

Risk Recreation, Gender, Technology and Empowerment

Reflections of Life on the Rocks

by Ellen Balka

Des liens existent entre technologies et sports, politique du corps, innovation et prise de pouvoir et point de contrôle

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respectif à la féminité. Dans son étude, cependant, l'auteure réalise que l'importance de ces liens comme objet d'étude a été trop longtemps négligée.

In early accounts of women and athletic pursuits, mention of technology was often restricted to discussions about the limitations imposed by women's clothing. For example, Smith writes about a doctor who recommended cycling for women "because it would encourage them to discard the 'murderous corset' and use their God-given muscles instead" (66). Moore noted that one early woman mountaineer climbed in a collection of petticoats, shawls, and capes which were all fitted with tapes to allow them to be looped up for climbing. Similarly, a woman climbing in the 1850s advised sewing small rings to the inside seams of one's climbing dress, through which a small tape could be threaded "in order to hoist up the dress when necessary" (Moore 43).

More recently, in her discussion of sport as an institution, Talbot identified the technology of sport (which includes the form of space, facilities, skills, knowledge, and equipment) as an aspect of sport that deters women from involvement. Talbot suggests that women's power as consumers has caused some equipment manufacturers to adapt sticks, racquets, and some sports clothing to fit the female shape, however many aspects of building design and sports technology ignore women's needs.

McKay and Huber argue that sport is an extension of the technical spirit, and that its mechanisms reach into one's innermost life "working a transformation of his [sic] body and its motions as a function of technique." They point out that both sport and technology have been "valorized according to masculine definitions of bodily skill and expertise" (205) and they suggest that the media plays an important part in articulating mythologies about

technological expertise. Along with many feminists who have studied technology (Cockburn; McNeil; Rothschild; Wacjman; Zimmerman) McKay and Huber argue that myths about technological expertise have played an important role in power struggles between men and women. They suggest that sport is increasingly influenced by a cult of technology that is designed to improve both playing and watching, and that notions of the proper enjoyment of sport are increasingly dependent upon technological imperatives.

Hadley points to the importance of technology for both recreational and competitive athletes, who are using new technologies to study athletic performance as well as develop new training techniques. Athletes benefit from the application of better methods and materials in the production of equipment and wearing apparel. In addition, athletes benefit from technological advancements in terms of sporting safety. Rintala suggests that technological innovation results in safer equipment which makes new skills and techniques possible, and can improve the safety of training. He argues that the emergence of superior athletic performance results from technological innovation produced by an increasingly powerful sports technology industry. However, this over-emphasis on technology may drive the selection of athletes as well as athletic training. Rintala explains how technological innovation in oars resulted in new selection criteria for competitive rowers. He cautions that as technology becomes more important in sports, equipment manufacturers are the winners, and athletes unable to afford access to the newest technological innovations are the losers.

Although some scholars have considered how women are disempowered in relation to technology and argued that mastery of technology can facilitate a sense of personal empowerment in women (see for example Turkle), the possibility of achieving a sense of personal empowerment through mastery of technology during athletic pursuits has not yet been considered. In the following sections I explore this issue by reflecting on my involvement with risk recreation in general, and rock climbing and mountaineering in particular. Risk (or adventure) recreation involves deliberately seeking recreation that contains elements of risk or danger (in a natural setting) and has an outcome that is uncertain, but influenced by the actions of the participant (Ewert 1989). Ewert and Hollenhorst point out that without specialized equipment, "the adventure recreationist is placed at a severe disadvantage and exposed to much higher risk levels" (1994: 181). They speculate that specialized equipment assumes a higher degree of importance in adventure recreation than is often the case in other forms of recreation.

The body politics of girlhood

Arlene Blum (the leader of the first American women's mountaineering expedition) wrote that prior to taking up climbing she was "an overweight out-of-shape teenager from Chicago who had never been good at sports" (xi). This could easily have described my life except I grew up in a different city, and I grew up skiing. Although I could ski down anything I considered myself and was generally considered by others to be unathletic.

Like many young women, I emerged from my adolescence with a very limited sense of physical competence, and poor self esteem. Although I was a competent skier and enjoyed skiing, the fact of being a fat kid seemed to cancel out the possibility that I could attain any sense of physical competence in the world—a world that for women is limited by a prevailing cultural belief in women's biological inferiority (Birke and Vines), and a world whose cultural logic advocates that women produce themselves as commodities whose identities, exchange value, and self worth are embedded in body management (Cole).



My poor self esteem and lack of sense of physical self derived in part from my experience as a battered child, which taught me to endure pain by escaping my body and going into my mind .

When I was 19 I spent the winter working in the ski industry and skiing everyday. By the spring I was as good a skier as I could have ever hoped to be. Having grown bored by the most challenging trails, with other dedicated skiers I began skiing more challenging terrain outside of ski areas. This ritual afforded its participants the quiet of the wilderness, beautiful views, and, usually, considerably more danger than one found in ski areas. After some friends and I found ourselves confronting danger as a result of our poor judgment, I decided to learn some mountaineering and rock climbing skills.

Climbing, innovation and empowerment

Christopher Alexander wrote in 1974 that the built environment was like a stage, consisting of standard situations linked together. Like the set for a play, the environment provides a context in which certain situations can occur. For me, rock climbing provided a context for mastering a technological system (ropes, carabiners, and other elements of 'protection' that lessen the impact of a fall) and learning to innovate with technology. It also provided me with a sense of control in relation to my environment—something I sorely lacked as a battered kid. Finally, rock climbing allowed me to see myself as strong, rather than fat. Arnold writes of a similar phenomenon, and suggests that the technical skills and physical activities associated with climbing and other adventure recreation activities allow women to experience their bodies in an active, functional arena, rather than an aesthetic one.

Safe climbing (rock and mountain) is based on a simple principle: injury occurs when people fall long distances. Thus, safety in climbing is partially dependent upon minimizing the distances that people fall. This is accomplished by climbing in teams of two, with the use of ropes and protection. Each member of the climbing team wears a harness, and climbers are linked together by ropes attached to their harnesses. While one member of the team climbs, the other member provides a belay, letting rope out while the climber climbs, and prohibiting the rope from going slack in the event of a fall.

The first person to ascend a stretch of rock is designated the leader. As the leader ascends the rock, she places protection—a variety of simple metal devices that are wedged into the rock or clipped onto more permanently affixed devices (pitons). Protection is placed every few feet so that if the leader falls, her fall will not exceed twice the distance she was above her last piece of protection. (When the climber falls protection and the belayer prohibit rope movement). When the leader gets to a safe place where she can anchor herself, she does so, and then places her partner, below, on belay. As the follower

ascends the rock, she removes the protection under the safety of a belay from above.

Achieving any degree of comfort as a climber requires achieving a degree of comfort with the technology of climbing, which is both elegantly simple and threateningly complex. The concepts underlying protection in climbing are simple enough to be observable, and thus transferable to other situations. Mastering climbing technology proved to be empowering in a pragmatic sense for me to the extent that it gave me transferable skills. As I developed an understanding of how climbing technology worked, I began to believe that an understanding of other technologies was within my grasp. As I learned to innovate in challenging climbing situations, I became more comfortable with innovating with technology in other situations.

Risk recreation, technology and locus of control

Bloch *et al.* suggest that mastery of sports equipment rewards the participants by enhancing performance levels and providing additional feelings of mastery. They also suggest that once acquired, equipment expertise allows greater appreciation of a product's importance to a sport, and the complexity of the sport may become more apparent and fascinating.

Ewert and Hollenhurst (1989) suggest that as experience with risk recreation develops, expertise increases and locus of control moves from external to internal. Locus of control refers to beliefs about the relationship between behaviours and the subsequent occurrence of rewards and punishments (Corsini). People who believe that the events that occur in their lives are a result of their own behaviour and/or personality characteristics are said to have an expectancy of internal control, while people who believe events in their lives to be a function of luck, chance or comprehension are said to have an expectancy of external control (Harre and Lamb). Ewert suggests that people climb in part to demonstrate a sense of control over their lives, and Dustin *et al.* similarly suggest that outdoor recreationists participate for a sense of competence that continues through the acquisition of new skills. Arnold suggests that rock climbing and rappelling require students to learn new skilled movements and mountaineering techniques, and these activities in turn create confidence and increased self esteem as students surpass their self imposed limits through successful mastery of a new and often stressful experience.

Although Kiewa suggests that in adventure situations nothing can be done about the fact of gravity, the weather, or the force of the current, and that the only control an individual can exert in adventure situations is over one's self, I would like to suggest that in the context of adventure and risk recreation one is able to mitigate the effects of forces such as gravity to a certain degree through technology. Possibly the act of being able to manipulate technology in an effort to mediate one's

survival (for example on a rock cliff) in a risk recreation environment may contribute to the development of an internal locus of control. For women who, unlike men have been denied access to the concepts required for lead climbing (Andrews), technology may be a more important aspect of developing skill, competence, and an internal locus of control in relation to risk recreation than it is for men.

Body politics, risk recreation and locus of control

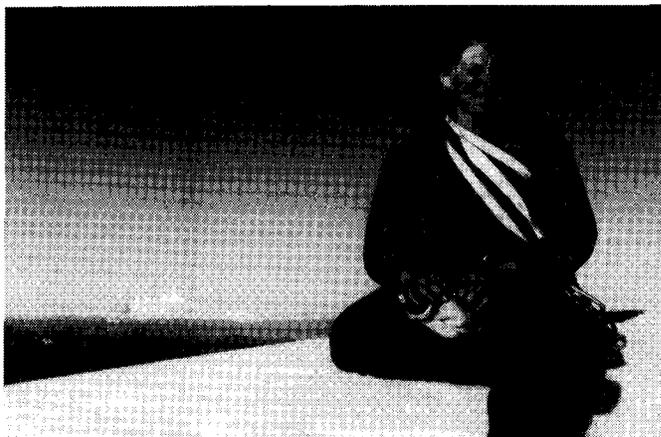
Numerous feminist critics have argued that women's physicality and participation in sport potentially offers the possibility for a more oppositional or transgressive practices, and a site for progressive body politics since it challenges the passivity inscribed on women's bodies (Cole). For me this was true. Like Arnold, I gained an appreciation for my strength and agility as I climbed and became competent in the back country, rather than as an object to be adorned and perfected. Arnold argues that positive changes in body image and the perception of one's physical abilities only occurs when exercise either increases one's level of fitness or skill. She suggests that technical skills and physical activities allow women to experience their body in an active, functional arena rather than in an aesthetic one.

In writing about women explorers, Norwood suggests that women who violate taboos are perceived by society as not real women. Cultural perceptions suggest that women adventurers cannot be any good at exploration because they are women, and their roles do not include the skills necessary to succeed at dangerous endeavors (Norwood). Women adventurers (and risk recreators) are in effect emasculated by virtue of their involvement with adventure, which has remained largely in the male domain. Birke and Vaines argue that if a woman performs as well as a man, she is seen as masculine (and hence abnormal) for her sex. McKay and Huber address this phenomenon as well when they point out that "what it means to be masculine is quite literally to embody force and competence" (208), characteristics that are both essential to success in adventure recreation.

Not surprisingly (given the power differential between men and women under patriarchy) Long found that among women, there was a strong positive correlation between masculinity and both self concept and locus of control. Norwood suggests that women explorers are making a statement of independence, particularly from the male world that limits their access to challenging environments. Climbing and other forms of risk recreation may facilitate the development of an internal locus of control in women partly by allowing women to redefine feminine norms of beauty (for example, being physically fit and strong, rather than thin) while simultaneously rejecting the traditional role and subordination of femininity through entry into the male worlds of adventure, exploration and technology.

Climbing, language, and metaphor

Elsewhere (Balke) I have written about the importance of learning the language of technology in order to function within the technological world. The language of climbing not only includes numerous technical terms for various forms of climbing hardware and aspects of the physical landscape, but climbing provides many metaphors as well. The metaphors of climbing (being on belay—the ultimate form of safety—and setting protection) as well as the relationships that climbing both required and engendered (trust) gave me a language through which I was able to



explore issues related to my childhood abuse. As was the case for O'Neill (a former climbing partner), moving through fear in the mountains had made taking emotional risks easier. Like Laine I had

used climbing as a drug, much the same way others use alcohol or cocaine. I'd used it to act with strength and with assurance, but behind that learned competence had lurked other more vulnerable emotions. I had climbed in part both to avoid these scarier emotions and to disperse them without having to admit to their presence. (316)

And, like the friend Laine writes about, climbing had made it easy for me not to think about a painful past, and as I remembered that past, my urge to climb diminished. Climbing had served its purpose. It had allowed me to develop a sense of physical empowerment and improved my self esteem, and through the false or limited sense of control climbing technology gave me in relation to the physical environment, I was able to develop a sense of control elsewhere in life. Best of all though, I learned about being on belay. Like Walker, "I could not refuse the challenge when life itself was the prize" (134).

This piece is dedicated to Catherine Freer (1949-1987) who taught me to climb, and to Leah Iraheta, my last climbing partner, with whom I learned about the real meaning of a belay.

Ellen Balke is an assistant professor of Women's Studies at Memorial University. Her research focuses on various aspects of women and technological change. She grew up skiing and she began rock climbing and mountaineering as an undergraduate in order to be safe while skiing outside of ski areas. As a graduate student she took up recreational (as opposed to life risking) white water rafting and kayaking. She spent a summer sailing competitively in Newfoundland, where she also took up ice hockey. Recently, she has been learning to enjoy the outdoors with a disability that requires she walk with a cane.

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- 1987 Betty Baxter founds the National Coaching School for Women
- 1988 Justine Blainey wins the right to play in the all-male Ontario Hockey Association, the Ontario Human Rights Commission rules that girls and women cannot be barred from competing in male sports and on male teams; tennis returns to the Olympic Games although fewer women than men will be allowed to compete; Carol Ann Letheren is the first woman to be *chef de mission* of a Canadian Olympic team
- 1980s Marathon swimmer Vicky Keith swims across all five of the Great Lakes
- 1991 Judy Kent is the first woman to be selected as *chef de mission* by the Commonwealth Games Association of Canada; Carol Ann Letheren is the first woman to be elected President of the COA; later that year she becomes the sixth woman named to the International Olympic Committee
- 1992 Equity and accessibility for girls and women in sport are targeted in the Minister's Task Force Report; judo becomes an Olympic event for women; Canadian women rowers win three gold medals and one bronze at the Barcelona Olympics; the Canada Games Council adopts wide-ranging gender equity principles; Canada's women's wheelchair basketball team capture the gold medal at the Stoke Mandeville Games and Paralympic Games in Barcelona
- 1993 Gender balance is incorporated into the guiding principles of the Canadian Sport Council, the new collective voice of Canada's sport community; the International Olympic Committee adds women's soccer and women's triple jump to the Olympic calendar; Wheelchair track star Christine Harder is the world champion and world record holder in 400m and 800m
- 1994 Biathlete Myriam Bedard becomes the first Canadian woman to win two Winter Olympic gold medals with victories in 7.5km and 15km at Lillehammer
- 1994 The International Olympic Committee confirms that women's ice hockey and women's and men's curling will join the Winter Olympic program in 1988 at Nagano, Japan
- 1994 The first international conference on women and sport with 280 delegates from 82 countries, including eleven Canadians, produced the Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport
- 1994 The Commonwealth Games Women in Coaching Program gave ten Canadian women international coaching experience and culminated in coaching positions for each at the 1994 Commonwealth Games; Judy Kent becomes the first woman to be elected President of the Commonwealth Games Association of Canada