

# Purposive encounters with “lack” in strength sports and diet culture

Molly Merson 

Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, San Francisco, CA, USA.  
E-mail: therapy@mollymerson.com

**Abstract** Informed by Andrew Dickson’s paper “Biomassochism: Lacan and the Ethics of Weight Cycling,” this paper explores the paradoxes and nuances of lack and power in women’s strength sports in the United States. Utilizing historical analyses of anti-blackness and sexism in the social milieu alongside the author’s personal experience as a strength athlete, this paper explores the *jouissance* of a strength athlete’s experience of pain alongside the pleasure of competition, and purposive “lack” as represented by encounters with failure embedded in athletic performance. Lack and failure are also taken up within a framework of diet and exercise culture. The paper also explores how purposive encounters with lack and failure function as an aspect of indigenous narrative (Tummalla-Narra, 2015), and can be utilized as tools to reclaim a sense of selfhood and agency. Additionally, the paper takes up aspects of anti-blackness and patriarchy embedded in “wellness” culture, how a settler-colonial patriarchal environment functions to de-link subjectivity from bodily autonomy and experience, and the ways in which strength sports may enforce, or reclaim, these delinked identities. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (2021) 26, 378–387. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-021-00227-3>; published online 19 July 2021

**Keywords:** lack; athlete; body; gender; race; *jouissance*

---

Strength sports are, at their apex, a performance. Most athletics, in some way or another, embody performative elements: The athlete trains for a sport and enacts it, often enacting the sport during the training itself. As an amateur Strongman athlete who is also a psychoanalytic candidate, clinical psychotherapist, and supervisor, I live among several overlapping realms: the psychic, the emotional, the environmental, the sociopolitical, the bodily, and the interwoven reveries and experiences that exist between all. Performance expresses itself differently in the clinical realm than it does for an activist or on the lifting stage, but all these realms require the



participant to show up with full capacity, having undergone practice, experience, commitment, and consistency, in order that, in Sara Ahmed's (2004) words, the subject perform and "do what they say" they will do (p. 1).

Training for competitions in lifting sports is a very intense experience. I have trained for several low-stakes competitions in varied strength sports where the "win" was primarily the *experience* rather than the prize (one of my favorites encouraged athletes to compete by offering stuffed dinosaurs as prizes). Even so, often I prioritized my training as though it was a requirement for my existence, while for the past several years I have been attempting to do the same in my psychoanalytic training. I have utilized exercise at times primarily in relationship to weight control as, in part, an unavoidable side effect of capitalist patriarchal culture, to which I am not immune. Sometimes, exercise has been laborious, including physical labor; sometimes, it has been fun; at times, it has been a drag; and at times, a punishment. Because of the culture in which I was raised, I experience significant psychic and physical embeddedness within "diet culture." It has taken me several decades to learn how to eat enough and be nourished enough to discover, and enact, the type of movement and live a vital kind of life.

When I entered the realm of Strongman sport, I did so because of my lifelong fascination with the idea of lifting heavy and odd objects. In a particular fantasy linked with my dislocated Scottish ancestry, I fantasized often about participating in the Highland games: a large event held all around the world which involves athletics, dance, music, and other Scottish cultural exhibits. Perhaps the most recognizable event of the Highland games athletics is the caber toss, a 20 to 50 foot-long log which the athlete attempts to flip end over end. Before I ever tried Highland games athletics, I competed in the amateur realms of CrossFit, Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, and Strongman. Strongman has been the sport that's stuck – at least for now.

Strongman has been described as "lifting heavy odd objects for fun." Among the "implements" of the sport are kegs, cars, axles, tires, and stones. Athletes carry hundreds of pounds on a yoke for short distances; they drag trucks, push boats, and throw bags of sand. These types of field sports involve farming and manual labor elements, and though an athlete can certainly purchase expensive equipment, it is not a requirement for participation. Anything that can be lifted, dragged, thrown, held, and/or carried may be attempted, and great efforts will be made to lift things that don't seem particularly suited to respond to human force. Athletes do this because it's enjoyable and strange, and because we want to challenge our bodies to do something unexpected, which ultimately challenges our beliefs about who we are and who we're culturally marked to be.

Training, on the other hand, can be a little less thrilling. Depending on the athlete's goals, training requires a type of fixation and rigidity of schedule, exercises, and diet that doesn't often equate to the free association of play. That said, there are moments in training where the nature of the frame – perhaps akin

to a five-day-per-week analysis – requires the subject to fully arrive and focus on the task at hand, to the exclusion of all else, sometimes in their garage or driveway, and often in community space. Training can become a space of reverence where there is a task at hand to accomplish a certain number of sets of a certain number of repetitions of this certain activity at this certain weight. In strength sports, the lifts may last for mere seconds. Upon completion of a lift, athletes turn to lifting partners to cheer each other on and commiserate with. Ultimately, in Strongman sport, the final culmination is the competition: A day- or weekend-long space of arrival, intensity, community, and play. Strongman sport is not the type of exercise one does in order to access the status offered by appearing “fit,” “slim,” “small,” or “light.” One could say that the Strongman community as a whole is invested in the thrill of mass moving mass. The *jouissance* in the heavy lifting is in our bruises and sore muscles, which demonstrate and remind us of these purposive moments of joyful action or painful failure. The doing of something over and over again, and actually achieving positive results, can bring athletes a sense of agency and subjectivity.

As Strongman athletes, we find ourselves surprised and excited by odd objects and our potential relationship to them; nearly every object we encounter in our lives generates the question: “Could I lift that?” Thus the lifter becomes an active subject of her own physical and psychic life. In white supremacist, classist, patriarchal societies such as the United States, those with bodies interpellated (Althusser, 1971; Guralnik, 2016) as “female” are socialized from preconception to take on the projections of a society which often insists on physical and psychic smallness. I argue that female, trans, and genderqueer lifters, just by nature of existing, are positioned to subvert this social messaging. For example, a well-known female strength athlete has “Take Up Space” tattooed on her thigh, claiming for herself and her thighs the right to exist in space. The oppressive effects of patriarchy are not limited to women, femme, or genderqueer people; an individual with a body interpellated as “male” is also subjected to a particular gaze intent on boxing-in his body. For example, the idealized man is typically expected to be muscular, hard, and solid, but not too threatening; and a man whose body does not fit that form may likewise be positioned to subvert a normative expectation of a male form. While the effects of these cultural projections are felt by the individual, and often taken on by them as a personal fault, these are cultural framings which highlight a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal narrative that one’s identity and value/worth in society can be identified by one’s body shape, muscularity, and proximity to/ distance from fatness. I further argue that these are *intentional* effects of colonization and white supremacist systems, passed along via multigenerational, interpersonal, and cultural projections and projective identifications, and reinforced by social norms and structural limitations (such as the size of seating on airplanes and other accessibility issues). These norms can enact further



violence in the family and social system by encouraging and re-enacting oppressive hierarchies of power between individuals.

To further illustrate the cultural implications of patriarchy on bodies, Jan Todd (1998), the first recorded woman to successfully lift the Dinnie Stones, describes an early encounter with women's purposive exercise via 19th century white American women's advice books. These books contain "discussions of appropriate exercise for women [such as the] suggestion [that] rolling over and over in bed could be regarded as healthful exercise," and, with perhaps some emotional distance and capacity to find humor, Todd further remarks that "[reading this] never failed to produce a chuckle" (p. 1), who traces the history of exercise as we know it, which was not common for people in the United States prior to the Revolutionary War. Todd writes that after 1820, when slavery was still an economic tool of the United States but was near to being abolished, white men and women began to turn their minds and bodies towards purposive movement. Throughout the book, she illustrates the ways physical movement intended specifically for white women, and aimed at preserving their "decorum and grace" (p. 89), was part of the social milieu; meanwhile, the subversive nature of women having autonomy over their bodies was heavily denounced – except on the stage. Todd notes the paradoxical contemporaneous cultural attraction to strong bodies as captured by a phrenologic dictum of the time: "Bigger bodies led to better brains" (p. 5). Attracted to the muscled beauty and feats of strength performed by professional Strongwomen of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s, Todd explores the ways in which popular culture has encouraged seemingly absurd calisthenic exercise to enable white wealthy women to become smaller and slimmer, and yet at the same time celebrated these strong-bodied performers (as long as those women weren't your wives, mothers, or daughters).

Of her decades in professional powerlifting, Todd shares her own experience in navigating the discrepancy between social norms and her own emerging relationship to bodily agency. She writes that she "had to confront personally [her] intellectual and emotional feelings about the relationship of strength to femininity, and [she] had to reconcile [her] interest in strength with the general societal belief that [her] sport was not only masculine but possibly dangerous for women" (p. 1). As she continues, "I began to understand that the regular physical training I did as part of my athletic life made me feel differently about my body and my sense of life's possibilities" (p. 1). Her developing bodily agency also liberated her mind, and opened up her access to potential outside the normative roles for women.

The notion of social control over body shape and size has deep roots in colonization, racism, and white supremacy in addition to patriarchy, as Todd describes. In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings (2019) describes the medicalization of thinness and dieting, tracing it back to the early 19th century. At this time, she writes,

America throbbed with revivalist fervor. A central goal for many people caught up in the movement was to transform what they deemed the intemperate American habits in food and drink [...] if they could prevent Americans from stuffing themselves to the gills and tipping with abandon, and instead reorient American dietary habits in a way that honored God, it would be the best thing for the white race. (p. 171)

In large part, Strings argues, this control over food intake had to do with maintaining white supremacy. In other words, if the white community was “fit and well,” they could be better, superior colonizers. In this way, religion, gender, body size, and “wellness” have been utilized to uphold a hierarchy based on skin color, status, class, and affiliation. After all, if bodies in a settler-colonial capitalist society are representative of status, access, and identity, a lot is riding on how we look.

Throughout the book, Strings links religion, “health” and the “well” body to anti-blackness, elucidating how the Kellogg Company (known nowadays for its cereal) began with a Seventh-day Adventist doctor promoting the wellness of Anglo-Saxons via food engineering, i.e. essentially promoting wellness to benefit white people. While Strings notes that Kellogg believed that “it was not excess fat, but excess leanness, resulting from a poor diet that was the existential threat facing Anglo-Saxon women, and by proxy the white race,” (p. 178) the threat of the “obese” person appeared to be positioned as a danger. In 1927, the former president of the American Medical Association warned that “underweight is more dangerous before thirty years of age and overweight after thirty” (Phillips, cited in Strings, p. 187). Coupled with the emergence of the Body Mass Index, an economist’s tool utilized as an indicator of health by life insurance companies (Bacon, 2010), anyone’s sense of self could become easily delinked from an intuitive relationship between one’s body and mind. How fat is too fat? How thin is too thin? What body is a good enough body? As a patient of mine once reflected in relation to Simone Biles’ gymnastic wins and the subsequent rule changes which prevented her from acquiring even more points for her record-breaking maneuvers, “there is no winning in a game where the goalposts are always moving.”

In his paper in this issue, Andrew Dickson evokes a deeply rooted, personally and socially charged dilemma in the notion of “Biomassochism,” defined as “the act of punishing oneself with one’s weight and enjoying it; usually involving bathroom scales”. I hear a reclamation of agency in this statement, a kind of queering of diet culture. It evokes for me my own social location as a white athlete and lifter, assigned female at birth, who enjoys using my biomass to move other mass around. In thinking about the “uses of use” (Ahmed, 2019), I wonder what part of my life as an athlete might be an attempt to overcome a fear of an experience which has already happened (Winnicott, 1974) by



becoming the subject rather than the object of usage. To exercise agency over a task that my mind tells me is quite impossible or even irrelevant to perform offers an opportunity to not only push up against an object but to experience that object also pushing up against me; there is a self, a skin-ego (Anzieu, 2016), and edges there that I have agency in delineating. Something is being done *to* me, but *by* me. The scrapes, bruises, and skin tears that are common in sports like Strongman, gymnastics, and roller derby are worn as badges of honor: a kind of pain that has come from effort and pleasure, as though ensuring that we always encounter pleasure as pain and the paradox of *jouissance* is never resolved.

Could the notion of obsession plug into the spaces left open by this paradox? Mai Zetterling (1973), director of the weightlifting-focused vignette "The Strongest" in the film *Visions of Eight* about the 1972 Munich Olympics, described her choice of sport to film: "I chose weightlifting because I knew nothing about it. And I suppose one thing that really fascinated me was that these men work in almost total isolation, and that they are obsessed. They don't seem to have any life apart from lifting. I am not interested in sports, but I am interested in obsessions." I posit that there is an obsessional quality in weightlifting and strength sports in part because, over time and with consistency of effort, the subject's efforts are sometimes directly rewarded. The athlete is also constantly confronted with lack, particularly when competing against another athlete. But the athlete persists, hoping that by dedicating themselves to their sport, they will achieve a kind of arrival, elation, validation, and perhaps relief embedded in a "win." But are there not always some moving goalposts, such as changing rules and resources, or are there scenarios in which the goalposts remain steady and reliable?

As Dickson describes, "The biomassochist wants to perform his lack for you". The weightlifter wants you to know that her lack has to do with her own agency; she submits to "lack" as something she owns and controls. As an amateur "hobby" athlete, I am constantly forced by my participation in Strongman to encounter lack. For all the effort I put into training throughout the year, however, I receive only a few opportunities to put my training to the test, and in public view. Competitions are the lifeblood of the sport: the gathering place of lifters of all genders and weight classes who throw their whole selves into four or five events, all of which last for only a few seconds. Competitors put everything into these moments, and we may be successful or we may not – or, worse, we may injure ourselves or someone else. Whether we are successful or not may have something to do with our training programs, our overall capacities, our levels of expertise, our access to training and recovery resources, or unexpected environmental concerns. It may also have to do with our own lack: if we lose, we may feel that everything we have put in becomes nothing. On a number of occasions, I have put all my efforts into a lift and the object did not budge. I have also been told , in signing up for a competition, to

expect to receive a “zero” score on at least one event – though, in Strongman, it is still possible to win the competition if you “zero” one event. (You get nothing, and you work hard for it.) While this takes some performance pressure off of the lifter, it’s a strange feeling when entering a competition to admit I am willingly signing up to likely fail if the implement weights are way out of my range. In strength sports, the *jouissance* lies in the purpose being the competition, but the competition is fleeting, momentary, and full of failure. Here, failure is part of the territory. And yet, we keep coming back.

When an action is purposive, the question can be asked what its purpose is and whether it may in fact be carrying out multiple purposes simultaneously. In Strongman, the purpose includes lifting, but the purpose of the sport also becomes one of creating the competitions as spaces and locations in which people gather. Competitions can often be friendly and diverse spaces, and I have heard a lifter say on more than one occasion she didn’t think she had it in her to make the lift, only to perform it and exuberantly exclaim through tears of joy that it was the single best moment of her life. The personal transformation can appear profound.

While the performance of sport can solidify one’s agency and power and increase mind-body connection, like most things that occur in patriarchal, settler-colonial cultural environments, it can also replicate violence. As with many sports, Strongman is divided into weight and binary gender classes, and the weight classes are divided in ways that evoke complicated feelings for some lifters. To mitigate the challenges of the body mass-to-weight lifted ratio, many lifters “cut” weight, similarly to Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighters or boxers just prior to weigh-ins. In effect, an athlete’s “walking around weight” may be 20 pounds more than her competition weight. This “water cut” is a dangerous yet not uncommon maneuver which can shift the practice of the sport towards an obsessional and restrictive psychic and physical experience. It is also reminiscent of exercise utilized for weight loss rather than bodily autonomy and increased capacity for feminist agency, which can result in poor performance on competition day, or, worse, even lead to hospitalization.

Here, lack rears its head again. When training for a competition, lack is linked to a purpose yet can re-enact a form of power and control, especially when training involves a diet or “weight cut.” An athlete’s fixation on “clean eating” and “macros” can reduce food to numbers on a scale. Food can become about combinations of macronutrients, which may de-prioritize intuitive enjoyment or sensory connection to hunger cues. Eating can become purposive eating, with no room for “pleasure eating.” The kind of tracking involved in this approach to eating can offer a supportive frame for some individuals to remember to eat, and yet may also further disconnect nutritive and bodily needs from cultural and intuitive bodily experience. In general, when “counting macros,” meals become about the economics of nutrition rather than a sensory or community experience. Food becomes less a matter of the experience of eating and more



of staying within the boundaries of what's "acceptable." At this point, eating can become delinked from both intuition and self, and forms a traumatic location within which other splits are possible, in which other traumata may emerge or become lodged.

Drawing an analogy to trauma, a clinical supervisor observed in regards to a patient of mine that when you've had to eat cardboard your whole life, there is no difference between food and cardboard. Extending the metaphor, if one holds no psychic expectation of *joyful* eating, when "real food" comes along, even when it is flavorful, the psychic and physical digestive enzymes for anything but cardboard are not there – so even something delicious becomes dull, and nourishment becomes indistinguishable from lack. This brings to mind the Kate Moss quotation Dickson opens with: "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels". Here, then, "nothing tastes" is equated to "good(ness)," invoking "skinny" as a feel(ing) whereby we are confronted with lack. In this case, our experience of flavor, sensation, and the cultural experience of food has become delinked from our bodily and psychic experience, replacing the potential for developing a connected "self" with gaps or absences into which diet culture can insert its cardboard meal packs, boiled chicken, and the slippery oppression of the needle on the scale.

Strength athletes often grapple with both ends of this paradox: the obsessive nature of training and the play of the sport itself. Athletes are tasked with weaving together – and, agentically, have the opportunity to weave – a sense of self and subjectivity through what Tumalla-Narra (2015) describes as "indigenous narrative" (p. 283), a positionality inherent within the subjectivity of each of us. In settler-colonial environments, this narrative is often replaced or informed by the colonizing narrative. Indigenous narrative seems a similar concept to Autotheory, which can function as an indigenous narrative in that the author works to reclaim himself of and for himself. Autotheory also seeks to disrupt the colonial narrative of detachment and disinterest by reinserting this indigenous narrative into the framework within which our stories are told. It reminds us that we encounter each other within a multitude of narratives, whether we are aware of them or not. It occurs to me that approaching our theories, clinical work, and relationships with anything other than an aim towards contextualizing ourselves within a personal and social/political narrative would be disingenuous at best and reinforcing of settler-colonial violence at worst.

For inhabitants of settler-colonial societies, relationships between our psyches, our bodies, and our capacity to perform – to do what we say we will do – have become disconnected. For me, strength sports are one way in which I am able to effortfully re-link my body to my psyche and thus work to assemble something which thus far has only been able to be felt by its absence. As Angela Davis (2013) has said, "Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate,



and disaggregate things that appear to naturally belong together” (p. 104). In this way, sport can function as a feminist, queer, and decolonial act, particularly when the body that performs it is an unexpected one within the typical framework of “purity,” “femininity,” “masculinity,” or “muscularity” (such as the weightlifter Sarah Robles, the sprinter Caster Semenya, or the gymnast Simone Biles). Black Feminism and other critical theories encourage us to interrogate our assumptions about what our bodies “should” be – what we should look like, weigh, lift, do, be, eat – and about what can become collapsed into disconnected categories, leaving us easily manipulated by powerful internalized and systemic social forces.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

## About the Author

Molly Merson LMFT (she/they) is a clinical psychotherapist, supervisor, and candidate in psychoanalysis living and working in occupied Ohlone and Patwin territories, currently known as the Bay Area of California. She is the author of “The Whiteness Taboo: Interrogating Whiteness in Psychoanalysis,” published in 2021 by *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, having co-founded the consultation group of the same name. Molly has presented at the Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology’s Spring Meetings on whiteness, race, accessibility, psychoanalysis, and reparations. Molly teaches and supervises at various Bay Area psychology training programs and institutions, and pursues abolitionist and decolonial psychoanalysis.

## Notes

- 1 As my body changes, and the circumstances of my life change, I can assume my relationship to exercise may also change, which I welcome as an element of growth and attunement to my psychic and physical needs.
- 2 Interestingly, there is an implement in Strongman called the “frame,” which is a four-sided loadable structure within which the athlete stands, arms extended from the sides about a foot on either side, and which they carry for a set distance as quickly as possible.
- 3 The Dinnie Stones are two large rocks found in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and named after Donald Dinnie, supposedly the first person to lift and carry them. The stones have handles attached and weigh a total of over 700 pounds (one is over 300 pounds, and the other over 400 pounds). It is



considered a major feat of strength to lift them, and doing so is often talked about as getting the "wind under the stones."

- 4 Phrenology, a pseudo-science directly linked to white supremacist notions of bodies being categorized and ranked as more or less human, capable, or smart, created a rationale for a society focused on colonizing the bodies of individuals which encouraged the use of projection and splitting to support the re-enforcement of racialized hierarchies and traumas.
- 5 Transgender Strongman athletes may compete in the gender category they most identify with without documentation, testing, or proof of gender identity. Non-binary athletes are still required to choose a gender category in sanctioned meets. For a comprehensive introduction to the nuances of gender and sex in strength sports, see Feigenbaum (2017).

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2004) Declarations of whiteness: The non-performativity of anti-racism. *Borderlands* 3(2): 1–15.
- Ahmed, S. (2019) *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Althusser, L. (1971) Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation). In: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by B. Brewster. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, pp. 127–86.
- Anzieu, D. (2016) *The Skin-Ego*. London: Karnac Books.
- Bacon, L. (2010) *Health At Every Size*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.
- Davis, A. (2013) Feminism and abolition: Theories and practices for the twenty-first century. In: F. Barat (ed.) *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, pp. 91–110.
- Dickson, A. (2021) Biomassochism: Lacan and the ethicsof weight cycling. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-021-00226-4>.
- Feigenbaum, J. (2017) Shades of gray: Sex, gender and fairness in sport. <https://www.barbellmedicine.com/blog/shades-of-gray-sex-gender-and-fairness-in-sport/>, accessed 22 August 2020.
- Guralnik, O. (2016) Sleeping dogs: Psychoanalysis and the socio-political. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 26(6): 655–63.
- Strings, S. (2019) *Fearing the Black Body*. New York: New York University Press.
- Todd, J. (1998) *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women 1800–1875*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press.
- Tummala-Narra, P. (2015) Cultural competence as a core emphasis of psychoanalytic psychotherapy. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 32(2): 275–92.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1974) Fear of breakdown. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 1: 103–7.
- Zetterling, M. (dir.) (1973) *Visions of Eight*. Wolper Productions.