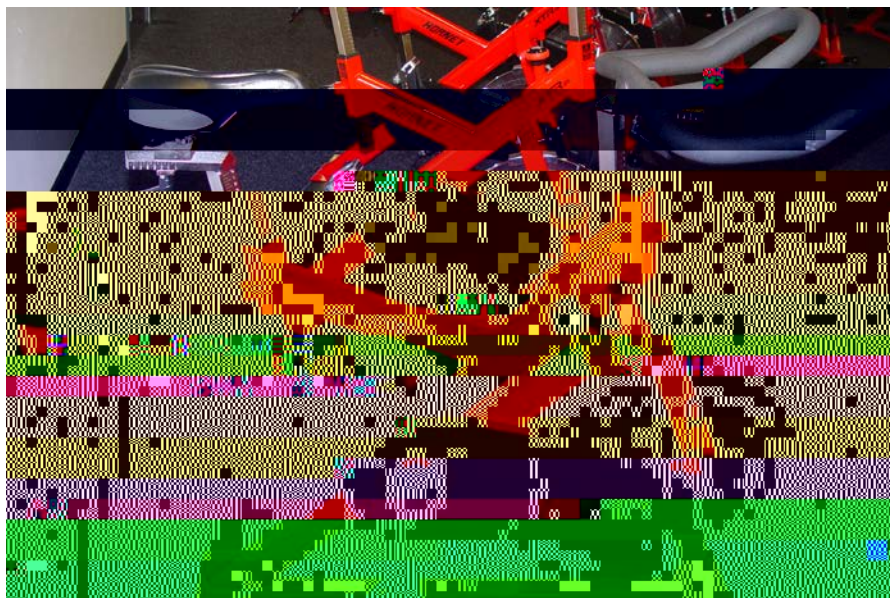


TARA BRABAZON

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

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



In most cases, these occasional exercisers do not return after their initial attendance. This spatial

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

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

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

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

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

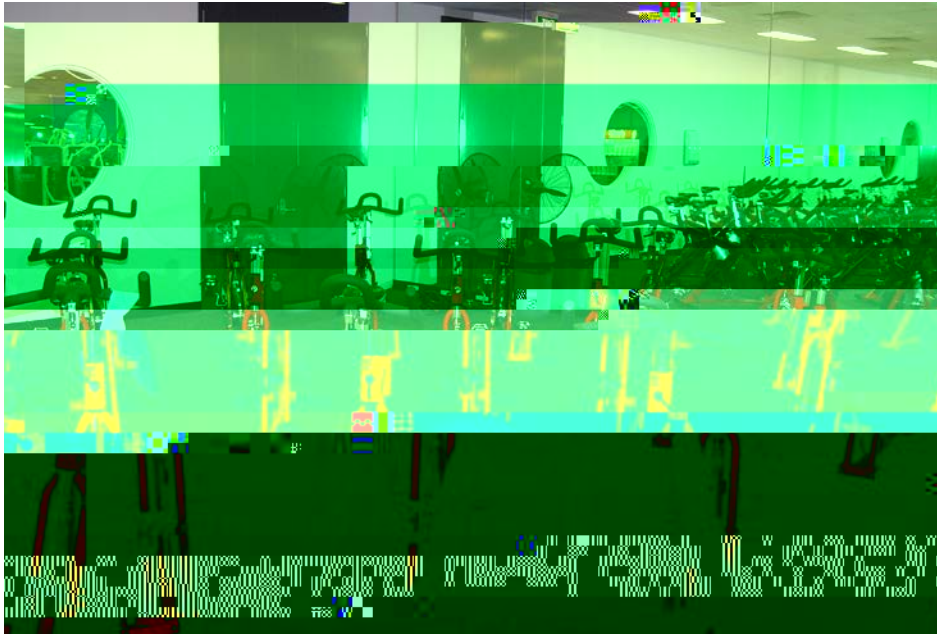
Notes from the sessions were assembled after each morning's classes. Obviously, being on a cycle precludes "at the moment" observations. Photographs were taken on the morning of the last observation. The goal was to follow the directives of Allan Kellehear's *The unobtrusividecTe a msb7*

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

Breaking the chain

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

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



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

I certainly was not expecting this change through the observation period. There had been no such rupture in the preceding three years. My original intention was to describe how a community of cyclists was formed by women who—

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

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

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

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

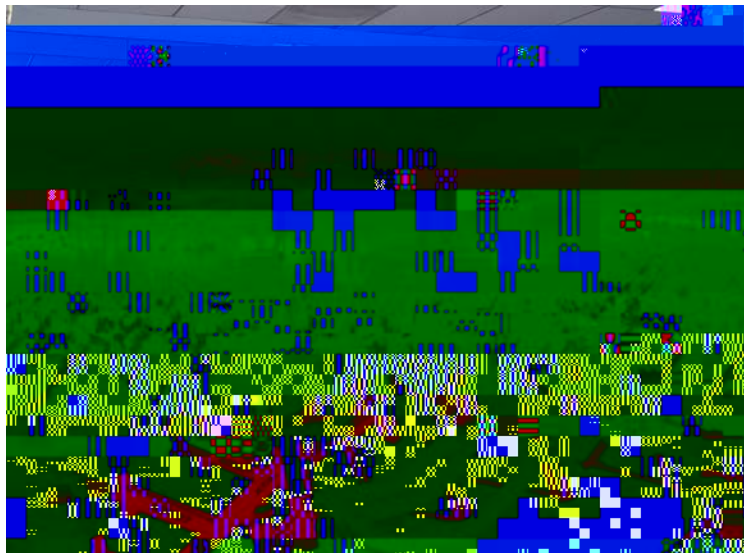
The “Gay 1890s” was made all the more colourful by the presence of the bicycle. Social historians allege that the bicycle had a great “levelling” effect on society. Upon the seat of a bicycle, anyone, regardless of class or social position, could now ride down the same street or the same park. Onlookers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

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

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

the differing transport needs of women and men in Africa and Asia, noting that

The feminine ideologies that encircle “aerobics” and “group fitness” as social practices create hyper-masculine posturing and commentary from “real riders.” Stephen Madden from *Bicycling* magazine describes the classes as “aerobics on a bike. Best avoided by real riders.”³³ His



However, I do choose to wear Philosophy Football shirts in bright colours of red, orange and blue, which feature slogans from philosophers, footballers and managers. Slogans range from Roy Keane’s “Happiness is not being afraid” to Bertolt Brecht’s “Art is not a mirror to reflect

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

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

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

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

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

Spinning exclusion

Physical activity generally, and sport specifically, is embedded in the rituals of masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the middle class and the working class. More precisely physical culture is implicated in the construction of the boundaries of normality.

Through my six week participant observation of a spinning class in which I was a long-term member, the explicit ruthlessness of patterns of community and otherness were a surprise.

Women enjoyed the class because they had found a space to dominate, talk and control a portion of their lives. When this space was threatened by men, the women responded with discrimination on the basis of (homo)sexuality. The success of this strategy was revealed by the “intruder” men internalizing the women’s critique and performing hetero-normative masculinity to excess.

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

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

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

⁴ Ibid.

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

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

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

⁸ The positioning of the researcher is obviously pivotal to all research projects, and is (too) often unacknowledged. Yet within participant observation methods, appended by unobtrusive sources like photographs, it is absolutely crucial to state, with explicitness and clarity, my position in this social sphere. Lenora Sleep confirmed that, “what I have learned over the years is the real danger in doing sociological research in any area ... when we, as social scientists, do not acknowledge and reflect upon our own biases before going into the field. As I familiarize myself with literature within the discipline, I note how rarely the relationship between the subject matter and the researcher is addressed with sociological studies. Yet, I believe it is a critical part of the story left untold—a part from which social scientists can gain knowledge and a clearer depiction of social life,” from “Personal encounters with(n)12(doi)7(n)12(g)o(u

²⁴ Murtha, 121.

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

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

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

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

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