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Muscle as Method

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Muscle Works: Physical Culture and the Performance of Masculinity

By Broderick D. V. Chow. 248 pp. Illustrated.

Northwestern University Press, 2024. \$38.00 paperback.

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“I can squat 150 kg, deadlift 180, bench 100, snatch 90, and clean and jerk 105. I have a 43-inch chest and 16-inch biceps and 24-inch quads...” (p. 3). Broderick Chow places his body on the line in his monograph *Muscle Works: Physical Culture and the Performance of Masculinity*. Situated at the intersection of performance, gender studies, and physical culture, *Muscle Works* demonstrates the impact of theatricality on Western conceptions of masculinity and intervenes in established physical culture scholarship that equates practices of masculine fitness with ideologies of eugenics, whiteness, colonialism, and nationalism. *Muscle Works* additionally serves as a thoughtful guidebook for an archival practice that attends to embodiment, ephemerality, and absence. For while physical culture is typically associated with white, heterosexual masculinity, Chow applies his embodied knowledge as a queer, Chinese Filipino Olympic weightlifter to anchor a reparative orientation. Chow’s practices of space-claiming animate his scholarship, as do stories of historical strongmen’s feats of strength and the contemporary peculiarity of CrossFit and social media fitness trends.

Muscle Works presents a counter-genealogy, revealing how physical culture can denaturalize hegemonic masculine scripts and create the possibility for agency, self-

representation, and resistance. Augmenting the Butlerian notion of gender performativity, the monograph proposes that masculinity should also be thought of as *theatrical*, or “a conscious, intentional act to convince, impress, or even ‘wow’ an audience” (p. 16). Through this lens, Chow reveals the influence of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Anglo-American theatrical conventions on both historical and contemporary Western masculine fitness culture. Chow argues that physical culture is important to examine because the athletic, muscled male body is a stand-in for, and materialization of, Western masculinity itself. At the same time, Chow demonstrates ways physical culture creates openings and fissures for reworking, recuperating, or refashioning a sense of self within scripted cultural frameworks for masculinity.

As such, *Muscle Works* is both scholarly and intimate. Each chapter is framed by personal vignettes that shape Chow’s engagement with an incomplete, ephemeral, or static archive. For example, he uses his own gym selfies to explore how the bodybuilding pose belies a dynamism that creates opportunity for agency and self-enactment, and while researching Japanese American bodybuilder Tommy Kono, Chow even incorporates the athlete’s notes into his own workout practices. This allowed Chow to experience Kono’s ideas through his body, paying both intellectual and embodied homage to a personally meaningful archival encounter. The vignettes root a predominantly historical study in lived experience, explore various logics present within physical culture, and anchor the counter-genealogical reparative reading Chow simultaneously theorizes and embodies.

The monograph offers several theoretical frameworks that may be useful to scholars of performance or gender. In his first chapter, Chow reinterprets the muscular body as “theatrical” to challenge the conception of an ahistorical, naturalized masculinity. While physical culture is theorized as emblematic of individualism, empire, and even authoritarian politics, “theatricality”

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ruptures these colonial meanings. Understanding bodybuilding as “theatrical” illuminates the practice’s inherent contradictions, “such as...the fact that it is a model of both a normative ideal and a ‘freaky’ extreme, and most importantly, the fact that it communicates a high-art ‘classical’ ideal in the low art of theater, which is shabby and material and laborious” (p. 29). These same contradictions are openings for the built body to signify meanings outside of naturalized heteronormative masculinity and allow for the possibility for self-fashioning, eroticism, and pleasure.

Later, the text examines “working out,” both the act of exercising and an embodied way to process and make sense of anxiety around economic and social changes. This framework provides accounts for affective and kinesthetic experiences that often go unobserved in bodybuilding. Building on this approach, chapter four examines “progressive overload,” interrogating which bodies are permitted to fail, then to recover (p. 101). This inquiry reveals how whiteness is imagined as inherently recuperable, allowing the white male subject to transcend the limits of his flesh and restage anxieties around his precarious economic situation.

The penultimate chapter, “Mirror: Racial Impressibility and the Built Asian Male Body,” traces forms of resistance within physical culture that are not immediately visible. This section also complicates the notion of “theatricality” by arguing that its unequal distribution is a tactic of gendered racism. It offers Chow’s most personal reparative reading and clearly articulates how minoritarian performance operates. I was particularly drawn to the discussion of Tommy Kono’s incarceration in a Japanese internment camp. The author reads Kono’s muscle growth as a form of embodied, dynamic resistance to carcerality and a means of entering a dialectic with dominant white culture. The book concludes with a utopian reading of a community of bodybuilders, framing how physical culture allows for alternative forms of social relations and intimacies.

Chow ends the chapter with a personal narrative that reminds us of his investment in this project: “...the gym is, and will be, a place to meet ourselves, and ask who we want to be” (p. 186).

I feel a particular resonance between Chow’s work and my own, as I both research and participate in an amateur wrestling league for transgender men and transmasculine people. Chow addresses transgender bodybuilding in his chapter on bodily transformation (p. 69). This section engages with cases of historical bodybuilders and contemporary transmasculine artists and athletes, troubling notions of linear transformation and suggesting that “reps” allow for the body to be continually remade. *Muscle Works* has given me language to make sense of my experience of gender euphoria during my first public wrestling match, despite having lost by a pin. I find it reductive to question why, as a transmasculine person, I felt euphoria while doing a masculine-coded sport. Chow’s work leads me to understand that transmasculine wrestling is not assimilation into or imitation of normative cis-masculinity. Instead, it is a minoritarian performance that enacts liberation. Wrestling events create space to “work out,” display, and affectively experience a distinctly transgender masculinity.

Muscle Works is an exciting and rigorous contribution to any field that engages with embodied practice, such as performance, gender studies, theater, and dance studies; it reminds us that the work of gender is at the level of the flesh, in how the body labors, performs, moves, fails, and grows. The book additionally serves as a methodological template for how lived experience, embodied knowledge, and positionality can guide inquiry and provides guidance around the archival challenges of studying ephemeral or bodily practices. Ultimately, *Muscle Works* encourages researchers to understand the body’s contradictions, instability, and dynamism not as a methodological stumbling block or a theoretical challenge needing resolution, but as a framework for generative and expansive inquiry.

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AUTHOR BIO

EVA MARIE GONZALEZ RUSKIEWICZ is a Latine transmasculine PhD candidate at University of California, San Diego's Department of Communication and Critical Gender Studies. Their work examines transgender and queer performances staged during moments of community crisis, documenting practices of care, teaching, and learning. They are also a musician, songwriter, dancer, and performance artist. Prior to graduate school, Eva taught elementary school music, and they remain a committed and passionate educator to this day.