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Biographical note

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Packing a punch for the feminist project? The autobiography of boxer Jane Couch

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Abstract: Work surrounding women's life narratives have become the focus of literary and sociological analysis in recent years. However as previous work contends, attention to given to sporting autobiographies remains limited. Where, more generally, the sporting lives of women are often linked in 'gender logic' and marginality, this chapter is a starting point to examine the published lives that sporting women tell. Attention is paid to how female embodiment and identity is constructed, presented, concealed and negotiated in the autobiography of Jane Couch the first woman to receive a British Boxing license. The reading suggests that Couch constructs a counter-narrative for other females to draw upon through her development of a pre-boxing dominating and uncivilised body-self. However, sport calls upon different and previously undeveloped body-selves for the first time. Specifically, the mirroring body-self as a call to the female sporting project is highlighted. Couch's story and the tensions it raises through narrative disruptions of the feminist project are discussed as part of a wider cultural narrative for women to draw upon.

Setting the scene: Autobiography and sport

Sporting autobiographies have been termed a cultural phenomenon in their own right (Freeman, 2001). That is, sport has become an occasion for autobiography, and as preliminary work into this area attests (Butryn and Massucci, 2003; Sparkes, 2004, 2008; Stewart, 2006; Stewart, Sparkes & Smith., in press) sporting lives may present specific ways of living and associated body narratives (Sparkes, 1999). This said, I suggest that the relationship between sport and autobiography is an important one; they are both activities people choose to do when they have the opportunity to decide how to spend their time. And therefore, importantly, autobiographies are a cultural resource for sports fans and others to draw upon where they offer an alternative away from the real world, and an opportunity for learning. In the

first instance, this learning may be more factual and informative. For instance, in the example of Jane Couch's (2000) autobiography *Fleetwood Assassin*, the focus of this study, Couch (2000: 71) recalls motivation to follow a favourable 'line' on discovering that women could box. She attests to addressing as much information as she could on the topic: 'I just lay there thinking about boxing and waiting for the morning to come so I could buy some more books on the sport' (2000: 71).

However, learning may also be occurring on a more subtle, less conscious level. Put another way, autobiographies are one way of learning about cultural expectations, frames and models of how to be. Importantly, ideologies such as gendered ones firmly script identities and subsequent future selves. Whether intended for this purpose or not, autobiographies draw people into a dual (and not mutually exclusive) education of the personal and social. Related to this, Frank (2000: 152) describes the typically large and best selling published books of 'personalities' and their hired writers as *monological* narratives. Monological narratives are written from the perspective of a single consciousness that filters and organises events. They are described by Frank (2000: 139) as being 'unitary, centred, having the last word'. According to Frank (2000) monological books exist at the far end of a continuum where wholeness and accomplishments are proclaimed (despite collaboration), as opposed to *dialogical* narratives and polyphonic texts. Dialogical narratives include the voices of others with some measure of authority likened to, or exceeding, the narrator's own.

In this sense, monological narratives are of some concern sociologically where popular readers consult, interpret and construct their own lives. As Frank (2000: 138) suggests; 'yet one problem with such identity claims is that the self they posit is too unitary, too much in control, even too masterful'. This form is connected to the history of the polished honest, logical and 'hard as a nut' (in the un-deviating sense) *male* practice of autobiography (Woolf cited in Smith, 1993). The autobiographical 'I', at the heart of this traditional form, is comprised in some recent work concerning the limitations of the masterful, monological sporting autobiography and the occasion of illness. The monological point of telling the disruption brought about by illness displays the author as having overcome (Frank, 2000). For example, Sparkes (2004), Stewart (2006) and Stewart, Smith and Sparkes (2011) have supported this notion by problematizing a limited and seemingly universal repertoire of cultural narratives available to fit sporting and illness experiences into. The majority of cases in these studies involved male subjects.

Despite offering much sociological interest, so far there is little-to-no work that includes sporting females and published autobiographies. This said understanding gender as a category for writing in the sub-genre of sporting autobiography is of interest where women have historically been excluded from both the cultural spaces of sport and autobiography. Referring to the

study of women's autobiographical practices in general, Smith (1993) suggests that exploring them is a way of unveiling prejudices at work in cultural artefacts and examining the universality of specific models provided by this genre. Importantly, Smith (1993) suggests that women have the possibility to side step and subvert this power through the practice of autobiography.

Exclusionary Pasts: Women in Sport and Autobiography

Gender and sport is a widely discussed issue in sporting literature (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2000) and quite often a topic of media interest'. From the outset, sport is a practice coded as masculine. Further, it is suggested that social differences in men's and women's involvement in sport are naturalized through gendered bodies under the rubric that anatomy is destiny (Kane, 1995; Theberge, 1998). Sport was, and in some cases still is, a practice not considered to be affiliated with the biological providence of women; harm and more specifically reproductive harm being cited as one reason for men and women not to compete against each other in sport (Hargreaves, 1994). Boxing, especially, is one such sport where debate surrounding this contention is ripe and women subsequently excluded from some competitions². However, sociological literature has sought to deconstruct notions of biological determinism to illustrate that the historical constructions of gender relations are responsible for social differences played out in the arena of sport (Kane, 1995). Theberge (1998: 184) draws attention to traditionally male sports as she notes that a focus on women in confrontational sports is a particularly powerful challenge to the construction of sport as an oppositional binary that 'naturally' reproduces gender divisions. Further, Connell (1995: 54) states that social relations 'are both realized and symbolized in bodily performances' and a common sense notion of the powerful athletic sporting body remains a key definer of masculinity in Western culture. When women cross into this domain they disrupt gender logic by using and developing their bodies in a way not immediately associated with femininity and the female body, they subsequently become even more 'othered' through their participation in sport.

Importantly, femininity is not independent of sexuality (Butler, 1993) and sportswomen assume another category in this othering process that acts to further distance them from disrupting the male/female binary. The heterosexuality of sportswomen is often open to question in sporting environments and practices (Griffin, 1998) based on this gender logic. Being successful in sport and performing masculinity questions their status as 'real' women and sportswomen are therefore assumed to be lesbian. Unfortunately this is a label which insights 'fear' into some women and requires negotiation (Clarke, 1996; Sparkes, 1994). The media, via a variety of outputs, often avert suspicion of the lesbian label in sportswomen by promoting heterosexual

values as natural and more attractive, where appearance is often foregrounded over sporting success (Duncan, 1990). This acts to reinforce the symbolic domination of men in the realm of sport.

This said the contemporary picture of women in sport is not an un-complex one where women are simultaneously making some tracks, and not, depending on your relation to a feminist political agenda. The nature and character of different women's positions in sport is contested and there remain overlaps and conflicts. For example, in her study of female boxers Mennesson (2000) concluded that the women occupied an ambivalent position whereby on the one hand they challenged the existing gender order, but on the other they also reinforced the status quo by displaying traditional modes of femininity. Similar conclusions have been found in other traditionally male sports and physical cultures such as snowboarding (Thorpe, 2005).

Like sport, autobiography is also a cultural and textual space that women have been traditionally excluded from. Smith (1993) outlines the history of the Western universal male subject as underwriting the history of the female subject where the former was well defined, stable, singular and unified. Drawing upon the work of Woolfe (in Smith, 1993), Smith (1993: 1) highlights the autobiographical 'I' as it serves as a metaphorical site of the universal subject and conventions of normative masculinity, and of 'marking the text of 'man'. Consequently women were defined against men as 'other' and as embodied subjects unable to speak with certainty or some notion of 'truth'. Thus autobiographical writing was not available to women as they were marked and identified by social roles and biological destiny. It became an exclusionary practice that culturally identified women as other. Possibilities for women to engage in autobiographical storytelling emerged only in the early 20th century (Smith and Watson, 2001) and became a way to put colour on an otherwise bland selfhood afforded to women (Smith, 1993). Further Smith (1993: 20) suggests that there are fascinating possibilities for reading Western autobiography and that autobiography for women may be one means of 'talking back':

'... women find narrative and rhetorical strategies through which to negotiate the laws of genre and the calls to provided subjectivities. Not merely passive subjects of official autobiographical discourse, they become agents of resisting memory and creative misprision' (Smith 1993: 22).

Accordingly, Smith and Watson (2001: 130) suggest an intimate relationship between the autobiographical body and the body politics of self writing, stating that:

'while she finds herself subjected to the social meanings of bodies, she can find ways to resist the kind of body pressed upon her through the body politic and this can be used to 'challenge, disturb, and displace the neat categorizations (and fragmentation/unifications) of bodies'.

The following reading of Couch's (2000) book *Jane Couch: Fleetwood Assassin* explores these issues using Smith (1993) and Smith and Watson's (2001) work to listen, attend, and read specifically for the female body and associated identities. The series of interlocking questions I ask of the text include: What models of identity are culturally available to the narrator at her particular historical moment? Which of these are embraced and which refused? What are the ideological and narrative tensions between subjectivity and the identities culturally assigned to the autobiographical subject? Precisely when and where does the body become visible? How is the narrator's body tied to the community from which it comes? What specific body does she claim in her text? Is the body as source of subversive practice, a potentially emancipatory vehicle for autobiographical practice or a source of repression and suppressed narrative? What narrative counter-practices does she import into the text?

This study is a starting point to a work in progress concerned explicitly and implicitly with a set of issues surrounding published sporting female autobiographies. Initially I feel it useful to sketch out the current landscape of sportswomen and autobiographical practices.

Sportswomen and autobiography: The current state of play

Employing a basic quantitative mould as a simple starting point to assessing the picture (Oakley, 2005), here I ask; given the potential draw of these books outlined above, what are 'the numbers' of male and female sports autobiographies available? To give insight, one online bookstore revealed 4700 entries under *biography>sport*². Just 29 entries were by sportswomen, a 0.6% total representation in this sub-genre, in this case. In the same online bookstore the first female sporting autobiography charted at position 221 when ranked in best selling order; world record holder and former British Broadcasting Centre (BBC) sports personality of the year, Paula Radcliffe's (2005) book entitled *Paula: My story so far*. This placed lower than books by relatively unknown sportsmen – certainly not, household names – in British sports culture. At the outset it seems then that women have to achieve a lot more, in sporting terms at least, to be published and purchased.

To set the background for the reading to follow, sportswomen are clearly relatively invisible on the cultural stage of published autobiography, reflecting a more general narrative of women in sport as a side issue or as 'other', and of the sporting lives of women as less important. Given this situation, *what* autobiographies *are* there, as a resource for how we learn and understand what it means to be a female in sport is of interest and untouched as a sociological resource. To better contextualise my choice from a limited number of available texts here, Moi cited in Smith (1993: 21)'s comments may help my cause: 'There are always those points at which the dominant culture and its discourses of identity do not work 'neatly and efficiently', since 'phantoms

always lurk, messing up'. Couch has achieved a story which is culturally interesting and, on first appearances, appears to be one such lurking phantom in the female sporting landscape. The historical moment of boxing is important where women have traditionally not been officially recognised as involved in the sport and becomes culturally interesting as it disrupts normal boundaries between male and female bodies, and challenges Western ideologies about femininity and women as fragile and weak.

Jane Couch

Fleetwood Assassin begins with an account of Couch's working class childhood, an important and underscoring identity that continues to frame her life story. She almost exclusively inhabits a world usually kept safely out of sight and excluded from the worlds of the middle class, and this marginality is expressed powerfully. Parental figures and significant others are largely absent throughout. In her narrative Jane Couch positions herself as narrator, and most of the book is centred on her seemingly natural ability to box. With a current career record of 9 wins and 2 losses, Couch tells of her movement into the developing world of female boxing. She was the first woman to receive a British Boxing license in 2000 after she filed a sex discrimination case against the British Board of Boxing Control (BBBC) and won. Structurally, the book follows the narrative pattern of bad-girl-turned-good (or better at least) and of having had her 'life turned around by boxing' (Couch, 2000: 253).

Becoming a fighter

The uncivilised and dominating female body

'Me, the product of a single-parent family in the fishing community of Fleetwood, my Father having spent most of my childhood years in jail. I was born to be a rebel, under the star sign of Leo. I hated school and only went if I couldn't avoid it. I started drinking, fighting and learning the skills of surviving the streets at an early age' (Couch, 2000: 133)

Prior to boxing, Couch begins to construct a narrative of self, telling stories of body usage not typically associated with being female. As a reader, I have very little sense of her subjectivity as that of female at all. Aspects of a less or uncivilised and dominating body emerge as described by Elias (1978) and Frank (1991, 1995) respectively. Both types are typically associated with male bodies. Frank states, 'it is impossible to consider the dominating body without also questioning the construction of the masculine body' (Frank 1991: 69). Further, Elias' (1978) work, and the relations and processes between men and women's bodies remain relevant here. According to Elias (1978) the civilised body has the ability to rationalize and exert a high degree of control over play of emotions, to monitor its own actions and those of others, and to internalize a finely demarcated set of rules about what constitutes appropriate behaviour

in various situations. In contrast the uncivilised body is constrained by few behavioural norms, gives immediate physical expression to emotions, and seeks to satisfy bodily desires without restraint or regard for the welfare of others. In this sense, combining the dominating and uncivilised bodies, a lack of internal discipline cannot neutralize the threat of its own contingency which is turned into enforcing control over others (Frank, 1991). Development of a civilised body is also linked to concepts of social class, whereby the courtly class sought forms of civilised etiquette to distinguish themselves from the lower orders they saw as vulgar (Elias, 1978).

Further, the civilized body has been linked to the female body where culture requires women to socially manage their bodies in different ways to men. For example, women must demonstrate self restraint in bodily appearance and self-monitor their appearance in line with the 'body-beautiful'. The female consumer body has become the vehicle of pleasure, enhanced through adorning and ordering the surface of the body in beauty culture (Turner, 2008). Opposed to this regime, violence as expression or enjoyment is certainly and especially disapproved among women. Young's (1990) analysis 'throwing like a girl' supports this assertion, and demonstrates that, from an early age, girls must take up less physical space and act in less aggressive ways than their male counter parts.

Talking of her body pre-boxing Couch describes behaviour typically not associated with a female agenda, and further one that is aligned with lower class working culture. Resistance to rules are a common feature, but importantly actions based on personal emotional states characterise the narrative as ones not usually displayed by men or women in any social class. Episodes of unrestrained, socially deviant, often violent, spontaneous and unpredictable behaviour are frequent, each account seemingly more extreme than the last. One drinking session with a friend leads to opportunist theft, criminal damage and subsequent arrest and assault of a police officer:

'... we were both well pissed before we got to the first pub The Royal Oak. Downing our first drink there, we listened to a girl blubbing – silly bitch had lost her earrings but she was upset about it. We talked to her for a while, and she seemed nice enough in her own way. Anyway, we thought we would move on while we could still walk. As we hovered outside the pub thinking about what to do next I saw the jewellery shop on the corner of Lord Street. It suddenly seemed a good idea to get the girl some replacement earrings and cheer her up. When I told Jenny what I was doing she was still just sober enough to say, 'Don't be so fucking daft.' Too late, I was off. Next thing I knew I had kicked the window in, grabbed about thirty pairs of earrings and was back in the pub, handing them out to anyone in sight. Everyone happy, we left and walked down to The Kings. We were both laughing, although Jenny was saying, 'You mental bastard, why did you do that?' I was still laughing. I didn't know why I had done it. It must have been the rum' (Couch, 2000: 58-60)

Another example of immediate expression of emotions without regard for the

welfare of others doesn't involve drink. Reacting to being irritated by a stranger, she writes:

... he irritated me. After a few verbals I grabbed a hammer from the tool kit (what is it with me and hammers?) and hurled it at him as hard as I could. The hammer went through the glass hitting the loud-mouthed bastard just above the eye. He lost control of the car and hit a wall' (Couch, 2000: 57)

The body is not only deviant in terms of *when* it chooses to act; it's also deviant in terms of *how* it acts. Body on body accounts are common, where the body is dominating in its style of usage. Frank (1991) describes the soldier in warfare as one such example; occupying a threatened position in its moment, where fear of the unknown means it is constantly looking over its own shoulder and trying to eliminate that fear. Dissociated from itself it's able to give punishment in a dyadic relationship with other bodies to extinguish that fear. Jane recalls physical fights with male partners and fights with other males *on behalf of* male partners:

'Our latest toy fight had got out of hand, each punch harder than the last. It was an indoors street fight, and I was hurt and beaten up. My body hurt but my mind was in agony. We went to bed but there was no way I could sleep. Dave was well away, out of it, in dreamland. I was still seething with rage. I had suffered, he must suffer. How? Hell! I'll just get something heavy and beat him to death. I searched and found a hammer. I stood over him, my only thought was to get revenge. I hit him, full force in the mouth breaking his teeth. He automatically moved; I swung the hammer again and smashed it into his nose. When he realised he wasn't just having a nightmare he just yelled, 'Get off, you mental bastard.' Eventually we kissed and made up, and he knew he deserved it for hurting me in our toy fight. I was lucky I hadn't killed Dave, and lucky he forgave me' (Couch, 2000: 28)

There is no body apologetic here. Other females unless aiding and abetting her lifestyle, and particularly if displaying feminine behaviour, are described in derogatory ways and with sexist language. Further, she aligns herself closely with features of the bad boy narrative in sporting media as identified by Whannel (1999). She portrays herself from traditional working class culture as unpredictable, aggressive, at odds with authority, rebellious, showing no signs of nerves, possessing natural aggression, seeing badness as 'fun', drinking too much, and being undisciplined and getting away with it.

The female body appears for the first time, though only very briefly, in an account of a masculinist economy that constructs women through their breasts (Smith, 1993). Unable to pay a court fine, Couch tries to earn some money in a wet tee shirt competition. And even then, she averts herself from the female body:

'I didn't really give a fuck about how I was going to get it but entering a wet t-shirt competition with the size of my tits, or rather the lack of size wasn't my best idea. If I hadn't had nipples and had been looking sideways, people wouldn't know if I was coming or going' I got eliminated in the first round' (Couch, 2000: 56).

The body, other than this incident, is an absent presence (Leder, 1990) where she does not talk of it and does not survey other women's bodies or her own.

The narrative reaches a pinnacle of lost control as she is charged with drink driving and sentenced to prison. At this point in the narrative, boxing becomes the epiphany for self change and reflection; 'I had no idea that I would turn my whole life upside-down by becoming a boxer.' (Couch, 2000: 65)

Becoming a boxer: Boxing and the call for different body-selves

The disciplined body-self

Couch was clearly able to draw upon and transfer dominating aspects of her body-self relationship developed through her life so far into boxing with ease. She was immediately good at it and wins her first fight. However, boxing required a new type of body-self and one that she had not developed so far in her life: a disciplined (and inherently more civilised) one (Frank 1991, 1995). The disciplined body is defined through the medium of regimentation and is monadic. In answering action problems of control it seeks predictability through repetitive doing things. For example, Frank (1991, 1995) refers to the soldier knowing himself in his drill to illustrate this style of body usage. Others have likened the highly time intensive training lives of athletes to developing this type of body (Sparkes, 2004; Stewart, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011). Couch's distance from the disciplined body is illustrated as she marks key transitional moments such as going for a run and becoming aware of boundaries for the first time; 'The last time I had had a battle with the police no one had mentioned rules!' (Couch 2000: 74). Needless to say, sculpting a disciplined body-self is a struggle and one she tries to resist:

'Don't get me wrong, it's what I wanted really, but after the carefree, reckless life I had been leading, to get stuck in a farmhouse in comparative isolation, with a couple of what I thought were a bit posh old-age pensioners, was almost as bad as staying in Drake Hall Prison. In fact, with Tex it was worse – I think he thought he was still a PT instructor in the RAF and expected me, and everyone else, to do what he said, when he said. He would stick out his bottom lip, study his watch, and say, 'Training starts at half past six I mean half past six, not twenty past six or even twenty-five to seven, I mean half past six!' I thought, You can fuck off, I'll train at what time I want. (...) when the training started my attitude would change' (Couch, 2000: 95).

She develops a more disciplined body over time, training five nights a week, monitoring a strict diet required for weigh-ins before competitions, and reducing drinking before a fight. Boxing appears to become somewhat of a civilising process for Couch as we might expect where sport has been historically linked as such (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Further, there are some parallels to Wacquant's (1995, 2004) ethnographic work on male boxers in an American ghetto. Both, although initially embedded in a social setting

characterised by physical force, must begin to train as fighters and instil new abilities, categories and desires specific to a new pugilistic life-world. Importantly, they must begin to conceive of and care for bodies in a different way, often tangled by the competing lure of the gym and the street. However, one new demand placed upon Couch, not required of the male boxers, is linked to the female body project.

Sport as a call for the mirroring body

As Iris Marion Young (1990) attests woman lives her life as both object and subject, and boxing calls upon Jane Couch as object for the first time. The female boxing body is novel and a commodity. Couch recalls common stories that circulate within the world of women's boxing concerning the exploitation of female boxers. For example, she recalls tales of female fighters exploited by 'boxing topless on seedy shows' (Couch, 2000: 87). In order to make her way in the boxing world, for the first time she is required to become a different body-self, one not developed thus far, but one typically associated with being female. The mirroring body (Frank 1991, 1995) seeks predictability in appearance, and recreates itself in the image of other, more stylish bodies. The medium of which is consumption. Unlike dominating and disciplined body types, it is associated with its surface. She starts to survey her own body and the bodies of others for the first time in the story. Her body re-appears as present (Leder, 1990), through direct talk of it in momentary views. There are glimpses of a mirroring body-self as she becomes aware of her appearance as a woman and of being attractive to the opposite sex; she also mentions gaining some pleasure in shopping for clothes, looking good and using a sun bed.

Paradoxically, succeeding as a female boxer seems to require compliance to this body politic. Photo shoots, TV appearances and other PR work seek to create a new image for her, one that sells and is aligned with feminine ideals. Couch (2000: 131) describes how one woman was employed specifically for this reason by her business manager: 'her job was to try to stop me using four-letter words and dressing in trendy teenage gear' in order to become 'an elegant, sophisticated young woman, with a southern accent, dressed in upmarket clothes and styled hair'. On Couch's (2000: 131) own reluctant admission, in one photo shoot she recalls 'the photos that came out were brilliant (...) but they just weren't me!' Clearly, this is a body-self that she tries to accommodate but ultimately rejects: 'I was out of that chair. I'm perfectly feminine, thank you very much. I don't need straight hair to prove that ... I was quite happy with me the way I was' (Couch, 2000: 132).

However, interestingly on some occasions where she is confronted with the female body politic as a frame of reference, Couch (2000: 87) takes the narrative of femininity into her own body-self and defines herself against other women that do not adhere to it:

'At least I had my long ringletted hair, not cropped to my scalp like some of the others girls, which make them look even more butch than they really were. Even Julia Shirley, a mother of two children, had really short hair (...) she just looked like a bloke'

She goes on to negotiate the complex construct of femininity and sport:

'I could see myself getting involved in an environment which, as far as I was concerned, was creating the wrong image for its participants. Somehow I had to change the image of women's boxing in the U.K, or get out of it and maybe just box abroad where it was being taken seriously. First though, I had to fight the man' (Couch 2000: 87)

There are clearly tensions and contradictions. On the one hand Couch criticises the standard of female boxing for not being taken seriously. On the other, the idea that female boxers must maintain some element of femininity to be taken seriously is presented; the female boxing body must not emulate that of a male one (which ultimately undermines female boxing ability). The dominating style of body usage needed to be good at boxing and the mirroring female body are in direct opposition and require negotiation, illustrating 'something of their flips and relations' (Frank, 1991: 53) and of empirical bodies not staying with one type of usage for long.

The findings here are perhaps not that surprising given the body of research that illustrates the female sporting body as still primarily valued for its aesthetic and expressive activities (Duncan, 1990), including work on women in 'unnatural' 'masculine' activities (Cox and Thomson, 2000; Guthrie and Castelnovo, 1999; Hargreaves 1994; Mennesson, 2000). Women participating in men's sports still face and experience binary gender logic at work (Kane, 1995) and continue to meet some standards of femininity, of which Couch is no exception as she makes a strong claim to her sexual identity.

Clinging to the female body: Lesbian? 'No Way!'

Importantly, a call upon the mirroring body as object requires that Couch self-surveys the meanings of her physical appearance. In doing so, she makes a claim for the feminine body as a symbol of heterosexuality. There is an underlying strategy, as we might expect, to avert suspicion of the lesbian label. Firstly, throughout the latter stages of the autobiography, sexual pursuits with men are casually dropped into the narrative which read rather awkwardly and out of place at times. For example, following a significant proportion of the text devoid of talk about her personal life and of men in a romantic or sexual capacity, she offers being somewhat promiscuous and 'off with some bloke' (Couch 2000: 111-112) as a typical explanation to be drawn by others for her disappearance from a TV shoot. Secondly, is a more overt strategy of confirmatory statements provided to the reader in the last two pages of the book should they need reassuring of her sexuality:

'Then there were the thick bastards who thought that because I was taking place in a male-dominated sport I had to be a lesbian! No way! Now don't get me wrong, while a may be a bit old fashioned and think that men should be men and women should be women, what other people do is their choice, and doesn't bother me as long as they don't expect me to join in. I must admit, when I first started boxing I too fell into the trap of thinking, as I looked around the dressing rooms, trying to keep myself to myself in a corner, Cor! She looks a bit butch, tattoos, cropped hair – I'll keep away from her. (...) Like in all walks of life there was the occasional lesbian, but none of them pushed their sexual preferences on me. In fact I made good (arms distant) friends with one or two of them, just as I did with black people, Asians, Catholics, Jews, male homosexuals and foreigners (or 'scrobs' as we called them in Fleetwood) of all types.' (Couch 2000: 254-255)

These statements, and where they are placed, imply a variety of cultural meanings. In the first, lesbians are inadvertently constructed as predatory and other and the myth of females in masculine sports as lesbian is played out. Secondly, sexuality is conceptualised as stable, essential and enduring. The take-home message is, 'No way!' would she ever become a lesbian. Thirdly, sexuality as something which can be determined by appearance is communicated. Long hair is emphasized as a symbol of femininity and complicit heterosexuality (Cox and Thompson, 2000; Stewart et al., 2010). Fourthly, the comments imply that women who are lesbian are acting like men (Creed, 2005). The unreflective and contradictory nature of this assertion is highly interesting and informative where we read of a masculine performance throughout the life story that most men could not replicate. Further, Couch's own conceptualising of sexual identity and gender reveals some clear contradictions in gender-sexuality logic.

Despite a clear call to the mirroring body-self, Couch represses most other notions of being a woman apart from not being lesbian, and in particular of the body politic to which she is, like it or not, aligned with. The lid is sealed on her heterosexual identity as she rejects the feminist movement on more than one occasion and none more so than in this statement:

'There was far more excitement outside the ring, with vast crowds of boxing fans trying to get a glimpse of Tyson, from the time he landed at Heathrow until he left the country. It wasn't only the fans that tried to besiege him; a woman's group of protestors made themselves irritatingly prominent. They had, unsuccessfully, challenged the belated and dithering decision of Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, to allow Mike Tyson, a convicted rapist into the country. Then some bright spark in the media thought it a good idea to get my opinion – after all, I was a woman and would surely back the feminist group. 'Will you be supporting women's rights?' Will you be trying to stop Mike Tyson fighting?'

For once I didn't say it in my usually forth right manner, but the words going through my mind were, Fuck off you stupid bastards. I like what I know about Tyson: he has been one of the greatest fighters ever, a legend. I can sympathise with him, he has been surrounded by hangers-on, money has been leached off him, possibly millions of dollars. As for being convicted of rape, what did that silly bitch think she was going up to his room for, a cup of hot chocolate and a peck on the cheek? Come off it, any woman

would know what she is likely to get in those circumstances. She probably enjoyed it at the time anyway ... I was so pleased that 'women's rights' didn't get their way.' (Couch 2000: 253-254)

The concerning messages this statement carries will undoubtedly worry anyone interested in women's rights. This specific case encapsulates the very concerns researchers have with harbouring hyper-masculinity in sport, where it is inscribed onto the body, spilling into other areas of social life including physical domination over women and the promotion of rape culture (Curry, 1991). However, read another way it seems likely that Couch is more closely aligned with the body-narrative of Tyson as a boxer first and foremost, than of middle-class women whose agenda does not resonate with her. In one sense this may be one uncivilised and pugilistic body admiring another. Despite this 'explanation', these comments placed in the last two pages of the autobiography leaves little space for reflection and resolve (and I suspect that may have been the point) where the fear of the lesbian label prevails so commanding, as she contemplates an unproblematic and definitely heterosexual future.

Some Closing Thoughts

It is clear that Couch experienced her body differently in different contexts. It has been possible to understand the multiplicity of corporeal tensions experienced and given an insight into the multiple ways in which sportswomen and their sporting bodies might be constituted. Smith and Watson (1998) remind us that gender is filtered through multiple differences and intersecting sites of oppression. The plurality of feminine models would be undermined if considering the construction of Couch's female identity without considering the influence that class narratives and social background bring to bear on the production of gender. She's a fighter before she encounters the practice of boxing, largely developed through her working class habitus and deviant social milieu. In a complex negotiation of the female body, before boxing, she challenges the weak, fragile, and passive female body as she embraces the strong, violent and dominating body. It is during this part of the narrative that the body is 'the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives' but yet is 'essentially characterized by absence' (Leder, 1990: 1). Couch does not talk of it, or of any gender troubles and we might suggest that she connects claiming the dominating female body to being an empowered subject by resisting reflection upon any identity dilemmas.

However, as Leder (1990: 4) points out 'it [body] often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction; we then experience the body as the very absence of a desired ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self.' Boxing calls forth some identity dilemmas concerning the female body for the first time. The mirroring body as part of a required body-self for

women in sport, I suggest, remains an issue. Couch's story reveals how women are culturally located within a structural system of inequality in boxing, where the mirroring body is called upon to act as a catalyst in a complex of cultural, physical and economic capital. It seems that, even where this strong female counter narrative is claimed, it cannot resist the construction of a mirroring body and of woman as object associated with her surface. This text provides a unique case to unveil the role of sport and the narrative power it is able to exercise over females where there is very little 'evidence' of a mirroring body-self having existed prior to its involvement in Couch's subjectivity. In other words, this subjectivity was not synonymous with woman beforehand; sport plays a significant role in its employment. This remains an issue because ultimately a concern with women's appearance undermines performance and is the undoing of women's ability and place in the world of sport.

Therefore, despite seeming to provide a strong counter narrative for women, upon closer inspection there are some narrative and ideological tensions between subjectivity and culturally assigned identities. Resistance to and complicity with, traditional notions of femininity coexist within the same cultural space in this book and thus upon closer examination the narrative becomes contradictory and more complex than the assertive and universal 'I' claims. Smith and Watson (1993: 128) state that 'bodies sometimes do and sometimes do not secure a correspondence between subjects and their cultural identities'. The cultural meanings assigned to the body politic, with which she is unavoidably engaged, aligns her with women's rights and feminism. However, interestingly she's not located in her body in this cultural way and rejects such claims. One can assume Couch feels compelled to emphasize heterosexuality to avoid suspicion and confrontation.

Some key tensions are raised in terms of the disruptions that this story provides to the current understandings of feminist theory. Some have suggested that physical empowerment is vital in women's liberation and empowerment (Guthrie and Castelnuovo, 1999; McCaughy, 1997) and Couch certainly attests to that. Corporeal materiality disrupts the naturally occurring binary that plays out along gender lines. Others have suggested we should we reject the idea that women need to occupy the position of men based upon a critique of masculinity (Greer, 1999) and the reproduction of violence that plagues men's sport. Women's boxing must celebrate a specific aggressive and dominating physicality and the story therefore does little to critique the role of sport in reproducing masculinity and its deep implications for compulsory heterosexuality (Birrell and McDonald, 2000).

Thus, the problem of needing to fit into one narrative of sexual identity seems to remain a problem in sport. Speaking of alternative sexual identity seems not yet up for negotiation in the cultural and textual space of sporting autobiography, despite that some counter narratives of women's bodies, such

as this one, begin to emerge. This said further investigation of the types of female body narratives that are available and transmitted into the cultural sphere via autobiographies is needed. This is important because they hold potential to be emancipatory, to increase narrative opportunities that women have on their cultural menu, to inform biographical re-visioning and to provide a voice to other women negotiating the sporting landscape.

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Notes

1. Recently the cases of Caster Semenya, a South African runner who has been subject to speculation surrounding her gender, and Sian Massey, a British football line judge who has been subject to speculation about her ability to do the job, have dominated British media headlines.
2. Women are entitled to fight for Olympic gold for the first time in the 2012 games, London.
3. Most book shops do not distinguish between biography and autobiography reflecting a complex genre issue. This search also includes different editions and formats.

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