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WORKING OUT THE CONTRADICTIONS

Feminism and Aerobics

Leslea Haravon Collins

Although feminist researchers have critiqued aerobics as an activity that maintains ideologies of female inferiority, many women, including feminists, attend, participate in, and enjoy aerobics classes. This research provides a preliminary exploration of the extent to which women can exercise agency within the gendered constraints of aerobics. The 10 feminist exercisers interviewed use strategies for participation that both downplay oppressive aspects of and enhance personal empowerment in their aerobics classes. These strategies include distancing, rejecting the critique, asserting agency, and making do. The women's ability to enjoy a practice while constantly remaking it to suit their own purposes is indicative of the way women often must live their lives within a misogynistic, patriarchal culture.

Aerobics is one of the few physical activities in which women are encouraged unequivocally to participate. An overwhelming majority of aerobics instructors and participants are women (Firebaugh, 1989; Fitness Product Council, 1996; Lloyd, 1996; Morse, 1987/1988; Toufexis, 1986). The institutionalization of aerobics, accomplished through the mass production of celebrity exercise videos, equipment, clothing lines, trade journals, and organizations like the International Dance Exercise Association, Aerobics and Fitness Association of America, and American Council on Exercise has increased its popularity and visibility across the United States.

Researchers have criticized aerobics as an activity that does more to maintain dominant ideologies of women's powerlessness and sexual commodification than it does to empower women through movement and action (Lenskyj, 1984, 1986, 1987; Lloyd, 1996; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Redican & Hadley, 1988; Theberge, 1985, 1987). Analyses of exercise videos, television workout shows, and fitness magazines have yielded similar results (Duncan, 1994; Eskes, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Kagan & Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1988). Opinion is not uniform on this subject, however. A large number of women, including feminists, are very devoted to and reap many rewards from their aerobics classes (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; Markula, 1995). There are even some feminist aerobics instructors (Haravon, 1995; Markula, 1995).

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This exploratory study examines some aspects of “aerobics culture” in an attempt to understand the extent to which women are both empowered and oppressed by it. The analysis problematizes the ways in which aerobics can be concurrently a feminist and a patriarchal practice. It also challenges these seemingly distinct categories by showing how they are, in fact, more interrelated than they are disparate and polarized. By learning about aerobics culture and the feminists who inhabit it, one can gain a preliminary understanding of the ways in which feminist aerobic exercisers both incorporate and discard powerful cultural ideologies about themselves and their bodies during the aerobic workout.

AEROBICS AS CONTRADICTION

In her participant observation and interview study, Kenen (1987) explored women’s reasons for participating in aerobics. She considered some of the double messages in an aerobics class, such as the traditional image of woman as fragile and not visibly powerful contrasted with a more feminist model of a woman with strength and stamina. Morse (1987/1988) called this femininity-with-strength ideal “a condensation of contradictions: thin and muscular, hard and curvaceous, it suggests power and yet a slender boyishness” (p. 25). The uniting factor in these contradictory images is, according to Bordo (1990), a battle against “the soft, the loose; unsolid, excess flesh” (p. 90).

Markula (1995) attempted to understand aerobics as a contradictory cultural form, paying particular attention to the meanings given by the class participants and the role of contradiction in these women’s lives. Using exercisers’ voices in conjunction with both academic and popular articles about aerobics, and combining ethnography, interviews, and textual media analysis, Markula assigned a postmodern understanding to aerobic exercise. Even as there is a dominant discursive practice, which dictates a thin and fit ideal, the women Markula interviewed “actively make sense out of their social world” and do not surrender completely to the values of hegemonic ideology (Markula, 1995, p. 429). She concluded that women “want to conform to the [fit body] ideal, but they also find the whole process ridiculous. As a result, women’s relationship with the body ideal is contradictory” (Markula, 1995, p. 450).

In this article, I problematize the discussion of contradictions presented by Kenen (1987) and Morse (1987/1988) and furthered by Markula (1995) by asking feminists who enjoy aerobics to articulate these contradictions and to explain how they affect these women’s lived experiences of aerobic exercise. In addition, I categorize the practices engendered by these contradictions by outlining four “strategies for participation” that enable these feminists to engage in this empowering and oppressive cultural practice. Whereas Markula’s goal is to “reconstruct the cultural dialogue surrounding the female body image in aerobics” (Markula, 1995, p. 424), my aim is to organize the contradictions that Markula and I have found in our research into strategies that enable women to participate in aerobics.

SUBJECTS

Ten feminist women who participate in aerobic exercise were interviewed for this study. The criterion for being a feminist for the purpose of this research was that each woman identify herself as such. A woman who gives herself this currently unpopular label is aware of her own resistance to dominant, patriarchal culture and will have an awareness of the sexist elements that are evident in some aerobic exercise classes. The women who participated in this study responded to an announcement in local newsletters distributed by the women's center and the women's studies program at a large midwestern university. The announcement explicitly solicited feminists who take aerobic exercise classes. The 10 women interviewed were middle-class, educated, and White. Two of the participants were Jewish.¹ Their occupations included teacher, executive, administrator, professor, student, nurse, and clerical worker. Occupational and ethnic differences, possibly due to the size of the sample, did not appear significant. Of the women interviewed, 7 participate in aerobic exercise at health clubs, whereas the remaining 3 are members of nonprofit recreation centers.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW: PROCEDURE AND ANALYSIS

Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was recorded and transcribed. I began by asking the women general questions about their experience with aerobics, such as: When did you start participating in aerobics? Why did you choose aerobics? What kind of aerobics do you do? and Where does your class take place (health club, recreation center, etc.)? I then asked them how they think aerobics is understood in mainstream culture and why they think most people do aerobics. After these general questions were explored, I asked them more personal questions about their own reasons for doing aerobics.

The first of the three themes I explored with the interviewees was agency and constraint. I asked them what in the practice of aerobics gives them agency and what constrains them. This question was answered with references to such aspects of the workout as the social dynamics in the aerobics room, the instructor, the music, the movements that aerobics involves, and the clothing one wears.

The second theme was the disempowering, oppressive aspect of aerobics. I asked each woman to discuss her understanding of feminist critiques of aerobics. Here, the women explored the contradiction of being feminists and enjoying aerobics. I asked them to react to the following quotes from Kagan and Morse (1988): "The aerobics industry is like a factory in which motion becomes an instrument for dominating and shaping the body as object" (p. 177); and

ultimately, the movement personality created in this aerobic exercise is that of an automaton; flattened in space and stationary, employing movements which are repetitive, remote from the self, and fragmented. Thus the human capacities for adaptability diversity, progress choice, depth, expansiveness or complexity are not acknowledged. (p. 174)²

The final theme was empowering aerobics. In this last portion of the interview, I asked the women to imagine a feminist, empowering aerobics class; how would they envision the perfect aerobics class? How would the class be different from and similar to previous aerobics classes? It was in this section that I explored with them the ways that aerobics is or can be an uplifting, inspiring, and possibly resistant practice for women.

Debates concerning the analysis and interpretation of qualitative research material have wavered from granting ultimate authority to the "educated" scholar to prioritizing the word of the experiencing subject (Clifford, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1896). One possible, partial solution to the concern with the politics of authority in feminist ethnographic research may be what Cole (1991) referred to as "shared authorial voice" in experimental ethnographic research. This voice acknowledges "the necessity of increased interaction, cooperation, and sensitivity between research and local subjects in the research process" (Cole, 1991, p. 44). Such a shared authorial voice is attempted in this study. I looked for patterns within each interview and focused on the way participants spoke about their experience (Agar, 1980). Analysis of the interview texts revealed four strategies of feminist participation, namely distancing, asserting agency, rejecting the critique, and making do. These strategies, which emerged from my categorization of the participants' responses, illustrate the ways that these women deal with the contradictions of feminism and aerobics.

THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As an aerobics participant since 1988 and an instructor since 1991, I came to this study with "the corrupting influence of group loyalties" brought by the research "insider" (Merton, 1972, p. 30). What I found in my initial explorations of this topic was that individual women participated in aerobics for both "empowering/feminist" and "oppressive/patriarchal" reasons, as I initially called them. I categorized reasons such as increasing strength and endurance and releasing stress as empowering, whereas I classified weight loss and preparing for bikini season as oppressive or patriarchal reasons for doing aerobics.

Contradictory reasons notwithstanding, I concluded that the aerobics instructor can affect the environment of his or her aerobics class, underscoring empowering aspects of the class and downplaying its more oppressive features. In an earlier article, I discuss methods that instructors can use to create empowering aerobics classes (Haravon, 1995). By employing

techniques that emphasize comfort, interaction, and personal expression among participants, the instructor can foster an environment that empowers his or her students. Despite the realities that “the aerobics class takes place in a societal context in which women are receiving the message that they are not good enough and must constantly improve” and “no activity can be purely empowering, it can only be more or less so,” there is still room for resistance in an aerobics class (Haravon, 1995, p. 40).

As an aerobics teacher, I am able, to a certain extent, to create a feminist, empowering atmosphere in my classes. Participants, however, are less able to control and set the tone of a class. Other aerobics classes may emphasize weight loss, thin thighs, and punishment for eating brownies. How might a feminist participant respond to these emphases? A health club may display images of sexualized women’s bodies in its aerobics room. How might an exerciser interpret such images within her aerobics practice?

This study focuses on the strategies that women employ when they feel that certain aspects of their aerobics practice and its trappings oppress and confine them: What do women, who want to feel empowered in their exercise classes, do when confronted with instructors and exercise spaces that are disempowering? And what are the parts of the class that they enjoy and find empowering? After describing participant accounts of the positive aspects of aerobic exercise, I consider the questions of disempowerment and contradiction as explained by these feminist exercisers.

AEROBICS AS ENJOYABLE

Women find control over both their physical body and over their progress in aerobics to be rewarding. Mildred, a White administrative executive in her late 40s, calls it “control over your own physical identity. . . . I think it’s very empowering and I immediately felt that when I first went.” Joan, a White graduate student in her late 30s, finds power in the workout by creating “my own construction that I want or my own way to set personal goals.”

Women also said that having the physical strength necessary to endure the aerobic workout appeals to them, as does the physical challenge of working out. Elaine, a White professor in her 40s, finds that

the most empowering is when one of [the instructors] . . . is going through a long aerobics segment and I’m just thinking, “Is this ever going to end?” But that’s the part that’s most empowering because . . . I’ve always had an ambivalent relationship to my body . . . and the fact that I can keep up with students who are half my age and when I realize when she says, “We are going to do 20 more of these repetitions” and I’m thinking, “Oh, right.” And then the fact that I do them.

Because of her “ambivalent relationship to her body,” Elaine finds the physical exertion and consequent success to be empowering.

Women enjoy “strong movement using your arms and your legs and using the ground and bending your knees” (Isabell) and the

incredible feeling you have after you've had a really good workout; it just makes you feel like you're in control over your body . . . not even just in control, you just feel healthy, I mean that's the main rush about the whole thing . . . I think it is empowering because when you come out feeling like that . . . that is a really empowering feeling. (Helen)

Theberge (1985) has argued that it is precisely these kinds of experiences that can make women's sporting practices into transformational acts. In sport, she wrote, women can "experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination . . . [and] women's sporting practice can challenge gender inequality by challenging sexual stereotypes and patriarchal control of women's bodies" (Theberge, 1985, p. 202). Aerobics may contain more contradictions than the mainstream "sport" Theberge wrote about, as it "encourages women to experience their bodies as strong" but is not necessarily "challenging sexual stereotypes." Many of the subtle and more blatant messages in an aerobics class encourage participants to cultivate their attractiveness to men (Kagan & Morse, 1988; Kenen, 1987; MacNeill, 1988; Markula, 1995).

Many of the women use aerobics for stress release. Isabell, a White, nontraditional college student in her late 20s, and Elaine discuss a similar theme of letting go of tension during a class. Isabell says,

I let go of all the negatives of the day or anything I have that is weighing me down. . . . I just let go of everything and get into feeling good and getting in touch with myself . . . mind is free and clear, my body's relaxed and feels like it's gotten all the negative out.

Similarly, Elaine takes "my day to aerobics, and by the time I'm done with aerobics the day is gone and I can be a nice, civilized person." Elaine goes even further, stating that "a lot of women in my position, professional women . . . they go to therapy, just regularly, that's a part of their life, and I call aerobics now my therapy." Helen, a White teacher in her early 30s, continues this theme when she says that "I've had on and off bouts of depression and so a main reason why I do aerobics is for my mental health."

Tina, a Jewish nurse in her early 30s, says that "taking aerobics has certainly helped me with confidence in general, in having more confidence in my abilities to do other things as well." Mildred alludes to another kind of confidence gained from the aerobics class. When discussing how the clothing worn in class affects her, she says,

What I realized is really nobody cares, which is immensely freeing, I mean it's kind of the reverse of oppression. It's sort of liberating, actually . . . there are people who by no means have perfect bodies who wear leotards and are not at all worried about the fact that every imperfection is on view.

For Mildred, it was reassuring to see that other women neither had perfect bodies nor apologized for that, which helped her to accept and have more confidence in her own body.

Camaraderie is an important aspect of aerobic dance exercise to many women. Mildred says, "I like being in a class with other people, I like just the social aspect of the experience; it's fun." Tina likes to have "other women around me doing the same thing," and Lillian, a White executive in her late 30s, enjoys "benefiting from the group experience." Redican and Hadley (1988) similarly found that camaraderie was "the second most important reason for attendance" in exercise classes (p. 60).

Some of these women's comments connect their rewards of aerobics with an ability to cope with daily life, whereas other remarks concerned the camaraderie and fun associated with aerobics. The ways that control, competence, and stress release are described here indicate that aerobics can be a site at which women refuel themselves to better fit into a society in which they need to be "nice, civilized people" and have control over their physical and mental selves. Parker (1983) called the use of exercise to make up for unfulfilling employment "compensating" (Redican & Hadley, 1988, p. 58). This reason for enjoying aerobics is a much more outcome-oriented one than is the more intrinsic and process-oriented "camaraderie and fun" reason. Goal-oriented reasons for finding aerobics enjoyable may seem more reactionary than resistant; the expression and release of one's daily frustrations in an aerobic exercise class may only rejuvenate the women and thus prepare them for further exploitation.

In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin (1968) discussed the medieval carnival as a rebellious response to the dominant social order. The carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth" (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 10). Fiske (1992), discussing Bakhtin, claimed that "the social antagonisms in the body politic are given expressive, material form in the inversions and disorder of bodies in the carnival" (p. 162). Although the carnival gave members of the lower classes an opportunity to release their frustrations with the status quo, their fetes ultimately upheld, rather than contested the dominant power structure. A concentrated, sanctioned time for violence and excess made the lower classes more compliant during noncarnival periods.

Not unlike Bakhtin's (1968) analysis of the carnival, aerobics may be interpreted as a site that, rather than being resistant, diffuses rebellious, disgruntled energy and transforms it into compliance. A major difference between the carnival and the aerobics class is that whereas exercise forms and shapes women's bodies to suit the patriarchy, the carnival does just the opposite, employing the body as a vehicle for vulgar, obscene, and socially unacceptable excesses (Bakhtin, 1968). Aerobic exercisers are conforming to societal norms by sculpting their bodies (unlike the carnival participants), even as they use the aerobics site as a means to express frustration toward the social order (like the carnival participants). These sculpted bodies are reminiscent of what Maguire and Mansfield (1998) called "civilized bodies," which are characterized by "highly regulated physical activities" and are a result of the "historical trend toward a tighter control over the appearance and function" of bodies (pp. 130-131). Despite this important difference

between the carnival and the exercise studio, both carnival and aerobics participants use the body as a means of pleasure and expression. Using the body in this way, both practices react against pressures of the dominant social order even as they re-commit themselves to its standards of social acceptability.

The civilizing process has also resulted in “a narrowing of socially acceptable expressions of emotions” and thus “a need for socially approved spheres in which human beings can experience exciting emotions” (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998, p. 131). The aerobics class can be such a place for some women. Fiske (1989) claimed that popular pleasures may take the form of either evasiveness or productivity, or using Barthes’s (1975) terms, *jouissance* and *plaisir*. Evasiveness, or *jouissance*, concerns the body, whereas productivity, or *plaisir*, is about creating meaning. *Plaisir*

is concerned with social identity, with recognition. If *jouissance* produces the pleasures of evading the social order, *plaisir* produces those of relating to it. . . . There are pleasures in conforming to the dominant ideology and the subjectivity it proposes when it is in our interest [to] do so.” (Fiske, 1989, p. 54)

Both kinds of pleasure are evident in these women’s comments. *Jouissance*, or the loss of self and subjectivity, “translated variously as bliss, ecstasy or orgasm,” (Fiske, 1989, p. 50) is evident in statements about the women’s physical enjoyment of aerobics. Isabell says, for example, that “I just let go of everything and get into feeling good and getting in touch with myself . . . my mind is free and clear, my body’s relaxed.” Elaine expressed her *jouissance* in aerobics as “a kind of fluidity where your body is moving in very intricate moves and you’re not conscious of it . . . it’s a positive, organic connection between all the elements.”

This *jouissance* produces a *plaisir*, in which these women can adapt and conform by experiencing socially acceptable moments of pleasure with the body as well as more “productive,” recognizable results, such as the release of hostile or angry feelings, improved fitness, camaraderie, and weight loss. Regardless of whether the pleasure these women take in their aerobic classes is considered conformist or subversive, it does seem to make them feel good about themselves. At the very least, as Fiske (1989) said, “improved self-esteem in the subordinate is a political prerequisite of tactical or even strategic resistances” (p. 68).

AEROBICS AS OPPRESSIVE

OBJECTIFICATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

In general, these women agree that sexual allusions are present and distressing in the aerobic workout. Kim, a Jewish undergraduate student, found that

things that the instructor says as opposed to the things I would hear a coach say were just really disturbing, like “squeeze your buns or nobody else will.” . . . and it’s all very sexualized and you are in this role and you have to have this body.

She felt overwhelmed by “this whole man-catching thing.” Tina expresses her discomfort with the sexualized clothing worn by some of the women in her class “wearing something like a thong would be absolutely not empowering . . . I don’t like it when other women wear them either . . . I feel like it’s belittling to women wearing those things, and even wearing the low-cut things.”

Lillian agrees that the thong “makes women look like a sex object in a gym.”

Some of the sights on which women are forced to gaze during their aerobic workouts feel oppressive. As Kim says, “Even the clothing just seems oppressive that everybody wears.” Kim finds an instructor who is “the little blonde, leotard, perfect body type” to be intimidating, “not that I really care to admit that I’m intimidated by it, but I don’t look like what I’m supposed to look like.” The use of “blonde” as part of the description of the perfect instructor also implies that the ideal woman is White in addition to being thin and fit. It is oppressive or intimidating for Kim to have to look at this “perfect” instructor during the aerobics class. In fact, many of the women interviewed said that they prefer to have an instructor who is neither too thin nor too blonde, as they feel intimidated by this look, although none of them mentioned going out of their way to find such an instructor, or to find a more “feminist” aerobics class, assuming such classes exist. Being seen can also feel oppressive. At a club that Kim used to attend,

you walk in and there’s an aerobics floor in the middle of the club, and there’s a track going around, and the men tend to run around the track. It’s like this whole spectacle thing and I feel very self-conscious, I feel like men are watching you jump around and [you are] being the object of the male gaze, and the whole experience is infuriating.

Joan mentions discomfort when she feels like her body is being scrutinized or judged by the instructor who says, “ ‘Girls, it’s bikini season.’ ”

Helen feels pressure about being seen in the right clothing at some aerobic workouts:

You have to adopt this costume that everybody else is wearing . . . and I just I don’t feel comfortable there . . . there’s such a conformist thing . . . that sort of lends to the oppression.

Referring specifically to the workout, Elaine expresses discomfort with being conspicuous as she exercises: “If you are in a long line, you feel like everybody’s noticing.”

Some of the feminists interviewed found references to fat made by the instructor or the club staff to be oppressive and in conflict with their own reasons for doing aerobics. Kim's instructor said,

"Oh, I ate a brownie last night, we have to do more leg lifts." And they always talk about this interconnectedness about cheating on your diet and so you have to do more exercise and so that's another thing that bothered me, is that exercising to compensate for eating dessert as opposed to exercising as an end in itself. . . . And it just doesn't seem like you should have to rationalize why you are working out hard, you should just want to do it.³

For these women, being objectified and having their bodies on display for judgment and criticism made the aerobic workout less enjoyable. When such events took place, the women did not "experience a form of being rather than . . . a form of appearance . . . a sense of an actuality of [their] bodies as [their] own" (MacKinnon, 1987, pp. 121-122). They also felt alienated from their bodies and from the class when the workouts were rigid and patronizing.

CONDESCENSION TOWARD THE PARTICIPANTS/ REGIMENTATION OF THE EXERCISE CLASS

These women are uncomfortable with practices that seem distant and regimented. Being objectified is bad enough, but being ordered around in an authoritative way is blatantly oppressive, particularly when the instructor assumes that all of the participants are there for the same purpose—slimming down and shaping up. Joan sometimes felt

like we were being molded, similar to what would happen in boot camp, everyone's in training to be a certain kind of person, with certain kinds of purposes, and it was one of those moments where I thought, "God, I would have been embarrassed if anyone from the university saw me in there dancing to this song" and for a moment I just thought, "This is awful."

For Tina, an oppressive workout is one that

reminds me of a regiment, somebody having authority over us, and actually having the nerve to make us walk in a circle like that. . . . And it kind of reminds me of kindergarten . . . there's that authority figure again. But here I am, I'm taking this aerobics class and it's by my own choice and I don't want some army general standing in front of me telling me what to do.

Helen, too, feels uncomfortable with a workout that is conformist and distant from her own reasons for working out. At those times, she experiences "all of those feelings where I'm measuring myself against this outside factory which is trying to force me to be this particular thing."

Although "the most effective forms of social control are always invisible" (Rothenberg, 1995, p. 367), the most forceful forms are the most obvious.

Whereas language and ideology can oppress unnoticed, “tanks in the streets and armed militia serve as constant reminders that people are not free” (Rothenberg, 1995, p. 367). Aerobic exercisers may be willing to take their fitness into their own hands and to turn a judgmental societal gaze in on themselves, but when an instructor tries to do it, the women find it uncomfortable and stifling.

In discussing their aerobic workout experience, these women expressed both immense joy and strong reservations about the practice. Although these women feel both empowered and oppressed by aerobics, they have all chosen to keep the practice as an important part of their lives. The oppressive, uncomfortable aspects previously discussed are apparently not reason enough to reject aerobics completely. To cope with these conflicting feelings, these feminist exercisers employ certain strategies, namely distancing, rejecting the critique, asserting agency, and making do to both downplay the oppressive aspects and to retain the empowerment of the aerobic practice.

STRATEGIES FOR FEMINIST PARTICIPATION

Unlike the female apologetic, in which women athletes must compensate for their athleticism by emphasizing their femininity, the women interviewed here employ a “*feminist* apologetic,” in which they feel they must compensate for their participation in a sport understood to be feminine and/or restrictive in other ways by stressing and using their feminist orientation (Wughalter, 1978). The women interviewed discuss practices or situations in the aerobic workout that they do not like or that seem to be in conflict with the feminist paradigm. Their methods of coping with these elements of the aerobics class are organized into themes of distancing oneself from uncomfortable practices, rejecting the critique that aerobics is monotonous and repetitive, asserting agency by resisting pressure to conform, and making do, or making the best of an unpleasant situation.

DISTANCING

The practice of creating distance between oneself and a practice one does not condone was evident when the women discussed music with sexist lyrics. Boe, a White graduate student in her early 40s, “tunes out” the music when it is offensive. She considers it to be “an adjunct . . . it’s not the thing that helps me a whole lot except to set a rhythm or something.” Mildred agrees that “the focus really is on what you are doing and the music is there to be a rhythm.” If Boe and Mildred can consider the music as merely an adjunct to their workout, simply there to set a rhythm, then they can continue to benefit from the workout without completely approving of the nature of the music.

Elaine discusses her inability to understand the lyrics in popular music as a way to distance herself from words that she realizes would offend her otherwise:

I guess that's in some ways freeing, because I think probably about some of the words, I would say, "Geez! What are these songs about?" If I did understand them. So it really frees me a lot to just listen to the music and not be thinking about what the words say.

For Elaine, being unable to understand sexist lyrics frees her to enjoy the workout.

Helen feels similarly:

I guess I'm just really not that aware of them; I mean I am sure that a lot of them are [sexist] but, I can't really tell what they're saying a lot of the time anyway. I'm not really aware of that. . . I'm not listening to the careful nuances of how he's treating her and she's treating him and all that kind of stuff. If I were, I would probably wouldn't like it very much.

For Boe, Mildred, Elaine, and Helen, the conflict of engaging in a practice that employs sexist lyrics seems to be resolved by remaining ignorant of the sexism. None of them mentioned feeling complicit in a practice that they know uses such lyrics. For these women, distancing, either through tuning out or through their inability to understand, is enough. The method of distancing from an unacceptable aspect of the aerobic workout involves remaining as unaware of it as possible.

Because none of the women interviewed actually mentioned confronting their instructors about music choices (perhaps a more obvious form of resistance than distancing), it could be argued that these women are voluntarily submitting to oppressive practices by being silent and unaware. Although this interpretation may seem like a reasonable one, it does not take into account the context-specific nature of the strategy of distancing, an approach that coexists with the other three practices that enable feminists to participate in aerobics classes. Furthermore, there are times when distancing oneself from an oppressive situation is the most effective strategy available. If my goal is to attend an aerobics class and the only ones in my town play music with sexist lyrics, I may not choose to fight that particular battle. The choice to distance here may suggest more about the aerobics environment than it does about these women's ability to assert themselves; when there is a lot to resist, some things, like sexist lyrics, are better left ignored.

It is possible to argue that these women are cultural dupes because they voluntarily enter into and register no complaints about an environment in which sexist lyrics are an accepted part of the practice. If they are "real" (sexist lyric-abhorring) feminists, shouldn't they go elsewhere to raise their heart rates and break a sweat? I would argue that given the options available to them, these women are simply adjusting to a culture in which being a consistent and uncompromising feminist at all times and in all environments is impossible. If being a feminist means confronting every oppressive situation and accepting no compromises in our social practices, many of us would be asked to turn in our membership cards. Distancing is

one strategy that enables feminists to participate in mainstream cultural practices.

REJECTING THE CRITIQUE

Another strategy that women employed was to reject feminist critiques of aerobics. At one point in the interview, the women were asked to respond to and discuss Kagan and Morse's (1988) denunciations of aerobics, which I both showed them and read aloud. None of the women accepted these scholarly critiques as valid; all of them defended aerobics against Kagan and Morse's comments. When the women did accept these scholars' remarks as true, they did so with qualification. As Amanda, a White administrator in her early 40s, says of Kagan and Morse's critique, "It's true. But I don't think that's a reason not to have [aerobics], and I don't think that's a reason to criticize [aerobics]." Kagan and Morse found no defenders in this group of practicing feminist aerobicizers. These women claim that such scholars do not understand the significance that aerobics has to its participants. According to the feminists interviewed here, Kagan and Morse's research is too far removed from experience to have any meaning for actual aerobicizing women.

One of the excerpts from Kagan and Morse (1988) reads as follows:

Ultimately, the movement personality created in this aerobic exercise is that of an automaton; flattened in space and stationary, employing movements which are repetitive, remote from the self, and fragmented. (p. 174)

Some of the women dismissed this critique by stating that certain of these attributes of aerobics, such as following, repetition, and limited space, are enjoyable, helpful, and positive for them. As Mildred says, "I just don't agree with it as a critique because I think some of the things they are criticizing are for me actually sources of strength." The critique that the aerobics class is uncreative and mindless is a common one (Kagan & Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1988). For some of the women interviewed, however, mindlessness can be helpful and revitalizing. Amanda enjoys the act of following, particularly after a hard day at work: "The nice thing about aerobics is just this at times: that you are too stressed out to do anything but go there and follow." Amanda is expected to be creative and to take charge all day, and aerobics is a place where she can let some of that go. She enjoys having a place in her life where she can dispense with obligations and demands on her mental energy. Despite living in a society that values individualism and competition (Bordo, 1997; Brantlinger, 1990; Fiske, 1989; Sage, 1990), Amanda validates following as enjoyable and legitimate.

The repetitive movements found in aerobics are also criticized by Kagan and Morse (1988) for being unoriginal and confining. Some women refute this critique by stating that they enjoy this part of the workout. They are able to recognize and validate repetition, not viewing it as categorically

bad simply because it is not improvised or even intricate movement. Mildred talks about the pleasure of repetition as meditative and ritualistic:

If there is repetition, that gives me pleasure in the sense that any ritual repetition gives pleasure. . . . Movements that are repetitive are a source of pleasure, at least for me. . . . You have to concentrate, you have to repeat, and far from being remote from the self, I think the self is very focused.

Elaine's alienation from her body before she began aerobics accounts for her reaction to the critique of repetition. Because she did not start from a place of uninhibited freedom of movement, she experiences the repetition and structure in the aerobics class as a source of empowerment and enjoyment:

The fragmentation of the self from the body is what I already had, and so I see aerobics actually as a reclaiming of the body . . . it's a way of reclaiming the self and the repetition actually is a means of experiencing a connectedness . . . the repetition actually is a way of marking success and a rediscovery of the body.

She goes on to consider a class of completely improvised aerobics:

If somebody just turned the music on and said "OK, just do whatever you want" . . . I think most women would just stand there and go "I can't do anything with my body that I haven't been given permission to do."

Joan has similar feelings about repetition in aerobics. "I might feel threatened if it wasn't regimented . . . for me doing this has a positive effect, but I can imagine that something else would be even more positive." When pushed to describe a more positive way of experiencing the body in exercise, Joan said that this question intimidated her, as she is not completely comfortable with her body as a moving subject.

Elaine contextualizes the critique of repetition within a patriarchal structure that already confines women's ways of moving. If women were living in a world in which their movements were unrestricted and uninhibited, then perhaps the repetition of aerobics could be seen as oppressive. Because Joan and Elaine experience a fragmentation of the body in everyday life, it seems fortunate, and even resistant, that they can appropriate aerobics' repetitive movement as a safe way to rediscover, and perhaps even to integrate, the body. Starting from a place of fragmentation and alienation from the body, as these women do, any form of movement that is enjoyable or even possible is an improvement in and a step toward bodily integration. Repetitive aerobics could even be a jumping-off point for more creative, resistant bodily expression for some of these women as their comfort and familiarity with movement increases.

This defense of repetition is, however, illogical if one assumes an initial comfort and ease with one's body and with movement. Although the

critique of aerobics as repetitive might make sense when analyzing a group of seasoned soccer or rugby players, it does not work for the majority of women who come to club or recreational aerobics classes. The critique of repetitiveness as confining is inappropriate and misplaced in this context. It accounts neither for the all-too-common discomfort that many women feel when moving and exercising, nor for the claim that, for these women, repetition can be a starting point in encouraging a more positive relationship with their bodies.

Another critique of the aerobic workout is that the space in which the exerciser moves is small, confined, and removed from the other participants (Kagan & Morse, 1988). Some women enjoy this space in which they can “do it the way I want to do it and I don’t have to feel like I’m part of this whole” (Helen). Mildred refuted the critique by saying that “that is one of the things I enjoy about it. You have this little private space where you move around.” These women appreciate having this private space in public in which they are not responsible to others as one is in a team sport or in dance, in which “if you screw it up it affects seven or eight other people” (Helen). Perhaps if women experience responsibility to others as part of their daily lives, they make use of the positive private space that the aerobic workout affords. For Mildred, the way space is organized in the aerobics class is essential: “Aerobics is a form of meditation . . . being isolated in a certain space is crucial to that, and not something that’s a negative for me.”

Sometimes, however, the aerobics room can seem too restrictive. When Tina finds the small space of aerobics confining, she skips her aerobics class and goes outside:

Today I didn’t, I could not stand to be in a room like that. Feeling like I was in a box because I am a person that has to be free—that really needs to be free, and I need a lot of space, and those times when I need a lot of space I don’t go to my aerobics class, I do things outdoors . . . so I enjoy it but there are times when I can’t tolerate it.

Whereas Tina sometimes does find the aerobics space to be too small, she does, in general, “enjoy it.” Her need to “do things outdoors” on occasion does not lead her to concur with unequivocal critiques of aerobics as confining.

Feminist critics also understand aerobics as a form of static movement; the exerciser is “going nowhere—at full speed” (Kagan & Morse, 1988, p. 169). Amanda’s response to this, “That’s why I like it. You’re not going anywhere, you don’t have to go anywhere,” reveals the assumption in the critique that, for movement to be acceptable, one must move to another physical place. This assumption makes sense when comparing aerobics to the scorekeeping, goal-oriented paradigm of mainstream sport. Other women also disagree with the critique of “going nowhere,” reclaiming this static movement in different ways: “You’re just going somewhere in a different sense; you’re developing yourself” (Mildred).

Whereas Kagan and Morse (1988) saw the limited space as restrictive, the women interviewed generally enjoy the space as a refuge from responsibilities and a place to concentrate, uninterrupted by outside elements.

ASSERTING AGENCY

When women were discussing how they accept oppressive aspects of aerobics while at the same time enjoying the practice, they mentioned control as a way of managing situations that may feel uncomfortable to them. If the women feel like they have control, they are more likely to agree to engage in a practice that may feel somewhat uncomfortable, because they feel that they can change it if necessary. When an environment is perceived as unchangeable, perhaps one of the only forms of control one has is avoiding certain parts of the environment or leaving it altogether. Although the classes may not change, the exercisers can make their own decisions or adjustments.

A more obviously resistant practice might be to start one's own, more feminist, aerobics class. Although this idea may seem like the most appropriate one for feminist exercisers to embrace, none of the women interviewed mentioned this option. Their strategies are limited to working with the existing structure of aerobics classes available to them and do not include attempts at radical transformation of the mainstream aerobic workout. Their goal is to maintain as much control as possible within the existing structure.

When discussing aspects of the aerobic workout that they do not like, some of the women mention certain ways of moving, difficult dance steps, or extremely fast music. Women maintain control when faced with these situations by either not going to certain classes or by not participating in the particular movement that makes them uncomfortable. Kim will "just selectively go where I feel comfortable." Isabell says, "If I don't feel like doing it, I'll do something else." As Tina explains,

I don't give in to everything that the aerobics industry wants me to do. In terms of wearing what they want me to wear, in terms of doing what they want me to do, when I'm in my aerobics class. If something feels really uncomfortable to me, I just don't do it.

As the aerobic class is structured around following the instructor's movements, there is pressure to do everything the instructor and the rest of the class is doing, and refusing to participate is no small feat, as these women indicate. Refusal to participate is one crucial way to establish control within the workout. Helen considers the decision about participation to be an empowering experience:

That was kind of a breakthrough once I realized that I could do that, that I didn't have to do exactly what the teacher was saying, that was definitely an empowering thing.

Amanda alludes to the pressure of conformity while assuring her own control: "I think some people feel compelled to follow it just the way it is. But I don't have any trouble with not doing that. I just do what works for me." In Lillian's experience, there have been

many times recently in this class where I've just walked out, where I've said "I am here at this health club, this is a really good, positive thing for me to do, I will not take part in any exercise that makes me feel bad about myself."

Exercising agency is their way of making the practice their own. Helen's agency is manifest when she feels like she has "choices that I make to do what the teacher says or not . . . that feels like I'm being a subject there because I'm willing my body to do those things." A teacher by profession, Helen notices the spaces for student choice within the aerobic workout. Discussing the student-teacher relationship in aerobics, she says,

If you're a feminist who comes into that situation you can say, "Well, I guess I don't have to be a follower. I can simply use this as a way to time and pace myself and get some ideas and stuff like that," but you sort of opt not to follow it in the same way that it's set up to be.

The implication that there is a "way that it's set up to be" indicates that making choices about which parts of the workout one participates in may not be a common or acceptable practice.

Some women are aware of the pressure to do aerobics for cultural reasons like looking good and losing weight, and of their own resistance to that. Elaine sees her participation as "not part of the cultural education of women to discomfort with their bodies . . . if I'm not doing it in that way . . . I think [dominating the body as object] is subverted by the people involved, [by] what they want out of it." Although Elaine realizes that there are harmful messages within the "cultural education of women," she thinks that women involved in aerobics subvert this when they do it for different, nonoppressive reasons such as stress release, camaraderie, and intrinsic enjoyment. These women attempt to create their own meaning despite the dominant hegemonic reading of aerobics as a conformist, sexist practice. Scholars discuss this creation of meaning as a resistant, but not necessarily a transformative, practice (Fiske, 1989; Lipsitz, 1990; Markula, 1995).

In relating a story of a confrontation at a health club, Isabell expresses the conflict between her reasons for doing aerobics and the culturally understood reasons. Here she maintains control over the situation by establishing her agency and exercising choice:

When I went [to the health club] they wanted to do a whole rundown of your weight and your body fat and I said to them, "I'm not here for that. I am here to go to the classes and feel good."

In discussing choice, some of the women are reminded of their early days in aerobics when they complied with oppressive practices that they would not engage in today:

I can remember a time when I first started aerobics when I wanted to do everything the instructor did and I would hurt my body and it wouldn't be right for my body . . . but I feel like I have more choice now; I feel like the instructor is a guide and you can kind of do your own thing within that. (Isabell)

Isabell makes an effort to establish her own agency as a way to remind herself that she is in control. It is possible that Isabell's feminism was a catalyst for her realization that she has "more choice now" in the way that she approaches aerobics.

Another way that agency was discussed was in reference to Kagan and Morse's (1988) statement that aerobics "dominates and shapes the body as object" (p. 177). Mildred's words, quoted here, illustrate her ambiguous stance. Whereas her desire to create a coherent narrative from her contradictory statements is evident, that very process may be interpreted as an example of "active consent of subordinate groups" (Sage, 1990). Mildred and others feel that if they are shaping their own bodies, thus maintaining control, then they are not dominated by the cultural message that aerobics is a means for achieving the female body ideal. To what extent the shaping is then under the women's own control is unclear, as it is hard to separate an individual's desire for a thin, fit body from the imposed desire of institutions such as the aerobics industry or patriarchy (Duncan, 1994; Eskes et al., 1998; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Morse, 1987/1988). Below is Mildred's statement on manipulation and control:

I can manipulate, but it's me, not the aerobics industry. I'm not saying to the aerobics industry, "Here, manipulate me and dominate me and shape me." I'm saying I want to shape myself. . . . I didn't feel like I was giving myself over to an aerobics industry and saying, "Do with me what you will," or, "I am an object for you to work with." If I am objectifying my body as something that can be shaped or manipulated, it's I who am doing that and the aerobics class is my means, my technique. . . . I didn't feel like I was raw material that somebody else was molding and emitting at the other end. . . . I might be using aerobics as an instrument to shape myself as an object, but I have to really be sure if I'm thinking of myself as an object. I guess I'm thinking of myself more as a system, like being in good shape . . . is more like a state of being or a system, not as an object so much. . . . So, yes I'm using aerobics to shape myself, yes, I'm using aerobics to dominate my body. I, not the aerobics industry, do this and that is a good thing for me. . . . So I feel like, yes, it may be an industry, yes, you may be looking at the body as an object, but my feeling is the control is mine and not the industry's.

Mildred wavers between considering her body an object or a "system." She agrees that her body is being dominated, though she changes that word to "control" toward the end of her comments. Because she sees herself as doing the controlling, however, she does not consider herself an accomplice to the aerobics industry's crime of domination of women's bodies, and of hers

in particular. As Morse (1987/1988) says of the aerobicizing woman, “she is her own Pygmalion, sculpting her own body” (p. 24). The coherence of her narrative becomes problematic, however, when one asks what the difference is between Mildred’s actions and those of the aerobics industry. As Eskes et al. (1998) asked, “Is it truly women’s own initiative that compels them to partake in beauty practices or the fact that they somehow feel that they are being watched, judged, and sanctioned for their appearance?” (p. 320).

Winning the consent of subordinated groups is a means to control them, and the success of the panopticon depends on the prisoners’ self-monitoring without the gaze of a guard (Foucault, 1975/1979). Mildred, then, may be inadvertently aiding structural and ideological institutions in “dominating her body as object” when she agrees to “voluntarily submit” to the demands of her exercise class (Morse, 1987/1988, p. 37). As Duncan (1994) said, “The panopticon functions so effectively because it does so via private self-monitoring. Women internalize the gaze and turn it against themselves” (p. 50). Because this self-monitoring is so effective, “modern society no longer needs structural mechanisms to maintain and reproduce power relations” (Eskes et al., 1998, p. 319). “Internalizing the gaze” may, to the aerobics class participant, seem to be a means of exercising agency when it is, in reality, a more insidious, because self-imposed, constraint. Because this gaze “disguises itself as private” (Duncan, 1994, p. 50), it tricks the self-monitoring subject into believing that the gaze, and its judgments, are his or her own.

The seemingly disparate categories of agency and constraint break down when one considers hegemony theory, consent of subordinate groups, and the internalized gaze. If these women consider themselves to be agents in the aerobics class because they manipulate their own bodies, are they resisting dominant institutions or are they actually reinforcing them? It seems that just as categories of empowerment and oppression are problematized in this study, so, too, are the concepts of agency and constraint. Whereas Mildred considers herself to be exerting agency and not being forced, an outside observer might see her as making choices to conform because of social pressure and constraint (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). As Lloyd (1996) put it, “There is . . . no need of visible compulsion in order to engage women in the practices of femininity because the mechanisms ensuring its operation are already (and invisibly) in place” (p. 92). The question, What counts as agency/individual choice?, remains problematic in this example.

MAKING DO

Another way women cope with contradictions in their aerobic workout is to resign themselves to certain unpleasant aspects of the practice. Given that, as feminists, they perceive that they live in an imperfect world, they must sometimes make do with what they are given, both in the aerobic workout and in their daily lives. One way these women make do with practices

that they do not approve of is to deny that they are an intrinsic part of the aerobic workout. Many of the women seem to assume that there is an essential aerobic practice and that cultural values are added onto it. Kim explains this with regard to being the object of the male gaze. The women are

in the middle of this floor where men are going around ogling at you, and I just resent the whole thing . . . it adds all this other stuff to aerobics.

When explaining what she does not enjoy in the aerobic workout, Isabell stresses, similarly, that "it's not the exercise itself, it's the other stuff that goes with it, that people put onto it." Boe differentiates between the aerobic workout and aspects of the practice that bother her: "If I'm going to object to anything that bugs me, it's nothing that has to do with doing the aerobics that I object to." The assumption here is that the physical practice of doing aerobics is separate from aspects such as the clothing worn in class, the instructor's demeanor, or choice of music.

Elaine implies that because the dominant reading of aerobics (i.e., aerobics is for being thin and losing weight) is not intrinsic to the practice, she is able to accept her own participation within it:

I don't think it's intrinsic, . . . I don't think that's at the core of aerobics. If it were, then I think I'd have problems with it because I would be participating in something that was in its essence saying "You're not good enough."

The interviewed women's conviction that some of the distasteful parts of their classes are not necessary, or intrinsic, to the practice of aerobics makes their workouts more acceptable to them. Creating a distinction between intrinsic and superfluous aspects of aerobics helps them make do with the less than satisfactory exercise classes available to them.

These women see aerobics as a form of exercise that becomes laden with patriarchal messages. If these women are able to distinguish between the essential elements of the workout and the ideological messages, the practice becomes more acceptable to them. It is interesting to note that these women make use of the term *essential* rather than merely claiming the positive and rejecting the negative aspects of aerobics. The notion that there is a pure aerobics, devoid of cultural messages, is problematic given postmodern and symbolic interactionist assumptions that there are no intrinsic, inherent meanings to any cultural practices (Barthes, 1977; Benjamin, 1968; Eagleton, 1985; Flax, 1990, 1993; Morely, 1980; Nicholson, 1990; Weedon, 1987). The significance here, however, is that these women use the differentiation of intrinsic essential and extrinsic unnecessary elements as a way to negotiate this contradictory practice.

For a feminist, making do may be one way to be able to function in an aerobics class, as well as in society. As Joan says, this is her way of coping with

so many things in my life that in a way maybe it doesn't seem so unusual to take the good with the bad in [aerobics] . . . this is what's available and this is how the world is right now, and I can't just do nothing while I wait for utopia.

Joan feels that waiting for the perfect class would put her in a position of passivity, and she chooses to work with the options available.

Amanda expresses her reluctance to create an aerobics class and her ability to make do in the following way: "There's no perfect class . . . I always get something out of it. . . . You always have preferences, but I can get something out of just about anything." Because Amanda is able to "get something out of just about anything," she does not find it necessary to actualize, or even try to imagine, a perfect class. It seems that she is used to relying on herself to create the situation she wants. For Elaine, "the benefits far outweigh the negatives" in aerobics and that is enough for her to enjoy and accept the practice.

Helen, too, seems accepting of her current situation despite its imperfections: "I can think of the utopian class and it isn't quite what I am doing now but I think it's a lot closer to it than a lot of other options that I have." Helen is aware of her options and makes her decisions according to what is available. When asked if she finds a tension between aerobics and feminism, she explains, "It's not really a tension right now because I've found a place that on that continuum is closer to being what I'm interested in."

Phrases such as "take the good with the bad," "getting something out of anything," and "closer to what I am interested in" describe the attitude of making do with what is available as a method of accepting unpleasant aspects of aerobics. It seems that this practice is common not only in the workout, but in other aspects of women's lives. Elaine realizes that, given society's influence on the individual, it is impossible to be a consistent feminist at all times. "I think if a feminist at any point in her life has the tentacles of culture on her body only 20%, she's doing pretty good. I don't think we get 100%." Because feminists can't "get 100%" of their lives free from "the tentacles of culture" and remain within society, they must resort to making do, to accepting the less-than-perfect aerobics class or work situation or leisure activity that, although it may not be consistent with all of their feminist ideals, is the best they can do in a culture of dominant, competing, and contradictory meanings. In addition, because these women have no feminist model of the ideal exercise class, workplace, or leisure activity, it is as hard to imagine the perfect feminist world as it is to imagine "getting 100%" free from the "tentacles of culture."

CONCLUSION

To not have to reject aerobics completely as an oppressive practice, these feminist exercisers use strategies of distancing, rejecting the critique, asserting agency, and making do both to downplay uncomfortable aspects of this practice and to enhance the feelings of empowerment and enjoyment

they get from aerobics. Given the aerobics classes available to them at the time of these interviews, these women must live in and work out the contradictions of living as a feminist in a patriarchal world in the aerobics realm as well as in their daily lives. Because no cultural phenomenon can be entirely divorced from the dominant ideology that surrounds it, strategies for feminist participation can feel empowering even as a more ideal situation is not available. It is this resourcefulness that makes it possible for women and other oppressed groups to make do with what capitalistic, patriarchal society presents us.

It could be argued that some of these strategies of feminist participation actually demonstrate acceptance rather than resistance. Making do and distancing, for example, appear to leave objectionable practices unchallenged. I argue that because feminists are not totally free to create their ideal world/aerobics class, they must to a certain extent conform to society/existing exercise classes and that this conformity does not represent utter capitulation to hegemonic ideals. And just as they do not have complete agency in the ordering of their world, neither are they completely constrained by powerful social forces/aerobics paradigms. In addition, these feminists are aware that they are consciously making do in a less-than-ideal situation, which differs considerably from a position of uncritical acceptance.

What may look like an act of passive acceptance must be examined in context. If we assume that no act or site may be wholly resistant or conformist (or completely feminist or patriarchal), then instances of conscious distancing or making do may still be considered viable strategies for feminist participation. Conformity and resistance, constraint and agency, and patriarchal and feminist practices become muddled and muddied as one explores the complexity and contradictions of popular cultural sites.

The act of reinterpreting practices to suit one's needs should not, consequently, be understood as unequivocally empowering or resistant, and having a feminist consciousness does not make these women reject completely the cultural demands placed on them. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (1993) articulated this view when she discussed her own participation in a weight loss program, which was criticized by some of her colleagues.

Feminist cultural criticism cannot magically lift us into a transcendent realm of immunity to cultural images, but it ought to help guard against the feeling of comfortable oneness with culture and to foster a healthy skepticism about the pleasures and powers it offers. . . . I should not deceive myself into thinking that my own feeling of enhanced personal comfort and power means that I am not servicing an oppressive system. (Bordo, 1993, p. 30)

Feminist awareness does not make it possible for the women interviewed here to transcend culture or to transform the practice of aerobics. It does, however, give them a tool for some kind of resistance and helps them "guard against the feelings of comfortable oneness" (Bordo, 1993, p. 30) with,

or passive acceptance of, our culture even as they are often complicit in fulfilling its demands. Because the women have this element of agency and are at the same time complicit in oppressive practices, the location of societal constraint becomes less clear, less obviously top-down, and more diverse and dispersed.

These characteristics are reminiscent of Foucault's (1976/1990) claims that power and resistance are omnipresent. Just as these women could not create seamless, noncontradictory narratives about their participation in aerobics, so the locations of power and resistance are also not stable and static. This is not to say, however, that these women have as much power as does an ideological state apparatus like the media (Althusser, 1971). Although the women have the ability to resist by reinterpreting and remaking what they are given, the fact still remains that they are not in control of the production and packaging of the aerobics classes in which they participate. Because they do not have access to this ownership, their actions, although empowering and helpful to them in their daily lives, contest, but do not change, basic power structures.

The extent to which these feminist aerobics participants disrupt or inconvenience gender roles or the structure of their aerobics classes may be minimal, but it exists nonetheless. Furthermore, the mere presence of a feminist consciousness in an aerobics class affects the way that messages in the class are received and interpreted by the feminist participant. It is neither the case that these feminists transform the aerobics structure, nor that the aerobics structure transforms these feminists. The two challenge, contest, and coexist with one another, and the tension between them produces not a coherent narrative but a site of struggle.

Living as feminists in a patriarchal world, these women attempt to work out (with) the contradictions by using strategies that, although not necessarily transformative, allow them to benefit from the aerobic workout without having to ascribe to the dominant reading of aerobics as trivial or sexualized practice. Their ability to engage in, accept, and enjoy a practice while constantly reinterpreting and remaking it to suit their own purposes is indicative of the way women often must live their lives within a hegemonic society that attempts to prescribe body standards and beauty ideals.

NOTES

1. The absence of women of color in the sample may be accounted for by the small sample size, the dearth of non-White populations in the midwestern United States, and the generally lower number of aerobic class participants of color.
2. Kagan and Morse's claim concerns the "movement personality" from an aerobics videotape and was not intended to describe a live aerobics class. I chose to use this quotation not for its accuracy in describing live aerobics classes but for its unequivocal and constraint-oriented stance, which, I hoped, would provide the women being interviewed with a starting point from which to discuss the ways that aerobics is oppressive to them.
3. It is interesting to note that none of the women interviewed ever mentioned challenging their instructors about such oppressive comments. I did not ask them this

question directly, as doing so might imply that I thought that they should have confronted their teachers and would place a value judgment on their action, or lack of action, in this situation.

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