

BODY FASCISM:

SALVATION IN THE TECHNOLOGY OF PHYSICAL FITNESS

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the physically fit body became the ideal of modern Western societies. Images of lean, sculpted men and women are now ubiquitous on billboards and in magazines, film, television, and video. Science and popular culture are profoundly intertwined, and a host of exercising and dieting technologies now can make some bodies fit the taut, muscular ideal. Many people aspire to this ideal of physical fitness and the attractiveness, health, longevity, and personal security that it represents. But, as Brian Pronger argues, this approach transforms more than the body's functions and contours; it diminishes its transcendent power, compelling it to conform to a profoundly limited imagination of what the body can do.

Calling on critics of modern techno-scientific approaches to life, Pronger articulates a theory of science and of the body and pries open the texts and procedures that form the technology of physical fitness in order to consider what they try to produce. *Body Fascism* views technology not simply as a tool for other projects, but as a project itself, producing its own realities, which Pronger argues are ultimately nihilistic. Indeed, he finds disquieting parallels between what technology has done to the environment and what it is doing to the body. Exploring fascinating intersections between postmodern Western and Zen approaches to life, he shows how the body's energy is vulnerable to insidious forms of exploitation as well as capable of harbouring the potential for transcendence.

The broad scope of this book makes it unique in the discipline, and it will be of interest not only to scholars in the fields of physical education, social science, science, and technology, but also to those who are personally drawn to modern technologies of physical fitness.

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Salvation in
the Technology
of Physical Fitness

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For Graeme Nicholson

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What's a 'culture'? Look it up. 'A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions.' A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society. Most of us wrigglers make do with life on that slide; we even agree to feel proud of that 'culture'. Like slaves voting for slavery, or brains for lobotomy, we kneel down before the god of all moronic micro-organism and pray to be homogenised, or killed or engineered; we promise to obey.

Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), 95

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Preface

From the time I was very young, I loved physical activity, especially swimming and bicycling. I was not competitive and never raced. I just loved moving. There was an intensity in it that was very important for me. But the insight that I took in that way of life gradually eroded as I approached adolescence and started to realize that in my culture physical activity for boys is primarily about sport and competition, about building masculinity, about learning to take up space in aggressive and domineering ways. That did not appeal to me.

Because I did not want to be part of that masculine heterosexist cult, as I would now call it in retrospect, I avoided physical activity almost entirely from my early teen years until I was thirty, when I started swimming again in order to lose weight and shape my body to fit the *bouffant* body style that was emerging in Euro-American gay culture in the early 1980s. Like many other middle-class people, I joined the fitness craze and shaped my body according to my desire to embody the models of health and good looks circulating ever more widely in so many parts of Western consumer culture. Developing a more 'marketable' body afforded me power in terms of self-esteem and access to sexual experience. I found it reassuring to believe that I was living a more healthy way of life that would keep me young longer and stave off disease. Knowing that I had the self-discipline that it takes to be a highly fit person gave me considerable pride. Developing a fit body seemed to save me from many problems that ageing poses in modern Western culture. But something else happened as well – something that undermined the reassurances that getting fit seemed to bring me.

What started out as instrumental exercise – swimming in order to

accumulate reassuring physical capital – in very short order turned out to be much more: a profound intrinsic experience. My sense of reality, of time, space, reason, and of sight, sound, and kinaesthesia, as well as my most solid senses of who, what, or how I was as a human being, my sense of the true origins of my life, was transformed by swimming. Everything that for almost twenty years had made me certain of the social structure of my finite life dissolved in the infinity to which moving through water brought me. Rilke's Third Duino Elegy describes what I felt was happening (Rilke 1989, 163–5). He offers a metaphor: a child letting go of the tender assurances given by its mother – assurances, I suggest, that parallel those that encourage us to stay with the solid way of life that comes from adhering to our socially constructed identities and hegemonic perceptions of reality:

Ah, where are the years when you shielded him just by placing
your slender form between him and the surging abyss?
How much you hid from him then. The room that filled with suspicion
at night: you made it harmless; and out of the refuge of your heart
you mixed a more human space with his night-space.
And you set down the lamp, not in that darkness, but in
your own nearer presence, and it glowed at him like a friend.
There wasn't a creak that your smile could not explain,
as though you had long known just when the floor would do that ...
And he listened and was soothed. So powerful was your presence
as you tenderly stood by the bed; his fate,
tall and cloaked, retreated behind the wardrobe, and his restless
future, delayed for a while, adapted to the folds of the curtain.

And he himself, as he lay there, relieved, with the sweetness
of the gentle world you had made for him dissolving beneath
his drowsy eyelids, into the foretaste of sleep – :
he *seemed* protected ... But inside: who could ward off,
who could divert, the floods of origin inside him?
Ah, there *was* no trace of caution in that sleeper; sleeping,
yes but dreaming, but flushed with what fevers: how he threw himself in.
All at once new, trembling, how he was caught up
and entangled in the spreading tendrils of inner event
already twined into patterns, into strangling undergrowth, prowling
bestial shapes. How he submitted –. Loved.
Loved his interior world, his interior wilderness,

that primal forest inside him, where among decayed tree trunks
 his heart stood, light-green. Loved. Left it, went through
 his own roots and out, into the powerful source
 where his little birth had already been outlived. Loving,
 he waded down into more ancient blood, to ravines
 where Horror lay, still gluttoned with his fathers. And every
 Terror knew him, winked at him like an accomplice.
 Yes, Atrocity smiled ... Seldom
 had you smiled so tenderly, mother. How could he help
 loving what smiled at him. Even before he knew you,
 he had loved it, for already while you carried him inside you, it
 was dissolved in the water that makes the embryo weightless.

At the same time as my exercise was giving me assurance that I was okay, that I could fit into a youth-centred and disciplined, bourgeois, white, and able-bodied culture, it also introduced me to an alternative, infinite reality that is both terror and friend. It shook me from 'the folds of the curtain' that the cult of physical fitness was drawing. In my early thirties, swimming, running, cycling, and many other kinds of physical activity rattled me and drew me into the 'spreading tendrils of inner event,' the freedom of infinity, that the puissant moving body can produce: 'Loved. Left it, went through his own roots and out, into the powerful source where his little birth had already been outlived ...' I wanted to learn more about the body and what was possible. How does one deepen one's understanding? Where are the wise teachers – the people who can help students of the body negotiate the 'powerful source,' the 'floods of origin,' the 'primal forest,' the 'ancient blood,' the smiles of 'atrocity'? Where does one turn to learn the wisdom of the moving body? How does one learn to teach that wisdom? How does one go about devoting one's life to this goal?

I thought that the path might lead through physical education. And so I took my aquatic rediscovery of the body, dropped my career as a violinist and teacher, and returned to university to study physical education. Modern physical education, it turned out, casts wisdom primarily as the technology of physical fitness, which understands the body as a biophysical object whose functions can be maximized by instrumental programs of training and diet. The technological vision of the body and of exercise dominates physical education, government policies on health and fitness, and the physical fitness industry. I found that the technological approach to the body overshadowed the

more Rilkean insights that I was beginning to develop. With this book I explore what in that techno-scientific approach I find troubling.

The technology of physical fitness is a discourse of texts, socio-cultural practices, and bodily procedures that produce human life in controlled ways: increased physical control in terms of muscular strength, endurance, and flexibility, and greater cardio-vascular efficiency for the sake of better athletic performance or greater control over health in terms of disease prevention, both physical and mental – living longer and more efficiently, for instance. The technology also plays a growing role in sculpting the body for a fashionable look – typically lean, muscular, and youthful. These objectives often intertwine, with some being more important at times than others. So, for instance, a person interested primarily in attaining a lean, visibly muscular body will focus on muscle-building exercises and will do some cardio-vascular work in order to burn fat; better cardio-vascular functioning may be a by-product of this focus, and so may improved overall health. If the person is striving for an extremely muscular look, he or she may do little or no cardio-vascular exercise and may reduce fat by using diet and drug supplements – in which case, the technology of physical fitness interferes with good health, increasing a person's vulnerability to various diseases, such as liver failure, heart disease, and anorexia nervosa. Similarly, someone may be interested in physical fitness 'purely' for 'health' reasons. To avoid heart disease or osteoporosis, a woman may take up a program of walking, jogging, running, or cycling; reduced fat and greater strength could be a by-product of this focus. Or a competitive athlete may be interested in furthering a professional career as a hockey player and, depending on the position that she or he plays, engage in an exercise and dietary program that builds the requisite physical capacities; long-term health in professional sports is often completely unrelated to, if not undermined by, sport-specific training (Hoberman 1992). There are also health-based programs of physical fitness that try to balance all the components. While the specific goals and efficacies of particular technologies of physical fitness vary considerably, the technology as a whole shares a common approach to the body, a common philosophy of what the body is and can be. It is this common philosophy of the body in the technology of physical fitness that I analyse in this book.

As I said above, the technology of physical fitness is a discourse of texts, socio-cultural practices, and bodily procedures that produce the

body. The texts of this technology – analysed in chapter 3 below – include scholarly scientific papers on the physiology and psychology of physical fitness; academic textbooks on the sciences of physical fitness; manuals for exercise and dietary regimes; and popular books on physical fitness, as well as magazines and audio and video tapes dedicated to physical fitness and body building. By virtue of their contribution to popular conceptions of the body, other magazines, books, films, and videos that feature the ‘fit body’ also serve as texts of the technology of physical fitness, including fashion magazines for men and women, soft- and hard-core pornographic videos and magazines, cyborg movies such as Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Terminator* movies, and the American television series *Baywatch* on beach patrols. This is not to say that there are not important differences in the shapes of the bodies in these various representations, differences represented by race, gender, class, (dis)ability, and the changing fashions for leanness and muscularity in consumer culture. But as I argue in chapter 3, they represent a common underlying philosophy of the body that the differences do not significantly change.

The texts do not exist independently of one another. They constitute what Julia Kristeva (1980) calls an intertextual ensemble, both reflecting and producing the socio-historical contexts in which they operate. For instance, the popular image of the lean, muscular body textually rendered in fashion magazines reflects the scientific texts on the physiology of exercise and muscular development; these bodies are the products of scientific knowledge. Similarly, the socio-cultural desirability of the lean, muscular body informs scientific research as the object that the technology of physical fitness can produce; the development of commercial products and the hope for resulting financial profit funds scientific research on, for example, exercise machines and running shoes. I explore the relationship between scientific textuality and social context more deeply in chapter 1.

The socio-cultural practices of this technology are often at work in government policies and initiatives on physical fitness; in physical education in schools; in professional, elite, amateur, masters’, age-group, and recreational sports; and in the physical fitness industry (fitness and sports clubs, fitness classes, personal training businesses, fitness equipment businesses, sports clothing businesses, and so on). Technological body procedures are at work in physical fitness testing, high-performance athletic training, popular workout routines, and dietary and lifestyle regimens, as well as in therapeutic exercises for the dam-

aged or disabled body. We can 'read' all of these texts, socio-cultural practices, and body procedures for their technological imperatives, for the ways in which they understand and go about producing the body.

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**BODY FASCISM:
SALVATION IN THE TECHNOLOGY OF PHYSICAL FITNESS**

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Introduction: Reading the Science and Technology of Physical Fitness

What is it we are a part of that we do not see?
Loren Eisely, cited in Martin 1999, 193

In the last three decades of the twentieth century the physically fit body became the ideal, if not always the reality, of modern Western societies. Images of the lean, sculpted body are now ubiquitous in the popular representations of magazines, billboards, film, television, and video. Popular books on physical fitness and diet have become a significant presence in most bookstores and one of the most successful sellers on the internet. Even small towns boasted fitness clubs and facilities in their community centres. And physical fitness products for the home now constitute a multi-billion-dollar industry in North America. But physical fitness has become not only a phenomenon of popular culture. The governments of most industrial and post-industrial countries now actively promote programs and support scientific research to develop the fitness of their populations. There is a substantial academic scientific literature on physical fitness. Physical fitness has become the centrepiece of physical education for children, adults, and the elderly. And the scientific technology of physical fitness has become the intellectual and applied foundation of universities' physical education departments, most of which are now called departments of 'kinesiology.' As Haraway, Aronowitz, and others have argued, science and popular culture are profoundly mixed in the contemporary scene. I argue in chapter 3 that this is particularly the case in the technology of physical fitness.

Building on the scholarly literature that has been critical of the cults and industries of physical fitness, this book deconstructs the phenomenon as a modernist technological approach to life. Drawing particularly on the work of Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault, and examining intersections between postmodern Western and Eastern (particularly Zen Buddhist) approaches to life, it develops a theory of the body and of science and technology that analyses the nature of desire in modernity as it is manifest in the techno-culture of physical fitness.

The dominant understanding of the technology of physical fitness, both popularly and in most academic discourse, is that it is a practical way to maximize the body's natural physiological and psychological capacity. Taking advantage of modern scientific knowledge of the body (exercise physiology, nutrition, and biomechanics) and of the mind (exercise psychology), this technology is the most modern approach to physical and mental performance. Not all the techniques have the same academic scientific credibility – it is commonplace among professional physical educators to deride the unscientific 'quacks' who are part of the physical fitness industry (Mrozek 1987). For that reason there are various 'credentiallizing' professional governing bodies, such as the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP), that attempt to ground their particular approach to physical fitness in modern exercise sciences. Fraudulence and quackery aside, the dominant understanding of the technology is that it provides one of the best ways to live life most productively and to the fullest. Certainly, there are many debates about what particular technological approaches are the most effective – for instance, debates about what intensity of aerobic exercise is optimal for the best training effect, about the wisdom of drug supplements, about which fats are unhealthy, about what exercises produce the most effective results, and about the most effective timing for stretching. But there has been insufficient concern in physical education – understood broadly as physical education in schools, recreational and high-performance sport, and the physical fitness industry – about the techno-scientific approach to the body as such.

Over the last two decades, a scholarly literature, critical of the cultures of physical fitness, has developed. While the social sciences and humanities have been significantly marginalized in the academic discourses of physical education – overtaken by science and technology – they have not been totally silenced. There is a valuable, albeit small,

socio-cultural literature critical of dominant policies and models of the techno-scientific approach to the body. It pursues a number of themes. It analyses the ways in which the technology has developed in relation to the problems of the welfare state and capitalist individualism.¹ Gender has been an important axis – the literature has criticized the technology of physical fitness as a cultural practice for the production of gender difference. These practices have contributed to the polarization and hierarchialization of the genders,² the marginalization of people who do not fit those polar distinctions or who challenge the hierarchies,³ the production of gendered power by physical strength or weakness that works to 'naturalize' power difference,⁴ and a virtual epidemic of exercise and eating disorders produced by the tyranny of changing images of the ideally fit body.⁵

The gender critiques unanimously maintain that gender differences emerge not only between the sexes, but also within them.⁶ Some critics of physical fitness have analysed it as a 'technology' of social discipline.⁷ This analysis emanates from the work of Michel Foucault, who is pivotal to recent histories of the body in modernity. In this framework, the services of health and wellness professionals, rather than rediscovering and restoring the body, have been instrumental in harnessing its energies in the production of social control. Scientific knowledge and the scientization of physical education have been centred in the production of this social control, an issue that I pursue at length in chapter 1.⁸ Also, out of feminist critiques of paradigmatic biases in scientific research there have developed critiques of ageist, sexist, racist, and ethnocentric biases in the exercise sciences. Other commentators have criticized the scientization of physical education for the way it aids the establishment of professional hegemonies (Beamish 1982; Harvey 1986; MacIntosh and Whitson 1990; McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990; Whitson and MacIntosh 1990), for its rationalization and mechanization of the body (Harvey 1986; McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990), as well for its technocentric (Bain 1990; Charles 1998) or technocratic (McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990) ideology.

Critics of physical fitness have overlooked an interesting body of writing in philosophy, history, anthropology, and sociology of science. Those authors who have appealed to Foucault's theoretical frameworks have made mention of his philosophy and history of scientific knowledge, but only in passing, and they do not plumb his analysis of the intimate connection between power and scientific knowledge.⁹ All the writers who have been critical of the scientization of physical edu-

cation have been so because they see in it negative political consequences. Yet they do not directly address the literature from the philosophy and sociology of science that could explain the powerful politics of scientific knowledge – the way in which scientific knowledge shapes the world in which we live. The materialist critiques of the scientific professionalization of physical education, describing the development of professional monopolies, come closest to an account of the power of science. But they go no further than citing the high status of science as a guarantor of legitimacy. As I argue in the chapter 1, there is more to the prestige of science than mere status: science is prestigious because it is so effective at changing the world. The power of the exercise sciences needs to be analysed for the ways in which they set out to change the reality of the body. Most of the critics of the science of the technology of physical fitness, while they do not have explicit theories of scientific knowledge, suggest implicitly that the sciences are problematic because their *ideas* of the nature of the human body and of the politics that contribute to its health or disease are inappropriate: the exercise sciences convey *false ideologies*, which is to say that their ideas about the body (understood, for example, metaphorically as a machine) and of health (as a primarily individual concern) are at odds with the *true* nature of the body and strategies for health. There is a stronger, indeed in some senses more material, critique of the exercise sciences, which argues that they are problematic not because of their *ideas* about the body and its politics, but because of the way in which they attempt to actually *produce* the body and its politics. I pursue this political philosophy of science in chapter 1.

It is also notable that, except for Vertinsky and Harvey, few critics have examined the actual texts of exercise science. While Vertinsky's analyses are prescient and offer excellent historical treatments of racist, sexist, and ageist ideologies in science, they, like the rest of the critical literature, ignore the substantial critical scholarship that has developed over the last thirty years or more in the sociology, philosophy, and history of science and scientific textuality. Those authors who invoke Foucault's analysis of the body and social organization do not appeal to his companion analysis of the sciences of the body. This leaves the bulk of the literature critiquing only the *application* of scientific knowledge of physical fitness, not the *knowledge* itself. Proponents of the sciences of physical fitness can then argue that their research is sound and that the problem lies outside the proper realm of science and instead in politics, policy, and so on. A stronger critique, which I

attempt to develop in the next chapters, suggests that the fundamental orientation of the exercise sciences is problematic.

Those authors who have engaged recent French social theory, namely in the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, have touched on the ways in which the body is a site for socio-cultural discourse. While Foucault and Bourdieu are obviously indispensable to any analysis of the body in modernity, there has been a flourishing of critical, reflective work on the body in social theory that enhances and reaches beyond them and that the literature on physical fitness overlooks. A fully-fledged theory of the body, in the light of recent continental European perspectives, has yet to be developed and applied to the cult of physical fitness. McKay (McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990) comments: 'One would imagine that a field calling itself human movement studies/science, human kinetics, kinesiology, kinanthropology, or physical education (especially when its professional leaders so frequently point to its alleged links with Greek culture and its sound mind/sound body pre-supposition) would have sophisticated discourses about human bodies. Although anthropologists, historians, philosophers, sociologists, and feminists have produced an impressive amount of literature about what Fay (Fay 1987) has called somatic knowledge, it is mainly a few cultural historians, sociologists, feminists, and maverick physical educators who are aware of its implications for physical education' (59).

The literature that has engaged continental European perspectives on the body has done so primarily in a negative fashion: the body as a site of oppression and subjugation to discourse. There is no definition of the body in the critical literature on physical fitness. While there has been considerable discussion of the abuses of the body in society, as a machine, as gendered, raced, classed, and so on, there has been no consideration of what in the body's nature makes it possible to be mechanized, gendered, raced, and classed. That is to say, there has been no attention to the ways in which the body is open to discursive appropriation, to the power of the body to be 'discoursed.' The positive power of the body to engage or resist discourse needs to be considered. Moreover, the erotic body, or desire, is mostly absent in the socio-cultural literature on physical fitness. As Caroline Fusco (in progress) points out, discussions of desire have been limited to questions of sexuality, and even there fairly simplistically, in binaries of homo- and hetero- sexualities.

A couple of authors mention the pleasures of physical activity and the fact that it has been left out of most technologies of physical fit-

ness, especially out of science-based physical education (Featherstone 1991; McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990), but they do so only in passing, in a couple of sentences. Pleasure or desire is not central to any discussions of physical education, except negatively, where physical education is constructed as strategic in the control of desire (the desire to indulge in delicious, fattening foods, for example). A positive sense of the body's pleasure and desire could make a positive contribution. In short, a thorough theory of the body has yet to be offered. Except for some discussion of Foucault on the body (Bordo 1993; Featherstone 1991; Harvey 1986; Harvey and Sparks 1991; Kirk and Spiller 1994; Kirk and Tinning 1994; Kirk and Twigg 1994; Kirk 1994; McKay, Gore, and Kirk 1990), there are no explicit theories of the body in the literature. And, most important, there is little theorizing on the horizons of transcendence in modern body culture.

I argue in chapter 2 that any adequate theory of the body and subsequent analysis of it in modern society, especially in physical education, broadly defined, requires an appreciation of the body's erotic power. I suggest that only with an appreciation of that very power is it possible to imagine a *physical* education that sets its sights on freedom, rather than on subjugation.

In this chapter on method, I first explain how I propose to analyse the technology of physical fitness and, second, describe the intertextual relation between this book and the authors whom it engages.

The Philosophy of the Limit

This section describes how I analyse the technology of physical fitness. It outlines a type of inquiry that looks at the ways in which various systems impose limits on reality, thus producing particular realities, and it suggests ways of thinking about dimensions that are left out of systems, such as the technology of physical fitness. Drucilla Cornell calls it the 'philosophy of the limit,' and it brings us to the powerful concepts of secondness and of alterity, or otherness.

A naturalistic reading of the technology of physical fitness seems simple and straightforward enough: scientific technologies of the body have penetrated its inner workings, have come closer than any earlier knowledge to understanding its functions and consequently have developed an array of techniques for maximizing its potential. If people order their lives in accordance with the technology of physical fitness, they will live longer, be healthier, and ultimately enjoy greater free-

dom and a more satisfying life than those who do not. In short, the technology of physical fitness represents a practical, *modern* way of living life to the fullest. But I argue that this modern approach to amplifying life's natural possibilities also limits it.

Over the last thirty years the naturalness of Nature has been the subject of considerable critique. Regarding the body, this critique has emanated from political activists who contest the ways in which bodies have been negatively represented by the dominant discourses of the natural body: women, people of colour, sexual minorities, people with disabilities, people of the so-called third world, and so on. Feminists have criticized the 'natural inferiority' of women and 'natural superiority' of men; anti-racists, the 'natural differences' of race; homosexuals, the 'unnaturalness' of their sexual desires and the 'natural superiority' of heterosexuality; people with disabilities, the 'natural incapacity' of their bodies; and 'third world peoples,' the 'primitiveness' of their desire. These differences have been scrutinized for being socially constructed systems of domination that are perpetuated under the guise of being 'natural.' Questioning 'nature' is key to postmodern criticism. Linda Hutcheon (1989) says: 'The postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural"; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees' (2).

A few words on 'postmodernism' are in order here. Debates on modernity and postmodernity continue to rage. Is modernity finished (Habermas 1983)? Is modernity killing us (Levin 1987)? Are we in a postmodern era (Huyssen 1986; Jameson 1984; Latour 1993; Lyotard 1984; Readings and Schaber 1993; Smart 1990)? Is postmodernism intellectually sound (Dews 1987; Lash 1990, 1996; Rosenthal 1992; Turner 1990)? Is postmodernism a viable political framework (Callari, Cullenberg, and Biewener 1995; Doan 1994; Ebert 1996; Grossberg 1992; Phelan 1994)? Since it would be inappropriate to get into the complexities of those debates here, I say simply that I sympathize with much of the critical impetus that is often signified by the term 'postmodern.' And as the rest of this book shows, I draw extensively from the work of writers who are in one way or another considered 'postmodern.' I do not want to constrain the following analysis to any particular postmodern 'orthodoxy,' if such a thing were even possible from a postmodern perspective. I do, however, want to align my analy-

sis with the broad intellectual, political, and ultimately 'spiritual' commitments that I believe are characteristic of most postmodern perspectives. Linda Hutcheon (1989) has summarized those commitments, saying they always involve five elements:

- critiques of domination
- awareness that dominating 'power is not something unitary that exists outside us' (3)
- awareness that dominating power lurks in what are often the most seemingly benign texts
- awareness of the critic's inevitable complicity in the very power structures being criticized
- the consequent obligation to self-reflexivity

Postmodern political activists, then, are keenly aware of the complex ways in which their political critiques and projects are intimately tied to, indeed complicitous in, the very sources of domination that they would try to resist, transgress, subvert, or transform. Hutcheon qualifies this, saying: 'But complicity is not full affirmation or strict adherence; the awareness of difference and contradiction, of *being inside and outside*, is never lost in the feminist, as in the postmodern' (Hutcheon 1989, 14, emphasis added). While the forms of dominating power critiqued by feminist, queer, anti-racist, environmentalist, and other activists may be insidious,¹⁰ the grasp of such power is not necessarily total. And that grasp is weakened by sensitivity to the myriad ways in which power hides itself. Heightened sensitivity to the paradoxical intimacy that domination and critical resistance find in each other characterizes the work of most of the writers that I invoke for the rest of this book. As Drucilla Cornell (1992) points out, 'Humility before the paradox undermines the self-righteousness that Nietzsche so despised' (90).

Identifying the insidious operations of dominating power has become crucial to many political activists and scholars. My analysis of the technology of physical fitness joins that endeavour. Methodologically, this is an examination of the ways in which the technology of physical fitness constitutes a *discourse* on the body that seeks to foreclose on its potential, disguising itself as a way of doing precisely the opposite. Drawing on Foucault, Toby Miller (1993) suggests that discourse be 'understood not as a universe of meaning but as a complex that combines "the action of imposed scarcity, with a fundamental

power of affirmation''' (Foucault 1981, 73). I attempt to show the ways in which the technology of physical fitness constitutes a complex of statements and practices of the body that limits its potential by affirming particular modes of being. In so doing, this discourse of physical fitness sets out to 'determine actions and thoughts ... [It] is a particular grammar that permits the making of choices only within its own rules. It decides what can and cannot be said, done, or represented' (Miller 1993, xiv). Robert Barsky (1993, 35) says: 'Discourse analysis theory proposes that relations of power in our society affect and shape the way we both communicate with each other and create "knowledge."' As Foucault (1979, 27) writes: 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.' The task, therefore, of my analysis is to reveal the ways in which power secrets itself discursively in the seemingly apolitical technology of physical fitness. It is crucial to keep in mind that a discourse, like a conversation, does not simply impose a reality, one-sidedly. It can never be a *fait accompli*; it is an active, ongoing process that productively coerces life, engaging it precisely in the complex tension between resistance and compliance.

I draw my analysis from the critical path that the postmodern feminist legal scholar Drucilla Cornell has called the 'the philosophy of the limit.' I argue that this type of analysis is particularly adept at revealing the hidden and oppressive operations of power in everyday discourses, such as the technology of physical fitness. 'The philosophy of the limit' has traditionally gone by the name 'deconstruction,' about which there has been considerable scholarly and political debate (Critchley 1992; Dews 1987; Morrison 1996; Silverman 1989). A frequent critique of deconstruction has been that it is preoccupied with taking apart the play of language, sliding into a ludic idealism that is not only politically futile but also ethically suspect, preferring elitist intellectual games to concrete political action. Deconstruction, it is claimed, fails to 'grasp' material reality, the 'real' lives of people who suffer from the material organization of life that perpetuates privilege in the contexts of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on, realities that some claim are best understood by 'materialist' critiques (for example, Ebert 1996; Messner 1996; Morton 1996).

Cornell has argued that so-called materialist arguments against deconstruction fail to appreciate the subtlety and political commit-

ment of its approach, which she says is concerned essentially with exposing the ways in which seemingly innocuous, indeed well-intentioned systems do violence, both symbolically and 'materially,' to our potential for living full lives. Jacques Derrida (1978), among the most influential practitioners of deconstruction, says that all systems (which would include linguistic, artistic, social, athletic, sexual, scientific, or technological) impose structural limits on the power to appreciate material reality. Such limits preclude our engaging in fully and genuinely ethical relationships with material reality, which in turn undermines our political power to formulate alternative constructions of reality. The point of deconstruction is to expose the insensitivity to the power of limitation that lurks within a system and to show that this insensitivity prevents our having ethical relationships with any body or any thing that is other – other either to the *operators* of the system or to the *system itself*. Deconstruction seeks to reveal what is left out and to show how such exclusions prohibit just, ethical relations. A deconstruction of the technology of physical fitness, therefore, would try to expose what that technology leaves out and what that marginalization indicates about the political program of the discourse.

Deconstruction, by the seeming negativity of the word itself, is sometimes confused with a kind of cynical, nihilistic reductionism – take apart the constructs and you are left with nothing. Some sociologists, philosophers, and political activists, thinking that deconstruction reduces everything to a cynical and unreconstructable litter, believe that it renders political action impossible (Dews 1987; Ebert 1996; Habermas 1983). To counteract such misunderstanding, Cornell (1992) has suggested renaming the project 'the philosophy of the limit.' Questioning limits has been central to the work of the activist movements that I mentioned above: feminists questioning the limits of gender, anti-racists, the limits of racism, and postmodernists, the limits of modernity (Game 1991; Gray 1995; Hutcheon 1989; Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1984; Miller 1993); the handicapped, the limits of ablism, gays, the limits of homophobia and heterosexism, and queers, the limits of gay culture (Champagne 1995; Kipnis 1993; Warner 1993); and post-queers, the limits of queer (Simpson 1996). All these scholars have engaged in some philosophy of the limit, questioning the ways in which social, economic, cultural, and bodily systems construct the limits of human possibilities. Clearly, there are activist political agendas in them all. Simply put: what limits are operative? how can they be justified? and where and how might it be wise to dismantle them?