about this? Foucault refused to make prescriptions about the sorts of practices that could be practices of freedom. He insisted:

I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. I hold that the role of the intellectual today is not that of establishing laws or proposing solutions or prophesying, since by doing that one can only contribute to the functioning of a determinate situation of power that to my mind must be criticized (Foucault 1991, 157).

Nonetheless, Foucault did provide some suggestions or guidelines for choosing ethical practices. For one, it will be helpful to know what practices we are currently engaged in, the power relations implicated by them, and the kinds of selves we are creating through them. When we know how we are constrained, we are better able to work ourselves free from these constraints (May 2011, 74). This knowledge can come from various sources. Foucault explains that, “people have to build their own ethics, taking as a point of departure the historical analysis, sociological analysis, and so on that one can provide for them” (1997b, 132). With their attentiveness to power, genealogical analyses will be particularly helpful to guide an ethics aimed at freedom, hence Mendieta’s description of genealogy as “a science of freedom” (2011, 113).

Further, in contrast to the contemporary Western obsession with finding one's true self—which, as we have seen, plays into normalizing power—we might take a creative approach to our self-making: “the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (Foucault 1997f, 166). Foucault likened this creative approach to an artistic endeavour. This artistic work on the self “is not (primarily) to produce an object that is pleasing to look at” (O’Leary 2002, 137); rather, “[it] is a certain attitude towards the self; an attitude which facilitates continuous critical self-transformation” (O’Leary 2002, 140). Taking the self as a work of art emphasizes creativity and freedom in the cultivation of one’s ways of being, rather than working to reveal an essential self hiding somewhere inside. This necessitates a constant self-critique, an experimental attitude, which may lead one to try “diverse practices” (Markula and Pringle 2006, 141-142), and entails a focus on the process of making, trying, and testing out, rather than on the end product. Using the knowledge one has about the ways one is being made, one can experiment with making oneself otherwise. Todd May explains that, “to live freely is to experiment with oneself, not always knowing whether one is getting free of the forces that have moulded one, nor... being sure of the effects of one’s experimentation” (May 2011, 80).²⁰

This focus on process connects with another of Foucault’s suggestions: that ethical practices of freedom should work to separate capacity from docility. We may engage in disciplinary practices as ethical practice, but we need to separate the capacities we gain from obedience and the “narrowing of behavioural possibility,” which usually accompanies it (McWhorter 1999, 180). McWhorter states that ethical practices cannot have an ultimate end other than “the expansion of behavioural options”

²⁰ I think of ethics as experimentation in the sense that one uses the phrase “experiments with drugs.” One is interested in trying something because they have some idea that they might get a good experience out of it, it intrigues them, seems like it may be pleasurable, but they are not and cannot be certain of what precisely what will happen. Perhaps they will make a habit of it, or perhaps it will be a onetime event.

(McWhorter 1999, 182). In other words, practices of freedom should maintain a structural “openness to becoming,” the perpetually critical and experimental attitude of the artist, through the rejection of static goals (1999, 193).

In short, the promise of this Foucauldian view is that “because we have become, we can also become different” (Mendieta 2011, 122). Recognizing the ways we have been made, we can refuse and make ourselves differently. We can use the practices provided to us by our cultures and societies as ethical practices of freedom but we should maintain an aesthetic or experimental attitude toward them and be attentive to their power effects. Recognizing that the experience of certain bodies as deficient is constituted in part by practices, this view suggests that we may practice ourselves into new, and potentially more positive, freedom-enhancing experiences of bodies. For feminists committed to ending patriarchal oppression, this alteration of practices becomes an ethical imperative. Bordo writes, “I view our bodies as a site of struggle, where we must *work* to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization” (2003, 184 [original emphasis]). Bartky asserts that, for example, “self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy” (Bartky 1990, 80). It seems that continuing with self-policing, for one, is therefore unjustifiable.²¹ Of course, as the questions motivating this thesis attest, changing one’s practices, however historically contingent or politically problematic we might think them, is not as simple as accepting that we should. It is my task in the chapters that follow to sort this out.

²¹ I think about ways to reduce self-policing in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented an account of experience in Foucauldian terms. I made a case for understanding experience as both constructed and open to intentional change. I have argued that experiences are the product of particular historically situated interactions between knowledge, power relations, and self-relations and the practices that follow from and feed back into these configurations. I have identified some of the main features of contemporary experiences of women's bodies as revealed by feminist Foucauldian analyses. I ended by introducing ethics as a practice of freedom and an opportunity to intentionally resist certain power relations by strategically altering practices of the self. My next chapter will build upon this account and look further into ethical practice as a way to change experiences in light of their constitution by constraining forms of power.

Chapter Two: Thinking Experience Differently

This chapter takes a closer look at the concepts of historically constituted experience and ethics introduced in Chapter One. In particular, I am interested in self-relation as both partially constitutive of historically constituted experience and the possibility of ethics as a practice of freedom. I follow Johanna Oksala's (2005) assertion that due to the reflexivity of self-relation, historically constituted experience should be conceived of as a series of foldings rather than as a prism. I argue that these foldings are what Foucault described as thought. As part of constituted experience, thought is desubjectivized; certain objects of thought (or forms of self-relation) are given as part of the "general background structure" of experience, limiting the possibility and intelligibility of practices accordingly. However, reflection is also the possibility of ethics and thus of the practice of freedom and intentional transformation of experience. Thus I distinguish the practice of thinking from desubjectivized thought. I argue that given this reading of thought, Foucauldian critique is a practice of "free" thinking that works to problematize dominant forms of thought and the practices linked to them. I introduce the notion of effective problematization, a potential effect of critique, where dominant forms of thought are problematized with such force that it makes possible or effects a new relation to these objects, a relation that may be interpreted as a "fold" in desubjectivized experience. I suggest that it is through this shift in relation that we can understand the link between Foucauldian critique and "limit-experiences," mysterious self-transformative events that transgress and thereby reveal the limits of the subject as contingent. In the last section I argue that by "sharing" his critiques in his books, Foucault attempted to effectively problematize dominant forms of thought for others, making possible or even necessitating the transformation of practices and experiences. That is, in addition to its potential as an ethical practice of thinking, critique can be used as a practice of power. I conclude by suggesting that feminist critiques

of embodiment can be understood as working to effectively problematize experiences of women's bodies, opening up space for a new relation to these experiences and the elaboration of practices informed by this relation.

Thought

According to Johanna Oksala, Foucault enabled the subject's intentional engagement in her own constitution with the introduction of the axis of self-relation. She explains that through this addition, "the subject constituted by the power/knowledge network is now capable of turning back upon itself: of critically studying the processes of its own constitution, but also of subverting them and effecting changes in them" (2005, 165). It is this capacity for self-relation or reflection that makes ethics, as described in the last chapter, possible. Subjects are able to critically reflect upon aspects of themselves and work to alter them, to bring their thoughts or desires, for example, into line with certain values or ideals. And yet, this self-relation is not somehow outside constituted experience, allowing subjects to evaluate their constitution from some objective standpoint. Taking self-relation to be an axis of constituted experience means we must think of reflection as intimately linked to and conditioned by historically particular forms of power-knowledge. Oksala describes forms of reflection and self-understanding as "culturally and historically intelligible conceptions and patterns of behaviour that subjects draw from the surrounding society" (2005, 4). So how are we to understand self-relation, constrained as it is, as the basis for the practice of freedom and intentional resistance?

I contend that this seeming paradox of self-relation can be understood through Foucault's concept of thought. Thought is, in one sense, the reflexivity that is part of historically constituted experience and which attaches itself to certain aspects of experience as objects of reflection. In other words, thought is the folding of experience back onto itself. Oksala argues that historically constituted

experience is best conceived of as a series of “foldings” rather than as a prism bounded by the power, knowledge, and self-relations axes (2011b, 211).²² The self-relations axis doubles back onto the field of constituted experience, allowing for certain experiences (including those of the self) to become objects of reflection, or for their existence *qua* experience to enter the field of possible experiences. As part of the structure of historically constituted experience, these folds determine what aspects of experience are available for subjects forming within this field of experience to think or reflect upon as well as the practices that are possible and intelligible for these subjects.²³

Foucault describes thought as “the domain where the formation, development, and transformation of forms of experience can situate themselves” (1997e, 200). It is in thought that experience appears as aspects of the self or the world that can be contemplated, questioned, or considered. It is in the space of this fold that experiences are available for reflection rather than experienced as immediacies. Hence Foucault’s statement that experience is “something that can and must be thought” (1985, 7).²⁴ Further, practices taken up in relation to particular forms of thought modify experience and create the conditions wherein new objects of thought are produced. As outlined in Chapter One, practices produce subjects and experience in general. As I will explain shortly,

²² Oksala makes this point in her 2011 *Hypatia* paper on the basis of lived experiences of the body, which exceed dominant discourses on the body and so challenge and may alter these discourses. Because individuals can reflect upon their own experiences, these experiences are a resource for transformation to historically constituted experience: “the external determinants or historical background of experience and the internal, private sensations fold into and continuously keep modifying each other” (Oksala 2011b, 211). This is not exactly what I am arguing here, because I am referring to the ways this reflection is constrained for subjects. Nonetheless, my use does not preclude Oksala’s argument about the relation between subjective experience and historically constituted experience.

²³ To be clear, I am discussing the field of possible experiences for subjects in a particular time and place, not the actual lived experiences of persons who may constitute themselves within this field. Thus a fold in no way guarantees that an individual will consider a certain experience to be problematic or curious, nor does it imply that the dominant objects of thought are consciously “thought” by particular persons. It simply means that there are certain constraints on what can be thought, what people are interested in thinking, and what it makes sense to think about, at any particular time and place. Significantly, thought generates practices that only make sense within the given configuration of experience. Thus, my practices *including* my subjective thinking may be legitimating and reifying dominant “folds” or forms of thought, which is a problem if they are linked to forms of power I want to resist.

²⁴ I also see in this statement an injunction for individuals to think experience, to make it the object of philosophical, critical analysis as Foucault does. In this sense, “thought” is read as the subjective practice of thought, rather than the folding I have discussed thus far.

practices also produce the conditions for certain aspects of experience to become objects of thought, and thus open up possibilities for new forms of thought. Thus thought, and the practices it informs, can be understood as a driving factor in the “formation, development, and transformation” of experience.

Recall the definition of practices given in Chapter One: practices are “different systems of action insofar as they are inhabited by thought” (Foucault 1997e, 201). In this sense, thought is not what any particular subject has in her consciousness while acting, or the justifications she might give for her actions. “What distinguishes thought is that it is something quite different from the set of representations that underlie a certain behavior; it is also something quite different from the domain of attitudes that can determine this behavior” (1997d, 117), explains Foucault. Rather, thought is a particular configuration of experience that makes certain practices possible and intelligible. Thus subjects acting within this configuration can be understood as practising a certain way of thinking. To reiterate, this does not imply that all subjects consciously reflect upon these experiences, but that their practices reflect this configuration of thought. In this way, practices are “a way of acting and thinking at once” (Foucault 1998b, 462). It is in this sense that thought is desubjectivized and cannot be understood as (at least only) something happening within the heads of subjects.

As with experience in general, practices are the analytic key to an investigation into historically particular forms of thought: “[thought] can and must be analyzed in every manner of speaking, doing, or behaving in which the individual appears and acts as a knowing subject, as ethical or juridical subject, as subject conscious of himself and others” (Foucault 1997e, 201). To restate what was established in Chapter One, the analysis of historically singular experiences will begin with the analysis of practices, which will reflect not only the forms of power and knowledge involved in the constitution of experience, but also the forms of thought constraining these practices. Because thought limits what aspects of a field of possible experience are available for subjects to reflect upon as well as the

practices that are available to them, we can begin to see why Foucault described his analyses of historically singular experiences as a “history of thought.” He writes: “there is no experience that is not a way of thinking and cannot be analyzed from the viewpoint of the history of thought” (1997c, 201).

Foucault also describes thought in terms of a capacity for separation or dissociation:

[Thought is] what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting to the present itself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem (Foucault 1997d, 117).

In terms of historically constituted experience, I interpret this statement to mean that thought allows for the limited objectification of some aspects of experience by subjects within this field of experience. Thought allows the subject to partially dissociate from this or that aspect of experience, making these experiences available for contemplation, questioning, and critique. In terms of the spatial imagery I have been using, this is the space of the fold. As the metaphor of folding suggests, thought does not allow a subject to remove herself from the experience in question or even from the field of possible experiences in order to reflect; this is not a distinct subject/object separation. Rather, the subject is allowed a certain reflective distance from various aspects of her experience thanks to the folds of thought, but nonetheless remains “attached” to them, or, if you will, part of the same fabric of experience.

In order to become an object of thought, an aspect of experience must become curious, uncertain, or provoke difficulties. In short, it must become a problem. In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes his interest in analyzing the “*problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which these are formed” (Foucault 1985, 11 [original emphasis]). Problematizations develop from “social, economic, or political

processes” (Foucault 1997d, 117). They can be understood as gaps, fissures, or contradictions arising from the interaction and incongruities of various practices. This is because while there is a sort of constitutive looping between practices and experience, this is not a closed system. Foucault describes this as follows: “schematically speaking, we have perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it” (2007, 65). Practices and forms of knowledge, power, and self-relations are constantly shifting, producing new forms of experience and subjectivities that conflict with extant forms. This is one way that practices generate the conditions for new objects of thought. An example of this is the conflict between the experiences generated by forms of mind-body dualism and normalization that I mentioned in Chapter One.

Foucault’s later work focused on bringing out the circumstances of the problematizations underlying dominant forms of thought, analyzing the practices and forms of knowledge, power, and self-relation that led to their development and prominence. He describes his task as a historian of thought as, “to define the conditions in which human beings ‘problematize’ what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live” (1985, 10). Rather than comparing various practices, forms of knowledge, or techniques of power surrounding sexuality, for example, he was interested in “the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions” (Foucault 1997d, 118). In short, Foucault was interested in the construction of sexuality as a moral problem, the dominant problematization or form of thought that is the basis of varied and conflicting discourses and practices surrounding sexuality (1985, 10).

This brings us to the second sense of thought; thought as a practice taken up by subjects. Though thought is part of the “background structures” of experience, subjects also are free in relation to what is given to thought and how it is taken up. As Rabinow puts it, thought is “always a practice of

freedom that could have taken (or could take in the future) a different form” (1997, xxxvi). This is possible not only because the folds of experience are contingent²⁵ – as Rabinow explains, any aspect of the field of experience can be an object for thought (1997, xxxiv) – but because subjects may *practice* thought or think outside of the constraints dominant folds may place on them.

As with practices in general, thinking within constraints perpetuates the power-knowledge-self-relation configurations that have constrained it. As Judith Butler explains, practices based on certain problematizations produce forms of experience that reify limits on what is deemed possible or, I would add, intelligible: “certain kinds of practices which are designed to handle certain kinds of problems produce, over time, a settled domain of ontology as their consequence, and this ontological domain, in turn, constrains our understanding of what is possible” (2002, 7). Working to free thought from these constraints is especially pressing for those interested in resistance or counterattack. Whereas practices are made possible and intelligible by forms of thought, strategies of (apparent) ethical resistance can be formulated *within* dominant forms of thought, reifying and reinforcing the forms of power involved in the fold itself. For example, McWhorter criticizes gay rights activists working to affirm homosexuality for reinforcing sexual normalization (1999, 98).²⁶ While these activists are responding to a real and troubling problem (i.e. the political and social oppression of homosexuals), without this attentiveness to thought, their resistance remains constrained by dominant forms of power. The dominant way of thinking about sexuality (i.e. as an essential and definitive feature of human beings) is unaffected by this resistance, and, as McWhorter’s work shows, this way of thinking is the source of strict constraints on freedom (namely normalized constraints).

²⁵ Oksala puts it this way: “thinking can only take place within a historically defined framework of rules and practices, but this framework is never a necessity” (Oksala 2005, 13).

²⁶ McWhorter argues for the need to dismantle sexual normalization in general, rather than simply revaluing homosexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality within this problematization. She explains this distinction: “I didn’t stand opposed to my tormentor’s *appraisal of homosexuality*. I stood opposed to their *drive to identify everyone on the basis of sexuality*” (McWhorter 1999, 98 [original emphasis]).

To be clear, attentiveness to historically constituted thought does not in any way get us outside of power. We might think of it as a folding over onto dominant folds themselves, always within the limits of the field of experience. However, if it is true that power functions as Foucault claims, then being attentive to the ways dominant forms of thought constrains the practice of thought may help us formulate more effective strategies for counterattack. This brings us to the question of how one might begin to think freely. In the next section I suggest that Foucauldian critique is a practice of thinking that works to free itself from dominant constraints on thought by problematizing dominant forms of thought.

Thinking Thinking: Foucauldian Critique

According to my reading of Foucault's work, critique attempts to think freely by taking dominant forms of thought as *its* object of thought.²⁷ In other words, critique works to problematize dominant forms of thought and the practices that are linked to them by revealing them as contingent and their limits as transgressable. In contrast to Kantian critique, this is critique as a question of the possibility of transgressing limits, not simply discerning what they are (Mendieta 2011, 121). Paul Rabinow describes Foucault's work as an effort "to cultivate attention to the conditions under which things become 'evident,' ceasing to be objects of our attention and therefore seemingly fixed, necessary, and unchangeable" (1997, xix). Critique does this by tracing the historical circumstances of dominant problematizations, the accidents and stratagems through which certain forms of thought became dominant and their limits and foundations taken for granted. If successful, I suggest that this problematization can create a new relation to these forms of thought and permit the articulation of new practices made possible by this new configuration of thought.

²⁷ Hence Foucault's description of philosophy as "the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself" (1985, 9).

There is a sense that one can intentionally problematize something by simply thinking about it skeptically. I can go to philosophy class and consider the potential unreality of my hand, or this table, or anyone else in the world but myself. Once I leave class, I am unlikely to live my life any differently having momentarily doubted the reality of the external world, whereas an *effective* problematization will be transformative of my practices and thus of myself and the way I relate to the world.²⁸ In terms of the framework being elaborated here, we might think of this problematization as creating a new fold in experience. Effective problematization creates a fold between the subject and the object of critique, or a new form of thought. In other words, a new relation is made possible between subjects and certain experiences. Subjects are able, or may find it necessary, to articulate new practices in relation to this new object of thought. With the articulation of new practices, there may be a concurrent shift in experience or subjectivities. This is because of the relation between thought and practices and their effects on the constitution of the self and experience. Note that this means an effective problematization that makes new thought and practices available to subjects, therefore, might be visible only in terms of changes in practices, not necessarily in consciousness or available justifications for actions.

Foucault explains that critique “[seeks] to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (1997k, 316). It is not that subjects are unfree with regard to thought prior to critique. Rather, it is through the problematization of formerly given limits that subjects are able to

²⁸ I read Linda Zerilli (1998) as addressing a similar problem. She argues that skeptical criticism of sex dimorphism does little to affect the way sex dimorphism determines “thinking, acting, and desiring” (1998, 436) and the way we understand ourselves as sexed and gendered beings. She argues, using Wittgensteinian terms, that sex dimorphism is a certainty, or an unjustified belief that is foundational to subjectivities and practices. Translating this into Foucauldian terms, we might say that sex dimorphism is an exceptionally dominant feature of our contemporary field of experience. Zerilli argues that we are unable to unseat sex dimorphism with propositional arguments and skeptical techniques because its acceptance and influence are not a matter of such reasoning in the first place. Thus, philosophical and scientific attacks on sex dimorphism are misguided and ultimately ineffective. These critiques may be understood as working within a dominant form of thought, specifically by problematizing sex dimorphism as a propositional belief to be confirmed or denied by propositional knowledge. This assumes that sex dimorphism the kind of thing that we could separate ourselves from and reject if we were given good enough reasons to do so. Because sex dimorphism is not this kind of thing (nor are we the sorts of subjects that could do this anyway), resistance using this framework is ultimately ineffective. In Chapter Three I argue that I made a similar mistake with my original research question.

articulate different practices. As Oksala writes, the point of Foucauldian critique is to “investigate limits and constraints, abusive forms of power, and in revealing them as contingent, to open up the possibilities for experimenting to transgress them” (2005, 186).²⁹ The elaboration of practices aimed at transgression is possible precisely because of the problematization of these limits. In other words, it is because of a shift in thought, creating the possibility to form a new relation to these limits, that we are able to articulate practices involving these aspects of experience that would make no sense within a dominant form of thought.

From a desubjectivized standpoint, problematizations arising from the interactions of various practices may do so with such force or within such circumstances that new folds in the field of experience materialize “unintentionally,” affording new objects of thought and practices to subjects. However, Foucault notes that areas of uncertainty in experience can exist for some time before any “effective problematization by thought” (1997d, 118). It is not a given that thought will turn to a problem arising within the field of constituted experience. Because thought is free, subjects might intentionally call attention to certain non-dominant problems, making them more immediate or pressing to themselves and other subjects in the field of experience. Foucault describes his books as contributing to extant but non-dominant problems, articulating these problems with such force as to “unleash” them into the public (1991, 159).³⁰ In other words, subjects might work to highlight and strengthen weak or undeveloped problems, creating or enhancing a “fold” on these aspects of experience, making them

²⁹ Foucault’s stated objective for Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality* was “to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (1985, 9). In other words, he set out to uncover the limits or constraints of thinking about sexuality in order to better strategize about thinking freely in this context.

³⁰ Foucault describes his work as giving momentum to projects already in motion: “to give some assistance in wearing away certain self-evidences and commonplaces about madness, normality ... to bring it about, together with many others, that certain phrases can no longer be spoken so lightly, certain acts no longer – or at least no longer so unhesitatingly – performed; to contribute to changing certain things in people’s ways of perceiving and doing things; to participate in this difficult displacement of forms of sensibility and thresholds of tolerance” (2000c, 234 my emphasis); “The book [*Discipline and Punish*] is merely inscribed in something that was already in progress... on the other hand, the book also worked for this transformation; it has been, even if in a small way, an agent” (1991, 41).

available for subjects to think and for different forms of practices to arise.³¹ This “intentional” problematization is a practice of free thought: “the subject exercises freedom in withdrawing from itself and problematizing its behaviour, beliefs and the social field of which it is a part” (Oksala 2005, 181).

For example, while sexuality is a central aspect of contemporary Western thought (and, indeed, is almost a necessary object for thought in the context of sexual normalization [cf. McWhorter 1999], Foucault’s work shows that this thought occurs within a given structure of sexuality as a natural and essential feature about human beings and as something that has fundamental moral relevance. This analysis of sexuality is not undertaken to deny its reality, as even though it is contingent and historically situated, it exists as a fundamental form of experience for contemporary Western subjects. However, by revealing the moral problematization of sexuality as contingent, Foucault’s work suggests that we may relate to sexuality differently, perhaps disconnecting it from its normalizing and freedom-limiting features. Oksala writes that “Foucault’s message to us is that sexuality should be understood as a practice or a way of being that provides possibilities for being otherwise, rather than as a psychological or biological condition that we must reveal the truth about” (2011a, 97). Given this new problematization, practices like “coming out” or, as McWhorter argues, scientific research to locate the “gay gene” (1999, 130-135), for example, may become questionable, dangerous, or lose their importance.

Critique as a Practice of Power

I want to briefly consider a connection between this idea of effective problematization and the second sort of experience identified by Foucault scholars: the limit experience. Foucault described his books as “direct experiences to ‘tear’ me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same”

³¹ “I invite others to share the experience... an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed. Which means that at the conclusions of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue: for instance, madness, its constitution, its history in the modern world” (Foucault 1991, 33-34).

(1991, 32). He did not view his books so much as professional contributions to his discipline but rather as attempts to transform himself and, he hoped, as an opportunity for others to have similar transformative experiences: “my problem is not to satisfy professional historians, my problem is to construct myself, and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed” (Foucault 2000a, 242). In my first chapter I noted that Foucault scholars usually divide experience into two sorts: the historically constituted type and limit experience. Limit experiences are, schematically speaking, a transgression of the constructed limits of the subject.³² Through transgression, this experience reveals the subject for what it is, namely, limited and transgressable, and also transforms the subject, changing both the self and the relation the self has with the world (Foucault 2000a, 239). It is the relation that the self has to the self, or an aspect of the self or its world that is transformed. As Foucault puts it, limit experience is “an experience that might permit an alteration, a transformation, of the relationship we have with ourselves and our cultural universe” (1991, 37).

I suggest that to “effectively problematize” an aspect of experience, something that was previously taken as a natural or necessary aspect of the self or the world, can effect something similar to a limit experience. I make this connection in the sense that an effective problematization can create a

³² We should recall that for Foucault there is no “subject” in general, but only particular kinds of subjects that are produced through various sorts of practices or techniques. Oksala writes that Foucault’s work can be generally characterized as “*a genealogy of the modern subject*” (2005, 3 [original emphasis]). One of the tasks of genealogy is to delineate the kinds of subject that are being produced and the ways in which this production occurs; to be a genealogist, “one has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis that can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework” (Foucault 2000e, 118). To go through with this dispensation, Foucault says we must do more than simply theoretically bracket the subject, or speculate about its non-existence. Foucault explains that “calling the subject in[to] question meant that one would have to experience something leading to its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else” (2000a, 247). In other words, the notion of a constitutive subject, linked to traditional philosophical and scientific practice, is a given that needs to be problematized through, and in order to do, genealogy. Or, conversely, genealogy is a practice that responds to the problematization of the constituent subject.

new relation to an aspect of experience; one is now “outside” or apart from something that one previously identified with, had taken for granted, left unnoticed, or deemed unimportant. I do not mean to suggest that one can orchestrate a limit-experience, mysterious events that they are. What I am suggesting is that by experimenting with critique as an ethical practice, a potential effect is a sort of limit experience in relation to the object of critique.

This connection provides one way to read Foucault’s repeated claim that his books were meant to create an experience for himself and to invite readers to have similar experiences themselves.³³ Martin Jay argues that a limit experience has two aspects: “the task of personal, active self-laceration and the retrospective written fiction that makes it available for others to appropriate for their own lives” (Jay 1995, 159). O’Leary claims that the historical analysis of an experience, as Foucault undertook in his work, “would itself endeavour to provide an experience which, in its own way, is also a limit-experience for the reader” (2009, 81). I contend that to attempt to effectively problematize something or effect a sort of limit experience for others is a practice of power over others. For Foucault, publishing genealogies or critiques more generally was a way of encouraging readers to think differently, of acting on their thought and thus on their practices, experiences, and selves.³⁴

The technique of genealogy is a strategic choice in light of Foucault’s aims for himself and his readers, chosen in part due to the effects of truth on the subject. Foucault explained that in order to create an experience with his books, truth is required: “it is evident that in order to have such an experience through a book like *The History of Madness*, it is necessary that what it asserts is somehow ‘true’ in terms of historically verifiable truth” (1991, 36). Foucault understood that truth has strong

³³ One example of this claim: Foucault said that his books “function as invitations, as public gestures, for those who may want eventually to do the same thing [transform themselves], or something like it, or, in any case, who intend to slip into this kind of experience” (Foucault 1991, 40).

³⁴ According to Foucault, sharing an experience with others is precisely *not* a description of one’s own personal experience: “it’s not at all a matter of transporting personal experiences into knowledge” (2000a, 244). It is a way of creating a similar experience for others, perhaps, but not necessarily, in a similar way as one’s own experience was created. To take another example of a potential limit experience, to read about the experience of taking LSD or another “good drug” would likely not have the same effects on the self as actually undergoing this experience oneself.

effects on contemporary subjects.³⁵ He explains: “what is essential [in *The History of Madness*] is not found in a series of historically verifiable proofs; it lies rather in the experience which the book permits us to have” (1991, 36). Thus Foucault does not assert certain truths simply because they are required by his discipline, but he *uses* truth specifically because of the experience to which it contributes. This is why Foucault described his works as fictions. O’Leary explains: “he doesn’t mean that they [the books] aren’t true, he means that they try (and sometimes succeed) in producing an effect that generates a new set of attitudes and new forms of practice” (2009, 6). Discussing *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains, “the investigation makes use of ‘true’ documents, but in such a way as to furnish not just the evidence of truth but also an experience that might permit an alteration, a transformation, of the relationship we have with ourselves and our cultural universe: in a word, with our knowledge” (1991, 37); and, with more explicit reference to problematization: “the book makes use of true documents, but in such a way that through them it is possible not only to arrive at an establishment of truth but also to experience something that permits a change, a transformation of the relationship we have with ourselves as being without problems” (Foucault 2000a, 244). Given the way contemporary subjects are constituted, they are highly susceptible to truth. Its use, therefore, is a particularly effective strategy for successfully acting on others’ actions.

It seems that this method was particularly effective at problematizing things for others. The reaction of many prison workers to *Discipline and Punish* (1995) – complaining that they were unable to work any longer in good conscience, that they did not know what to do – is a sign, Foucault claimed, that the experience he had in writing the book was “wider” than his alone (2000a, 246). When confronted with the workers’ “paralysis,” Foucault explained that this was precisely the sort of reaction

³⁵ “Things being as they are, nothing so far has shown that it is possible to define a strategy outside of this concern [for the truth]. It is within the field of the obligation to truth that it is possible to move about in one way or another, sometimes against effects of domination which may be linked to structures of truth or institutions entrusted with truth” (Foucault 1997j, 295).

he was hoping to create with his work: “my project is precisely to bring it about that they ‘no longer know what to do,’ so that the acts, gestures, discourses that up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous” (Foucault 2000c, 235). This supports my claim that effective problematization constitutes a shift in thought. Former practices, inhabited by problematizations that are no longer in force or which are problematized themselves, would be inappropriate or make no sense to continue.

This paralysis is not an end in itself (Foucault 2000c, 235). New practices must be elaborated in the face of the new problematization. Foucault described his task as outlining problems in such a way that they would not only problematize but that these new problems they would not be easily answered by those with authority:

I concern myself with determining problems, unleashing them, revealing them within the framework of such complexity as to shut the mouths of prophets and legislators: all those who speak *for* other and *above* others... It is at that moment that the complexity of the problem will be able to appear in its connection with people’s lives; and consequently, the legitimacy of a common enterprise will be able to appear through concrete questions, difficult cases, revolutionary movements, reflections, and evidence (1991, 159).

Foucault claimed that the creation of this malaise would lead to a more radical change over time than any prescriptive work he could do (2000a, 290). According to my reading, this is because thought is in an important (but limited) sense foundational to practices. A shift in thought would necessitate the reworking of many practices, which in turn would create a range of transformations. New practices, responses, and solutions would come about bit by bit, through creative attempts, false starts, etc.: “it’s a matter of working through things little by little, of introducing modifications that are able if not to find solutions, at least to change the given terms of the problem” (Foucault 2000a, 288). In short, by

effectively problematizing dominant forms of thought, Foucault opened up space for thinking differently and for new practices. Because practices are intelligible within certain structures of thought and on the basis of certain problematizations, when thought shifts, practices need to be reinterpreted or altered in order to make sense in terms of the new problem.

Thus it seems that critique has two possible functions; first, as an ethical practice that aims to get outside of constraints by thinking differently. Secondly, sharing critique with others is a practice of power, an attempt to effect a shift in thought, to problematize non-dominant problems and thereby alter practices. As mentioned in Chapter One, Foucault avoided giving prescriptions or recommendations in light of his work. He wanted to leave this space of possible actions as open and undetermined as possible, to avoid filling it with authoritative prescriptions so that subjects finding themselves with this new problem could respond as freely as possible. Foucault described our task in light of his view of power as to “acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ethos*, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games with as little domination as possible” (1997c, 298), and thus, when effecting this shift in thought, left space for the free articulation of responses.

Conclusion

In sum, I have considered the view that experience understood as historically constituted by forms of power-knowledge-self-relation contains within it the reflexivity that is also the possibility for the intentional transformation of experience. As Oksala writes, “the constituted experience and its critical transformation must not be assumed to be two categorically different things” (2011b, 219). I argued that this seeming paradox of experience can be captured by Foucault’s concept of thought. Thought can be understood both as the folding over of historically constituted experience onto itself, producing constraints on the practice of thought by subjects forming within this field of experience *and*

as a capacity for reflection that subjects can practice freely, in the sense that they can act other than they are being constrained to do. I argued that thinking freely is central to successful practices of resistance or attempts to alter experience because of the ways problematizations determine practices. Without an awareness of the problematizations within which one is working, one's practices of resistance can inadvertently reinforce dominant forms of power one wants to combat. I argued that we can read critique as an attempt to cultivate alternative problematizations, specifically to problematize what is taken for granted by dominant problematizations and therefore taken as inevitable aspects of experience. By strengthening non-dominant problematizations, critique has the potential to throw one outside of oneself and shift relations between the self and aspects of experience. This opens up the possibility for the elaboration of different practices than those constrained by dominant forms of thought.

Given this account, feminist critiques of embodiment can be read as drawing attention to a certain problematization of the female body (i.e., as a deficiency that needs to be corrected, as a visible object) and in so doing, problematizing this form of thought and the practices linked to it. If effective, this creates space between the self and these experiences of the body that will allow for the elaboration of ethical practices. Given the success of this non-dominant "fold" in thinking about bodies, the question becomes – what do we do now?³⁶ I take up this question in Chapter Three, where I will build upon my account here to argue that my original question of stubborn beliefs is a function of a dominant form of thought, one that, on the Foucauldian view, seriously limits freedom and is actually rather dangerous.

³⁶ I think there are signs similar to those Foucault points out that this problematization has had some success. Heyes notes, for example, that many of her students complain they can no longer enjoy the conventional practices of femininity (2007, 122). The elaboration of various strategies to cope with the patriarchal implications of these experiences signals something similar.

Chapter Three: Rethinking (my) Critique

Thus far I have constructed an account of experience in Foucauldian terms. I have argued that experiences are constituted by the interaction of various historically and culturally particular forms of knowledge, power, and self-relation and the practices that inform and are informed by these forms. I presented an account of ethics that suggests that individuals can intervene in the construction of their own experiences through strategic practices of the self. I argued that thought is the folding of experience in a way that constrains practices including reflection within the limits of dominant problematizations. Critique works to problematize dominant problematizations, to think outside constraints of dominant thought by thinking the constraints themselves. As Butler puts it, the task of critique is “to bring into relief the very framework of judgment itself” (2002, 4). This is what Foucault attempted to do with his books – to problematize the given way of thinking/experiencing criminality and sexuality, for example, making this very thinking/experiencing and the problematization it arises out of an object of thought. I argued that feminist critiques of the body can have the same effect, creating some distance or dis-identification between the self and experiences of bodies, allowing for the articulation of practices that may better resist dominant forms of power.

In this chapter, I will bring these considerations to bear on my original concerns, namely “stubborn” beliefs and experiences of the body and what might be done about changing them. I suggest that the question of stubborn beliefs that motivated my work can be read as the result of an attempt to alter problematized experiences of the body based on an implicit (and dubious) understanding of rationality and critique. Thus, my original approach is problematic not only because its ineffectiveness can lead to guilt and frustration, but because this unquestioned form of thought seriously limits freedom. I suggest that problematizing stubborn experiences along Foucauldian lines will be less apt to

lead to self-blaming for any ineffectiveness and may produce more effective strategies for transforming these experiences. For instance, one might problematize the “stubbornness” of certain experiences of the body as a sort of defence mechanism of normalizing power, which in itself can be a target for transformative ethical work.

I conclude the chapter with a consideration of Honi Fern Haber’s (1996) argument that female body building can be a practice of resistance against the constitution of women’s bodies and identities through patriarchal or phallogentric surveillance. While there has been much work done on women’s bodybuilding, fitness, and sport from a feminist perspective since Haber’s paper was published (ex. Brady, 2010; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Markula and Pringle, 2006), I engage with it here because it provides an occasion to think through the connection of critique and ethical practices of the self.³⁷ I argue that Haber presents bodybuilding as a form of governmentality, or a practice of the self that is also a practice of power over others. Though she does not articulate it as such, her standards for resistance require the muscled woman’s body to function as a sort of visible critique that problematizes phallogentric ways of seeing – a practice of power – *as well as* being an empowering body for the muscled women themselves. I argue that the conflation of these two forms of practices leads Haber into a normalizing schema, and that it is more helpful to separate out the value of bodybuilding as a practice of the self and the use of the visible body as a practice of power over others. This is my contribution to the project of elucidating responses to the problematization “unleashed” by feminist critiques of the body, and a way of working through the framework I have elaborated throughout this thesis.

³⁷ This paper inspired much of my thinking about feminist ethical practice and a reevaluation of my own fitness activities, so I am also engaging with it in a spirit of gratitude.

My Problems Have Problems (A Self-Critique)

As I suggested in the last chapter, reading feminist critiques like those by Bartky and Bordo can contribute to the same sort of experience Foucault sought to create with his books. This experience can transform an aspect of one's self from being certain, uncomplicated, or simply uninteresting to being urgently problematic. In the case of Bordo and Bartky, it shifts the problem from being one of bodies themselves, wherein the deficiencies of the visible body are simply given, to one of the way one experiences bodies and the practices linked to these experiences. I argued that it is in the space created by this problematization that ethical practices can do their work. Once experiences of the body become an object for thought we can take deliberate steps to try to alter them. For instance, instead of concentrating on making my breasts appear or *be* different, I can focus on changing my negative experience of my breasts. This will lead me to engage in different kinds of practices than if my aim was to change my breasts themselves. I may nonetheless change my breasts (as Davis's friend did), but even so there are important differences between these projects that I think can be brought out by looking at this through a Foucauldian ethical lens.

In order to see this distinction more clearly, it will be helpful to introduce Foucault's breakdown of practices of the self into four aspects. Recall that practices of the self are those actions and habits that aim to transform the self into some kind of ethically valuable subject, such as a pure, truthful, or responsible self. The first aspect of these practices is the ethical substance, or the part of the self which is ethically or morally relevant (Foucault 1997c, 263). This is the part of the self upon which work is done, or which the work aims to alter: one's sexual behaviour or thoughts, for instance. The second aspect is the mode of subjection, or the reasons or justification to engage in ethical projects (Foucault 1997c, 264). One might engage in ethical practice because it is a religious imperative or because one's sense of humanity demands it, for example. The next aspect is ethical work, "self-forming activity," or

the means of transforming the self into an ethical subject (Foucault 1997c, 265). This is the precise practice one engages in to transform the self, such as reporting one's thoughts in a journal or the confession of one's sexual behaviours to a religious authority. The final aspect is the *telos*, or goal – the type of individual toward which the ethical practice aims (Foucault 1997c, 265). For instance, one could aim to be a pure person, a rational person, or a free thinking one.

Taking someone like Davis's friend as an example, let us sketch out some practices of the self on the dominant or "pre-critical" problematization of the body.³⁸ Imagine a woman who has always found her breasts to be dissatisfying: too small, not proportionate to her body, not "feminine" enough. The ethical substance in this case is her visible body, specifically her breasts. She engages in working on this aspect of herself because she feels compelled by her sense of deficiency, by a sense that her breasts are central to her femininity (which is essential to her), and that they are inadequate to realize this; this is the mode of subjection. She buys padded bras, goes out of her way to avoid being seen topless in changing rooms and by lovers for fear of embarrassment, and at some point begins to research breast augmentation: her ethical activities. The *telos* of this activity would be to be feminine, proportionate, *normal* – a state that would allow her to stop worrying about her breasts all the time, to feel at home in her body, perhaps to feel like her "true" feminine self.

If the feminist critique is effective, these elements change. Different critiques would call different parts of this schema into question. The idea that one's femininity is something that is natural and yet needs to be achieved on the body through work may become problematic. The standards by which one's visible body is judged deficient may be called into question. The role of the visible body as the ethical substance or the focus of one's efforts may become suspect. Any of these shifts puts the practices formulated within the original schema into doubt. Further, the specifically Foucauldian

³⁸ I do not mean that such women are not critical thinkers; I am specifically referencing feminist critiques of embodiment.

critique raises worries about the effects of these practices; rather than just affecting the individual, we can see that these projects have larger power effects with social and cultural consequences that are bad for women in general.

There are many ways to formulate feminist responses to these new ethical frameworks. My initial problematic of stubborn beliefs is, as I will argue, the result of a particular way of formulating what can be read as an ethical response to the problematization “unleashed” by feminist cultural critiques of the body. To review, I had originally been concerned with “stubborn beliefs” about the body. The situation was one in which, for example, a woman encountered feminist critiques of embodiment and intellectually accepted them, but found her negative experiences of her body unchanged. When she tried to give up the practices she now saw as contrary to her political commitments (such as dieting and shaving), she was embarrassed, ashamed, and disgusted at herself; signs that she still believed in and valued patriarchal standards. I intuitively located this problem at the level of beliefs: either the woman believed what these critiques presented but she could not put it into action (she was acting irrationally), or she had conflicting beliefs, and the “patriarchal” beliefs about her body were so strong or “stubborn” that she could not rid herself of them or their effects on her experiences and practices. If she was intellectually convinced by the feminist critiques, why couldn’t she get rid of her false beliefs? According to the ethical schema, I took experiences of the body (the ways I felt and thought about bodies) as the ethical substance, the thing that needed to be worked on. I was frustrated because I had taken some action (ethical work) that *should* have but failed to alter this experience, namely reading and intellectually accepting cultural critiques of the body. But why would I expect critique to alter my experiences?

I think this expectation can be linked to my implicit acceptance of a specific form of rationality described by Linda Alcoff (2006, 54).³⁹ On this picture, which Alcoff notes is very influential in the contemporary West, rationality is premised on the capacity of the self to disengage from the “external world,” deliberate upon it, and then make a reasoned choice to re-engage in various aspects of the world, including one’s own social and cultural identity. If one is unable to fully disengage from a thing in order to reflect upon it, then one’s participation in or affinity with it cannot be rational (Alcoff 2006, 53). Likewise, if one does disengage, and in reflecting finds good reasons to avoid re-engagement but *does so anyway*, then this is also irrational.

Given this account, the way I originally set up my problem was to understand feminist critiques as providing this disengagement *and* the knowledge that made “re-engagement” undesirable. In light of this new knowledge, I made the rational decision to reject patriarchal beliefs about bodies, but nonetheless found myself still attached to them. I attributed this stubbornness to beliefs because I presumed that critique functioned on the level of knowledge, as providing some truths about the state of the world. Thus, if I failed to reject something that I now *knew* was wrong, there must be something wrong with my knowing.

I seem to have been in good company in assuming this model. The “pride” movements Probyn (2000) criticizes can be read as playing on a similar view, with a bit more emphasis on the will: a willful rejection of certain experiences (the ethical activity) considered to be politically pernicious (knowledge provided by critique) should stop us from having these experiences (the ethical substance) altogether, “liberating” us (the *telos*) from the pernicious social and cultural influences of sexism, racism, ageism, etc. This act of the will *should* work if I am truly autonomous, i.e. able to disengage and therefore be rational in Alcoff’s sense. When these activities fail to alter the ethical substance as

³⁹ Alcoff calls this “Cartesian rationality,” but I will avoid this generalization.

expected, this failure is located in the self. I have either failed to properly *know* what the critique revealed to me as true, or I have failed to *will* myself to reject what I know is bad. I am irrational and fail to be autonomous.

Having problematized my original problematization of this topic, I can offer some criticisms of this approach. First, there are good objections to this model of rationality. It has been roundly criticized by feminists, among others, and is premised on a sort of mind/body dualism that is itself suspect. For instance, recall McWhorter's concerns about the link between dominant forms of power and dualism as mentioned in Chapter One. Further, the strategies this model generates for change are not, in practice, very effective. Critique simply does *not* allow a person to rise above the object of critique (Bordo 1993, 31), or to "opt out" of experiencing it (Meagher 2003, 32). Probyn argues that the willful rejection of certain experiences of the body is not only ineffective in eradicating these experiences, but creates a social environment that pushes them underground, "where disgust, blame, and resentment seethe under the surface under a sanitized veneer of acceptance" (2000, 128).

Most importantly from a Foucauldian view, thinking about rationality and ourselves on this model allows normalizing patriarchal power to work even more efficiently. It seems that one of the main dangers of this dominant way of thinking about critique and the self is that it turns discontent and frustration in on the individual. When our enlightened attempts to throw off sexist, racist, ageist etc. "influences" fail, we blame ourselves. This self-blaming limits the sorts of work subjects might undertake or even imagine in resistance to dominant forms of power, perpetuating the oppression of women and the sorts of consumerism benefiting from women's beauty practices. This "leaves us stuck in an illusory Cartesian liberal individualism while the world around us turns us into docile, normalized

bodies with very little freedom at all” (McWhorter 1999, 212). We end up being irrational, not autonomous, or even pathological knowers, compounding the negative effects of these experiences and precludes effective strategies for combating these forms of power.⁴⁰

What I am trying to get at here is that taking a Foucauldian view allows us to see that thinking is, after all, a *practice*, informed by forms of power-knowledge-self-relations. We have to remain critical of the way we are thinking *even when this thinking thinks it is free* (maybe even especially then), and the strategies for change that we formulate in response to this thinking. In other words, we need to remain critical of the way we are responding to the problems revealed by feminist cultural critique.⁴¹ Critique is a practice, and the way we practice it generates particular kinds of responses, reflecting particular configurations of experience. As Butler reminds us, the subject must “form itself within forms that are already more or less in operation and underway” (2002, 19). If we want critique to be free, we need to maintain an experimental, aesthetic attitude and an attentiveness to power, just as with other ethical practices of freedom.

⁴⁰ An interesting example of pathological knowing is the 2006 paper “Competence to Make Treatment Decisions in Anorexia Nervosa: Thinking Processes and Values.” The authors problematize the “extreme” beliefs and values held by anorexics about their bodies, as reflected in their pathological eating and exercise practices. They note that some of the individuals suffering from anorexia in their study had questioned these beliefs and values and therefore, through their behaviour and their refusal to engage in treatment for this behaviour, showed a “discrepancy between their objective knowledge... and their belief in it in the sense as true of themselves and relevant to their situation” (2006, 271). Some of the participants recognized a dissonance between their beliefs about the general state of the world and others, and their own bodies: “some of them had knowledge that body shape and the pursuit of fitness was not important in general, and also that it was not important to others, but that despite this knowledge, it remained disproportionately valued with respect to themselves” (2006, 274). The authors end up, somewhat apprehensively, locating the problem in the anorexia itself. They label the “extreme” beliefs and values as “pathological,” but are worried about whether these “pathological values” can be rigidly attributed to the disorder rather than the individual herself. In other words, though these individuals have succeeded in problematizing their beliefs and values about bodies and eating and have intellectually accepted the “truth” – namely, a more moderate view – the authors have to posit a pathological explanation for why these individuals cannot believe or accept this truth in such a way that would override the other belief, and so be reflected in their behaviours (i.e. either not being anorexic in the first place or accepting treatment for anorexic behaviour).

⁴¹ I see Probyn (2000), Meagher (2003), and Heyes (2007) engaged in this project in different ways. Probyn criticizes the pride movement, especially fat pride; Meagher articulates an aesthetics of disgust as an alternative to the outright rejection of disgust at the body; Heyes criticizes Davis’s approach to the problem (as well as Bordo’s) and offers guidelines for formulating ethical responses that are more attentive to the nuances of normalizing power.

What has changed now that I have taken a more thoroughly Foucauldian view of critique? First, I can think of feminist critiques of embodiment as having “worked” even though I continue to feel disgusted by my own body and those of others. There is no sense in which a critique allows me to “disengage” entirely from the experience under critique. It is always only a partial disengagement, a “fold” in my experience. Critique makes these aspects available for my thought, and allows me to formulate intentional strategies and attitudes toward these experiences qua experiences rather than just reacting to their content or taking them as given. This new relation makes possible the articulation of different practices than was formerly possible: this means the critique was effective. Further, critique can guide strategies for change to avoid replicating problematic power-relations. For example, once the limits of a historically constituted experience have been illuminated through genealogical work, then we can pursue experiences at the edge of the limits in an attempt to transgress them. Once we know about the construction of women’s bodies as visual objects judged by heteronormative or phallogocentric standards, for example, we can cultivate practices at the edges of these limits. This might mean practising our bodies into being bad or unattractive objects, or trying to experience bodies as something entirely other than a visible object—perhaps as a set of capacities. I’ll discuss this possibility more in the second half of this chapter.

Importantly, this view means that if in my course of ethical practice I come up against “stubborn” experiences of some sort, I can problematize this stubbornness itself and formulate strategies to change it. Rather than seeing the psychic pain my body causes me as a sign that I still accept patriarchal standards of embodiment (with the concomitant understanding that my resistant project has failed), I might problematize this pain as a sort of defence mechanism against

normalization.⁴² Pain, or the threat of pain, is a primary tool for normalizing regimes (McWhorter 1999, 179), used to force subjects into compliance with practices and norms. Heyes describes normalizing practices as using “cycles of pain interspersed with brief windows of pleasure to keep subjects dependent on their authority.” Giving in to normalizing practices is often seen as the only way to assuage the suffering created by failure to reach normative standards (Heyes 2007, 121); we can see Davis’s friend as capitulating to this view by getting her breast augmentation. Seeing this pain as constituted and contingent rather than necessary or a sign of the failure of my ability to change myself, I can alter my strategies accordingly. Problematizing it in this way prevents me from taking my pain, fear, or discomfort as a *prima facie* reason to abandon my ethical experiments.

Let me illustrate this point using an example. The belly dance community is a social space where non-normative female bodies are often celebrated and eroticized.⁴³ Angela Moe’s paper “Belly Dancing Mommas” (2011) argues that belly dance challenges dominant notions about pregnancy and motherhood, particularly through the way belly dance reveals and emphasizes the torso – a body part that, especially during and after pregnancy, is usually covered up (2011, 88). Let us imagine I want to experiment with belly dance as a practice of the self, to see what it might do to my experiences of my body. However, I am too self-conscious of my belly (postpartum or not) to wear the costumes with cropped tops or perform the shimmying movements that cause my body to visibly jiggle. While the other dancers, who have all shapes of bellies and visible stretch marks, wear these costumes and

⁴² I am not suggesting that in all cases “stubborn” experiences will be the result of normalization. However, in the case of contemporary experiences of bodies, this seems likely. In her latest work, Johanna Oksala suggests that a contemporary version of “consciousness raising” groups might be helpful in problematizing the individualization of this sort of pain, and thereby elaborating different and perhaps more effective strategies for resistance. Oksala mentioned this in the discussion period of her talk “In Defence of Experience,” at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, March 22, 2012.

⁴³ Having taken classes in many different disciplines of dance, belly dance was, for me, by far the most accepting and celebratory of non-normative women’s bodies. African dance classes were also very body-positive. Having grown up doing ballet (where hardly anyone’s bodies are proper ballerina bodies, and even fewer people actually feel good in a leotard), taking belly dance and African dance classes changed the way I felt about my dancing body for the better.

shimmy with abandon, I am too ashamed and disgusted by myself to join in. Instead of letting this shame and disgust prevent me from my ethical experimentation with dancing, I can problematize this pain and try some techniques to reduce it. For example, there are many techniques suggested by cognitive behavioural therapy for depression, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic disorder that, I think, can be usefully employed to reduce self-surveillance (cf. Phillips 1996; Burns 1999). The techniques I am familiar with work by calling attention to the practices one engages in on a daily basis – mirror checks, weighing oneself, pulling at the skin, looking at fitness magazines, etc. One works to stop or reduce these self-policing practices through techniques like journaling and automatic thought analysis. Beside these techniques, there are other strategies that might reduce or negate this normalized pain, including giving up on belly dance and trying something else. It is an experiment, after all, and as Heyes (2007) and McWhorter (1999) argue, finding pleasure in disciplinary practices *for themselves*, rather than for their ability to help us meet normative goals, is going to help us separate increases in capacities from docility, something central to challenging normalization. If I simply cannot enjoy this activity, then there are plenty of other potentially resistant activities in which I might find it easier to take pleasure. Since any practice of freedom should be increasing possibilities, I may be able to come back to belly dance later on in my “ethical” life and find it less painful.

In sum, by working through these Foucauldian ideas, I have come to see my original approach to “stubborn beliefs” as informed by a dominant and problematic form of thought. Taking a Foucauldian view has allowed me to see my “stubborn” experiences as something that can be worked on themselves. I suggested one way we might tackle stubborn experiences of bodies is through the reduction of self-policing. This brings us to the final section of this chapter and the thesis, wherein I think through Honi Fern Haber’s suggestion that women’s body building is an ethical practice that interrupts the functioning of patriarchal surveillance. This provides an opportunity to work through the framework I

have elaborated throughout the thesis, and to make further concrete suggestions for strategies of resistance against normalized experiences of bodies.

Apparent Resistance: The Muscled Woman as Visible Critique

In “Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman” (1996), Honi Fern Haber is concerned with the way surveillance functions to constitute and reinforce patriarchal power. In particular, she is interested in interrupting the way women’s bodies are constructed as objects for phallogentric desire by the “male gaze” – the way both men and women have learned to and practice reading and seeing women’s bodies according to phallogentric norms.⁴⁴ This gaze constrains women’s aesthetic possibilities and, through power’s productiveness, their subjectivities. Haber advocates throwing a wrench into this surveillance by constructing visibly “revolting” bodies that confuse readers and, hopefully, call attention to the patriarchal nature of the reading itself. However, Haber runs into the problem of “stubborn” experiences – she worries that even for those feminists who intentionally cultivate their huge muscles, these bodies will be sources of self-hatred and therefore fail to be empowering.

After reconstructing Haber’s case, I argue that Haber reinscribes her muscled woman into a normalizing schema, something she is explicitly trying to avoid. This is a problem from a Foucauldian ethical standpoint because while the “revoltingly” muscled female body may interrupt the functioning and effects of patriarchal surveillance, normalization seriously limits women’s possibilities. I will suggest that this is a side effect of a conflation between two types of practices – those of the self and

⁴⁴ Haber is using the terms phallogentric and “male gaze” without explicit definition. Her use seems to be rather general and unsophisticated. By phallogentric, I take Haber to mean male-centred or focused, specifically within the broader context of patriarchal gender relations. Phallogentric desire would also be closely linked to heteronormativity. Haber’s use of “male gaze” suggests there is only one form of male gaze, which is enacted by all subjects regardless of gender (1996, 142).

those of power – and the assumption that resistance needs to engage *both* in order to be resistant. I read Haber’s paper as a call to make women’s bodies into a “walking” critique; a way of using the visible body to publicly problematize the practice of phallogentric normalizing “seeing” or “reading” of women’s bodies. In this way it is an attempt to act on other’s actions – the practice of power. At the same time, Haber wants this practice to be “phenomenologically empowering” (in the sense that it *feels* empowering) for the women who undertake it, a practice of the self aimed at increasing women’s possibilities and capacities. I will argue that distinguishing between these two techniques will help us formulate strategies for coping with the “self-hatred” that may arise from such bodies and avoid the normalizing schema Haber ends up instituting in an attempt to guarantee the effectiveness of the visible critique.

At the beginning of her paper, Haber declares that the goal of her project is to overthrow the tyranny of phallogentric desire (1996, 137). As a means to this end, she advocates the presentation of bodies that interrupt the reading of women as the objects of phallogentric desire. Haber posits that women are severely limited by this reading of their body, particularly in ways that prevent them from effectively resisting patriarchy, or from even *wanting* to resist it (1996, 142). Through the proliferation of visually disruptive bodies, Haber hopes to overcome these limitations and create space in which women are seen, and can see themselves, as more than “tits and ass” (1996, 138).

Drawing from Foucault, Haber argues that the “writing” of power on the body presents an opportunity to use aesthetics to resist certain strategies of power. As phallogentric power is written directly on the female body (in the form of body shaping, clothing, makeup, shaving, etc.), Haber suggests that women can weaken this power through the refusal to “reproduce” it by conforming to its aesthetic norms. Writing something different on the female body will challenge the “everyday male

readings” of women’s bodies that reinforce phallogentric restrictions on women (Haber 1996, 142).⁴⁵ For example, not shaving one’s legs might throw the assumed function of said legs (to attract, or at least to avoid repulsing, men) into question. She argues that this visual challenge might call attention to phallogentric reading itself, which I understand to be a visual form of critique. She writes, “resignifying women’s bodies is to confuse, or perhaps refuse, traditional gender distinctions, to problematize phallogentric seeings and readings of women’s bodies” (Haber 1996, 139). Therefore, the cultivation of the visible body in contravention of phallogentric aesthetic values is both a feminist and Foucauldian act of resistance. “[It] is not merely an aesthetic battle over imagery, it is also a political battle,” Haber writes (1996, 141).

Haber recommends the body of the female body builder as such a resistant aesthetic. She claims that the combination of traditionally masculine strength and the female body can be both subversive and empowering for women. The muscled woman problematizes phallogentric readings of women by challenging interpretations of weakness, timidity, or inferiority (1996, 145), undermining the “inevitability of sexual domination” (1996, 142). The female body builder’s body also calls into question the naturalness of stereotypical feminine traits, such as submissiveness, delicacy, and weakness, and, in doing so, undermines the idea that there are natures at all (Haber 1996, 145). In these ways, writes Haber, the muscled woman forces a rethinking of the meaning of women’s bodies; by combining femininity and strength, images traditionally kept separate, female muscle will “expand our language, will present us with new metaphors, that like all good metaphors, will reshape our ways of seeing” (1996, 153). Haber hopes this “re-visioning” will do more than force unconventional readings

⁴⁵ Though Haber doesn’t explicitly say so, I think she must mean that this re-writing needs to appear deliberate, rather than just be something *other* than phallogentric norms. Otherwise the body could simply be read as a failed body, still within the normalized trajectory. This may be why she chooses body building, something that is clearly deliberate and takes an immense amount of dedication and work, rather than cultivating a fat or wrinkly body (though she does mention these offhand later in the paper (1996, 154)).

of women's bodies: it should open up new, non-phallogenic ways of understanding ourselves and each other (1996, 154). In other words, Haber is hoping that the muscled woman will function as a sort of visual critique; that, using Foucault's terms, it will create an experience for those who see it. She draws a connection between her project and the method of genealogy. The muscled woman's body, like genealogy, makes the "ideological dimension" of women's and men's bodies noticeable (Haber 1996, 154).⁴⁶ Rather than simply rejecting the body as abnormal or disgusting, she hopes that this body will force people to re-think their readings of women's bodies in general: "the body of the muscled woman problematizes seeing in a way that calls attention to the cultural presuppositions oppressing both men and women on an unconscious or ideological level" (Haber 1996, 142).

I think we can understand the resistance Haber is going for as an attempt to create a shift in *thought* by calling attention to the structure of patriarchal surveillance itself. In other words, she is trying to problematize the way bodies have been understood as failing or succeeding to meet phallogenic norms. Once this "ideological" dimension becomes visible, it opens up the possibility for freedom "to invent or choose new ways of understanding ourselves and others" (Haber 154). If we see this phallogenic way of reading as contingent, then we might begin to imagine other ways to engage with bodies. Here is the "space" in which we might begin to see and experience women's bodies as more than "tits and ass."

In order to play this critical role, the muscled woman's body must be "immediately and obviously—even shockingly—present" (Haber 1996, 142). This requires huge muscles; the "revolting" aspects of the muscled woman's body must be inscribed in plain sight in order to force the necessary re-readings. For this reason, the bodies of other female athletes will not suffice, for although these women may be physically strong and feel empowered, "such internal feelings do not problematise seeing, and

⁴⁶ Foucault does not engage with the concept of "ideology," and here we can see Haber bringing together different theoretical frameworks in a somewhat confused manner. For our purposes here, we can re-interpret her claim to say that the muscled woman's body reveals the role of power in constructing gendered readings of bodies.

the need for such problematising is my thesis, the achievement of such, my goal” (Haber 1996, 143).

These women’s bodies are easily read within a phallogentric schema and so participate in the smooth functioning of patriarchal surveillance and power.

Haber is attentive to the difficulties of resistance within a Foucauldian framework. I will divide her concerns into two sorts. First, she outlines some worries that follow from the inherent limitations of signs and the way power generates meaning. These worries affect what I see as the “critical value” of the muscled woman’s body. Because the critical function of her muscled woman relies on the ways she is read, and so is “at the mercy of readings (and subject to misreadings),” Haber is concerned that the muscled woman’s body will be interpreted *within* the dominant structures of power rather than calling attention to them, and her body’s resistant value may be lost in translation (1996, 146). Female muscle may be sold as the key to health, or her body will be read as an attempt to be more manly, reinforcing masculine superiority (Haber 1996, 152). On the other hand, phallogentric standards for femininity may expand to include muscle; this expansion “defuses the radical import of the image by making it one more possibility for that which arouses phallogentric desire” (Haber 1996, 152). If the male gaze can read the muscled woman’s body as attractive, then her resistance has failed.⁴⁷

Haber is also concerned that women will not find their muscles empowering due to normalized desires and the construction of women’s identities within phallogentric power networks.⁴⁸ In our terms,

⁴⁷ Haber describes how this might work: “real men like muscled women; the fact that they can find her body lustworthy and are not threatened is a test of their own manliness” (Haber 1996, 150). I think this attitude can be seen in many fitness communities, and is proffered by many muscled women themselves.

⁴⁸ Haber is also concerned that these normalized desires will prevent women from even considering embodied resistance of this sort. “Women act in collusion with patriarchal power because they are constituted within discourses that give ‘woman’ meaning as subjects of the male gaze” (Haber 1996, 141). Haber complains that “many women, even those who may seem to be the embodiment of radical possibilities, do not want to be liberated from phallogentric desire” (1996, 149). I am more interested in cases where women *want* to engage in resistance but find themselves “blocked” by their own desires or pain.

these concerns affect the value of bodybuilding as a practice of freedom; if it causes the woman pain, then she hasn't worked her way out of phallogentric limits (at least psychologically, if not physically). Haber notes that through the production of subjectivities, power makes women "come to desire the very same things that limit our life choices" (Haber 1996, 140). Many women's self-worth is premised on male approval; for some women, this includes the need to feel desired by men (Bartky 1990, and cited in Haber 1996, 147).⁴⁹ Furthermore, as Bartky (1990) cautioned, because the muscled woman's body puts normalized femininity into question, Haber's shocking aesthetics may threaten women's identities as fundamentally sexed beings. Here we can see Haber approaching the "stubborn" experience I have been concerned with: the woman consciously rejects phallogentric aesthetics and power and even works to cultivate something in opposition to them, but her pain is a sign that these phallogentric values still influence her.

Referencing Foucault's "aesthetics of existence," Haber worries that the co-implication of identity or subjectivity and power makes the "injunction to create oneself as a work of art" problematic (Haber 1996, 146). If identity is constructed within dominant forms of power, then it is not only the ways we are read that are limited by these forms, but our imaginations and emotional and psychological capacities for change.⁵⁰ The rejection of the normalized feminine body through the construction of an intentionally "revolting" one may require a radical reconstruction of (feminine) self-identity, an understandably daunting task, even for those with pressing political agendas. For these reasons, even those women who choose a muscled body for feminist reasons may find it hard to overcome these

⁴⁹ In *Bodymakers*, feminist bodybuilder and theorist Leslie Heywood describes this sentiment, noting female body builder's anxiety and fear over the "loss of approval, acceptance and love that acceding to the norm brings them" (Heywood 1998, 33).

⁵⁰ This is a legitimate worry, though it implies an understanding of dominant power as monolithic. If there are various problematizations available to subjects within a given field of experience, as I have suggested, this may not be as much of a problem as Haber seems to think.

emotional and psychological (phallogocentric) barriers. Haber notes that breasts are often central to women's senses of self-worth. She asks,

What happens to the self-esteem of the female bodybuilder whose breasts' size shrinks significantly when she loses body fat, or whose breasts develop stretch marks from doing flies?... what if she does mind, and minds so much that she comes to hate herself (her body)? In such an instance even if her body is subversive, it will not be liberating (1996, 156).⁵¹

It seems that even with the best feminist intentions there is a worrying conflict between presenting a subversive aesthetic and being empowered by it. Her only suggestion in face of this "stubbornness" is that if women find the results of muscled resistance too painful, they should choose another form of bodily protest (Haber 1996, 156).

Haber laments that the complexities of this Foucauldian picture of power and subjectivities mean the resistance she advocates is problematic: "it becomes very difficult to imagine where a chosen, and phenomenologically empowering, self-conscious resistance would come from, or why it would occur" (1996, 148). In the face of this difficulty, she simply reiterates that normalized desires are bad for women: "we must not minimize the threat that present desire poses to the lives of all women" (1996, 151). Therefore, these desires, and the normalized, patriarchy-preserving bodies and selves they produce, should be rejected. The implication is that however painful it might be to do this, if we do nothing radical with our bodies, we are doing nothing but supporting patriarchy.

⁵¹ Haber seems to use liberation and empowerment interchangeably here. For Foucault, liberation has a very specific meaning, which Haber does not seem to be using (cf. Foucault 1997j, 282-284).

Taking a Critical Look at Haber

I was originally attracted to Haber's paper because of my own interest in weightlifting, but was turned off by Haber's insistence that my practice (which did little to make my body non-normative looking but greatly changed the way I felt about my body) was not actually resistant because it was not visibly revolting.⁵² Since working through the concepts presented in this thesis, I've found a more sophisticated and, I think, productive way of reading the paper, which I will present in what remains of this section.

I read Haber as proposing bodybuilding as a practice of governmentality, though she does not articulate it as such. Foucault makes no distinction between the personal and the political, as the framework I've laid out should make clear (McWhorter 1999, 189). Nonetheless, he makes a distinction between practices we use to affect others – techniques of power – and techniques used on ourselves – technologies of the self (1997h, 177). The ways these two forms of technologies come together is governmentality (Foucault 1997i, 225).

McWhorter uses Foucault's notion of governmentality to refer to the ways we might ethically practice power over others, or in other words, use (and cultivate) our capacities to influence others' actions *as* an ethical practice of the self (McWhorter 1999, 211). As we know, technologies of the self are informed by power (thus the call to practice them "freely" instead of just following what is given by dominant forms of power), so we can alter the ways dominant forms of power affect us by taking up ethical practices of the self. However, it is not clear how doing so actually affects the ways dominant power continues to affect others. McWhorter suggests that working to alter the structures of power will follow from practices of the self aimed at freedom because dominant power relations, and those people

⁵² An earlier critique of Haber can be found in my paper "Visualizing Resistance" (Dean 2011). Some of the concerns expressed in that paper are repeated here.

and institutions who have real stakes in maintaining them, have an interest in limiting individual possibilities for practising freedom (1999, 191). This means that as part of our practices of freedom, we will likely need to engage in altering dominant culture through the use of technologies of power. Those interested in ethical practices of the self will need to “exercis[e] power over other people to force them to allow us to do our self-transformative work” (McWhorter 1999, 191). These strategies might aim to “attack certain social institutions and practices and to alter the conduct of people who currently take their identities from those institutions and practices” (McWhorter 1999, 213). Thus governmentality may be central to any effective practice of ethical resistance.

To read women’s body building as a practice of governmentality, we need to conceptually pull apart two intended effects of the muscled woman: effects on the self and effects on other’s actions. Haber does this in a limited way with her distinction between subversion and empowerment. She does not explicitly define empowerment, but gestures toward the “psychological, economic, and sexual ostracism” that may result from having a revolting body as signs of dis-empowerment (1996, 147). She also juxtaposes the muscled woman and the anorectic, stating that the anorexic woman’s body might be “subversive” visually but is not empowered in the way the muscled woman is. This is simply a matter of the sickness and impending death of the anorexic (Haber 1996, 143). Thus it seems that empowerment is a mixture of a positive mental and emotional state and physical strength or well-being. One could conceivably achieve these things by engaging in normalizing practices like wearing makeup or losing weight (though because of the way normalized femininity is constructed, it seems unlikely), hence the need for the empowering practice to also be something subversive. We might say that Haber is looking for something that is empowering in a resistant way – insofar as it expands our possibilities rather than reiterating patriarchal phallogentric limits on the self – but further, she wants this thing to be

publicly resistant, insofar as it functions as a critique for those who are reading the body with phallogentric eyes and thereby colluding with patriarchy. But we need to recognize that these two things can come apart and, I will argue, should in this case.

I have two major problems with the way Haber suggests we use bodybuilding as resistance, both of which are linked to Haber's attempt to articulate a "governmental" practice. First, Haber is dangerously close to recommending a new normalizing (albeit not so phallogentric) schema for feminists interested in embodied resistance. This is for two central and linked reasons: one, she defines "subversion" or resistance as succeeding in being visibly revolting, i.e. locating resistance in its effectiveness as critique, and two, she ignores the value of the practices involved in bodybuilding in and for themselves.

While she rejects the possibility that there is any essential self, by insisting that in order to resist patriarchy women's bodies must be "radical" or "revolting" with reference to the phallogentric ideal, Haber can be read as positing a new normative ideal. In *Self-Transformations*, Heyes cautions that resistance to normalization cannot simply posit "better" identities as the *telos* of practices of the self: "resistance to these [normalized] constraints... cannot simply invoke alternative substantive accounts of the kinds of subjects we would be better off being, since these accounts will have their own apparatus of normalization" (Heyes 2007, 118). Any supposed resistance invoking a new and improved self as *telos* creates a normalizing force. The new ideal must be striven for, individuals will be measured against it, and once again ways of being are limited. For Haber, anything less than revolting is a failure (1996, 152).⁵³ This institutes a new set of restrictions, requiring constant revision to

⁵³ While Haber does not advocate that all women take up the muscled body, her criteria for being "revolting" seems to stand no matter what kind of bodily resistance is chosen. She lists other bodies that might also participate in aesthetic resistance to patriarchy: "tattooed bodies, bodies practicing homosexual or lesbian revolts, flagrantly tattooed bodies, flagrantly ambiguous bodies, wrinkled bodies, bodies that take up space, bodies that refuse to wear prostheses, surgically constructed bodies" (1996, 154). These bodies are also subject to evaluation according to some visibly radical ideal. How tattooed is tattooed enough? How "flagrantly ambiguous"?

accommodate the shifting values of phallogentric aesthetics, and necessitating an ever more shocking body to remain subversive. As Haber worries, due to the openness of signs *and* especially because of the effectiveness of dominant forms of power to absorb meanings that might escape it, it is going to be very difficult to achieve this end.

Haber is not attentive to the pleasurable potential of bodybuilding. Her recommendations make it seem like the only reason we would engage in bodybuilding is for the subversive results. This is in line with a normalizing schema. Normalizing practices, and the capacities they produce, are only valuable insofar as they are the means of conforming to or working toward their normative ideals. For example, Heyes looks at the various capacities created by the Weight Watchers program—enjoying fresh vegetables, having more energy to pursue hobbies and play with grandchildren—which are only valuable as a means to achieve thinness (2007, 79). The ability to enjoy raw carrots is useless if it does not make one thin. By positing the visibly radical muscled woman as her *telos*, Haber has devalued the practice of body building in a similar manner. The practice itself, and capacities created by it—lifting progressively heavier weights, adhering to strict dietary rules, carrying groceries on one’s own, feeling less physically intimidated by others, and, as I will argue, experiencing oneself as capacity instead of as visual object—are of little value to Haber’s resistant project. It is only as means or side effects of the muscled woman’s “revolting” body that these phenomena have importance.

However, as mentioned in Chapter One, McWhorter suggests that increases in capacity gained through disciplinary practices be separated from the increase in docility, or “the narrowing of behavioural possibility,” which usually accompanies it (1999, 180). Ethical practices cannot have a *telos* other than “the expansion of behavioural options” (McWhorter 1999, 182) and cannot close off future possibilities for transformation. McWhorter insists these practices maintain a structural “openness to becoming” – the perpetually critical attitude of the artist – through the rejection of static

goals (1999, 193). In light of the necessary rejection of normative goals, non-normalizing practices might be taken up for the pleasure they can provide: “what if we...simply engaged in graduated disciplinary practices for their own sake—for the pleasures they bring—rather than for some goal beyond them?” (McWhorter 1999, 182). Focusing on the pleasures created by engaging in ethical practices may allow us to use the technologies of the self available to us without tying us to normalized *telos*, and allowing us to maintain the openness to becoming central to practices of freedom. Many women, feminists and not, engage in bodybuilding, or, more broadly, the practice of weightlifting because it is a pleasurable experience. Following McWhorter, by disengaging this pleasure from a normative goal – whether to be normative feminine or revolting – I suggest that the practice of bodybuilding might be a practice of freedom.

I think Haber insists upon this visibly revolting *telos* because of this admittedly disheartening realization: due to the way patriarchal power uses surveillance, if my appearance is normative (either insofar as it meets goals or in not meeting norms I show my displeasure with this failure and my attempts to rectify it) then I am allowing patriarchal power to function. Haber understands this to mean that if I do not call the entire system of seeing into question, then I cannot resist the system. While it may be the case that appearances easily read by phallogocentric standards do not challenge this way of seeing, I want to argue that if we separate out practices of the self and practices of power over others, then we can see that bodybuilding can nonetheless be resistant, or, in Haber’s terms, empowering in non-normative ways. While bodybuilding involves various disciplinary practices including weightlifting and dieting, I will focus on weightlifting. I argue that weightlifting can be a practice of resistance regardless of its visible results because it can generate non-normative experiences of the body, namely experiences of the body as capacity, and produces pleasures that might motivate continued practice without the aid of normative goals.

Problematizing the way women are objectified by the male gaze, one of the strategies we might try is to engage in embodied practices that are not *about* the way the body looks, rather, about what the body does. Wendy Burns-Ardolino (2003) suggests that promoting experiences of the body as capacity should be central to feminist liberatory practice. She argues that women should “actively engage” their bodies as capacities to disrupt objectifying norms (2003, 43). She writes, “what is at stake here, then...is the right to be read as a body having the capacity to act, and having that capacity take precedence over the recognition of the feminine body as object” (2003, 47).⁵⁴ Practising our bodies as capacity may allow the primacy or dominance of experiences of bodies as objects to recede. In other words, we might engage in practices that problematize the body as capacity rather than as the visible object of phallocentric desire, strengthening experiences of the body as capacity.

I suggest that the weight room is a place where experiences of the body as capacity may be cultivated. Feminist and weight lifter Mistress Krista writes on her fitness blog *Stumptuous*:

I work out in sloppy gym wear with no makeup, and I get dirty and sweaty and messy haired. My breasts are not lifted and separated; they are mashed onto my chest by my cheapo sports bra. When I forget to shave my legs I don't really care. I am in there to work hard, to lift some heavy shit, and *to forget about how my body looks in favour of thinking about what my body does* (2008, [my emphasis]).

Experiences of bodies as *doing* instead of *looking* a certain way can be used as counter-memories, resources for building alternative conceptions and discourses on the body, from which one can critique the dominant discourse. Counter-memories are experiences that do not fit into dominant ways of explaining things. McWhorter gives the example of muscle memory in a piano player's hands as a

⁵⁴ Burns-Ardolino is working within a phenomenological framework that plays on the “inner/outer” dichotomy that Heyes argues is normalizing (2007); namely, she wants women to express their inherent intentionality on their bodies through this exercising of capacities. I don't endorse much of what she says, but I like the idea of performing the body as capacity as a way to create an experience of the self as such, and the notion that this can be read off the body.

counter-memory that challenges mind/body dualism. She notes that these memories can provide a “place from which to analyze oppressive forces” (1999, 199). If many individuals share similar counter-memories, they can use these as a basis to come together, to work to develop alternative discourses of meaning that can explain these experiences. At the very least it can serve as a “place” from which I can critique my normative experiences of my arms.

I am not suggesting that all weightlifting is a non-normalizing practice of freedom. Many women, myself included, begin (and continue with) weight lifting as a normative practice. But as McWhorter says about her own ethical ventures, “the disciplines I undertook changed me to the extent that the goal I started with became relatively unimportant” (1999, 187). Taking pleasure in the ability to “lift heavy shit” may provide an alternative way of taking pleasure in the body, one that potentially outweighs or negates the promised pleasures (and inevitable pains) of the way the body appears. In my own experience, for example, the pleasure of doing full push-ups has far outweighed the pain I experienced over non-conforming arms. A blog posting on the feminist pop culture website Jezebel is a testament to the potential of various sport and exercise activities to do this. The original post, written by blogger Erin Gloria Ryan, described a shift in the blogger’s relationship with food and her body as a result of marathon training. She undertook this training for various normative reasons like losing weight and general health. Beginning with a generally antagonistic relationship with her body, Ryan notes that after starting running, she found herself thinking differently about food: “rather than worrying a plate of spaghetti would go straight to my thighs, I started worrying that it wouldn’t” (2010). She emphasized the possibilities for exercise to cultivate positive relationships with food and the body, rejecting the view that “the only reason we’d possibly want to exercise is to have a sexy body or to be smaller or more in line with what society has determined is an acceptable size” (Ryan 2010). The blog comments echoed this view. Ryan notes that the response she received from commenters was

overwhelming, and promised to compile another post consisting of commenters' stories about how "using their bodies in physically demanding ways has helped them appreciate themselves as more than pretty little knickknacks with attached boobs" (Ryan 2010).⁵⁵

I suggest that these practices – whether weightlifting, running, or rugby – can be seen as practices of freedom, because being able to take pleasures in the body that are not related to the achievement or approximation of phallogentric norms is an increase in capacities, specifically our capacities for non-normalized pleasures. I think we can interpret these as practices that, while possible and coherent within the dominant problematization of the body, produce experiences and pleasures that exceed this structure and actually make more sense within this non-dominant thinking about bodies. It is in this way that weightlifting can be a practice of freedom regardless of its visible results.

Another worry is that while Haber recognizes that pain is linked to normalization and the ways power constitutes identities, she fails to problematize it in a way that would allow us to work on it. When her muscled woman hates herself, Haber (albeit reluctantly) tells her to find something else to do. While I do think that giving up particularly painful ethical experiments is an option, as I suggested above, I think there are strategies available to reduce normalized pain. If we pull apart practices of the self and the practice of power over others, we can see that working on this pain instead of simply pushing through or backing down can actually be, in itself, resistance. Of course, working on one's own pain is unlikely to have direct effects on the way patriarchy works in general. This may contribute to why Haber does not try to work around this pain.

This brings me to the second aspect of governmentality: the practice of power over others. The point Haber hits home is that transforming myself and my experiences is important for my own well being and perhaps for my ability to engage in larger political projects, but if others continue to act in

⁵⁵ I looked for this follow-up article but it seems that it does not exist.

ways that reiterate the structures generating negative, oppressive experiences, then I do not really “meaningfully resist” these structures. While McLaren claims that “self-transformation, then, implies social transformation because institutional and social practices constitute subjectivity” (2004, 230), this relation seems derivative and politically unsatisfying. I vote with McWhorter, then, in thinking that while resistance may begin or be grounded in ethics, it is also going to require some practices of power over others.

Thus, I do not wish to argue against experimentation with styling the visible body as an ethical practice of power over others, taking strategic advantage of the perpetual presence of the “gaze.”⁵⁶ There may be more subtle but nonetheless important ways we can call the phallogentric system of seeing into question without being this revolting. McWhorter notes that the wider variety of women’s bodies we encounter, whether they are actively resisting norms of femininity or are simply “failed” bodies, the less we are able to make generalizations or sweeping characterizations about “women” as a group (McWhorter 2004, 160). She understands Haber as attempting to use this strategy through the recommendation of visibly revolting bodies. Haber does note that at the least, the muscled woman can be a sort of alternative role model, giving other women who may already be ambivalent about “locating their happiness in phallogentric desire” (1996, 151) another option for visible embodiment. While I agree with this, I think it is more likely that the women we see with non-normative bodies who obviously *don’t care* about their non-normative appearance might provide better role models for

⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the idea of using the visible female body as a critique is intriguing. I think this might be what Meagher (2003) is arguing that artist Jenny Saville does with her collection of female nudes. She argues that Saville’s work, paintings of “fat female” bodies, with “flesh that is puckered, scarred, and bruised” (2003, 37) is directed at the “problem of *experiencing oneself as disgusting*” (Meagher 2003, 24 [original emphasis]). Meagher argues that these paintings provide an occasion to experience and reflect upon one’s disgust (2003, 29), bringing the disgust to the fore as an emotion that cannot be denied and as something that should be interrogated. The way the paintings accomplish this is strategic and complicated; it plays on juxtapositions with traditional forms of painting the nude body, media representations of women’s bodies, and on the “mainstream political correctness” that urges us to deny feeling disgusted or repulsed by such bodies in the first place.

alternate female embodiments. Having a purposefully cultivated non-normative body might be a good way to show and cultivate this “not caring,” (which means obviously muscled but not entirely “revolting” female bodies might do) but there can be other ways to do this.

For example, Burns-Ardolino suggests that engaging one’s body as capacity will lead to a “subversive performativity” (2003, 43) that disrupts readings of women as visual objects. This performativity may play out in small ways, not necessarily the radical or shocking displays that Haber envisioned. Markula and Pringle suggest that a woman’s focus on core strength at the gym, presumably in distinction to the normative insistence on “flat abs,” publicly problematizes the way the “fit feminine body” is constructed (Markula and Pringle 2006, 152). This small choice might show that this woman’s body is not experienced as a mere object – where fit means a flat stomach or six-pack abs – but as a vehicle for strength and balance (not to mention a pain-free back). More radically, sports theorist Brubach argues that the bodies of many female athletes, while generally normative in appearance, are nonetheless resistant because they are not *about* the way they look: “their muscles, like the fashion models’ slenderness, are hard-earned, but here the means is not abstinence but exertion. Though their bodies have been meticulously cultivated, their bodies aren’t the point: the point is their ability to perform” (Brubach quoted in Heywood 2003, xx). The visibly resistant aspect of these bodies might function best while these bodies are in motion; during the marathon, the tennis match, or skiing race, it may be difficult for others to objectify these female athletes, or at least to reduce them to mere visual objects. Whether this challenge remains in play after the event is over is debatable.⁵⁷ Just like Haber’s muscled woman, these visible displays come with no guarantee to disrupt phallogentric power. Nonetheless, by making the distinction between practices of the self and practices of power over others, we can still see the resistant value of these activities insofar as they may be practices of freedom.

⁵⁷ I thank Stephen Theirman for this point.

While these attempts at visual critique may be more or less effective, they are certainly worth attempting. However, I think there are many options for acting on others' actions in order to resist dominant power relations; critique is only one of them. It is true that Foucault saw critique as a way to spark deeper and more radical change than other tactics (2000a, 290). From a feminist perspective, then, it would be ideal if everyone problematized patriarchal body norms and the practices linked to them. However, insisting that women make their bodies into walking critiques in order to resist patriarchy is utopian at best. If you cannot or do not want to use your body as critique then it does not mean you cannot resist the way phallogocentric power constrains you and others. If we are as skilled as Foucault or McWhorter in creating transformative experiences through genealogies, then it may be worthwhile to "share" critique as a practice of governmentality. This may be especially valuable if we are concerned about leaving space for others to practice freedom. Sometimes, however, we might just have to act on others actions without leaving as wide an opening for them to articulate a variety of responses. We might work on media campaigns to increase representation of non-normative female bodies in mainstream media, for example. Perhaps we will lobby for government health programs and policies that do not encourage nor rely upon fat-panic. Practicing power over others might mean we will act within traditional forms of political and social activism, as McWhorter does in her fight for political justice for the GLBT community in Virginia. While these avenues may reinforce and produce political subjects that we find problematic, it may be one of the best ways to get people to act as we need in order to practice our freedom.

Haber seems to be correct in that maintaining a more or less normative appearance, unfortunately, does mean that your appearance is helping patriarchal surveillance to function – thereby producing those negative experiences Bartky and Bordo's analyses revealed. This does put us in a bit of a bind. However, perhaps patriarchal surveillance is not the biggest problem we have at the moment. As

Foucault pointed out, we need to decide what our greatest danger is today, and go from there (1997c, 256). Perhaps I need the social currency of a normatively acceptable appearance to have my lobbying work taken seriously. Remember that the task is not how not to be governed at all, but “the art of not being governed quite so much” (Foucault 2007, 45).

Conclusion

In sum, the elaboration of my Foucauldian framework has revealed the forms of power-knowledge-self-relations implicated in my original approach to the problem of stubborn experiences. Thinking through it with Foucault and Foucauldian has allowed me to formulate strategies to reduce the pain and suffering that changing my practices might cause, which is practically and politically much better than simply sitting with my guilt as a “failed knower.” In the second half of the chapter I worked through Honi Fern Haber’s paper on body building as a form of Foucauldian feminist resistance, arguing that she wants to use the visible body as a form of critique, or use of power over others. I had several concerns about her formulation of this. I argued that bodybuilding can be taken up as a practice of freedom by individuals, regardless of the visible effects. I also argued that there are many ways to interrupt the working of phallogentric surveillance, though their effects will likely be less radical than Haber intends.

Conclusion: Looking Down on Oneself from Above

These days, that mind/body dualisms and a historical conception of selfhood are intellectually and ethically problematic is something we can be said to know. But we know these things only as propositions we hold to be true, and holding a set of propositions is not the same as living out those propositions; asserting something is not the same as incorporating it (McWhorter 1999, 147).

There is irony in those efforts one makes to alter one's way of looking at things, to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there. Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking? Perhaps at most they made it possible to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point and in a clearer light. Sure of having travelled far, one finds that one is looking down on oneself from above (Foucault 1985, 11).

I began this project in search of straightforward and practically useful answers to a set of questions that had been bothering me for some time. Having learned from feminist critique that my body is inherently acceptable, why am I consistently frustrated by its failure to meet conventional norms? Why does the idea of abandoning the politically problematic, time-consuming, and expensive practices I undertake to approximate these norms provoke anxiety, shame, and disgust? If I am an intelligent and rational human being, why is knowing the truth about bodies not enough to change my

thoughts and feelings toward them? Given the stubbornness of my thoughts and feelings, is there anything that *could* be enough to change them?

Uncomfortable with the sexist bind that my intuitive approach led me into, I attempted to reframe the problem through the work of Michel Foucault. I argued that according to Foucault's concept of historically constituted experience, experiences of bodies are constituted not only by forms of knowledge, but by historically particular forms of power and self-relation and the practices linked to these forms. This picture allows for intentional intervention in the making of experience through strategic ethical practice. I introduced Foucault's concept of thought to work through the connection between the reflection necessary for ethics and the forms of self-relation that are part of historically constituted experience. I argued that while thought is constrained by dominant forms of power, it may be practiced freely. This free thinking is precisely what critique aims to achieve. Critique does not, contrary to the implications of my motivating questions, separate the self from the object being critiqued – be it my disgust toward my body or patriarchal standards of attractiveness – and allow the subject to rationally consider whether she should reengage with the object or reject it. Instead, I argued that through problematization critique can shift relations between subjects and the objects of critique, making possible and calling for the articulation of new practices, including ethical ones, in response to these new problems.

Turning my Foucauldian framework onto my original questions, I found that I had formulated the problem within the constraints of a dominant way of thinking about the self, rationality, and critique. This way of thinking was unhelpful and even dangerous insofar as it did not generate effective strategies for the alteration of experiences, and, further, it located the responsibility for these failures on the subject herself. This compounded the negative effects of the experiences in question and effectively precluded meaningful resistance to dominant forms of power. By problematizing this way of thinking

and taking a more Foucauldian view of critique, experience, and the self, I argued that we might problematize the signs of “stubborn” experiences as defence mechanisms of normalizing power rather than as failures of the self. This allows us to articulate ethical strategies that might be more effective in transforming experiences and in resisting dominant forms of power. I concluded by working through the possibilities of women’s body building as an ethical practice based on the form of problematization “unleashed” by feminist critiques of embodiment. According to my reading, Honi Fern Haber suggests that the hugely muscled woman can be an empowering embodiment for women and act as a sort of walking critique, problematizing patriarchal surveillance by her very appearance. I argued that while critique can be an effective strategy for acting on others’ actions it is not the only way to interrupt surveillance or power more broadly, and as a practice of power over others, is not a necessary component of ethical resistance.

There is something embarrassingly obvious about the conclusions I’ve arrived at through this project. As McWhorter predicts in the epigraph above, I have “known” that mind body dualism and traditional views of the subject are politically problematic and philosophically questionable since my first classes in feminist theory. And yet, here I am, over two years after formulating the basic idea for this thesis, and it was only through this labour that I was able to recognize these views operating in my thinking. I had been, in other words, constrained by a dominant form of thought, thinking within the limits of this thought without recognizing its existence or its effects on my practices. Working through Foucault’s views has helped to problematize this form of thought in a way that reading philosophical critiques and deconstructions of dualism and the autonomous self had not. In a way I feel I have created for (and out of) myself a shining example of the disconnect between propositional thinking and the “field of possible experience,” “thought,” or implicit understanding (to use Shotwell’s [2011] term) that

structures feelings, affects, perceptions, practices, and thinking. I am not quite sure if I am now “above” myself, as Foucault puts it; but I do find myself some place significantly different from where I began. Given the frustration and suffering from whence I came, it is a place I am glad to be.

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