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Sex in the Spinning: Stationary Cycling and the Patrolling of Difference

This article was triggered by a Sunday morning conversation on 5 March 2006, while pedalling a recumbent stationary bicycle. I always spend an hour in a gentle warm-up before the “Spinning” class commences in the studio. While the Sunday morning cycling class commences at a civilized 9am, the regulars from the 6am weekday classes also dominate the early morning weekend classes. The same core group of seventeen participants attend all these sessions, fourteen women and three men. One of these women sat on an adjacent cycle during my warm-up phase. She smiled, and asked how I was. I outpadded the i-Pod from my ears and we began talking. Actually, I listened as she told me about her consumption of food. She had recently been swept up in a diet that supposedly was safe because it was verified by a doctor. It involved eating more red meat than a bloodhound and a complete ban on bread, pasta, rice and carbohydrates. She was losing weight, but her face had settled into the disturbing beige favoured by interior designers on makeover programmes. It was her words, rather than her skin, that were most disturbing. Jodie¹ informed me that for the first time in her life, she had “worked out” dieting and what had been going “wrong” for her all these years. Over the gentle hum of the whizzing wheel, she said, “you know, Tara, carrots are in all diets, right? But now I’ve worked it out. If I eat carrots, I put weight on. If I eat cream, I won’t. I’m thirty-four, and it’s taken me all these years to get this sorted out.” When I realised that she was not joking, I fumbled an answer about

the effectiveness of her weight loss results. There was no point of discussion. She had an evangelical belief in the diet powers of meat and cream.

When the time came to leave the leisurely recumbent for the stress and strain of the spinning class, Jodie told me that she would have to miss today because the diet meant she had no energy, but would attend the 6am class the following day. I wished her a happy Sunday and just before mounting the bike, I took out a notebook to scrawl the details of our biking encounter. This was the start of six weeks of observing these early morning spinning sessions, interrupted only by the Easter break, where no classes were held. Before moving to the United Kingdom, I was part of this early morning group, attending cycling classes six days a week, with the only break for the Tuesday morning “Super Drill” session that only three of the women and none of the men attended. I used to attend the Drill until Peter threw an eight-pound medicine ball at me which, instead of catching with my hands, landed with a thud on my left breast. While some women may enjoy this Boadicea effect, the tear of chest muscles meant, from that day forward, that Tuesday mornings would be spent walking rather than throwing.

This ethnographic study is located in an elite, lifestyle gym, with high membership fees that must be paid annually, and in advance. The site features two pools, a spa, a sauna, six tennis courts, five squash courts, two badminton courts, a large and well stocked gym, a fitness studio where classes such as step, pump, yoga, seniors and pilates classes are held, and the spinning studio, filled with thirty-six stationary cycles. Yet my study is not only located in this particular place but is compressed into a specific time, the 6am weekday classes, the 8am Saturday class and the 9am Sunday session. The regulars arrive when the gym opens, at 5:30am on weekdays and 7am at weekends.

Some warm up in the cycle studio. Others go to the gym for a period on the rower, treadmill or stepper. By the time a non-regular arrives at the “normal” preparation time for a class, perhaps five or ten minutes before the scheduled start, they walk into an already filled room. The intimidation is obvious, along with the complex set-up of the bicycles’ handlebars and seat.



In most cases, these occasional exercisers do not return after their initial attendance. This spatial exclusion is also reinforced through fitness and motor skills. Because most of the participants complete six spinning sessions a week, with many training before and after the class as well, there is an incredibly high level of endurance exhibited in the classes. The instructor is a personal trainer who leads sixteen spinning classes a week throughout Perth in Western Australia, alongside fitball and weights classes. His cycle is marked as distinct through colour and its raised positioning at the front of the class.



Sam's speciality is interval training, concluding with two ninety-second sprints where he dismounts from his own cycle and patrols the class, standing in front of participants barking "encouragement" while he twists the resistance knob of the spinners. His control over the environment is also confirmed through the closeness of the stereo and fan to his cycle. He manages the physical and sonic environment. There is no option but to be fit and manage this routine, to become fit quickly, or to leave the class.² My desire is not only to investigate the architecture of the cycling suite, and how power and community are configured in this space, but how structures of belonging and exclusion are constructed and perpetuated.

Cycling was not an accidental choice for this study. The domination of women in this class is also no mistake. Patricia Vertinsky confirmed that,

The sport that was to exert the greatest influence on women's physical emancipation... was bicycling—an activity introduced from England in the 1870s that became enormously popular in the late 1880s and early 1890s. For women, bicycling offered the potential for physical mobility and the benefits of healthy, active recreation, as well as a new sense of liberty from restrictive dress and chaperonage.³

There is intellectual value in repositioning Vertinsky's theory about cycling within the 2000s, in a post-work, post-Fordist environment. The mobility has gone. Stationary cycles replace the outdoor road bikes. Similarly, the restrictions of dress and corsetry, which enacted a discipline imposed from outside the body, have been replaced by a corset of muscle and a cult of thinness, a discipline imposed from within.



Women no longer require a chaperone as self-surveillance of our bodies in a room of mirrors completes the task with even greater ruthlessness. Yet through these changes, my analysis confirms Vertinsky's argument that middle-class women gain most from sporting activity.⁴

Setting up the bike

At the commencement of any class, a five minute period is required to adjust the stationary bicycle to the specific height and flexibility of the participant. Not surprisingly, some attention is also required to the "set up" of this cycling study. While Vertinsky's research demonstrated a dense deployment of historiographical interpretations and archival sources, the contemporary application of her argument in this current analysis uses unobtrusive research methods. No interviews were conducted, but participant observation was deployed. Using Helen Thomas's and Nicola Miller's study of ballroom dancing in the south-east of London as a model, I observed the behaviour, conversations and appearance of participants and also took part in the classes.⁵ Like Thomas and Miller, I informed the club manager of my study, and he granted me permission to take and reproduce the photographs deployed in this observation. Photographs are silent sources which allow the speed of daily conversations and power relationships to be reviewed later in a way that permits the spatial context to be assessed. The fitness instructor for these early morning sessions was also informed of my study. The other participants were not.

While inspired by Thomas and Miller's study, there are particular concerns to be addressed in participation observation methods. Upon reading Katherine Frank's observation of strip-club customers,⁶ where she worked as a stripper in five establishments and then interviewed "clients," my gentle concerns about the social positioning of the researcher became more urgent. The reticence with which the men approached Frank outside the clubs, and her disturbing location as both an academic as a dancer, served to muddy the determination of class differences between patrons and dancers.⁷ The discomfort of the "punters" in seeing a stripper as a researcher was the remarkable intervention and innovation in this article. But Frank's complex

positioning and observations provide a warning beacon to researchers, to think carefully about the setting of a scholar in any study.

Frank's article confirmed that the researcher's status is an important variable in this study.⁸ While conducting the observation, I was a "regular," one of the seventeen people who rarely, if ever, missed an early morning class. I had been part of this gym since it opened in August 2003. I attended the first spin class, at 6am on the first Monday of the gym's opening. It would have been very difficult to conduct this study if I was not in this group, as conversations stop when non-regulars enter the spinning space. Therefore not only was I part of this community, but I was implicated in the power relationships, inequalities and exclusions that take place. It was known by the participants that I am a university teacher who writes books. While initially creating wariness from other women, caused as much by my "odd" employment as my lack of children, my "use" over the years increased. I was often treated like the Professor from *Gilligan's Island*, being asked to comment on a range of seemingly disparate issues, such as helping with school selection for children, assisting the women with job interviews or a course, career advice, or suggesting the best place to buy a book. While aware of this power differential, and to avoid some of the concerns raised within Frank's study, interviews were not undertaken. However it is important to note that—for the other participants in the class as much as for this paper—I was inside this cycling community, but outside "normal" femininity because of my employment, education level and childless status. This "insider/outsider" status becomes relevant and important through the course of this study.

Notes from the sessions were assembled after each morning's classes. Obviously, being on a cycle precludes "at the moment" observations. Photographs were taken on the morning of the last observation. The goal was to follow the directives of Allan Kellehear's *The unobtrusive researcher*.⁹ The value of his methods is that he demonstrates that—without the rush to interviews or surveys—much valuable research material can be revealed by looking and listening carefully to the social world. This observation, of behaviour, dress, architecture, spaces, music, food and drink, can not only provide subtle evidence, but can be the trigger for complex

interpretations. Raymond Lee termed these methods and strategies as “a call to social researchers to think creatively about the sources and use of their data.”¹⁰ The goal is to use the observation to develop a theory, rather than commence with an idea or premise to test. The weakness of such methods and strategies is that they are inferentially weak. A confirmation of causal relationships is difficult because of the prevalence of uncontrolled—and uncontrollable—social variables in the observed environment.

Breaking the chain

The period of observation was between March 6 and April 26, 2006. This was a significant period for the spinning community, where a “threat” emerged to the assumed easiness of the women in the group. It was also an unexpected intervention in terms of the research project. On the first Monday of the study, a group of seven men arrived in the cycling studio at 5:30am. Only one of them—Eddie—had intermittently attended classes before this time. His behaviour was known to the women. He always chose the available bike closest to the mirrors, and spent the class looking in the mirror (at himself). The women talked about him before and after the classes, and rolled their eyes when he glanced at his reflection through the session. He continued this behaviour as he and his six friends became “regulars” through the period of the observation. They also disrupted the positioning of the women in the class. In most aerobics classes, there are informal spots where participants regularly stand, or position their steps or fitballs. Cycling classes are no exception. Particular bikes are favoured and it is rare for someone to move.

The problem was that the seven men occupied the first row of bikes. There were only two women—myself and Fiona—on the second row. The overwhelming majority of the class—who were women—were suddenly pushed to the tightly packed back row. In the week after this positioning stabilized, the women started to complain about the men’s behaviour in the period between arriving and setting up their bikes at 5:30am and the commencement of the class at



6am. The men were outside the room on the gym equipment during this time. The moment they were gone, the women started their commentary. Suddenly the class had split. The men did not speak to the women. The women did not speak to the men. The three men who had been part of the community before the “intruders” arrival were included in the conversation and became “honorary women” through the process. These men also complained about the newcomers’ “bonding” and aloofness. On Monday March 13, this standoff over “bonding” became more insidious, damaging and worrying. Eddie left the class before the cool down. As he passed from his position in the front row next to the mirror, through the second row of men, Phil gave him a playful pat on the rear. The next morning’s class—the Thursday session when the “intruders” were in the gym and the class was again dominated by the “original” regulars—the women were buzzing about the pat. The consensus was that the men were “gay” which “explained” why they were not talking to the women in the class.

I certainly was not expecting this change through the observation period. There had been no such rupture in the preceding three years. My original intention was to describe how a community of cyclists was formed by women who—socially and economically—share a great deal. All are white, all—except Fiona and I—have children.¹¹ All are married. The women themselves are positioned in a tight age group. While Fiona is the youngest at twenty-five, the

rest are aged between thirty and forty. The median age is thirty-five. Their primary topics of discussion are family and food. While all are in paid work, at least part-time, it is rarely discussed. A certain level of affluence can be assumed because of the high membership cost. Therefore, when these women “explained” the men’s behaviour by aligning gayness and misogyny, creating a blistering homophobia, I was stunned at the speed with which judgments and prejudice emerged. By the end of the observation period, the women’s laughter in response to the men’s behaviour started to become uncomfortable.¹² It became clear that six of the men—at least—were not gay, or at least closeted.¹³ Once they realised the women’s assumptions, they started to discuss their wives and children loudly before the class. They chatted to Fiona about the set-up of the bikes. We became “the girls,” and “you ladies.” But Eddie, who was not married, started to be the object of ridicule for the men as well. On the final morning of the observation, Eddie was pushed back to the third row, away from the other men. The men who dominated the front row were at the most aggressive I had seen them through the period, willing each other through the class with statements like “come on, Darren,” and “speed up, you bastard.” Eddie was completely isolated, only looking at his reflection for company. The other men, when faced with the “threat” of gayness, dumped and isolated their friend, the person who brought them to the gym.

The community of cyclists—men and women—had been unified once more in patrolling the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity. The men in the class began performing the ideology of masculinity to excess, and the married, heterosexual women evaluated their behaviour, looking for any slip in the performance that may confirm homosexuality. Cycling became the vehicle for this ideological warfare, not the cause or the outcome. Allen Warren confirmed the historical trajectory of the men’s behaviour in sport through the late 1900s and early twentieth century:

Athletic prowess was seen as developing a proper “manliness” in the young men, a bundle of qualities which channelled the physical aspects of his masculinity in acceptable ways, at the same time instilling a complementary set of values whereby his views of women could be idealized and controlled.¹⁴

Although these men were in their thirties, their physical competitiveness on a stationary bike—while appearing tautological—was confirmed through verbal “encouragements.” At the point that the social system of the spinning class—dominated by heterosexual women and compliant, often silent, supportive and outnumbered heterosexual men—was ruptured by “bonded” men, the social order was reconstituted through a narrow enforcement of “normal masculinity,” a project in which both heterosexual men and women are invested.

As an observer, it was probably the most disturbing six weeks of participant observation that I have enacted through my research career. The easy confluence of homosexuality and misogyny remained the disturbing and upsetting “event” of the period. My status as a married woman, wearing a wedding ring, and intentionally not intervening because it would corrupt the study, has left me feeling disturbed and implicated in the homophobia. While all research presents unexpected results, the transformation of this exercise space within six weeks was startling. In acknowledging the unexpected “event” that emerged through the observation, the next section of this study contextualizes this rigid demarcation of the masculine and feminine in and on the bicycle.

Wheel Women

The bicycle holds an odd and ambivalent place in the socialization of children.¹⁵ “It’s like riding a bicycle,” has become a cliché to mean that once a skill is learnt, it is never forgotten. What this statement suggests is that knowledge of the bicycle is pervasive through childhood and adult life. It is a means of transportation, and also a metaphor of freedom for disempowered groups.¹⁶ Yet in the early 1880s, the “high wheeler” bicycle—which was also known the boneshaker—was unstable and dangerous. In 1886, the “safety bicycle” emerged, with two wheels filled with air and of equal size. This innovation was important. As Richard Harmond suggested, “the emergence of a safe and, at the same time, light and comfortable machine did much to overcome popular suspicion of the wheel.”¹⁷ For children, a bicycle allows them to move through space independent of the family car and the watchful eye of their parents. For the working class and

women in the late nineteenth century, the bicycle held a similar function in facilitating freedom.¹⁸ Katherine Murtha tracked this influence:

The “Gay 1890s” was made all the more colourful by the presence of the bicycle. Social historians allege that the bicycle had a great “levelling” effect on society. Upon the seat of a bicycle, anyone, regardless of class or social position, could now ride down the same street or the same park. Onlookers found it increasingly difficult to distinguish the classes. Nowhere was the role of the bicycle as a vehicle for social change more apparent than in the lives of women, and by the 1890s increasing numbers of women took to the road with passion. The bicycle provided them with a freedom, mobility, and sense of adventure previously denied to them. This phenomenon did not come to pass without an enormous struggle.¹⁹

Women on a bicycle were not only mobile. Their physical movements triggered a change in clothing, from skirts to bloomers, and the decline of the whale-bone corset. Besides the loosening of undergarments, there was also a loosening of the dependent ties to men. Charges of sexual impropriety followed these female bicyclers. Many of the abusive descriptions of “promiscuous” women are derived from this period. The phrase “town bike,” who was “ridden” by men, and the description of being “loose,” which originally described a woman without a corset, conflated femininity, sexuality and cycling.²⁰ Yet the “New Woman” of the 1890s remained a provocative trigger for a reconstitution of feminine “standards” and “values.”²¹

Most significantly for this current study, the public display of women cycling raised debate about the gendering of athletics and sport.²² Doctors warned of “bicycle eyes” or “bicycle face” from the strain.²³ Only in 1958 did the Union Cycliste Internationale recognise women cyclists.²⁴ Even in 1999, the social pressures placed on cycling women were causing social hardship. Elena Johnson noted the consequences of this conclusion. She confirms

the differing transport needs of women and men in Africa and Asia, noting that throughout Africa women spend more time than men transporting goods. The heavy loads and the energy required to carry them take their toll on the health of women and their families, particularly in regions where nutritional intake is insufficient. In some African countries, such as Uganda, it is socially unacceptable for women to ride bicycles. Access to such modes of transportation, however, can alleviate women’s isolation, poverty and ill health, and reduce the energy and time spent daily in transport activities.²⁵

For the Bicycle Transportation Coalition, based in South Africa, cycling is justified through its environmental sustainability, not as a method to question the gender order and the distribution of household labour.

Not surprisingly, female cyclists still raise concerns in the scientific literature. Over one hundred years after the initial fears of women's "freedom" and reproductive "damage,"²⁶ scientists are still monitoring the problems of the female cyclist. In a 2001 study of (only) seven competitive women cyclists, the purpose and conclusions were conveyed in the language of empiricism, which masked the ideological intent to establish and naturalize differences based on gender:

Because of the increasing number of competitive female cyclists, it is important to determine if there are gender-specific responses to high-level training. Male cyclists have been studied in more detail than female riders. Little research is available on physiologic profiles of competitive female cyclists. This project was undertaken to add to the body of knowledge in regard to female cyclists' training responses and to determine if differences in selected anthropometric and metabolic measurements existed between off-road and road female cyclists.... These results indicate that, although the subject pool was small, female off-road and road cyclists' physiological profiles are basically similar. This study was limited by the small sample of convenience and by the number of variables studied.²⁷

The "value" of such a study needs to be questioned. There is no cross-national investigation, no mention of the race or age of the women involved, or where the study was undertaken.

Similarly, the convergence of femininity *and* sickness, and femininity *as* sickness is revealed in the 1999 *British Medical Journal*. Not surprisingly, cycling is again their pivot of "concern." Their assumptions about youth, the frailty of women's reproductive organs and even—remarkably—the "neurosis" of exercising women, is layered into the language of scientific objectivity.

Few persons deny that moderate exercise with the bicycle is excellent for healthy young women, but in the case of women suffering from pelvic disease the case is different... as a rule cycling does harm those subject to haemorrhages from uterine and ovarian inflammation. On the other hand the researches of Regnault and Bianchi have shown that this kind of exercise does not depress the abdominal viscera; indeed, it actually raises the organs. Hence the fear of "displacements" is exaggerated; but patients with flexions and versions are often neurotic, and expect that cycling will make them worse.²⁸

The attention on "habitual menorrhagia"—without any discussion of the parameters of "normal" bleeding—while also naturalizing "normal exercise" for "healthy young women,"²⁹ serves to patrol the boundaries and acceptability of cycling. Further, the determination of "patients" as "neurotic" when concerned about the relationship between menstruation and cycling is ironic

considering that the medical profession actually initiated and invented this concern in the late nineteenth century.

Through these medical challenges, cycling indoors for exercise in structured and choreographed classes has increased.³⁰ Indoor cycling has a few synonyms: spinning and RPM. The latter is the brand name for the cycling classes choreographed by the Les Mills Franchise. Indeed, there is a range of choreography necessary in a class. There are three positions for the hands: starter/starting, racing and on the T-bar for a tighter and streamlined ride. Similarly, there are three basic body positions: seated, hovering over the saddle and the hill climb. There are also more advanced combinations of these moves, including jumps, and completing press-ups on the bar while climbing a hill. All these elements—along with the music selection—are pre-choreographed for the class. The variable within the control of the individual participant is the tension on the fly wheel. Instructors tell their spinners when to put on resistance and when to release it. So while spinning and RPM are choreographed classes where everyone is completing the same actions at the same time, there is a significant individual variable that can alter the workout.



The bikes demonstrate much similarity to road bikes, with a weighted flywheel, adjustable seats and toe clips. The goal for instructors and participants is a clear, uncomplicated cardiovascular workout,³¹ with attention to the intensity level of participants, whatever their age or gender.³²

The feminine ideologies that encircle “aerobics” and “group fitness” as social practices create hyper-masculine posturing and commentary from “real riders.” Stephen Madden from *Bicycling* magazine describes the classes as “aerobics on a bike. Best avoided by real riders.”³³ His concerns about the feminine and artificial nature of the practice were somewhat alleviated by his realisation that spinning was created by Jonathan Goldberg in 1987.³⁴ He also attended classes to write his article. While he was impressed by one instructor, he was “offended” by other participants in the room:

Ronnie, it turned out, was a personal trainer and former Navy SEAL, whose class is like him: big, artless and brutally effective. The room contained some obvious noncyclists in oddly offensive clothing, but there were also a few riders who’d brought their own pedals.³⁵

Madden has a clear, and masculine, notion of a “good” class and effective exercise. His taking offence at clothing is really a commentary about those who do not fit into his narrow parameters of cycling. However this journalistic rendering of ethnography does demonstrate—besides clothing—one significant marker between cyclists: those who have the “clip” shoes for cycles, and those who must use the toe cage to secure their athletic shoes.



Within my gym, this is not a marked differentiation. There are only two bikes geared for the clips. One is used by a male regular, who is an experienced cyclist. The other is used by a woman in the regular attendees group whose husband bought them as her “reward” for losing

weight. Because the majority strap conventional running shoes into the pedals, it is not a difference that can be marked as masculine or feminine, experienced or inexperienced. While it suggests regular attendance to make the purchase worthwhile, it is a marking of money, not skill.

While the ideology that unproblematically celebrates the benefits of sport and physical activity is flawed,³⁶ the assumption that women's bodies are more easily damaged than men's has survived through the cycling and medical literature for one hundred years. Also, the generation of women in the spinning class—between the ages of thirty and forty—suffered from strict gendered differentiation in school physical education classes. Women of my age ran around a field, played netball, hockey and softball. The opportunity to play football³⁷ or cricket, or lift weights, was beyond the confines of conservative femininity.

It is no surprise that when the parameters of masculinity are judged and evaluated, women also patrol femininity. The women in the cycling class are thin, fit and lean. They rarely attend weights classes, as the daily spinning sessions dominate their physical activity. For these women, dieting and exercise are locked in a tight embrace. Indeed, they discuss food and dieting before each class. They reveal their weight loss and gain and the diets of their friends. Most of them discuss their inability “to lose that last five pounds” that they “carried” since the birth of their last child. To my eyes, all appear very thin, with their clothes confirming that there is no “extra” five pounds actually to lose. Clothing also confirms their similarity and community. They choose to wear tight shell tops with shorts, featuring Nike, Puma and Reebok logos. Their colour range is narrowly limited to pastels: pink, green and blue. Their bodies are on display, like a personal trophy to their efforts. I am marked as different in this context. Because I am physically larger than the other women, I need to wear a sports bra which would be revealed if I wore a shell top. Also, I prefer the anonymity of a t-shirt so that I can work hard physically without worrying about breasts popping in and out, embarrassing sweat marks, or self-patrolling my body in a room of mirrors.



However, I do choose to wear Philosophy Football shirts in bright colours of red, orange and blue, which feature slogans from philosophers, footballers and managers. Slogans range from Roy Keane’s “Happiness is not being afraid” to Bertolt Brecht’s “Art is not a mirror to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” I do receive some odd looks from gym members in these shirts, and on one occasion while walking out after a Saturday morning class during the observation period, a large man that I had not seen before accosted me in the gym, aggressively demanding why I was wearing a “Marxist” shirt. He had seen the word “socialist” in one of the quotations, and the red colour of the shirt matched his mood.³⁸ I tried to explain to him that the quotation was derived from Bill Shankly. He blankly looked at me. I asked why he thought the shirt was red. He replied, “because you’re a socialist.” I suggested that he needed to read a bit more about football. Shankly was (obviously) the most famous manager of Liverpool Football Club. They play in red, the same as the shirt. My conservative accuser went the same colour as the team strip, but—with finger pointing in my face—stated that my clothing was inappropriate for the club. When I noted that I thought the same about his Nike swoosh shirt, considering the payments received by workers in Indonesia, the gym’s personal trainers had to physically intervene, and escort me to my car. Clearly, though, this moment confirmed the politics of the club, monitored through women’s clothing. Revealing and tight clothes with corporate logos are acceptable and naturalized. Anything political—or even “clever”—becomes a problem. Within the confines of my regular classes, my “odd” shirts are justified by “the regulars” because I am

physically larger and therefore am using the t-shirt to “cover up,” rather than offer a political commentary on sports clothing.

Obviously female sexuality is the great unmentionable in this class. All the female regulars are married. They discuss their husbands continually. They ask me about mine. The assumption, goal and ideal for these women is a heterosexual, monogamous, married relationship. Homosexuality is not mentioned as an option, identity or point of discussion. Perhaps fit women, dressed in revealing exercise wear, sweating in a daily class on bikes in close physical proximity means that sexuality is simply too intense to be discussed.³⁹ The silence itself is important. Griffin’s emotional journey in reconciling her sexuality and sporting ability confirm the depth of the athletic closets.⁴⁰ Yet she also showed the impact of silence, of a social world punctuated by hetero-normativity. There is absolutely no space for lesbianism or even sexual plurality in this cycling class. The fear of difference, and the labelling and repressing of gay homosexuality, leaves lesbianism the great unmentionable of the spinning class.

Time, space and spinning

Class is heavily determined by the type and amount of physical activity undertaken. Yet it is also enfolded into social space. The gym in which this research is based is situated in Bibra Lake. This is a light industrial suburb of Perth in Western Australia, surrounded by working class housing. The apparent contradiction of a “lifestyle gym” being situated in such an area is not as odd as it may appear. It is situated in a sprawling complex that would be uneconomical if based in more affluent suburbs. Instead, the clients travel to this area by car from middle-class suburbs within ten kilometres of the gym: Leeming, Kardinya, Murdoch, Bateman, Bullcreek and Melville. The inflated fee for membership transforms the organisation into much more than a site for aerobics. Instead, it becomes “a club,” with more resonance and similarity to a golf or tennis establishment: exclusionary and exclusive. There are no indigenous, African or Asian participants in the class. While there are Italian, Greek and Croatian spinners, a band of whiteness encircles the gym. This exclusion is not only enacted through the annual, lump sum

fee, but the social location. As Bibra Lake is a light industrial suburb unserved by public transport, all members must drive to the gym.

The class of these spinning women is not determined by educational level, as only two other participants besides me have attended university. Fiona is an occupational therapist and Cheryl is a high school teacher. For the others, their paid employment includes office work, hairdressing, shop assistants and bank tellers. While the class designation of these women may appear ambivalent, it is important to note that all have returned to work after childbirth and child rearing, and have husbands in full-time employment. Significantly, their husbands do not attend the gym.

Time is also a significant determinant of social and economic status in aerobics classes. The 9:30am and 10:30am classes are overwhelmingly dominated by women with young children. The occasional sessions I attended during the six weeks of observation showed that no men attended the pilates, abdominal, pump or step classes at these times. One man attended the 9:30am cycling session. The classes that run between 11:30am and 1:30pm are aimed at seniors, and are tailored for strength training, pilates and meditation. From 5:30pm to 7:30pm the club is busy and much more diverse, with children and teenagers, and men and women training for intense periods after work. What makes the 6am cycling participants distinct from those who attend the 9:30am classes is that the gym's crèche is not open at the start of the day, confirming that their children are older or their spouse is prepared to be active in childcare for a ninety-minute period before school. Also, a few of the women moved from the 9:30am classes to the morning sessions after they returned to paid employment, so that they could continue to exercise.

The scale of connectivity amongst the 6am regulars is also confirmed at weekends. On Saturday and Sunday, the weekday 6am participants mark themselves in the group as a community, even when others—"the weekend warriors"—fill up the class. The weekenders include more men, heterosexual couples, and younger participants in their early twenties. Yet through conversation topics and language, the relationship between "the regulars" is established. They arrive early, claim their "normal" bikes and start talking. It is an odd bond, based on

strange and artificial behaviour, sharing an early morning indoor cycling class, while most people are either still asleep or tending to household activities. The strangeness of the behaviour establishes an exercise hierarchy: commitment is confirmed by the time and regularity of the participation. The 6am regulars are—in their own minds—the most devoted exercisers and the backbone of the gym.

Spinning exclusion

Physical activity generally, and sport specifically, is embedded in the rituals of masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the middle class and the working class. More precisely physical culture is implicated in the construction of the boundaries of normality. Through my six week participant observation of a spinning class in which I was a long-term member, the explicit ruthlessness of patterns of community and otherness were a surprise. Women enjoyed the class because they had found a space to dominate, talk and control a portion of their lives. When this space was threatened by men, the women responded with discrimination on the basis of (homo)sexuality. The success of this strategy was revealed by the “intruder” men internalizing the women’s critique and performing hetero-normative masculinity to excess.

The behaviour of the women towards men, while discriminatory, was understandable. When reviewing the history of physical activity, women have been structurally excluded from participation. Such a systematic discrimination, which has also been suffered directly by the generation of women in this cycle class, explains—but does not justify—their eagerness to claim, maintain and protect “their” space from men. With remarkable clarity, Patricia Vertinsky has reviewed the intricate and conflictual relationship between women and physical exercise. She shows how sport was used to increase men’s control over female sexuality. This institutional sexism has been perpetuated in our present:

Revisiting the story of women, sport, and exercise in the 19th century evokes the heady anticipation felt by late 20th century women seeking to hone and test their physical powers in fitness and sporting endeavours. It also underlines the reality that women of all ages and talents continue to be denied equal access to many of the benefits that participation and success in sport can bring.⁴¹

The intense concern that physically active women would have their reproductive organs damaged through movement fed into Social Darwinism and the ideologies of domesticity in the nineteenth century. It is no surprise that women—even at 6am in the morning—respond aggressively to “their” bikes and “their” class being claimed, appropriated and changed to suit the needs of men.

What also needs to be acknowledged is how frequently sport is used as a method to “prove” that a man is not homosexual. Within this middle class gym, very conservative assumptions about masculinity and femininity are perpetuated. Sport is an agent of socialization to confirm the differences between men and women. At the historical moment in the nineteenth century where women were making claims for the franchise, education, reproductive control and the right to paid work, organised sport structurally excluded men and women. Sport became a way to perform competitive, strong masculinity away from the “threat” of women. Michael Kimmel, in reviewing the rise of baseball from 1880 to 1920, confirmed that, “the perceived crisis of masculinity was not a generic crisis, experienced by all men in similar ways. It was essentially a crisis of middle-class white masculinity.”⁴² The baseball diamond enclosed a pastoral myth and provided a surface for contesting the limits of masculinity.

In the 1890s, the bicycle became the mode of transportation for the “New Woman.”⁴³ Yet this newness was formed not only through physical mobility through space, but a social transformation. Now that stationary cycles have become the foundation of fitness classes, the nineteenth-century metaphor of newness and freedom has changed, along with the mobility. Instead of social, economic and political transgressions, these spinning women use their cycles to circle the limits of not only “normal” femininity, but also the movements in masculinity.

¹ In keeping with ethical ethnographic practice, all the names of participants and instructors have been changed throughout this paper.

² I am reminded here of Penelope Portman’s analysis of “low-skilled” students in physical education classes who “felt the critical environment in the class lessened their ability to be successful in physical education,” from “Who is having fun in physical education classes? Experiences of sixth-grade students in elementary and middle schools” (*Journal of teaching and physical education* 14, 1995), 451.

³ P. Vertinsky, “Women, sport and exercise in the 19th century,” in D. M. Costa and S. R. Guthrie, eds., *Women and sport: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), 70.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ H. Thomas and N. Miller, “Ballroom blitz,” in H. Thomas, ed., *Dance in the city* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

⁶ K. Frank, “Exploring the motivations and fantasies of strip club customers in relation to legal regulations” (*Archive of sexual behaviour* 34.5, 2005).

⁷ This type of disruption is often termed the Hawthorne Effect, where the presence of a research can disturb and distort their findings.

⁸ The positioning of the researcher is obviously pivotal to all research projects, and is (too) often unacknowledged. Yet within participant observation methods, appended by unobtrusive sources like photographs, it is absolutely crucial to state, with explicitness and clarity, my position in this social sphere. Lenora Sleep confirmed that, “what I have learned over the years is the real danger in doing sociological research in any area ... when we, as social scientists, do not acknowledge and reflect upon our own biases before going into the field. As I familiarize myself with literature within the discipline, I note how rarely the relationship between the subject matter and the researcher is addressed with sociological studies. Yet, I believe it is a critical part of the story left untold—a part from which social scientists can gain knowledge and a clearer depiction of social life,” from “Personal encounters with sociology, religion, and issues of gender” (*Sociology of Religion* 61.4, 2000), 474.

⁹ A. Kellehear, *The unobtrusive researcher* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1993). He states that “this book has been written for the growing number of people who believe that there is, or that there should be, more to social research than either surveys or in-depth interviews. Much valuable insight can be gained about ourselves and the lives that we lead by simply listening and watching both systematically and with care. Furthermore, a significant amount of work can be conducted without either engaging with or disturbing the activity of other people. In other words, much of this research is unobtrusive,” vii. He recommends using not only eyes and ears, but the avatars of our senses, such as cameras and computers.

¹⁰ R. Lee, *Unobtrusive methods in social research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 2.

¹¹ While it is assumed that Fiona will have children, my lack of children by the age of thirty-seven is an oddity for the women. If I had not been married, then my aberrance would have been disruptive. While I chose not to have children, women rarely mention this topic because it is assumed that I can’t—rather than won’t—get pregnant.

¹² The use of laughter as a mechanism for resistance from the back rows of the cycling studio has some historical precedents. Helene Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (*Signs*, Summer 1976), and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (Indiana University Press, 1984), noted how humour is a tactic for the disempowered to (temporarily) renegotiate power.

¹³ I am not making an identity categorization of these men’s sexuality. As no interviews took place, their self-identification is not recorded. However significantly, once women started their “laughing tactic,” the men overtly discussed their wives and children loudly enough for the rest of the class to hear.

¹⁴ A. Warren, “Sport, youth and gender in Britain, 1880-1940,” in J. C. Binfield and J. Stevenson, eds., *Sport, culture and politics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 53.

¹⁵ Lenora Sleep embedded the bicycle into the narratives of our personal lives. She stated, “within the hustle and bustle of contemporary life, times of personal reflection and assessment are rare. Whether it is when we learned to ride a bicycle on our own, the first time we felt love or hate, or when we first developed a passion for something like chocolate or jazz—these memories form part of our personal identity,” from “Personal encounters with sociology, religion, and issues of gender” (*Sociology of Religion* 61.4, 2000), 473.

¹⁶ There is complex classed history to be written about the bicycle. However Joseph Bishop noted in the United States during the 1890s that new bicycles cost less than US\$100, which was less than the price of a horse. Please refer to “Social and economic consequences of the Bicycle” (*The Forum*, August 1896), 680-689.

¹⁷ R. Harmond, “Progress and the flight: an interpretation of the American cycling craze of the 1890s” (*Journal of Social History* 5, Winter 1971), 193.

¹⁸ Jan Wright noted that early feminists saw physical activity and specific physical activities, such as cycling, as challenging contemporary conceptions of what it was possible for a woman to be and to do.” See her “Changing gendered practices in physical education: working with teachers” (*European Physical Education Review* 5.3, 1999), 181.

¹⁹ K. Murtha, “Cycling in the 1890s: an orgasmic experience?” (*Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 21.3, 2002), 119.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A fine study of the “New Woman” on bicycles has been written by Clare Simpson. Please refer to “Respectable identities: New Zealand nineteenth-century ‘New Woman’—on bicycles!” (*The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 18.2, 2001), 54-77. She places specific attention on how cycling not only changed clothing styles for women, but triggered debates about social roles. She also provides other examples where cycling provided metaphors for women’s sexuality: “fallen women,” “strayed off the path,” and “fast” cyclists.

²² Murther, 121.

²³ For a discussion of the medical critiques of cycling women, please refer to James Whorton, *Crusaders for fitness: the history of American health reformers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 304-330.

²⁴ Murtha, 121.

²⁵ E. Johnson, "The right to bike" (*Alternatives Journal*, 25.4, 1999), 5.

²⁶ Please refer to Lisa Strange and Robert Brown, "The bicycle, women's rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton" (*Women's Studies* 31, 2002), 609-626.

²⁷ J. K. Hulser, B. S. Smith, F. B. Wyatt, "Physiological characteristics of female off-road and road cyclists" (*Physical Therapy* 81.5, 2001), A43-A45.

²⁸ "The bicycle and diseases of women" (*British Medical Journal* 318.7183, 27 February 1999), 569.

²⁹ This assumption of normality and youth in evaluating the success of cycling is critiqued by Lee Cunningham and Robert Cantu. They confirm that "the use of various aerobic exercise devices, including stationary bicycles (lower extremity ergometers) and new devices which couple upper extremity exercise together with bicycling ... are now being used for the rehabilitation of patients who have had heart attacks." See his "Acute and chronic effects of exercise using an exercycle in healthy, untrained adults" (*Physical Therapy* 70.8, 1990), 494.

³⁰ Diane Lofshult showed that the number of clubs offering indoor cycling classes had increased by 24 per cent between 1997 and 2002: "Indoor cycling is still on a roll," *IDEA Health and Fitness Source*, April 2003, 17.

³¹ Stacey Lei Krauss described this as "the primary goal of an indoor cycling class." See her "Performance-driven indoor cycling," *IDEA Fitness Journal*, January 2006, 93.

³² Shannon Griffiths confirmed that "a properly designed indoor cycling program can enhance cardiovascular health, regardless of age or ability level. But you must integrate various intensity levels to get the most from participants," from "Indoor cycling sample class: explore your zones," *IDEA Fitness Journal*, February 2005, 83.

³³ S. Madden, "Somewhere fast," *Bicycling*, November 2002, 62.

³⁴ It is also important to note the newness of spinning. Kristin Anderson makes the point about snowboarding that two of the reasons for women's high level of participation are that it is new—and therefore operating outside the historical divisions of organised sports, and it is "unorganised." Because of its newness, snowboarding does not have a history of excluding women. Again, spinning continues this argument, even though "real" cyclists judge the practice. Please refer to Kristin Anderson, "Snowboarding: the construction of gender in an emerging sport" (*Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23.1, 1999), 55-79.

³⁵ Madden, 62.

³⁶ Such an ideology is often expressed in newspapers. For example Louise Milligan reported that "Students involved in the Rock Eisteddfod are less likely to use and abuse drugs and alcohol and have better coping skills," from "Rock helps in fight against drugs, drink" (*The Australian*, May 15, 2002), 19.

³⁷ I am including all codes of football in this determination. Even though women are now given the opportunity to play association football, I never saw a soccer ball through my physical education classes in the 1970s and 1980s. Obviously, there are still restrictions—both institutional and political—on women playing Australian Rules Football, Rugby League and Rugby Union.

³⁸ The slogan on the shirt, a quote by Bill Shankly, reads "The socialism I believe in is everyone working for each other, everyone having a share of the rewards. It is the way I see football, the way I see life."

³⁹ Mike Imren confirms the "unmentionable" nature of lesbianism. He intimates, "let's break the code and acknowledge openly that to Americans, one of the most appealing characteristics of our women's soccer champions is their apparent heterosexuality.... Not only were the women projected as sexy, but as heterosexy," from "Just one more story on the women's World Cup soccer team," *Arlington Heights Daily Herald*, July 13, 1999.

⁴⁰ P. Griffin, *Strong women, deep closets: lesbians and homophobia in sport* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1998). Griffin stated that "I spent my years as a college athlete and a high school teacher and coach in this secret and silent world. I lived a double life, censoring what I revealed about myself," 5.

⁴¹ P. Vertinsky, "Women, sport and exercise in the 19th century," in D. M. Costa and S. R. Guthrie, eds., *Women and sport: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), 63.

⁴² M. Kimmel, "Baseball and the reconstitution of American masculinity 1880-1920," in M. A. Messner and D. F. Sabo, eds., *Sport, men, and the gender order: critical feminist perspectives* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1990), 57.

⁴³ Clare Simpson confirmed that "the independent mobility of cyclists raised genuine alarm for their physical, if not moral, safety," 57.