Negotiating the ‘F-Word’ in the Field: Doing Feminist Ethnography in Action Sport Cultures

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This paper examines the potential of social theory for enhancing researcher reflexivity and praxis in the ethnographic field. More specifically, we advocate the potential of feminist interpretations of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “regulated liberties” for helping critical ethnographers navigate some of the embodied political and ethical tensions and challenges encountered in male-dominated physical cultures. Drawing upon examples from our fieldwork in surfing and snowboarding cultures, we illustrate some of the strategies we employ to subtly subvert problematic cultural norms and values within these action sport cultures. Engaging the work of poststructural feminist and Bourdieusian scholars, we raise some of the ethical questions and concerns we have experienced as cultural members and feminist researchers while engaging with participants in the waves and on the slopes.

Cet article porte sur le potentiel de la théorie sociale pour améliorer la réflexivité et la praxis du chercheur dans le domaine ethnographique. Plus précisément, nous préconisons le potentiel des interprétations féministes du concept de « liberté réglementées » de Pierre Bourdieu pour aider les ethnographes critiques à tenir compte des tensions politiques et éthiques incarnées telles que rencontrées dans les cultures corporelles dominées par les hommes. En nous appuyant sur des exemples tirés de notre travail de terrain sur les cultures du surf et de la planche à neige, nous illustrons quelques-unes des stratégies que nous employons pour subvertir subtilement les normes et les valeurs culturelles problématiques au sein de ces cultures de sport d’action. En dialogue avec le travail des universitaires féministes poststructuralistes et bourdieusiens, nous soulevons des questions éthiques que nous avons rencontrées en tant que membres d’une culture et en tant que chercheuses féministes, tout en nous engageant avec les participants dans les vagues et sur les pistes.

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Slightly giddy from the remnants of jet lag, a long day on the mountain followed by three interviews, and a video premier at a local snowboard store, I feel myself sinking into the plastic chair placed randomly in the corner of the kitchen. Three professional American male snowboarders and a photographer are also sitting around the kitchen table in this house where they live with my good friend and ex-snowboard instructor colleague, Melissa. She is busily doing the dishes and I am fighting to keep my eyelids open, when one of the young men starts recalling an interaction with a fellow professional female snowboarder; “She’s probably the hottest snowboarder and she rides really good but from what I hear, she’s gets a bit freaky in the bedroom”, while another chides in, “yeah, on our latest trip she was sleeping on my floor and asked whether my bed was comfortable. I knew she wanted me to invite her in… she really wanted it”. Another top female snowboarder was declared “a butch lesbian”. As the young men proceed to reduce professional female snowboarders to sexual objects, I feel anger churning in my stomach and my cheeks flushing. I wonder how to challenge these young men on their sexist and homophobic banter without provoking an angry or violent response, or offending my friend for whose hospitality I am grateful. I also consider, if I do question their behavior, am I doing so as an ethnographer, fellow snowboarder or feminist? The dictaphone was switched off four hours ago; do they know my research and politics don’t have an on/off button? As I debate my options, Melissa throws a wet dish cloth at the most vocal in the group—“dude, you’re just bitter because those girls snowboard better than you”—the others chuckle and nod in agreement. The conversation changes tack, the moment has passed, and while I am left with angry words on my lips, I am equally inspired by the effectiveness of Melissa’s response.

Carloads of sun-bleached surfers with boards stacked high on the roofs have been filing into town over the past few days. The competition is tomorrow and already the car-parks overlooking the beaches are full. I arrive late at the opening party for the annual surf event, which some of my research participants and local friends are competing in. As I walk toward the bar entrance, the door opens. Music and laughter spill into the street, followed by four drunk young men, who stumble towards me. Eager to avoid any interaction, I duck around them toward the open door, but as I do one of them reaches around his friend, grabs my buttocks, and suggests, “Maybe we’re leaving too early boys?” Stung, I turn to face him, “Get your hands off me!” and rush through the door as they walk away, laughing. Even in my jeans and T-shirt, I suddenly feel uncomfortable, and wonder what the crowd is going to be like inside. Making my way through the throng, I note that the place is packed with strangers and locals, young and old, filling the dance floor. I am relieved when I spot a group of my male friends gathered at the bar. As one of the guys orders me a beer, I proceed to tell them about the groping incident. They know about my work and my politics, so they are careful in their responses; one of them gazes back toward the dance floor, and another shifts his weight uneasily. Sensing their discomfort, I conclude my tirade and change the topic. As we stand talking about the predicted swell, a middle-aged man, a stranger to us all, approaches me. I feel his breath on my neck as he throws...
his arm around my shoulders, slides his hand down my back, and proclaims to my friends, “This one’s a go-er. Someone should snap her up!” He concludes by cupping his hand around my bum and squeezing before walking away. The boys look at me, open-mouthed, waiting for my response. I am stunned and humiliated, and my thoughts race as I consider how best to respond. My immediate impulse is to give him an earful, but sadly such physical violations are not unusual at events like this and many women ignore such behavior, so my response may be perceived as over-reacting. My wide-eyed and unexpected silence compels the guys into disbelieving laughter. Jake stares at me and exclaims, “Holy crap! I can’t believe that just happened to you again. What’s with these guys? Can’t they keep their hands to themselves?” I can only nod in agreement as the color rises in my neck and face. Carly and Anne walk up, excited I’ve arrived, until the boys regale them with what just happened. “What a moron. Where is he?” Carly wants to know. I tell her it’s ok and that I think I’ll leave soon, but Anne protests, “Don’t let him ruin your night. Come on!” and pulls me into the crowd and onto the dance floor.

As feminist scholars conducting ethnographic research on women’s experiences in action sport cultures, we have shared some similar researching experiences. Most significantly, we have both conducted fieldwork within action sport cultures (surfing and snowboarding) in which we are active participants and have preexisting social and cultural connections and relationships. Holly commenced her ethnographic research about snowboarding culture in 2004 after four years competing and instructing, and has since published widely from her doctoral and postdoctoral fieldwork conducted in various mountain communities around the world (see Thorpe, 2011a). Rebecca’s current research also involves participant-observation and interviews, but her focus has been on recreational female surfers living in her local surfing community on the east coast of Australia (Olive, 2009a, 2010). Despite the differences in our research projects, as women conducting feminist ethnographic research in physical cultures in which we are (or were) active participants and cultural members, we have both experienced similar social and physical pleasures and perils of doing such fieldwork. In this paper we focus on the latter and, more specifically, on the potential risks and challenges for feminist ethnographers working in male-dominated physical cultures such as surfing and snowboarding.

As with most modern sports, many action sports were created by and for men, particularly young men (Robinson, 2008; Thorpe, 2007; Wheaton, 2000). Despite changing cultural demographics, young men in their late teens and early twenties continue to constitute a dominant force at the core of surf (Booth, 2001, 2004; Evers, 2004, 2010; Ford & Brown, 2006; Waitt, 2008) and snowboard (Anderson, 1999; Thorpe, 2010) cultures. While the number of male and female surfers and snowboarders from various social classes and age groups continues to grow (“Action Sports”, 2007), many highly committed male (and some female) participants continue to celebrate fratriarchal masculinities performed both on and off the waves and slopes (See Evers, 2010; Thorpe, 2010), and hedonistic lifestyles organized around social events where drugs and alcohol are often prevalent (see Thorpe, 2011b). In our separate research projects, we have both examined the ways women are marginalized within action sport cultures, as well as some of symbolic and embodied
practices employed by female surfers and snowboarders to negotiate space within these male-dominated physical cultures (see Olive, 2009a; Thorpe, 2009). In this paper we build upon this research and existing literature on the maleness of surfing and snowboarding cultures, to highlight the challenges facing female researchers working within these spaces, and the tensions we have experienced negotiating our multiple roles and responsibilities as researchers, active participants, and feminists.3

Of course, questions of how to negotiate and practice feminist politics and ethics in fieldwork are not new (Ackers, 2002; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009; Lather, 2001; Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010; Stanley, 1990). For example, Lisa Weems (2006) recently asked how feminist ethnographers working in educational contexts can “imagine the field as a site that involves the negotiation of political and ethical issues—both theoretical and pragmatic?” (p. 996). In this paper we raise similar questions for feminist ethnographers working in physical activity and sporting cultures.

This discussion has been inspired by the reflexive turn in qualitative research, and particularly our concerns about what it means to “do” reflexive feminist ethnography. Reflexivity and critical reflection have been developed and explored in feminist literature for several decades (Ryan & Golden, 2006). Groundbreaking feminist researchers, such as Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Elspeth Probyn, have contributed concepts of “strong reflexivity” (Harding, 1996), “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991), and “thinking the social through the self” (Probyn, 1993), as part of a feminist critique of mainstream scientific methods that privilege masculine notions of objectivity, scientific detachment, and value neutrality (Speer, 2002; Daley, 2010). Today, reflexivity is commonly used to refer to a method that all qualitative researchers “can and should use to legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations” (Pillow, 2003, p. 175). The “reflexive turn” in the social sciences and humanities has been such that many contemporary ethnographers seem to agree in the virtue of reflexivity in the theoretical and research practice (Foley, 2002). Arguably, however, reflexivity is increasingly becoming an over-used, under-defined, and hollow term (Kenway & McLeod, 2004; Maton, 2003). Many contemporary ethnographers proclaim to adopt reflexive approaches to their research, yet few explicitly differentiate whether they are doing so in theoretical, methodological, or representational terms. In this paper we understand reflexivity as being more than a “methodological tool” (Pillow, 2003, p.175), or theoretical concept, but rather as an invaluable part of doing embodied, ethical, and political ethnographic research (Carrington, 2008; England, 1994), or what Patti Lather (1986) referred to as “research as praxis” (p. 257).

This is an important issue in feminist ethnography, for as Margaret McLaren (2002) argues, feminist research is not only contextual and theoretically-informed, but is political and active as well. Although our research was not necessarily underpinned by the “political imperative” of feminism to “make visible women’s experiences” (Lather, 2001, p. 200), we were both interested in understanding the ways surfing and snowboarding cultures are “organized, represented and experienced in relation to the operations of social power” (Andrews, 2008, p. 45). As our research developed we became increasingly aware of the various forms of power operating on and through women’s surfing and snowboarding bodies, and the various strategies employed by female participants to negotiate space within male-dominated cultures. Neither of us set out to do “feminist” ethnography (that is research that seeks to
“empower” women by giving voice to the “voiceless” [Lather, 2001] or change existing gender inequalities). But, our epistemological and political alliances with feminism—or our “feminist habitus” (McCall, 1992) embodied during our early socialization into the family and peer groups, and education—raised complex issues for us in the field. In addition, our reflections since concluding our fieldwork, and talking about these experiences with each other, have helped us understand more clearly where and how our growing relationships to feminist theory and politics have affected our experiences and responses in the field.

In this paper we reveal some of the tensions we have experienced in our efforts to negotiate our multiple and dynamic female, feminist, researcher, and surfer/snowboarder subjectivities in the field. The paper consists of four parts. First, we briefly discuss some of the methodological issues facing researchers doing ethnographic work in action sport cultures, and particularly feminist ethnographers working in male-dominated social fields. As well as highlighting key themes in the existing literature on this topic, we also identify silences regarding the multiple roles and responsibilities of critical scholars in the field. Following this we explain how our experiences of “confounding disruptions,” “discomfort,” and “feminist failure” in the research field prompted us to reflect more critically upon our multiple (and sometimes conflicting) positions as feminists, cultural participants, women, and critical scholars. Third, we advocate the potential of poststructural feminist interpretations of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “regulated liberties” for helping critical ethnographers navigate some of the embodied political and ethical conundrums in the field. In this discussion we offer a selection of examples from our own fieldwork to illustrate some of the strategies we employ in our efforts to subvert problematic cultural norms and values within surfing and snowboarding fields, advocating the value of social theory for enhancing researcher reflexivity and praxis in the field.

Feminist Ethnography and Action Sport Cultures

Like a growing number of critical scholars interested in action sports, we both approached our research having already participated in the activity for many years, and with a level of physical ability and preexisting cultural knowledge, such that we may be considered “cultural insiders” (Butts, 2001; Evers, 2004, 2006; Thorpe, 2005; Stranger, 1999; Wheaton, 2002). In the fields of surfing and snowboarding, we negotiate and reconcile our multiple roles as active participants, researchers, women, and feminists, in the waves, on the slopes, on the beach, on the chairlift, in the car-park, in bars and cafes, and at events such as competitions and social occasions including BBQs, award ceremonies, and film premiers. In these situations we engage in various embodied and social interactions with our participants, such as paddling for the same wave, hiking the same trail into the backcountry, getting (un)dressed in a crowded car-park, or sharing a chairlift ride at a mountain resort. While our past and present cultural commitment, physical abilities, and social capital within the fields of snowboarding and surfing helped us gain access to some cultural spaces, develop relationships with some participants, and enable understandings of the multiple forms of power operating on and through our own and others bodies, we are also aware that conducting research from an “insider” position can carry potential pitfalls in developing the critical, analytical distance
necessary for contextualizing the perspectives of interviewees and our observations in the field (Couldry, 1996; Wheaton, 2002).

Reflecting upon the challenges of managing multiple roles in the field, some action sport scholars have described highly affective situations in which they were faced with personal, cultural, and ethical dangers and difficulties. For example, Belinda Wheaton (2002) recalled her feelings of exclusion when overhearing her male windsurfing friends making sexist remarks, while Clifton Evers (2004, 2006, 2010) described many moments of discomfort, shame, and frustration at the sexism and homophobia he encountered while researching the surfing experiences of young Australian men. For both Wheaton and Evers, such situations were particularly challenging when their past and present windsurfing friends or surfing “mates” were implicated. Our experiences in the fields of surfing and snowboarding have presented us with similarly confronting situations prompting feelings of shock, anger, and frustration. While some action sports scholars have recognized the difficulties of navigating multiple positions in the field, few have reflected on fieldwork as a site of praxis, or offered comment on the researcher’s sense of personal and/or professional responsibility to respond to injustices or inequalities observed in the field.

Feminist researchers have long admitted the reflexive and methodological complexities and contradictions of their political, researching, personal, and gendered positions (Bordo, 1991; Fonow & Cook, 1991; O’Brien, 2010; Squire, 2002; St. Pierre, 1997; Stanley & Wise, 1991; Wilson, 2010). Somewhat surprisingly, however, few have offered advice on how to practically negotiate these issues in ethnographic projects. Such issues are exemplified by Rebekah Wilson (2010) who explained how she “smiled through gritted teeth” (p.139) as she endured sexist comments to access participants, while asking: “Is such collusion ever acceptable? When, where and for what purpose?” (p.139). During our early fieldwork, we were plagued with similarly challenging methodological, ethical, and political questions: When is it appropriate to question sexist, racist, or homophobic sentiments expressed by some participants in our fields of inquiry? How can we effectively challenge perpetrators of violent or misogynistic practices observed in the field? Is it our place to do so? Must we bite our “feminist tongue” to collect quality data? If we do “speak up” for ourselves or others in the field, what are the consequences for our research, as well as our own and others’ personal safety? Until recently we tended to navigate difficult research situations alone, turning predominantly to feminist theory and scholarship to give us guidance and inspiration. However, our recent dialogue both with one another and with feminist and Bourdieusian theory has helped us rethink our feminist ethnographic research practices and politics.

Approaching ethnographic research from the dual positions of cultural insider and feminist researcher not only raises epistemological issues, but ontological questions as well. Indeed, as feminist participants and researchers moving constantly within and between active participation, data gathering and analysis, and theoretical reflection, we often found ourselves in challenging ethical positions. Moreover, our past and present cultural participation and the personal and professional relationships we develop with individuals, groups, and the places in which we conduct our research, mean that we are deeply passionate about surfing and snowboarding cultures in local, national, and international contexts. In so doing, we increasingly feel “accountable” not only to our participants and peers, but also to help improve conditions for future generations of surfers and snowboarders.
For Carrillo Rowe (2005) a “feminist politics of relation” begins with a deeper understanding of the “communities to which we belong, with whom we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable” (p. 18). In this paper we similarly argue that researcher reflexivity, ethnographic practice, and feminist praxis cannot be separated from the relationships we develop with people in places of work and leisure. In other words, we recognize that “how our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others” (Denzin, 1997, p. 27) is integral to doing reflexive feminist ethnography in physical cultural fields.

From Feminist ‘Failure’ to Reflexivity in the Field

It is somewhat surprising that despite the “reflexive turn” in the social sciences and humanities, so few scholars offer suggestions as to how researchers can develop their reflexivity. Scant advice is available as to how a heightened awareness of the power relations within the research field, including the researchers position in these dynamics, might be used to minimize or reduce problematic power relations. Here we briefly consider Wanda Pillow’s (2003) interesting suggestion that “a tracing of the problematic of reflexivity calls for a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions—at times even a failure of our language and practices” (p. 192). Indeed, it was some of our early experiences of “confounding disruptions” and “discomfort” in the research field that prompted us to reflect more critically upon our multiple (and sometimes conflicting) roles and responsibilities as feminists, physical cultural participants, and critical scholars in surfing and snowboarding cultures.

During the early phases of our research, we both experienced some unsettling interactions with participants in which our (apolitical) responses surprised, and sometimes disappointed, us. For example, while conducting an interview with a professional female snowboarder, Holly became derailed when confronted with the accusatory remark, “Oh god, you’re not one of those feminists are you?” Rather than challenging her interviewee’s stereotypical assumptions of feminism, Holly panicked and tried to sidestep the question, promptly redirecting the conversation into “safer” terrain. Listening to the audio-recordings of the interview, Holly became troubled by her response which she identified as a “feminist failing”. At the time, she vowed never again to conceal her feminist identity from her participants, and to embrace such moments as opportunities for engaging in critical conversation. However, on a separate occasion, while conducting fieldwork at a ski resort in the United States, Holly faced a more confronting ethical dilemma when she was invited to attend a “snow party” being hosted by some of her research participants. At the party a homemade video recording of violent initiation rituals was played for the entertainment of the guests. The video featured three boys, between the ages of 11–13, being forced to drink excessive amounts of alcohol by a group of older male snowboarders, and then being exposed to a variety of demeaning and aggressive pranks (see Thorpe, 2010). Despite being aware that such hazing rituals are not uncommon for young male snowboarders, Holly was shocked to see the perpetrators of this dehumanizing and violent behavior laughing and joking, and that despite the disturbing nature of this video no one questioned their actions. With many party attendees under the influence of alcohol, Holly decided not to highlight the problematic power relations and violent practices being endorsed through the
screening of this video. Although publicly challenging the perpetrators actions in this situation may have posed risks to Holly’s safety and/or her research project, she nonetheless found her apolitical response unacceptable, prompting her to search for literature to help her imagine effective strategies to safely question such practices when confronted with similar scenarios in the future.

Rebecca has experienced many similarly challenging interactions while conducting participant-observations in her local community, online, and in the waves. For example, while sitting in the surf waiting for the next set of waves, Rebecca noticed a group of local teenage girls she knew, paddling out to join her in the line-up. They were wearing bikinis and smiling, excited to be in the water. As they paddled toward her, the girls passed a middle-aged man who leered at them from behind and chortled loudly to his friend, “Excellent. Things are looking up out here.” His words were loud and rang back to the young female surfers, who did not turn around. Rebecca recalls feeling furious, thinking of how she felt when men had brought similar unwanted attention to her body in the surf. She wanted to say something to him, to give him some idea of how his words might make these girls feel, yet she sensed that the girls did not want her to make a scene on their behalf, and thus held back the tirade that she felt building behind her lips. During a conversation about the incident on the beach a few days later, one of the young women responded to Rebecca’s concerns, “Nah don’t say anything. He’s just some creepy guy, hoping our swimmers will fall off. We’re kinda used to it.” In one sense, Rebecca was validated by these comments—challenging problematic gender practices in any surfbreak, let alone in a small community, can carry long-term consequences in the waves and on land for the one speaking up, as well as those she is defending. Yet the interaction, and particularly her inactivity, continued to trouble Rebecca’s feminist conscience. While she respects the wishes of her female participants to remain silent in some situations, she also recognizes the male surfer’s comments as reflective of problematic gender norms and values within the broader surfing culture. Much like Holly in the situations described above, Rebecca wondered whether her silence was complicity in his comments, and how she might act in such situations in ways that respect her multiple roles and responsibilities as a feminist, friend, fellow surfer, and critical researcher.

For Visweswaran (1994), the practice of failure is “pivotal for the project of feminist inquiry” (cited in Lather, 2001, p. 203). Similarly, Lather (2001) explained:

Placed outside of mastery and victory narratives, ethnography becomes a kind of self-wounding laboratory for discovering the rules by which truth is produced. Attempting to be accountable to complexity, thinking the limit becomes the task, and much opens up in terms of ways to proceed for those who know both too much and too little. (pp. 202-3)

Importantly, our feelings of feminist “failure” and “reflexivities of discomfort” (Pillow, 2003, p. 175) in the field prompted us to ask new questions about our epistemological and ontological assumptions, and particularly our own personal and professional politics, ethics, and responsibilities as feminists, critical researchers, and active physical cultural participants. These past feminist “failings” in the research field led us to theory, and particularly feminist interpretations of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “regulated liberties” which helped us rethink our everyday practices and politics within the fields of surfing and snowboarding.
Reflexivity and ‘Regulated Liberties’: Feminist Praxis ‘Within/Against’

Most criticisms of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual schema invoke structuralism and determinism, yet some of his later work provides more space for agency and reflexivity. In An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, for example, Bourdieu with Wacquant (1992) explained, “I do not see how relations of domination... could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it” (p. 80; original emphasis).6 Bourdieu (1991) used the term “regulated liberties” to refer to the small exercises of power that arise within the existing symbolic system or social field, but which resignify it in some way. Although Bourdieu left the concept largely underdeveloped, Lois McNay (1999) believed “regulated liberties” has “important implications for a feminist understanding of the relation between women and dominant representations of femininity,” because it provides “a way of obviating simplified theories of oppression and provides a framework in which to understand some of the “hybrid” forms women’s autonomy has recently taken” (p. 104).

Extending Bourdieu’s concept of “regulated liberties”, McNay (2000) described the practices of hybridity, performative resignification, parody, and masquerade, as “symbolic tools” employed by some groups of women to “subvert patriarchal definitions of femininity” within existing social structures (p. 58). Although McNay (2000) did not offer a detailed discussion of these “symbolic tools,” she supported her argument with examples from studies of “girl culture” which describe “highly feminized cultural icons, such as Madonna” as providing teenage girls with “a set of symbolic tools with which to subvert patriarchal definitions of femininity,” and “lipstick lesbians” reappropriation of signifiers of conventional femininity to challenge “stereotypical assumptions of non-heterosexuals” (p. 58). But, McNay (1999) also recognized that, while symbolic and embodied practices are “often hailed as resistant,” “regulated liberties” typically have an impact “only on the relatively superficial “effective” relations of a field rather than its deeper structural relations” (p. 105). Elsewhere she proclaimed that the concept of “regulated liberties” helps us think of political agency and change in “non-oppositional terms;” women’s practical and symbolic strategies “cannot be understood through the binaries of domination and resistance” but rather involve “complex processes of investment and negotiation” within social fields (McNay, 2000, p. 58). Drawing inspiration from recent feminist interpretations of Bourdieu’s work, we consider the potential of “regulated liberties” for rethinking our research practices and feminist politics within the surfing and snowboarding fields.

Bourdieu is well-recognized for his innovative contributions to the ethnographic craft (see Wacquant, 2004), yet he did not apply his notion of “regulated liberties” to his fieldwork; nor are we are aware of any contemporary critical ethnographers who are using this concept to inform their practices in the research field. Here we draw upon the work of feminist theorists and ethnographers to help us “work with” (Bal, 2009) the concept of “regulated liberties” to better imagine how it might be used for engaging in “research as praxis” (Lather, 1986). We further expand the notion of “regulated liberties” in relation to our own experiences of negotiating complex ethical situations and practicing embodied politics in the
field. In other words, we engage the concept of “regulated liberties” to examine the “complex processes of investment and negotiation” (McNay, 2000, p. 58) for feminist ethnographers working and participating in male-dominated physical cultural fields.

Patti Lather (2001) did not explicitly draw upon feminist interpretations of “regulated liberties”, yet we find her work useful for thinking about how this concept might be used to enhance the practice and politics of reflexive feminist ethnography. She described doing feminist ethnography in “non-innocent space[s]” as “about both ‘doing it’ and ‘troubling it’ simultaneously” via “risky practices that both travel across contexts and are made in each situated inquiry” (Lather, 2001, p. 204). She identified the “work of methodology” as requiring careful negotiation of the “field of play” based on an embodied and theoretically-informed understanding of “the politics of knowing and being known” in a particular context (Lather, 2001, p. 204).

For Lather, affective feminist politics and research practices require an understanding of the cultural norms and values, and power relations within a symbolic system or social field, as well as an acute awareness of the positioning of the feminist ethnographer within the research context. With such knowledge, the critical researcher can engage in “free-play”—or symbolic or embodied practices “within/against” the “limits” of a social field—which may work to “unsettle the dominant” ways of knowing within a particular context (Lather, 2001, p. 204). For Carrillo Rowe (2005) adopting a position of “differential belonging” can further facilitate feminist reflexivity and praxis. She explained that “tactical maneuvering” within and across social fields not only allows “the cultural worker to move among and across… various positionalities and loyalties”, but also offers a standpoint to better identify where transformation may be possible (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 25). Our movement within and between academic and research fields—or put another way, between theory, practice and culture—evoked some uncomfortable tensions as we struggled to (un)learn the strategies of each field. Yet, this field-crossing helped us develop a position of “differential belonging” within the surfing and snowboarding cultures, and thus the critical distance necessary to ask new questions about some previously unquestioned gender rules, norms and practices within the male-dominated action sport fields, and rethink the politics of our past and present “belonging” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005; Thorpe & Olive, 2010). In the remainder of this paper we draw upon poststructural feminist literature to help us imagine what these “regulated liberties”—or practices “within/against” (Lather, 2001) or “politics of relation” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005)—might look like in the ethnographic fields of surfing and snowboarding.

Regulated Liberties in Physical Cultural Fields

As feminist ethnographers working within the fields of surfing and snowboarding, we frequently engage in various forms of “regulated liberties” to subtly draw attention to inequalities and injustices without evoking knee-jerk reactions that we fear may compromise our projects, damage our relationships with participants, or inadvertently put ourselves or others in danger. Here we offer a few brief examples (selected from many possible scenarios) to illustrate such “regulated liberties” in practice, and to highlight the “messy doings” (Lather, 2001) of feminist ethnography in action sport cultures.
In our efforts to practice “regulated liberties” within the surf and snowboarding cultures, we both contribute to various media: Rebecca writes a blog about women and surfing, and we both write for niche websites and magazines to further question some of the problematic power relations operating within these male-dominated physical cultures. In an effort to make our work accessible to our surfing and snowboarding peers and research participants, we aim to use language and designs that are culturally consistent with cultural media, yet we also draw upon critical and feminist literature to help us subtly subvert the dominant narratives offered in niche surfing and snowboarding media (Frohlick, 2005; Henderson, 2001; Rinehart, 2005; Wheaton, 2003). Typically writing from our dual positions of active cultural participants and researchers, we are working both “within/against” existing niche media systems and the board-sport cultures more broadly. Writing in niche media becomes a form of “regulated liberties” as we subtly resist relations of power from within the fields of surfing and snowboarding: we often share the pages with mainstream and industry writers, and use culturally specific language, yet we also attempt to “trouble” dominant ways of knowing via subtle use of irony, narrative, and posing thought-provoking questions.

While some posts and articles are more effective and affecting than others, the following comments suggest that our practices of “regulated liberties” within surf and snow media do prompt critical thinking among some readers. According to the editor of an Australasian female-specific glossy surf, skate, and snowboarding magazine, an article deriving from Holly’s Foucauldian informed research on snowboarding media in which she asked readers to critically consider the exclusion of women from male-dominated snowboarding films, and the value of female-only snowboard films as an alternative, “really made people think” and prompted “plenty of discussion and feedback” and from male and female readers. According to the editor, the article also provoked considerable “discussion around the office… [among] lots of keen boarders and skiers” (personal communication with Thorpe, March 2007). In the subsequent issue, the editor commented that Holly’s article had impelled a reader to write an article for the magazine: “Since the last issue we have had a huge response to [Holly’s] article on the virtues and vices of all girls snowboarding DVD’s. This got Cris thinking about whether girls preferred to snowboard with their girl or guy friends…” (Editor, 2007, p. 54; see Thorpe, 2008, 2011a). Rebecca also receives messages from readers that confirm her words and images are prompting her peers to ask new questions about their surfing experiences. For example, after one post about feeling marginalized in the surf titled “Ignorance is Bliss” (Olive, 2009b), one female reader commented: “Hey [Rebecca]. Thanks for a great piece. You really got me thinking and it’s good to know there’s a forum like this where questions of surfing, identity and gender are taken seriously.” Karen responded to Rebecca’s words, by writing an article titled “What It Feels Like for a Girl” subsequently published in a niche surfing magazine of which Rebecca is a member of the editorial team (de Perhuis, 2009). Responses such as these illustrate the importance of researchers contributing to these kinds of cultural discussions, in culturally appropriate spaces. Indeed, engaging cultural participants in dialogue via various forms of niche media can be productive and rewarding for both the researcher and the audience (Olive, 2010; Thorpe, 2011a). It is important to keep in mind, however, that while writing in niche magazines, blogs and websites are sometimes effective forms of “regulated liberties”—small
exercises of power that challenge dominant norms and values within a field—our efforts are typically isolated to various dimensions of the surfing and snowboarding fields, and thus larger structural change is unlikely. As Chambers (2005) explained, regulated liberties take place from “within the dominant context and corresponding habitus” and thus “do not really subvert those structures” (p. 339). Moreover, writing a magazine article or a blog post from the comfort of one’s desk is a very different experience from witnessing and experiencing forms of sexism, racism, or homophobia while “doing research” in the field. In the latter, we must often make instantaneous decisions which can have very real physical and social consequences for our research and for our own safety, and perhaps unanticipated implications for others.

Exploring the notion of “regulated liberties” further, we have found that it is possible to engage in productive ethical and cultural conversations in the field, but this requires careful consideration of the unique social dynamics and local politics, a reflexive consideration of our role within it, as well as an intimate understanding of the broader culture within which we are working. Drawing upon Carrillo Rowe’s (2005) work on “politics of relation”, we recognize our everyday interactions and relationships with participants in the field as always “functions of power”, and thus integral to both our feminist politics and research processes and practices (also see Speer, 2002). For Rebecca, the potential of practicing “regulated liberties” both in the field, in the community, and on her blog, has been highlighted by friends and research participants who engage with her work in various locations, including the waves. Critically engaging with feminist literature helped Rebecca find a position of “differential belonging” within her local surfing community, and she regularly engages in embodied and symbolic practices that subtly challenge the dominant ways of knowing gender and feminism in the surfing field. For example, on one occasion, Mark, a friend within her local surfing community, called out at her across the water “Girls can’t surf!” As other local male surfers looked on, waiting for Rebecca to react, Mark assured them “It’s ok. Rebecca’s a feminist!” before paddling away with a wide grin spread across his face. When Rebecca loudly suggested Mark was a feminist too, he responded by laughing and agreeing, and they began an impromptu discussion about what feminism means for each of them, and how this plays out in surfing culture. In this case, Rebecca was engaging in a “politics of relation” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005), that is, she was able to use existing relationships to the surfers around her to risk speaking back to Mark’s comments. In other scenarios, where Rebecca might have less social capital among those in the water, such a response would have been met with potential scorn, aggression, and even violence.

At other times it has been cultural participants, especially other women, who have taught us when and how to react, when to laugh and when to practice restraint. As Rebecca’s research develops, she is discovering that for many local women the act of continuing to surf regularly is sometimes the most effective form of everyday politics and agency. Similarly, as Holly has discussed elsewhere, some female snowboarders employ highly creative, symbolic practices and embodied politics to navigate space within the snowboarding field, and challenge the maleness of the snowboarding culture by deploying fluid and hybrid identities to produce sites of contestation over the meanings of the female snowboarding body (see Thorpe, 2008, 2009). For example, US Olympic silver medalist Lindsey Jacobellis consciously

During our fieldwork, we often wear the same clothing, use the same jargon, and carry the same equipment as many other female surfers or snowboarders. Based on our embodied and theoretical understandings of the dynamics in a particular context, however, we sometimes consciously (de)emphasize some aspects of our multidimensional hybrid identities—surfer, snowboarder, researcher, feminist, lecturer—via speech, dress, and comportment, to help us both “do it” and “trouble it” (Lather, 2001). As illustrated in Rebecca’s example above, we have actively engaged in conversations on topics unusual for a particular environment (e.g., on a chairlift or in the waves) to challenge stereotypical assumptions of female surfers and snowboarders as “babes on boards” either “looking for a guy, there because her guy is, or trying to be one of the guys” (Blum, 1994, cited in Thorpe, 2008, p. 204). This has prompted questioning among female and male surfers and snowboarders about what it means to be a feminist in the early twenty-first century. Moreover, in situations where we observed and/or experienced inequalities and injustices from either our male or female peers or participants, we experimented with various responses ranging from quick witted humor and irony, visual signs of disapproval (e.g., a frown, raised eyebrow, or paddling, walking or riding away), to verbal statements and/or questions in an effort to prompt the perpetrator to rethink their position (“Hey buddy, that’s a bit harsh. How would you feel if someone treated your sister like that?”). As our relationships with participants and peers continued to develop over months and years, we drew inspiration from the highly creative embodied and symbolic practices employed by some women to negotiate space among their male and female peers. Some of our male peers and participants also taught us important strategies for challenging other men’s problematic assumptions and practices. Our attempts to practice “regulated liberties”—as researchers, feminists, and active participants—in male-dominated action sport cultures are both informed by, and informing of, our relationships in the field.

This is not to suggest, however, that our ideas or efforts were universally accepted. Some people remained skeptical of our feminist perspectives, unwilling to critique the surf or snow cultures that provide them a sense of belonging and identity, and so much physical pleasure. According to Chambers (2005), many women in male-dominated fields make adaptations and adopt strategies to “manage the masculine culture into which they are entering” (p. 342). This seems true of many female surfers and snowboarders, particularly those who have engaged in prolonged periods of enculturation and sustained participation in the surf and snow fields (see Thorpe, 2009). Interviews and interactions with highly committed female participants who accepted the current social construction of the surf or snow fields often posed a different set of challenges. For example, when an experienced female snowboard judge proclaimed during an interview that, women who don’t like the maleness of snowboarding culture, and particularly the sexism in the media, “probably should not get into snowboarding” because female snowboarders need a “very open mind” to “accept a lot of things that you may not agree with” (cited in Thorpe, 2008, p. 216), Holly (learning from past “feminist failures”) took a deep breath before encouraging the interviewee to consider whether women “should have to accept the sexism in the culture”, and offering examples of female snowboarders
who do not, and describing efforts by some women to actively challenge assumptions regarding the position of women within the snowboarding field. While this particular female snowboarder was not willing to further engage in this conversation, others embraced similar opportunities to reveal their frustrations and discuss some of the problematic power relations in the snowboarding culture.

The success of our efforts to intervene in the field varied considerably depending on the dynamics of the situation and our own sensitivity to the particular context, as well as our ability to think and respond quickly. We have found that, as our research progressed, and we gained confidence in our roles as ethnographers in the fields of surfing and snowboarding, we became more efficient and effective in our interventions which, although largely impacting only superficial relations within the surf and snow field rather than deeper structural relations (McNay, 1999), are an important part of being a reflexive feminist ethnographer.

Subtle practices of resistance within a social field are not always successful in challenging the existing norms and value systems within the symbolic system, and sometimes carry risks for the individual agent. Citing postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1983), McNay (2000) explained:

the dominant is often shielded from the potentially destabilizing effects of the ambivalences of (colonized) subjectivity: “caught in the Imaginary as they are, these shifting positionalities will never seriously threaten the dominant power relations, for they exist to exercise them pleasureably and productively” (Bhabha, 1983, p. 205). (McNay, 2000, p. 59)

While Bhabha is speaking specifically about the difficulties of challenging the dominance of colonial powers through practices of hybridity, McNay applied these ideas to contemporary understandings of gender and agency within existing social structures. Rebecca learned the limitations involved in practicing “regulated liberties” and speaking up in the male-dominated surfing culture when a small group of male surfers responded to her blog posts by narrating her into fictional sexual fantasies and by writing parodied comments under her name in their own online spaces. In a “pleasurable and productive” and counter-resistant act of their own, the men usurped her online identity for their own fratriarchal humor and bonding (Evers, 2004), belittling her in the process. This experience was distressing for Rebecca, who initially responded by silencing her own blogging voice. However, with the support of co-contributors on one particular blog she writes for, Rebecca was able to engage in online discussions about freedom of speech, marginalization, sexism, and homogeny with a number of the blogs regular readers, including several of the men who had parodied her. Despite the upsetting nature of this experience, the support and participation of her colleagues encouraged Rebecca to engage more explicitly in culturally contextual discussions that reflected issues of discrimination in surfing. This led Rebecca to new understandings of the multiple and varied ways her work is being read and responded to in virtual spaces, as well as the potential perils (and pleasures) of practicing “regulated liberties” in male-dominated physical cultural spaces (Olive, 2010).

Speaking and acting from our dual positions as cultural participants and researchers within the field, we continue to seek new strategies to subtly subvert problematic cultural norms and values with surfing and snowboarding cultures. We have learned some of the risks associated with posing such challenges. We are also
intimately aware that simply performing individual acts of symbolic resistance is not enough to overturn the male-dominated social structures within action sport cultures (Krais, 2006). For McNay (1999), the very value in Bourdieu’s work is that it demonstrates the difficulty of change: it “provides a corrective to certain theories of reflexive transformation which overestimate the extent to which individuals living in post-traditional order are able to shape identity” (p. 113). Certainly, when applied to the practice of doing feminist ethnography, Bourdieu’s notion of “regulated liberties” has the potential to help us capture some of the ambiguities, dissonances, frustrations, disappointments, and subtle negotiations of power, we have experienced as critical researchers and cultural participants within the male-dominated physical cultural fields of surfing and snowboarding.

**Conclusion**

While we both experienced some tensions negotiating new and existing relationships with our surfing and snowboarding peers and participants, conducting ethnographic research on surf and snowboard cultures has been a personally and professionally enriching and rewarding experience, and has been invaluable in helping us access new cultural understandings and lived experiences. For us, practicing feminist ethnography has been facilitated by our use of poststructural feminist literature, particularly surrounding issues of power, ethics and reflexivity, as well as our theoretically-informed conversations with each other regarding our past and present research experiences. These conversations have allowed us to open up this dialogue, to share resources, ask new questions, and support one another as we continue to develop our research strategies and everyday feminist politics (see also Thorpe, et al., 2011). As feminist researchers who are also active participants, we occupy multiple and dynamic positions in the field which ultimately affects our research practices and politics, and our relationships with our peers and participants.11 Our “uncomfortable” ethical and political experiences in the field, and our efforts to reflexively negotiate our various subjectivities, has facilitated new understandings of the multiple forms of power operating on and through our own and others bodies in the waves and on the slopes. We have found, however, that maintaining an ongoing dialogue with theory has helped us better embody our own politics and negotiate each situation on its own ethical terms. While other feminist ethnographers will surely have to negotiate struggles and tensions unique to their sites of inquiry, we suggest the value of social theory for enhancing reflexivity and engaging in “complex processes of investment and negotiation” (McNay, 2000, p. 58) in the research field.

**Notes**

1. Both authors contributed equally to this article.

2. In an effort to communicate the dynamic and spontaneous nature of fieldwork experiences and relationships, we have used “versions” of our field-notes as introductory narratives. Although these narratives are not perfect replications of our experiences, neither are they untrue. We both see ourselves in each of these stories, and feel they reflect and combine experiences we have both had (Denison & Markula, 2003). Such approaches help us communicate an experience in a
way that is complex, affective and embodied (Rinehart, 1998). Our hope is that by sharing these moments, their meanings may lead to other feminist ethnographers “seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story…” (Richardson, 2000, p. 158).

3. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a more detailed discussion of the complex power relations within the fields of surfing and snowboarding. However, we refer interested readers to Booth (2001) and Ford and Brown (2006) for an analysis of the gender relations within surfing culture, and Anderson (1999) and Thorpe (2006, 2011a) for a discussion of the construction (and contestation) of gender in snowboarding culture.

4. Sometimes, we are able to choose the ways we present ourselves as researchers in the field, and sometimes cultural and contextual relationships predetermine these decisions (Ahmed, 2010). For example, while Rebecca is well-known and open about her work in the spaces she is conducting her research, this openness is often enforced through her local identity, revealed by people who know her and wish to engage others with her work. Holly on the other hand is often assumed to be just another traveling snowboarder until she explains otherwise. Although Holly never conceals her researcher identity from cultural members for research purposes, in some situations it is not feasible (or safe) to declare her researcher identity or ask for informed consent from all participants (for example, observations made from the chairlift of unidentifiable snowboarders and skiers interacting in the terrain park below or at a snowboarding event with thousands of young, intoxicated spectators). For Holly, negotiating the overt and covert aspects of her research requires a different ethical sensitivity than Rebecca, whose researching identity was explicit.

5. A useful exception being Liz Stanley and Sue Wise’s (1991) discussion of the ways they negotiated and made sense of an ongoing series of homophobic and obscene phone calls.

6. “Belonging” is a key dimension of Bourdieu’s understandings of resistance. With “belonging” to a social field comes the possibility of understanding the unique value systems and rules structuring the social space, and thus the potential to anticipate possible responses to challenges to the structure of the field. For Bourdieu (1992), the practical and political activities of the agent transcend the immediacy of the present through the “mobilization of the past and practical anticipation of the future inscribed in the present in a state of objective potentiality” (cited in McNay, 1999, p. 104).

7. It is important to note that Lather’s work differs from Bourdieu’s, whose “reflexive sociology” was detached and “theoretical”, while Lather draws on a more “deconstructionist” reflexivity and postmodern ethnography (Foley, 2002). While Bourdieu is well known for his rigorous ethnographic practices in France and Algeria, and his work on “reflexive sociology” in which he encourages sociologists to pay attention to how the practices and discourses of their own discipline “affect what and how he/she writes and thinks” (Foley, 2002, p. 476), he did not employ the concept of regulated liberties in relation to his own fieldwork. Thus, in this paper we draw selectively upon the work of feminist theorists and ethnographers, such as McNay and Lather, to help us (re)engage and extend the concept of regulated liberties to better imagine how it might be used to enhance the practice and politics of reflexive feminist ethnography.

8. While Lather’s (2001) referral to the research field as a “field of play” echoes Bourdieu’s work on social fields, here she is more explicitly drawing upon a Derridean interpretation of “free play” within the structure of the machine such that the dominant are “unsettled” (p. 204).

9. Holly admits to being less effective at this than Rebecca, which highlights an important point; not all ethnographers will feel comfortable/able to use humor or irony in the moment.

10. Rebecca would like to acknowledge and thank Clifton Evers, Stuart Nettle, Alex Leonard and Thomas Williams for their ethical, consistent and thoughtful comments in this particular “conversation”. Their well-expressed ideas and perspectives were insightful and enlightening and helped Rebecca in both articulating and understanding her own responses to the situation.

11. Of course, this is not just an issue for female researchers, but rather all critical ethnographers. Indeed, we are enthused by the efforts of those male researchers who are discussing some of the ethical dilemmas of negotiating the hyper-masculine and fratriarchal practices in their ethno-graphic research in male-dominated action sport cultures (Evers, 2004, 2006; Laurendeau, 2008).
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