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queerRunning head: THE qBODY PROJECT

The qBody Project:

From Lesbians in Physical Education to Queer Bodies in/out of School.

In/visible Bodies: Lesbian Sexualities and Sporting Spaces

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Abstract

The qBody project is a qualitative research study which aims to understand how students with ‘queer bodies’ are impacted by heterosexism, transphobia, ableism and fat phobia in Canadian physical education. Approximately 40 adults, who self-identified as a sexual minority, gender minority, having a physical disability and/or socially undervalued body shape/size were interviewed about how physical education impact their participation in, and alienation from, physical cultures later in life. This paper situates the theoretical approach of the qBody project within the historical development of research into homophobia and lesbians in physical education and sport. Specifically, the paper traces how postmodern theories of embodiment are transforming ‘lesbian studies in sport’ into multidimensional studies of marginalization and normalcy – an area which might be referred to as ‘postmodern body studies’.

The qBody Project:

From Lesbians in Physical Education to Queer Bodies in/out of School.

Introduction

Within postmodern theories of embodiment, the idea of a socially constructed ‘lesbian identity’ has developed into a more complex notion of ‘embodied subjectivity’. This approach to research, that I refer to as ‘postmodern body studies’, has the potential to transform ‘lesbian studies in sport’ into multidimensional studies of marginalization and normalcy. Postmodern body studies draws from aspects of queer theory, trans theory, postcolonial theory, crip theory and fat theory to provide a multidimensional way of thinking about embodied subjectivity. The paper illustrates this broad theoretical shift using the theoretical framework and preliminary findings from the qBody project.

The qBody project is a qualitative educational research project that seeks to understand how students living with ‘queer bodies’¹ are impacted by heterosexism, transphobia, ableism and fat phobia in Canadian physical education. The purpose of the project is to examine how students

¹ The term ‘queer bodies’ does not primarily refer to lesbian, bi, gay, trans or queer students; rather, it refers to students who in some way experienced their *body* as being ‘queer’ – somehow excluded from the normative – in physical education. Thus, ‘queer bodies’ refers to students whose racialized gender, sex or sexuality was regarded as non-normative, and also those who felt different due to their physical dis/ability, their body shape and size.

² Pseudonyms are used for all the people we interviewed except one person who requested that we continue to use their real name.

³ Q refers to ‘questioner’ or the person conducting the interview. Five members of the research team conducted interviews for The qBody Project, two of whom were people of color and three were white. Like the participants, each of the interviewers also identified with one or more of the following marginalized groups: sexual minority; gender minority; having a physical disability; or as fat/overweight. This meant that each interviewer was 3

in physical education contexts are constituted by, and actively negotiate, a matrix of oppressive and normalizing discourses about the body, including discourses about lesbian sexuality.

Approximately 40 adults have been interviewed about their experiences, as students, in physical education and how this impacted their participation in physical cultures later in life. The criteria for being interviewed was to self-identify with one or more of the following marginalized groups: sexual minority; gender minority; having a physical disability; or as fat/overweight. To conduct the interviews I worked with a team of graduate research assistants, who had an extremely rich array of research interests and political involvements, such as anti-psychiatric survivor activism, body image therapy, critical sport studies and fat activism. They were encouraged to interview people they knew as a result of these research and political interests, and we also approached contacted people via community organizations involved in eating and body issues, trans and queer advocacy, disability sports and fat/size acceptance groups.

The qBody project reflects the shift in my own research from issues facing lesbian teachers in physical education to postmodern research into queer embodiment in movement cultures inside, and outside, physical education spaces. In this paper, several preliminary findings illustrate how the conceptualization of the research and interpretation of people's interviews has been informed by concepts and debates within trans theory, crip theory and fat theory.

A. Social Constructionist Research into Homophobia and Lesbian Identity

In the early 1990s feminist researchers started to examine how heterosexism and homophobia restricted the ways in which students and teachers in sport and physical education constructed and expressed 'lesbian' identities. The main focus of this early research was on the social construction of 'lesbian' identities in homophobic PE contexts.

Within physical education research, an ongoing line of inquiry in North American research examined how lesbian PE teachers and coaches 'manage' their sexual identities in the homophobic milieu of schooling. Woods and Harbeck's (1992) phenomenological study asked, "how lesbian physical educators cope with some unique occupational stresses relating to society's perspectives on homosexuality and women in sports" (p. 142). Pat Griffin (1991, 1992, 1998) identified a continuum of management strategies lesbians used to separate or integrate their personal and professional identities. These ranged from 'passing' as heterosexual, 'covering' which involved censoring rather than deceiving, 'being implicitly out' to 'being explicitly out'. In sport psychology, Vikki Krane and Heather Barber (2003, 2005) utilize a social identity perspective to analyze how coaches negotiate their identities as 'coach' and 'lesbian'. Some researchers in sport sociology continue to use the identity management framework to analyze lesbian experiences in heteronormative sport cultures, such as boxing (Halbert, 1997) and women's soccer (Harris, 2005). Iannotta and Kane (2002) critiqued the idea that being explicitly 'out' as a lesbian was the most liberating strategy of identity management or development. In the U.K., researchers such as Gill Clarke and Andrew Sparkes counterpoised the public realm of the school against the private life of the lesbian teacher (Clarke, 1996; Sparkes, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Sparkes & Templin, 1992). Susan Cahn's (1994a) historical research traced how racialized lesbian identities were socially constructed through medical, sexological, popular media and education discourses that shaped U.S. physical education from the late 1920s. Cahn's conceptualization of sexual identity acknowledged, but did not substantially engage, debates about identity and subjectivity that were emerging at the time. While Cahn acknowledged the potential of poststructural theories about fragmented, non-unified identities, she noted that the oral histories of women she interviewed strongly suggested that "a sense of

authentic self is both real and necessary to people living within a given context" (Cahn, 1994: 332). Since the 1990s poststructural queer/feminist ways of thinking about subjectivity have consistently weighed the apparent 'truths' of identity claims against the exclusions produced by fixed or singular identity politics. Research formulated in the midst of these debates gradually shifted from explaining the social construction, and more proscriptively, the management of lesbian identities in sport towards the re/production and management of the discourses within which the very notion of 'lesbian identity' becomes intelligible.

B. Poststructural Discourses of Sexualities in Sport

Poststructural feminist theories of subjectivity began to formulate a major critique of the notion of 'lesbian' identity as a coherent and stable sense of one's sexuality, proposing instead that subjectivity consists of multiple performative, fragmented and incoherent subject positions. In particular, theories of feminist poststructuralism (c.f. Davis & Gannon, 2005; Lather, 1991, 2007; Weedon, 1997) transformed earlier social constructionist research about lesbian *identities* into critical analyses of how lesbian *subjectivities* are constructed through multiple discourses within various sporting and physical education discourses (Birrell & MacDonald, 2000; Caudwell, 2006). This multifaceted, interlocking perspective enables more subtle understanding of bodily experiences in sport.

Illustration – Multiple Coming Outs as Bisexual, Queer, Trans

The illustration below, taken from the qBody project, highlights how one person's subjectivity was narrated within multiple and shifting discourses about sexuality and gender. The following excerpts about multiple moments of 'coming out' are taken from an interview with

Teiresias² who self-identified as a white gender-queer, transguy at the time of our interview.

Teiresias recalled coming out as bisexual during grade 8:

Q³: When did you come out?

Teiresias: I was thirteen

Q: You were young. So that was in middle school? Okay. Did you come out as queer, at that point? Or lesbian?

Teiresias: I came out as bisexual. I guess this was the label that I plastered onto my forehead at the time.

Teiresias: ...the [same] time that I was coming out, I had some really awesome friends. I was lucky in the sense that six of us came out as bisexual or gay or lesbian at the same time.

Q: In your teens?

Teiresias: Yeah, in my Grade 8 year. So, even if they weren't close friends, it was just really awesome having that.

Teiresias' experience reveals that in addition to coming out as 'lesbian' or 'gay', 'bi' and 'queer' were possible alternatives to normalizing heterosexual identities. This range of sexual identities taken up by students in Teiresias' school resonates with broader shifts from gay and lesbian identity politics to queer politics (c.f. Jagose, 1996; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995; Walters, 1996). Teiresias went on to narrate coming out as queer and, later, as a transguy:

² Pseudonyms are used for all the people we interviewed except one person who requested that we continue to use their real name.

³ Q refers to 'questioner' or the person conducting the interview. Five members of the research team conducted interviews for The qBody Project, two of whom were people of color and three were white. Like the participants, each of the interviewers also identified with one or more of the following marginalized groups: sexual minority; gender minority; having a physical disability; or as fat/overweight. This meant that each interviewer was differently positioned, as an insider or outsider, in relation to the people they interviewed. We recognize that our different social locations -- especially in terms of racialization, fatness, and non-heterosexuality -- profoundly affected how each interview unfolded. As the author, I acknowledge there is an important layer of self-reflexivity that needs to be written, beyond the scope of this paper, about how our different locations that lies beneath the common designation of 'questioner' or Q.

Teiresias: Coming out just as queer at one point helped me about my body because, at that point, I was feeling “If I could just be a guy, things would be figured out”. But then when I came out as queer, it opened up a space for differently gendered subjectivity and so that ended up definitely changing how I felt about the body that I inhabit. But then, later on, I ended up coming out as trans, and all the body stuff that leads up to that...

Thus, Teiresias’ sex/gender coming out narratives move through being bisexual and gender-queer and, later, coming out differently as a transguy. These multiple moments of coming out coagulate, and shift, across sexuality and gendered subjection positions to form a quite different narrative about subjectivity than would have been solicited in my earlier research that focused primarily upon the construction of lesbian and heterosexual female identities.

Poststructural research also strives to reveal the *normalizing* effects of dominant discourses about sexuality. This analytic focus can reveal the normative effects of particular lesbian discourses. For instance, Ravel and Rail (2006, 2007) show how women’s sports in Quebec discursively produce a ‘gaie’ space which normalizes a particular formation of lesbian sexuality which excludes some Francophone sportswomen who position themselves as ‘gaie’, lesbian, bisexual or who refuse labels in different ways. Poststructural studies of sporting sexualities, fashioned in the wake of postcolonial, critical race, transnational and queer of color theorizing, also have the potential, and urgent responsibility, to reveal how the persistent deracialization of sex/gender/sexuality sustains the normalizing, and so often overpowering, effects of whiteness. For example, by interrogating the mainstream popularity of Latina professional golfer Nancy Lopez, Douglas and Jamieson (2006) showed how discourses of whiteness, class and heterosexuality coalesced in new strategies of racialization that strengthen white racial power and privilege.

Illustration – World of Normal Normality

Several people who took part in the qBody project talked about how they felt socially marginalized at school and during physical education. Below are examples of how a few people

described how they felt excluded from various regimes of normalcy, often in multiple and overlapping ways. These short excerpts provide a window into people's precarious and complex experiences of being positioned on the edges of what Kiki called the 'world of normal normality'. Scout identified herself as intersexed and a queer, gender lesbian. She also described her class as 'poor white trash' and racial identity as 'mutt, but you would suppose I was white'. In this brief excerpt, Scout recounts how her whiteness changed when, as a child growing up in California, she moved from mainly black neighborhood into a new school:

Scout: I was always the kid from a bad neighborhood or the kid from a bad family or the poor white kid, or the freaky smart kid. I was just, *I was never in the mold*, you know? Like I said earlier, I looked like the mold because I was a white girl but I didn't fit that mould because I wasn't blonde.

I went from a [black] neighborhood where I grew up in... to this new white neighborhood. I never fit in because my people [were white], weren't you know the right color, But that's where I grew up, so that was my culture right? So they stuck me in this white neighborhood and I was, like, 'Hey, where are all the black people?' and I'm not black.

So [*laughs*] at a very young age I clued in that there's two very different worlds. There's the one I grew up in and then there's this other world that I can't access. I don't understand it. It just doesn't relate to me at all.

That pretty much set me up for all of these kinds of things with school and physical activities because I never had that clique, and there was no clique for me. So if I didn't have any social clique I wasn't going to have any physical activity clique either, because it's all integrated in the same system right?

Scout attributed her deep sense of never fitting 'in to the mold' partly to her classed and racial positioning, feeling that she 'never fit in' to the black neighborhood nor could she access the culture of her white neighborhood. Scout identified herself as 'poor white trash', an identification in U.S. popular culture which, John Hartigan (1997) suggests, "maintains a portion of whites as problematically fitting into the body of whiteness" (p. 316). Scout was articulate about her sense of not fitting into mainstream white culture of her school, especially the girls' volleyball and tennis teams. She went on, in other parts of the interview, to narrate how her sex/gendered body -- she discovered later in life she was intersexed -- was also problematic, if not entirely unintelligible, within her school, family, and competitive gymnastics contexts. Part

of the analytic and political aim of critical, deconstructive poststructural research is to name, and contest, the hierarchical and constraining effects of such normalizing discourses about binary sex categories and classed whiteness that constituted Scout's embodied subjectivity outside the mold or problematic in some way. Interpreted from this political and ontological standpoint, Scout's experiences have much to reveal about the intersection between particular formations of whiteness, classed identity and assumptions about dimorphic biological sex.

Kiki talked about the impact of normative discourses in physical education, particularly what she called 'very general' heteronormative sex education discourses and also her experiences of being sexualized because she developed big breasts earlier than her friends:

Kiki: [In physical education] I developed a disdain for the normal kind of sexuality that is in normal body image. So for me, instead of growing up into heterosexuality, trying to be seductive and attract males, I was growing up more desirous of people and attracted to different shapes and different bodies and different sexes. And who knows, but perhaps the exclusion from the *world of this normal normality* and normal sexuality helped me expand my own desires as seeking out difference.

Teiresias and Wawa both identified with a range of 'othered' subjectivities. For Teiresias, identifying with 'freakishness' was a way to resist normal gender subject positions whereas Wawa described feeling close to 'fat' and 'learning disabled' students who were ostracized.

Teiresias: Some other friends were coming out as queer and the group of us were being, like, non-normatively gendered and kind of celebrating freakiness or freakishness...That ended up counteracting some of the things that came out about being negative about our bodies. I think I was still really insecure...I remember a group of us just feeling solidarity in being freaks. [laughing]

Wawa: There were other kids that were going through the same stuff as me that were considered fat or had like a learning disability. Nobody wanted to hang out with them because of it. So yeah, I always felt close to people who were ostracized, like I felt like they had more to offer, and they were just more real.

Q: Yeah. And do you remember other kids that were, you saw maybe being picked on or that you felt that they were discriminated against?

Wawa: Yeah, for sure. Like definitely the kids that were more awkward or kids that were fat, or you know, boys who were labeled like sissy or queer or you know like that kind of a thing because they weren't like aggressive enough and they weren't pushy enough and they weren't into competitive sports enough.

These brief recollections of queer identifications across a range of marginalized student subject positions – freakish genders, ostracized learning designations, fat embodiment, white trash - speak to the need for ‘lesbian studies’ research to also go beyond singular conceptions of sexuality towards non-essentializing, relational approaches. Thus, feminist poststructuralist research seeks to understand, and challenge, how sexualities are constituted with a shifting matrix of normalizing and marginalized discourses circulating within sport and physical education.

C. Postmodern Body Studies

Poststructuralism has been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to corporeal or embodied aspects of subjectivity. Several new areas of critical theorizing about the body and subjectivity have emerged in the early 2000s – areas of scholarship I collectively refer to as ‘postmodern body studies’ – which seek to redress this disembodied trend in poststructuralist social research. Postmodern body studies draw from aspects of queer theory, trans theory, postcolonial theory, crip theory and fat theory to provide multidimensional ways of thinking about sexualities as part of an embodied subjectivity. The qBody project, as one example of this approach, explores how students negotiate a matrix of normalizing body discourses within physical education in intersecting, fluid and contradictory ways. This section of the paper illustrates how such new theoretical lenses have informed the qBody project’s analysis of multiple discourses about the body.

Trans Theory

Issues about transsexual, transgender and intersex embodiment form a central concern in the emerging field of Trans Studies (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Wilchins, 2004), a field of inquiry which encompasses some sharply contrasting theoretical and political elements. Indeed, few

trans theories are seamlessly aligned, theoretically or politically, with queer theories (Alsop, Fitzsimons, Lennon & Minsky, 2002). One strand within trans theory rejects queer theory's deconstruction of sex/gender identity categories because it continues the harmful erasure of many transsexual and transitioned people's lived experience of, and narrative about, the 'realness' of their sexed identity (Prosser, 1998). In contrast, another strand of trans theorizing explores new transgender identities, communities and politics, and problematizes the very notion of living any stable, coherent gendered identity (Noble, 2006). This, in a way, builds on queer theory's deconstruction of sexual binaries (homo/hetero) and identity categories, to analyze how the prevailing, binary gender categories of male/female are insufficient for many transgender people (Halberstam, 1998). Following the call for participants who identified as sexual and gender minorities, participants in the qBody narrated their experiences in physical education from a range gender, trans and intersex identifications. Some participants, like Alan below, spoke explicitly about the shifting and complex nature of their sexed and gendered subjectivities.

Illustration – My Body Appeared

Alan identified himself as a middle-class, white, gay man at the time of the interview yet he described how, while growing up, he felt 'wrong' in his body and wished he could be a girl until, quite suddenly, his body 'appeared' and he realized he was a boy who was really feminine.

When he was seven years old, Alan remembered: "that's when I started having my gender dysphoria". He recalled being teased because of his feminine gender expression as his masculinity was "assaulted" in several contexts.

Alan: I always had a bit of a gender dysphoria when I was younger...When I was a little boy, my masculinity was really assaulted by everyone else around me. I was constantly reminded, told, chastised, belittled on my masculinity. "You act like a girl. You look like a girl. You talk like a girl. You're friends with the girls. You hang out with the girls." So I learned from a very early age, there was something inherently wrong with my body. That was strong. I didn't understand why am I not a girl. Had I been a girl, my interests, my playmates, and my lack of interest in roughhousing with other boys through sport, wouldn't have been chastised.

There would have been lots of room for me to explore what I wanted to explore, which were considered feminine, you know? It's no surprise now that I worry about my masculinity at 25.

Alan contrasted feminine activities, such as art, dolls and dressing up, with masculine activities, such as hitting a ball, gross motor skills and sports:

- Q: So you feel that being a boy that was considered feminine was a lot more challenging than had you been a girl?
- Alan: Yeah. If I was a girl, no one would tease me for playing with dolls, no one would tease me for being good in art, no one would tease me for dressing up. I used to like to dress up in girls' clothing. What gay boy didn't, right? *[laughing]* I didn't like sports. As a little boy I thought there was something about sports that was very distasteful -- it was some ball in the dirt. Like I don't want to do that! I wanted to be more indoors -- touching fabric, touching hair, having pleasant scents, and being clean.

In addition to these embodied sensations of gender, Alan's sense of gender difference was reinforced through institutional discourses of assessment in physical education:

- Alan: My report cards, "I worry that Alan isn't developing—" what's the opposite of fine motor coordination? I had great fine motor coordination. What's the opposite, the one where you hit a ball? *[laughter]* The teacher was worried about it.

For Alan, physical education and sports were spaces that required and rewarded masculine bodily movements and sensations. He had to negotiate his gender expression within a feminine/masculine gender binary which he experienced through the contrasts between pleasant/distaste, clean/dirty, indoors/outdoors and fine/gross motor skills. These gendered constructions of particular bodily sensations and movements as feminine *or* masculine led Alan to “learn from a very early age there was something inherently wrong with my body”. He described how he came to profoundly dislike his own gendered embodiment:

- Alan: I hated my body, I hated it so much. Like, why can't I be a pretty girl? Why do I have to be this ugly boy thing that's turning into a man. And it wasn't being a boy or being a man that I had a problem with... it was the social construct of what those things meant. It wasn't that I wanted to be a girl, it was the social construct of what being a girl would have allowed me to do at that time in my life.

Alan described forming positive feminine identifications with cleanliness, pleasant smells, fine motor movements and touch, hair and fabric -- things he wished to be able to feel and sense.

In contrast, he felt that mastery of strong, skilled and expansive movements, which have historically been normatively associated with hegemonic sporting masculinity, were deeply problematic because they deprived him of access to feminine activities that he so badly wanted.

Leading up to puberty Alan abjected these masculinizing gross motor skills, athletic mastery, smelliness of boys and the dirtiness of sports but later, when he was thirteen or fourteen, as his sexed embodiment altered he “started liking being a boy”.

Alan: [This boy] showed me how to masturbate. And then I started doing it myself, and then my body appeared...I started liking being a boy [laughter] ... That moment is when I started becoming aware of my body. It came from my dick and it didn't come from an imaginary vagina. I used to like imagine, fantasize, dream that I had like a vagina and breasts...I was like 'No, I have a cock.' That's what became visible -- my genitals became visible.

Alan explains how his gender identifications shifted from feminine to more masculine, from wanting to be a ‘pretty girl’ to ‘liking being a boy’. He described how his gender was formed through early fantasy identifications with his vagina and breasts and then, at puberty, more by visual identifications with his male genitals. Yet, in addition, Alan talked about how his sense of gender laminated these fantasmic and visual identifications with his sexed body onto institutionalized physical education discourses about measurement and gendered forms of motion and his gendered sensations of smell and touch.

Narratives such as Alan’s reveal the shifting nature of gender and sex subjectivities that complicate and destabilize the gender binary discourse that pervades every level of physical education. It points to the need for body studies to take trans and intersex subjectivities seriously and to tease apart issues of sexuality from issues of sex/gender in order to expose the myriad insufficiencies regarding gender within physical education. To do this, differing strands and debates within trans-feminist studies (Scott-Dixon, 2006) need to be deliberately and self-reflexively engaged in the new era of ‘lesbian studies’ in sport.

Crip Theory

Disability Studies has interrogated what gets counted as a ‘normal’ body, challenging taken-for-granted ideas about mobility, productivity and even that any body is able across different circumstances and times of life. Focusing critical analysis and politics on the construction of normative bodies, in this case ‘able’ bodies, has obvious similarities with queer theory and has recently developed into crip theory which seeks to analyze, and challenge, connections between the social construction of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness (Schildrick & Price, 2006). In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer (2006) explains how “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness which in a sense produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness” (p. 2). Below, two participants reflect on how their experiences of being queer and/or trans and also living with chronic pain changed their view about their own embodiment.

Illustration – Disabling Pain and Honoring Queerness

As a queer woman, Wawa notes the connection between dealing with chronic pain with also dealing with “feeling like excluded and ostracized and unloved in a lot of spaces.” Wawa described how having Crohn’s disease led her to reevaluate why she had been academically perfectionist and came to honor who she was on a deeper level:

Wawa: It was horrible because I was totally debilitated with pain. But, in retrospect, it gave me an opportunity to really retreat into myself and figure out the things that I really wanted to do with my life in a way that wasn’t about kind of performing, even sort of the academic standards that I had internalized as a kid. Like I think that a lot of the ways that I dealt with pain in my life and a lot of ways that I dealt with just *feeling like excluded and ostracized and unloved in a lot of spaces* [italics mine], a lot of it was about just like being a perfectionist academically...and I think when I had Crohn’s, I reevaluated a lot of that and I wanted my life to be a lot more about health and about really honoring deeper needs, to feel like I was just more on a journey of surrounding myself with people that I loved and that made more sense to me and that honored who I was on a deeper level.

Teiresias spoke about how living with chronic pain and coming out as a trans guy both changed how he relates to his body, by moderating his self-expectation about the physical activity he can manage:

Q: Did you feel like your feelings about your body change over time?

Teiresias: Coming out just as queer at one point helped me about my body because I was feeling, “If I could just be a guy, things would be figured out.” So when I came out as queer, it opened up a space for differently gendered subjectivity and so that ended up definitely changing how I felt about the body that I inhabit, I guess. But then later on, I guess I ended up coming out as trans, and all the body stuff that leads up to that ends up...More recently, stuff with chronic pain stuff makes me get quite frustrated with my body ...I feel as much as I’ve been really, really frustrated with the chronic pain issues I’m dealing with right now -- that doctors don’t have a solution for or don’t have really like any explanation for -- it’s been re-orienting as far as my approach in a lot of ways. I used to feel if I didn’t take the stairs all the time, or if I didn’t walk instead of taking the subway, or if I wasn’t as active as I could be, regardless of how I was feeling, I’d be “Oh, you’re just being lazy” to myself. And I’m just kind of reorienting that in the sense of like “Okay, well, you know what? Walking upstairs is hard right now and it’s really painful.” And so like changing how I think about and relate to my body and try to think about things differently.

In both these individual narratives living with chronic pain interpenetrates Wawa and Teiresias’ sense of being queer and trans. These inseparable experiences of marginalization, both in physical education and more general physical activity cultures, led each person to contest and transform normative able-bodied discourses. Wawa re-examined her own ‘academic perfectionism’ which was constituted by wider meritocratic, productivity discourses in education. As an adult, Teiresias has been involved in “trying to do some cross-fertilization within disability communities about queer stuff, and disability stuff with queer communities”. Thus, both Wawa and Teiresias’ narratives foreground and, to an extent deconstruct, the ways able-bodiedness is normalized through taken-for-granted physical education discourses about health, fitness, productivity and ability.

Fat Theory

Fat theory, rooted in second wave fat liberation and feminist movements, is now burgeoning into academic field of fat studies that is, to varying degrees, influenced by queer and

psychoanalytic theory (Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2001). There is a growing amount of critical research into fat phobia and the harmful effects of ‘obesity’ discourses in sport and physical education, evidenced by a recent special issue about the social construction of fat in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. Deborah McPhail from York University, Toronto, who specializes in feminist fat studies, conducted a detailed analysis with me into ways that participants in the qBody project negotiated fat phobic discourses in physical education (Sykes & McPhail, 2007). Part of our analysis is summarized below to highlight how individual’s responses to phobic discourses about obesity and their fat subjectivities are necessarily inter-penetrated by gender and sexual subjectivities.

Illustration - Diversity of Shapes vs. Fascist Standards

Several participants who self-identified as fat or overweight at some point in their lives, talked about how they experienced their fat subjectivity in relation to multiple sex/gender identities. Johnathon, who self-identified as straight, suggested that “men can have certain amounts of baggage in a kind of simplistic sense and not be viewed as being fat or whatever”. This point is similar to Susan Bordo’s (2003) insight that men can *have* fat without *being* fat whereas women cannot. In some gay male communities, however, it is *more* difficult for gay men to have fat. Jean-Paul explained:

Q: We’ve had lots of conversations about the fascist body standards of Church Street.
 Jean-Paul: Well, I think there is increasingly a defined body type that is very muscular and lean and requires one to spend a great deal of time working at the gym... If you don’t fit into this category, then you’re not sexually desirable. You need beauty and muscularity and a certain image is very much celebrated...People are quick to marginalize you. You just see yourself as much more peripheral.

This type of fat phobia in some gay men’s communities appears to contrast with higher levels of tolerance for fat bodies in queer women’s communities. Sammy-Jo, who described

herself as a queer dyke, felt “there is more room as a queer woman to fit a little outside the norm with my body”. This point was reinforced by Wawa:

Wawa: I think being around more queer spaces and queer women transformed that bullshit male patriarchal standard of what I was supposed to be into me as, kind of, a beautiful, sexy, hairy, you know, gorgeous woman. Just in my own right -- without any kind of standards of what that’s supposed to be. I think it unleashed sexiness in a different way too. It made sexuality so much more profound, more full and ripe with tastes and smells. Also, the incredible diversity of shapes that were tantalizing and real and whole, instead of performed and plastic and bullshit.

Karen, who self-identified as ‘absolutely fat’ and ‘queer with a complicated gender’, recalled changing her personal space in relation to becoming butch:

Karen: Now, exploring more of my butchness, my stereotypical masculine traits have helped me become more comfortable with my size because guys are allowed to take up space, right, but women are not supposed to.

Karen’s increasingly butch gender identity altered the amount of space she felt comfortable occupying. She came to resist anti-fat discourse by redefining her gender sense of personal space, and by extension, to revalue her fat subjectivities in relation to shame and abjection. This process of resisting or deconstructing fat phobic discourses was described by Le’a Kent (2001) as replacing “the narrative of abjection...by a narrative of attack” (p. 142).

In/Conclusion

The qBody project seeks to explore how students form not only lesbian subjectivities but how these are contingent on a matrix of discourses about the body produced through the institutionalized body discourses of physical education. So often people interviewed for the project talked about their sexualities in intricate, multi-layered and shifting ways that could not be neatly isolated from their embodied sense of body size, physical capabilities and social positioning in terms of gender, queerness, whiteness and racialization. Such personal narrations convey the need for ‘lesbian’ studies in sport to move away from a singular focus on sexuality

toward an approach that can critically analyze a matrix of normalizing and marginalized discourses about embodiment that circulate within sport and physical education.

Normative, anxious and harmful discourses about bodies are tenacious, flexible and increasingly generated through the neoliberal governmentality of physical education discourses that legitimate sexual regulation, healthism, and able-bodied productivity. In the face of these meager yet pervasive discourses, on a political level it is crucial to continually form alliances between marginalized communities in order to create livable and pleasurable spaces within schools, physical education programs and sporting contexts. This means seeking what Chantal Mouffe (2006) called nodes of articulation at theoretical and ethnographic levels when conceptualizing critical approaches to research that:

constantly reject any kind of essentialism – either of the totality or of the elements – and affirms that neither the totality or the fragments possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation (p. 7).

Towards this end, this paper illustrated how three areas of critical thought about the body – trans theory, crip theory and fat theory – informed the conceptualization and interpretation of one particular research project about physical education. This merely illustrates one instance, rather than provides a template for, critical postmodern body studies into sport and physical education.

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