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## **Chapter 18 Afterword**

### **Simone Fullagar**

Each of the chapters in this book have offered a thought provoking exploration of the gender assumptions that shape sporting bodies, capacities and relations of inclusion/exclusion. Importantly, the collection as a whole has made visible women's influence on contesting and transforming action sport as a 'generative' cultural practice (Ahmed, 2004, p.155), while historical omissions have also been given critical attention. In this closing chapter I reflect upon how the various action sport feminisms in this collection articulate a set of concerns about embodied experience, new media representations and contested notions of 'empowerment' within the context of contemporary cultural and feminist debates.

While the low participation rates of women and girls in traditional sports is often cited as problematic in a range of sport policies (Australian Sports Commission, 2015; Department of Media, Culture & Sport, 2015), there is increasing recognition of the appeal that action sports and physical cultures have had for women and girls in recent years. Action sports offer different challenges, an ethos of embodied experimentation and creative mobility that plays out through individual-collective and human-nonhuman relations (technology, nature, urban spaces). Learning to skateboard, roller skate, ride horses, BMX and surf as a girl in 1970s Australia meant taking embodied risks and mastering moves that produced an expansive corporeal confidence – a freedom in mobility that was always bound up with the dangers of transgressing masculine sportscapes. With

few other women participants there were never simply waves for the taking or half pipes to be shared, these action zones had to be contested, challenged and reconfigured as spaces for women to become. Spat on, sworn at, dropped in on, shut out, laughed at and reprimanded for being too risky (by parents, teachers or other girls) or not risky enough (by male peers). Action sports generated embodied affects of pleasure, fear and shame that, for girls like me, involved multiple negotiations of shifting gender power relations.

We have seen these issues resonating through the range of chapters in this collection as authors contextualised women's entry into particular action sports spaces with desires to be afforded the same respect as men, to be valued as skilful participants or competitors, and also to change the culture or rules that were largely created for 'universal' man (Braidotti, 2013). Regardless of their intentions (feminist or not), women's embodied presence in action sports is 'disruptive' of the gender order as it invokes sexual difference and unearths the powerful effects of gendered dualisms on commonsense world views and sport knowledge. While structural inequalities still persist and differ markedly between women, it has become vitally important to understand how gendered power relations work to sustain and transform normalising practices and moral codes about what women can and cannot do, should or should not do. When situated within the broader context of women's work (paid and unpaid), family, leisure, health and everyday lives, action sports that are played or watched make gendered norms visible well beyond the subcultural context.

I vividly remember when Pam Burrige began to win world surfing championships and the Australian feminist film *Puberty Blues* was released, there was a sea of unease about the universalised 'beach babe' changing as women began entering the water to claim their waves (Wheaton, 2003 and chapters by Olive et al, Roy, Nemani & Thorpe, lisahunter). Greater visibility brings with it greater opportunities to transform and disrupt the gender order (as it intersects with race, sexuality, class, disAbility, age) in multiple ways (and with it the risk of inciting a range of overt and covert sexist responses, and even violence). Although greater visibility of women's action sport is vitality important, we have also seen how power relations move in complex ways with dominant notions of femininity reasserted for the purpose of profit maximisation or masculine privilege asserted in the name of winning (see Crocket's chapter). To paraphrase Lauren Berlant (2011, p.3), the promise of freedom for women through action sports is also bound up in a form of 'cruel optimism'. The more action sports become part of a mainstream fantasy of living 'the good life' (optimising one's agentic selfhood) the greater the inequality between those who can and cannot engage, between the flourishing self and the one who fails (to be happy, healthy, thin, desirable, successful etc) within the global conditions of advanced liberalism.

The entanglement of women's action sports in complex global and local sport 'industries' with masculine histories mean that they can never simply be conceptualised as a straightforward site of empowerment. On the one hand action sport has afforded women great 'success' and visibility in relation to the dominance of masculine bodies and capacities. We now have highly paid

professional athletes, such as American professional surfer and model Alana Blanchard, whose value is created through the global flows of feminised sport commodities. Such normalised aesthetic and athletic bodies are privileged in terms of whiteness, heteronormativity and able-bodied capacities – action sports in this context are far removed from resistant, radical and non-normative histories and different cultural contexts. Together the chapters in this collection articulate a counter narrative about action sport that makes visible the multiplicity of experiences that characterise different gendered identities and embodied performances. Speaking through the interconnections of the local and global, physical and digital cultures, normative subjectivities and otherness, the contradictory conditions of possibility for women are evident in nuanced accounts of the challenges of the ‘politics’ inherent in the ‘play’ of action sports.

Even with the rise of more recent sport cultures that have been created by women (roller derby) the question of gendered power relations is ever present with respect to differences between women (and in relation to negotiations over transgender participants)(see Pavlidis and Connor’s chapter). Yet, unlike other mixed-gender sports documented in this book (surfing, skating, Frisbee, rock climbing, martial arts, parkour, snowboarding, mountain biking), derby offers a sportspace where men began to participate on terms that were created by women. Other sports like parkour also offer the promise of a more inclusive aesthetic that values embodied forms of expression and movement that contest the dominant masculine sport logic of ‘higher, faster, longer’ (see Wheaton’s chapter). Action sport feminisms offer a unique contribution to broader feminist debates because they continually invoke the question of becoming (Braidotti,

2013) *as a corporeal concern* - what can the female body do? And in the spirit of greater reflexivity about the changing gendered ideas of womanhood and girlhood (as cis, non-conforming or trans gender) how are differences (race, class, disAbility, age, sexuality, religion) between women performed through action sports?

Action sports push the gendered boundaries of how we understand the changing material and discursive contexts that open up/close down possibilities for everyday, extreme and elite forms of participation. What is particularly important for the growing field of inquiry is the ability to move between registers of meaning to articulate individual and collective gendered experiences as social, political, economic, biological, geographic formations. Action sport feminisms have tended to privilege active embodiment as inherently agentic and historically defined against the on-going cultural positioning of women as biologically inferior (weaker, risk adverse, less masterful). This positioning has been important in creating a discursive space for feminist articulations (images, texts, experiences) about how women can participate and compete on their own terms and thus questioning the binary logic that underpins the normalised gender order of sport. Broader feminist debates have also sought to question more deeply the contradictions of 'empowerment' that play out in the individualised framing of women's and girl's choice, self-control and entrepreneurial success that are bound up with new media practices and post-feminist ideals of autonomous selfhood (McRobbie, 2007; Harris & Dobson, 2015; Keller 2016).

Dobson & Harris (2015) offer an analysis of the social conditions that shape contemporary girlhood in the post-feminist/post-girl power era that has particular resonance for the emergence of action sport feminisms. They argue that there has been a shift within advanced liberalism from the assumption that girls are desiring or demanding empowerment to an assumption that *girls are already empowered* and hence will perform as self-actualising subjects in media, consumption and education. In this sense girls (typically white and middle class) are positioned within popular culture as agentic subjects speaking up, voicing their opinions, expressing their bodies and sexual identities and actively resisting through blogs, tweets and related feminist social media actions (in the broader context of feminist activism such as the HeforShe campaign and Everyday Sexism website).

Dobson and Harris' (2015) critique of how agency is assumed within much of the youth studies literature is also relevant to action sports in terms of how thinking can become stuck within the parameters of structural determinism or voluntarist notions of individual freedom. The empowering aspects of action sport have been conventionally understood in terms of how women and girls enact and resist gendered identities that are socially prescribed. Often there is an assumption within feminist accounts of sport that a voluntaristic subject acts on or in the world as a rational, unified self – rather than being constituted through those actions and experiencing uncertainty, multiplicity and a contingent sense of agency. Dobson and Harris (2015) argue that the assumption of agentic selfhood leaves little room for women to articulate their experiences of victimization, exclusion and suffering that are produced within patriarchal

power relations – to be positioned as a victim of violence, harassment or sexism is to have failed to be an empowered, entrepreneurial self in control of one's life. Contributors to this collection have wrestled with these tensions around gendered agency and importantly have mapped out the cultural conditions of possibility that produce, normalise and disrupt the gendered performance of an 'action sport self'. Many feminists (Atebcui et al; Olstead et al; Spowart & Burrows) have usefully drawn upon Foucauldian ideas that recast questions of agency through a focus on the process of subjectification where 'agency is produced in the course of practices under a whole variety of . . . relations of force. Our own "agency" is then resultant of the ontology we have folded into ourselves in the course of our history and our practices' (Rose, 1996:189). Arguing against the desire to universalize the empowering benefits of action sport for women and girls, Thorpe & Chawansky (along with lisahunter; Nemani and Thorpe; Wheaton) make the strong case in their chapter for 'consideration of the broader forms of religious, cultural, national, and international power relations operating on and through girls and women's bodies, or local girls and women's own culturally-specific forms of agency and resilience'.

Others have developed their analysis through a Deleuzian trajectory that explores the ways in which power works through affects that are produced in the flows of everyday sport relations and practices (chapters by Roy; Pavlidis and Connor). In relation to the broader posthumanist turn in cultural and feminist theory, the exploration of sport technologies and new media opens the door to further consideration of how subjectivities are produced in relation to objects and non-human nature (chapters by Bicknell on bikes; McKay on feminist



skate blogs; Olive et al on surfing). While few contributors draw explicitly on critical posthumanist or 'new' materialist feminist perspectives there are considerable overlaps and shared concerns about how bodies matter, the entanglement of subjectivity in a host of human/non-human relations and the affective workings of power that are significant in thinking ahead about the nexus of action-sport-feminism (see Braidotti, 2013; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015).

One very promising area of inquiry that has political relevance for the social change agenda of action sports is the exploration of human-digital data assemblages from The Internet of Things, social media networks that enable collective women's visibility through to wearable technologies. Lupton (2016, p.3) writes about how new ontologies emphasize the entanglement with lively data 'that are configured by human users' interactions with digital technologies are different versions of people's identities and bodies that have material effects on their ways of living and conceptualizing themselves'. Action sport feminisms are now very much entangled digital and physical cultures where technology is inseparable from the experience in many ways. As Wheaton comments in her chapter 'parkour participant/film-maker/researcher Julie Angel started a blog *See and Do* that promotes 'images of women who are doing things they love that happen to involve facing fears, being brave, getting strong and taking risks.' The multiple stories, images, counter narratives and accounts of diverse cultural contexts conjure a feminist politics of imagination that connects diverse publics including participants, activists, academics and organisations (See chapters by Wheaton, Thorpe & Chawansky, and McKay for example)(Latimer & Skeggs, 2011). Through digital engagement women effectively produce action sports as sites of knowledge and affiliation in ways that can open up new possibilities for

shaping sport practices, rules and engagements beyond (see Pavlidis & Connor's chapter on roller derby leagues) (Dobson, 2015; Thorpe, 2016).

In terms of these and other future research directions there is a need to continue to expand the analysis of gendered experiences of action sports beyond white, middle class, able bodies, young cis-women to consider who is not visible and why, as well as explore the cultural logics that shape different practices and identities. As Sydnor argues in the final chapter of the collection, pedagogic spaces and practices provide a key cultural site for creating reflexive and creative action sport feminisms that put the body and critique into play simultaneously. Also in related fields, such as education, colleagues are engaged in challenging stereotypes of British Muslim femininity through transformative dance and film projects, 'building on a feminist investment in the agency of materiality, we think through the problem of the body as a site of learning, raising questions about how diverse bodies might fit in those environments that have traditionally suspended the body altogether, such as the university' (Hickey-Moody et al, 2016, p. 214). In thinking about the multiplicity of feminist perspectives and forms of activism (inadequately captured by the notion of a third wave) that inform the changing landscape of action sports MacCormack's (2009, p.92) insights emphasize the value of pursuing a 'fleshy politics' that is 'not which position is right or more important, and which positions are most alike and therefore most capable of effectuating change, but which becoming intensities align us with certain groups for tactical events of thought that can activate change'.

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