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Breaking and Entering: Presupposition and Faux Pas in the Gym

A NIGHT AT OLYMPIC GYM

On the night in question the gym's front counter, from which the staff oversees the gym, was typically busy. Dave Bigalow was regularly distracted by requests for the latest copy of *Flex* (the leading bodybuilding magazine), and, because no one was buying it, he was irked at having to indulge them. Draped over the glass counters, looking at photos of themselves and others in the magazines, were bodybuilders making snide comments or passing compliments about their compatriots' photos, depending on who was or wasn't in the gym: "Look at his calves, man. Dude has polio legs." Doing this collectively serves to reaffirm the bodybuilder's world, since through a complex combination of mutual deprecation and admiration, they weave a superfine web of fear and expectation known only to themselves.

Because sales of gym paraphernalia were brisk that night and the tumult around the desk was too much, Dave was tired of it and fighting not to lose patience. Standing a few feet away was a middle-aged woman from Tucson, her shrill voice making him wince: "Wait'll the girls see these shirts! Oh, they'll just roar!" Dave looked over to me with an exasperated expression on his face. Such voyeurs are a regular

feature at the gym, but because they often buy items, the orders are to deal with them politely. He smiled his handsome smile for her and answered her patiently. The woman's spouse was pumping Tracy Pram's hand (Tracy is one of the elite pros at the gym), while their gangly son took a snapshot of them both with the family Instamatic. Tracy indulged him even though he was visibly tired after a taxing workout.

Behind the spacious counter is the office of Olympic's owners—a large, well-appointed place with executive pretensions. Inside, Swede was engrossed watching Charlie, another Olympic bodybuilder, install a new computer for the gym. Sales of products and memberships had soared so in recent years that it had become a necessity, and the technicians and equipment around the new installation resembled of a surgical team performing a demanding operation. In place of green surgical garb, everyone here wore tight-fitting Olympic T-shirts and baseball caps with the gym's logo on them. Charlie was chief surgeon, and the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead matched sweat stains on the back of his unsurgeonlike T-shirt. Preoccupied with his work, he checked and rechecked every move while other staff members looked on, mesmerized. From outside it looked touch-and-go as one person after another was sent out to fetch more tools. Each exit and entry was marked by a careful opening and closing of the door.

Aerosmith's Steve Tyler could be heard singing "Love in an Elevator" in every nook and cranny of the two-story structure. The massive sound system is the heartbeat of the gym. You won't hear rock classics or flaccid rock here, only baseline stuff that gooses you as you enter into a world in need of a psych (elevated mood to fit the level of activity).

In one corner carpenters could be seen scampering up ladders as they put together a new frame for a sun room. Their ruckus, normally sufficient to drive you slowly crazy, was drowned out now by urgings to "Fight the Power" and punctuated by the clanging of weights. Loose nails from a carpenter's apron fell mutely to the floor where, before their second bounce, their motion was fused into the sight of a burly young man squatting with 350 pounds of iron on his shoulders, sweat exploding off his face as he strained to stand back up.

For this young man and his cousin, Public Enemy was faint ambiance. Known to bodybuilders as "The Huns," Don and Phil Ratchet have attained a level of notoriety by reversing Freud, standing the frail psychoanalyst on his head. Whereas Freud claimed civilized man strives to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, these bodybuilders revert to primeval man: Pain is exalted, pleasure eschewed.

Don's turn had come to squat (performing a deep knee bend with

a weighted bar), and the ante was up to 400 pounds. His training partners rose to the occasion by hurling a torrent of insults at him, even threatening him physically. The Huns can often be seen beating on each other (a technique they facetiously call "heightened arousal training") in preparation for and during the lifting of heavy poundages ("maxing out"). So much for positive reinforcement. He responded, though. Face flushed with exertion and insult, Don stood squarely beneath a rack groaning with metal.

At the opposite end of the gym high-powered lighting announced a photo session. A leading bodybuilding publication had sent some of its staff to do a piece on a rising young star; Olympic is one of the preferred locations for such features. A small circle had formed around the shoot. The subject, a black man named Ben Fletchworth, was being primed for elite candidacy through these photo sessions. Tensed in each hand was a 45-pound dumbbell, which he had frozen into a still for the photographer. The photo session is designed to illustrate a particular training method by someone of stature in the field, but it allows other members of the subculture to scrutinize the subject in a way that couldn't normally be done. Those gathered marveled quietly at Ben's enormous arms. When these people next talked about arms—they normally divide the body along lines of body parts and can treat them separately—it is Fletchworth's arms that they may well have had in mind. The gleam in his eyes told us that he was perfectly aware of it all.

Surrounding this pastiche was the constant movement of bodybuilders as they flowed from one machine or rack of weights to another. It was a ceaseless ebb and flow, and, like the ocean waves, one can become pleasantly inured to it. However haphazard these movements may appear to the untrained eye, they are governed by an absolute order. Each person is the result of his or her quest for the most effective form of training. Strength is not frittered away as it might be in a health spa, it is economized and every movement calculated. And woe to him who violates the subtle rules of space and time.

For all the seriousness of the gym—preparations for contests, posing, training, and the like—there is still time for purely social encounters. Old friends may drop by just to talk about personal matters. Often, a bodybuilder will come to the gym to find a job from postings on the bulletin board, or, having just been bumped from a job, one may come looking for some quick money or a place to stay. People often argue publicly in the gym as well. On the night in question there were no arguments. Pro Mel Miller was reclining against a machine talking with interest to someone about a series of videotapes he is planning to produce and market. Close by was another pro. Thor Sandstrum's rapid

patter of Swedish washed over a fellow countryman who nodded and laughed. Clowning was also in ample supply that night, as one of The Huns seized the microphone behind the desk in imitation of ex-sportscaster Howard Cosell broadcasting a bodybuilding contest.

Clearly, Olympic Gym is more than an aggregate of bodies. Many will spend their best years here, their youth consumed with this life. In a world often short of meaning, each of us might appreciate the niche these people have carved out of one of America's most alienating cities.

Analogized as a city, Olympic Gym has distinct cultural trappings. It is because of its success in generating a lifestyle around the needs of certain men and women that the gym has grown over the past ten years. It is all-encompassing, complete; and therein lies the secret to the devotion it receives. Viewed from the balcony, the people below appear to be randomly consumed in their individual quests; viewed as a collective, they appear to be milling, meaty cast members of *Marat Sade*.

Where once there were small, exclusive cults, the popularity of such elite gyms in today's American culture has turned places like Olympic into instantly recognizable cultural icons. Now, "pencil necks" with little interest in anything beyond training to fit into size 32 pants and women interested in firmness mingle with champions. Only the most rugged, committed male bodybuilders would have considered entering these gyms as recently as the late 1970s.

Interestingly, despite inroads made by women since the early 1980s, the world of elite bodybuilding is still very much a male preserve. In fact, I would argue that the very presence of women bodybuilders in elite gyms only serves to heighten the issues of masculinity that bodybuilding, by definition, deals with. Muscle-mongering is, at its very root, a male issue; a primary, albeit perhaps atavistic, signifier of male status. Just what that male status means in contemporary North American culture, and how a certain segment of the population goes about trying to secure that status, is described in the following ethnography. This study is concerned with the social-psychological world of competitive bodybuilding, with particular reference to issues of masculinity.

When I began this field study in 1979 there was precious little interest in either the study of bodybuilding (outside of Southern California) or men (outside a small core of scholars in psychology and an even smaller cluster in sociology). The early 1990s, by contrast, have shown a groundswell of interest in studies and therapies related to men and male issues. I would like to mention in passing the most salient societal and intellectual factors that have made men's studies a fast-growing field. This new interest ranges from views of men as warriors

without weapons, men without jobs, men in search of missing fathers and in flight from overbearing mothers, to men grappling with issues of sensitivity and manliness. The men's movement as seen, for instance, in poet Robert Bly's¹ admonition to find male initiation rituals absent for the North American male is one example of this new interest in masculinity, as is the growing popularity of war games for adults (mostly men), in which one can give expression to the warrior deep within all men. Others seek to redress hurts that many men have had to endure as boys growing up in a postindustrial, father-absent Western society. Scholarly treatments of men and masculinity have also begun to accumulate since the mid-1970s.² Whether we see all this as naive and self-indulgent or critical and honest, men have definitely begun a focused self-examination of their gender vis-à-vis women and society in general that will continue for some time.

For the past twenty or so years the women's movement has provided us with a model of self-examination in which paradigms have been developed, a sweeping range of interdisciplinary work carried on, and programs, policies, and therapies fashioned that represent an evolutionary step forward for women in the West. Much of this, one may argue, was the result of necessary struggles waged by women under repressive conditions (i.e., in a sexist and patriarchal society). Although the outrage that often propels such movements may not be present for men, the progressive design that stems from a critical and frank assessment of men in society, propelled in part by feminist thought, may allow men to reap certain rewards as well. What all these new views of men have in common is a dissatisfaction with the status, and, at times, the idea of "being a man" in contemporary society. This sense of malaise, of necessity, requires a criticism. So, just as feminists in the 1960s forged a critique of society in which the unfortunate dependency (in every way and on every level) of women on men had to be identified, examined, and repudiated, so, too, are men such as Sam Keen, author of the popular male manifesto *Fire in the Belly*,³ calling for an end to the unwholesome dependency that men have on women. Although his is not a belligerent repudiation of women, in seeking to sever the dialectical ties (he would claim, dependency) that men have to women, Keen is constantly at risk of sounding misogynist, the more so because he and Bly continue to hold on to male archetypes such as the warrior that are thoroughly outdated.

Such male interests, however misguided, cannot be simply dismissed as foolish groping by yuppy men or collective male midlife crises, however. Considering that our society has seen inroads made into many of its patriarchal institutions and witnessed the traditional

male pillars (e.g., occupations) fall one by one, movements (if we may call them that) such as Bly's and others represent widespread, if diffuse, social expressions that deserve serious examination. Social scientists interested in men's studies⁴ have been working and meeting increasingly since the mid-1970s, in an attempt to document the vicissitudes of masculinity. Although the early research tended to assume a single male identity, in a heterogeneous society such as ours there is no single masculinity, no one view of what a man is.⁵ Issues of masculinity are, however, widely shared, not only by men in our society, but cross-culturally as well.⁶ 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. This would not preclude the presence of a dominant cultural set of ideals as to what gender ideals are, i.e., what a man and woman ought to strive for. These cultural norms regarding gender are differentially shared by groups (race, class, and ethnic) in society. Referring to men, Connell⁷ terms a society's dominant notions of manhood as "hegemonic masculinity," a sense of masculinity that exists alongside others, but because of its "official" positions enjoys a greater status .

Critique must begin with the most "legitimate" societal/cultural forms, moving down to others. We must look at archetypes and actualizations of men, looking at each with an eye to figuring out why these no longer satisfy or function well. Although in my view there is not as much interest in this project as there should be from feminists, when the contributions to men's studies begin to show a depth and a progressive direction, we may see more collaboration. Perhaps this is the way it should be at this point, i.e., that men should take on the study of men directly and honestly, since it is men who both understand the complexities of the problem and stand to benefit most directly from breakthroughs.

It is in keeping with this trajectory of research concerns that this study is presented. The subculture of bodybuilding is both a sport subculture and a constellation of male archetypal traits, and it is this duality I wish to explore.

THE PRESSURE-TREATED MAN

Sociologist R.W. Connell clearly points to the social and cultural determinacy of gender in the following passage:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular phys-

ical skills and lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it. . . . In no sense is all this a consequence of XY chromosomes or even of the possession on which discussions of masculinity have so lovingly dwelt, the penis."⁸

Social practice forges masculinity and femininity. It seems clear, then, that society's institutions line up in service of genderizing biological males and females. Masculinity is socially etched onto the body. When (in this case) masculinity is successfully integrated, one's gender appears to emanate from the body in what is often perceived as "natural." When the approved form of masculinity is not completely socialized, the male is thought of as having deviated, an unnatural act and condition.

There is, in this simple dichotomy, a set of societal assumptions that have serious and complex consequences (see chapter 9 for more complete discussion). First, the hegemonic definition of masculinity so roundly approved defines men not simply as a list of positive attributes (e.g., brave, stoic), but equally by negative traits. In this sense, masculinity is defined less by what it is than by what it is not, i.e., to be a man is not to be a woman.⁹ Once established, the definition-by-negation principle encourages a young male striving to be a man to aggressively negate any female attributes in himself and others (see chapter 9). This negation works in tandem with a hierarchical structure in which men traditionally dominate women.

Part of achieving a satisfactory sense of self involves proving one's manhood to the group (family, various institutions, men's groups, etc.) Hence, to prove one's manhood one needs to distinguish oneself from women, a situation which, in male-dominated societies, often fosters a view of women as a repository for negative traits. Faulty psychosocial relations with men (particularly, according to psychologists, with one's father) can also lead to a crippled sense of security.¹⁰ Often, however, although faulty relations with one's father or other males may be the root cause of one's difficulties, the individual troubled male rarely confronts these sources of the conflict; rather, he is more likely to take out frustrations on less threatening individuals, i.e., women and other relatively powerless people. For individual males within societies built around male dominant culture the deprecatory view of women may be heightened or lessened in relation to the degree of individual psychological security attained. Failing to live up to some ideal of masculinity often results in a heightened negative response to women (and weaker men) on the part of insecure men. The relational quality of mas-

culinity and femininity is central to this exploration of manhood. Herein lies the path taken in my study of bodybuilding subculture, for it represents a worldview designed to provide answers to boys and men in search of a sense of masculinity. By emphasizing gender separation based on sexual dimorphism, bodybuilding winds up fueling some of the more anachronistic views of gender relations; and in some respects bodybuilding and bodybuilders represent the most extreme view of masculinity our society has. That view clings to the old notion of men as rugged, fearless, and fiercely independent. The corollary to this view is that men are not weak, dependent, or emotional (all traits historically assigned to women).

Bodybuilding's rise to mass appeal is somewhat surprising considering that it languished in obscurity for so long. Dating to the award-winning film *Pumping Iron* in the mid-1970s, the subculture started to gain wider visibility. It has only been within the past decade that bodybuilding has been popularized through its milder variation, fitness training. A market survey by a Dallas-based firm, Sports Marketing Group, pointed this out when it listed the 114 most popular sports in the country, with bodybuilding ranking thirty-fifth (behind tractor pulling, but ahead of Professional Golf Association golf, Olympic hockey, men's bowling, and harness racing). There are, at present, more than 25,000 health clubs in the United States.¹¹ Muscularity has become more than fashionable. It has come to be perceived as necessary for those who seek optimum health, a sector of the population that includes the mass of baby boomers, but includes youth and the aged as well.

The present study of bodybuilding seeks to explore the social psychology of muscularity and masculinity. The constellation of traits that swirl at the core of bodybuilding tells us quite a bit about our societal sense of gender; in this instance, about men and their sometimes troubled sense of security. Men, for instance, view their bodies as instruments,¹² or in forceful and space-occupying ways,¹³ all in an effort to assert masculine ideals. But if men use their bodies offensively, they also use them defensively, in that the body, as an "etch-a-sketch" for a complex set of symbols, can be so constructed and presented as to give the appearance of hegemonic masculinity with nothing behind it. That is, the male body can be a chimera, a psychologically defensive construct that looks invulnerable but really only compensates for self-perceived weakness. In the following analysis I argue that, like the Wizard of Oz, there is a marked tendency to construct an imposing exterior that will convince others of what one is not convinced of oneself.

As a social site for male issues, the discussion of the hustler in chapter 8 attempts to examine the constellation of traits I identify as

authoritarianism, hypermasculinity, narcissism, homophobia, and femi-phobia. Just as I have chosen an extreme form of North American masculinity to study, so, too, have I selected the most excessive men within the larger bodybuilding community. Of the thousands of men who might call themselves bodybuilders, and of the many more who engage in weight training, the bodybuilders depicted in these pages are distillations. As such, they exhibit behavior and attitudes that are more exaggerated than those of moderate members of this sprawling community. The bodybuilders described and analyzed here, however, afford us a view of certain essential elements of hegemonic masculinity that are not as observable or discernable among more mainstream men. It is in comparison to the latter that hegemonic masculinity and some of its attributes should be viewed; although men may carry certain predispositions to the traits here described, they do not invariably manifest them.

In examining "comic-book masculinity" (chapter 9), I also present cultural pitfalls that await those who, for one reason or another, subscribe to hegemonic masculinity. Not only is the subculture shown to be riddled with inconsistencies, but the individuals who uncritically accept these ideals are frequently doomed never to attain them. Nevertheless, there is a certain degree of fit between psychological attributes in the hustler's composition and the larger culture of which bodybuilding is a part. According to this, authoritarianism gives way to cultural notions that propagate fascism, homophobia and misogyny as social traits. The weakness that lives at the core of so many bodybuilders, and the vulnerability that they struggle to overcome, is responsible for the elaboration of a lifestyle and subculture that brooks no weakness or vulnerability. Just as the superhero Superman and his daily personification, Clark Kent, play off each other's presentation of self, i.e., strong and weak; so too must we understand that to strive to become a "he-man" of necessity requires us to acknowledge our weaker side. Repudiation of all within us that is seen as an embarrassment to our virility, our sense of manhood, is futile, since these are poles of a continuum, not either/or propositions.

The subculture of bodybuilding, on the other hand, provides the individual with a supportive milieu in which to work out issues of self-esteem and masculinity, a social world within which one can find both meaning and purpose. As an ethnography, *Little Big Men* examines the creation of a subculture that is internally consistent, but experiences an uneasy tension with mainstream societal norms and conventions. In the tradition of critical ethnography,¹⁴ and particularly critical sport sociology,¹⁵ the individual, subculture, and mainstream exist as a con-

tested terrain in which each seeks to establish its position vis-à-vis the other, and in which the actors struggle with issues that are at once externally induced and internally integrated. To convey the sense of the gym (and subculture) as a "haven in a heartless world," to borrow the title of a Christopher Lasch book,¹⁶ I initially present the gym from an emic view, describing its structure, rhythms, relations, and the like, before moving to a more analytical perspective in chapters 6 through 9. To get a sense of this subculture one has to acknowledge its exotic qualities, and through my first weeks and months in the gym, we can witness the foreignness of bodybuilding by chronicling my cultural naivete. The anthropologist is, despite his or her presentation of self as intrepid, really quite vulnerable to faux pas, and early on bears more resemblance to cultural buffoon than cultural bard.

THE PLACE

Along one end of the gym covered with posters and announcements for upcoming events stands the front desk. Over it loom photographs of larger-than-life men assuming unnatural positions, straining their muscles in a controlled frenzy of contractions. In the world of bodybuilders this is called the "pose," and the front desk is in a West Coast muscle mill called Olympic Gym. My attention to these details was a surprise to me, a reflex to the immediate discomfort I felt upon entering a world of strangers; the sight and sound of them heaving, grunting, and sweating with weights unnerved me. The whole place seemed caught up in one large orgasm, and in that first encounter I did not want to be the dreaded interruption of this erotic scene between humans, mirrors, and metal.

I wasn't the only voyeur. Olympic Gym had a gallery set aside just for those who came to gawk—either wandering in off the street or intentionally coming to watch—and in the part of California where Olympic was, the entertainment was as likely to come from the people in the gallery as it was from the bodybuilders working out. Olympic is to bodybuilders what Mecca is to the Islamic faithful: the hub of spiritual existence, the center of being. Many make annual pilgrimages to this shrine. One British pilgrim had saved his meager wages for a year just to work out at Olympic Gym for a few weeks. A white South African auto-plant employee could be seen buying anything associated with the place. In that first day I could hear a half-dozen languages being spoken, the words trying in vain to compete with the dominating bass of the rock music filling the place. This was September, a time tra-

ditionally reserved by serious bodybuilders for final training, or "fine tuning," for the major contests coming up in a few weeks.

For all its kaleidoscopic presence and spectacle, Olympic has a sedate and respectable exterior. Housed in a modern office complex and sheathed in black glass, Olympic could pass for an architectural firm, except for the sign with its logo bolted to the front of the building. The parking lot is shared with other businesses in the mall, and is always sure to sport license plates from Illinois, New York, or Florida. As you enter, however, things shift dramatically from corporate chic to exotic. One is immediately struck by the cavernous feel of Olympic, much as one would be upon entering Toronto's Skydome for the first time. Gone is the claustrophobic atmosphere of the traditional gym: cramped quarters, limited equipment, and sickly artificial lighting. Thirty-foot ceilings with large skylights, an endless array of weight machines, and massive speakers infuse the place with energy. There is room to stretch out and work.

Depending on the day or time you pull into the parking lot, you are apt to see anything from a few serious competitors lost in the maze of horizontal and vertical iron contraptions to a mass of what seem to be scurrilous brigands picking up the very foundations of the gym. There are people there who have been pumping iron for years and are no closer to a genuine conversation than the cop who just came in intent on arresting a fugitive (they occasionally find one here). Then there are lawyers and doctors who not only discuss business, but do so while squatting several hundred pounds of iron. There are both the "new wave" youngsters, nineteen-year-olds whose ears are pierced and fitted with diamond chips and the "butt floss" set (bottoms worn over spandex leotards that reveal the buttocks), refugee women from the aerobic outback—elements not indigenous to Olympic Gym, the result of media exposure that this place has had in the past decade. These recent arrivals to gym culture are content, as one disgruntled oldtimer put it, "to sit on a piece of apparatus with their four-pound weight for ten minutes and spend the next half hour talking about it." For them nothing would be finer than turning the gym into a singles bar. Serious women bodybuilders also disdain the recent arrivals, but however resented, the newcomers' lackadaisical proximity to world class bodybuilders is enough to allow the gym to sit precariously on the fence between elite professionalism and chic.

Strictly speaking, Olympic Gym is not a community; it is a large, special-purpose facility like a bar or a church. Just as do other special-purpose facilities, it recapitulates the phylogenetic process. There are many times when it takes on all the characteristics of a community.

Viewed from the balcony of the 10,000-square-foot gym, one can see that it is laid out gridlike, as if composed by Salt Lake City's Mormon founders. Main street: a neat avenue about six feet wide and 250 feet long bisects the gym. Weight stations, miniskyscraper affairs of iron in a variety of shapes and functions, cut the space into cubes and line the main boulevard the entire length of the gym. "Avenue of the Olympians," I call it. Jutting off at regular intervals are straight little streets variously leading to pulleys, back machines, free-weight racks, and the like—all dead-ending into mirrored walls that create an infinite sense of space. There's Leg Press Lane, Bicep Boulevard, and Ab Avenue. There is even a ghetto of "Blue Monsters" (Nautilus machines). The front desk, located at one end of the main avenue, magically becomes the old town hall where all official business gets transacted. Looking at small scale social units as dioramas helps one to grasp the object of study as a microcosm, as well as to isolate social patterns and functions, and aids in finding regular patterns of behavior. The gym, street corner, or school can all be seen in this way.

At times the streets of Olympic Gym are virtually deserted, and only a few inhabitants are out. However, around noon and six in the evening—rush hours—the gym is crowded with bodies double- and triple-parked: big, eight-cylinder jobs with gleaming chrome deltoids and baroque hood ornaments that double as chests. No compacts here. The sound of construction—steel on steel, echoing grunts—vies with the heavy metal rock and the announcements from city hall's public address system ("Mike Cresswell, telephone call," or "Hey! Pick up those weights, damn it!"). In response, catcalls sometimes curl up from "neighborhoods" within the gym. There's a surly gang of toughs congregated around the T-bar (a bar and plates rigged for the back) screaming at the employee who just demanded they pick up the 45-pound plates they've been scattering about like empty beer cans. "Fuck you! Pick em' up yourself!" they scream, but the man at the front desk is already busy with another call and is never offended, anyway.

Arranged on the walls are large posters of the sport's samurai, the elite bodybuilders who have won major contests. Smaller 8" x 10" glossies (perhaps 200 of them) line the walls in other parts of the gym. These are the men and women who are in the process of attaining rank, and who come to places like Olympic Gym rather than other gyms because they offer the best equipment and an electric environment that stimulates them to train harder. These lesser lights have won smaller contests and hope to win more status-filled events that may make some of them superstars in their own right.

Some 2000 people pay annual dues to Olympic Gym. They range

from the occasional to the twice-daily devotee. Additionally, there are thousands of walk-ins who pay to train for a day, week, or month. This population is staggered over the sixteen hours a day that Olympic Gym is open (6 A.M. to 10 P.M.).

The gym has moved several times over its thirty-year life span. Then, as now, it was recognized as the elite gym. At its original site Olympic occupied smaller quarters and looked much more like a traditional "sweat-n'-swear" male bastion. By 1984 it opened its new location and the owners took a giant step forward. Designed with aesthetics in mind, the owners initially gave the gym a kind of Scandinavian purity—which, as time went on, became increasingly cluttered. Clean, cool, white walls; lofty ceilings; and a combination of direct and indirect natural lighting lent the gym a dignified black-and-white effect. Gone was the conventional front desk, shabbily thrown together. The Olympic Gym T-shirts and sweatsuits which used to be thrown over protruding objects or hooks carelessly tacked on the walls, have been placed in well-crafted merchandise counters serving the dual purpose of front desk and display case. The substantially enlarged line of bodybuilding products the gym carries is now tastefully exhibited.

The workout area has an inoffensive indoor-outdoor carpet, but the front desk area has stained glass windows and a custom-tiled floor. Stairs lead to two additional floors, where dressing rooms and storage rooms can be found, as well as to a balcony that affords a commanding view of the whole place. By 1986, the gym had again expanded to almost double its size.

Olympic Gym gave the serious bodybuilder a professional place to work, to be and be seen. Its clientele seem to have gained in self-esteem by "moving up" at a time when the sport and subculture were at the threshold of respectability. In doing all this, Olympic Gym has performed an important cultural and social service. By providing for its followers a new standard of excellence, a showcase, and a window to the larger society, it helps to remove past stigmas and provides a dignified presence. This ethnography seeks not only to examine the subculture within the relatively bounded world of bodybuilding, but to scrutinize the impetus to create and reproduce such a world.

CONFESSIONS OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

Primates long ago learned not to stare at unfamiliar or threatening others. We avoid staring too long at a troop of bikers cruising the streets or at a surly-looking male at the end of the bar unless we're willing to

face a possible confrontation. On the other hand, always in search of exotica and stimulation, we do enjoy staring—unnoticed. We are a nation of voyeurs, people watchers, spectators to spectacles who take a perverse delight in almost anything beyond our work-a-day experience. How fortunate, since, as an anthropologist, my job is precisely to stare, or, as we prefer to think of it, to “observe.” Here, I had readied myself to observe the subculture of bodybuilders, to sit and blatantly stare at a group of completely unfamiliar, large men and women. Their size was undeniably intimidating, as it is designed to be. In fact, the quest for ever-larger and more ostentatious musculature was the point on which their entire world turned. On that first day, however, I only reacted to the intimidating quality of the size.

I was trained in techniques of observation, experienced in imposing myself on others (anthropologists are seemingly a presence to be tolerated), and I was convinced that there was not a bizarre or grotesque type of behavior I hadn’t seen, read about, or had told to me. Crossing the threshold of the gym door, however, I unexpectedly froze when it came to engaging the “erotic” scene before me. I turned instead and frantically examined the anonymous wall behind the front desk. The embarrassment I felt over watching the goings-on was bad enough; my response was something else—very unprofessional. In retrospect, I felt like one of those subway-riding New Yorkers who, when faced with an ugly incident on the homeward journey, sits with eyes riveted on some inanimate object, denying it all in the hope that the obscene drunk or attacker will desist. In the years ahead, I would smile as I saw this same response in others.

The wall on which I now lavished my attention offered only a partial respite. Affixed to it in rows were pictures mostly of men, arrested in similar poses that exaggerated their gleaming musculature. Their eyes were most memorable. They seemed to look out in anticipation of the appreciative clucking that comes from those who habitually look at these pictures. Perceived by the outsider as alien and somewhat threatening, the photographs, this entire place, seemed more marginal than I had previously thought. Yet, in the gym, a community of like-minded questers had fashioned common beliefs, actions, and values safe for their own consumption.

I had come to this part of the country intending to study bodybuilders as I had Native Americans, earlier. The latter had become more problematic with time, and I needed a break from the cultural and political surprises that marked Native American studies. Already somewhat familiar with weight training and bodybuilding, I left Boston confident that no surprises lay in store for me—at least not on the order of study-

ing some uncharted human population in the interior of Brazil. That assumption was my first and most serious mistake. Precisely because I hadn't expected anything unusual, the unexpected was most likely to happen. In this instance, a hitherto-unperceived prudishness, one of the many biases that get in the way of objective observation, was triggered.

I anticipated a few hard-core men lost in their routines amidst a mountain of weights, not a pulsating room full of people propelled by what seemed like some mysterious, erotic force. The collective grunting and swaying, the seminudity and hyperintimate preoccupation with the body proved disconcerting. I expected this gym, like others, to exhibit a public face, in the sense of people self-consciously monitoring their behavior in accordance with modesty. In gyms, strangers dressed more scantily than normal assume quasi-intimate positions. To get around the potential discomfort there is a highly ritualized set of behaviors in which everyone is expected to engage. So it was that I expected such conventions to be followed in Olympic. What I happened upon, however, was unabashed self-admiration, people scanning themselves openly, directly, each body part looked at. Most of us will steal a side-long glance at ourselves as we walk past a store window, saving our real self-examination for the privacy of our bedroom mirrors. These people, however, appeared to stop just to pose, touch, and look at themselves and others in full view of the world. At least they did to me, that day. Alas, once again I was wrong. What I saw was more a statement about the observer than the observed. It would be some time before I understood the role of the mirror and the curious narcissistic interactions people had with it.

"Can I help you?" The voice of someone behind the desk filtered through my concealed terror. I turned, frantically trying to think of something to say, some reason for being there, for standing like an idiot looking at these pictures. How embarrassing, had I been gawking for an eternity?

I'm safe if I buy something. "Uhm, I'll take one of those T-shirts in medium... make that large." Consume a bit of their culture, tribute to the brigands.

"What color?" The voice came back.

"Damn, I don't know what color. I don't even want one." I thought.

"Blue." I said.

It wasn't until I had paid him that I noticed the man. He was conventionally good looking twenty-plus years: blond shag hair, blue eyes, deep tan, straight features, a muscular version of the late Ricky Nel-

son (from the 1960s television sitcom, "Ozzie and Harriet.") Completing the purchase, I regained my composure and asked if Swede, the general manager, was in. How could I have forgotten my appointment with Swede?

He came out of his office with a smile already on his face. For him it was a magical year. He'd met his current wife earlier in Salem, Massachusetts. They got married about the same time that he got a call from his friend and mentor, Stan, out here at the Olympic Gym. Stan invited Swede out to manage the gym which, as a New Englander tired of bitter winters and eager to be in the best milieu for bodybuilding, appealed to Swede. Within the year Swede would buy into the gym. There was absolutely every reason to be content. His joy instantly put me at ease, and as we sat down to talk I knew that if I succeeded at all, he would be the reason.

"What kind of study do you want to do?" Swede asked, looking over the letter I had sent him a few weeks before. Having anticipated just such a question from the gatekeeper, I decried the second-rate position of the sport, the erroneous myths, the need to address whether or not the subculture was in fact compensation for shortcomings. On and on I went in a torrent of reasons, needs, and rationalizations that, in retrospect, were clearly excessive. Truthfully, however, I did not want Swede to decide against my project thirty seconds into my pitch. Such is the power of ethnographic gatekeepers that they can, within seconds, unhinge a project that took months to put together. With an air of never-a-doubt, Swede calmed my concerns by saying it would be just fine. He would personally introduce me around. I slumped back in my chair, looking around me for the first time while Swede answered the knock at the door. I relaxed for the first time in weeks.

That initial meeting in Swede's office was punctuated by the entrance of two young men, Sam Behrouze and Ken Jefferson. Donna Summer's voice swirled in from the speakers in the gym as the door opened. Ken closed the door, and the two men greeted Swede warmly. I recall thinking that their affability was not what I expected from bodybuilding superstars. In my scenario they all suffered from Clint Eastwood Disease, a disorder that constricts the facial muscles and jaw and makes everyone speak in short, choppy sentences. The long term prognosis of such a malaise was not good, I was sure. Tempers would get progressively worse, leading ultimately to violent death. Yet Sam and Larry were warm and seemingly vulnerable.

The upcoming Mr. Universe contest prompted Sam's visit. Reflecting the hyped atmosphere at Olympic Gym, Swede chided his brawny compatriot, asking him whether he had done anything to get ready for

the contest, now a scant two weeks away. All three shared a laugh. It was common knowledge that few trained harder than Sam, who was favored to win his weight class. Before the hilarity subsided, however, and without the grin leaving his deeply tanned face, Sam reached for the waistband of his sweatpants and pulled them down to his knees. *Replay:* Man 1 asks a seemingly legitimate question about training, and Man 2 pulls down his pants. What was going on?

All eyes, minus mine, since I winced at this, focused on Sam's massive thighs, covered by skin so devoid of fat that, like parchment, it was almost transparent. I didn't know whether to excuse myself, for fear that some very private thing was about to occur, so I began rummaging through my briefcase. Swede and Ken Jefferson, however, looked closely at his thighs, and nodded appreciatively. They were impressed, which, it finally occurred to me, was some sort of answer to Swede's question. Sam, smile still on his face, now turned fully to face me. His pants somewhat restricted his movement, but he shuffled over to me, and I knew I was expected to comment. I believe I said something clever like, "Piece of cake. You've got the contest in the bag." Actually, I hadn't the slightest idea of what was good or bad, thinking only that bigger was better. But Sam didn't pull his pants up. Instead, he flexed his thighs, looked at them the way someone would at a prize German shepherd going through its repertoire of tricks, and, as his veins strained to break through the skin of his thighs, it became clear to me that he was merely making a visual report of his condition. Nothing sordid or questionable, just an athlete asking for confirmation of his readiness. Only, instead of a foul shot, punt, or time trial being the measurement, it is the body: pure, simple, and pretty much naked. I'd been at Olympic less than half an hour and had already twice been forced to come to grips with my lack of preparation for this study.

This study was supposed to be easy and familiar, but my complacency was shaken by several revelations about myself. I vowed vigilance. Each day I would patiently watch as the members of the gym came and went, talking to people as their time permitted. Each interview was logged, its high points noted, so that after a month I grew more confident that things were at last beginning to take shape. The old sense of anticipating my conclusions came over me again. This dangerous state of mind can, if undetected, lead a fieldworker to miss data or misconstrue it. For instance, one subject that came up often—though indirectly—was the generalized hostility on the part of certain people at Olympic Gym toward homosexuals. This homophobia took the form of various members of the gym mocking each other in imitation of gay men, accusations of homosexuality, and a variety of insulting behaviors.

Whereas this joking is widespread in locker-room humor, it was particularly vicious at Olympic Gym. On one occasion, after an effeminate-acting male walked into the gym to work out, the man I was speaking with said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "Alan, if there's one thing I can't stand, it's seein' queers work out here." Some other members chimed in, and the man in question hurriedly left. Shortly afterward, I was working out in a gym near my apartment when it dawned on me that this gym was primarily gay. The incident at Olympic still fresh in my mind, I decided to interview people around me informally and ask them how they felt about being involved in a sport in which the upper echelons so roundly condemned them. They introduced me to the two gay owners of the gym, who laughed when I told them what people at the top thought of gays. "Almost everyone over there [Olympic Gym] has been 'made' by us 'fags'," said one facetiously. "Come to our party in a few weeks and you'll see them [top bodybuilders] all there," said the other. They went on to chronicle the longstanding and widespread incidence of relations between gay men and bodybuilders. Name after prestigious name, and anecdotes connected with them, were casually and humorously provided. I walked out sensing that confirmed or not, these views represented serious contradictions within this subculture, and I had again erred in forgetting to avoid preconception and the face value of my data. Back at Olympic Gym people denied any systematic involvement with gays. "Look, there are as many gay plumbers as gay bodybuilders," was the way one put it. But now I was alerted to denial and wondered whether a core issue in the bodybuilders' self-identity was involved. By the time I learned to read the signs, people would become more open with me about that subject.

Two weeks later I was once again forced to encounter my naivete. A highly respected and widely recognized bodybuilder had informed me that although he had at one time taken steroids (a synthetic male hormone condemned by the sport's establishment), he no longer used them because he had mastered the intricacies of diet and training. He looked earnest as he gave me detailed points of his diet and regimen. A few days later I came in as usual. Small clusters of bodybuilders were huddled over the latest issue of one of the premier publications in the sport, a ritual repeated in the gym each month on the day it arrives. The bodybuilder in question was flanked by his friends, poring over the magazine and commenting on each picture. When they reached the advice column he writes, he read aloud a question sent him by a teenager in Pontiac, Michigan. The question concerned what sort of steroids were best to take. As he read the question, he imitated the high-

pitched voice of his fan. Laughter all around. Then he went on to read his advice to the young man, which went something like this: "Don't destroy yourself. If you want a physique like mine, don't take shortcuts." Convulsing laughter. "I didn't win my titles by taking drugs. Chemicals are no substitute for hard work." He would have continued, except that he was wiping tears from his eyes. His friends were on the floor.

Thinking about this, I concluded that being gullible was, oddly, an integral part of the field experience. Initial data posed a threat if one took it at face value, and the measure of cultural understanding came in direct proportion to the ability to discern and play with (interpret) behavioral contradictions. To assume that people are telling the truth is naive, since it assumes that toying with the fieldworker out of playfulness or boredom, or misleading him to keep him away from potentially damaging information, is not in the "native's" mind. Since we are often not in a position to determine the accuracy of our data, we often rationalize its validity or lay such a thick smokescreen as never to have the question arise. Doing fieldwork in our own society, where language is shared and most behavior already partially comprehended, was a blessing compared with working in cultures where we were complete strangers and totally ignorant. But it was also a curse, because, if the data-validity issue was a legitimate concern, I had now come to question all fieldwork done by all anthropologists for all time. Only those who would stay in the field for years, learning all the intricacies of language, culture, and behavior were to be trusted. Only those fieldworkers who truly knew the culture, yet could remain sufficiently on the edge to report the culture meaningfully, were to be trusted. By these standards, almost all anthropologists operating today would be suspect, since we tend to take what people in other societies say at face value and rarely stay long enough to uncover discrepancies. Was it really reasonable to assume that these people, or any others, would, at the sight of an anthropologist, spill their secrets, revealing their deepest contradictions? Why wouldn't they have some fun with an outsider? At last I was coming of age at Olympic.

BODYBUILDING: REPUDIATED AND REDISCOVERED

Olympic Gym as Subculture

During the next five years the discrepancy between what bodybuilding is and what it represents itself as being became clearer to me. The men and women of Olympic Gym are in some ways consciously the creators

of their world, but for the most part their culture is formed unintentionally. What they wear, what they believe, and the way they act are all mythologized in the pages of bodybuilding magazines, in spectacles called "contests," and in the reflections of the public. What passes for bodybuilding subculture is eagerly and unquestioningly adopted by the rank and file.¹⁷ Much of what goes into the depiction of this subculture is itself a knee-jerk response to other forces, as the gym is capable of generating unique cultural traits, as well as aping larger cultural patterns.

The subculture of Olympic Gym has grown to include women and many more minorities than it did a decade ago, when it was very macho and very white. In it, one now finds a variety of noncompetitors, as well as professionals and amateurs from almost any place in the world. For the majority of bodybuilders who have to work at jobs to support their training, occupations run the gamut from firemen and police to lawyers, doctors, and politicians to blue-collar bricklayers and truckers. Two million pounds of weights attached to a bewildering array of bars, pulleys, cams, and axles provide the setting and *raison d'être* for this collection of disparate lifestyles and backgrounds.

Although the membership of Olympic Gym has grown to over 2000, there is a core of 150 to 200 who most characterize bodybuilding subculture. These are the people who not only look and act like bodybuilders—training, dieting, talking iron—but subordinate all other life concerns to bodybuilding. One can conceivably look as big as a bodybuilder without being part of the subculture, if other considerations such as work or self-identity take precedence over bodybuilding. So the huge man coming in to train four times a week who has a family and a job as a fireman will be perceived as marginal to the core community. It's when you take just any job that supports your training that bodybuilding becomes the most important thing in your life; this qualifies you for membership in the core community. Such people differ from dabblers the way a Clydesdale differs from a quarter horse. An ex-foreman in a paper mill, Ron came from rural Ohio. Jim is a native of Venice, California with a bachelor's degree in nutrition. Peta is an exotic dancer from Albuquerque. Mary teaches school in the San Francisco Bay area. Beyond their origins and occupations, the diversity narrows, becoming mere background to the pursuit of physical size, symmetry, and shape. It is this preoccupation that forges a new self-definition.

A lexicon has grown up centered on the caring for and redefinition of the body. Terms such as abs, delts, cuts, gains, presses, 'roids, hustling, and bitch tits are as likely to evoke an emotional response from these people as the notion of trickle-down economics would to a Reagan loyalist. The hours of the day are pinned to a workout schedule, and