

CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING: WOMEN

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Ruckers, Maulers, and Transgressors: The Historical and Social construction of Bodies, Space, and Gender in Women's Rugby

Historically, women in sport have been constituted as 'bodies out of place', particularly in contact and collision sports such as rugby. Sheard and Dunning (1973) see rugby as a male preserve and Nauright and Chandler (1999) have examined the issues of violence, physicality, and masculinity in men's rugby. Susan Birrell (1994) argues that sport is an ideological construct, something that men do 'naturally' but something that women do at risk to their social, psychological, and even physical selves. Challenges to the masculinist domain of sport have been met with a variety of negative reactions, including overt hostility. I argue in this paper that female bodies in sport, particularly in aggressive, physical, contact sport such as rugby, can and have been considered bodies out of place that have the potential to become transgressive bodies. The construction of transgressive bodies and space centers around issues such as control of the body, occupying space as form of power, and the manner in which the physical body is used in space.

Here I review historical understandings of the body, the way notions of space and spatiality have changed over time, and the history of women in collision and contact sports. I combine two theoretical approaches to the body. The first is best represented in the work of Michael Foucault who views the body as historically "inscribed" and emphasizes the constitutive power of social values and norms. The second is the "lived-body" perspective of Merleau-Ponty that offers a more individual, psychological or psychoanalytical approach. I suggest that the body can be seen as both socially and historically inscribed and as a lived, individual experience. This approach offers the possibility of conceptualizing the female rugby body as both a historical and social construct and as a concrete, material experience.

Implicit in the construction of the powerful, rugby body is the issue of control. The historical exclusion of women from contact and collision sport has contributed to the control of the female body. Many feminist theorists have addressed this topic by examining reproduction, abortion and contraceptive rights, rape and sexual assault, domestic violence, and compulsory heterosexuality. Catherine Mackinnon argued in 1987 that women's bodies were constructed as weak and frail and that sport was one mechanism that could make women strong and more capable of resisting male attempts to control the female body. I

argue, like Mackinnon, that sport — especially contact/collision sports like rugby — has excellent potential for contributing to the development of powerful bodies.

Throughout history and across cultures spatial arrangements have been based on gender segregation. Women and men have occupied different social, cultural and physical space. These spatial gender arrangements are socially and historically produced and have provided different access to valued knowledge and thus helped to perpetuate status and power relations and differences. Feminist geographers have asserted that definitions of femininity and masculinity are constructed in particular places in a manner that facilitates cultural work and sport is one such cultural space. Consequently, the intersections of theories and histories of the body and space offer an exciting way to examine women's rugby and in this paper I begin to make that examination.