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ON WOMEN AND RUNNING: A FEMINIST  
RHETORICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE  
POLITICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL  
IMPLICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-  
RAISING VIA THE SHARING OF WOMEN'S  
RUNNING STORIES

Janelle Leann Briggs

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [janelle.briggs@gmail.com](mailto:janelle.briggs@gmail.com)

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ON WOMEN AND RUNNING: A FEMINIST RHETORICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE  
POLITICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING VIA  
THE SHARING OF WOMEN'S RUNNING STORIES

by

Janelle Leann Briggs

B.B.A., University of Louisiana at Monroe, 2007

M.A., University of Louisiana at Monroe, 2009

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Speech Communication  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
December 2014

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

ON WOMEN AND RUNNING: A FEMINIST RHETORICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE  
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Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Speech Communication

Approved by:

Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton, Chair

Dr. Nathan Stucky

Dr. Rebecca Walker

Dr. Angela J. Aguayo

Dr. Bobbi Knapp

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
September 23, 2014

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

JANELLE LEANN BRIGGS, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Speech Communication, presented on September 23, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ON WOMEN AND RUNNING: A FEMINIST RHETORICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE POLITICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING VIA THE SHARING OF WOMEN'S RUNNING STORIES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton

The goal of my dissertation is to further our understanding of the political ramifications of women's running stories by focusing on the intersections of feminist rhetoric, women in sports studies, political theory, and ontology. To this end, I examined six books written by women, about women, who participate in the sport of running. Since I am most interested in how gendered concepts teach us how to be "appropriate," and due to the fact that what is considered appropriate gendered behavior changes over time, I start from a place of understanding that "appropriateness" is necessarily both hegemonic and unstable. As a feminist rhetorical critic, I am foremost concerned with gendered relations of power, and am interested in working to move those relations towards the democratic end of liberty and equality.

This dissertation examined the following five research questions: First, how do women articulate their running identities in the stories they tell? For example, do women depict running as central or influential to their self-concepts, roles, identities, ambitions and/or goals? If so, how? Specifically, what identities, concepts, or themes are common across stories? Second, do individual women explicitly discuss, or implicitly allude to, multiple identities or roles? If they embrace multiple identities or roles, how do they rhetorically navigate among them in the stories they tell? Third, how, if at all, do women articulate their experience of gender norms? Fourth, what are the points of possible contention, clash or disagreement in the discussion of women

runners' experiences? How might the various perspectives that women (and others around them) express be in legitimate (agonistic, pluralistic) conversation with each other? And finally, in what ways might these stories hint at ontological change as a real possibility, and/or provide a canvas for an agonistic and plural relationship with the self and others? In other words, what commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do different perspectives have in common, that might bring them together to work for mutually-agreed upon change in the world, or in the political order?

Upon completion of this dissertation, my feminist rhetorical analysis provided ample evidence that the texts I examined are clearly consciousness-raising documents, as their sole purpose is sharing stories of how women journey through life via running. This project illustrated that a particular kind of consciousness is raised when women's bodies are running, sometimes alone, but often together. This consciousness provides a freedom for these women to be more whole, strong, and authentic versions of themselves; running gives way to a mental and physical strength that these women may not have found otherwise.

While for some rhetors and audiences, the essential question of women and girls' participation in sports looms large, for many other people, the issues have broadened and deepened from the original 'to play or not to play,' and now encompass subtler concerns, from the wearing of the hijab in athletic competition to whether or not women should train during pregnancy. The female body is constantly on display and up for debate, and the female body in the realm of sports is no exception. Together, feminist rhetorical criticism and agonistic pluralism provided me with the foundation to creatively analyze women's running stories for their political and feminist ramifications, places where women are celebrated and heralded as strong athletes, as well as point out places where liberty and equality are still lacking.

## DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, from whom I received my life's blood, love of learning, and strength of character.

Mommy: You gave me my happy disposition and vivacious laugh, and it was you who taught me the importance of looking out for others and encouraging those around me. Thank you for always reminding me that I possess the strength to embody your legacy: "Briggs women always do their best."

Pop Pop: You provided me with my sense of humor, strong muscles, and big brown eyes that provide more than a peek into my heart and soul. Through your words and actions I learned that I am worthy of love, inherently and without reservation. Thank you for holding me close and teaching me that "it is good to laugh" – no matter if the situation is bright or bleak.

I love you both.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is a labor of love, brought into being by the tender care and expert touch of my major advisor, Dr. Suzanne Marie Daughton. Dr. Daughton's attention to detail and willingness to read draft after draft until my arguments were clear and complete is what enabled me to successfully complete this project. I am forever grateful to Dr. Daughton for teaching me the importance of celebrating even the smallest successes, being in the moment (because the present is just as beautiful and exciting as the future), and for teaching me that prioritizing self-care is a radical feminist act that we all deserve. Love, hugs, and glitter to you, Suzanne.

With deepest gratitude, I wish to thank the members of my doctoral committee: Dr. Nathan Stucky, for his uncanny ability to ask questions that cut me to the quick in the most beautiful way; Dr. Angela Aguayo, for her encouragement, gifting me with an amazing collection of "hand-me-down" scholarly articles, and allowing me the privilege of helping to care for Baby Zac; Dr. Rebecca Walker, for graciously becoming a committee member at a crucial time and sharing her insights into the work of Chantal Mouffe and rhetorical theory; and Dr. Bobbi Knapp for introducing me to the discipline of sports studies and challenging me to (re)consider my understanding and application of feminist critique in relation to sporting culture.

To my friends and colleagues: My heart is full because of your support, companionship, and love. Thank you for choosing to be part of my life, and for allowing me the privilege of being a part of yours. The first round is on me.

## PREFACE

“In any case, I think that feminist thinkers are entitled to the excitement and intellectual challenge of forging and intensively testing visionary paradigms, of inaugurating their own discursive communities as sites of solidarity and creative communication in their own terms, and of self-consciously exploring confrontational rhetorics as some instruments, among others, for initiating wholesale intellectual change in their favor.”

Margaret Urban Walker

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? [...] Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. [...] It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Marianne Williamson



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# CHAPTER 1

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

You've been wanting to shake things up in your life for a while – maybe you've become a little more attached to your couch than you would've liked or you just want to take on a new challenge. For whatever reason, you've been eyeing up running but you are yet to make your move. Understandably, you're a little scared and have a lot of questions. Well, fear not, I'm here to guide you through your first steps into the running world. (Carey-Campbell 2)

This is a project about women who have forayed into the world of running and in it have found a home. My journey into running started out like that of many other women. I was never very confident in my body; when I started a Masters program I decided it was time to start liking myself and that running would be the key to my transformation. When I run my body takes over and refuses to listen to the rubbish my culture has taught me about what my body should be. When I run I learn again that my body is strong and beautiful, and that I am enough. That is why I run; throughout the coming pages I will go on a journey to find out why—and to what end—other women run.

This project focuses on the intersections of feminist rhetoric, women in sports studies, political theory, and ontology. The goal of my dissertation is to further our understanding of the political ramifications of women's running stories. To this end, I will be examining several books written by women, about women, who participate in the sport of running. I am interested in how women take on the identity of 'runner' and how the stories they tell reveal their running selves to themselves and others. Thus, my research hinges upon three factors: running, identity,

and ‘political’ activity. I will use Chantal Mouffe’s political theory as my theoretical framework and feminist rhetorical criticism as my research methodology to further elucidate the implications these stories have for women and our society.

In her theorizing of radical democratic politics, Chantal Mouffe argues that what is really at stake in democratic politics is establishing the us/them distinction in such a way that both groups can function in a pluralist democracy. For Mouffe then, inherent in political life is the notion that there will—*and should*—always be inherent conflict between various groups, but that conflict must involve friendly adversaries, rather than outright enemies. Throughout my dissertation, I will explore the concept of agonistic pluralism as it creates a platform for a radical new ontology.

While Mouffe’s work focuses specifically on modern democracy, I will be using her work to talk about political action at the micro-level: daily interactions, storytelling, identity work, and individual/group consciousness of cultural gender norms, oppression, and resistance. Part of what makes Mouffe’s work so applicable to my project is that she recognizes that hegemony is never stabilized; stories will keep changing because what women are “up against” will always change. Some battles are won and the victory is sweet, but the war is never won; something else takes its place and we must figure out ways to “win again”— always recognizing that other groups and individuals are forging their own forms of victory. Here, agonistic pluralism is key: rather than trying to work against each other, various groups should recognize the value in the others’ approach to dealing with the same issue. For my purposes, certainly not every woman will decide to take up running, but those who do not should not deride those who do, and vice versa.

With agonistic pluralism as my theoretical foundation, I will then build a methodological framework for feminist rhetorical criticism. My starting point is that gendered concepts teach us how to be “appropriate.” Since what is considered appropriate changes over time, this appropriateness is necessarily both hegemonic and unstable. Therefore, much like agonism is described above, rhetoric (by which we learn how to act, think, and speak) is ontological. The notion that ideas, beliefs, and political perspectives different from mine are *just as valid* as my own, and that these various perspectives are equally destabilized and contingent upon the ever-changing political landscape, is the foundation for my radical agonistic feminist rhetorical framework. As a feminist rhetorical critic then, I believe that Mouffe’s theory and ontology, combined with the understanding that rhetoric is also ontological, will allow me to question rhetorical artifacts from the perspective of identity formation and embodiment.

Furthermore, I am interested in how these stories can function as a form of feminist consciousness-raising, whereby women come to reevaluate themselves and their role(s) in society through a running-based way of being. Feminist consciousness-raising not only dovetails nicely with my chosen method of feminist rhetorical criticism, but also with my desire to analyze these texts from a political perspective. Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough state that, “As a political interaction, the primary effort of the [consciousness-raising group] is to determine the nature and causes of the group’s ‘oppression’ and to provide the foundation for ‘revolutionary acts to eliminate oppression.’ Therefore, consciousness-raising sessions often create new political values” (137). In their article, Chesebro et al. created a schema for what they termed the four stages of consciousness-raising. I anticipate that their categories will also be useful for my project; this will allow me to focus my project around identity, the issue of polarization (agonistic pluralism, in Mouffeian terms), establishing new values, and relating to others.

This leads me to contemplate some of the overarching questions for my project: How do women's running books rhetorically encourage the creation of community and self-care, in the face of social pressures that make it difficult for women to claim both time and their bodies for themselves? How might these same books (perhaps unintentionally) rhetorically reinforce those social pressures? And in what ways do the stories women tell about their running selves include the possibility for new ways of being? In the next section I will provide an overview of the relevant literature that provides the impetus and justification for this project.

### **Literature Review**

In this section I review the relevant literature on women in sports; scholars interested in the topic primarily publish in the fields of kinesiology, media and popular culture, and less so in communication studies. I have gathered and read literature on female runners specifically, and on female athletes more generally, in order to get a sense of how female athletes are constructed in the context of sporting culture.

In this literature review I address the following questions: What are the major themes that emerge in the discussion of female athletes, and female runners in particular? What overarching concepts and questions about female athletes do scholars explore? And finally, how have scholars' methodological choices influenced the answers their research has produced? To gain answers to these questions, this chapter is organized as follows: I begin with an overview of the broad topic of gender in sport, then focus specifically on communication research in sport, the body, and feminist and critical methodology. I end the first section with an examination of the methodological approaches in gender and sport that are outside the field of communication. Second, I examine women's exclusion from participation and (re)integration into sporting culture. Here I also discuss Title IX, the landmark legislation that requires equitable treatment in

sports for women, and the importance of participation in sports for girls and women. Third, I move to journalism and media and address issues of coverage, both quantity and the gendered nature of women in mainstream media. The fourth section examines body image in sport—how sports affect women’s self-image, as well as how media coverage influences how women think of themselves and their bodies. Following this, it is appropriate to look at the two major categories of sports for women: “strong sports” (such as hockey, rugby, and football) and “feminine sports” (such as gymnastics and figure skating). The terms “strong sports” and “feminine sports” are used primarily in Gender and Sports literature and can be found in journals such as the *Sociology of Sport*, *Sport Psychology*, and *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. I use these terms throughout this project as they seem, from my research, to be the predominant labels for the two overarching categories of sports for women. I also look at concepts such as “frail femininity” (Leeder) and “female masculinity” (Butler). Sixth, I move to the specific topic of women and running, the heart of my interest in this topic. I provide an overview of literature that addresses the rates and reasons for participation, nation-based studies on women runners, and the concept of identity formation and story-telling as a way of taking on the identity of a runner. Finally, I end the review of literature with specific research questions that have yet to be addressed, and why they should be addressed by communication scholars.

I chose this organizational strategy because it best fits with the literature. The sections I have outlined are the major themes that emerged throughout my researching process; additionally, these themes resonate with my research goals. While each section does not specifically connect with women and running, this body of scholarship works to paint an overarching picture of the world that women enter when they decide to become an athlete, at any level of participation.

## **The (Fe)male Gender and Sport**

### *General Overview and Importance of Topic*

“Our relationship to sport is one of those remarkably naturalized social phenomena that seemingly seeps into our pores of sensibility” (Wenner 1571). Athletics are an important topic for scholarly analysis because of their prevalence in our society (Wenner, Butterworth), their political influence (Brummett), and how they shape our understandings of appropriate gender behavior (Brandt and Carstens, Krane, and Steinberg). Indeed, Bethan Evans, citing Simonsen, points out that we are currently living in the “era of the body” (548). This is an exciting time for scholars interested in examining the connections among the body, sport, politics, and gender theory.

Brandt and Carstens state that, “Sport is a human endeavour that was and still is associated with predominant male participation and masculinity. [...] The portrayal of women in stereotypical roles not only reflects society’s view and interpretation of gender roles, but also contributes towards sustaining and constructing such roles [...]” (233). Typical gender roles for women include loving and supporting wife, caring mother, keeper of the home, and more generally someone in the role of helper. Additionally, women are supposed to be pretty, sweet, and heterosexually attractive (Markula, Theberge). All these attributes continue to come to the forefront in the realm of athletics, where strength, power, aggression, and determination are key (Gottesman, Miller).

When looking at the realm of sporting culture it is important to keep in mind the concept of a gender continuum. Heywood and Dworkin cite Mary Jo Kane’s perspective on the gender continuum in their pivotal text *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*: “Kane argues that because individual athletes are encouraged to participate in ‘gender appropriate’ sports such

as figure skating for women and football for men, because the media largely remains silent about women's participation in 'male' sports like rugby, football, and hockey, and because women who excel at these sports are constructed as being 'like men,' sport 'works to suppress evidence of a [gender] continuum [...]' (9). Nancy Theberge conceptualizes the gender continuum in a different way, arguing instead that, "The 'image problem' facing all women athletes has particular consequences in sports [...] These consequences are highlighted in the contradiction [...] wherein players judge themselves by their performance on the court, and the public and media are preoccupied with their appearance and sexuality" (325). Later in this chapter I will address the issue of media coverage specifically; I cite Heywood and Dworkin and Theberge here because it is important to have this understanding of gender as a foundation as I move through the literature on gender and sport.

Joli Sandoz accurately argues that, "Competitive athletics becomes a rigged game, in which 'cute' pictures of world championship athletes and constructions of female-only sport as gender rivalry serve to buttress male-is-superior ideology" (33). Additionally, while sport is on one hand competitive, it is also participatory. Sport-as-exercise (rather than competition) is a large part of Western culture and contributes to the thin female ideal. Pirkko Markula poignantly states the issues that many women have with their bodies, which they attempt to remedy through exercise:

Obviously, storing fat is a highly undesirable, yet natural process. The storage places are the problem spots whose fat levels women carefully monitor. These areas require special toning as they appear especially prone to excess fat and flab. As other scholars, I contend that these spots 'where we store most of the fat' are the very parts of our bodies that identify us as females: the rounded bellies, the



larger hips, the thighs, the softer underarms. These ‘female parts’ are also the ones we hate the most and fight the hardest to diminish. (435)

It is important to point out a blatant contradiction: the accumulation of muscle is one way the human body “fights” fat production and storage—but, as noted above, women are taught to not be overtly muscular in Western culture. Vikkie Krane states the contradiction this way: “On one hand, women should be able to respect the natural shape and size of the female body and resist the need to manipulate it. [...] On the other hand, they also need to value their ability to develop large muscles and to engage in highly physical sport and recreational endeavors. In both situations, women challenge hegemonic femininity and the culturally ideal female body” (129). This tension is at the heart of why studying women in sports is so important.

Communication scholars have long been interested in the concept of gender performance and this takes center stage in sports studies. Judith Butler’s work entitled *Gender Trouble* has been highly influential for scholars seeking to understand how and why men and women participate in sports. “Previous explanations for girls’ lower sports participation rates have been based on dominant constructions of heterosexual femininity and masculinity. These position masculine as active and feminine as passive, meaning that sport, as an active pastime is not considered a feminine activity and participation may undermine girls’ construction and performance of their feminine identities” (Evans 548). Thus, for women to perform our gender “correctly,” most sports have been deemed out of the question.

### *Communication Research in Sport*

The Communication discipline offers several vantage points from which to study sporting culture from rhetoric to popular culture, nation-based studies, morality, and feminist-informed research agendas (Brown and O’Rourke). Barry Brummett examines sport from the intersection

of rhetoric, performance and politics. He notes that “Some performances around sports and games are explicitly connected to rhetorical effects in politics. [...] The Olympics have often been a site of performances with rhetorical impact as a focal point for nations and groups to send persuasive messages to the world” (2). Here, Brummett is referring to instances such as the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympics due to foreign policy disputes. Additionally, “Players know they enter onto a stage when they enter into the game. [...] These performances are rhetorical in that they influence how people think about social and political issues. In creating these influences, sports and games have tremendous effect in popular culture” (Brummett 3). Indeed, rhetorical criticism is a popular methodology for the study of sports, specifically in relation to media representation(s) of athletes (Butterworth, Fuller, and Billings). Linda K. Fuller’s text *Sport, Rhetoric, and Gender: Historical Perspectives and Media Representations* examines, in part, how language constructs female athletes as less-than their male counterparts through phrases that have become commonplace such as “run like a girl,” and “throw like a girl.” Here the meaning is a double entendre that seeks to maintain strength and performance levels for the sexes as distinct as possible—boys run and throw, whereas girls do so *like girls*.

Research about sport can be found in every major journal in the Communication discipline, focusing on everything from portrayals of athletes in the media (Enck-Wanzer, Butterworth) to critiquing narratives of nationalism during the Olympics (Housel). While studies that examine media representations are popular, Communication scholars are also interested in how sports function as hegemonic in every day life (Hundley). The fact that “[...] LPGA members are relegated to a second class status behind MPGA members” is not just an issue of coverage, but of the hegemonic nature of gender roles within Western Society (Hundley 39, emphasis in original).

Communication scholars are interested in highlighting stories where the hegemonic order is taking place, and examining situations where athletes work to resist patriarchal gender norms. One such story is that of Katie Hnida, a walk-on place kicker at the University of Colorado in 1999. Michael L. Butterworth states that, “In a climate where football is both beloved and believed to be vulnerable to the increased presence of female athletes [...]”, athletes like Katie Hnida are seen as subversive and work against dominant notions of femininity (259).

*Communication Research: Feminist and Critical Methods*

Hegemony is obviously at work in other areas, not just the realm of sports. In this section I move to a broad survey of Communication research to provide an overview of work done on the body, feminist methods, and critical methods. Outside of sport-based studies, Communication scholars have done extensive work to further our understanding of the lived experience and how to apply feminist/critical methods to the female body and lived experiences, which is an important part of the foundation for my examination of literature on sporting culture.

Feminist and critical methodologies are concerned with concepts such as power, privilege, agency, voice, and what are often hegemonic gender representations. Scholars interested in such work examine artifacts produced by various groups, social movements, and the media. Victoria Pruin DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski offer the following explanation for why the media are such a powerful force in our society, and what communication scholars must keep in mind while conducting their research:

[...] media are one of the primary mechanisms that reiterate gender while also providing locations in which resistance can occur, in both construction and reception. However, even as we discuss the possibility of oppositional readings of media messages, we emphasize that such readings are not equally available to all

audiences and that when they are available, they are not readily transformed into counterhegemonic politics. (237)

One such example of media research is the call for programmatic study on the “effects of hegemonic depictions of female bodies on television” (Hendriks). Hendriks suggests that, “in a quest to find answers to the problem [of body image and eating disorders], we need to take one step backwards in the causal chain to ask, ‘Is there a link between media consumption and body image?’” (107). Hendriks then looks specifically at the impact of mediated messages on body image. She ends by stating that her research bears out the following: “The message in the large majority of these advertisements is clear, ‘Thin is in’” (Hendriks 118). This is problematic since the thin body ideal becomes the new hegemony into which many girls and women feel they must force their bodies.

Scholars such as Natalie Fixmer and Julia T. Wood recognize that these hegemonic ideals should not stop the feminist movement. Fixmer and Wood posit that the personal is *still* political and argue that third wave feminist texts focus on redefining identity, building coalitions, and enacting personal resistance as tactics to continue pushing the message of equality (236, emphasis in original). This idea of empowerment is a common thread in critical, feminist communication research, as it is a topic explicitly taken up in the works of several other scholars, including Darlington and Mulvaney, as well as Chavez and Griffin. Perhaps most poignantly, Chavez and Griffin write, “We believe, however, that conversations about what our feminisms are, how we define them, and how they move us forward in the world are among the most important feminist conversations that we could have” (2). Several topics and methods for having these important feminist conversations come under the purview of the next section.

Lastly, I would like to note that the discipline of performance studies within communication has also contributed to the study of the body specifically, and critical methodology more broadly. Here, I am most interested in the how the concept of performance as a way of knowing can be deployed to further my investigation of women and running. Dwight Conquergood provides three “pivot points” for enacting performance as a way of knowing: accomplishment, analysis, and articulation. Here he refers to “the making of art and remaking of culture [...] performing as a way of knowing”; the “interpretation of art and culture [...] concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing”; and “activism, outreaching, connection to community [...] as] contribution/intervention as a way of knowing: praxis” (152). These pivot points dovetail with my research as the stories I am investigating are the actual performance of running, taking the time to articulate to self and others what it means to be a runner, and giving back to the running community. I will examine these stories for clues as to whether and how women come to know and understand what it means to be a runner through the act of running itself—i.e., what happens when one is out on the road?

Dwight Conquergood notes that, “performance flourishes within a zone of contest and struggle” (“Of Caravans” 137). Performance as a way of knowing recognizes that this “zone” is not fixed: it moves, shifts and accommodates multiple performances and identities. Shane Aaron Miller echoes this understanding of performance as a zone of contest and struggle when he argues that,

Athletic competition, based as it is on the *assumption* of a level playing field, contains within itself the symbolic resources that invoke and promote a fluid understanding of gender. For women’s and girls’ success on this supposed level playing field, especially in those instances where that success is in direct

competition against males, is a powerful and direct deconstruction of hegemonic femininity and fixed notions of gender. (176, emphasis in original)

Here, Miller is referring to Judith Butler's work on gender performance and how such performances are sites of struggle both for the individual and those around her.

Furthermore, performance studies allows for the critique of sport from multiple angles, as is noted in the work of Kurt Lindemann on disability and that of Laura Grindstaff and Emily West on "spirit" in cheerleading. These scholars take the body seriously as a site of learning and knowing. Lindemann's work seeks to highlight ways that we can gain insight into "the ways disability is and can be performed in everyday life" (100). Grindstaff and West, in their work on cheerleading, conclude that, for those they interviewed, these performances should not be taken "too seriously or read at face value because the performance frame itself signals unreality" – by this they mean that cheerleaders use this frame as a way to negotiate their understanding that cheerleading is complicit in "reproducing a retrograde and racialized gender script" (159). Through their performance of spirit cheerleading, participants came to know and articulate scripts amongst themselves that weren't always readily available to the audience. Goffman's articulation of performance is helpful here, as he notes the differences between backstage performances and performances on stage. This knowing when one is "on" and "off" is an interesting concept, as it implies that the body recognizes various spaces as safe for one to be less vigilant – at least, subconsciously.

Here I refer back to Conquergood, citing Geertz, who is writing on the fluid and contested nature of identity:

I argue [...] that identity, ethnographically considered, must always be mixed, relational, and inventive.' The idea of the person shifts from that of a fixed,

autonomous self to a polysemic site of articulation for multiple identities and voices. From the boundary perspective, identity is more like a performance in process than postulate, premise, or originary principle. (“Rethinking Ethnography” 184-185)

This understanding of identity is important to mark, as it influences my own perspective towards identity work. If identity is a performance in process that means that women runners are always in the moment of learning, becoming, and articulating who they are and what it means to be a woman runner. Critiquing stories from this perspective allows for a fresh and embodied reading that situates stories as in-process rather than static, past-tense finished works. Using this lens allows me to take the personal-as-political, providing a foundation for assessing the body as a rhetorical artifact.

*Additional Methodologies for the Study of the Body...And More Sport Goodness*

Here, I review scholarship that is informed by the feminist/cultural studies perspective, Michel Foucault’s concept of the technologies of self, as well as political and feminist theorist Judith Butler’s notion of gender performance. While some of the scholars I highlight apply these methods and concepts to sport, others do so to the body more generally. This section, then, serves as a transition to the rest of this literature review on women and sports.

While introducing her reader to feminist cultural studies, Cheryl L. Cole states that, “In addition, this standpoint recognizes that the knowledges and practices produced by sport in advanced capitalism cannot be and are no longer contained by institutional spaces but are dispersed and expressed in the everyday normalizing practices of remaking bodies, identities, and pleasures” (6). It is important to remember that these ‘everyday normalizing practices’ are not gender neutral; rather in many cases they privilege the male sex. “We are talking about the

consequences of women's exclusion from a full share in the making of what becomes treated as *our* culture" (Smith 281, emphasis in original). Moira Gatens puts it more harshly: "I would suggest that this problem is, at least partly, related to the continuing fascination that we have for the image of one body [...] And it is a 'dream of men.' Women, and others, were not copartners in this dream and to attempt to join it at this late stage is as futile as trying to share someone's psychosis" (87).

The work of Michel Foucault is crucial here, as Sandra Lee Bartky explains, "Foucault's account in *Discipline and Punish* of the disciplinary practices that produce the 'docile bodies' of modernity is a genuine tour de force, incorporating a rich theoretical account of the ways in which instrumental reason takes hold of the body with a mass of historical detail" (131). Referring again to Cole, she points out that many of these ideologies are directed at controlling and/or regulating women's sexuality and reproductive capacities, as well as marginalizing sexual difference.

In 1995 Genevieve Rail and Jean Harvey edited a special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* on the influence of Foucault in sports studies, since it is this approach that allows for the (sporting) body to be positioned as a central component of research questions. In the decade that followed this issue, sport sociologists continued to use Foucault in their work, specifically his concept of "technologies of the self" in relation to athletics and physical fitness as a way to probe questions of care, agency, and choice. One of the more prolific scholars in the field, Pirkko Markula, published two groundbreaking articles on this subject. Markula distinguished the technologies of the self as those which result "in a process of subjectification in contrast to the technologies of power that [result] in a process of objectification"; she went on in later work to apply this concept in her research on aerobics teachers by asking questions about identity



construction, body-building practices, and reflection on the ethical use of one's power as an instructor (90).

I return to Judith Butler's work on the body and gender performance, as it is far-reaching and influential. While my review of her work here is brief, I focus on the most important concept that Butler has developed as it relates to the study of sporting culture and its connection with Western culture at large. Butler posits that gender is not something one is born with, but something one learns to perform by engagement with one's culture. "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well" (Butler, "Performative" 404). Gender performance, then, is not static, as there will always be nuances in how one interprets and enacts sociocultural gender norms. As Bartky also notes, citing Butler, "We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement, 'a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh'" (132). One category in which these styles vary is that of the female athlete; as we will see later, this performance is often at odds with what society says is appropriately feminine.

## **Women's Exclusion from, and Reintegration into, Sport**

### *History of Exclusion*

Patricia A. Vertinsky's text, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century* provides an excellent overview of the systemic exclusion of women from sports. Vertinsky traces medical science and practices that posited women as inferior to men. Most notably, the concept of "vital energy," along with the belief that menstruation was a disability, worked hand in hand in the subordination of women in all areas of

life, including participation in sports. Additionally, “Vitalism held that energy for the human organism was derived from a vital force which was limited, non-renewable, and which should be expended only in the service of family, God or the country” (Rail 1). Vertinsky quotes a Dr. Bennett as saying in 1880 that,

many years of the most vigorous and active period of a woman’s life are spent in germinating and suckling her offspring, during which time she is physically capable of little else... The whole sexual system of woman has a profound influence on her physical nature... Indeed her natural muscular feebleness and delicacy of constitution render violent exercise...distasteful to her. (71)

Remembering that this quote was written in 1880, one might not be so surprised that women’s primary ability was seen to be in bearing and raising children. One could understand then, that anything that might jeopardize said ability would be held as suspect at best. However, even today, coaches, doctors, and sporting authorities are highly concerned with what is termed the “female athlete triad.” Noting that no such designator exists for male athletes, the female athlete triad refers to three ‘disorders’ that primarily, or exclusively, effect female athletes: osteoporosis, disordered menstruation, and “energy deficiency” which most often manifests itself as disordered eating (or in other cases, simply not taking in enough calories needed to support physical training). This is just one area where the pathologization of women’s bodies continues to enable our treatment as second-class athletes.

Moving forward in history, Vertinsky also covers the transition from women’s exclusion from sports into the time when moderate exercise and competition was allowed in the early 1900s. Here again, women’s ability to procreate was key in this change. It was determined by doctors that some forms of exercise, when appropriately scaled back, were helpful in women

developing the resilience and stamina necessary for taking care of a family. Sports such as track and basketball were modified so as not to strain women's 'delicate sensibilities.' While women now run the same distances as men in track and field, feminine forms of basketball (smaller ball) and baseball (termed *softball*, smaller playing field, different pitching style), are still being played today, as a way to accommodate women's differing (and often informally assumed to be "lesser") abilities. The overdetermined conclusion is that women are different from men, subordinate to men, and that in the realm of physical capability, they should be treated as such.

### *Title IX*

Of course, this all began to change with the passage of Title IX in 1972: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal assistance" (Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist 67). In their text *Equal Play: Title IX and Social Change*, Nancy Hogshead-Makar and Andrew Zimbalist provide an overview of the legislation and its impact on collegiate athletics. Hogshead-Makar and Zimbalist point out that, "Given that American society is governed by principles of equality, tolerance, freedom, and the rule of law, it seems curious by contemporary standards that equality for males and females in federally supported education [which includes athletics] was ever considered to be a radical idea" (1, see also Cahn 250).

However, not everyone is fond of such radical ideas. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) fought mightily against Title IX, arguing that the legislation would be the proverbial end of men's collegiate athletics. "Behind this ominous claim lay the belief that men's programs would suffer irreparable damage if forced to endure budget cuts, scholarship reductions and the loss of other resources that would go towards the support of women's

athletics” (Cahn 255). Here again, critics of Title IX considered it more important to sustain men’s sports at *current levels* than to even attempt parity for women’s sports.

### *Importance of Participation*

The major problem with the continued exclusion of girls and women in sport is the missed opportunity for females to participate in athletics. Sport is a site of empowerment, where girls and women learn to tap into their inner strength, both physically and emotionally (see Blinde, et al.; Dixon, Warner, and Bruenig; Helstein; Samuels; Toor; and Vertinsky). Blinde et al. identified five areas where collegiate female athletes felt they gained empowerment specifically from their participation in athletics: female bonding, group identity and common goals, enhancing women’s status in society, awareness of women’s issues, and a raising of their feminist consciousness. I was specifically interested in the third and fifth finding (enhancing women’s status in society and raising feminist consciousness), since, as we will see later, often times female athletes are marginalized in Western culture. Blinde et al. elaborate on this point:

Challenging traditional qualities associated with females, women athletes though they were viewed as strong, competent, and independent individuals. Athletes also commented that sport participation shows women ‘in a different light’ by reflecting qualities such as assertiveness, confidence, control, drive, and motivation. (55)

Clearly then, equal, equitable access to sport participation is crucial for girls to grow into women who feel empowered in their bodies (I do note that not all females want to participate in athletics; for those who do, however, it is important that they have the ability to do so).

### **Journalism and Media**

*Coverage Counts: Or, Male Hegemony is Everywhere!*

“Despite the growing level of participation by female athletes at all competition levels and documented fan interest in women’s athletics, coverage of women’s sports remains inferior to that given male sports across all media” (Adams and Tuggle 238, see also Kian, Mondello, and Vincent). As is painfully obvious by now, sport is a male preserve and women are still fighting to be taken seriously as athletes. One part of the problem involves some very sexist circular reasoning. Women’s sports are not covered because ‘no one watches them,’ but since they are hardly ever covered, no one has the opportunity to watch them, and thus, the cycle continues (see Billings and Whiteside and Hardin). Andrew Billings notes, “Women athletes have earned the respect of millions of fans. Sports writers and sportscasters should start to follow the trend. After all, it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It’s about time” (419). In Billings’s analysis of ESPN’s List of the Top 100 Athletes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he discovers that only eight women are listed! “A lack of women athletes on the list says volumes about the past, present, and future through shaping our views about what women’s sports history was in the 1900s and what women’s sports history will be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Billings 416). This lack of coverage works to hide, even erase, the enormous progress female athletes have made in to sporting culture, and perhaps is an attempt to eradicate women’s desire to push even further into the sporting realm. Similar studies in print journalism reveal reluctance to give women space within the sporting imaginary (Henderson). By constructing women as ‘sports cuties’ or sexualized beings, the terrain of sports can remain a place of masculine privilege (Hardin, Lynn, and Walsdorf).

A second part of the issue is the *types* of coverage female athletes receive. The media actively construct women’s sports as less exciting than men’s sports. Greer, Hardin, and Homan found that “Women are presented as ‘naturally’ less suited for sports through coverage that emphasizes their difference from men. Discursive themes present women as weaker, more prone

to emotional outbursts, and less able to handle the stress of sports” (175). Greer et al. examined women’s and men’s track and field coverage at the 2004 Olympic games and unfortunately concluded that, “Masculine hegemony in sport is reinforced when men’s and women’s events are produced in ways that present women’s sports as inferior in entertainment value” (177). Part of the problem is that women athletes are often rhetorically constructed as women first and athletes second (see Daniels); coverage is almost always supplemented with anecdotes about the athletes’ social identities as wives, mothers, sisters, and/or daughters, and the reassuring moral that their sport makes them better at those (patriarchally-constrained) roles.

Additionally, Bissell and Duke conducted an analysis of commentary and camera angles of women’s beach volleyball at the 2004 Olympics. Their findings are not surprising. Commentary on the American team of Kerri Walsh/Misty May was abundantly positive, non-sexist and focused on the team’s dominance during the Games. “With regard to visuals, however, the camera shot, body shot, and camera angles used during the games did tend to emphasize the athletes’ sexual difference, sexuality, and feminine characteristics” (40). Essentially, viewers saw a lot of images taken from behind and focused on the athletes’ butts, clad in bikinis. This type of coverage was the same in the 2012 Olympics, leading Nate Jones to write the hilarious and now internet-famous article, “What If Every Olympic Sport Was Photographed Like [Women’s] Beach Volleyball?” The article is a collection of photographs from Getty Images of male athletes’ rear ends. On second thought, I suppose this is only funny because, in our heteronormative, male-gaze-dominant culture, “everybody knows” that compared to women’s, men’s butts are less sexy and pleasing to look at? (Similar findings were reached by Helene A. Shugart in her work on the 1999 U.S. women’s world championship soccer team.)

However, gender is not the only thing that is constructed in the media. Jamie Schultz presents a reading of Serena Williams's "catsuit" (a tennis outfit described as "a body-clinging, faux leather, black cat-suit") that brings to the forefront how the intersecting issues of race and gender trivialize and distract from Williams's talent. Schultz brings several issues to our attention about the nature of Williams's body in the public eye. First, Schultz interrogates the "catsuit" and discusses how Williams's body is discussed in terms of sexuality, since the suit was equated with lingerie. Schultz also examines the animalistic nature that has long been associated with the bodies of black women, and how this notion was further problematized when Williams herself said, "This is an innovative outfit. It's really sexy. I love it" (345). It seems that there can hardly ever be a conversation about female athletes without talking about their sexuality. As a case in point, Schultz notes that "Sexuality often enters into discourse concerning female athletes [...] With Serena Williams, however, it was not necessarily a case of heterosexualization, but rather that her catsuit was indicative of deviant sexuality" (350).

### **Body Image**

In tandem with media representation of female athletes are the effects such representations have on our self-esteem and body image. "The media are said to be partially responsible for a young female's desire to be extraordinarily thin because of the number of media messages promoting the 'thin ideal.' [...] Because many women and young girls look to the media as a means of better understanding cultural norms and expectations" (Bissell "Sports Model/Sports Mind" 454). A consequence of these images is the high rate of eating disorders in women of all ages. Kimberly L. Bissell states that, "While the cause of eating disorders is largely unknown, one view is that several sociocultural factors play a vital role in the promotion of disordered eating. Because mass media help transmit prevalent U.S. sociocultural values, norms

and ideals, the mass media also operate as important influences on eating disorders and feelings of body dissatisfaction” (“What Do These Messages” 110). This becomes even truer for female athletes, as they already have heightened focus on their bodies.

Christy Greenleaf’s work on athletic body image is important here. She defines athletic body image as “[...] the internal image one has of his or her body and the evaluation of that image within an athletic context” and is concerned with “how athletes perceive and value their bodies as athletes [...]” (Greenleaf 64). Greenleaf’s study of female athletes yielded the finding that most of the women “liked the power and strength of their bodies, yet at the same time recognized that they should avoid becoming ‘too muscular’ in order to fit within cultural norms and ideals” (65). Cultural norms and ideals also take on a material dimension in the form of clothing: most women’s clothes are simply not constructed for a muscular frame.

#### *Body Image and Branding: A Brief History of Nike*

As has been noted by other scholars, Nike has had numerous campaigns in the past 20 years specifically directed at female consumers (see Helstein, Grow, and Cole and Hribar). Tara M. Kachgal’s work on Nike asks whether an earlier version of their website, *NikeGoddess.com*, “constitutes a form of *commodity feminism* [...] where female consumers are encouraged to use consumer goods (Nike products) to reflect their individuality and autonomy, as well as their dismissal of traditional gender roles” (136, emphasis in original). Since the passing of Title IX in the 1970s, girls’ and women’s participation in sport has increased dramatically, thus creating a new niche market for sports-based companies.

Increasing support and acceptance of female athletes necessarily questions and “threatens” the monolith of the male body as the only true and ideal generic athletic body. Cole and Hribar contend that, “Nike has become a celebrity feminist through its rearticulation of



women's issues and the position of bodily consumptions in stabilizing identity in a historical moment marked by instability and insecurity" (350). As noted above, women often struggle with body image and work very hard at making their bodies meet the 'thin ideal' that Nike also propagates.

Nike has become one of the overarching voices that dictate what an appropriate female athletic body is allowed to look like. Generally speaking, women who want to be athletes must also be (hetero)sexy, as numerous scholars such as Markula, Vertinsky, Harris, and Schultz, have pointed out. More specifically, Michelle T. Helstein argues that,

Nike's popular knowledge of what or who the female athlete is continues to increase, and so too does its control over what or who can be constituted as the female athlete, and vice versa. This means that, as women continually measure and police their progress toward excellence, they come to embody the pursuit so that it feels normal, natural, and innocent to aspire to the prescriptions of Nike advertising. The authority of Nike to provide prescriptions to excellence and emancipation, to define what is 'within the true,' is accepted, although the politics behind the production of that truth remains unquestioned. (289)

Without belaboring the point, Nike has historically sanctioned and defined appropriate sports for women. At elite levels, specific sports require specific body types; by only marketing particular bodies, Nike implicitly marks these sports as the ones that are most appropriate for women.

Other scholars, such as Carl J. Singley and Shelly Lucas, have examined previous Nike marketing campaigns and noted how this company places women's bodies in the crosshairs of the appropriate body/appropriate sport debate.

**Strong Sports versus Soft Sports: Are You Tired of Patriarchal Hegemony Yet?**

### *Hard Bodies and Female Masculinity*

The appropriate body/appropriate sport debate sees the most contention around women who participate in what are traditionally seen as men's sports. Sometimes termed "strong sports" (see Dworkin and Mennesson), women who participate in football, rugby, weightlifting, and others tend to upset gender norms and compulsory heterosexuality, where men are strong and women are weak and demure. "Corporeal displays of masculinity disturb the ordering of sex, gender, and incidentally, desire [sex] because masculinity in women has been inextricably annexed to lesbianism, particularly in sport" (Caudwell 376-377). Through her study on women's footballing (soccer) bodies, Jayne Caudwell examines how players negotiate corporeality within masculine hegemony. This link is seen in other realms outside of sporting culture: "There is no question that the varied forms of female masculinity, including transsexuality, have been framed in the mainstream media as a spectacle" (Cooper 45). Even though women are increasingly participating in these sports, there is debate about how much change in this seemingly negative perception there has actually been.

Most of the studies on women who participate in traditionally masculine sports are focused on identity management. Since there is so much negative rhetoric surrounding strong women, this work is crucial to understanding how women cope with the added pressure of negative societal repercussions. Mennesson's study, cited earlier, examined female boxers, while Chu et al. interviewed female rugby players in New Zealand. As rugby in New Zealand is parallel in national importance and male dominance to football in the U.S., female players of both sports face similar obstacles. Even though the women interviewed were often tired of constant challenges to their participation, they continued because of their love for the game, the friendships that they made, and because the game posed a challenge that could only be answered

with their strong bodies. Women breaking ground in these fields have made significant inroads to transforming the notion that women should not have muscles, but even so there is still a proverbial glass ceiling on how strong women can be (Dworkin). It is in women's participation in such sports that female athletes "provide a challenge to hegemonic notions of sex and sexuality, as well as participating in dominant discourses which shape feminine bodies" (Johnston 328).

### *Feminine Sports*

Feminine sports are concerned with grace, beauty, and symmetry—or more concisely, with style. Barry Brummett's conception of the rhetoric of style is useful here, as style is: a complex system of actions, objects, and behaviors that is used to form messages that announce who we are, who we want to be, and who we want to be considered akin to. It is therefore also a system of communication with rhetorical influence on others. And as such, style is a means by which power and advantage are negotiated, distributed, and struggled over in society" (xi).

The style of sports such as figure skating, gymnastics, and cheerleading for women is decidedly feminine. To participate in these sports at elite levels one must be both cute and tiny, and one's strength must be hidden beneath a lithe body than can create beautiful lines and bold, yet demure physical statements. This is most certainly the case in figure skating "where costume, makeup, and gesture feminize and soften the athletic prowess required for executing triple jumps and flying sit-spins" (Feder 63). In her study of figure skating Abigail M. Feder argues that, in a sport where men and women's performance is similar, femininity is over-determined so that it is blatantly clear that women are women (and therefore, not men, so hegemonic masculinity remains intact). Women who participate in "feminine" sports are seen as being

heteronormatively sexy; their physical strength is masked by the beauty and finesse of their sport; they get both more media time, and more traditional types of sexual harassment for being athletes (“Hey, sexy lady!”) (Dworkin, Sowards and Renegar).

### **Women and Running!**

To begin, women have been significantly marginalized, if not outright excluded, from competitive running since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Looking back to the work that Patricia Vertinsky has done on women’s history in sport, it was long thought that even a mile was much too far for a woman to run. Women were not allowed to compete in the marathon at the Olympics until 1984, not even 30 years ago. Pamela Cooper traces women’s history with the marathon, with Katherine Switzer’s rogue entry in the 1967 Boston marathon. At that time women could run alongside men in the race, but not as participant with official race bibs. Switzer understood the difference between being able to run next to men and run as a competitor, so she registered as “K. Switzer” and hid her face and body with baggy clothes until after the race began. When she finally ditched her sweats for shorts and a t-shirt, the race director (having been notified that K. Switzer was a woman) chased Switzer down and tried to tackle her out of the race; however Katherine Switzer finished the race—with the help of her boyfriend, who tackled the race director so that she could continue running!

Over time, women’s running has become not only a prominent pastime, but a well-established genre of competitive athletic events, at all race lengths (Ogles and Masters). Running is now a burgeoning industry, generating millions of dollars every year (Hill and Robinson). One segment of this industry is women’s running books, of which Annmarie Jutel completed an extensive analysis. Jutel found that, “Running books remain a tool which reproduces the discourse of the female body as fragile, in need of extraneous support, and which reinforce

women's traditional role[s] of wife, mother, and nurturer, at odds with other arguments that stipulate an increasing social empowerment of women in the sporting context" (1005, see also Goucher). Since Jutel's study was published in 2009 and addressed texts dating from as far back as the 1980s, I am hopeful that the present study (of more recent texts) will reveal different findings. However, even if my results parallel Jutel's, I am investigating a different facet of such works: I am interested specifically in the identity construction of woman-as-runner, regardless of the other roles women might take on in their everyday lives. I will discuss the texts I have selected at the end of this chapter.

### *Nation-based Studies*

Toni Bruce and Emma Wensing address issues of systemic racism within national culture and the culture of sports in their study of Australian runner Cathy Freeman. During the 2000 Olympic Games, Cathy Freeman, an Australian Aborigine, was chosen to light the cauldron during the opening ceremony. This decision was met with a sense of national pride by some, and overt racial hatred by others. After examining published letters to the editor, the authors conclude that the letter-writers were contesting Freeman's selection as the cauldron lighter, larger ways in which sports and politics were interwoven, and the place of the Aboriginal flag in the Olympic Games. The authors present letters from both sides of the debate, arguing that even though overt racism is not as socially acceptable as it once was, deeply negative feelings towards the Aborigines still remain. The authors did not comment specifically on the influence Freeman had during the 2000 Olympics as a runner, other than to say that her victory in the 400-meter race was a source of national pride.

Theresa Walton presents a strong case for understanding how U.K. marathoner Paula Radcliffe was read as both a triumph and a failure for her country during the London Marathon

in 2003. Walton bases her analysis of Radcliffe on newspaper articles surrounding three key events: the 2003 London marathon, the 2004 Olympic Marathon, and the 2005 World Championship. “Media discourse of Radcliffe offers a site to examine complex, and sometimes contradictory, intersecting ideologies of gendered and raced national representation surrounding her running successes and failures” (289). Walton examines how the media constructed Radcliffe based on her gender: as is typical with female athletes, she was generally pictured with her husband and manager. However as a female athlete, she triggered a sense of national disgrace. Radcliffe set her second world record at the London marathon, but all the reporters could talk about was how embarrassing it was that she beat every man who represented the UK. “Thus, even as Radcliffe represented British success, she concurrently represented British failure, by highlighting the lack of ‘real’ sporting representation that was ultimately male” (291). Radcliff’s win was positioned as a reminder that (male) British athletes need to step up their game. Lastly, Walton challenges the utility of Radcliffe being presented as a “great white hope” for women’s running—this is a framework that “is not particularly helpful in understanding elite women’s distance running since the elite international field in women’s distance running remains a diverse group in terms of geography, skin color, ethnicity, and politics” (296).

But perhaps the most famous instance of a female runner in recent history is that of South African-born Caster Semenya. John M. Sloop’s overview of Semenya’s story is brief and telling:

While it may take a little prodding, those who follow popular culture know at least the bare outlines of the Caster Semenya story. As relayed by mainstream news outlets: in July 2008, 17-year-old South African Caster Semenya won a gold medal in the 800-meter race at the Commonwealth Youth Games. The next year, she won both the 800 and 1,500 meter races. In August 2009, Semenya won the

gold in the 800 meter at the World Championships in Athletics in Berlin, with a year best time of 1:55:45. Hours before the race, news broke that the International Association of Athletics Federations (hereafter, IAAF) was having Semenya undergo both drug and ‘gender tests’ to investigate dramatic breakthroughs in her speed as well as suspicions based on her masculine appearance. (81)

Sloop goes on to address the three questions that were posed concerning Semenya’s gender: Semenya as male and the need for an official gender test; Semenya as female and the rhetorical narrative given by friends and family: just look at her and you know she is a girl; and finally, Semenya as hermaphrodite and the third sex as reification of her difference. It is on this third possibility that Sloop elaborates that this “discourse neither places Semenya in one category or another but maintains the meaning of those categories as a route by which to understand Semenya’s body. [...] the logic does create (or maintain) a meaningful reality for most ‘bodies,’ providing most of us with ‘bodies that matter,’ at the expense of those with bodies that confuse” (88). Furthermore, Dee Amy-Chinn powerfully argues that, “although drawing on hegemonic understandings of sex and gender that are particularly prevalent in sport—a discourse based on the notion of a fundamental and deterministic binary model of sexual difference, combined with an assumption that men have an inbuilt athletic superiority [...]” Semenya faced an epistemic injustice that a male athlete (a ‘real’ athlete?) would never have had to endure.

### *Marking Athletic Identity*

Athletic identity can mean different things to different women, as is the case with any identity category. Women in Mean and Kassing’s study on this topic negotiated their athletic identity by marking difference: “Women marked themselves as different from other women to construct athletic identities [...] Making these claims however required deployment of

hegemonic discourses about gender, femininity, and sexuality, which served to re/produce narrow versions of female athleticism and femininity” (137). Mean and Kassing also found that, while sport is a site of empowerment for women, at least for those whom they interviewed, their athletic identity work was mostly an attempt to manage and negotiate hegemonic gender roles in relation to their athletic endeavors. As I have noted throughout this review of literature, grappling with hegemonic femininity (against and alongside notions of hegemonic masculinity) is a constant necessity of female athletes.

The ways in which we are taught to see our bodies and ourselves, in this thin-and-sex-obsessed culture, contribute to the many struggles female athletes face in managing identity. Michelle T. Helstein offers the following research call, to which my research contributes: “If [...] we are invested in making the production and consumption of sporting identities more just (less oppressive, more inclusive, etc.), we must attend to not only how certain subject positions are constituted within discursive practices but also to why and how the subject forms or does not form temporary attachments (sees oneself) to those discursive subject positions” (98). For example, some elite women runners, who are also mothers, use running as a way to negotiate these discourses: “Running was seen as a way to balance the demands of a new mothering identity with a return to one’s athletic identity albeit in new ways. [...] Co-participants in this study indicated that they [...] viewed themselves as ‘more than just a runner’ after they had their children” (Appleby and Fisher 14).

### *Running Identity*

Stuart L. Smith defines athletes, runners, and joggers as three distinct groups: Athletes are those runners who are elite, and stand a chance to win the race or place in their age group. Runners train at a high level, typically running far more mileage a week than is needed to simply



stay in shape, and they also run at a faster speed than joggers. Joggers are typically fair-weather participants, do not jog on a regular basis, and essentially do not take on jogging as part of their identity. Runners then, are *runners*; joggers jog when the urge strikes them. Smith discusses each group, but spends most of his time on runners. He provides details into whether and how runners distinguish themselves from joggers. Smith points out that, although time—how fast a runner is running—definitely matters in the distinction, “There was a clear trend for slower runners to subscribe to more generous standards and quicker runners to set more demanding ones.

Whatever an individual runner's own performance in terms of pace, the dividing line to which they subscribed invariably meant they were 'safely' on the 'right' side of it” (181). Another key distinction was the idea of dedication (sometimes even bordering on obsession) with running.

Lastly, Smith addressed the social significance of being a runner. Many of the participants said they derived pride from being a runner, especially when someone was in awe of their mileage. Participants were also quite irritated when they were called joggers instead of runners, several indicating that they had quite insistently corrected people who made this mistake.

Whether or not they are ‘elite,’ runners are still a very small minority of the population. Although running is growing in popularity, only about one-tenth of one percent of the entire U.S. population will ever complete a marathon each year (Boudreau and Giorgi). While not all runners complete a marathon, this statistic provides some perspective on the influence of running in the United States. Concomitantly, women who are not elite athletes tend to participate in “welfare running, pursued for health and fitness aims; and also performance running, pursued in order to improve and sustain performance. [...] Elements [of performance running] can usually

be applied to ‘serious runners’, who ‘regularly run further and faster than fitness for health would demand’” (Allen-Collinson 308).

Rupprecht and Matkin found that women who complete multiple marathons had the following motivators in common: struggle, emotion, pride, intimate connections, preparation, and inspiration/transformation. Each of these motivators surfaced at various points in their training; for example, the struggle of dealing with an injury during training, or the transformation that occurs after you finish your first long training run of 10 miles or more. Rupprecht and Matkin noted that, “Several of the participants suggested that marathons were a metaphor for life,” meaning that training and running the race mirror the ups and downs we often experience in our daily lives (327). Furthermore, “it is important to acknowledge that women who choose to train for a marathon are making an investment on many levels—sacrifices made to others (time away), emotional demands (fear of the unknown, lack of belief in self to finish, worry about injury), and physical challenges (intense workouts, proper nutrition, getting rest)” (Boudreau and Giorgi 236, see also Goodsell and Harris; Barrell, et al.).

Benjamin M. Ogles and Kevin S. Masters found four overarching reasons why people participate in the marathon. First, people train for the marathon for physical and health motives, such as improving health, as well as weight concerns; second, some runners are inspired by social motives, such as socialization with other runners and gaining recognition from friends and family. The third category they found is achievement motivation, such as winning a competition or reaching a personal goal; the final category is psychological motives, such as coping with stress or anxiety, increasing self-esteem, and adding a sense of purpose to one’s life. While these categories were gleaned from interviews with marathon runners, specifically, they can be used to gain a sense of what drives other runners as well.

Often, it is personal struggle that leads women to begin running. Boudreau and Giorgi echo this sentiment in the introduction to their study on novice marathon runners:

What happens, however, when a women's inner will is so faint, exhausted, or numb that she becomes paralyzed and just goes through the motions of life? She may dream of a brighter future at work or home and yet fail to take small steps towards creating the life she imagines. She may become defeated in some aspects of her life and not realize that she can have a positive effect on her own life. What would help empower her to become unstuck and propel forward, instead of her merely existing each day? (235)

For the women in Boudreau and Giorgi's study, the answer to these heart-wrenching questions is running. Women not only use running to help get 'unstuck' but also as a way to celebrate who they are, their inner strength and commitment, and their ability to push their bodies.

One element that is often hard to get just right is the relationship between food and exercise. While it is unfortunate that "Buddy the Elf" was incorrect and the four main food groups are not "candy, candy canes, candy corn, and syrup" (*Elf*), Rebecca Busanich and her associates used a narrative approach to ascertain a comprehensive understanding of the body, food, and exercise in relation to distance runners. They found that,

This [narrative] approach holds great promise for enhancing healthful body, food, and exercise experiences and behavioral practices for athletes and exercisers. By attending to the personal stories of athletes and or/exercisers within a cultural (e.g. discursive) context, practitioners can be more reflexive regarding the complex meanings surrounding *disordered eating* and how various aspects of the concept are experienced. (Busanich, et. al, 588-589, emphasis in original.)

Clearly not all runners experience ‘disordered eating,’ but as Busanich et al. found, depending on how hard athletes push themselves, and what cultural scripts they may be following, it is important to “highlight the complex meaning-making process behind such experiences [of ‘disordered eating’] and how they are narratively and discursively shaped and gendered” (588). One’s relationships with one’s body and with food are always multiple and contingent; Busanich and her colleagues found that through grounding their work in cultural studies and using a narrative approach, quite often participants found a “pathway to change via the provision of resistance narratives and broadening the discursive resources for both men and women that construct the physical self” (588). This is important work, as I too am interested in storytelling and how these stories may shape one’s relationship to one’s body.

The women who participated in Megan Kelly Cronan and David Scott’s study “particularly valued two aspects of their [training] experience: forming a community with other women and using their bodies athletically instead of focusing on them aesthetically.” (23). Cronan and Scott also found that participating in sport can be a liberating activity for women and that sport can work as a site of resistance against patriarchal gender norms. “Sport and the female body in particular, are two constructs often defined and judged with a male gaze. Yet within the context of their training programs, participants were reclaiming and repositioning their bodies and their sport” (28). Citing Nancy Theberge, Cronan and Scott further explain, “The potential for sport to act as an agent of women’s liberation, rather than their oppression, stems mainly from the opportunity that women’s sporting activity affords them to experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination” (21).

One of the interesting things about running is that those who run regularly often form a routine, running the same routes, and it can often become mundane. Hockey and Collinson note

that “Training constitutes a central, habitual and mundane activity within the distance runner’s world; mundane in its regularity and routinised nature, but also transcending it, as for many runners and other sports participants, sport in some ways represents an ‘escape’ from the mundane” (“Seeing the Way” 70).

Jacquelyn Allen Collinson and John Hockey also write about “identity work” and “long-term body projects” from personal experience. Both authors are veteran long-distance runners, and both experienced a debilitating knee injury around the same time. Since the two authors normally trained together, they decided to document their two-year recovery process; this article is the outcome of their autoethnographic research on injury and identity. After a discussion of the distance-running subculture, Collinson and Hockey discuss the relevant literature on injury and identity work. The authors discovered three identifications that aid an individual in self-identity work: materialistic identification (physical spaces such as rehab facilities and walking the usual running routes, still dressing like a “runner” even though you are injured), associative identifications (when others still associate you with the former identity), and vocabularic identifications (also called “identity talk,” this occurs when you use language from your former identity to help you recover). The literature and experiences presented in this article are useful on a personal level, and in the larger discussion of women’s running, as injury is an assumed risk of the sport and happens to almost every runner at some point in her career.

Pirkko Markula uses a Foucauldian frame to analyze a novel written by Jenifer Levin. Levin's book is about an African American woman who becomes empowered after she begins running and completes her first marathon. Markula frames the subject position of Celia, the protagonist, as highly oppressed. In addition to being a racial minority, Celia is a lesbian, single-mother, and in a low-paying office job. After realizing that she is slowly becoming an alcoholic

and has gained a considerable amount of weight, Celia decides she must take control of her life; Alberto Salazar, the then-most-recent winner of the Chicago marathon, inspires Celia. Markula grapples throughout the article with issues surrounding the notion of empowerment in regards to the main female character. She questions whether or not women's participation in sport can be transformative when, “[s]port and exercise, as societal institutions, are dominated and controlled by white, wealthy, heterosexual, well-educated 'mainstream' citizens” (100). While Markula insists that there are tensions in understanding how and why women participate in sport, she concludes by noting that “[...] sporting women are living, thinking, feeling subjects, [and] that these feelings and thoughts are deeply influenced by societal discourses” (103).

William Bridel and Genevieve Rail use Foucault’s concept of technologies of power and the self to examine the practices of gay male marathoners, as they are interested in discovering how gay men experience their bodies within and outside of the running culture. By focusing on the bodies of gay men, Bridel and Rail point out that they are focusing on a privileged body type—the “lean, muscular, stereotypically masculine” body, a body type that quite often “subordinates aging and/or female bodies” (130). Bridel and Rail also discuss the concept of surveillance and argue that gay male runners must work to adjust their bodies between two different worlds, the world of running and the world associated with gay culture.

Also using concepts from Foucault, Hanold works to “examine the ways in which high-performance female ultrarunning bodies are created by and understood through the discourses of the normative running body, gender/femininity and pain” (161). Hanold begins by contrasting the bodies of runners as compared to ultrarunners (essentially any race longer than the marathon). Through ethnographic data, Hanold argues that the bodies of female ultrarunners do not, nor do they need to fit into the stereotype of “the runner's body”—tall, willowy, lean and

muscular. The women he interviewed all expressed how the sport of ultrarunning is demanding in ways that marathon bodies are not always equipped to handle and that this is truly a sport where you cannot easily judge or predict a body's performance by the way that it looks. In addition to body size and appearance, Hanold also closely examined the way that pain functions for women ultrarunners. He points out that “pain and injury occupy a prominent place in runners' understandings of themselves” (163). Throughout their narratives, each of the women discussed how pain functioned during races and how they learned to push their bodies past what they thought they could handle. In the end, Hanold concludes that the goal of “pushing the limits and finishing” rather than PR's [Personal Records] or winning, makes ultrarunning a “distinct category of distance running” (173). Here, fast bodies are not (always) the ones that count, rather it is the bodies that are able to dig deep and finish the course.

## **Conclusion**

For my project, I am interested in filling a gap in the literature, by asking how and why women take on the identity of “runner.” Whether professional or amateur, running requires a particular kind of commitment and those who run, from what I have seen, usually deploy some kind of discursive strategy to make their identity as a runner known both to themselves and the public. This means that a communication-based study, particularly a rhetorically-based study, will have a specific advantage: my project will attend to the ways in which women’s discussions of their own identities as runners have the potential to influence their own, and others’, understandings of them as women. Multiple texts on women runners (differentiated from texts that teach women how to run) have been published in recent years, including auto/biographies and books that share the stories of multiple women who run. Based on the research I have reviewed here, there is an ample scholarly audience for such work. I see this project as

connecting work on athletic identity management, running as a specific sport, and how women manage hegemony in their daily lives as female athletes.

### *Justification of Texts*

After searching broadly and browsing widely among the writings on women and running, I have settled on six rhetorical artifacts for examination. In choosing texts to analyze, I decided to focus on texts written by and/or about amateur female runners, so as to gain perspectives articulated in women's own voices. I made this choice in focus because leisure or amateur running lends itself more closely to an agonistic analysis, due to what we might consider a built-in tension between different aspects of themselves: for these women, running is a part of their lives, rather than what their lives are about professionally. I further narrowed my selection to books whose central focus is how running has impacted women's lives. To garner a variety of perspectives, I chose texts that approach this goal through different genres. The texts I selected vary in structure, organization, and style: my selections include a memoir, a self-help book, three anthologies (featuring the first-person narratives of many different women runners), and a novel. Specifically, my chosen texts are as follows: *Sole Sisters: Stories of women and Running* by Jennifer Lin and Susan Warner (anthology); *Tapping the Fountain of Youth: Profiles of Women Runners Over 50* by Carol Hansen Montgomery (anthology); *Women Runners: Stories of Transformation* edited by Irene Reti and Bettianne Shoney Sien (anthology); *Running from Love* by Rozsa Gaston (novel); *Personal Record: A Love Affair with Running* by Rachel Toor (memoir); and finally, *Be Pretty on Rest Days: The Badass Woman's Guide to Running* by Muireann Carey-Campbell (self-help). Taken together, these texts present myriad perspectives and experiences on what it means to be a woman runner; thus they are ripe for analysis and will



present a broad cross-section of contemporary rhetoric on the topic. In the following chapter, I discuss the theories and methods I will bring to bear on these artifacts.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter of my project, I argue that the work of rhetorical scholars should be used as a guide for being (ontology) rather than solely as a tool for understanding (epistemology). Language—our use of rhetoric—shapes how we learn to behave, and through rhetoric, we come closer to understanding who we are. That is, both our rhetorical choices and the rhetoric we encounter should be viewed not just as a framework for understanding, but also as a framework for living. This framework for living is further developed by the notions of radical democratic politics and agonistic pluralism, as conceived by Chantal Mouffe. I will combine these two concepts with ontological feminist rhetoric, to provide a new theory/methodology hybrid for critiquing the female sporting body.

In her theorizing of radical democratic politics, Chantal Mouffe argues that, “The real issue at stake in democratic politics is how to establish the us/them distinction in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy. A pluralist democratic order presupposes that the opponent is not seen as an enemy to be destroyed but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated” (Religion, Democracy, and Citizenship 323). Therefore, inherent in political life is the notion that there will—*and should*—always be inherent conflict between various groups, but that conflict must not be one of enemies but of friendly adversaries. In what follows, I will explore the idea that Mouffe’s conception of agonistic pluralism creates the platform for a radical new ontology, or way of being in the world. As Sophie Bond notes, “Mouffe’s ontology is a relational and differential ontology of lack, rested in the idea that an identity or entity has no essence but only gains its meaning, its fulfillment through its relationship with the Other [...]”

(168). In this regard the “Other” is defined as the person or idea that is adversarial to one’s own position.

With agonistic pluralism as my theoretical foundation, I will then build a methodological framework for feminist rhetorical criticism. My understanding of feminist rhetoric is framed by the work of Michaela D. E. Meyer:

[... feminist rhetoric is] *a commitment to reflexive analysis and critique of any kind of symbol use that orients people in relation to other people, places, and practices on the basis of gendered realities or gendered cultural assumptions.*

[And feminist rhetoric is concerned with how] gendered concepts occur, how they are communicated in daily interactions, and how they transform the practices associated with the [gendered] concept across cultures, spaces, and time. (3, 9 emphasis in original)

My starting point is that gendered concepts teach us how to be “appropriate.” Since what is considered appropriate changes over time, this appropriateness is necessarily both hegemonic and unstable. Therefore, much like agonism is described above, rhetoric (by which we learn how to act, think, and speak) is ontological. The notion that ideas, beliefs, and political perspectives different from mine are *just as valid* as my own, and that these various perspectives are equally destabilized and contingent upon on the ever-changing political landscape, is the foundation for my radical agonistic feminist rhetorical framework. As a feminist rhetorical critic, I believe that Mouffe’s theory and ontology, combined with the understanding that rhetoric is also ontological, will allow me to question rhetorical artifacts from the perspective of identity formation and embodiment.

This theory/method hybrid allows me to ask the following questions of my artifacts: How might the various sides of debates be in legitimate conversation with each other? What commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do both sides have in common that might bring them together to fight for mutually-agreed upon change in the world or political order? How would embodying the notion that one's adversary has just as much a right to be "correct," change how one lives in one's body, in the world? While these questions might not seem rhetorical at face value, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes that, "all rhetorical theories make the ontological assumption that man [sic] is, by nature, subject to and capable of persuasion" ("The Ontological Foundations" 97). I derive my understanding of rhetorical possibilities beyond simple persuasion from Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin's concept of Invitational Rhetoric:

Rather than presenting a predetermined set of options from which individuals may choose, a rhetor who wishes to facilitate freedom allows audience members to develop the options that seem appropriate to them, allowing for the richness and complexity of their unique subjective experiences. Perspectives are articulated as a means to widen options—to generate more ideas than either rhetors or audiences had initially—in contrast to traditional rhetoric, where rhetors seek to limit the options of audiences and encourage them to select the one they advocate. (12)

Indeed, this is precisely Mouffe's goal, which Foss and Griffin echo further, when they cite James A. Herrick's opinion that "'a virtue approach to rhetorical ethics may provide the kind of flexible, yet directive, ethic needed' to maintain the democratic nature of a pluralistic social order" (15). I will explore the notion that agonism-as-lens for feminist rhetorical criticism necessitates the understanding that it is possible and necessary to radically change how we view competing ideas—and hopefully generate additional possibilities—so that we can more fully

engage in the world around us. Foss and Griffin's invitational rhetoric provides theoretical grounding for my understanding of hegemony; since we will never be beyond hegemony (in Mouffean terms), it is paramount that our rhetorics be able to convey the complex and ever-changing nature inherent to working towards liberty and equality for all.

In order to achieve the aforementioned goals, I will first conduct a brief survey of epistemic rhetoric, followed by a discussion of some of the links scholars have made between rhetoric and ontology. Closely related to the discussion of ontology is the important work done on rhetoric and the physical body; bodies are both material and discursive—this branch of scholarship argues that the body should be taken seriously both as a site of rhetorical production and as an entity on which rhetoric is inscribed. The third section will function as a bridge between “body” rhetoric and feminist rhetoric, doing so by relying on examples from sports, media, and religion to illustrate how rhetoric shapes our understanding and lived-experience. Fourth, I provide an overview of Chantal Mouffe's political theory, concepts, and an overview of scholars who have utilized her perspective in their research. Lastly, I build and discuss my methodological framework of radical, ontological feminist rhetorical criticism. I provide a connection between ontological rhetoric and the work of scholars such as Mouffe and her work on agonistic pluralism. The argument I present follows, in part, that of Foucault, where an agonistic relationship to the body is a potentially liberating way to view one's self. Note as well that by understanding rhetoric as ontological, agonistic pluralism suggests a foundation by which multiple feminist ways-of-being can become established.

### **Epistemic Rhetoric**

Rhetoric has been tied—for better or for worse—to notions of “truth,” knowledge, and understanding. The five canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery)

have often been denigrated as tools for the manipulation of truth and knowledge, used by the crafty and dishonest as a way to proffer their tales and falsehoods; however, the connection between rhetoric and epistemology is important, no matter how fractured its history (see Dues and Brown). Brummett argues that generally truth is conceived of as something that is either physically and/or philosophically verifiable and that, “Both of these meanings of truth [...] are tied to epistemology. [...] They require a dichotomy between the nature of reality and the ways of finding out about reality” (“Burke’s Representative” 161). Reality or truth is constructed as being “out there” and thus the goal of epistemic rhetoric is to articulate what is “out there” to be found. In the same article Brummett goes on to state that,

[From an objective standpoint] The truth is a special order of ideas that is possible *not* to know. Rhetoric remedies that ignorance. To the extent that rhetoric is at all *creative*, or adds anything to 'reality,' then it must be indicted by the idealist, for its task is only to make effective the truth. It cannot create or add to the truth. [...]  
From an intersubjective point of view, language is indeed subject to ethical considerations. This is because it creates the meanings that are reality, and does so as much as or more than does physical sensation. (164-165, emphasis in original)

Brummett persuasively argues that while rhetoric does not make something truthful, when deployed, rhetoric does help us understand the truthfulness of a particular ideology or perspective. Ethics are clearly important here, as one would hope and trust that we are being convinced of what is good, rather than what is not. It is for this reason that I hold epistemic rhetoric slightly suspect; this position seems to advocate that we must first be convinced of a position and leaves out the notion that our bodies can already know what is good for us.

The notion of rhetoric as epistemic is important in as much as it relates to popular or common understandings of rhetorical theory and practice. If we consider, for example, the rhetorical construction of arguments regarding a woman's right to abortion versus pro-life arguments, we can see how both sides of the debate use language to craft their understanding of truth. Whether or not it is “more” true for women to have autonomy over their bodies or for babies to be born is not of issue here—my purpose in using this example is to illustrate how epistemic rhetoric is used to shape our understanding and our beliefs. The goal is to win more people over to the rhetor’s perception of what is true. In this example, rhetoric's purpose is to make the truth of either side of the abortion debate effectively persuasive. Rather than the function of rhetoric being the proffering of truth, Burke argues that rhetorical criticism “[...] is epistemic rather than merely evaluative; it generates knowledge of the human condition” (Brummett, “Burke's Representative” 480).

Epistemic rhetoric creates a frame of reference for what we know to be true about the world. For my project, this is a step in the right direction. I am concerned with how rhetoric functions as a way for people to understand who they are as well as how and why they interact in the world. Knowledge about the human condition, what Burke terms “equipment for living,” helps the rhetorical critic gain access to the tools for understanding that groups and individuals use on a daily basis. Epistemology-as-rhetoric is concerned with understanding and sense-making, specifically the language choices that are made in service of that understanding. This approach to rhetorical theorizing assesses the tools that groups and individuals possess and works to articulate what could be considered “best practices.” Epistemic rhetoric is concerned with analyzing how and why arguments/perspectives are crafted and to what ends. Potential guiding questions from this branch of inquiry could be, “How does *Women's Health Magazine*

discuss female orgasm? What options for female sexual pleasure are they providing to their readers and how are these choices rhetorically deployed?” Here, the rhetorical critic would be concerned with notions of epistemology and normative functions—how sexuality is discussed, taught, and commonly practiced.

However, this approach to understanding rhetoric places emphasis on the mind and can be read as reinforcing Descartes's Mind/Body split. Here, rhetoric is ostensibly only in service of how knowledge can be further developed and articulated. This perspective privileges the work of the mind—endeavors such as the sciences, philosophy, and quantitative inquiry in the humanities—and tends to leave the actual art of living unexamined.

This reading is similar to that of Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar who laments, “It is as if rhetoric were in search of its other, the substantive other, who when found would fill out its formal emptiness. But this other which is to provide rhetoric with a grounding, relieve it from that epistemic anxiety with which it has been burdened since Plato, will always elude us” (196). It is my contention that understanding rhetoric as ontological can help further the notion that rhetoric is embodied, a part of what it means to be human. Ontological rhetoric can provide the necessary grounding and relief that (according to Gaonkar) epistemic rhetoric needs. In the next section I will review literature on ontology, rhetoric, and the combination of these two modes of inquiry to further my argument.

### **Rhetoric and Ontology**

Communication scholars such as West and Turner argue that, “Ontology is the study of being and nonbeing [...] ontology gives us a certain vision of the world and of what constitutes its important features” (54). This branch of philosophy addresses the inherent issues related to the nature of being and what aspects of lived reality are most important at a given moment in



time. John T. Warren, in summarizing the work of Deleuze, states that, “ontology is, essentially, a repetition of difference—that is, ontology is a transformative and fluid state, characterized by repetitive acts that are always unique, even if they are historically informed repetitions. Being is fluid, adaptive, and always anew, never ‘simply’ repeating” (297). Warren also draws on the work of Judith Butler, who argues that we come to our identities through repetition and performance (see “Gender Trouble”).

Additionally, I draw on the work of Tony Lawson for my understanding of ontology. Lawson emphasizes that ontology, as an area of study, is concerned with the nature of reality and operates from the perspective that we are able to understand the world in which we live and that our experiences, relationships, and human conditions are actually possible. Lawson argues that, “social structures have causal powers that are irreducible to those of human individuals. For example, social structures such as language systems emerge out of human interaction, but have powers of their own that are irreducible to the human speech acts on which they depend” (121). Ontological rhetoric addresses how language structures reality by allowing for the creation not only of social hierarchies, including gender and religion, but also our very ability to describe and analyze our mundane experiences. Furthermore, “Ontological analysis, then, can provide insight. [...] Ontology can indicate possibility, at most the conditions of actualities. It cannot determine which configuration of possibilities will or will not be actualized in any context” (Lawson 122). This type of analysis cannot determine what *will* be, but rather helps the critic determine what *is* and why those configurations persist.

James W. Chesebro’s commentary on how epistemology and ontology fit into the study of Communication, and rhetoric specifically, is quite useful here:

all methods of rhetorical criticism presume that distinct substantive entities exist, an ontological assumption, while simultaneously holding that human beings create, construct, or impose—to some degree—their own understandings regarding these entities, an epistemic assumption. [...] the ontological-epistemic dialectic figures in a rhetorical conception which posits that the story teller, story, and those who listen to the story are discrete (an ontological assumption), while likewise holding that the story may redefine the understandings of both the story teller and those who listen to the story (an epistemic assumption). (179)

I am interested in the discrete stories, storytellers, and those who listen to said stories. I take for granted that the stories we hear change our perspective; what I am curious about is how we come to specific stories in the first place, how our being shapes what we come to know.

For Bryan Crable's understanding of Burke's dramatic ontology, the focus is on Burke's understanding of language: "Dramatism is ontological because it begins [...] with the assumption that 'language in particular and human relations in general can be most directly approached in terms of *action* rather than *knowledge*'" (327). Crable goes on to explain this position, stating that, "Language, then, is not simply matching verbal label and nonverbal entity. Definition requires the selection of a particular circumference from which the entity receives its 'intrinsic' character. This is to say that a thing is not so much *represented in* as *constituted by* language" (emphasis in original, 328). By putting Chesebro and Crable in conversation then, we are come to the understanding that we are constituted by the stories we hear. This constitution is ontological and provides the foundation for my radical feminist reading of women's running stories.

The combination of rhetoric and ontology addresses a fundamentally important perspective, for as Campbell notes and I quoted above, “all rhetorical theories make the ontological assumption that man [sic] is, by nature, subject to and capable of persuasion” (97). This perspective posits that our reality is shaped by our ability to be persuaded by and to use persuasive language. For Campbell, theories of symbolic behavior provide the most productive and comprehensive approach for understanding rhetoric as ontological:

[...] persuasion is a process in which the individual creates his [sic] meaning through detecting, identifying, and interpreting the stimuli he [sic] receives and which is integrated into and hence influences his [sic] perceptual framework. Persuasion is necessary because men [sic] are alienated, requiring persuasive uses of language to induce identification and cooperation in order to overcome the conflicts natural to the human condition [...] (104)

Power, language, and other social institutions make necessary an approach to rhetorical theorizing that questions the nature of reality, human interaction, and identity. “What is needed is an ontological orientation that allows for persuasive action at times, but all the while mitigating the cognitive traits associated with reifying control and change as 'natural' facets of one's being-in-the-world” (Stroud 152). Persuasion is not inherently manipulative nor does it need to be focused on what needs to be fixed; its purpose goes beyond control and eliciting blind allegiance. Rather, the persuasive element of rhetoric can and should be used to understand and critique how we use language to shape our realities and make selections from available life experiences. Like Stroud, Campbell, and Lawson, this is where I begin my project of articulating the need for an ontological approach to rhetoric.

In looking for other articulations and applications of ontology, Maithree Wickramasinghe's feminist work on gender as ontology is especially helpful:

ontology is itself highly dependent on numerous variables such as time, age, location, class, race, sexual orientation, transgender status, external conditions and events. [...] Consequently, gender as ontology must be envisaged as fundamentally relative, fluid and in a state of flux. (608)

It is important to remember that what is real and what it means to be a good woman constantly change as fads, trends, and new “requirements” and products are developed. How we interact with rhetoric is not neutral; it is shaped by who we are, and the kind of language to which we have access, all of which are based on class, race, gender, and a host of other factors.

My work in this chapter is also in part a response to Lesli K. Pace's work on rhetoric and ontology: “As we proliferate feminist ontologies, our epistemological claims are no longer burdened with the valuation of materiality and discursivity. Thus, we refocus our scholarship and address feminist concerns differently in the future” (182). The kind of rhetoric I am espousing requires that we consider these factors in our analysis, in our construction of persuasive messages, and in our taking on of rhetorical positions, for we literally embody the rhetoric we espouse. For my work then, ontology is the understanding that our very beings are constantly in flux: we are always transforming, growing and regressing. The kind of analysis I hope to do will provide insight into the connections between women and running stories and point to the possibilities that emerge at that intersection.

### **Feminist Body Rhetoric: A Brief Literature Review to Craft a Perspective on Being**

Drawing on scholars across the field of Communication, my aim in this section is to articulate how rhetorical analysis of the body can serve as a starting point for theorizing rhetoric

as ontological. At the outset, a definition of feminism is crucial: “Feminism is a politics. It is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society. These power relations structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (Weedon 1). Using analyses that interrogate media representations, religious texts, and sports, I will illustrate how the body is shaped rhetorically across various social contexts.

To begin, Shannon L. Holland examined popular media representations of Private First Class Jessica Lynch following her release from captivity in Iraq. Holland points to the discrepancy in gender hierarchy where women are always already deemed the antithesis of male strength and military might. Although serving in the U.S. Armed Forces unquestionably requires strength and fitness, this difference in gender expectations leads to Lynch's body being rhetorically situated as infantile and in need of saving by her male comrades:

For many people, Lynch's body has 'come to matter' as an icon of female essence, a symbol used to sustain the gender binaries both inside and outside military culture. [...] The conclusion drawn in many of these accounts suggests that the sexual assault and victimization of military women and the erosion of masculine prowess are the inevitable results of a failed politic [i.e. feminism] that attempts to belie the reality that men and women are fundamentally different.” (45)

At stake here is to what extent women's bodies and experiences are taken seriously—as both contributors to and victims of military culture. Neither the maleness of the military nor its concomitant violence towards women are inherent. Indeed, understanding the rhetoric of the

military as ontological and material allows for a critique of this system as shaping and allowing this particular reality to develop and etch itself on the bones of both men and women.

Drawing in part on the indispensable work of Susan Bordo, D. L. O'Brien Hallstein critiques the female postpartum body in popular media. Like Holland's work on Jessica Lynch, O'Brien Hallstein interrogates the construction of the celebrity mom's body post-birth. Changes in society's expectations of women's bodies—that they should be always already sexually alluring, slender, and now aerobically and muscularly fit—has placed extreme emphasis on the celebrity mom's ability to regain her pre-pregnancy body. “The convergence of these two cultural changes has had a profound impact on the understanding of both the pregnant and postpartum body and plays a central role in how the quickly slender, even bikini-ready, body works rhetorically to simultaneously acknowledge and refute second wave feminism” (O'Brien Hallstein 118). O'Brien Hallstein correctly points to the ever-more-rigid body norms that women encounter on a daily basis. Clearly these norms are experienced differently by different women, but O'Brien Hallstein's scholarship points to the overarching trends that require women to be a particular definition of “healthy.” This work is crucial to my project as it illustrates the rhetorical methods deployed by larger institutions to regulate women's bodies. By making a particular body-type the ideal and articulating that body as being in the realm of possibility, women's choices can be shaped and constrained beyond just how they feel about themselves; the reality of what is required to be a woman changes over time as this rhetoric is perpetuated (Chernin, Tavis).

Furthermore, issues of identity and sense of self are necessarily rhetorical and ontological. “Selfhood is a fundamental issue that not only shapes how humans live their individual lives but also how they relate to each other in their social lives. The much celebrated

American Self is [an] autonomous, independent, and achievement-oriented individual” (Cai 280). While the female athletic body is only one example, the female athlete (both amateur and pro) has become a staple in popular culture, as can be seen in even a cursory glance through magazines and books. The woman who is physically active, which is not necessarily the same as a female athlete, is constructed in memoirs and self-help books as being strong and happy, possessing more fulfilling relationships with friends and family, as well as a sense of purpose and self-esteem (see Samuels; Lin and Warner; Toor). The ability to achieve this new female ideal is heralded in magazines as only taking a few minutes per day, requiring a quick change in your daily routine, or a simple commitment to one's health and fitness. Women are presented with contradictory ontologically-based rhetoric: it seems impossible to ever become the women we are supposed to be, as *something* is presented as always being ‘wrong’ and in need of toning.

We can better understand this by looking at Naomi R. Rockler's research on the NBC hit sitcom *Friends*. This research led her to two important questions surrounding the intersections of feminism, rhetoric, and ontology: “How is it that so many young women learn to understand women's issues in therapeutic ways and to reject systemic change and collective action as solutions to these issues? What rhetorical strategies are deployed within our discourse that contribute to this hegemonic outcome?” (246). Like Rockler, I am concerned with how feminism/rhetoric are being inscribed on the bodies of both men and women; rhetorical choices, made by television executives, academics, and activists shape whether and how people come to understand and resist domination, social pressure, and hegemony. Unfortunately, and Rockler is quick to point this out, popular media representations do not seem keen on dealing with these important issues. Rockler notes that the characters on *Friends* fail to realize that their personal struggles are connected to a political system with systemic issues that exist beyond their

individual experiences. Rockler draws on Burke's concept of “equipment for living” as an important rhetorical tool, since it allows us to consider the vantage point(s) from which people interact with the world.

It is important to remember that Western understandings of communication, gender, and the self are not the only perspectives from which we can choose. While this approach is certainly dominant in U.S. American culture, Stroud presents the *Bhagavad Gita* as an alternative source for rhetorical theory. The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient Hindu text that calls followers to renounce attachment with the world while simultaneously working on behalf of the betterment of society. Stroud argues that “[...] the *Bhagavad Gita* can open the concept of rhetoric and its practice up to a way of orienting oneself toward actions in society that does not involve the purpose of one's goals as the be-all-end of existence, [...] rhetorical education can contribute to the complexity of options and viewpoints that one has available” (156). This is an explicit ontological shift from Western individualism. As a source of knowledge, Stroud presents the *Bhagavad Gita* as an alternative to the fierce physical requirements and the reach-the-finish-line mentality that can be so present in our daily lives (this is especially important to remember, as my topic of study is athletics!). This perspective provides further grounding for my project in marking and critiquing gender roles, as they are variously experienced in Western culture.

### **Chantal Mouffe**

Chantal Mouffe is a political theorist whose major contribution is the development of “agonistic pluralism” as a theoretical concept for radical democracy; in this section I will outline Mouffe’s key concepts using her original texts, as well as secondary texts that have contributed to my understanding of her work. Agonistic pluralism is way of being requiring that we be in zealous conversations with an adversary. Mouffe defines an adversary as, “[...] somebody whose



ideas we combat but whose right to define those ideas we do not put into question” (*Paradox* 102). Agonistic pluralism then, is a political strategy that puts opposing groups and individuals in dialogue with each other. The purpose of these negotiations is to further our understanding of cultural ideology, identity and values in a way that validates the various needs, beliefs, and perspectives of those who are present at the proverbial “table.” This means that we must be willing to listen to and legitimately consider perspectives that we would rather ignore or find distasteful—if and when all groups/people are working towards liberty and equality for all, as Mouffe calls for an understanding of democracy that “requires a ‘conflictual consensus’: consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation” (*On the Political* 120). This places Mouffe’s theory in a somewhat lofty position: not everyone is welcome at “the table”; however she recognizes that marking positionalities as il/legitimate “is always a political decision, and that it should therefore always remain open to contestation” (120). The plurality Mouffe posits, which “requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the agonistic debate and those which are to be excluded” is what makes discussion of the implementation of liberty and equality for the good of all an actual possibility, rather than just a mere fantasy.

Chantal Mouffe also provides an excellent framework for understanding and dealing with hegemony in the political order. By introducing pluralism, Mouffe provides a ‘way out’ from under monolithic and (post)structuralist gender norms, religious beliefs, and associated practices. This ‘way out’ allows female athletes to be taken seriously since the male=strong/women=weak dichotomy is no longer simply accepted (nor even simply resisted) as the prevailing social norm. The concepts that are necessary for understanding Mouffe’s conception of hegemony are

politics, the political, radical democracy, and agonistic pluralism. Combined, these concepts provide the platform for what I will later develop: a radical ontology of feminist rhetoric.

Agonistic pluralism, as presented by Mouffe, can be conceived of as a new way of being in the world, that when deployed rhetorically can work to mitigate the discursive and material effects of hegemony. Mouffe recognizes that we must “acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them, while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power – this is what is specific to the project that we have called ‘radical and plural democracy’” (*Paradox* 22). While this may seem counter-intuitive, it is my position that by recognizing the various hegemonic requirements that are put on our bodies, and by attempting to understand the motives behind this rhetoric, we can begin to envision a way of being where we create inroads to the structures within which we live, so that we can carve out space(s) for change.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler works to further develop her concept of gender performativity, which is useful for understanding how we can begin to carve out the space(s) for change. Additionally, the concept of gender performativity is critical to the work that I am doing here, as I am interested in how women enact and take on the identity of *woman* runner. Butler points out that,

There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the ‘we’ cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a

reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed. (*Bodies* 84)

Here, Butler is arguing for an understanding of gender performance that recognizes that we are at once constituted by “cultural and political discursive forces” and that we constitute those very forces by our performance of them (*Bodies* 84). Butler also uses the example of juridical law, in relation to Althusser’s notion of interpellation, to explain this back and forth, both/and functionality of performativity. Butler points out that the very call of the law—the moment of hailing—necessarily allows for the possibility of refusal, creating an opportunity for what Butler terms a “consequential disobedience” (*Bodies* 82). This unintended consequence of hailing provides the necessary slippage for new and radical performances. (Butler goes on to provide an analysis of drag performances; I see a potential parallel here, in the ways women’s running bodies defy traditional gender norms.) Butler also points to the notion of citational practices as a way of understanding sex and gender performance:

Where the law appears to predate its citation, that is where a given citation has become established as ‘the law.’ Further, the failure to ‘cite’ or instantiate it correctly or completely would be at once the mobilizing condition of such a citation and its punishable consequence. Since the law must be repeated to remain an authoritative law, the law perpetually reinstates the possibility of its own failure. (*Bodies* 71)

I see this working in relation to women running through the citation or repetition of running norms and gender norms concurrently, where the risk of failing to perform either or both correctly is always a possibility, even a probability or an inevitability, since in some ways running norms contradict feminine-gender norms (and vice versa). This tension between and

amongst the various ‘laws’ that women runners must negotiate illustrates precisely the instability of said ‘laws’ in the first place. This instability does not negate risk however, as Butler goes on to point out that,

there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely. (*Bodies* 86)

For my purposes then, I am interested in how women choose to take on (and how they may resist) the identity of runner, and how they understand the performance of that role as it impacts their lives and the other roles that they may choose to take on (or may resist, or at times, be forced to adopt). Here, Butler is speaking specifically to the performance of gender as “man” or “woman” and points out that the being of these genders are inherently unstable. This is an important point, for the obvious reason that the ability to be a runner is dependent on a variety of factors at the physical level, and that the gendered performance of running can vary greatly.

This leads me to the connections that Butler provides between gender performance and Mouffe’s conception of the political. To begin, Butler makes the point that the very terms that are meant to function as political “rallying points”—‘woman’ and ‘runner’ in my case—never fully constitute one’s identity because those points are necessarily unstable. “Iterability underscores the non-self-identical status of such terms; the constitutive outside means that identity always requires precisely that which it cannot abide” (*Bodies* 140). Butler then moves on to discuss how political signifiers, specifically those that designate subject positions, come to have various meanings.

No signifier can be radically representative, for every signifier is the site of a perpetual *meconnaissance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers—‘women’ is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. It is what opens the signifiers to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification. It is this open-ended and performative function of the signifier that seems to me to be crucial to a radical democratic notion of futurity.

This understanding provides further grounding for Mouffe’s concept of agonistic pluralism; there is and always will be tension surrounding what it means to be a woman runner. My work here is to engage that tension, map its potential boundaries and tell the stories that make up its landscape. Linking Butler to Mouffe then, allows me to negotiate the signifier of ‘woman runner’ as a necessarily unstable political signifier, a starting point from which multiple performances can emerge as enactments of the-personal-is-political struggle. But these moments are not born out of pure choice: “the reading of ‘performativity’ as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms (the ‘chains’ of iteration invoked and dissimulated in the imperative utterance) constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (*Bodies* 139).

While Mouffe’s discussion of agonistic pluralism is not structured for analysis of an individual’s lived experience, I will argue that this perspective can be used at the micro level. Clearly there are dissenting and diverging opinions about what constitutes the ideal female body; however, agonistic pluralism provides a lens for filtering these perspectives to reveal the possibility of a commitment to liberty and equality. In the remainder of this essay I will

periodically use this example of the ideal female body as a touchstone to illustrate the utility of agonistic pluralism at the level of the individual. For now the “table” (specific to this project is the “women’s running table”) mentioned above is surrounded by all the competing and contradictory notions of beauty, choices for occupation, lifestyle, religion, politics, food, activities, etc., with which a person is familiar. Agonistic pluralism allows us to consider all of the available rhetorical modes of being that are available to us at any given moment, recognizing that those options change over time as some are added and others are no longer available (for a multitude of reasons). Indeed, the approach that Mouffe is advocating has as the aim of radical democratic citizenship the establishment of a new hegemony that has as its foundation interactions built on equality in social relationships, institutions, and cultural practices. This new hegemony is ever-changing, always contested, and necessarily contingent; this is what allows for the radical notion of *pluralist* democracy.

Mouffe begins her discussion of agonistic pluralism by detailing the implications of how power and hegemony are deployed rhetorically.

Since any political order is the expression of hegemony, of a specific pattern of power relations, political practice cannot be envisaged as simply representing the interests of preconstituted identities, but as constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain. (Mouffe, *Paradox* 99-100)

Here Mouffe is working to refute the opinions of Rawls and Habermas who concur in their belief that we come to politics, argumentation, and our bodies as already-constituted individuals, the belief being that ‘we make the arguments, the arguments don’t make us.’ Like Mouffe, I fundamentally disagree with Rawls and Habermas and instead contend that the arguments and politics we encounter shape us, and our bodies.

I recognize that agonistic pluralism can be read as tolerating (and requiring that we listen to and legitimately consider) hegemonic sexism, racism, ableism and unrealistic expectations for the female body. Moreover, the idea that we should respect varying opinions, search out common ground, and listen to everyone's perspectives are rhetorical strategies that are commonly attributed to women and are thus deemed less compelling than traditional, masculine logic. However, Mouffe articulates conditions that protect agonistic pluralism from becoming synonymous with 'doormat' behavior: Not every idea counts as agonistic in nature, because not every idea is in line with democratic principles. Mouffe's theory requires that to be considered a citizen or member of the agonistic, plural community, one must agree to the democratic principles of liberty and equality. Mouffe points out that,

The view of citizenship I want to put forward as the one required by a project of radical and plural democracy is that of a form of political identity that consists of an identification with the political principles of modern pluralist democracy, that is, the assertion of liberty and equality for all. It would be the common political identity of persons who might be engaged in many different enterprises and with differing conceptions of the good, but who are bound by their common identification with a given interpretation of a set of ethico-political values

("Return" 83)

For Mouffe, citizenship works as the common denominator for all other identities; it informs how individuals see themselves in all aspects of their lives—justice, equality, and liberty become the filter for how one embodies gender, race, class, religion, and politics. This Mouffean understanding of agonistic pluralism allows us to highlight our differences, so that what remains are our similarities. While this is no easy task, it is indeed the type of work that must be done if

various groups (e.g., third-wave feminists and post-feminists) want to work together for social change.

I also draw on Debra Hawhee's work to further address this concern. Hawhee traces the use of agonism as a term from ancient Greece and notes, “for the sophists at least, agonism produces rhetoric as a gathering of forces—cultural, bodily, and discursive, thus problematizing the easy portrayal of rhetoric as telos-driven persuasion or as a means to reach consensus” (186). The purpose of agonism is not to convince everyone to be on the same page or to come up with an absolute truth, but rather it is a way to negotiate and validate the needs and perspectives of everyone. Agonistic pluralism presents the opportunity, for those who take dialogue seriously, to navigate political differences to reach a desired end-state of being and reality.

Agonistic pluralism as a political approach allows women to craft a space for ourselves on the basis of our own legitimacy, our own definitions of what our bodies should look like and accomplish, what we find to be fulfilling, and discuss the ways in which current systems both allow for and hinder women's success. Thus it is that much more important that Mouffe brings the feminist notion that “the personal is political” to the table (see Weedon). To assume that politics, and by extension rhetoric, should only be concerned about the struggle over resources or access to rhetorical choices, is to ignore issues of power, according to Mouffe: Power is exerted in additional ways that have not been considered in current studies of rhetoric, ontology, and the body. “It is to ignore the limits imposed on the extension of the sphere of rights by the fact that some existing rights have been constructed on the very exclusion and subordination of others” (Mouffe, *Paradox* 20). This position forefronts the notion that political systems must be understood as inherently hegemonic, privileging some at the expense of others. However, agonistic pluralism mitigates these discursive and material effects of hegemony by crafting a



system where ideas are validated as potential options—not requirements—and allowing for the possibility of rhetoric to function ontologically: we are free to choose and shape our bodies and our minds according to the principles we find most compelling.

A brief overview of post-structuralism is also necessary for understanding Mouffe's theoretical position. Post-structuralism-as-theory allows for a fuller understanding of the gender order in which we live. Here, I draw on Chris Weedon:

The analysis of the patriarchal structures of society and the positions that we occupy within them requires a theory which can address forms of social organization and the social meanings and values which guarantee or contest them. Yet it must also be able to theorize individual consciousness. We need a theory of the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power. We need to understand why women tolerate men and the mechanisms whereby women and men adopt particularly discursive positions as representative of their interests. This is the agenda which a feminist poststructuralism might consider.

(12)

Post-structuralism provides for the contingency and flexibility necessary for a pluralist democratic politics. Mouffe states that because of the foundation post-structuralism provides, “the project of radical and plural democracy is able to acknowledge that difference is the condition of the possibility of constituting unity and totality at the same time that it provides their essential limits. In such a view, plurality cannot be eliminated; it becomes irreducible” (*Paradox* 33).

Weedon also notes that it is in the work of Foucault where post-structuralism is articulated as a perspective that creates spaces for the potential of plurality; the “constant deferral

of meaning, and the precarious, discursive structures of subjectivity are integrated into a theory of language and social power which pays detailed attention to the institutional effects of discourse and its role in the constitution and government of individual subjects” (104). This understanding is key to my work, as I am interested in how agonistic pluralism can help destabilize patriarchal gender roles and allow female runners to craft identities in conversation with, but not dictated by, our society.

The literature I have presented offers numerous examples of how the availability of rhetoric shapes our lived experience and thus influences our understanding of reality and what it means to be. Popular culture presents numerous examples of gendered expectations, which hem in how women and men are perceived and presented as good or useful in society. Based on my overview of literature in the Communication discipline, it seems clear that we have a strong understanding of the influence of patriarchy, sexism, and media saturation. This foundation is important as I move forward into new areas of theorizing, remembering that I operate from the perspective of feminist rhetoric. This scholarship provides the baseline for coming to terms with what my options are as a woman in this culture, for I too am constrained by the mores, taboos, privileges and oppressions that being a woman affords me. Moving forward, I will now add an additional conceptual level to my argument, that of agonistic pluralism, as a way to theorize new ontological relationship(s) with the self.

### **Feminist Rhetorical Criticism + Agonistic Pluralism**

Writing on feminist ethics, pluralism, and different types of rhetorics, Margaret Urban Walker provides, in part, the impetus and courage for this project:

In any case, I think that feminist thinkers are entitled to the excitement and intellectual challenge of forging and intensively testing visionary paradigms, of

inaugurating their own discursive communities as sites of solidarity and creative communication in their own terms, and of self-consciously exploring confrontational rhetorics as some instruments, among others, for initiating wholesale intellectual change in their favor. (154)

As detailed throughout this chapter, feminist rhetorical criticism is a method for engaging with the world through focusing on gendered concepts and practices, as well as transforming the world into a more equitable place for all. Feminist rhetoric is a method, a way of writing, and a perspective on being in the world. Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards have worked extensively to develop the foundation for a theory of feminist rhetoric “[...] that demonstrates the importance of language and rhetoric, eliminating pain and humiliation from our language, demanding solidarity among all sorts of humans, highlighting social hope and optimism, and providing a theory that tolerates, mediates, respects, and encourages difference” (“A Unifying” 332, see also Sowards and Renegar).

The concept of the second persona (Black) and the ideological turn in rhetorical criticism (Wander) will be useful in this study. Black describes the usefulness of the second persona as a way to effect moral judgment of the discourse: “The critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his [sic] real auditor become. What the critic can find projected by the discourse is the image of a man [sic], and though that man [sic] may never find actual embodiment, it is still a man [sic] that the image is of” (90-91). Black’s paradigm allows for the critic to imagine, through analysis of the text, whom the rhetor is addressing (the auditor); Black argues that this should, in part, be the goal of criticism, since “We know how to make appraisals of men [sic]. We know how to evaluate potentialities of character. We are compelled to do so for ourselves constantly. And this sort of judgment, when

fully ramified, constitutes a definitive act of judicial criticism” (91). Essentially, *morally assessing* words on a page is a task that, until Black’s essay, critics had avoided. Black is calling for a critique of the citizens whom those words call into being.

Concomitantly, what is required to more holistically complete a Blackean analysis is an understanding of ideology, “The partiality of a world view, body of belief, or universe of discourse,” from which the rhetor operates (Wander 97). Wander points out that,

A more catholic and, I think, surer grip on ideological analysis understands that it does not force a doctrinaire rejection of Idealism in favor of Materialism or the dismissal of Aristotle in favor of Marx or Habermas. What such a critique draws out is the emancipatory moment in whatever tradition, event, or text that is of concern. (99)

Wander asks the critic to look, in some sense, beyond the text(s), to the larger political and institutional landscape. Wander is quick to note that, “More than ‘informed talk about matters of importance,’ criticism carries us to the point of recognizing good reasons and engaging in right action. What an ideological view does is to situate ‘good’ and ‘right’ in an historical context, the efforts of real people to create a better world” (111). This too, is the goal of my project.

Black and Wander present what might be termed “traditional” models of rhetorical criticism. While these are useful and applicable, Bei Cai notes that in recent years feminist rhetorical critics have had some success in pushing traditional rhetorical models forward to account specifically for women’s lived experiences, but that it takes courage to work against established templates for rhetorical theorizing. As I pointed out in my introduction, I will be using a template developed by Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough to help organize my project. While these authors were examining the consciousness-raising strategies of already-established

small groups, I will be using their framework to assess texts as *tools* for consciousness-raising. It is my intention to discern whether or not women's running books create the possibility for consciousness-raising and change in the way women live in their bodies and in the world.

Using consciousness-raising as a lens for women's running texts affords me the opportunity to further politicize these texts and examine them from a Mouffean perspective. There are two aspects of consciousness-raising documents that are important to my analysis. The first is that, in part, the texts I will be examining function as a sort of consciousness-raising tool. It is my job as rhetorical critic to bring to the fore the ideological and political ramifications of these texts, which Norman notes are generally absent in any overt fashion. This is in part because "the personal is political" is not a present idea in women's running books. Brian Norman argues that the consciousness-raising document,

privileges experiential knowledge over ideology or political philosophy. Shared experiences provide access to a provisional speaking 'we' that will weigh in on key issues. In this way the narratives articulate how group members are personally shaped by and respond to the multiple demands of race, gender, nationality, and class [...] (41)

I, too, will examine the selected texts for narratives of how women runners are shaped by and respond to the demands of their chosen leisure activity along with the "regular life demands" that come up in their stories.

Secondly, I am using consciousness-raising as a lens, because I believe, along with Clair, Chapman, and Kunkel, that a feminist project should be grounded in the lived experiences of women. A key component of consciousness-raising is sharing stories with one another. As a feminist rhetorical scholar, I argue here that women's stories, or personal narratives, should be

the foundation for scholarship. By personal experience, I mean “the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events” (Foss and Foss 39). Foss and Foss point out that,

The data of personal experience in feminist scholarship usually assume the form of women’s personal narratives about the events of their lives, their feelings about those events, and their interpretations of them. They reveal insights into the impact of the construction of gender on women’s lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression, and their perspectives on what is meaningful in their lives. (13)

Clair, Chapman, and Kunkel echo this notion: “Sharing personal experiences, both of accepting and resisting oppression, draws its strength from the reality of women’s everyday lives. Such narratives form the fabric of social change” (246). Lastly, “Consciousness-raising is central to the process of creating a critical awareness of our culture” (Sowards and Renegar, “The Rhetorical Functions” 535). In running, moments of clarity come when one is out on the trail or running the roads; life comes into focus, both its goodness and its injustice. This critical awareness, or consciousness-raising, is one storytelling aspect that I am looking for in my analysis. I am curious to find out how coming to consciousness might be portrayed on the pages of these texts, what choices the rhetor might make to present her experience(s) to the reader, and how this new consciousness might clash with life as the rhetor knew it before.

One of the goals of my research agenda is to be a part of this challenge to the establishment, and to answer the call put forth by Michaela D. E. Myer, that feminist rhetoric should, “elevate those voices [working against oppression] and their choices in constructing their rhetorical agendas. Perhaps in the next forty years, with a commitment to redefinitions of gender,

agency, and power, we will produce rhetorical strategies for women that provide tools to combat our existing social system” (13). I hope that the framework I suggest here will be such a tool.

Each of the approaches I have discussed, taken together, provide a rationale for being that I find liberating and yet, it still holds me accountable for my use and embodiment of rhetoric.

Like Lesli K. Pace, I too am making the following claims:

'a way of being' and 'a theory of being' should not be treated as two distinct notions. To be clear, I am advocating that 'being' changes as a result of recognizing the constitutive nature of both materiality and discursivity. In essence, not only does theorizing feminist ontologies change the way we study existence, it also provides the opportunity to 'be' differently. (50)

The more I contemplate my own existence, the more aware I become of my own rhetorical choices and that fact that I both *embody* and *encounter* the rhetoric that shapes me; it is always already on my body, and yet, to some extent I can choose what I allow to be inscribed on my person. Cai remarks that there has been success in furthering feminist theory and rhetoric but this change in perception is difficult as it requires challenging traditional notions in the field. “The ongoing challenge for feminism is to integrate itself with other facets of identity and to increase inclusiveness” (Cai 286).

Agonistic pluralism allows for the revelation, the development of a new hegemonic order that would make these new ways of being a possible reality. Mouffe builds her theory on the principles of liberty and equality and understands that these principles should be the foundation for social relations and subject positions. In terms of feminist rhetorical methodology, I will use Mouffe’s perspective as my lens when I ask questions of selected texts regarding liberty and equality. Since this theory/method hybrid is specifically designed to be ontological, it is not

necessarily suitable for all feminist projects. Intersectional politics, for example, might come to be understood incorrectly as no longer necessary, if careful attention is not paid to the nuances required for coming to “the table.”

While I am obviously in favor of Mouffe’s theory, I feel it is necessary to contextualize my use of her work. As I mentioned above, agonistic pluralism necessitates that conversation about how to implement social change happens in a shared symbolic space (or “table”). In this conversation, political and ideological differences are welcomed and seen as legitimate—insofar as those differences work towards the end goal of liberty and equality for all. Herein lie two questions that must be addressed: First, how do we determine which political or ideological positions are working in service of liberty and equality, and are thus welcome at the proverbial table? And second, what then do we “do” with those positionalities that are unwelcome?

Mouffe’s discussion regarding the work of Wittgenstein is helpful here, specifically when she quotes him as saying, “So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false. It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life” (*Paradox* 67-68, emphasis in original). There must always/already be agreement in our use of language for Mouffe’s concept of liberal democracy to work; in this sense, her theory seems utopian. However, Mouffe goes on to use the example of “following the rules,” as when playing a board game, and notes that of course, we must be able to distinguish between following the rule and disobeying it—but we must be willing to make space for the myriad ways of *obeying* said rule. Examining all of the possibilities for obedience is not a one-time consideration, but is part and parcel of the development of radical democracy. Here again, it is important to remember that the struggle is how to deploy liberty and equality for all, *not* in finding a singular “best practice” with which to



end the conversation. This is perhaps the hardest part of Mouffe's theory to grasp, as it feels so antithetical to our current political process. Setting aside the concept of consensus requires that we embrace the fact that struggle will be an ever-present reality, which is an uncomfortable thought to be sure. Mouffe insists though, that by focusing our critique on the differing perspectives (rather than aiming our vitriol at those espousing said perspectives) we can make inroads for social change.

With this additional framing in mind, I will address the two questions I posed above (how do we determine which positions are welcome, and what do we do when we determine that a position is unwelcome?). In her discussion of human rights, Mouffe points out that these "rights" are "defined and interpreted at a given moment[;] they are the expression of the prevailing hegemony and thereby contestable" (*Paradox* 4). For example, marital rape was not a crime in the United States until 1993. Until that time, a wife's "right" to her body was not a legal (or relational) entitlement. So, in regards to the first question, a position that wanted to deny a woman the right to say no to her partner would not be considered in service of liberty and equality, and thus not a part of the conversation at the table. In regards to the second question, in this example it is my perspective that those voices not in favor of criminalizing marital rape were rhetorically constructed as being outside of (liberal) democracy.

The work "on the ground" that must occur for Mouffe's theory to become reality is this: continual discussion about what constitutes liberty and equality, and the ways in which these rights should be enacted. It would be a mistake, and inappropriate, to read Mouffe as being in favor of political relativism. While Mouffe is not explicit in her definitions of "liberty" and "equality," this makes perfect sense given her project, which I will state again: "both perfect liberty and perfect equality [are] impossible. But this is the very condition of possibility for a

pluralist form of human coexistence in which rights can exist *and* somehow manage to coexist” (*Paradox* 11, emphasis in original). Pluralism leads us to recognize that there will always be opposing sides, an “us” and a “them,” which Mouffe terms “friends” and “(agonistic) enemies.”

This leads us back to Mouffe’s insistence that “we vs. they” is not the only form these relationships can take, as it is at this point that we are (re)introduced to agonistic pluralism, wherein we engage with agonistic friendly enemies (rather than antagonistic enemies) with whom we share a common symbolic space, with the recognition that “we” and “they” want to organize this space in different ways; this ever-shifting (re)organization “creates a space in which this confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final” (*Paradox* 15). Again, Mouffe requires that we let go of the idea that there will ever be a unity of “the people” on any given matter, as no amount of dialogue, discussion, or debate will ever convince those in positions of power to give up their influence. To fully implement her theory, we must also disregard the notion that her pluralist democracy could “ever be perfectly instantiated” as this is “to transform it into a self-refuting ideal, since the condition of possibility of a pluralist democracy is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its perfect implementation” (16). This is why we must embrace the paradoxical nature of Mouffe’s political theory and the fact that it provides no easy answers to the questions (of implementation, etc.) that arise in examining and applying her work to communication phenomena.

When I first came to this project I often felt silenced by the word ‘radical,’ as nothing about running seems at first to be radical in nature. However, “The process of sharing is a form of feminist activism because it creates a network of experiences [among] women and acts as a story telling process that others can learn from if they so choose” (Sowards and Renegar, “Reconceptualizing” 66). The fact that there is still such strong opposition to legislation like

Title IX, that women's sporting bodies are still mostly heralded as sex objects, and that female masculinity is still taboo, makes any attempt to own one's story as an athlete a radical component of feminist, agonistic politics (see also Nelson). "Pluralist politics then, is foremost a matter of figuring out how a necessarily conflicted polity can bridge its divisions sufficiently for people to live together without sacrificing a healthy degree of diversity" (Ivie, "Rhetorical Deliberation" 277). Not only are there multiple identities in the running community, but also in the feminist community. This research delineates space for one such group (female runners) in the mosaic that is radical feminist politics; it my hope that my examination of these stories will contribute to our understanding of what it might mean to live agonistically.

### **Research Questions**

For this study, I am inspired and informed by Chesebro et al.'s work on the rhetorical stages of consciousness-raising groups. I am influenced as well by feminist rhetorical criticism that reminds us that discourse presents us with ways to not only view, but also experience the world. Critical probes from Hart and Daughton's *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* exemplify such an approach, by paying attention to factors such as these: In what ways does this artifact suggest that women should look, think, feel, behave? Overall, how might this message challenge the mystiques of femininity and masculinity? And how might this artifact reinforce them? In what ways are women advantaged or disadvantaged by such portrayals? What are the implications of these depictions for women (of different classes, body sizes, sexualities, ethnicities, nationalities, etc.), both in terms of how they see themselves and in terms of how others see them? (see pp. 284-5, 291). In such a spirit, therefore, I will be focusing on the following specific research questions:

1. A. How do women articulate their running identities in the stories they tell?

- B. For example, do women depict running as central or influential to their self-concepts, roles, identities, ambitions and/or goals? If so, how?
  - C. Specifically, what identities, concepts, or themes are common across stories?
2.
    - A. Do individual women explicitly discuss, or implicitly allude to, multiple identities or roles?
    - B. If they embrace multiple identities or roles, how do they rhetorically navigate among them in the stories they tell?
  3. How, if at all, do women articulate their experience of gender norms?
  4.
    - A. What are the points of possible contention, clash or disagreement in the discussion of women runners' experiences?
    - B. How might the various perspectives that women (and others around them) express be in legitimate (agonistic, pluralistic) conversation with each other?
  5.
    - A. In what ways might these stories hint at ontological change as a real possibility, and/or provide a canvas for an agonistic and plural relationship with the self and others?
    - B. In other words, what commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do different perspectives have in common, that might bring them together to work for mutually-agreed upon change in the world, or in the political order?

In the following section I will detail the scope and significance of this project and preview the remainder of this document.

### **Scope and Significance of the Study**

This project is limited in scope to texts written by (mostly) White, heterosexual females living in the West. Throughout my research process I have scoured the Internet, as well as

various bookstores and libraries, for texts written about women runners, by women runners. My research led me to a pool of texts that are relatively homogenous in terms of authorship and whom they interviewed (or who chose to submit their story for the anthologies). Some women identified themselves as lesbian, or chose to use the word “partner” in their stories; additionally, some women chose to identify themselves as being of a race other than Caucasian.

Unfortunately, these instances were few and far between. This may be in part because of the type of story I am interested in—that of women who choose running as hobby and in one way or another came in contact with an author or editor. (Both of these conditions assume and require a certain level of privilege in terms of wealth, education, and a culture with access to technology. I also could be missing extant biographies that have not been translated into English.) And of course, my choice to focus on books, and specifically, books about amateur runners, necessarily limits the selection, for in the elite arena around the world, women of all races and sexualities are prominent figures and at least some of their stories can be found in news articles, magazines, and professional journals.

An additional area where my study contributes to the study of Communication is through the process of developing a hybrid theoretical framework and methodology. As a feminist rhetorician I have learned that it is important to be able to work and play with the various facets of who I am and the work to which I am exposed. By this I mean that feminism has taught me to take apart the box and reassemble it. That is what I am doing with key areas of scholarship I am addressing. I am taking rhetoric, political theory, and sports studies and figuring out a way to have them “talk” to each other, so that I might be able to provide an informed and sound opinion as to the process of developing a feminist consciousness surrounding women and leisure running.

## **Précis of Chapters**

I anticipate that my dissertation will follow, albeit loosely, the “Stages in Consciousness Raising” developed by Chesebro, Cragan, and McCullough. In Chapter One I will orient the reader to the purpose and scope of the study, and review literature on gender and sports. In Chapter Two I will make the case for the combination of Mouffean political theory and Feminist Rhetorical Criticism, and lay out the specific questions for analysis.

Chapter Three will include discussion of research questions one, two, and three, as I examine the women’s running texts for: stories that tell of coming into a running identity (whatever that might mean for she); acknowledgement of the challenges she faced when beginning to run; and whatever goals she might articulate for herself at the outset of her journey. I will present findings on whether/when the rhetor must address the “establishment” (cultural norms, for example). I will seek out moments when women take time for themselves, for example, and also critically examine stories in which the rhetor chooses the “establishment” over running.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss research questions four and five, bringing Chantal Mouffe’s political theory into the discussion, as the second stage in Chesebro et al.’s description of consciousness-raising is “Group Identity Throughout Polarization.” I will discuss the concept of agonistic pluralism, how it can be applied to women and running, and examine the texts for whether/how the rhetors deal with “friends/enemies/adversaries.”

Chapter Five will cover the final stage, as outlined by Chesebro et al.: “Relating to Other Revolutionary Groups.” In this chapter I will address concerns about the homogenous nature of my artifacts, and outline directions for future scholarship, including how this study can contribute to other interdisciplinary projects. While “women’s running books” (as I have defined

them for my project) are similar in authorship, other sorts of stories (magazine articles, blogs, etc.) abound, featuring various perspectives on how sport in general can change the lives of women. This chapter will give me a chance to forecast how my study, and possible extensions of it, might participate in the broader conversation about the role of sport in changing the political landscape for women.

## CHAPTER 3

### WOMEN'S RUNNING IDENTITY STORIES

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will provide the first phase of my analysis of women's running texts. I will accomplish this goal by using Feminist Rhetorical Criticism as a lens through which to read my selected texts. Specifically, I will be addressing the following research questions:

1.     A. How do women articulate their running identities in the stories they tell?  
       B. For example, do women depict running as central or influential to their self-concepts, roles, identities, ambitions and/or goals? If so, how?  
       C. Specifically, what identities, concepts, or themes are common across stories?
2.     A. Do individual women explicitly discuss, or implicitly allude to, multiple identities or roles?  
       B. If they embrace multiple identities or roles, how do they rhetorically navigate among them in the stories they tell?
4.     How, if at all, do women articulate their experience of gender norms?

To accomplish this analysis, I will first briefly frame my analytic approach, and then I will provide stories and direct quotations from the texts that illustrate my findings.

Most of the stories in these texts take the form of personal narrative or storytelling. Clare Hemmings points out that, "how feminists tell stories matters in part because of the ways in which they intersect with wider institutionalizations of gendered meaning" (*Why Stories Matter* 1). As a feminist rhetorical critic, I have chosen to situate this project as a story in and of itself, and I see myself as responsible for pointing out how the stories I analyze both conform to and challenge gender norms. Personal narrative is a common feminist approach to dialogue and



consciousness-raising. Su-Linn Yu notes that personal narrative is a “critical method and practice [that can] shed light on feminist identity and reimagine a feminist community” (876). In addition to examining these texts for stories of personal narrative and identity formation, I am also looking for how gender norms are articulated. Like Michelle M. Lazar, my goal is to “show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (142).

The remainder of this chapter is divided into five sections based on topical categories I found through a close reading of all six texts. These categories, in order of most to least common, are as follows: reasons women run, the transition to entering races, how partners and families fit into the running lifestyle, how running helps women cope with grief, and why women run in groups. Organizing this chapter by topic affords me the ability to highlight the major themes in the stories, while simultaneously providing a foundation for returning to my research questions.

As a way of providing clarity while moving throughout this chapter, I will provide here a brief overview of my main findings for each research question, and within each topical discussion, I will elaborate on examples that illustrate each theme. First, while these stories did not reference “identity” explicitly, they did implicitly, showcasing moments that indicated how running influenced these women’s sense of self and understanding of who they are in the world. In regards to the second research question, I found that the vast majority of writers discussed the various roles that women take on in their daily lives (such as individual, mother, wife, sister, and friend), as well as how being a runner became one of those roles along the way. Thirdly, in examining the language choices used to make sense of these women’s various roles, I discovered

that, by far, most women tended to rely on stereotypical assumptions about gendered behavior *only* when referring to their familial roles. When referring to themselves in the role of “runner,” the women used more empowered language and described themselves as individuals or members of a transformative group. Lastly, often more nuanced than responses fitting into the first three questions, rhetorical choices surrounding women’s experience of gender norms lacked a critical awareness of gender inequality and articulated the need for change in gender and social norms.

### **Why Women Run**

The first category I found details stories of why women start running in the first place. Every story I read detailed, to some extent, why and/or when the protagonist began running. Stories in this category tended to be straightforward and specific, and addressed the physical body in some form or fashion. For example:

Like many women, our running started with a craving for ice cream. And creamy pasta. And dark chocolate. But before long, our three-mile jogs along Philadelphia’s riverside Kelly Drive became so much more than a way to burn calories. It was our therapy, our time to mull questions big and small, to escape the workday world, to connect, to talk. (*Sole Sisters* v.)

There are several implicit assumptions in this story, which address my fourth research question about women’s experience of gender norms. The most blatant is the need to burn calories, and a guilt-ridden relationship with food; the message seems to be that if one is going to enjoy “the finer things” or “sweet treats,” then one had better make sure to run it off. Running is often a solution women arrive at because it is a physically intuitive practice. Our bodies naturally know how to run and we can participate in the sport/activity on our own, without the need for a coach or much expensive equipment.

Also even though the storyteller states that regular runs “became so much more than a way to burn calories,” in keeping with taken-for-granted assumptions about women’s beauty and worth in society, the need for those calories to be burned is never taken off the table, so to speak! Kim Chernin posits that “A woman obsessed with the size of her appetite, wishing to control her hungers and urges, may be expressing the fact that she has been taught to regard her emotional life, her passions and ‘appetites’ as dangerous, requiring control and careful monitoring” (2). The desire for chocolate and pasta must be tempered, if not outright controlled. This desire is not something women deserve or can afford to have. These things can lead to round bellies and flabby arms, states of being that are constructed as wholly undesirable. Here, in this moment, there is no celebration for how bodies can look in a natural state of being; there is no space for women to be relaxed and confident in their own skin. In this story, cravings and calorie-burning are at the forefront; therapy and time to process life’s ups and downs are presented as secondary. Although these unforeseen benefits grow to be more meaningful than the calorie-burning, they are not expected to be a woman’s first concern. “Come for the fat-burning; stay for the therapy” seems to be the sense of it, as the story invites readers’ acknowledgement that most women are initially drawn to running as a way of making the body an efficient calorie-burning machine.

Running to earn the privilege of eating delicious treats is just one of the many patriarchal, male-gaze-inspired reasons why women run. However, other health-motivated reasons are featured as well. One woman named Joy Hampton started running to help her quit smoking; she started running in her late forties with no real training goal or training program, and she was always just happy to finish (*Tapping the Fountain* 79). In this story, the phrase, “always happy to finish” invites the reader to experience the sense of accomplishment that comes with successfully finishing a difficult and challenging task. At the same time, the phrase reinforces traditional

femininity by belying the woman's competitive spirit, asserting that there is no need to best someone else, in order for her to have a positive experience. Also, noting that Hampton used running to help her stop smoking illustrates the power of replacing one habit that is deemed unhealthy with a more desirable one. The repetition that running provides can cast a spell, in Hampton's case, that helped her focus on the physical strength she was gaining and overcome her cravings for and addiction to smoking. Stories such as this point to the utility of running and illustrate how running can begin to change one's relationship to one's body, in addition to offering implicit reassurance that one need not adopt a competitive, cut-throat, attitude. Joy's story, and others like it, point to the truth that you don't have to have a training plan to be a runner—you can run for the sake of running and the concomitant strength(s) it brings into your life. These stories indicate a shift from oppression (and the status quo) to empowerment and showcase a step towards women's valuing themselves and their health (as *persons*, rather than as wives, mothers, etc.), which is cause for feminist celebration.

It was quite common for women in these texts to cite health reasons as the impetus for starting to run. Muireann Carey-Campbell writes, "I realised [sic] that I constantly felt lethargic. I had no energy, I didn't want to do anything [...] the reality hit me hard; I was overweight, unhealthy and unfit. Top this off with my general mood at the time and I knew something had to change" (*Be Pretty* 4). I see a kind of purity and honesty in this story; we have all had that "moment of truth" when we realize something about our lives that we know we simply must address. It takes a certain kind of vulnerability and strength to do something about the cold, hard fact(s) that we have ended up someplace we do not want to be. Exercise is often used as an antidote to depression, lethargy, and general malaise; getting out of a rut often means we have to

change not only our mental perspective but our embodied life choices as well. For Carey-Campbell, the antidote she selected was running.

However, what goes unquestioned in this example are the ideas of “healthy” and “fit” to which Carey-Campbell is comparing herself, and how she comes to the conclusion that it is *her* body that must change. Susie Orbach notes,

The body is experienced as menace. From this perspective, we cannot but fail.

Our bodies are bound to be wrong. It is not our stance towards the body that is seen as problematic. There is no space for such a shared critique... We have only a temporary peace, with the next opportunity to take “it” in hand and attempt to keep refashioning it medically, emotionally, and physically around the corner.

There is no such thing as a body that can simply be. (*Bodies*, 136)

Perhaps Carey-Campbell unwittingly made herself sick with lethargy by buying into the idea that her body must continually be in progression towards a perceived ideal and cannot simply exist as it is? No doubt, Carey-Campbell is, at least on some level, comparing herself to the thousands of digitally enhanced images that bombard us on a regular basis, each of which presents “an idea of a body that does not exist in real life” (Orbach, 109). Carey-Campbell’s articulation of her experience with gender norms (RQ4) speaks directly to Orbach’s findings, for the image of the “ideal female body” that is always-already fit, healthy, and happy places her actual body on the chopping block and in desperate need of a physical and emotional makeover. I am inviting the reader into the struggle that is how to navigate bodily autonomy and a desire for health and fitness in a culture that tells women they should look svelte and firm. Carey-Campbell’s articulation of her relationship with her body, when understood through the lens that Orbach provides, allows us to also see the complex nature of our identities (RQ1-3)—how we come to

see ourselves in the world. When we see our own bodies in relation to airbrushed models, perfected images, and unattainable beauty standards, it is easy to lose sight of what makes us unique and lament the fact that life is a journey with both peaks *and* valleys.

In the anthology, *Women Runners*, I found this poignant story that speaks to one of life's valleys:

In December of 1995, Valerie Jean, my lover of eight years, left me. After so many years of adapting to her moods and needs, I was living alone for the first time in my life. I fell in love with my house with woodstove, loft, and view of the sea. I began to hear my inner voice, stayed up late at night reading and talking to friends, writing. I also looked at the path winding along the sea, felt my legs yearn. I want to do something to strengthen my confidence in my body, I thought.

Maybe I *could* run? (Irene Reti 230, emphasis in original)

This story points to the tension that surrounds many a woman's journey into running—the hurt that comes from detaching oneself from a former partner (voluntary or not), and the sometimes-corresponding opportunity to find time and strength to take care of oneself. Relationships with self and others are often at the forefront of women's running stories; these relationship-focused stories speak directly to my first and second research questions. Navigating relationships is part of managing multiple identities and roles. Additionally, this story speaks to my third research question, as Reti moves fluidly through multiple roles and identities. Reti values her friendships with others, along with her solitude, reading, and writing, and thereby achieves a new sense of normal in her life by finding balance among activities she enjoys, implicitly inspiring readers to do likewise. Reti's story invites the reader into her processing of loss; in the void left by her lover she learns how to find worth and meaning by listening to herself and following that inner

voice whenever it spoke. Reti's words also speak to the body's ability to tell us what it needs and when it is ready to try something new. By asking the question, "Maybe I *could* run?" Reti rhetorically creates a space of hope and possibility where she can flourish in spite of her devastating loss.

Summoning inner strength and determination is part of the beauty and guts of these stories. One woman, Katherin Beiers, tells her story this way:

When I got close to 50 and was starting to gain weight, I had a yearning to try a sport... So I went to the campus track and started running. It took me several months to do one mile without stopping. I was so excited I called my three kids, who were in college, and told them that I had run a mile... About a year later I realized I was doing well and liked the physical rewards of running. I would go back to my desk after my running lunch break and have lots of energy. I was really proud of myself. I told my friends that I no longer went to lunch; I went to the track, ran my lunch hour, and then ate something at my desk when I got back. That got me started. (*Tapping the Fountain* 151).

Here again, the abhorrence of weight gain bubbles to the surface. Kim Chernin writes specifically of the tyranny of slenderness in Western culture and how this tyranny is naturalized; she further notes that it seems obvious that a woman should start to combat her body when it starts to slip and sag (*The Obsession*). We are taught to ignore, mask and fight the physical truth that our bodies *age*. However, this story reveals that in the face of such tyranny, self-discovery and empowerment are possible. Through running, Beiers realized that she is a strong woman, capable of crafting the kind of life and relationship with her body that she can take pride in and celebrate with her friends and family, which speaks directly to my first and fourth research

questions on running identity and gender norms. Beiers worked to shift her self-concept from that of someone who was overweight and aging to a woman who is empowered and engaged. This shift defies gender norms that seek to keep women frail and afraid of life's inevitable changes.

Before I transition to a discussion of reasons that keep women *from* running, I will provide a brief review of how this category fits into my research questions and then a final story that illustrates how all of these questions work together. In terms of how running identities are articulated (RQ1), these women are rhetorically constructed as ordinary and like “most female readers” in many respects. Therefore, this normality invites the reader into a world where being a runner becomes a possibility for her/him as well—these narratives can offer a vision of inspiration for readers. In regards to my second research question, while these women do not use the phrase “running identity” specifically, they do allude to other roles and responsibilities and discuss, sometimes in contrasting terms, how starting to run shapes who they are and changes how they approach the world. When addressing these multiple roles, these women embrace character traits such as resilience, cooperation, and determination to manage all that is on their plates and find space for running to fit. While not discussed in explicitly critical or feminist terms, these stories deal with the reality of patriarchy “on the ground.” Women, who are often taught to put themselves last, demonstrate their shifting understanding, acceptance of, and resistance to gender norms, as they share stories about the revolutionary act of making time for themselves and putting themselves first.

Rachel Toor provides another example of how running teaches women to put themselves first when she tells the story of running a marathon and meeting a woman named Liz along the course. Rachel helped Liz maintain her pace through mile 25, and while they were running Liz



told Rachel that “She was a mother of three, living in the suburbs, and had been training for the race by herself. ‘It’s something I wanted to do just for me,’ she said. ‘It’s a special time of day, the time I get to run’” (73). Women who begin running later in life, as Liz did, often speak about wanting to reclaim space and time for themselves after they have spent so many years caring for their families (RQ1). My second and third research questions (on managing multiple roles), leads me to examine what is left unspoken in Liz’s narrative. While Liz does not say that her life of suburban motherhood is drudgery, her use of the phrase “It’s a special time of day” invites the reader to appreciate her opportunity to spend time alone, out on the road. This rhetorical choice also encourages us to wonder whether perhaps, Liz does not feel she has as much freedom in other areas of her life, and to speculate that she might feel constrained by the other roles she performs throughout her day.

Toor takes great care to paint a nuanced picture of the intersection of sport and gender on the body, in a powerful moment where both Toor and Liz grapple with gender norms (RQ4). Somewhere along the course, Toor asks Liz what her goal time is to finish the marathon. Toor notes, in response to Liz’s answer of “to finish,” that, “Of course that’s what she said. She’s a woman. [... Rachel...] pushed [Liz] and she conceded that her dream was to break four hours” (75). In expressing the belief that it does not matter how long it takes to finish, Liz is regurgitating the cultural script that tells her competition is not for women. At first glance, Toor’s comment of, “She’s a woman” could be heard as flippant and judgmental (75). But, as I will illustrate in the coming pages, Toor has a unique perspective on gender and running. Obviously as a female runner, Toor recognizes the immense pressure Liz is under to be a “proper” woman. In that exact moment of recognition and empathy, Toor provides the possibility

for Liz to tap into the strength she cultivated during all her training runs, push past those cultural expectations, and claim her rightful prize.

Moving on, not only is it important to understand why women start running, but also it is important to discuss what keeps women from lacing up their shoes and heading out the door. In this discussion, what often comes to the fore are issues of gender norms (RQ4), such as always looking pretty (heterosexually attractive) and the issue of women being constructed as sex objects. The stories I discuss next are examples of these types of issues, as well as those brought up by my other research questions, and illustrate the impediments many women face in relation to running. Muireann Carey-Campbell, in her “badass women’s guide to running,” states,

What often isn’t addressed when it comes to women and working out, is the enormous leap in courage it takes to get going. When we look at images of fitness models, who are supposedly being active, none of them are sweating. Who are these women?! It just makes no sense and as a result, we are even more paranoid when we take to the streets to run. (*Be Pretty* 10)

By noting the courage necessary to “take to the streets,” Campbell is pointing to the ubiquity of the male gaze, recognizing that women’s bodies are always on display. Since most women do not always-already look like these elite female athletes and airbrushed models, it is no wonder that women often have a hard time getting out the door.

Part of the issue is historical; here I link back to Patricia Vertinsky’s work and that of Genevieve Rail, who thoroughly traced the limitations placed on women’s participation in sports by physicians and administrators. For quite some time it was rare for women to participate in sports. A woman named Ellen Wessel notes that part of her story is dealing with the reality that “Being a woman running outside, in shorts, was not normal in 1974. Being honked at and

harassed was” (*Sole Sisters* 105). As harassment is still a common problem, women are (unfortunately) quite accustomed to this phenomenon and chafe at the blatant sexual objectification and attempts to mark their identities as “other,” rather than being seen as a subjects/runners in their own right (RQ2-4). Carey-Campbell addresses this issue with force and humor:

You’ll find people sometimes make comments when you’re out running. They usually come in one of two ways: some guy wolf whistling out of his van or a drunk fella outside a pub telling you to get your knees up. I don’t know about you, but I don’t tend to take my fitness cues from rotund little men who are drunk in the middle of the day. And sure, I’ve had some insults thrown my way when running too, but the great thing is, I’m running, so I get away from offensive douchebags pretty quickly. (12)

What is important to note here is that, from Carey-Campbell’s perspective, catcalls are a fact of life, part of the nature of the beast. She accepts and does not take to heart the systemic and everyday nature of sexism that is inherent in a patriarchal culture. Here I refer back to Judith Butler and her writing on Althusser’s notion of interpellation, in her book, *Bodies That Matter*. Interpellation refers to the notion that one becomes socially constructed through being hailed or called to by the law. In Althusser’s example, a police officer calls out “Hey you!” and the “you” then becomes a subject under suspicion. Butler argues that Althusser “does not consider the range of *disobedience* that such an interpellating law might produce. The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation” (*Bodies* 82, emphasis in original). This more nuanced understanding provides a space to reconsider what it might mean for a woman runner to

be catcalled, for Butler goes on to discuss how interpellation can lose its power to create that which it refers to and can instead create something entirely different. “It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience” (*Bodies* 82). It is my position, clearly, that women runners are not socially constructed as runners when catcalled, but rather in this moment are disobeying previous interpellations of “appropriate womanhood.” Catcalling then, is an attempt to (re)constitute women from independent runners to sex objects. This role negotiation, which was mentioned in approximately 10-15 percent of stories, speaks to my third and fourth research questions (about navigating among identities and reflecting on and critiquing gender norms, respectively).

Obviously this (re)constitution does not erase the fact of being honked and “hollered” at; this is such a common, “normal” reality for women runners, that it has become a gendered expectation (and a classic complaint). “The comments are made because it’s apparently a big deal to see a woman putting her all into physical activity. It’s instilled in us that it’s just not ladylike to sweat... It is more than time to change that attitude and we simply have to be the change we want to see” (Carey-Campbell 12). Carey-Campbell speaks directly to long-held assumptions about gender roles and appropriate behavior (RQ4), and yet she also presents an interesting dilemma. As we have seen above, women are supposed to be in shape, but yet we are not supposed to be out in the world sweating it up. This paradox presents a fine line that women must negotiate when deciding whether or not they want to take on the identity of “runner” (RQ1). On the one hand, these women are attempting to take control of their lives and bodies through exercise (following the Western cultural mandate that women should be thin), but that very act violates another mandate that women remain sweet and pretty, not sweaty and stinky.

This dilemma, and those stories that speak to it, help answer my fourth research question by detailing women's experience of sometimes-conflicting gender norms and expectations.

Because of these conflicting mandates, the change that Carey-Campbell says we must be is not so simple to achieve. Isis Amelia Rose Sien points out an additional challenge, noting that not everyone is so supportive of women taking to the streets, “like the men who leer from their cars as they pass me, forcing me to risk my safety and put up with it or relinquish my independence and always run with the guys” (*Sole Sisters* 164-165). Of course there are always safety concerns that can make it risky to address catcallers for their sexism in the moment (see for example, “The Everyday Sexism Project”). These are just some of the choices that women runners are up against, considerations that must be contemplated before we head out the door—Is it (probably) safe during this time of day for me to be by myself? Running with a cell phone can feel mandatory, as can telling a friend or loved one that we are going out running and when we will be back. These practices speak to a particular experience of gender norms; Sien's articulation of her frustration at having to choose between personal safety and independence points to the continued domination of women in Western culture. Part of what Sien alludes to is rape culture, “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth ix). Rape culture normalizes fears, such as those articulated by Sien, as part of “the way things are”—running with the guys or putting up with it become the only two options—holding those leering men responsible does not enter into the realm of possibility. This constant, underlying fear becomes part of women's lived reality; indeed it is a quite common experience of gender norms (RQ4).

Despite these roadblocks, the women highlighted in these stories ultimately made the decision to become runners, and reaped myriad benefits along the way. Several women share

detailed stories of how beginning to run changed how they relate to themselves and, as a result, they learned more about who they are. These stories speak to my first three research questions on identity and identity management, as they discuss relating to our physical and mental selves in new and often healthier ways. An important distinction is made by Rachel Toor, who dismisses the perception that running is primarily about getting a better body, or even better mental focus:

Years later, thinking back on my beginnings, I see that while eventually I came to understand that running would be good for my body and for my mind, it took me longer to know what it would do for my heart. Not the knobby muscle that pumps blood through the body, the organ that keeps the physical self alive, but the emotional place where feelings pool and clog and eventually spring free. What I didn't realize, when I first started lacing up my shoes, was that for me, running would be so much about love. (*Personal Record 8*)

Running, like meditation, helps us tap into our heart-center and focus in on who we are, what we feel, and what we desire. Toor's description of how emotions pool, clog, and spring free invites us to imagine how spending time alone or with others on the road can be a platform for much-needed emotional processing. Her words may also create a bit of suspense about how running relates to love, about the connection of emotion and relationship, characterized by the ebb and flow of breath in the body and the outpourings of the heart.

Toor goes on to discuss how running is one of the most intimate activities you can do with another person: "run with someone for long enough at a time and you will be stripped bare," she notes (8), not only because women tend to talk on the road, but because the physical body, its exertions, excretions, aches and pains, cannot be glossed over. Running with another person is ultimately more about trust than it is about getting a better butt. Even for women who run alone,

when they are on the road it seems that they can no longer hide even from themselves. Kate Kinsey's story is one of deep depression and a life built on lies. In gut-wrenching honesty she writes that

Running became the one event in my daily life that I looked forward to. Books and movies paled in comparison to the refuge of my feet slapping patiently in the fresh morning air. Then one morning it wasn't enough. I ran and swung with no release. Frantically, tears pouring down my face because I couldn't, just couldn't face the realness of my life, I ran the loop again. (*Women Runners* 32)

That day, running wasn't enough to solve or even escape from her problems, but it was enough to get her through the day. Running often serves as a coping mechanism, a way to fill the void or disengage from the problems of life. But eventually, running becomes the avenue by which one comes to face life head on. For Kate, writing about how running changed her life helped her be able to articulate what her life was actually like: "Some days I cannot see the barest glimmer of sun for all the oozing, stagnant tangles I have to get through. It would not matter if I could make you a map of the treacherous land—it shifts its labyrinth for each new visitor and the only compass lies in your belly" (*Women Runners* 33). What is great about running is that "Your mind is working. You can replay a problem over and over and work it out. And afterward, your problems don't seem quite as bad as before" (*Sole Sisters* 87). This sentiment was echoed in story after story. Like Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, we learn through these stories that women need time and space for themselves to process and that the space of the open road is an ideal location for women to find themselves.

Once running becomes a regular commitment, the practice invites reflection on the relationship with the self and opens up space for the realization that one is "good and beautiful

and deserve[s] to be happy” (*Women Runners* 33). Kinsey’s inspiring reflection speaks to what I realized is an inevitable transformation, as she pinpoints the immense influence that one’s running identity (once established) has over all of the other identities and roles one takes on (RQ1-3). As I mentioned at the start of this section, every story includes at least one reason why the protagonist began running. As it turns out, so too does each woman articulate a mental breakthrough or an “ah-ha!” moment that occurred when she realizes how her newly acquired physical and mental strength spills over into the other areas of her life.

The prevalence of the “ah-ha!” moment sets the foundation for discussing how running identities are acquired and articulated (RQ1), and will allow me to conclude this section on reasons women run. To begin I must point out that a lot of the identity markers we take on in life, such as “parent” (through a planned pregnancy or adoption) or “Doctor” (through successfully writing and defending a dissertation) are *anticipated*. In general, both adoption/pregnancy and writing/defending follow a relatively consistent timetable with clear guideposts along the way. That timetable provides the opportunity to mentally prepare for taking on the new identity.

The women’s running stories indicate that becoming a “runner” follows no such timetable, as these women did not begin running so that they could one day take on this new identity. No, they were motivated to begin running because of something else entirely. As we have seen, that something else could be a guilt-ridden relationship with food where one runs only to offset a slice of chocolate cake, or the goal of becoming comfortable in one’s own skin. Since running is a means to an end, it is not surprising that running identities only just begin to form when women make the connection between running and personal growth. There is no magic number of miles a woman must complete in order to reach her “ah-ha!” moment and proudly declare, “I am a runner;” taking on this identity is a nuanced process. It is different in every



story, but at some point along the road, when the reason they began becomes just a part of their story rather than the whole, these women see themselves in a new light and realize they have become runners along the way.

## **Racing**

After reasons to run (and overcoming whatever kept women from running), the second most prevalent narrative topic involved running races. While many women never decide to enter a race, a theme emerges in nearly three-quarters of the stories about the transition from running for fun, either alone or with friends, to entering road races. Based on these artifacts, it is clear that entering that first race is a “rite of passage” which many women choose to go through at some point. In the anthology *Sole Sisters*, I found the story of a particular race called the Women’s 5k Classic in Pennsylvania. This race is described thus: “The largest women’s race in Pennsylvania and the nineteenth largest in the nation, ‘The Event’ is unapologetically girly. A pink balloon arch billows over the starting line. Men in tuxedos with pink cummerbunds escort the races on bicycles. Finishers are rewarded with pink carnations, cookies, and champagne” (*Sole Sisters* 25). This event is about getting women to try a race for the first time, creating a sense of community around women and running, and setting apart a race that is just for women. “‘There are a zillion races every weekend that men will do,’ says Wendy. ‘We want this to be a place where women can try their first race in a nonthreatening environment. There’s something very special about that. We have kept this race a protected environment’” (25).

The decision to race is different for every woman: some like the competitive nature, some get a group together for a bonding experience, and others want to push their bodies to a PR (personal record). The planners of The Women’s 5k Classic have emphasized some very basic gender stereotypes; by being “unapologetically girly” the race reinforces rigid gender roles and

identities. The men are dressed to distinction, to “match” and accompany the women, and the abundance of pink sugar underlines associations of triviality and self-pampering not present in stereotypically butch/manly Gatorade advertisements, for example. Yet at the same time, by camping it up (tuxedos, bicycles, cookies, and champagne) this event offers the opportunity for playful self-reflection on what it means to come together and support each other as women. Additionally, the spectacle ironically engages with gender norms. Casting men as escorts, rather than racers, puts them on the sidelines. The male escorts apparently need the aid of a machine to keep up with the active, sweaty women runners. Placing the men in tuxedos encourages us to see them as decorative, and even (since they are on bicycles) a bit ridiculous. (After all, James Bond drives an Aston Martin, not a Schwinn, in his tux.)

Another text both challenges and reinforces gender norms, utilizing racing as a plot device to introduce future lovers. In chapter one of the novel *Running from Love*, we meet Farrah in the heat of a 5k race. Farrah is determined to surge ahead of the man who just passed her, saying to herself that she “hadn’t trained five days a week for the past six months just to eat the dust of someone with calves the size of ham hocks” (2). We learn that Farrah’s secret weapon is her final kick, her surge close to the finish line. Farrah is clearly competitive and refuses to accept inferior status because of her gender; just because the person in front of her happens to be a man, she isn’t going to stop pushing and let him pass her by. But as she is closing in on the man in the blue shirt, she trips and falls. Farrah is embarrassed that the man stops to help her even though she was trying to pass him; she tells him to go on and not ruin his time, but he stays to make sure she is ok. With this plot development, Farrah’s competence as a competitor is damaged, and the man’s physical dominance *and* his gentlemanly manners (his unwillingness to take advantage of her relative frailty) are established. Farrah is quickly entranced by his

muscular body and bold blue eyes – this is a love story after all, chick lit at its least subtle. The way Farrah and her love interest, Jude, meet is telling. Farrah trips and falls just as she is about to pass this man, placing her in need of his care and attention (making her the damsel in distress); her fall also ensures his masculinity (as he is not outrun by a woman). I am left wondering how the story might have changed if Farrah’s character had beaten out Jude in the end. Would she have been as attracted to Jude if she had beaten him; would he have seen Farrah as a threat to his masculinity rather than as a woman worthy of wooing? These are the questions that feminism demands that we ask, even though the easiest assumption, given our patriarchal culture, would be that the answers are resoundingly negative.

Races can be a time for a woman to push hard and not let anyone get past her. This quite obviously can push against how women are taught to behave in everyday life, as one woman explains:

In road races, I’m mainly competing with myself. Every once in a while I’ll have moments of competing with someone else in a race. It happens when someone about my age or younger, or someone who looks less fit than I am, is close to me in a race. A few years ago at a 10k a woman was on my shoulder for nearly the whole race—maybe drafting—then near the end we were even and I decided not to let her beat me. So I basically sprinted the last quarter mile. She knew and picked it up, but I outkicked her. It was ugly. I was totally spent when I crossed the finish line. I went up to her afterwards and apologized—I don’t know what got into me. (Abby Raven, *Tapping the Fountain* 21)

This woman notes her occasional need to compete against women her age and younger, pointing to how Western culture pits women against one another; especially as we age, we learn to resent

those who are coming up behind us. Raven also points to competition between women of different sizes and alludes to how embarrassing it would be to be beaten in a race by someone who appears to be less fit than she is. Susan J. Douglas's commentary on sisterhood is poignant for this example:

And here lies the dirty little secret about sisterhood. It was easy to feel sisterhood with those “beneath” you or lateral to you in class, wealth, or appearance. But to feel it with those “above” you—hey, that little insecure, catty voice kicked in—those weren't your sisters, they were the competition, the ones getting more than you got, the ones who had won, the ones you could never beat. (225)

We learn early on who the competition is and form alliances accordingly. And yet, Raven invites us to feel shame along with her, as she processes her unladylike, petty, and what is ultimately un-sisterly behavior. In the moment where “competitor” trumps the role of “sister,” or “friend,” Raven at first sees this trumping as a moment of triumph and perhaps even liberation. However, as soon as that moment passes, Raven sees that same triumph as a personal failing and begins to second-guess and critique her choices. Her flip-flop of regret is a painful moment of role navigation (RQ3). Because of that critique there is an element of bravery in this story; I am touched by her vulnerability in admitting to being ageist and sizeist. Raven is hinting at yet another implied “should” for women's behavior: that we should always be polite and civilized in public. But this story resonates with us, not because she is perfect, but because we can all identify with her momentary lapse in “appropriate” behavior.

This analysis points to gender norms about how women are taught to compete against each other (for male attention, among other things) (RQ4). It is one thing to try to ignore this training on a day-to-day basis, but when our bodies are put on display in a race, as in this story,

all of our frustration and struggle are brought to the forefront. And yet still my initial reaction was to find the willingness of this woman to berate herself for winning rather appalling. Why shouldn't a woman push hard and try to beat someone else? On the surface, this story reinforces the notion that women should be apologetic and demure, and that beating someone else is shameful or embarrassing. However, utilizing my critical, feminist perspective allowed me to see that this woman was not berating herself for winning the race, but for *why* she pushed so hard to win. Raven made it personal; the implication is that the "other woman" did not *deserve* to beat her. The phrase "it was ugly" becomes a feminist critique of these ingrained cultural values—not about racing/winning/beating others, but beating someone else based on a preconceived notion of their inherent worth as an individual, based on stereotypes of bodies of various shapes and sizes being less fit.

Fraught with such complex internal dialogue and cultural expectations, the decision about whether or not one is ready to race often is laden with pressure. Another gender norm is the culturally feminine tendency toward physical caution, rather than the risk of physical challenge (RQ4).

The progression from jogging to racing, though, took longer than it *should* have. I once thought that racing was for professional or highly competitive—not "average"—runners. But later, I realized that racing provided me with the impetus to become a better runner and to train more consistently. I was curious to see if I could work my way up to a half-marathon. It seemed like an incredible challenge. (*Tapping the Fountain* 53, emphasis in original)

Women are extremely adept at "shoulding" ourselves—telling ourselves what we should or should not be doing, thinking, feeling, or believing about ourselves. By berating herself about

how long her transition from running to racing took, this woman claims that there is a correct timeframe that this transition *should* take, both for herself and her readers, rather than focusing on enjoying the process and taking things one step at a time. Here also, the focus is on this woman's *amateur, non-competitive* status. This is yet another instance where the author is constructed as an everyday woman, someone with whom an "average" reader/runner can identify with, as she notes that she is clearly not a professional or highly competitive; she immediately makes an excuse for her inability to win the race, and instead focuses on the benefits of racing (consistent training, working on increasing her mileage). While this woman's first assumption is that she is not good enough to race, she comes to learn that the reverse is true, and the act of racing enables her to become a better runner. As I mentioned earlier, articulating one's running identity (RQ1) is a continuous process that ebbs and flows with the lessons that running provides; for her that means recognizing that she is capable of tackling new distances and seeing herself as a legitimate member of the racing community.

There is something inherently different about signing up for a race and running it with other people: your body is compared to the bodies of others, as opposed to simply going out and running the same distance alone, without the time being officially recorded for all the world to see. Approximately two-thirds of the stories I analyzed include racing and detail how entering that first race does mark a shift in running identity (RQ1). What is more telling is how some of these women navigate the transition and shift in identity with ease. Tongue (somewhat)-in-cheek, I attribute this to women's experience of gender norms (RQ4); we are quite used to being in competition with each other, having our bodies compared and ranked, and we are always-already on display. So, in these particular stories, being ready and willing to race was simply something that seemed out of reach only until the woman realized her own readiness. Kris Whorton writes

For some time now, three years maybe, the idea of running a hundred-mile race has hidden in the curls of my brain. It was my father-in-law and the other participants of the Leadville 100 who put it there. Surprisingly, the “idea” of running a hundred miles didn’t frighten me. Instead, it awakened in me a curiosity, a wonder in myself, my ability, my strength, both physical and mental, and a quiet want. As with the idea of running a marathon six years earlier, I felt no panic, no immediate need to set a date or start training toward the “goal.” I simply let it live inside me for a while, months, a year, two years, until I felt it coming out as stronger than a murmur. (*Women Runners* 150)

This story points to the importance of other runners in shaping our goals and the challenges we want to conquer as runners. Based on the support that Whorton had in her running community, and her previous experience(s) and trust in herself, she was not scared of this new, 100-mile, distance. Whorton knew she was supported and that she had the strength with which to complete this particular race. Note her words, “a quiet want...” There is no fear or trepidation, only want, desire, and trust in her body to take her through the miles. Eventually the desire became something she couldn’t ignore and in that moment she found peace in her running identity, as that part of her had learned to be untroubled and serene, accepting growth as it came. Whorton’s running identity assumed a leadership role or centrality in her life, and built a quiet confidence and clarity within her.

In contrast, my own running identity was, at first, extremely competitive and focused on achievement and completion of goals. When I began running all I did was train for races and push my body for better times. I placed third in my age group at my first local 5k and was immediately hooked on the competition. Now, several years later, I have absolutely no desire to

race or to put in the time and effort for setting personal records. This is in part because finding the time to train for races, if one is going to be a serious competitor, can become a challenge.

One racing mother put it this way:

The 30-39 age category is the toughest in women's running and triathlon and is littered with seasoned champions. Some are childless with lots of time, money, and energy for training. Others, like Sarah Graham, one of the Pacific Northwest's top amateur triathletes, squeeze in training between changing diapers and packing preschool lunches. Seeing another mom at races crowned women's champion helped reassure me that it was okay to hang on to the athletic part of me despite motherhood. (*Women Runners* 152)

Sometimes the stars align and a woman finds herself with the training trifecta: time, money, and energy. Other times, a woman has to juggle life, a partner, children, sleep requirements, and limited resources. Sometimes all it takes is seeing another woman—regardless of her motherly status—out there pushing, to remind oneself that this dream is worth pursuing, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Balancing, or navigating among, gender roles (RQ3) was a focal point of three-quarters of the stories I read. I will return to this theme of balancing gender roles with running in the following section. For now it is important to round out the answers to my first research question by noting that racing competitively obviously adds a different dimension to both one's running identity and the time it takes to enact that identity. And the choice to stop racing is just as important as is the decision to start:

The decision to stop racing and to eventually stop even timing my runs was liberating, although at first I felt like a failure. But as time went on, I knew I had made the right decision. With the pressure off, running became something



different, a process I could learn from rather than pit myself against. It empowered me in more ways than I probably realized, giving me both confidence in my ability to do things and the fitness to do them. (Alison Townsend, *Women Runners* 24)

This woman marks the pressure many women face in the running community, as evidenced by the stories I analyzed. There is a myth that one is not a real runner unless she races and times her training runs. The implied assumption is that a runner must always have her Garmin or Nike running watch strapped to her wrist to count every mile, every second, and every calorie. Townsend's language helps us feel the struggle, along with her, as she transitions to a freer relationship with running. It is amazing how running naturally spills into other areas of women's lives; confidence in one's physical body, more often than not, leads to confidence in how one chooses to go about living life. Townsend's running identity morphs from one that is fueled by competition (with externally-imposed rules and limitations, and necessarily evaluative comparisons to others, or to oneself at different times), into one that is relaxed and focused on personal empowerment to live in the moment and trust in her unique capabilities. Not surprisingly, perhaps, such stories about racing and not racing, and this freer relationship with running, tie together my first and fourth research questions (running identity and gender norms), marking a level of self-determination and immanent value that reflects what Foss and Griffin refer to as core feminist principles.

### **Partners and Families**

The third most-common narrative theme in my artifacts involved partners and families. Analyzing the stories in this section proved rather difficult for me, emotionally speaking. More often than not, the narratives these women shared tended (far more frequently than in the other

categories) to reinforce traditional gender norms and patriarchal values (RQ3). In our patriarchal culture, women are often tasked unequally with expectations that they will be the ones caring for children or parents, and setting their own goals aside. In some cases, a more equitable arrangement can be made. Even when this is the case, women can still face obstacles to creating and maintaining time for themselves, as this anecdote illustrates:

However, right now my husband and I share responsibility for staying with my mother-in-law in her room in a nursing home... I'm finding it very difficult to fit in marathon training. This will be the first year that, because of family responsibilities, I won't be running two marathons. Right now I'm training for some half-marathons. (*Tapping the Fountain* 75)

With the words “share responsibility” we are invited to recognize and appreciate the support this woman gets from her partner in a seemingly equal arrangement. However, even so, she still has to drastically change her lifestyle and personal running commitments in order to meet her relational responsibilities. Another story that speaks to my second research question about the challenging nature of navigating multiple gender roles and relationships is that of Char Simmons. Simmons writes

Throughout five pregnancies in four years, three miscarriages and two births, I remained a fiercely competitive, if middle-of-the-pack, runner and triathlete. Breastfeeding, poopy diapers, sleep deprivation, and a part-time job were no obstacles. I'd train six days a week and race monthly, reveling in the luxurious expanse of time when I could focus on doing just one task, rather than six simultaneously. Racing and training were my quiet time. (*Women Runners* 154)

In an anecdote that addresses gender norms (RQ4), Char Simmons further expounds on how she was able to train with two babies at home:

A flexible, unflappable, and long-suffering husband gave me the luxury of time necessary for long workouts. For up to five hours, Jeff took care of two testosterone-driven toddlers while I swam, biked, and ran to oblivion. It was no contest who had the harder job. I came home from workouts refreshed. Jeff ended his marathon babysitting sessions looking haggard and in need of a nap. (*Women Runners* 156)

Clearly, in some ways, this couple bends gender norms with aplomb, but this story rhetorically invites readers to see this man as a hero (“flexible, unflappable, and long-suffering”) by virtue of his shouldering part of the parental responsibility. While I want to applaud a working partnership where both people support and respect each other, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the support and respect in this relationship is somewhat undermined given the assumption (with the use of the word “babysitting”) that the default option should be Char taking care of the babies rather than Jeff. It takes two people to make babies, and yet here, in a story about a woman taking charge and pushing her body, she still has to reconcile time away from her children—even when they are with their father!

This story illustrates the struggle parents must negotiate in our patriarchal system. Simmons is both subversive and somewhat naive in this story. She is subversive because she recognizes that she does in fact deserve and need time for herself away from her children and that this time is in fact a luxury that many women are not provided by their partners or cannot afford if they are single mothers. On the other hand, as I mentioned above, I am troubled by her uncritical use of the word “babysitting” to describe a man spending time with his own children.

The use of this word suggests that Simmons believes that her husband's caring for their children is secondary to hers, and that his watching of the children is akin to the actions of a paid caretaker (or someone to whom she now "owes a favor"), rather than her partner in parenting.

Stories about partners did not always feature children (although about two-thirds did), as reproducing is not part of every woman's reality, for a multitude of reasons. The ways in which running fit into these stories were as varied as the women themselves. For Freddi Carlip, it was after her husband died that she began to enjoy running just for the sake of the activity. "I always ran either with my husband or a friend. Now I run by myself, for myself" (*Tapping the Fountain* 99). Carlip's story illustrates the choices that often come with significant life changes, such as the death of a partner. Her relationship with running changed from a communal experience to a solitary one; the choice to shift to running solo indicates a newfound strength to "go it alone" after her husband passed away. Carlip's shift in running identity speaks to my first three research questions as she navigates her evolving relationship with running and herself in the wake of her husband's passing. The gender roles of wife and partner that Carlip had enacted for so long now must be replaced. Choosing to run alone is an act of strength, determination, fortitude, and self-reliance in the face of unspeakable pain and change. While Carlip does not explicitly refer to the feelings of loss and sadness that come at the end of a relationship, women running for themselves can include dealing with loss through running, which is the focus of the next section.

## **Grief**

Since running affects women's lives and relationships in far-reaching ways, inevitably, dealing with loss was the next most-common major theme that emerged in these stories. Approximately ten to fifteen percent of the stories I read dealt with grief. These stories tended to tap into my research questions regarding running identity and navigating gender roles. For

example, one's identity as a runner can offer, for a time, a refuge from shocking changes in relational roles, and identities that have become overwhelmingly painful. Stories in this category were shared with deep emotion and compelling prose, several of which focused on the loss of a child, as did the story about Midori Sperandeo:

They named their daughter Mikili and they grieved for her as any parents would mourn the loss of a child. Running became Midori's escape, a salve for her soul. Her daily workouts gave her day structure, something to do between waking up and falling into fitful sleep. *Eyes open, shoes on, run.* No time to languish in bed in the dark. (*Sole Sisters* 112)

Getting up and immediately going for a run was a way to gain emotional momentum before grief left Sperandeo immobile. This refrain is the common factor linking all the grief stories. These women knew that, for them, pushing through the pain by way of running provides their best chance for healing. They are empowering themselves from the body, into the spirit:

Healing the body from loss was easier than healing the heart. Instinctively, I developed a post-miscarriage ritual, some type of physical challenge. Competing as best I could only two weeks post-miscarriage, the Run from the Bears 10k served as a purifier, a physical cleansing, as if sweat could wash away the pain.

(Char Simmons, *Women Runners* 147)

In such accounts grief is constructed as a raw, physical emotion that was met *instinctively* by the body-in-action. These women literally could not remain still. Running works as a method for processing grief—one of the most intense emotions—as tried and true (for these women) as any other form of processing. I read these stories as those of strong women, intent on grappling with

loss through resilience and strength. Another woman shared the loss of her husband with these words:

“Running has been my way to grieve,” says Sandy. “It’s that constant friend that I have with me on bad days. I can put my sneakers on, and as hard as it is to get going I know that once I finish the run, I’m going to feel better. Even if I’m just lying to myself.” (Sandy Felt, *Sole Sisters* 69)

Here and in stories like it, running is constructed as the one thing that is always consistent, always a comfort. Even when we know, deep down, that running will not bring a loved one back, somehow hope for some physical and emotional relief from the tension and exhaustion of grief gets us out the door anyway. It is impressive that these women found the strength to get up and keep running day in and day out. These stories teach that it is appropriate to grieve with one’s entire being and that women can respond to grief in ways that are strong and seemingly empowering, allowing runners to keep functioning while they heal.

Nancy Lamar tells her story with these words: “There are still days when the sadness and emptiness bear down mercilessly, days that force me to climb. I run often. I take a different path whenever possible. I inhale my surroundings and exhale whatever ails me” (*Women Runners* 89). Just as our physical muscles grow stronger when we tense and then release them, we can heal from grief through periodically letting go, as well as through experiencing the pain when it arises. The act of physical exertion somehow strengthens these women so that they are able to deal with life; a stronger body leads to a stronger heart and mind. Dealing with depression and anxiety has forced me to turn inward and be honest and open with myself about who I am and how I work. Many of these insights have come to me while I’ve been running. So even though I want to ignore the ways in which Nancy’s story of depression, sadness, and confusion resonates

with me, I appreciate the ultimate empowerment this story provides, along with many others about the strength, triumph, and clarity that running brings.

Throughout these grief narratives there is always a silver lining and an optimistic undertone. These stories also resist several cultural narratives about gender norms, my fourth research question. One of these norms is that women are reduced to nothing without a (presumably heterosexual) partner. Another is that grief is completely debilitating and renders women incapacitated. These stories are inspirational because the women who tell them literally ran through their grief; they found strength within themselves and in their relationships with fellow runners that eventually led to healing and happiness. Stories about women running together and finding community is the focus of the next section, which presents the findings of the final category for this chapter.

### **Groups of Women Running Together**

These stories are my favorite and represent approximately one-third of the stories I read. Even though I run solo, reading these stories got my running juices flowing the most. These stories convey a sense of camaraderie and playfulness while at the same time occasioning deep relational trust. There is something special about running with a group of women. In these stories I found rhetorical constructions that spoke to each of my research questions. I will begin with my first and last research questions (running identity and gender norms and experiences), as Rachel Toor points out that running with women is different from running with men:

The conversations tend to have more substance; feelings get discussed, and the names of partners and children are known and remembered. I like to drop in on the girls from time to time, but in truth, I am more comfortable with the guys.

Gender being what it is—a spectrum—there are often women with the men, and

men with the women, and men who are more like women, and women who are like me: more like men. (*Personal Record* 41)

Toor engages typical gender stereotypes about women, that we discuss feelings and remember details about friends' lives, but what Toor's story does is open up the possibility for play and difference. Note that Toor does not tick off what men do on runs (other than to imply that their conversations are less substantive or personal); she simply says that she behaves more like the men. Toor uses the word "spectrum" for discussing gender behavior and places herself, or at least, her "running identity" squarely on the "masculine" end. By doing this she subtly points out that it is perfectly acceptable both for a woman to be "one of the guys" *and* for men to be associated with femaleness. Her presence and high level of comfort and ability to keep up with the boys is not constructed as threatening their masculinity (in this particular excerpt). In this moment Toor is able to shine light on our ability to play at gender and express our gendered selves along the spectrum. The running community is actually the perfect place for this lesson to be learned, as there are so many different ways of running: for exercise, companionship, competition, etc. And bodies vary greatly along gender lines in relation to running aptitude for speed versus endurance. While men are typically faster than most women, as the distance gets longer, women tend to become better runners than men.

The great thing about running is that there is enough space on the road for everyone. There are also enough running groups that a woman is likely to find one that she fits with—or meet enough people along the way that she could form her own! Different from running solo, running with a group of women creates a space for conversation and openness. Irene Reti narrates her story of running with various women:



I ran with Kay and Shasta on foggy wet mornings through the redwoods. We talked about our struggles to love our bodies, to learn our limits. I ran with Shoney and Jennifer and discussed feminist politics as we loped along the railroad tracks by the river. Kathy and I ran along the shore, discussed writing and relationships. I ran with the women of the Santa Cruz Track Club who gave me encouragement each Wednesday night. All of these women had propelled me toward June 21 and the north Shore of Lake Superior Minnesota [my next marathon]. Their love and faith in me, and watching them meet and surpass their own running goals, had inspired me. (*Women Runners* 233)

As Toor points out above, when women run together, names are remembered, and intimate details about ones life and family are shared. In Reti's story, these women's abilities to communicate and connect are celebrated, as are love for competition, physical strength, and endurance. This story combines qualities that are considered masculine, as well as feminine virtues, which allows for Reti's running identity *and* gender experience to be one of fluidity rather than being boxed into "appropriate" behavior. Reti's story speaks to her experience as a woman runner and how she constructs her identity through shared experience. Her story, and those like it, illustrate that identity formation is not always a solitary endeavor, and that identity is often formed in relationship.

This leads to another major theme in stories about groups of women who run together and that is a sense of camaraderie and community through running. One running group calls themselves "Team Windsor" and prides themselves on being "therapy in motion":

"When you're running, there is no eye contact. There's something about that that makes people feel safe. It allows them to let their guard down," Judy says... With

all that sharing in the air, Team Windsor could have become a prime breeding ground for gossip. But there is an unwritten code: “You don’t take anything away from here and tell your neighbors. What is said here does not go back in the gossip circle,” Judy says. In the early days there were some offenders. Judy says they “self-selected themselves out. They did not fit into the culture.” (*Sole Sisters* 41, 43-44).

We all have a desire to be heard and simultaneously not judged for who we are and what we are going through in our lives. We also seek a sense of safety and trust—these human needs for connection can be facilitated through running and the development of a close-knit community and shared culture. Hart and Daughton ask critics to consider how a rhetorical artifact encourages men and women to “look, think, feel [and] behave” (285). This particular excerpt indicates that these women require a particular kind of behavior (openness and trustworthiness) to be a part of the group. As readers, we are also invited to cherish those values. Note that an emphasis is not placed on speed or fitness, but on one’s dedication to the team and commitment to leaving stories on the road. In these stories, the women are encouraged to care for each other, respect and value others’ needs as well as their own, and stay true to honesty, loyalty, respect, and integrity. While some of these can be considered classically feminine virtues, they also characterize the best ideals of classic masculine friendships and battlefield bonds. Notably, there is a stated injunction against the feminine stereotype of gossip, in favor of solidarity. And the fact that these virtues are enacted while the physical body is in constant motion puts an interesting twist on the situation, reinforcing some gender norms and rocking others. These women may embody sweetness and demureness at home, but there is nothing sweet about a sweaty body in the midst of exertion.

Here, these women are also navigating multiple roles—those of individual, runner, friend, and potentially partner and parent as well (RQ3). Looking back to the stories on partners and families, accommodations for children must be made for women to be able to go running. Dealing with all the concomitant demands of each of those roles simultaneously points to the complexity of women’s lives and the necessary ability to juggle various needs and expectations. I find that these stories show up traditional female gender roles and add a layer of complexity. These women are not passive; rather, they actively pursue life and find ways to manage multiple roles and gendered expectations to their benefit.

The last story I will share is the story of “The Dawn Patrol,” yet another vibrant women’s running group:

One by one, the women gather under a streetlamp on a silent suburban corner. It is a little before five on a misty Carolina morning. The sky is as gray and lumpy as an old woolen blanket. The air is sweet with the scent of wet honeysuckle. Sheila pulls into a parking spot and hops out of her van. Liz, wearing an orange vest with reflector strips, waits at the curb, talking to Gina. Pat, a schoolteacher due in her kindergarten classroom in two hours, stands with Janet, a hospital administrator in charge of a hundred employees. Everyone whispers. The last time they gathered for their dawn run, a neighbor stormed out of her house. “Every morning you women wake me up!” she scolded. The runners try hard not to make noise, stifling laughs like schoolgirls. After the last of the group arrives, the dozen women scamper into the darkness—and crank up the volume. (*Sole Sister* 132)

What I love about this story, really all the stories I have shared in this section, is that they take the reader right to the heart and excitement of the running community. It is easy to imagine being

a part of this early-morning group, meeting one's friends, getting caught up on each other's lives, ready and eager to put one's body to work in the process. As a whole, these stories answer M. Ann Hall's call (citing Morse) for "bodily activity [to] be redesigned to incorporate interaction among participants" (58). Hall's work specifically critiques traditional women's aerobics classes in which women simply mirror an instructor; by focusing on interaction among women and subsequently changing the imagery associated with the female sporting body, she says, "there is the potential to have self-action in women's bodies, rather than have them remain a site of obsession" (58). Hall's position and research acknowledges the battle many women fight with their bodies in an effort to get them to submit to unrealistic beauty expectations. When exercise morphs from a woman staring at her body in a mirror while she works out, willing it to be smaller and firmer (see also Markula), into a communal running experience in which life is shared, celebrated and coped with, we are then focused on what our bodies can accomplish and how they connect us—rather than their size or the number of pounds associated with them.

Here I engage with my research questions surrounding running identity and experience of gender norms (RQs 1 and 4). When women run together, they are able to both critique (through conversation) and experience (through the body in motion) gender norms and experiences. Running becomes more than just exercise, but a way to interact with and challenge cultural mores and to forge an identity-as-runner that serves these women in powerful ways, even after the run is over. Research questions two and three are implicated as well, in that, in sharing about their lives, women may experience supportive companionship about their own running identities, and empathy or inspiration about the multiple roles they assume in their lives.

The story of "The Dawn Patrol" concludes with the following:

This, Liz explains, is what keeps the women rising before dawn to run through the streets together, the murmur of their conversation rising above the neighborhood stillness. For forty-five minutes before another hectic day begins, the women will laugh a little, talk a lot, ponder the mysteries of children and husbands, analyze everything from movies to food, while dispensing help on matters of health, finance, and home. (*Sole Sisters* 136)

What all these stories provide is a foundation for a new way of being, a feminist ontology that allows the female body to come to the fore, to be the focus of who each woman is, rather than merely a reproductive incubator or receptacle for the penis, or a placeholder for an actual personality. While blunt, I think I speak an important truth. These stories illustrate the power of being in and using one's body. Running—legs pumping, lungs expanding and contracting, heart beating—allows a woman to focus on all of who she is, and when that focusing happens in a group, as these stories illustrate, something incredible happens. Shifts in focus become possible, nuanced understandings about what it means to be, and new ways about how we should relate to each other bubble to the surface when we are out on the road.

## **Conclusion**

Pondering one's identity as a runner leads naturally, if not inevitably, to pondering one's identity as self and in relationship. Strengthening one's body invites one to flex in other arenas, and to navigate, if not fluidly, then at least with a commitment to multiple roles and realities. I find that, in relation to my topical categories, women's running experiences almost defy categorization. These stories bled into one another; commenting on loss inevitably led to writing about the importance of families and friends. Reasons why women started running were often connected to stories about the need for community, which was found in women's running

groups. These women's relationship(s) with running are multifaceted and point to the myriad ways in which women take on numerous roles in daily life and in their relationships.

“Running identity” emerged as a conduit for how women make sense of and rhetorically navigate all of their other roles and identities. Thus, to provide an answers to my research questions on identity, I must simultaneously discuss gender norms as well. I was not expecting this to be the case, as I assumed that running identity would naturally come to the fore, since all of these stories had running as their focal point. This lack of overt focus on running identity makes sense, however, given that these women are all amateur runners and running is something they must fit into their daily lives, as opposed to professional athletes who ostensibly live life the other way around. Part of the reason running identity did not emerge as a driving force is due to the rhetorical construction of these women as “every day” or the “girl next door.” Rather than running identity being a primary marker, runner became one of the many “hats” these women wear on a daily basis. While there were certainly stories where running became a much more pivotal practice (such as grief narratives), overall, for these women, running served as an activity that transformed the other areas of their lives.

This idea of transformation leads me to discuss my second and third research questions more specifically. *In every story*, the woman writing alluded to, if not directly discussed, at least one additional role outside that of runner. In fact, helping to navigate their multiple relationships is *the primary role* that running played in these women's lives. These women rhetorically navigate between multiple roles and identities by learning to make time for running. Whether they are training for a race or running with friends for therapy and exercise, running works as the hub of the wheel or glue that holds everything together.

There does seem to be a hierarchy among the roles these women perform, with running being a reflexive commitment. By this I mean that these women recognize that running enables them (through increased energy and clarity of mind, for example) to perform their other roles and identities better. In the cases of women struggling with depression or grief, running (with its attendant biochemical helpers, adrenaline and endorphins) provided a balm that helped facilitate healing so they could continue on their life's journey.

Lastly, in regards to my final question on experiences of gender norms, the stories I analyzed dealt with deeply-held beliefs about body image, balancing parental roles, dealing with misogyny (i.e., street harassment and catcalling), the impossible double standard that women be thin and in shape but not out on the roads running and sweating, and finally the myth that women are nothing without an (assumed-heterosexual partner). Each of these unique instances revealed women attempting to navigate (hetero)sexism and the ingrained subordination of women in Western culture. These women's experiences of gender norms and expectations naturally led to shifts in their relationships, although these shifts were not explicitly from a feminist perspective. For example, some women, when they needed assistance in caring for their children, they expected their partners to contribute—not because equality is something valued, but because running/training time is so important. And yet for other women, the exact opposite was the case: they realized their priorities and goals were equally important and insisted on getting the support they needed.

Overall, throughout this analysis I learned that while women do identify themselves as runners in each text, they primarily identify themselves in relational roles when reflecting on *impediments* to running. For example, a woman's role and identity as partner or mother would often trump her identity and commitment to running if a choice had to be made between the two.

This choice led me to consider how our understanding of gender, power, and storytelling are at play in these narratives. Amy Allen, citing Seyla Benhabib, asks the following poignant questions about gender:

Is not the I who asks “(how) ought I identify with this or that gender narrative,” insofar as it is embodied and concrete, already gendered? Does it make sense, then, to think of gender as a narrative that we can choose how to weave into our own life story? Or, rather, is gender in some sense a (culturally and historically specific) precondition for the telling of any narrative whatsoever? If that is the case, and if, as Benhabib herself maintains, gender difference is intimately bound up with power inasmuch as all known gender-sex systems function to exploit and oppress women, then does it make sense to think of power as merely structuring the available options from which we choose when constructing our gendered life stories? No doubt it does that too, but does it not also go deeper in the self than this, structuring the very I who chooses how to enact his or her gender? (165)

Allen’s questions serve to spark my own reflection(s) on this chapter. Throughout these pages I have maintained that these women are working from cultural scripts that dictate appropriate behavior based on gender. While this may very well be the case, Allen asks that I further consider the element of power that always-already informs these women—before they even begin to tell their stories, really, before they even *begin*. Recognizing that choices regarding identity and gender performance/experience are constrained by power relations that are always at work to oppress women allows me to further ground my findings in a necessary element of possibility and hope.



I say possibility and hope because power relations are not fixed, stable bastions of control. In the next chapter I will critique these power relations based on Chantal Mouffe's political theory of agonistic pluralism and feminist ontology. Returning to the women's running texts, I will continue my analysis by examining these stories for moments of tension and play surrounding gender performance and further explicate these narratives in the hopes of articulating a radical new feminist ontology, made possible through an application of radical, plural democracy.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND MOUFFEAN POLITICS

#### **Introduction**

The goal of this chapter is to provide the final portion of my analysis of women's running texts through the use of Chantal Mouffe's political theory, consciousness-raising, and feminist ontology. I will begin by providing a review of the following concepts, as developed by Mouffe: "politics" and "the political," power and social relations, and hegemony. These concepts, defined in Chapter Two are critical to the analysis presented in this chapter. After this review, I will provide a preview for the remainder of this chapter.

#### *"Politics" and "The Political"*

I would like to remind the reader of the distinctions Mouffe makes between "the political" and "politics," as these distinctions help elucidate women's running as a political activity. By "the political" Mouffe refers to the elements of antagonism that are inherent in all social relations, such as those that exist between those men and women in sports broadcasting who believe women need and deserve more coverage, versus those who think the status quo is appropriate, for example. "Politics" on the other hand refers to the policies, practices, mores, and institutions that seek to organize and order "human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are effected by the dimension of 'the political'" (*The Return* 101). Making this explicit then, sporting culture, and the running community specifically, are microcosms of a larger patriarchal culture that is subject to the same strictures of "the political" and "politics" as would be any other political entity.

These two distinctions make it possible to critique the dynamics of women's running stories from a unique perspective; focusing on how these stories operate at the political level and

are influenced by politics creates an avenue for understanding how women's running stories can contribute to the project of liberty and equality for all. To put this distinction another way, "politics refers to the 'ontic' level while 'the political' has to do with the 'ontological' one. This means that the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted" (*On the Political* 8-9).

### *Power and Social Relations*

At the outset, I believe it is necessary to discuss how women's running is political and to sketch a few brief connections between women runners and Mouffe's political theory. To begin, Mouffe states that, "if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values" (*Paradox* 100). Understanding that power relations, in this case set in a patriarchal structure, constitute the society in which we live is paramount and cannot be overstated. Women runners reside in a society that places them in a secondary position and devalues their athletic efforts on the basis of gender. This is the heart of my project; power relations shape and inform the sporting culture in which women runners reside.

Women's subordination, which is part of the very fabric of patriarchal culture, takes on many forms and must be challenged. Mouffe describes the "Wollstonecraft dilemma" which helps explain the nature of this problem. The "Wollstonecraft dilemma" refers to an equality catch-22, requiring that women become like men in order to be their equals, yet at the same time, women's 'unique attributes and abilities' must be taken into consideration. However, this consideration "is to demand the impossible because such difference is precisely what patriarchal citizenship excludes" (*The Return* 80). Women cannot simultaneously be like men *and* exhibit

qualities that are in any way construed as feminine. Thus it is impossible for women to gain admittance into patriarchal culture; we are always already excluded from the entity that organizes the world in which we live. And yet, Mouffe argues, this dilemma can be overcome by working towards her conception of a radical and pluralist democracy and its concomitant citizenship, which requires that all members work towards liberty and equality for all.

As a feminist rhetorical critic, I am foremost concerned with these gendered relations of power, and am interested in working to move those relations towards the democratic end of liberty and equality. This work happens at the intersection of feminist theorizing and cultural practice. Mouffe extends her work into the realm of feminist theory when she writes that, “A radical democratic interpretation [of citizenship] will emphasize the numerous social relations in which situations of domination exist that must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply” (*The Return* 84). Women’s running is one such situation; it consists of social relations that are structured and gendered in ways that disproportionately benefit men. “Situations of domination” clearly exist here in U.S. American culture, and must be challenged so that liberty and equality can become the norm. Mouffe goes on to explain, at some length, the importance of feminism in politics:

Feminist politics should be understood not as a separate form of politics designed to pursue the interests of women *as* women, but rather as the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands. Those goals and aims should consist in the transformation of all discourses, practices, and social relations where the category ‘woman’ is constructed in a way that implies subordination. Feminism, for me, is the struggle for the equality of women. But this should not be understood as a struggle to realize the equality of a definable

empirical group with a common essence and identity—that is, women—but rather as a struggle against the multiple forms in which the category ‘woman’ is constructed in subordination. (*The Return* 87-88)

This is an important articulation for my project, as women’s running is made up of “discourses, practices, and social relations” where women can be, and indeed often are, constructed as subordinate. These discourses are what make up the political entities—women’s bodies and social discourses—that I am working within and against in this project. I will illustrate that women’s running stories work to challenge cultural narratives and create space for a transformative understanding of the category of woman runner.

Following Mouffe’s understanding of feminist politics, I would like to point out using the words of Olive and Thorpe that “feminist research is not only contextually and theoretically informed, but it is political and active as well” (424). Along with Olive and Thorpe, this is where I link my work with women’s running stories to political and rhetorical theory, via Mouffe’s political project: agonistic pluralism and radical democratic citizenship make it possible to actively work against patriarchal and hegemonic gender roles, as I (re)read these stories as attempts to create a radical new space where liberty and equality reign. The argument I wish to advance is this: Women’s running stories articulate ways of being a woman runner in patriarchal, heterosexist culture; these ways of being are enacted in a unique subculture with an agonistic and plural landscape, wherein emancipatory politics account for unequal power relations through “friend/enemy” relationships. These relationships are formed through feminist consciousness-raising via running.

## *Hegemony*

Mouffe's conception of hegemony places hegemony firmly in the realm of "the political" which "refers to the dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated" (Mouffe, *Agonistics* 2). Understanding "the political" requires "recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency" (*On the Political* 17). At face value, hegemony is simply a term used to describe how cultures attempt to create some sort of social order; in practice, it is the process of ordering everything from ideas to belief systems, to genders and sexualities along a predetermined hierarchy. The problem comes in when the hegemonic structure (hierarchy) grants dominance to one group over another. Western culture is organized by patriarchal hegemony, which is a social system that grants, at its most basic level, power, prestige, and privilege to men over women. Joseph A. Diorio notes that hegemony creates a decidedly biased social state: "Without neutral public space, citizens must deploy their personal and communal views in debating what is good for society, resulting potentially in irreducible conflict" (514-15). However, these "personal and communal views" are necessarily informed by the hegemonic structure of the culture and since it is "disseminated widely and persistently enough, hegemony makes it possible to achieve specific political and legal objectives that would not be possible without it" as Springs explains (21).

Patriarchal hegemony wishes to erase the double-edged truth that Mariah Burton Nelson so eloquently states:

Women feel like people. We don't think constantly about being women. It's natural for us. We can even forget about it for long stretches of time. ... Men

scramble to retain some power by framing women as special athletes: female athletes. Through both text and photographs, sociologist Margaret Carlisle Duncan has noted, women tend to be depicted primarily as women—genderized—while men are depicted as brave, successful, tough, admirable human beings. (198)

This is the work of hegemony in sporting culture—the gendering of women and simultaneous humanizing (and valorizing) of men. This can be seen in story after story of female athletes in popular culture, where these individuals are constructed as partners, mothers, and daughters first and athletes second. Addressing hegemony, as Nelson does, provides us with the understanding necessary to tackle this “genderizing” of women by calling attention to the insidious dissemination of this perspective, which allows for the possibility of tearing down the walls of patriarchy.

The key to understanding hegemony is having an honest discussion of its root: male domination. Margaret Ledwith offers an important historical perspective on Gramsci and his understanding of hegemony, which makes it possible for us to tie feminism and hegemony to “the political”:

Gramsci turned the key to the personal as political with his reinterpretation of the traditional Marxist concept of *hegemony*, opening our consciousness to the public/private divide and the way that domination permeates the most intimate aspects of our being through our interactions in civil society, for example, the family, community, schools and formal religions which remain key sites of male domination. This is the basis for Gramsci’s acknowledged contribution to feminist thought which has provided a tool of analysis for understanding the sites of

gendered oppression in society. By exploring the nature of consent, we come to see that hegemony is always in process, in continuous struggle, and we begin to see that feminist consciousness is the beginning of questioning the nature of that consent in relation to patriarchy. (687, emphasis in original)

The current hegemony is situated in a matrix that allows for, if not outright requires, oppression based on gender. Ledwith's articulation of hegemony is rich and nuanced, and provides an excellent foundation for a deeper discussion of Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism, the political, and politics. All three of these pieces work together. Since the political is always already a site of struggle and politics seek to provide order to the political, it makes sense that those attempts at stabilization are necessarily contingent on who yields power and domination. What then becomes of primary importance is what other perspectives (such as feminist consciousness) are brought to the table.

Celeste Condit writes "a hegemonic position presumes that contradictions are inevitable to all human political entities [...] Consequently, from a hegemonic perspective, contradictions are only useful for indicating where the tensions and necessary conditions in a social concordance might be" (221). This is precisely Mouffe's point, as Condit points out "Because social systems must seek to serve multiple interests, a variety of principles will be applied, and these will not be consonant with each other in every case" (221). Dana Cloud admonishes "an understanding of hegemony as concordance [as posited above by Condit] is an appropriate critical model only if one is satisfied with the compromises allowed within and by the 'given conditions'" ("Hegemony or Concordance," 117). However, what Cloud's position fails to recognize is that the "given conditions" are inherently unstable and are "given" only by the *current* hegemony. Mouffe responds to this perspective by arguing that such a position



refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimensions constitutive of ‘the political’. Their aim is the establishment of a world ‘beyond left and right’, ‘beyond hegemony’, ‘beyond sovereignty’, and ‘beyond antagonism’. Such a longing reveals a complete lack of understanding of what is at stake in democratic politics and the dynamics of constitution of political identities and, as we will see, it contributes to exacerbating the antagonistic potential existing in society. (*The Return 2*)

Rather than exacerbate antagonism, Mouffe seeks to provide the foundation for agonistic relationships through the creation of a new hegemony “articulated through new egalitarian social relations, practices, and institutions” (“*The Return*” 86). In her book, *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe states “what we need is a hegemony of democratic values [liberty and equality for all], and this requires a multiplication of democratic practices, institutionalizing them into ever more diverse social relations, so that a multiplicity of subject positions can be formed through a democratic matrix” (18). Working towards this new hegemony is part of the work of this project, and is central to the analysis provided in the remainder of this chapter.

#### *Preview of Chapter*

Possibilities for achieving this new hegemony, through an application of radical and plural democracy, will be the ending point for this project as I will arrive at these possibilities by further analyzing the women’s running texts selected for this project. To illustrate how these stories do in fact articulate a new way of being, I will discuss the remaining two research questions:

5. A. What are the points of possible contention, clash or disagreement in the discussion of women runners’ experiences?

- B. How might the various perspectives that women (and others around them) express be in legitimate (agonistic, pluralistic) conversation with each other?
6. A. In what ways might these stories hint at ontological change as a real possibility, and/or provide a canvas for an agonistic and plural relationship with the self and others?
- B. In other words, what commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do different perspectives have in common, that might bring them together to work for mutually-agreed upon change in the world, or in the political order?

The structure for this remainder of this chapter is as follows: First, I will begin by connecting Chesebro et al.'s second stage of consciousness-raising with Mouffe's concepts of agonistic pluralism and the "friend/enemy/adversary" distinction. I will then construct an "agonistic conversation" between women's running stories and the larger cultural context in which they are situated. The purpose of this conversation is to explore unequal power relations and outline the unique subculture in which women runners reside. Second, I will build on my interpretation of ontology from Chapter Two, detail how ontological change is a real possibility through agonistic and plural relationships with the self and others, and discuss how women's running is a political act. I will also discuss how, despite having different commitments, goals, beliefs, and values, the women in these stories work together for social change. I will conclude by providing specific commentary on my final two research questions and offer a brief preview of the next, and final, chapter.

### **Group Identity Through Polarization + Mouffe's "Friend/Enemy/Adversary" Distinction**

In this section I discuss the work of Chesebro et al. alongside that of Chantal Mouffe to provide a unique discussion of the consciousness-raising process. Second, I discuss Mouffe's

conception of “friends” and “adversaries” (the concomitant term from Chesebro et al. is “enemy”) and detail instances of these positionalities found throughout the women’s running texts, as well as discuss the social ramifications of these relationships. Third, I weave together an agonistic conversation between the “friends” and “adversaries” detailed previously. I end this section with a discussion about how agonism calls for ontological change.

### *On Consciousness-Raising*

This section focuses on Chantal Mouffe’s political theory and links to the second stage of Chesebro et al.’s description of consciousness-raising, which is “Group Identity Through Polarization.” Chesebro and his colleagues offer several insights into their second stage of consciousness-raising, as they explain that a group begins to build solidarity by “securing a group consensus that [they are] a distinct subculture of the larger society” (141). Chesebro et al. also point out that part of the second stage of consciousness-raising is that, by developing group solidarity, “this initial division subsequently allowed the groups to identify an ‘enemy’” (141). It is my contention that this “enemy” that Chesebro et al. speak to is synonymous with the “friend/adversary” distinction that Mouffe has developed. Mouffe discusses the “us/them,” “friend/adversary” distinction in the introduction to her book *The Democratic Paradox*. Mouffe writes that agonism

involves a relation not between enemies but between ‘adversaries’, adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as ‘friendly enemies’. That is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way. (13)

In discussing enemies versus (agonistic) adversaries, Chantal Mouffe notes that enemies are “persons who have no common symbolic space,” where as adversaries are “‘friendly enemies,’

that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way” (*Paradox* 13). The feminist argument that “the personal is political” clearly makes space for the sociopolitical issues women runners contend with to be included in conversations about “the political,” as heteronormativity and traditional gender roles (for example), are adversaries that are part and parcel to the elements of antagonism imbedded in our culture’s social relations. Herein lie several questions that I must address: How best can we transform sporting culture and patriarchal culture into the realm of “friendly enemies”? What *current* space might there be for an agonistic relationship between women runners and the dominant sporting/patriarchal cultures?

To answer these questions, my task is to determine and define this “common symbolic space” – and discuss how a radical feminist politics would organize this space. It is my contention that running creates a common ground for women to begin to articulate who they are and to form an embodied response to patriarchal sporting culture. Mouffe argues that, “what we need is a ‘life politics’ able to reach the various areas of personal life, creating a ‘democracy of the emotions,’” wherein we can understand the “power relations which structure contemporary post-industrial societies” (*Paradox* 15). I will demonstrate that through storytelling, these women are engaged in consciousness-raising wherein they become aware of the unequal power relations that structure their daily lives. This new awareness, brought about through the activities of running and storytelling affords them the opportunity to forge new ways of being in the world that account for, resist, and work against patriarchal injustices. In the next two sub-sections, I detail instances of friends and adversaries that I found within women’s running stories.

## *Friends*

Friendship stories detail how women positively interacted with each other and to what potential, political ends. One woman, Roberta B. Jacobson, explained her relationship with her running friends this way:

No matter how exhausted we got, one thing was for sure, we never gave up. ‘I’m not going to quit if she doesn’t. If they can do it, so can I.’ As distances increased, we became a pack of wild wolves, fifty females strong, charging along together, pushing ourselves to limits we’d never even imagined. (*Women Runners* 54)

In this story athletic competition is positively valued, rather than being seen as something to be squelched or labeled “unfeminine.” The women use each other as springboards to propel each other forward and gladly take on a strong mascot (pack of wolves) as the symbol of the strength and solidarity for their group. Jacobson’s use of “a pack of wild wolves” as a metaphor for her running group invites us to picture a group of women unfettered from expectations. We can picture them running free and strong; their strength is not the kind that comes in the form of bulky muscle, like the proverbial “strong as an ox” but rather their strength is formed in a communal connection. These women are strong for each other, they move together through the woods with stealth and assuredness, silently daring anyone to try and slow them down.

Furthermore, running friendships are often forged through struggles and hard times outside of running, creating a need for connection with others:

Being around ‘The Janes’—new moms and veterans of all ages with dozens of kids among them—she found that she needed them as much as they needed her.

In the long runs or after workouts, she would learn things from these other mothers, the kind of intuitive knowledge that comes from experience and passes

from one woman to another [...] Joan and Mimi became true friends, bonded by so many shared hours in the confessional of long runs. (*Sole Sisters* 6-7).

In this excerpt the reader is invited to share in Joan's transformation, following along as Joan comes to understand what it means to be a mother, how to take on a female role that was at once part of her bodily experience and something she simultaneously felt she knew nothing about. Joan knew everything about running and so as she offered that knowledge to the group, she gained new knowledge that helped her on her journey. Carol Tavris writes in *The Mismeasure of Woman*, "The result of this process is that gender, like culture, organizes for its members different influence strategies, ways of communicating, nonverbal languages and ways of perceiving the world" (291). In these stories we see feminine ways of knowing and connecting at work, bonding over motherhood, and the passing on of knowledge as strong and supportive ways of being in the world.

Another part of this new and unique subculture, created through relationships, lies in the different roles women play when out on a group run:

Captains go into every run knowing they may wind up strolling with a beginning walker, or jogging slowly with a woman working through a heartache. 'Whenever you go out you have to be prepared to sacrifice your run to help another woman,' Judy says. (*Sole Sisters* 43)

In this running group, the focus is on helping each other navigate the ups and downs of life. Thus, being a "captain" is an honor since camaraderie is valued over maintaining a faster pace. We are also invited to imagine the feelings of responsibility and pride captains feel in helping new group members progress from walking to jogging to running over the course of several weeks or months. Being trusted with hearing another woman's heartache is portrayed as a

privilege, one that results in a series of intimate moments that bring women together through the shared activity of running. This is part of the beauty of these stories—on the road, these women focus on how to care for each other and put divisive issues like “the mommy wars” aside, as they learn how to work together towards liberty and equality for all. Running becomes a panacea, a place to even the playing field through finding a shared pace. Even though in this story some women are given the title of “captains,” through running in groups women often learn to blur the lines of the “hierarchy” by synching their pace alongside whomever is in need on that particular day.

On a more visceral level, Carey-Campbell asks,

Why get sweaty alone when you can rope someone else in? If you have a friend who is a runner already or looking to get into it, having a buddy to do it with can make it a much more pleasant experience. You’re much less likely to flake out on your runs if there’s the possibility of letting someone down as a result. Working out a plan together and supporting and encouraging each other through it is not only a great way to tackle a goal and get fit, but also a really good bonding experience. (*Be Pretty* 16)

Putting your body on the road with someone else is an intimate act and creates the foundation for a shared physical and emotional experience. This positive way of viewing running further manifests itself with the notion of accountability—Carey-Campbell notes that we are much more likely to stick with a running regimen if we know someone is waiting for us. Through Carey-Campbell’s upbeat prose, we are invited to understand running not as drudgery, but as an opportunity to enjoy getting to know someone else, while simultaneously getting in shape. These relationships are what make consciousness-raising possible; through this bonding experience,

women runners come to recognize that they are part of a unique subculture, up against a world pushing them to think, look, feel, and behave in ways not of their choosing, but rather, prescribed by a culture that wishes to keep them docile and dependent (Foucault, 136).

A women's running subculture also factors significantly into the novel, *Running from Love*, as shown in the moment where Farrah and her friends invite the handsome man in the blue shirt to breakfast. Once at the restaurant, we find the narrator reminiscing that

there was something about Farrah's running club that was like family. They offered her unconditional support as well as limitless teasing. And then, there was the trash-talking component. She hoped they would dial it down while Jude was at breakfast with them. Both Ana and Blanca endlessly grilled her about her love life, lecturing her on the perils of waiting too long to start a family or, for that matter, go out on a date. (11)

That's what close friends are for right?—pushing us to live life to the fullest and to take risks we might not, without a gentle push in that direction. This is an excellent example of consciousness-raising at work—Farrah recognizes, here and throughout the novel, with the help of her friends, that she is capable of making strong and fulfilling decisions, without the *need* for a romantic partner, even though the possibility of dating Jude is fun and exciting. In this excerpt, we are invited into a family of friends, wherein a foundation of mutual trust and respect has been built over time. The “limitless teasing” and “endless grill[ing]” are components of a special kind of relationship; one that allows for the simultaneous recognition of stereotypical gender roles (dating and starting a family), while at the same time having respect for Farrah's individual life choices.



## *Adversaries*

For this project, the “adversaries” are those who oppose women running, in the hegemonic sensibility that sports are still a bastion of male privilege, superiority, and priority. In Chapter One I recounted numerous instances of women being “up against” a history of exclusion from sports and a more general overview of the impacts of patriarchal culture. It was not difficult to find examples of times in the women’s running stories when women recounted their own negative and disempowering experiences: “Being raised in the 1950s, I was expected to ‘act like a lady,’ sit demurely, and play with Barbie dolls” (Bujak, *Tapping the Fountain* 51). Gender expectations run quite deep and influence behavior and belief systems by telling us who we are supposed to be in the world and how we are supposed to act. “Act like a lady,” and “sit demurely” conjure very specific and docile images. Acting like a lady means knowing your place and how to perform in that space. In this excerpt, playing with Barbies is constructed as a passive activity, one in which Bujak is continually learning and role-playing the being of a proper woman. Despite the efforts to make women conform to patriarchal gender norms, women’s resistance is a thriving force, as Bujak continues her narrative: “But I ditched Barbie whenever I could, and snuck out to find neighborhood baseball, kickball, football, stickball, or any game that involved running. In fact, I’ve been running ever since my mother told me not to—at about age three” (*Tapping the Fountain* 51). Bujak, and other women like her, seemed to know instinctively or intuitively what was best for them, what their “truth” was. For Bujak, running was a way of being in the world that brought a sense of control and freedom; it was literally something she had to do to be her authentic self, even if that meant going against what she was taught and other people’s expectations.

Sometimes going against expectations doesn't come that easily—these “adversaries” cannot always be faced right from the start. Part of the problem of patriarchy is its concomitant heteronormativity, yet another hurdle women must clear to be true to themselves. Rita Stumps shares her story:

I was determined not to be a lesbian at that time, and had done everything I could to deny it. After all, how could I, a woman in a heterosexual marriage, possibly be gay? Never mind my reasons for marrying, to fit in, fulfill my family's expectations, resign myself to the fate that seemed to make everyone around me so happy. I had no personal control, except in one area. As an anorexic controls her body through obsessive dieting, so I controlled the only aspect of my life I could, my only time alone, my precious time spent in the hills. Running those many miles helped me deny who I really was; by controlling speed and distance, I could control myself, and keep the secret I swore never to reveal to anyone, especially to myself. (*Women Runners* 223)

Being a good woman means loving a man and providing a heterosexual household for your children, in Stumps mind; we are invited into the struggle between who she knows she really is and the expectations against which she is pushing. Stumps paints a picture of how running can become a place to hide as well as, eventually, to process. Running is a way to deal with the back and forth that comes with making a huge life decision. While Stumps was running alone, she finally came to the decision that she needed to be honest and come out to her family. Running provided a safe space for her to gain the strength necessary to be authentic; she used running to dig deeper, experience her desperation, and finally determined to be true to whom she really is.

Being true to oneself can be exceptionally difficult when that appears to conflict with the needs of those we love. I follow Stumps' story with a discussion of how patriarchy's unbalanced gender roles require that, for women, others' needs take precedence over their commitment to running:

Joan had little support juggling the demands of motherhood and coaching (not to mention her own training) among the alpha males of college sports. At the same time, there were not many elite athletes like herself who were taking detours on the mommy track. Her running peers were incredulous when she decided to interrupt training and competing to have her first daughter in 1993. One rival pronounced publicly that a mother, distracted by children, would never be good enough to make an Olympic team. Joan savored proving her wrong. Not only did she come back stronger from pregnancy to win the U.S. cross-country title in 1995, she went on to qualify for the Olympics the next year. At the Olympics, the media hailed her as the Comeback Mom. (*Sole Sisters 2*)

Joan is a runner! Period. Yes, she is also someone's mother, daughter, sister, and friend. But in this moment, Joan is a runner. The problem is that women have for so long been tethered to the roles they play in other people's lives and not to the primary role they play for themselves as unique individuals. Relying on Susan Bordo, I note that what is needed to interpret a story such as this is a lens capable of critiquing power as constitutive:

Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis of power 'from below', as Foucault puts it; for example, of the mechanisms that shape and

proliferate—rather than repress—desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance. (167)

Looking again at Joan’s story, where she is heralded as the “Comeback Mom,” we must recognize the power that is at work in rendering this person *a woman*—a mother—first and foremost, over an athlete. We do not expect the transition into fatherhood to take a toll on male athletes at all; it is not surprising that Joan did not receive support from her coaches and colleagues. After all, a mother’s place is at home with her baby. Headlines do not portray male athletes’ performances as more impressive if they have a two-month old baby in the house; when a male runner wins a race, “father” is not in the headline. The rendering of Joan as a women/mother over athlete, and men as men/athletes over fathers, is the work of patriarchal hegemony discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

However, what Bordo’s conception of power allows us to see are these gendered norms at work *and* at the same time, reveal Joan’s deviance. Joan delights in undermining those norms and proving everyone wrong, as she managed to successfully take a detour from training—and make a huge comeback!—while at the same time, taking care of her child. Her deviance was doubly transgressive; Joan worked against deeply-seated tropes of both the ideal athlete and the ideal mother; one does not simply take a break from elite training, nor does one usually take so much time away from a newborn to return to peak physical shape and elite international competition.

Because of patriarchy and heteronormativity, a woman’s relationship with herself is quite often fraught with insecurities based on the thin-female ideal, second-class citizenship, and the glass ceiling placed above women in virtually every area of their lives. Susie Orbach details this issue:

Body beautiful and the goal of perfectibility have been democratized. Invitingly set out as available to everyone in any country whatever their economic situation, the right body is trumpeted as a way of belonging in our world today. This democratic call for beauty, disconcertingly, wears an increasingly homogenized and homogenizing form, with the images and names of the global style icons pressed on the lips and the eyes of the young and the not so young. While some people may be able to opt in and do so joyfully, a larger number cannot. For the democratic idea has not extended to aesthetic variation; instead the aesthetic has paradoxically become narrower over the last few decades. The slim aesthetic—with pecs for men and ample breasts for women—bedevils those who don't conform, and even those who do happen to fit can carry a sorrowful insecurity about their own bodies. (3)

Orbach brings women's body image, as influenced by Western culture's singular female icons, into the realm of the political and showcases just how pervasive and invasive these norms are for women. The slim aesthetic, as Orbach terms it, works in insidious ways to mark as deviant bodies that do not conform to the norms set out for us to emulate. In some ways these norms can become all-encompassing, as they influence how women see every aspect of themselves.

Orbach's articulation of this "adversary" provides helpful framing in conjunction with Mouffe's political theory.

Mouffe urges the reader to remember that the agonistic perspective she advocates "acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonistic

struggle among these adversaries” (*On the Political* 32-33). What is interesting about the findings I have discussed in this section is that there is really only one adversary, patriarchy, that manifests itself in multiple, insidious ways. The good news is that all of the pieces that make up women’s participation in sporting culture are contingent on an ever-fluctuating hegemony that the situation will, by definition, change. What will determine the nature of this change is debate in a “shared symbolic space” (Mouffe, *On the Political* 121). In Chapter Five I will argue that in the case of women in sports, this “debate” is happening on the ground, in spaces created specifically for women and girls to put their bodies on the line and demand greater access to sporting culture.

#### *Agonistic Conversation(s) Between Women Runners and the Larger Culture*

Jason A. Springs explains the necessary tension involved in living out agonistic pluralism in Mouffeian terms:

Of necessity, democratic political engagement will entail points of concession and compromise. Yet, Mouffe’s agonist model sees these as moments in the persistently unfolding processes of change in which conflict continues to unfold, though emerging in new forms, and cutting across varying constituencies. In other words, agonistic pluralism expects moments of compromise to occasion further interpretive contestation and conflict. (19)

In other words, agonistic moments involve give and take, wherein women make inroads in the sporting culture and are inevitably met with backlash, which in turn creates a need for further dialogue and change. This cycle necessarily continues ad infinitum, as that is the very definition of hegemony. Smooth sailing is never possible because what is being built is a common

symbolic space between two opposite points of view (patriarchy and feminism). As Mouffe points out,

Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. And the fact that this must be envisaged as an unending process should not be cause for despair because the desire to reach a final destination can only lead to the elimination of the political and to the destruction of democracy. In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism. (*Paradox* 33-34)

Through their storytelling, women who run detail instances of conflict and may come to recognize that pushing for equality continually leads to conflictual engagement. However these positionalities are not static—cultural mores, political leanings, and standards for appropriate behavior ebb and flow.

Kim Chernin’s writing on the tyranny of slenderness, one such standard for appropriate female appearance and behavior, succinctly details the need for a new hegemony through agonistic conversations: “We have entered an era of cultural life when everyone is preoccupied with a woman’s body but few women, whether fat or thin, feel comfortable living inside the body they possess” (35-36). Even though this observation was written in 1980, it rings true today, over 30 years later. As I have pointed out through the entirety of this study, women are caught in a catch-22 when it comes to their relationship with their bodies, to the extent that this relationship is dictated by hegemonic ideals and a sexist rationale proffered by patriarchal culture. What is necessary is to change women’s relationship(s) with those “adversaries” from

one of antagonism to one of agonism; the goal of agonism being to create the possibility for women to “feel comfortable living in the body they possess,” which includes participation on sports, provided by a new hegemony.

I have previously illustrated the shared space surrounding women’s participation in sporting culture and feminism. Where there is still significant disagreement, even hostility, is in what those two areas (feminism and sporting culture) mean and what they look like in practice.

Mouffe writes that,

A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation between democratic political positions, and this requires a real debate about possible alternatives.

Consensus is indeed necessary but it must be accompanied by dissent. There is no contradiction in saying that, as some would pretend. Consensus is needed on the institutions which are constitutive of democracy. But there will always be disagreement concerning the way social justice should be implemented in these institutions. (*On the Political* 113)

For example, looking back to the literature on women rugby and football players, as well as female bodybuilders, we can reread the debate over women’s muscular strength as an agonistic, rather than antagonistic, struggle. It is perfectly understandable that women would be reluctant to cease maintaining “normal” or “traditional” feminine physiques when it is quite obvious that those who do not will face backlash. If we consider this particular concern from the perspective of feminist empowerment and equity rather than hate and inequality, we see that there is indeed room for women to make strong choices and live their authentic selves, even in the face of stereotypes. Neither side of the necessarily contingent and unstable binary, be it the ever-



changing cap on women's muscularity or our culture's insistence on the impossibility that women athletes be heterosexually attractive to all men, is good for humanity.

By engaging with these rhetorical constructions through a Mouffean lens, we see that the struggle over women's sporting bodies is an uphill battle to reach the end-goal of women having liberty and equality in an unjust patriarchy. When viewed agonistically, women's physiques and sporting endeavors (whatever they may be) become sites of hegemonic contestation, with both material and discursive ramifications. For again, Mouffe points out:

My main argument here has been that, for we feminists committed to a political project whose aim is to struggle against the forms of subordination that exist in many social relations and not only in those linked to gender, an approach that merits us to understand how the subject is constructed through different discourses and subject positions is certainly more adequate than one that reduces our identity to one single position – be it class, race or gender. This type of democratic project is also better served by a perspective that allows us to grasp the diversity of ways in which relations of power are constructed, and helps us to reveal the forms of exclusion present in all pretensions to universalism and in the claims to have found the true essence of rationality. (*The Return* 88)

I am *not* arguing that sexism is not rampant in sporting culture. What I am arguing is that we should recognize that sexism and still attempt to find some common ground that leads towards liberty and equality. We need not throw out the baby of “sports culture” with the “sexist” bathwater. It is my contention that storytelling is one way in which women can “stand taller;” the artifacts that I have analyzed throughout this project illustrate the power of sharing personal

narrative as a way to create space for change. This change, towards new ways of being that resist the current patriarchal hegemony, is the focus of the next section.

### **Ontological Change—New Relationship(s) With Self and Other**

#### *Ontology: A Brief Review*

Susan Frank Parsons writes a beautiful explanation of ontology, which is apt for this study as she links the study of ontology to that of language and gender formation. Contemplating bodies and sex/gender leads Parsons to consider:

the formation of the self, and in particular about the role of speaking as I grow up into what is said of me and as I respond to the ways in which I am spoken of and spoken to by others. The delicacy of these verbal strands that make a place for me, and that I then take up in my own speaking of and form out of them myself, suggests the risk that is in language. For speaking can hold me down and make of me a mere thing and freeze me in a past, or it can hold open a future into which I can stretch, for whose coming I may prepare as I bring myself towards that of which speaking speaks. Understood as performative, speaking thereby enacts the self, bearing it towards being and so into its own becoming, and so it is that in speaking I come to matter as engendered and enfleshed. The precarious moment of remaining open for this future coming-to-be is the edge of silence out of which comes speaking. (340)

Parsons's framing allows me to reflect on the implications of storytelling, both the stories we are told and the ones we speak about ourselves. Certainly both sets of stories influence each other, and in turn influence our lived experience: who we become. Additionally, this understanding of ontology, of the study of being, wrapped up in language—in rhetoric, rhetorical choices, and an

implicit understanding of rhetorical criticism—sets the stage for the final section of this chapter. I weave literature concerning the study of ontology with women’s running stories to illustrate a new way of being through running, linking the physical body with a metaphysical understanding of who these women are and what it means to be a woman runner.

### *Ontological Change*

Margaret S. Crowdes’s work on women, rhetoric, ontology, and martial arts sets the stage for my own analysis of women runners. Crowdes notes throughout her research that the ways in which women interact in the world changes as they gain control and mastery over their bodies. Rachel Toor writes of her struggle to take her first steps of becoming a runner: “I was angry [...] because I wasn’t good at this [running]. I hated doing things I wasn’t good at. It is easier not to try new things. And it unpleasant to have someone witness your struggle” (14). This is an important observation as it harkens back to one of the many barriers to running that I discussed in Chapter Three; before women can become someone new, they must first push past the roadblocks to even start the process. Once the journey begins, newfound insights, strengths, and other benefits begin to manifest in the body rather quickly. Toor states that in her case, one of those new benefits was friendship:

By becoming a runner, I was welcomed by strangers as a comrade, and I gained, as my legs got stronger and my lung capacity increased, an increased and more complex capacity for friendship, especially with men. I have always had a handful of women I hold close—whose intense friendships I rely on, where we sustain and support each other. Through running I learned not to be one of the boys, but to be myself, a woman among men. (xii)

Toor's musing on relationships and gender-based interaction is an invaluable resource to me, as her story provides a platform to discuss the intersection of ontology and Mouffe's political theory. Note that Toor stated she learned to be herself, "a woman among men" and *not* "one of the boys," the latter being a statement reminiscent of Mouffe's articulation of the Wollstonecraft Dilemma, wherein a woman cannot exhibit masculine behavior without simultaneously highlighting her femininity. While I find the former phrase, "a woman among men," most interesting, as it highlights the complexity of Toor's newfound running identity, and her concomitant shift in being, it is paramount that both phrases be placed alongside each other for analysis.

Both phrases grapple with the underlying question of how to (properly) be a "woman" when "men" are around, which Crowdes articulates this way:

When it is commonly believed that women should be competent specifically at being soft, emotional, unaggressive, available, attentive to the needs and wishes of others, and when a state of dependence on and vulnerability to others (usually men) has been considered appropriate and desirable for women, then competence communicated through physical strength, verbal directness, direct eye contact, confident posture, or independent thinking is frequently perceived as challenging, inappropriate, or incompetent, i.e., unfeminine. (530).

Thus, at first glance, the options articulated by Toor seem to be opposite sides of the same coin. A woman who is labeled "one of the boys" is often described as one who effuses the attitude that she does not need to try too hard to impress men with lots of makeup or jewelry since she is completely comfortable in her natural state; she is never, ever "dramatic" or "emotional;" interestingly, she is absolutely recognized as a female, meaning she is most likely heterosexually

attractive and embodies Leeder's concept of "frail femininity" at least to a minimum degree so that the boys' sense of masculinity remains intact; she appears to identify more with men socially, as she is down to watch sports or play cards; this woman appears to never be offended by the (sometimes, perhaps even oftentimes) sexist jokes the guys crack, nor does she cringe while watching a boxing match with the group; this woman is the epitome of what men consider to be a cool chick, as she is presumably beautiful, and willing and able to take on specific, albeit limited, masculine traits so that they feel comfortable enough around her as to easily disregard her personhood and female standpoint, without having to feel guilty or worry about being called out. Essentially then, for a woman to be "one of the boys," men must find her hot and nonthreatening.

On the other hand, being "a woman among men" seems, at first glance, to be a startlingly different embodiment, as it sounds like the philosophy of a woman who takes pride in her staunch performance of being a "woman" while in the presence of men. The use of the words "women" and "men" rather than "boys" and (presumably) "girls," gives this phrase an air of maturity and regality, as if this option is the high road, and the other is childish and unsophisticated. Obviously, this phrase sets up a false dichotomy, one that grossly ignores the breadth and complexity of the gender spectrum, which then dovetails into a set of entirely impossible—and yet very important—choices.

Toor's decision to identify with the phrase "woman among men" rather than being "one of the boys," reveals that in this moment she sees herself as beyond the need to try and fit in, to make herself into someone she's not just to be included. However this is complicated by the fact that throughout her memoir she consistently notes that she prefers running and hanging out with men over women. Her struggle to negotiate these labels and what they require of her in practice,

illustrates the power of language in shaping her being, and her desire to be loved and accepted for whom she really is. Through running, Toor says she gained the confidence to just be herself, and to express her gender in ways that felt natural and authentic. By marking a distinction between these two phrases, Toor's words allow us to consider this additional tightrope women must negotiate in relationships with men (and women), and simultaneously interrogate our reactions to people who balance differently than ourselves. This particular story illustrates that women who run grapple with how to present themselves, the implications of that choice making, and how all of these facets influence their being.

Crowdes' work also touched on this negotiation, as she discusses that through martial arts, women become more confident, garner the strength and resilience to get out of situations and relationships that are unhealthy, and stand up for themselves in society. But at an even more basic and personal level, they begin to put themselves first and take care of their own needs as an example from the novel *Running from Love* illustrates:

Nerves atwitter, she [Farrah] knew what she needed to do. A short, fast, hard run would not only clear her head, but firmly recement her in the present moment. 'Be here now' was her favorite motto after 'It's not what happens, it's how you handle it.' She needed to think on both maxims while cold, fresh evening air poured into her lungs and pricked her senses. [...] The air felt crisp, clean, and fresh on her skin. Immediately, her mood lifted. She was baffled, still hurt and more than a little curious, but it was the past beckoning to her, and she'd already been there. It hadn't treated her well. [...] After three loops around the block, she'd had enough. (Gaston, 98-99)

Notice Gaston’s rhetorical choices in this excerpt, the grounding and sense of stability she establishes with the words “firmly cement her in the present moment,” and how the mantra “be here now” invites the reader to feel the sense of contentment and focus on the moment that running provides for Farrah. As she is running in loops around her neighborhood, Farrah recognizes, through her internal monologue, that dwelling on the past holds nothing for her and is an unproductive and futile use of her time. Gaston’s literary style allows the reader to join Farrah as she engages with the emotional remnants of her previous relationship, and breathe a sigh of relief alongside her when she realizes the important difference between mulling unnecessarily over what could have been, and letting our pasts grow and shape us in important ways. Additionally, this excerpt illustrates perfectly the ontological grounding that occurs through a continued (re)connection with the body. Throughout the story, Farrah continually comes back to running as the activity that grounds her and gives her connection to herself and her community, and eventually to a relationship with someone who loves and understands her. The way that Gaston describes the connections between running and Farrah’s experiences creates the space for an understanding that running is more than an activity; it is a way of life, a way of being in the world that centers on the body in motion, and how that specific motion changes everything else.

We read about this being the case for yet another woman runner when Susan Marsh writes:

My once troublesome side stitches had vanished after I learned how to breathe in rhythm with my stride. Now I saw I could use the same idea to combat brain stitches. Get the mind in rhythm with the body. As my legs focused on their task of getting my body up the mountain, all parts had to cooperate. [...] I wasn’t

running away from problems anymore, but toward a solution. I couldn't see it yet, but I knew it lay in front of me, and I felt myself closing in, moments of clarity, when lungs and heart and legs and mind worked together, were accumulating in my memory. (*Women Runners* 209)

Marsh's articulation of her running experience illustrates the ontological change that is happening through her body. As Mouffe articulates, through ontology and (feminist) politics, "new objects and relations between objects become thinkable, and this has crucial consequences for a non-rationalist understanding of the political" (*Paradox* 139). Simply put, becoming is a process, and a political one at that. Much like coming to a feminist consciousness, one does not (usually) become a runner in a single day. The above excerpt from Susan Marsh's lived experience details the ebb and flow, back and forth, along the journey. Marsh's storytelling specifically highlights the negotiation(s) that must be made as one takes on and/or changes fundamental aspects of one's being (such as how one responds to crises—innate reactions that solidify into habits over time). As Marsh describes her experience in detailed language, the reader is invited to run alongside her as she gains strength in her legs and runs towards solutions to her problems, and to cheer her on as she flexes her new mental and emotional muscles that allow her to finally care for herself. In this way, the body mirrors our true essence: as women run they experience physical pain and also moments of ecstatic connection when their muscles and lungs work together. So, too, do women experience times of mental displeasure and jubilation when their outlook on the world, and how they see themselves in it, is burgeoning from their newly-acquired feminist consciousness. Marsh closes in on "moments of clarity" made possible by her *body, heart, and mind* coming together; in so doing, she elucidates the veracity of



Mouffe's argument, that through new relationships in and among objects, a new, non-rationalist, way of being is revealed.

Ontological change through consciousness-raising via running is further illustrated through this last story:

Running brings a sense of place: I never get bored with my training routes. I find comfort and security in these well-worn courses. I've become one with the neighborhood. I didn't quite realize the extent of my belonging until one day when I walked the route due to a few cracked ribs. Strangers stopped me on the street and said things like, 'Are you okay? Why aren't you running?' I didn't realize that I had become part of their everyday experience. (*Tapping the Fountain* 55)

This story foregrounds explicitly the heart of this chapter: running is what changed this woman's life, but that change occurred within a particular ontological framework; note that in this excerpt, this woman was interpolated fully as a runner by members of her neighborhood—not by herself alone. Nonetheless, Kioupiolis points out the possibility for a different reality when he argues that “ontological speculation can also paint the picture of a mutable world that is pregnant with rich possibilities, inspiring and encouraging the kind of unlimited contestation, generative politics and solidarity ethics that mark out radical democracy” (692). While women are currently constructed as *women* vis-à-vis cultural mores, even when—perhaps especially when—they are working to “buck” those same prescriptive norms, once women stake a claim to their bodies and put them out on the road, they challenge commonly held beliefs about where a woman's place should be. This challenging is part and parcel of the formation of a new hegemony, brought about by feminist consciousness-raising and ontological change.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

While this chapter is obviously organized differently than the previous analytical chapter, I chose this organizational strategy because it best allows for a thorough discussion of all the theoretical elements, analysis of the selected texts, and research questions. Throughout this section I will review the feminist rhetorical criticism I presented throughout this chapter as I address each research question in order. I will begin with RQ 5.A.: What are the points of possible contention, clash or disagreement in the discussion of women runners' experiences? When I began this project I presumed that there would be points within the stories where women articulated various experiences that might be outliers, that women might be "adversarial" with each other. My thinking in asking this question was to be able to probe the ways in which competition or lifestyle choices might form fractures or fissures in relationships. However, what I found was that the women who shared their stories in these texts came together, through running, over issues that would normally divide a group of people. For example, looking back to the story of Joan and her running group "The Janes," these women had vastly different life experiences and expectations—it would certainly not be surprising to find strife and disagreement here. However, there was a mutual need for one another's perspectives and input on how to live life to the fullest. The differing experiences of these women were valued, rather than seen as a source of antagonism.

Instead of there being contention between the women themselves, I found that there is legitimate clash and disagreement between them and the culture in which they reside. This finding speaks volumes to the need for agonistic conversations to take place at the cultural level. I found four adversaries of women runners: the notion of "being a proper lady," heteronormativity, traditional gender roles, and body image.

Despite the adversaries discovered being nonmaterial, they are enacted through individuals, people who continue to run “the machine” as-is, in a way that best serves the interest of particular groups, most often to the detriment of women. Mouffe points out that, seeing opponents as enemies to be destroyed is “precisely what a pluralist democracy must avoid; yet it can only protect itself against such a situation by recognizing the nature of the political” (*The Return* 6). Remembering that “the political” refers to the very nature of antagonism that is inherent in *all* sociopolitical relations, Mouffe urges us to “not hope for the elimination of disagreement but for its containment within forms that respect the existence of liberal democratic institutions [that value liberty and equality for all]” (*The Return* 50).

Each of these adversaries manifests itself in pervasive ways and falls under the umbrella of patriarchal hegemony. However, the act of becoming a runner, and the concomitant consciousness-raising, makes these women strong and enables them to stand up to these adversaries through assertiveness and recognizing that what they are doing makes a difference in the larger cultural narrative surrounding women’s bodily autonomy. By making the choice to go out and run, these women change not only their physical bodies, but also their mental capacity for strength and determination, the partnership dynamic within their relationships, and lastly, they increase the visibility of women runners specifically, and women athletes more generally.

These findings lead me to next contemplate RQ 5.B., “How might the various perspectives that women (and others around them) express be in legitimate (agonistic, pluralistic) conversation with each other?” I have come to hold the perspective that agonistic pluralism is a powerful political choice and that this choice can be played out in micro-interactions at both the interpersonal and cultural levels. As an exemplar, reconsider the story of Joan, the “Comeback Mom.” I pointed out in my analysis that Susan Bordo’s conception of power revealed Joan’s

deviance as she undermined cultural norms by being both a professional athlete and a mother. By working against cultural scripts, Joan enacted agonistic pluralism; she turned outright antagonism on its face by being the conduit for agonistic dialogue. When Joan was interpolated as deviant, she did not cower before those messages. Instead, Joan used her body and life choices to illustrate the potential of women to be more than the tropes laid out for them. This story is agonistic pluralism in action; Joan's body-in-motion as mother and runner necessarily required that the rhetoric surrounding her story "acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment. They are precarious and pragmatic constructions which can be disarticulated and transformed as a result of the agonist struggle among these adversaries" (*On the Political* 32-33).

Even the nickname "Comeback Mom" can be interpreted as an agonistic call for recognizing the plurality of women's lives. Plurality often seems impossible to achieve as women are constantly reduced to a few specific roles. This reduction happens through cultural scripts such as the ever-festering "mommy wars" that are consistently stoked by the culture machine wherein stay-at-home-moms are pitted against so-called "working-moms," and childless women are depicted as the epitome of selfishness. Rather than celebrate the moments when women have the ability to actually make empowered choices for themselves and their families in their daily lives, patriarchal hegemony actively works to minimize the options open to women. However, cracks, though seemingly small and inconsequential, exist in the system. As I also pointed out, Joan's deviance was doubly transgressive; this transgression not only pushed back against patriarchy and heteronormativity, but also provides a new feminist ontological script from which women may select as they make their own life choices.

Joan's story serves as an ideal transition for me to provide commentary on both RQ 6.A. and 6.B.: In what ways might these stories hint at ontological change as a real possibility, by providing a canvas for an agonistic and pluralistic relationship with the self and others? (In other words, what commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do different perspectives have in common, that might bring them together to work for mutually-agreed-upon change in the world, or in the political order)? Throughout this chapter I have detailed instances of how running changes a woman's relationship with herself. These changes are shifts in perception and understanding of how to be in the world. Agonistic relationships are focused on making liberty and equality for all a real possibility. In the stories I analyzed, liberty and equality manifested themselves in the form of resistance against patriarchy and gender norms. For example Roberta B. Jacobson's story wherein she uses the metaphor of a pack of wild wolves to describe her running group, points to an interesting ontological identity shift. While the idea of communal connection may seem to fall into the proverbial category of "women's ways of knowing," it is my contention that this is an example of radical feminist, agonistic, and ontological change. Remembering that my understanding of ontology is one that is wrapped up in language, taking on such a metaphor (wolves) indicates that these women are committed to each other's well-being and strength—despite cultural scripts that mandate demureness and always putting others first.

When I drafted RQ 6.B. on goals, beliefs, and values, I anticipated that these things would be explicitly discussed in the stories, and that given the diversity of women's lived experiences, their goals, beliefs, and values would differ. What I found is that these women tend to focus on their roles (wife, mother, daughter, friend), how those roles impact their ability to spend time running, and then adjust their goals, beliefs, and values until they find that elusive

balance. When women valued or placed emphasis on roles differently, that is when agonistic pluralism came to the fore; whether the goal was winning a race, time without the kids, running for therapy, or running for companionship, these women allowed their different priorities to bring them together. They worked with each other to make their lives better through the specific activity of running. All of these women appear to want liberty and equality for their gender, a goal which is played out as the ability to be a runner, no matter their other roles.

At the end of Chapter Three, I stated that I continue to ground my research in possibility and hope, due to the fact that power relations “are not fixed, stable bastions of control.” This hope stems in large part from how Mouffe integrates her understand of feminism into her political theory. While patriarchy is indeed insidious and more often than not, actively works to exclude women from positions of power at all social levels, Mouffe urges us to contemplate “How is ‘woman’ constructed as a category within different discourses? How is sexual difference made a pertinent distinction in social relations? And how are relations of subordination constructed through such a distinction?” (*Return* 78). These questions set the foundation for a radical shift in our understanding of how to tackle the problem of patriarchy, as Mouffe urges us to discard the homogenous identities of “women” and “men” in favor of

a political project whose aim is to struggle against the forms of subordination that exist in many social relations and not only in those linked to gender, an approach that permits us to understand how the subject is constructed through different discourses and subject positions is certainly more adequate than on that reduces our identity to one single position – be it class, race or gender. This type of democratic project is also better served by a perspective that allows us to grasp the diversity of ways in which relations of power are constructed, and helps us to

reveal the forms of exclusion present in all pretensions to universalism and in the claims to have found the true essence of rationality. (*Return* 88)

I have found that such an understanding takes some of the “edge” off of my embodiment of feminism, as it allows me to recognize that, while the system of oppression in which I live pits “men” against “women,” it need not be this way—and in fact, this is not the way things actually are. Social relations are far more nuanced than a gender binary reveals, and in these nuances we can find space to shift subject positions, rethink defining discourses, and create inroads for the development of a new hegemony.

With this fresh reminder of the possibility for a new hegemony, the words of Alexandros Kioupkiolis come to mind: “Thinking through the fundamental logic of being has a critical and prefigurative value for democratic politics. Such explorations serve to unsettle underlying notions that project a rigidly determined world, impervious to transformative agency” (691-692). Throughout this chapter, I have worked to illustrate important connections between consciousness-raising literature, theories of hegemony, agonistic pluralism, and ontology that illustrate, in part, the power of (re)thinking and engaging with the possibilities for dismantling the patriarchy to which Kioupkiolis alludes. Taken together, these disparate areas of study create a unique framework for analyzing women’s running stories. I have shown the utility of applying political and ontological theory to these stories as a way to elucidate the life-change these women have experienced through running. It is both the act of running itself and the concomitant strength and resilience that come with the physical act that provide the impetus for political and ontological change in these women’s lives. In the next and final chapter, I will detail how these types of changes are happening at the cultural and political levels in the United States, provide

concluding remarks on this project, as well as discuss potential ways this work can be extended in the future.



## CHAPTER 5

### AGONISTIC PLURALISM IN ACTION: RELATING TO OTHER REVOLUTIONARY GROUPS, CONCLUDING THOUGHTS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Introduction**

Throughout this project, I have argued, along with many other scholars, that sport helps women gain self-confidence, inner strength and resilience, as well as self-discipline, physical strength, and stamina. As this chapter is the culmination of my project, I will first remind readers of my research questions and review my findings through a discussion of the analytical patterns and themes I discovered. Next, I will revisit the four stages of consciousness-raising, developed by Chesebro et al. In discussing the fourth and final stage, relating to other revolutionary groups, I will provide an overview of Girls on the Run (GOTR), a nonprofit organization that centers on inspiring personal growth and social change through teaching girls to run. With a working knowledge of GOTR in place, the third section of this chapter reiterates Chantal Mouffe's concepts of agonistic pluralism and "the political" by illustrating how GOTR embodies these Mouffean terms and works to inform a new hegemony.

In the concluding section I will provide reflections on the theoretical schema I built and suggestions for how future scholarship can extend the ideas and arguments I have developed throughout this project. Through suggesting additional critical perspectives, I hope to point to the continued need for research on women in sport, especially projects that work to highlight the power of women's storytelling and embodied experience as unique sites for feminist rhetorical analysis and the application of political theory.

## Review of Research Questions and Findings

One of the goals of this final chapter is to provide a sense of closure and completeness to this project, by providing a recapitulation of my research questions and findings. For reference, my research questions are reprinted here:

1.     A. How do women articulate their running identities in the stories they tell?  
       B. For example, do women depict running as central or influential to their self-concepts, roles, identities, ambitions and/or goals? If so, how?  
       C. Specifically, what identities, concepts, or themes are common across stories?
2.     A. Do individual women explicitly discuss, or implicitly allude to, multiple identities or roles?  
       B. If they embrace multiple identities or roles, how do they rhetorically navigate among them in the stories they tell?
3.     How, if at all, do women articulate their experience of gender norms?
4.     A. What are the points of possible contention, clash or disagreement in the discussion of women runners' experiences?  
       B. How might the various perspectives that women (and others around them) express be in legitimate (agonistic, pluralistic) conversation with each other?
5.     A. In what ways might these stories hint at ontological change as a real possibility, and/or provide a canvas for an agonistic and plural relationship with the self and others?  
       B. In other words, what commitments, goals, beliefs, and/or values do different perspectives have in common, that might bring them together to work for mutually-agreed upon change in the world, or in the political order?

When I reflected on the entirety of this project, four overarching themes emerged: running is more than exercise (but exercise is important), traditional gender roles take precedence in women's lives, cultural narratives are circumscriptive, and power is an inescapable social element. I will now discuss each of these themes in detail, linking them to my research questions and analytic findings.

*Running is more than Exercise (But Exercise is Important)*

In Chapter Three I devoted an entire section to detailing the myriad reasons why women run, wherein I specifically discussed the connections between running and body image (including size, weight, and self-esteem). When considering stories that focused on running for weight loss, I invited the reader into the struggle that is how to navigate bodily autonomy and a desire for health and fitness in a culture that tells women they should always/already look (hetero)sexy. I use the term "bodily autonomy" as a way to speak to, on the one hand, the undeniable cultural teaching that women must be fit and firm, and on the other hand, the notion of choice: that desire to believe we possess the ability to *choose* whether or not we want to get in shape and for what reasons (choice and power will be discussed more thoroughly below). As women are taught to compare our bodies to perfected images of female models, this is clearly a gender norm (RQ4) that all women face. This teaching requires us to see our natural bodies as "menace," to be controlled and watched with the vigilance of a prison guard, to ensure that we are always inching closer and closer to the ideal (Orbach 136). Despite this ideal being one that does not, nor cannot, naturally exist, women (and men) resort to controlling what they can: food and exercise.

Yes, stories often began with phrases such as, "our running started with a craving for ice cream" (*Sole Sisters* v.). However, I was delighted to find that protagonists eventually shifted

their focus to the intangibles gained from running, relegating aesthetic changes to the backburner. Muireann Carey-Campbell made it a point to delineate between these two overarching reasons to run in her how-to book, *Be Pretty On Rest Days: The Badass Guide to Women's Running*. Carey-Campbell discusses the importance of viewing the mind and body holistically, by paying attention to changes in self-esteem and personal empowerment, and celebrating the physical manifestations of running, rather than allowing negative energy to manifest in hyper-focus on diet or the size of one's thighs.

Gaining emotional strength, often an unanticipated benefit of running, is what really helped these women change how they viewed their physical bodies. Storytellers articulated that, through the practice of running, they experienced a dramatic change in their self-concept; these women felt empowered to love their whole beings, speak up in relationships, and take the time for self-care. This finding helps to answer my third and fourth research questions on navigating among roles and identities, and women's experience(s) of gender norms. In stories such as that of Katherine Beirers, who started running on her lunch break and learned she was capable of creating the kind of life and relationship with her body she always wanted, and the woman named Liz who decided to start running just for herself and whom Rachel Toor paced through her first marathon, we see that women learn to push back against proscribed gender norms and adapt relationships to fit their newfound identities. In fact, in reflecting on this project, I am now considering the possibility that the identities of "the self" and "runner" emerge only after this new emotional strength develops.

With this possibility in mind, I would like to remind the reader of the surprising finding that ties all of my identity questions (RQs1-3) together: when "running identity" emerged, it worked as a conduit for how these women make sense of and rhetorically navigate all of their

roles and identities. In other words, while running is one of the many “hats” these women wear on a daily basis, running worked mainly to provide a sense of organization to the other areas of their lives. Thus, running was rhetorically constructed as a way to better manage one’s service to family; once “hooked” women realized that running provided the strength to be self-empowered and that it was this change that enabled them to improve things at home.

### *Traditional Gender Roles Take Precedence*

It is not surprising that these stories typically began with an overview of the individuals’ status in relation to marriage and the nuclear family; with these relationships being primary markers, it makes sense that these stories would detail how running impacts the ways in which one performs the role, and embodies the identity, of wife and mother. At the beginning of their stories, women would often try and figure out how running could fit into the roles they were already performing, rather than the other way around. With women often being tasked (unequally!) with caring for children and maintaining the home, focusing on those roles first and the self second was rhetorically constructed as apparent best (correct, appropriate, given, obvious) choice for the woman and her family.

This is why women primarily identified with social, or relational roles, when discussing impediments to running. One example I mentioned in Chapter Three is that a woman’s role and identity as a partner or mother would often trump her identity and commitment to running, if a choice had to be made between the two. It is not just ingrained subservience that encourages women to put others first, it is also that we are taught to always see ourselves in relation to others. When analyzing these texts for how women rhetorically navigate multiple roles and identities, I found that these women always navigate from a standpoint of relating to others—

they essentially attempt to assess how this or that act will be perceived by others and thus change (for better or for worse) others' perceptions of them.

To successfully manage all of life's demands, a priority-based schema is obviously necessary. My analysis revealed evidence that women develop a hierarchy to help them navigate their multiple roles and identities (RQs 2-3). Hierarchies were individually tailored, and remarkably flexible, as they were used to assign importance to the various roles and identities that each woman needed to perform in the moment. Thus, while my comment above (that stories begin with a focus on a heightened need to maintain top performance of traditional, patriarchal, gender roles) remains true, as these women gained strength and empowerment through running, they gained the ability to fluctuate the level of importance placed on various roles so that the role of self-as-runner could sometimes take the "top spot" without inducing overwhelming feelings of guilt or selfishness.

Some women came to feminist consciousness (discussed in detail below) on their own, through mulling things over in their minds while running. Others developed an empowered perspective through friendships, found in running groups and one-on-one relationships. Regardless of the setting, being out on the road is where many women began to articulate a new way of being and the need to make themselves a priority. Self-care can be easily swept under the rug, in comparison with all of the physical and emotional needs partners and children (and women themselves) have come to expect women to meet. As such, women in these texts were presumed to be heterosexual and female relationships were also presumed to be platonic. I do not believe that these rhetorical choices were intentional, made to inflict pain, or make the texts read as exclusionary. Rather, these choices speak to the power of heteronormativity and the engrained requirement that those who are not heterosexual mark themselves as such.

### *The Power Element*

While not expressly named in any of my research questions, this project implicitly deals with the element of social power. The ability to define and shape one's world is not universal, but rather a privilege doled out based on a complex hierarchy that, historically, grants less power to women. The stories I analyzed illustrate that women are always-already informed by patriarchal hegemony, a social hierarchy of which women had no official capacity or legitimate voice in creating, and is therefore one that places women at a distinct disadvantage.

However, this project also revealed that running is one way that women can harness the effects of power on their daily lives. As I discussed in Chapters Three and Four, running enabled women to gain physical and emotional strength; flexing these muscles enabled them to make empowered life choices and process some of life's tougher moments, such as grieving the loss of a child or partner, grappling with depression, or learning to embrace an "empty nest."

In discussing my first research question on running identity, my analysis reveals that women see being a runner as only one of their many roles, and that usually, when faced with a choice between running and familial obligations, family won. Through this observation I realized that hegemonic power always-already informs how women assigned priority to identity markers, and the often-necessary requests to restructure the division of labor. However, by the end of Chapter Four, it becomes clear that running, and the concomitant strength and resilience women gain, provide the foundation for change, as they continue through the consciousness-raising process, discussed in the following section.

### **The Consciousness-Raising Process**

Throughout this project I used Chesebro et al.'s four-stage process to explain the phenomenon of gaining feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness-raising, discussed in

Chapters Two and Four, occurs via the sharing of personal narratives and storytelling, by which women (and men) realize, and learn to resist, their own oppression. Recalling the words of Brian Norman, these narratives focus on how individuals are “personally shaped by and respond to the multiple demands of race, gender, nationality, and class” (41). To have a feminist consciousness then, ideally means that individuals have an acute awareness of social issues surrounding gender and sexuality (particularly in regards to inequality, inequity, and social justice), while maintaining the notion that *every* aspect of their being shapes their relative position in their cultural and social hierarchy.

Chesebro et al. identified four “functional stages through which group members passed while raising their level of consciousness,” by synthesizing small group conversations about the Gay Liberation movement (197-198). Even though the majority of stories I analyzed were told by individual women, and the women’s running groups that were included did not have feminist consciousness-raising as their intended purpose, these stages still provide a useful arc for interpreting the changes experienced by the protagonists.

### *Stages 1-3*

The stages laid out by Chesebro et al. begin at the place where group members have already had the self-realization that they are in the process of, or have already taken on, a new identity. This first stage is easy to understand in relation to small groups, since they are gathered together with a stated purpose; as I detailed in previous chapters, obtaining the identity of “runner” was not the main goal when these women began this practice. That being said, most stories did include a turning point, a moment when each woman saw herself in a new light, and thus took on a new identity, because of her commitment to running.



Their newfound running identity manifested itself, without exception, in the form of physical, mental, and/or emotional strength; each of these women eventually learned to use those strengths to resist their own oppression—and to identify common enemies (“adversaries” is the corresponding Mouffean term). At this point, protagonists begin to move through stage two, “group identity through polarization.” This stage is characterized as a time when individuals begin to see that their experience(s) as women/runner places them in a unique subculture, wherein their oppression is made even more visible.

This increased visibility helps women begin to articulate the enemies/adversaries standing in the way of their personal growth. When examining the women’s running texts, I found four main adversaries that were present across each collection of stories: the ingrained notion of the “proper lady,” heteronormativity, traditional gender roles, and the embodied, complex concept of body image. These social norms are all concerned with the control of women (and men): how we should behave, dress, what (house)work we should perform, how we should feel about ourselves and our bodies, who we should be in romantic relationships with—the list goes on and on. Once women recognized the inequity of the current social and political system, they were able to see these gendered standards and ideals for what they are, and able to see that they should (and could!) be resisted, challenged.

For example, we see this recognition in Maryanne Chute Lynch’s story. She confesses that, growing up, she thought all women had babies, took care of their husbands’ laundry, and cooked pot roast. The first time Lynch saw a marathon at age 10, she wondered whether women were allowed to race, and if they were, could they even finish? Running was not rhetorically constructed as something women could do, and was certainly not on the “approved” list of female duties in her world of experience. Lynch’s story culminates when she proudly states that

not only did she decide to become a runner, she ran the 101<sup>st</sup> Boston Marathon, which coincided with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's sanctioned participation in the event. In closing her story, Lynch mused about how different her daughters' experiences of gender roles and norms could and hopefully would be:

I am encouraged that after watching hundreds of women, salty, chafed and euphoric with challenge, my children think it bizarre that females were barred from the Boston race. I hope subliminal advertising, unequal pay, anorexic models, and banter over feminism [being a derisive term] will seem equally absurd to their children in twenty-five years." (*Women Runners* 213)

Through running the Boston Marathon, Lynch was able to see and articulate the current dichotomy that women face by pointing to the "icon of the feminine that never has and never will exist" extolled by advertisers, and how this ideal is in stark contrast to the stinky, sweaty bodies of women runners (*Women Runners* 212). This story encapsulates the shift in consciousness-raising from stage two, naming adversaries (i.e. icons of femininity) and learning to work against them (i.e. running despite being raised to see it as inappropriate for women), to stage three, outlining new values and creating a new vision.

In this third stage of consciousness-raising, Chesebro et al. observed four functional characteristics that order how new values are determined. My analysis of Muireann Carey-Campbell's discussion about barriers that keep women from running illustrates this ordering process. First, adversarial (patriarchal, in this case) values must be identified. I argued in Chapter Three that catcalling, a very real and visceral reason women avoid running in public, is an attempt to (re)constitute women from independent runners into sex objects. The adversarial, patriarchal value then, is that women exist to fulfill men's sexual needs and fantasies. Second,

group members must attribute the adversarial value to the conditions or factors that control their world. That catcalling is not only a classic complaint, but also a gendered expectation, illustrates how viewing women as sex objects shapes our existence in the world—we must be prepared with a witty response, learn to ignore the honking and lewd comments, and sometimes hope we have enough energy left for a final kick if we feel threatened and need to run to a safe place.

Once the connection is made between adversarial values and their impact on the lives of group members, those values are, in the words of Chesebro and his colleagues, “attacked” (142). Essentially, group members go through what a former professor termed “the angry phase of feminism.” My own angry phase began when my eyes were opened wide to the blatant sexism I had somehow never noticed before, my heart and mind were instantly overwhelmed by the complete and utter injustice of patriarchy, and my entire body pulsed with rage at the world for continuing to perpetuate misogyny. Carey-Campbell’s passionate charge, “it is more than time to change that [sexist] attitude” is one such attack against the adversarial value of women existing for men’s sexual needs and desires (12).

What remains is to articulate new values for being and operating in the world. These new values are practical in nature, meaning that they change how women view themselves in the world, and represent a shift in thinking about how women should be treated. Using my earlier example (barriers to women running), when a woman decides to start running, she is creating a new value for her life. The specificity of the new values varies based on the barrier(s) women face as individuals. Donna-Lane Nelson’s short story entitled “Real Life” illustrates the impact of instituting the value of prioritizing time for running.

Judith Ducker, the heroine in Nelson’s piece, is one of five siblings and is responsible for caring for their elderly mother. When Judith decides to become a runner and train for the Boston

marathon, she asks her brothers (the two other siblings who live locally) to step up and help care for their mom during her longer runs. When her brothers refuse to help, claiming they are too busy with their own lives and families, Judith takes a stand. That night, over tea, Judith tells her brothers, “I am going to run four marathons. If one of you don’t stay with Mother, I’ll walk out for good” (*Women Runners* 183). Filled with a mix of anger and disbelief, her brothers protest; Judith pulls out her packed suitcase and drives the car halfway down the driveway before her younger brother races out of the house to stop her. With her brothers begrudgingly assisting with the care of their mother, Judith trains and successfully qualifies for Boston at her third marathon. In the end it is not her family-of-origin that cheers her on to the Boston finish line, but a sort of substitute-family: a man named Fred (a customer from the diner where Judith works), who brings his two children to the race to help support Judith. Judith is euphoric at the finish line; she immediately wonders what it will take to beat her time at her next marathon.

Implementing new values, once defined, necessarily changes the structure of the present system, whether that be a patriarchal family structure or hegemonic ideals of femininity. Sometimes, as in Judith’s story, women must be willing to take a hard line with partners and/or family members and demand support in redistributing tasks and caregiving so as to make time for running. In other situations, the challenge is redefining cultural scripts. As a final example, many women wrestle with the adversarial value that women’s bodies should always-already be in shape so as to meet heterosexual standards of attraction. A new value might be that women are more than what their physical bodies look like; thus running becomes a way to get in touch with, and strengthen, mental and emotional muscles so as to facilitate an empowered body image and a holistic relationship with the self.

The three stages discussed above, self-realization of a new identity, group identity through polarization, and creating new values for the group, set the foundation for the final stage, relating to other revolutionary groups. This project focused on consciousness-raising through storytelling in rhetorical artifacts; in discussing this fourth stage, I will relate the analysis provided in previous chapters to a nonprofit organization that is working to further feminist consciousness-raising through running. In this discussion I work to link my compiled, edited artifacts to a current, ongoing project so as to illustrate the continued importance of storytelling and activism as political tools for social change.

#### *Stage Four: Relating to Other Revolutionary Groups*

Chesebro et al. discuss at some length the fourth and final stage of the consciousness-raising process, which is relating to other revolutionary groups. The authors note that,

From a larger ‘movement’ perspective, this stage was apparently intended to insure that there is ‘constant, cultural revolution’ within the movement, and it also appears to be an effort to remove all forms of oppression from within and from without. Accordingly, the groups sought to identify other kinds of subcultures which might potentially become viable political forces and part of the larger revolutionary movement. (Chesebro et al. 143)

In thinking about this stage in relation to my project, it occurred to me that potentially the most important group to relate to the stories of women runners would be girls. Abigail Jones, a Senior Staff Writer at Newsweek, reports that market segmentation created a new demographic subgroup: tweens. Jones says that “Tweens range in age from 10 to 12 years or 8 to 14 years, depending on whom you ask. The U.S. Census estimates that there are more than 20 million tweens in the country; just under half are girls” (n.p.). Further more, an American Psychological

Association report entitled “A New Look at Adolescent Girls,” states that “Approximately 18.5 million adolescent girls, ages 10 to 18 years, were living in the United States at the last census in 1990. The lives of these girls are complex, affected by their gender, race, ethnicity, class, differing abilities, and sexual orientation” (1). I contend that, since tween and teen girls have been syphoned off as a separate, niche market and are thus being specifically targeted with gendered messaging, possess a unique set of standpoints, and are growing up into womanhood as defined in our current culture, it is fitting to frame them as a revolutionary group.

### **Girls on the Run**

Chesebro et al.’s study ended at the point where other revolutionary groups were simply identified. I see it as important to take this project one step further, by providing an overview of Girls on the Run, an organization that works with tween and teen girls to create social change. After describing the work of this nonprofit, I will make connections between Girls on the Run and my theoretical framework by providing concluding thoughts on my use of feminist rhetorical criticism, ontology, and Mouffe’s political theory.

I first heard about Girls on the Run while looking for jobs after finishing my preliminary exams. My friend Toni told me about Idealist.com, a website that provides job postings in the nonprofit and non-government organization sectors. Using the search terms “women + girls + sports,” I found the applicant call for the position of Vice President of Programming and Evaluation at Girls on the Run (GOTR). After reviewing their website, I fell in love, and even though I knew it was a longshot, I had to apply to work at an organization focused on teaching girls how to develop a positive body image and respect themselves and others, through running. Jazzed about finding such a perfect fit for my skills and interests, and my heart not yet heavy with the myriad emotions that come with being rejected, I immediately went to Amazon.com and

ordered *Girls on Track: A Parent's Guide to Inspiring our Daughters to Achieve a Lifetime of Self-Esteem and Respect* by GOTR founder, Molly Barker, Googled news articles, found academic studies and a dissertation analyzing the organization, and of course, looked at potential housing options in Charlotte, North Carolina, where GOTR is headquartered.

Established in 1996, Girls on the Run has as its stated purpose to, “inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident using a fun, experience-based curriculum which creatively integrates running” (“Our Mission”). GOTR is an exemplar of how to work with girls and women at the intersection of self-esteem and sports. More specifically, GOTR teaches girls that they can reject limiting gender norms and scripts through embracing the physical, emotional, and spiritual strength they gain from running.

To accomplish their mission, Girls on the Run offers programs for girls in grades 3-8; sessions are held over a 10-12 week period. The program culminates in a community-wide, non-competitive 5k (3.14 miles). By training for and completing a race, girls learn that confidence “comes through accomplishment as well as a framework for setting and achieving life goals. Crossing the finish line is a defining moment when the girls realize that even the seemingly impossible IS possible” (“3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Grade Program,” emphasis in original). The GOTR curriculum mixes structured lessons with physical activity. This unique formula helps each participant gain “skills to shut out the noise of the external world that is attempting to limit who she is and to instead listen to her individual truth—the one that will lead her toward an enriching and contented life” (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade Program). GOTR also provides extensive resources for parents on its website, and founder Molly Barker’s book offers an easy-to-use, at-home version of the school curriculum so caregivers and daughters can learn and grow together (see “Parent Resources” and *Girls on Track*). The online resources fall into the categories of physical and

mental health, body image and eating disorders, and “other” (this section includes a host of suggestions for books, magazines, and other resources, as well as best practices for raising girls into smart and confident women).

What is impressive about GOTR is that they recognize the ramifications of their work in shifting the political landscape. Mouffe notes, that in order to enact the goal of a radical democratic politics we must

come to terms with dimension of conflict and antagonism within the political and [...] accept the consequences of the irreducible plurality of values. This must be the starting point of our attempt to radicalize the liberal democratic regime and to extend the democratic revolution to an increasing number of social relations.

Instead of shying away from the component of violence and hostility inherent in social relations, the task is to think how to create the conditions under which those aggressive forces can be defused and diverted and a pluralist democratic order made possible. (*Return* 153)

We can see how GOTR seeks to combat the barrage of negativity girls face in their efforts to, not just make girls and women “feel” better about themselves (although that is important), remain focused on the understanding that increasing girls’ self-esteem and self-worth is a catalyst for social change. Every bit of growth, such as gaining the courage to be proud and content in their bodies, works to erode the grip of patriarchal norms that latches onto these girls at birth. GOTR merits discussion in this project as it provides evidence that an agonistic approach, as detailed by Mouffe, is a productive strategy for engaging (and ultimately working to reshape) patriarchal culture.



## On Mouffe

Recall from Chapter Four that “the political” is shorthand for the elements of antagonism inherent in all social relations, whereas “politics” refers to things such as policies, laws, social practices, institutions, and gendered scripts, and agonistic pluralism is concerned with recasting opponents as adversaries (rather than enemies) in “‘a war of position’ whose objective is not the creation of a society beyond hegemony, but a process of radicalizing democracy – the construction of more democratic, more egalitarian institutions” (*Agonistics* xiv). *Girls on the Run* engages in this “war” by teaching girls that they can rewrite gendered scripts, for example. Lesson Six of the GOTR curriculum, “It’s Cool to be Myself,” teaches girls that it is ok to be smart and/or good at sports, regardless of what negative things other’s may think about them (*Girls on Track* 147). With an activity that asks girls to think about what makes them remarkable, participants learn to focus on what they think makes them special. This flips the switch from girls gaining their sense of worth from others, to cultivating positive self-esteem on their own terms. Broad, long-term implications of just this one change include the possibility of increasing the number of girls who study science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and decreasing the impact that the “feminine ideal” has on girls’ choices to participate in athletics; both possibilities hinge on girls being taught that it is “cool” to know what they like and to pursue those activities, despite hearing stereotypes such as “girls are not good at math” and “sports are for boys.”

Furthermore, the work being done by GOTR enacts the spirit of Mouffe’s political project. By working to empower girls through running, GOTR is challenging the current hegemony on multiple fronts. At the individual level, as illustrated above, girls learn to resist cultural scripts through the GOTR curriculum. In training for and racing in a 5k, girls experience

the power and strength of their physical bodies; this experience teaches girls to celebrate their bodies, rather than view them as shameful.

Girls on the Run enacts Mouffe's concept of agonism at the local, state, and national levels. By partnering with local schools and communities to host the 10-week programs and end-of-season 5ks, GOTR makes school administrators, teachers, and caregivers aware of how powerful sports participation can be for girls' self-esteem. My Googling of GOTR delivered a plethora of articles that illustrate GOTR staff and volunteers engaging with local and national media in an agonistic fashion.

For example, in a 2014 press release announcing Girls on the Run as the first-ever recipient of the \$100,000 Cigna Foundation World of Difference Grant, GOTR President Elizabeth Kunz states, "Our partnership with Cigna brings us another step closer to achieving our vision of a world where every girl knows and activates her limitless potential and is free to boldly pursue her dreams" ("News"). The strategic rhetorical choice to use "activates her limitless potential" and "boldly pursue... dreams," both powerful and robust phrases, helps readers take sports programming for girls seriously by linking the work of GOTR to the cultural dream of a brighter future for the next generation. In so doing, GOTR is working towards creating "the conditions for the establishment of a new hegemony articulated through new egalitarian social relations, practices and institutions" (*Return* 86). It is my conclusion then, that Girls on the Run, is a model of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism in action, as it is clear that the organization is involved in the "war" with patriarchal, hegemonic, sexist adversaries to (re)determine the meanings and implications of our gendered political order.

## **Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion**

This understanding and application of agonistic pluralism provides me the opportunity to reflect on the theoretical framework I have deployed throughout this project. I will now tie together my discussion of GOTR with the women's running stories detailed in previous chapters, bringing a sense of closure to this project. To do this, I would like to return to my original framing of feminist rhetoric by Michaela D. E. Meyer:

[... feminist rhetoric is] *a commitment to reflexive analysis and critique of any kind of symbol use that orients people in relation to other people, places, and practices on the basis of gendered realities or gendered cultural assumptions.* (3, italics in original)

This framing was paramount in the analysis of women's running texts that I conducted, as I worked to identify and critique gendered concepts and language usage by pointing to the numerous cultural and political ideologies that are at work "behind the scenes." My analysis unearthed specific categories (reasons why women run, the transition to entering races, how partners and families fit into the running lifestyle, how running helps women cope with grief, and why women run together in groups) that revealed how women runners come to understand who they are as women and as runners. Oftentimes, these women were able to engage the tensions surrounding their multiple identities rather effectively; through their storytelling, running revealed itself to be an effective activity for teaching resilience of both mind and body.

Mixing Chantal Mouffe's theory with feminist rhetorical criticism proved a natural fit, since both perspectives are focused on equality. As a framework for analysis, this combination allowed me to remain cognizant of the implications of the stories I was analyzing. I also realized the necessity of marking my own experiences and perspectives, so that I could be generous and

reflexive when analyzing stories that subtly undermined women's self-determination. Working with Mouffe's concepts in relation to the women's running narratives proved fruitful, in that I was able to argue for a nuanced political interpretation. Together, feminist rhetorical criticism and agonistic pluralism provided me with the foundation to creatively analyze women's running stories for their political and feminist ramifications, places where women are celebrated and heralded as strong athletes, as well as to point out places where liberty and equality are still lacking.

I also worked to develop radical new feminist ontology throughout this project. My analysis led me to claim that running "enacts the self, bearing it towards being and so into its own becoming, and so it is that in [running] I come to matter as engendered and enfleshed" (Parsons 340). The combination of a feminist rhetorical perspective and Mouffe's agonistic pluralism make this new ontology possible. Since part of understanding this new ontology is recognizing the possibility for forging new relationships, I was able to argue that these new conceptual arrangements made it possible to see women's running in a new light. This articulation of ontology provides a language capable of describing the power that running can manifest, shaping not just how women interact with the world around them, but who they are at their very core, the very essence of who they are.

The overarching theme of this project was consciousness-raising, denoted by my use of Chesebro et al.'s schema as an organizational tool. Consciousness-raising is one of many feminist ways of knowing, as it focuses on creating a space for women to "share their experiences through personal testimony in order to relate to one another and generalize experiences" (Sowards and Renegar 535). The texts I examined are clearly consciousness-raising documents, as their sole purpose is sharing stories of how women journey through running. This

project has illustrated that these stories work to create a kind of community in which women can find support and camaraderie, and that running isn't just a form of sport or exercise. Rather, a particular kind of consciousness is raised when women's bodies are running, sometimes alone, but often together. This consciousness provides a freedom for these women to be more whole, strong, and authentic versions of themselves; running gives way to a mental and physical strength that these women may not have found otherwise. To that end, my feminist rhetorical critique of these stories has provided an important foundation for future scholarship.

I am also bridging the individual stories of women runners and the rhetorical work of the nonprofit organization above. Marie Hardin and Erin Elizabeth Whiteside note that, "Simply put, any sustainable efforts to increase sporting opportunities for girls and women must carefully attend to the power of individual narratives, in everyday conversations, and how these relate to larger cultural narratives" ("Storytelling" 273). I take this call as a sign that this project is working in the right direction, linking individual stories with nonprofit organizations that, together, provide a strong foundation for scholarship and social change.

Providing a detailed overview of Girls on the Run served to highlight the ways that the sporting community is being actively engaged at the intersections of feminism and politics, in an agonistic fashion, as GOTR works specifically to increase girls' and women's access to sports and to change how they relate to their bodies. Rather than being an additional text for analysis, I bring GOTR to the table simply to serve as a means of pointing out the complete utility of the consciousness-raising schema (via Chesebro et al.). GOTR is simply an illustration of the fact that work is being done, currently, at the intersection of gender and sports, above and beyond engaging these issues systematically in the academy.

This project has showcased the success of a unique and complex theoretical framework for working at the intersections of gender and sport, feminist rhetoric, political theory, and ontology. I feel strongly that scholars who identify as female athletes should do more autoethnographic work. While I did mark my identity as an athlete in this project, I believe that it is important that I hold myself accountable for telling my story in future work. As I reflect on completing this project, I am struck by the immense responsibility that comes with being a feminist rhetorical critic. This critical lens is not just a way of approaching scholarly research—it, too, is a way of being in the world. There is immense power, privilege, and vulnerability that comes with being a feminist scholar; telling our stories is highly important, especially when we come to our sporting bodies with a critical perspective.

I also suggest that future scholars continue to work at these intersections by adding additional research methodologies such as critical ethnography, or perspectives such as critical race theory, communication and social change, or social protest rhetoric. These approaches would provide interesting inroads into the study of gender and sport. There is still so much controversy over girls' and women's participation in sport. While for some rhetors and audiences, the essential question of participation looms large, for many other people, the issues have broadened and deepened from the original 'to play or not to play,' and now encompass subtler concerns, from the wearing of the hijab in athletic competition to whether or not women should train during pregnancy. The female body is constantly on display and up for debate, and the female body in the realm of sports is no exception. Because sporting culture is a microcosm of larger society, female sporting bodies are subject to the same structures and mores—if not more so, since they are compared to the sporting bodies of boys and men as well. Further work

should be done to assess how successful programs, such as Girls on the Run, are helping turn the tide by improving girls' and women's body image and self-esteem through sport.

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VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Janelle Leann Briggs

janelle.briggs@gmail.com

University of Louisiana at Monroe  
Bachelor of Business Administration, Marketing, December 2007

University of Louisiana at Monroe  
Mast of Arts in Communication, December 2009

Dissertation Title:

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