

Reflections on Gender from a Communication Point-of-View

Reflections on Gender from a Communication Point-of-View:

GenderSpectives

Edited by

Nickesia Gordon and Laura Finley

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Reflections on Gender from a Communication Point-of-View:
GenderSpectives
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Edited by Nickesia Gordon and Laura Finley

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

PEACE STUDIES: EDGES AND INNOVATIONS

LAURA FINLEY AND MICHAEL MINCH
ON BEHALF OF THE PEACE AND JUSTICE
STUDIES ASSOCIATION (PJSA)

Peace Studies: Edges and Innovations is a book series edited by PJSA Board Members Michael Minch and Laura Finley. The intent of the series is to fill in gaps in the conflict, peace, justice and reconciliation literature while presenting texts that are on the cutting edge of the discipline. The series includes both edited and solo-authored books that combine academic rigor and accessible prose, making them appealing to scholars, classrooms, activists, practitioners and policymakers.

Books in the series focus on re-conceptualizing and expanding peace education, looking to and drawing from communities that have been marginalized, overlooked, or forgotten; identify new understandings of the role that gender, multiculturalism and diversity play in the creation of a sustained peace; promoting innovative peacebuilding strategies and movements related to positive peace and justice; exploring the relationship between peace studies and other contemporary problematics, such as climate change and the rights of indigenous peoples; addressing the overlap, interpenetration and symbiosis between peace and conflict studies and other disciplinary areas; and analyzing current issues in criminal justice, with an emphasis on restorative alternatives. Due to the breadth of the topic matter, the series is appropriate for readers of all disciplinary traditions.

In sum, the series aims to promote the most interesting and exciting trends or movements in the field of peace and conflict studies. It is also intended

to render more visible the unique contributions of peacemakers and to promote the mission and goals of the PJSA.

The Peace and Justice Studies Association is a binational non-profit organization with the mission of creating a just and peaceful world through research, education and action. PJSA is dedicated to bringing together academics, K-12 teachers, and grassroots activists to explore alternatives to violence and share visions and strategies for peacebuilding, social justice, and social change. The organization serves as a professional association for scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies, and is the North American affiliate of the International Peace Research Association. Additional information about PJSA can be found at www.peacejusticestudies.org.

Books in the Series

- Amster, Randall, Finley, Laura, McKutcheon, Richard and Pries, Edmund (Eds.) *Peace Studies Traditions and Innovations* (2015).
- Standish, Katerina. *Cultural Violence in the Classroom: Peace, Conflict and Education in Israel*. (2015).
- Finley, Laura and Concannon, Kelly. (Eds.) *Peace and Social Justice Education on Campus: Faculty and Student Perspectives* (2015).
- Meyer, Matt and Vidya Jain. (Eds.). *Satyagraha / Ujamaa: Connecting Contemporary African-Asian Peacemaking and Nonviolence* (forthcoming).

INTRODUCTION

NICKESIA GORDON

On a subject as personal as gender, multiple perspectives exist, many of which do not necessarily fit traditional ideas about how to enact gender. This volume represents an exploration of gender from a variety of standpoints, many of which are deeply personal and introspective. Importantly, the collection of essays documents the experiences of and reflections on gender from graduate and undergraduate students in the field of Communication. The concept for the book is partly the product of conversations, queries and discoveries that emerged from a spirited Communication and Gender course offered by the Department of Communication at Barry University. However, *Genderspectives* quickly burgeoned into an interdisciplinary account of gender experiences from a variety of voices representing multiple academic programs. The book privileges the student voice, offering contemplatives from the students' point of view in their encounters with gender issues as they intersect with their identities, sexualities, race and ethnicity, nationalities as well as socio-economic backgrounds, in their everyday communicative experiences. Prevailing notions of selfhood are often contested and scrutiny of one's own understanding of gender as it is constructed, performed, evaluated, and negotiated in socio-cultural and political contexts is a common thread that unites many of the chapters that comprise the collection.

Several chapters are co-authored by students and faculty, while others are written by faculty scholars who incorporate student reflections into the essay. Notwithstanding, *GenderSpectives* denotes an articulation of the critical thinking and ethical reasoning processes students can engage in as part of an educational experience that prepares them to be conscientious members of society who are capable of initiating and contributing to social change. The collection of essays also empowers each student contributor by providing a platform from which they can voice their concerns and advocate for social change. Students are potential academics but more importantly, it is imperative that their voices get recognized as part of a critical pedagogical/ transformative educational process. The volume is different from others in that 1) It focuses on student voices and their

personal gender stories; 2) It is a product of student learning, i.e. students reflecting on and putting into practice what they have learnt; and 3) It is an example of engaged student learning where students engage in critical thinking, ethical and moral reasoning, inquiry and analysis as well as intercultural explorations.

The essays posit personal or research questions writers have based on gender encounters in a variety of settings including family, work, educational, religious, mass media and peer. The discussions that subsequently emerged from these contextual frames lead to the organization of the book into three sections, namely Gender and Identity, Gender and Language and Gender and Institutions. Collectively, the sections offer discussions on issues such as the gender binary, the concept that excludes LGBTQ identities and posits heterosexuality as the only viable option. Essays that tackle this topic deconstruct established beliefs about gender norms and offer more dynamic approaches to understanding gender performances. Discussions also problematize the idea of feminism as purported by popular culture and contemplate the complexity of articulating feminism through pop cultural industries such as mass media.

Another topic covered under the three sections include examinations of the role of language in gender constructions. Several chapters examine issues of semantic imbalance and derogatory speech and their disempowering effects. Such language often contributes to sexually based violence against women, an issue that multiple essays address. Rape culture, particularly on college campuses, female objectification, and the male gaze are concepts that are simultaneously explored.

Specifically, section one of the volume, Gender and Identity, focuses on representations and constructions of gendered selves in a variety of contexts. Several of the works in this section critique the patriarchal organization of female subjectivity and question the political and social construction of gender that often invokes the gender binary. For instance, in her essay, "Boys Will Be Girls and Girls Will Be Boys," Finley points out how gender role norms inform people about how they are expected to dress, look, and behave as a result of the sexual characteristics that are presumed to be tied to their gender identity. As she argues, although these norms have changed over time, and people are now beginning to recognize that gender is far less binary and much more fluid, there remains a certain rigidity in societal expectations for males and females. LaCarruba similarly argues for non-binary identities which do not have to conform to the ideas of masculinity and femininity in the chapter titled, "The Gender Binary from The Outside."

Other essays in the section argue that the image of womanhood that is constructed by patriarchy is invariably sexual and limiting in nature. As Cixous (1980) points out, “women’s imaginary is inexhaustible” (246), yet male centered discourse insists on defining female subjectivity in rather restrictive sexual terms. For example, women are either castrating Medusas, or unfathomable continents (Freud 1950). Gordon, in chapter six, concludes that such articulations of female identities relegate women to the position of the objectified other, used to maintain patriarchal hegemony.

Section one also includes ethnographic accounts of gender identity performances, as expressed by Kluch and Spikes in chapters one and two. Each interrogates conceptions of masculinities and the role of hegemonic masculinity in constricting expressions of manhood that do not fit the normative gender performances. As Plester (2015) observes, “hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal but it is normative” (541) insofar as it exemplifies the cultural ideal. As Kluch and Spikes’ chapters bear out, for men to conform to hegemonic masculinity “they must distance themselves from both femininity and homosexuality” (541).

Section two, Gender and Language, delineates the connection between language and the construction of gender. Essays in this section acknowledge that the control that patriarchy assumes over the construction of female identity has been, for the most part, facilitated through language and its political application. Feminist theory has consistently referred to the phallogentric nature of language which “hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (Cixous 1980, 251). As it is language that constructs identity, it follows that the group that is in control of language will also be in control of the construction of subjectivity. Consequently, “[i]t comes as no surprise...that language is an instrument of oppression” (Littlejohn 2001, 224) that has been used to mute the experiences and voices of women and men who do not conform to idealized expectations of gender performance. Language “is instrumental in constructing the world in which we live” (Littlejohn 2002), therefore, its patriarchal control engenders a construction of the female and male subjectivity that reduces individuals to objects. Kornfield and DeSantis, in their essay, “The Language of Gender,” discuss the oppressive nature of language and how it is used to maintain the gender binary and construct a world in which this dichotomy seems immutable. So do Concannon and Nicols in their chapter, “Speaking Up, Acting Out: Reflective Dialogue and The First-Year Writing Course,” in which they reflect on the ethical dimensions of language use within the context of an introductory and an advanced level writing course.

Finally, section three, Gender and Institutions, offers discussions on the institutional discourses and practices that help shape gender. As DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2008) make clear “institutions, like individuals, communicate gender and are gendered through communication ...gender is much more than a personality trait and is itself a social institution (141). Therefore, institutions of education such as schools and colleges, work, family and mass media, impact gender in the ways in which they exert hegemonic control over how gender is performed. Institutionalized violence against certain genders is oftentimes the direct result of institutional practices that maintain gender inequalities. Several chapters examine the institution of education and its role in shaping problematic gender discourses and practices. For instance, Finley in chapter twelve exposes the culture of rape on college campuses while offering ways in which this culture may be dismantled. Chapin and Paoletti also look at education’s role in informing gender relations in chapter thirteen, where they outline the disturbing relationship between sexism and bystander intervention among middle school and high school students while advocating for the integration of violence prevention education into the school curricula.

All the essays in the volume offer critical perspectives and reflections on gender that challenge normative practices and expectations. As one student from the aforementioned Communication and Gender class reflected:

It is okay to teach your sons how to wash their own clothes, the dishes, cook and clean up after themselves, because it is ultimately traits they will need when they become an adult. It is okay for a father to let his daughter help him cut the grass, take out the trash, and learn the basics of maintaining a car, such as changing a tire or checking the oil. That teaches her that she does not have to depend on anyone to do any of those tasks for her. Teach them that everyone is equal, no matter what their gender/sex is. Encourage them to go against the norm, to make a difference in the world.

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SECTION ONE:
GENDER AND IDENTITY

CHAPTER ONE

RECREATIONAL BODYBUILDING AS CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION: COMMUNICATING CROSS-CULTURAL MASCULINITIES IN U.S. COLLEGE GYM CULTURE

YANNICK KLUCH

Introduction

As I make my way across the university lawn, I can feel a splash of excitement each time I spy a new building, a new facet of this campus that will be my home for the next few years. It is the foreignness of this campus that fascinates me. Will I ever find my way around on this huge place? A quick turn to the right exposes a giant glass front protruding from the blanket of green, freshly cut grass: the front of the Recreation Center. I look at it as if I had just reached the top of the Statue of Liberty. My usual pre-workout excitement is increased by my fascination for this new lifting environment. As I pull open the door, my eyes get as big as a child's eyes on Christmas morning. I take a few steps towards the center of the building. The lifting machines are lined up like soldiers; each group of machines seemingly focusing on one particular muscle group. The lifting machines line up around a free weight area containing three dozen free weights, while the entire first floor is overlooked by an army of treadmills and other cardio equipment on the second floor. The mirrored walls and giant headlights look modern and futuristic, yet familiar, and this place reminds me of my gym back home. Maybe, I reassure myself, I have already found a small piece of home away from home.

As my eyes travel with amazement from one corner of the gym to the next, I do not realize that I am almost running into two guys coming my way. An abrupt stop saves me from crashing into two young college men who seem to be twice my size. "Sorry, I was just goi—," I attempt to say, but am interrupted by the stocky-looking guy to my right. "You're all good, man,"

he says briefly and walks away, while his equally buff friend rolls his eyes. "I remember my first time at the gym," I can hear him say as they veer away from me, and both begin to laugh. "That skinny dude needs to add some more plates if he wants to impress any girls in those short shorts... or boys," the other one whispers. The corners of my mouth, almost touching my eyes just moments before, are now pointing towards the floor beneath my feet. My stomach starts to twist, pulling my breath down into uncertainty. What did he mean by that? This is surely not my first time at a gym, and I have worked out for many years in Germany. Nobody has ever called me skinny, either. Within seconds, the walls that have previously given me refuge in this foreign place have turned against me.

Like many scholars before me, I have been drawn to the study of men and masculinities through my initial discomfort with traditional masculinity. Using Connell's (1987) theoretical framework of multiple co-existing, hierarchical masculinities in any given cultural, social, or historical context as a theoretical framework, it is the goal of this chapter to provide insight into the complexity of men's experiences with multiple co-existing masculinities through an autoethnographic analysis of my own masculine identities in cross-cultural contexts. While some research has been conducted on the role of gym culture and bodybuilding in the construction of masculine gender identities (see e.g. Alvarez 2008; Bridges 2009; Denham 2008; Klein 1993), few scholarly inquiries offer autoethnographic insights into masculinities and bodybuilding in general, and no scholars have offered autoethnographic accounts for recreational bodybuilding (i.e. bodybuilding for recreational rather than competitive purposes) as a meaningful activity to construct and communicate cross-culturally fluid, complex masculine identities. Taking an autoethnographic approach, in this chapter I explore how cross-cultural masculinities can be communicated and constructed through non-verbal, verbal, and embodied communication practices in U.S. college gym culture. Further, I aim to provide insight into how identity markers such as gender and nationality intersect to create specific gendered experiences in U.S. sporting contexts.

On method: Writing an autoethnographic narrative on cross-cultural masculinities

A distinct pop fills the room, as I throw my bag full of books into the rusty locker that is missing half of its blue color. Writing that last paper was rough. I had buried myself in mountains of books for the past two days, and the more words I wrote, the more miserable I became. I was disappointed that even after three months in the program, I had been as dependent on my German-English dictionary as my brother was on

alcoholic drinks during family gatherings. I take off my pants and hoodie, and change into my favorite pair of shorts and a black Nike t-shirt that I had bought the week before as a reward for making it half-way through my first semester of graduate school in America. As I tie my shoes, a guy walks in and takes off his shirt. I look at his well-defined, muscular upper body. I can't help but feel intimidated by the size of his musculature. Why does almost every guy in this gym look like they came straight from the newest Hollywood blockbuster? How do they get these bodies? The guy throws a quick "What's up?" at me, but leaves for the shower section before I am able to respond.

I have just finished my first set, when a 6-foot-tall, fairly muscular, curly-haired guy dressed in long shorts and tank top walks up to me. "Hey man, do you mind if I jump in? The gym is so packed, I don't want to waste my time standing around." I double-check to see if he was actually talking to me, before I respond excitedly: "Absolutely." I hop off the bench and make way. The nameless guy walks over to the shelf of free weights and, with seemingly no effort, picks up the 65-lbs-dumbbells. As he starts to push the weights away from his body, sweat is dropping off his forehead and his breathing is getting louder, until he calmly utters a determined groaning after each rep of his set. After eight reps, he slams the weights on the ground. "Your turn, man. Do you need a spot?" I am not sure what he means: "A spot?" He raises his eyebrows. "Yeah, in case you fail I can spot you. So that you can give one hundred percent on your last set," he explains. "I usually don't need spots, but thanks," I respond. "Then you are not giving one hundred percent," he says and both of us start to grin.

"I'm Spencer, by the way," he says right after I finished my next set. "Nice to meet you, Spencer!" "Dude ... where are you from?" His question takes me by surprise. "Germany. I guess my beautiful accent gave that away," I respond. "Well, that too. No offense man, but I kind of figured you weren't from Ohio. You just, I guess, look different. Know what I mean?" Spencer grins at me. I know he did not mean to insult me, so I smile back, left in the dark about what he meant.

It is the autoethnographic research tradition that allows researchers to "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 276). My autoethnographic narrative is, therefore, first and foremost an articulation of the cross-cultural friction between multiple masculine identities embodied and communicated by myself in a time of struggle. I outline my experiences as an international student, as a gendered sporting individual from a foreign country, entering U.S. college gym culture through practices of recreational bodybuilding. My first encounter with Spencer,

who later became one of the closest friends I was going to make, constituted such a moment of cross-cultural friction. His words reminded me that I was in a new cultural context, and in this new context I was marked as *different* by the way I looked.

It is the objective of the autoethnographic researcher to connect “the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2004, xix). Ellis (2013) reminds us so eloquently that “autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively” (10). Through the display of “multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 739), the autoethnographic writer becomes a vulnerable observer of his own experiences, which, ideally, exposes the very own vulnerability of the text’s readers (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Bochner, in his work with Ellis, has also advocated a more frequent academic use of personal narratives, which he describes as valuable agents in the sense-making process of complex human experiences:

[They are] ... stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life’s unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one’s meanings and values into question. (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 744)

What I experienced in my first few weeks in an American gym can accurately be summarized as the starting point of a process of *chaos* and *struggle*. The derogatory words that the two young men aimed at me surely hurt and the things Spencer said upset me, but, more importantly, this moment was so significant because it shattered my perception of what it meant to be masculine. As an undergraduate student in a business-oriented program in Germany, I was shockingly unaware of socially and culturally constructionist accounts of gender. Like for many undereducated individuals in their twenties, the idea of male vs. female was essentially simple to me; I considered it to be a core human trait. It was not until years later, after I had become immersed in the interdisciplinary fields of communication and masculinity studies, that I was able to look back at my experiences as an international student entering U.S. gym culture as an outsider through a communication perspective. My masculine identity, it became evident to me, had always been linked to my upbringing and identification as German, which is why my exposure to a new cultural context—the college gym in the American Midwest—had led to cross-cultural friction in my masculine self that is worthy of being documented

and analyzed. I use my narrative to show that—for me—through gaining access to hegemonic masculine scripts, the gym became a site of both cultural *adaptation* and cultural *transformation*, thus offering a rare autoethnographic account of sporting practices in general and bodybuilding in particular as a meaningful activity to communicate cross-culturally fluid, complex masculine identities.

Communicating cross-culturally fluid masculinities in the U.S. college gym

The juicy green that made the big lawn in front of the Recreation Center so inviting months before has given way to a thick layer of dreary white. It began snowing three days ago, and on this early January morning, the cold air feels like a whiplash in my face. As I wait for Spencer to arrive for our first workout session after Christmas Break, I reflect on the months that lie behind me. Spencer and I have become fairly close friends since our first encounter at the gym. I ran into him the next day, and had asked him for his phone number to be able to coordinate our lifting schedules so that we could work out together. Soon after, we became lifting buddies who spent, at minimum, three hours together at the gym each week. While we had some trouble combining our schedules at first, our lifting sessions had become a rehearsed choreography by the end of the semester. “Sorry I’m late,” Spencer says shortly after finishing a sprint from his car to the main entrance, “Let’s gets this lift going!”

I sit down on the bench that we have put in an upright position so that we could do dumbbell shoulder presses. I push the weights in the air and start to lift them up and down in a controlled manner. My arms and shoulders look good in the mirror. I am glad I decided to wear a cut-off today, and my eyes continue to stare at my shoulders in the mirror two feet away from me as I finish my set. “I have a question,” Spencer declares, while falling into to bench to start his own set. “And I wondered this before, but I thought it was kinda weird to ask.” “Go ahead, man, no worries,” I respond. “How come you barely have any armpit hair?” “What do you mean?” I don’t think I understood his question, and he reacts to the confused look on my face: “I’m just wondering, because it looks like you have no armpit hair, when you do the shoulder press.” I realize that I understood him correctly the first time, and start to chuckle about this unexpected question. “Well, of course I can grow hair in my armpits. I just shave them. I don’t like looking like a bushman.”

Spencer looks at me with his eyes wide open. “Why would you shave your armpits on purpose? That’s what girls do,” he says, after he has gathered his thoughts. “I know, man, but it’s actually pretty common in Germany. All my guy friends shave their armpits. It’s just more hygienic, and no girl

likes looking at a ball of sweaty, three-inch hairs when taking off your shirt." I try not to sound too embarrassed, but I was taken by surprise with this topic that all of a sudden seemed oddly intimate to me. Spencer eventually breaks the silence: "I don't think I have ever seen a guy who shaves his armpits here. Must be a German thing," Spencer concludes and switches to a more mocking tone, "like wearing short shorts and hugging other guys instead of fist-bumping them."

Masculinity can best be described as "the socially constructed way to be a man" (Zayer and Otnes 2012, 90). As such, masculinity is composed of gestures, acts, and enactments and "one way to frame masculinity is to see it as a set of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors that may be at odds with each other" (Klein 1993, 16). Masculinity, then, is typically understood to be characteristic male behavior that it is measured by methods such as appearance, behavior, voice, and muscularity (Alvarez 2008). Because masculinities are "complex, often contradictory, always in process and never finished" (Kennedy 2007, 23), scholars have started to identify a new depth to the study of masculinity. Masculinity is now conceptualized as hierarchical, with hegemonic masculinity at the top of the societal hierarchy. This "culturally idealized form of masculine character (in a given historical setting)" (Connell 1990, 83) is constructed in relation to marginalized and subordinated forms of masculinity (Connell 1987). As such, hegemonic masculinity is the "taken-for-granted, or 'common sense' model of what it is to be male" (Brookes 2002, 130). In addition, Tan et al. (2013) found that hegemonic masculinity, while it might not be the most common type of masculinity, sets the standard against which the achievements of all other men (the majority) are judged. In other words, while hegemonic masculinity is not normal, it certainly is normative. It might be for this reason that hegemonic masculinity is "experienced by many men as a strait-jacket; a set of conventions of behavior, style, ritual and practice that limit and confine, and are subject to surveillance, informal policing and regulation" (Whannel 2007, 11).

It is the performative nature of masculinity that makes it an apt area of analysis when looking at the construction of gender from a communication perspective. Indeed, the gym then becomes a domain in which masculinities are communicated through performing bodies. For bodybuilding and exercising bodies, the gym can become a significant place to align with hegemonic notions of masculinity (Alvarez 2008). Alvarez (2008) has shown convincingly that "muscular can be built, and masculine can be learned. [...] Today, the gym has, of course, become another tool in the acquisition of these sets of muscles and set of skills" (127). It may thus be barely surprising, as White and Gillett (1994) have

found through their analysis of *Flex Magazine*, that “bodybuilding is a cultural practice that represents, promotes, and encourages attitudes which reinforce the subordinate status of women and counterhegemonic masculinities” (33). Because bodybuilding promises quick results and greater physical self-control (as well as aesthetic value), it allows men to construct a superior self-identity that represents Western cultural ideals of hyper-masculinity including power, authority, and domination (Wiegers 1998). It may be for this reason that while my experience in the college gym shows that my masculine *German self* was judged in comparison to the American norm, I did not perceive the hegemonic norm as a “strait-jacket”—rather, it was this norm that allowed me access to hegemonic experiences in the gym.¹

The work of Wiegers (1998) illustrates that gym culture helps construct masculinities in the United States and that the male body plays a central role in these constructions. This in itself is barely surprising, as the male body has been described as “the primary agent of hegemonic masculinity” (Martin and Govender 2011, 221). This is also supported by other studies: In their comparison of homosexual and heterosexual gym-active males, Brown and Graham (2008) found that gay men who are classified as rather feminine use the gym to develop a greater sense of masculinity. The gym, as such, becomes a place where masculinity can be increased and validated; it is a place in which men can use their bodies to construct non-verbal and verbal communication behaviors that place them closer to the hegemonic ideal.

In her analysis of bodybuilding star Arnold Schwarzenegger, Boyle (2010) argues that “the built body as a laboring body is seriously complicated by the goal of bodybuilding, which is to display muscles rather than to demonstrate their utility” (159). This means that the masculine body is feminized and subject to homoeroticism (Boyle 2010). Taking a different approach to the positioning of the male body as an object of desire, White and Gillett (1994) state that “the [bodybuilder’s] muscular body as masculine is valorized, and identified with, as an object of desire to be sculpted and presented in exchange for recognition of its social value” (21). This becomes particularly important in times when traditionally male domains (such as aforementioned commercial labor) have come under threat (White and Gillett 1994). In times when

¹ It is important to acknowledge my privilege in this context. As a white, male, able-bodied individual from a Western country, it was easier for me to gain access to hegemonic experiences in the United States, and I was less likely to experience what Whannel (2007) describes as the “strait-jacket” (11) of hegemonic masculinity due to the configuration of my body.

characteristics such as aggression, competitiveness, and leadership can be openly expressed by women, “men’s muscles are all that remain as visible symbol of their masculinity” (Choi 2003, 79). Similarly, my experience shows that I relied primarily on my body to align myself with the hegemonic norm in the U.S. College gym.

It had become obvious to me in my friendship with Spencer that it was our bodies that most significantly distinguished my masculine identity from that of Spencer, unmasking the non-essentialist nature of my masculinity as well as the hierarchical nature of our co-existing masculinities. Even though recreational bodybuilding had offered me an opportunity to express my identity, it was now my body that, in the words of Connell, created “trouble” (Connell 1990, 89) due to its lack of somatic compliance and nonconformity with the social definition. For Spencer and I, our bodies herewith became the primary agents in the communicative construction of our masculine identities. Spencer’s blunt condemnation of my shaved armpits offers a fruitful example of differences in cultural perceptions of what it means to be a man. While my shaved armpits had been seen as a sign of masculine maturity and source of female desire in Germany, they were now a part of my body that visually estranged me from the idealized form of masculinity in the culture of the U.S. college gym. More importantly, it was through my body—through my shaved armpits and through the clothes that I covered my body with—that a foreign masculine identity was communicated to Spencer, and it was through my body that I quickly learned to develop communicative behaviors that allowed me to access masculine scripts that would place me closer to the hegemonic ideal.

Masculinity as a tool of cultural transformation: The value of my story

The warm May sun shines bright into my eyes through the large glass front of the Recreation Center. The tingly feeling of my face tells me that my pre-workout has finally kicked in. I walk back over to the squat rack next to the one Spencer has blocked for himself, and put another 25lbs-plate on each side of my squat bar. I close my eyes for a moment, and focus all my energy on my second-last set of squats laying ahead of me. Just two more reps. “I’m ready,” I say as I open my eyes. Spencer moves behind me to spot me. I get under the bar and place it below my neck. With one distinct push, I throw the bar on my back, take three tiny steps back, and push my butt as close to the ground as my joints allow without having my knees pass me toes. “Ok and now push up,” I hear Spencer say, and I follow promptly. I push up as hard as I can, but I feel like my shoulders are pulled

to the floor by invisible strings. “You got this, man,” Spencer reassures me, and with a determined groan I push myself up into an upright position with the last bit of energy I have left. “Damn, dude, three 45s and a 25 on each side? That’s a new PR,” Spencer shouts, and I get excited about my newest achievement. “Obviously, it’s all because of my excellent personal training skills.”

I have to admit that Spencer is right to a certain extent. For the past five months, I have followed Spencer’s every move in and outside the gym as if I was his shadow. He showed me what to eat, when to eat it, when to work out what muscle group, when to do cardio, and what supplements to order to achieve optimal training results. We had started a new workout at the beginning of the semester. Each day, we trained a different muscle group. Six days of the week we came to the gym with only one goal: muscle failure, which meant muscle increase after the regeneration period. The work out sessions were more exhausting than before, but my discipline has not gone unnoticed, neither to me nor to others. I have gained 18 pounds since the start of the semester. I can tell that my arms look bigger, my shoulders are wider, my legs less skinny, and my abs more defined. I look into the mirror straight ahead of me, and feel satisfied. Over the past weeks, I have received many compliments about the transformation of my body. From “I can definitely tell you beat your ass off in the gym, man” over “Dude, you look HUGE” to a simple “nice body”—I appreciated all compliments. I did beat my ass off in the gym. Sure, I had Spencer to help me get started, but it was me who increased his weight each week. It was me who disciplined himself to follow a strict diet that supports my lifting goals. And it was me who got up every other morning to go on a run before class. I look at my reflection in the mirror again. Under my arms, I can see a fraction of bushy black hairs. I hadn’t shaved my armpits in weeks.

The gym became a prime place for me to not only learn about what it means to be a man in the United States, but also to adopt communicative behaviors and practices that would bring me as close to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity as possible. I had built what Hensley (2011) describes as a “house of muscle” and, more accurately, an “embodied hegemonic masculine shell” (61). It was my “hegemonic shell” that allowed me to transcend my overt status as outsider not only in the gym, but also in the wider cultural environment that made up my experience as an international student in the Midwest. Presumably trivial things such as growing out my armpit hair or putting on long shorts are overt expressions of a body—my body—used to communicate a privileged form of masculinity. As such, my communicative performance of shifting forms of masculinity allowed me to transcend the imagined borders of difference through the careful creation, communication, and negotiation of cross-cultural masculinities.

In his autoethnographic essay on his experiences as a competitive natural bodybuilder, Garratt (2015) shows impressively that “the performative natural bodybuilder is ... a veritable chameleon, reconfiguring for the audience, and further adapting behaviors to suit the assumed expectations and requirements of particular social situations” (348). As a recreational bodybuilder who, and this is at the heart of my story, was an international student thrown into an unfamiliar cultural environment, I became a “veritable chameleon” myself. It was due to the careful friction between cross-cultural masculinities in general, and the hegemonic masculine ideal embodied by Spencer (and later myself) in particular, that I was able to communicate a masculine identity that was constructed in close psychological and physical proximity to the hegemonic ideal. As such, the ability to perform hegemonic masculinity through recreational bodybuilding in the College gym has not only offered me a process of cultural *adaptation*. It has, more importantly, offered me a process of cultural *transformation*.

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CHAPTER TWO

“LOVE WOMEN AND HATE FAGGOTS!”: CONTRADICTIONS IN IDENTITY CONCEPTION AND PERFORMANCE

ANTONIO SPIKES

Contradictions.

I hate contradictions.

And yet, I call myself an intercultural communication scholar in training (technically a PhD student) who believes that identity is not stable, for it remains in a state of flux. This idea has led me to areas such as critical race theory (Bell 1980; Crenshaw 1991), Black feminist thought (Collins 2009; Griffin 2012), and queer theory (Butler 1999; Muñoz 1999; Sedgwick 1990). Considering how identities are constituted in a complicated matrix of social, cultural, and political forces, people can experience their lives in both congruent, and contradictory ways. I generally see myself as a Black gay male experiencing contradictions in his identity and performance thereof. In the following narratives, I would like for you, the reader, to look at a series of events where a young Black male contends with forces such as racism, masculinity, heterosexism, and his religious identity at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Before that, a note about the method and concepts that undergird this examination.

Autoethnography

Telling one's story is a risky endeavor (Jackson 2013; Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013). Originally, I thought I had no stories worth telling. But everyone has a story. Even if one's narrative lacks dramatic tension, that account provides the means to examine oneself in relation to another (Anderson 2006). Exposing our narrated selves to the world invites people to see us, and it also invites writers to connect with others through the