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Contesting and Constructing Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Women's Roller Derby

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CONTESTING AND CONSTRUCTING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY IN
WOMEN'S ROLLER DERBY

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ABSTRACT

Contesting and Constructing Gender, Sexuality, and Identity in Women's Roller Derby

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In this dissertation project I use the case of women's roller derby to examine gender resistance in spaces produced and dominated by women. I examine the challenges and strategies roller derby participants deploy in resistance to the gender binary and its gender mandates, and whether or not these strategies and cultural expressions are oppositional or political. Through a combination of ethnography, participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of web and print media on roller derby, I explain how women's roller derby participants construct identity, varying types of femininities, and engage in forms of cultural resistance through their sport. I analyze the political and cultural challenges skaters and the sport of roller derby pose to the gender binary, mainstream gender expectations, and understandings of femininity and sexuality, and investigate how those challenges manifest at the level of individual identity, roller derby organization, and roller derby cultural symbolism. I argue that the skaters' embodied practices challenge and disrupt notions of gender, sexuality, body, and identity.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION – DERBY AND RESISTANCE

Imagine you could invent a sport from scratch. How about something sexy, anti-corporate, amazingly fast and incredibly violent. A sort of anti-golf. Now imagine that the women who play this sport have names like Ivana S. Pankin, Sybil Disobedience and Gori Amos. And how about tie breakers settled by a pillow fight between a punk mother in a skimpy sailor costume and a heavy metal librarian in a fluorescent orange porn-fantasy prison mini-dress? And how about, instead of red cards, bad girls have to spin a “wheel of shame,” with punishments including being spanked with plastic flyswatters by the entire team (or crowd?)? Congratulations. You’ve just imagined the all-new, all-female, all-punk roller derby—possibly the greatest sport ever invented. (Guardian Weekly May 2005)

The above is an excerpt from an article in the *Guardian Weekly*, in May of 2005. The article articulates the hype and excitement around the very beginnings of the resurgence of the sport of women’s flat track roller derby. The excerpt highlights the athletic, spectacle, and performative features of women’s roller derby, particularly during its first decade from 2003-2012. In its depiction of some of the more sexualized elements of the new roller derby, however, like the sexy uniforms and the non-traditional penalties of spanking instead of time in the penalty box, the article also describes certain features of the sport that, at the time, spawned a growing debate within feminist communities. This debate centered on, whether, through players’ uniforms and antics, roller derby and rollergirls presented and embraced a stereotypical picture of female sexuality adhering to gendered norms within a patriarchal culture or, whether the sport, its players, and overtly sexy team uniforms subverted traditional gender roles and images of traditional female sexuality by embracing and playing with identity and performance of gender and sexuality.

The sport of roller derby does not thus nicely conform to standard Westernized ideas about women’s traditional behaviors or gender roles. In this respect, derby reflects third wave

feminist constructions of gender and sexuality, with all of their layers and complexities. This is also the lens through which I entered roller derby, understanding it as a feminist endeavor.

The Feminist Roots of Resistance in Roller Derby

On a hot summer evening in June of 2005, I pulled into the small, pot-holed parking lot of Corks Café, ready for another Thursday night of cocktails with the Feminist Drinking Club (FDC). The feminist drinkers, as the group was known, was a local Las Vegas group serving as a hub for feminists and their allies to gather to network and drink. It was an eclectic group of folks, mostly women but also men, involved in various facets of Las Vegas' growing activist/feminist/urban/art/cultural/academic community(ies). On some nights, the group was small, maybe a dozen people. But more often than not we had 20-40 people, with folks trickling in and out all-night long. There were no planned activities per se, other than showing up at Corks around 8 p.m. on Thursday nights. And on this Thursday night, a group of newcomers joined *us*.

The Rollergirls showed up after practice, around 10 p.m. Ivanna and Dish, Anne G., Lorena, Shawna, Char, Red, and another unidentified woman walked in within minutes of each other. They had found us through word of mouth, and through my friend Sharon – a regular FDCer, who had just joined the Sin City Rollergirls (SCRG). When Sharon entered about 15 minutes after her teammates arrived, I'd already struck up a conversation with Ivanna, the founder and captain of the newly forming derby team. She and co-captain Dish had moved to Las Vegas from Arizona and had been in town less than a month. Ivanna had founded the Arizona Roller Derby (AZRD) league, and she and Dish had come to Las Vegas to start Sin City Rollergirls. They would also eventually establish Sin City Skates – a skate shop just for derby girls that specialized in derby gear and equipment. Sin City Skates began in Ivanna's living room

as a quest to find and provide quality gear for her and other skaters in the league. The business has now grown into a 2,000 square foot store, located in San Diego, serving the national and international derby communities.

My friend Sharon joined us just as Dish was in the midst of telling me about plans of roller derby's world domination—a vision of leagues in every city across the globe, the growth of roller derby's revolutionary DIY model organization, plans to bid derby as an Olympic sport, and the evolution of rollergirls as a new type of female athlete. “Talk to her about doing derby,” Sharon tells Dish while pointing to me. Drink in one hand, cigarette in the other, Sharon with her slight southern accent was even more energetic and animated than usual. Since she joined the league, Sharon had been insisting that I should join, too. It's fun, she told me, and this is an amazing group of women. More specifically though, she thought I would “probably” make a good jammer—the person in roller derby who scores points by lapping opposing team members. At that time, though, I had no idea what a jammer was.

In that moment, I never thought that I would become part of women's roller derby, or that women's roller derby would become the topic of my research. I was intrigued, though, from the moment that the skaters walked through the door of Corks. They were an assorted group, consisting of women who were single, married, divorced, queer, straight, artists, punks, service workers, professionals, and students. They also ranged in age from early twenties to mid-forties. But collectively they were a group of pierced, tattooed, loud, strong, independent, often overtly sexual, opinionated women who were completely into their sport, with grand visions and long-term goals of creating and sustaining this latest incarnation of roller derby. Even then, the key founders of derby, like Dish and Ivanna, envisioned their sport growing to national and international levels of competition, being written about and/or discussed in the sports section of

the paper or on a sports network, and maybe even, someday, being up on the boards in the Sportsbooks of Las Vegas. Though slowly shifting, the institution of sport still largely persists as a cultural arena that maintains and naturalizes a western, hetero-normative standard of gender and gendered behaviors, and ultimately reinforces the gender binary. Derby's grand vision, it seemed, also included resisting this corporatized model of sport, and challenging what I have come to call the hetero-sexing and hetero-gendering of sport, sport space, and athletes.

A week after our first meeting at Corks I ran into Dish, Ivanna and a several other skaters of the newly forming SCRG again, this time at the local dive bar that would eventually become the home site of SCRG's after bout-parties. Following a near brawl in the mosh pit (too many bodies in a small space) Trish and I retreated to a quieter corner of the bar, where she tried her derby pitch once again. This time she appealed to the athlete and academic in me. For Trish, also a life-long athlete, one of the most important features of roller derby for her was what she referred to as the personality of roller derby. It was a new kind of sport, based on a different model of organization, and provided a space for a different kind of female athlete and athletic play. Derby was, she would tell me over and over again, breaking down existing barriers, particularly around gender, sexuality, and corporate rules and control of sport. Derby participants were building their sport from the ground up, making their own decisions about how to, and who gets to, play the sport. As she later told during an interview, "...[derby] is really driven by the fact that it's done by women, and *that* is different. And the women just completely run the gamut of every kind of experience, you know—economic, ethnic, religion, educational, everything. I mean you know there are, like, unemployed strippers, there are professionals, there are housewives, there are academics... We are changing the world. That's the beauty of this sport. There is space for everyone."

I was more than intrigued; I wanted to be part of this burgeoning DIY competitive, contact sport which seemed to be pushing boundaries around everything I knew about sports, gender, and being an athlete. Roller derby, it seemed, had the potential to be a site of cultural resistance, and maybe even a new type of social movement. Skaters were not necessarily using traditional protest tactics as we might recognize them, and they were not striving for a political, state-based change, or a reallocation of resources; it did, however, seem like they were seeking cultural change by challenging and resisting cultural codes. How do skaters build community and create collective identity? To what extent are they guided by a DIY ethic and a desire to resist corporatization of their organization? Moreover, how do they challenge and defy gender norms and stereotypes about women and femininity in sport? I wanted to know more.

That summer the Rollergirls consistently showed up at FDC, and I showed up at their fundraisers, socials, team practices, and eventually at roller derby “tryouts.” As it turns out I was drawn to derby for some of the same reasons as the others who wanted to join this four-wheeled phenomenon: The challenge and physicality of the sport, the athleticism involved, the camaraderie and community it created, and roller derby’s complete uniqueness from most other team sports and women’s sporting spaces. I found that for many skaters, derby was an important and a unique cultural space in which they could resist, parody, poke fun at and even reconfigure the trappings of femininity and specific roles in which many women felt pinned in by or stifled. Spaces of resistance like this are rare for women, and particularly in the highly patrolled social/cultural/political boundaries of sport.

My skating career was shorter-lived, as it was difficult for me, as a graduate student, to find the time I needed to be a productive member of the team; nor could I escape my own fears of having to finish out a semester with a broken arm, a torn ligament, a snapped collarbone, or

worse. (In roller derby, you will get hurt. It's the fifth commandment). My intrigue eventually became my dissertation topic. I quickly realized I was witnessing not only the nucleus of what seemed to be a unique organization, but also what appeared to be a space of cultural resistance. Roller derby was a sport, but was it also becoming its own form of social movement by redefining culture and lifestyle within that space?

Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1994) notes that Western culture positions sexuality within a context that punishes people through direct and indirect social and cultural constraints. Most women's sports, in particular, reflect this model. Presentation of body and performance of sexuality are two areas highly patrolled and controlled. Ice skating, gymnastics, diving, and tennis, for example, have historically been acceptable sports for women because they are aesthetically pleasing (uniforms and bodies adhere to characteristics ascribed to femininity), do not involve bodily contact with opponents, and control action to protect athletes from over exertion or injury (Eitzen 1989). Implicit in this list of characteristics is a strict control over the performance of the athlete and characterizations of athletes' sexuality, sexual practices and presentation. In short, there is an unspoken mandate for women athletes to align with accepted cultural images and tropes around gender, sexuality, femininity, and womanhood. Moreover, women's participation in the traditionally male sphere of competitive, contact sport raises questions specifically around issues of gender, sexuality, and femininity. Derby, I found, provides a place for women to embrace and engage performances that not only resist, but also subvert a wide range of cultural norms and values in relationship to womanhood and female sexuality, and the varying forms of oppression left in the wake.

The organization of derby, the overt way teams used performances of drag, hyperfemininity, and S&M imagery to destroy the traditional masculinist model and structure of

aggressive, competitive, consumerist contact sport, and the skyrocketing popularity of derby signaled something important about the forms of a contemporary challenge to gender and to the gender binary. Was this also part of what was meant by “world domination”?

In this dissertation, I conduct an ethnography of the development of the Sin City Rollergirls. My goal is to examine the challenges and strategies skaters deploy in resistance to the gender binary and its gender mandates and whether these strategies constitute an oppositional or political movement. What are the mechanisms women who participate in derby use to create derby-specific identities, and to interact with conventional definitions of sport, femininity, and gender while also subverting and redefining them? In what ways do individuals in the sport claim, or not claim, feminism to consciously challenge the gender binary? Importantly, how do skaters do derby as a strategy of cultural resistance? What types of political and cultural challenges do the women in roller derby pose to mainstream gender expectations and mainstream understandings of femininity and sexuality? Is roller derby a realm where mainstream expectations of gender, sexuality, and femininity are being transformed? How do they draw on femininity while resisting gender inequality in sport? How does this challenge, adopt and subvert femininity within predominantly female-generated and female dominated spaces?

How Far We’ve Come

What I was seeing in Las Vegas was part of a larger phenomenon. What began in 2003 as a grassroots effort by a handful of women to define and organize a women’s sport quickly became a national and international phenomenon. In just four years, from 2006 to 2010 Women’s Roller Derby expanded from approximately 50 leagues in the U.S. to 440 leagues (Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby Association). By 2015 that number had reached almost 2,000

leagues spanning 54 countries. The primary governing bodies of women's roller derby estimate that as of 2015 approximately 100,000 women worldwide are participating in the sport.

Back in 2005, when Trish the Dish and her partner, Ivanna S. Pankin, first came to Las Vegas, strong teams had been established in Austin, TX, Los Angeles, CA, and Tucson and Phoenix, AZ, New York City, Brooklyn, NY, Seattle, WA, and Raleigh, NC, with smaller teams quickly popping up in other urban areas across the U.S. Trish and Ivanna had helped found the Phoenix and Tucson teams, and had come to Las Vegas to bring the burgeoning roller derby revolution to our city of sin. And they tapped into the Feminist Drinking Club to mix, mingle, and recruit.

Roller Derby here in Las Vegas looks much different now than it did then, when its seeds were being planted in local spaces like the FDC, the Double Down Saloon, the Art Bar, local music festivals, feminist art shows, and First Fridays. At that time in Las Vegas, these were still alternative spaces, but becoming central to the landscape of the city's newly developing downtown scene and community. The physical spaces, and the groups that gathered within them, provided venues and platforms for artists, musicians, performers, tattoo artists and piercers, feminist 20-somethings, students, activists, young entrepreneurs, craft beer brewers, new culinary vendors (Food trucks!), and a growing youth scene whose members consumed this culture. This cultural and urban confluence was the backdrop of, and central to, the formation and growth of derby in Las Vegas. Community and its spaces within—large or small— is central maintaining the DIY backbone and ethos of derby, in Las Vegas and in cities and towns across the globe. Derby leagues are anchored in, and fiercely dedicated to their communities.

After the 2009 season, team founders Ivanna and Trish left SCRG's original team, the Neanderdolls, and now play in San Diego. In their off season, they run derby boot camps in the

U.S., and now throughout Europe to help newly emerging teams abroad establish themselves and integrate into the WFTDA. The original 18-member Neanderdolls team has grown to fifty-five members and has reorganized and regrouped into a league of four home teams and one traveling team. The league has gone from holding its bouts outdoors in a local park, to an abandoned warehouse sized roller hockey rink in a rundown strip mall on the edge of downtown, to their own dedicated space – a grand ballroom—in one of the established hotel and casinos just off the Las Vegas Strip. While the league’s fundraisers and social events remain in local, independently owned and operated venues and community-based scenes, they have also plugged into larger, corporate owned glamorized public spaces like various club venues inside of the Palms Casino, The Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, the now defunct Riviera, and one of more popular locals’ casino, called South Point. This latest incarnation of women’s roller derby (in Las Vegas and elsewhere) is certainly more polished and shinier than it was in its inaugural year, but there is still a strong DIY ethos and feminist heartbeat at its core. Moreover, the resurgence of women’s roller derby has not subsided, but emerged as a 21st century manifestation of its own sort of gender movement, producing a female dominated subcultural space where norms around identity, gender, sexuality, femininity and what it means to be a woman athlete are being constructed, deconstructed, challenged, and in many cases, transformed.

History of Roller Derby: The First Whistle

Roller Derby has challenged boundaries around “serious” athleticism and “entertainment” since its inception. Roller Derby is a contact sport that originated in the US in 1935, as a type of sports entertainment based on pairs of skaters making laps around an oval

track. At its inception during the era of Great Depression roller derby was more of an endurance sport than a competitive sport, starting off as a coed marathon roller race where teams—one man and one woman per team—took turns skating 57,000 laps, “the equivalent of a 4,000-mile cross-country race” (Roller Derby Preservation). Once the sport’s founders realized that audiences went crazy when skaters collided while passing each other on the track, the roller derby that became so familiar during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, was born. Roller derby became an instant hit that sold out stadiums across the U.S. In the 1950s and 60s roller derby was so popular in the U.S. that all major TV networks aired derby matches weekly, giving rise to the advent/development of, and sole focus on, women’s leagues. However—thanks in part to over-exposure—spectacle came to be emphasized over sport; by the end of the ’60s, a Roller Games league showcased choreographed backflips, staged brawls between skaters, and even pies in the face. Finally, by the ’80s, roller derby’s popularity was on the wane.

Contemporary roller derby, however, is fast paced, is not staged, and has an athletic edge. While today’s leagues use the traditional four-wheeled skates seen in earlier derby and the tactics of the game are similar to leagues of the past, most derby bouts are now played on a flat track rather than a banked track. The flat track allows for the sport to be played in a wide variety of locations and venues, such as local parks, community centers, small arenas, or even parking lots, making it easier than finding a location to construct a banked track. Overall, the sport involves two teams of five skaters, who skate counter-clockwise on a small, narrow track.

Each team has one jammer and four blockers. It is the job of the jammer to outskate the oppositional blockers and break ahead of the pack and score points by doing laps. There is frequent, sometimes violent, physical contact between the players. Body blocking and elbowing

are allowed in most leagues, but skaters cannot intentionally trip or punch other players. Players who do, or who block illegally, fight, or behave in an unsporting manner receive penalties.

The current derby leagues also differ from their historical counterparts in that contemporary roller derby is all-female, self-organized, formed with a DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic, is international in scope, is unpaid and operating on an amateur circuit. Unlike the earlier co-ed leagues that were often sponsored, the women who play at present are independent, and often pay to play. They buy their own gear and health insurance, and often cover their own travel expenses. The leagues are not part of larger corporate owned sponsorship, nor are they coach or school owned and operated. They gather their own sponsors, raise their own funds, do their own publicity, recruiting of players, and organize their own bouts, scrimmages, practices, fundraisers, promotional events, and half-time entertainment.

Within the current roller derby renaissance today's players are seriously committed to the athleticism, strategy, and formal characteristics of play within the sport, so much so that in 2004 members of multiple leagues from across the U.S. founded the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). The WFTDA was developed specifically to foster and promote the sport of roller derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sports-womanship, and goodwill amongst league members. The WFTDA's governing philosophy—and second sentence on their mission statement—is “by the skaters, for the skaters.” Women, usually skaters on the team, are the primary owners and managers of the leagues in the association. The WFTDA also sets the standards for rules, regulations, seasons, and safety, dictating the guidelines for national and international competitions and leagues.

Why Study Roller Derby?

Contemporary roller derby is both a grassroots amateur sport and a cultural performance that simultaneously entertains a diverse array of fans at the same time as posing a significant challenge to definitions of sport, gender and sexuality. By cultural performance I mean the ways that skaters consciously embrace the tongue-in-cheek theatrics as part of their events, and the ways in which irony, parody, and camp are central to the theatrics. For example, leagues boast teams with names like Queens of D’Nile, the Sockit Wenches, the Tommy Gun Terrors, and the Unholy Rollers. Additionally, each skater claims a unique “skate” name and often develops an on-track persona and alter-ego to match their names. Skater names usually play on words that create a double entendre with ironic, faux-violent or sexual puns, and allusions to pop culture, such as: Ivana S. Pankin, Anne Gre Feminist, Bette Noir, Shawna th’ Dead, Skid’n Nancy, Sandra Day O’Clobber .

The roller derby bouts (matches) also carry their own ironic, sardonic names. The Sin City Rollergirls hold regular league fundraisers called Down and Derby; large regional championships carry titles such as First Blood. New York’s Gotham Girls hold an annual weekend tournament called Hot Summer Fights, and upcoming regional championships for northern and eastern regions are titled Brawl of America and Wicked Wheels of the East, respectively.

Team uniforms typically symbolize a mix of sport, punk rock, burlesque, or rockabilly fashion, and tattoos and piercings. Colorfully tattooed women, many with skin piercings, sport league uniforms that consist of fishnet stockings, knee high striped socks, and either hot pants or skirts short enough to show off their underwear. Players often resemble punk rockers and classic pin-up girls more than mainstream images of female athletes. The degree of camp and sexuality varies from team to team. However, when taken as a whole, the totality of player names, bout

titles, campy performances, and suggestive attire, rollergirls appear to simultaneously embrace and challenge traditional images associated with femininity, particularly the presentation of female athletes and athletic events. Rollergirls combine physical strength, aggression, and bodily contact with hyper-feminine attire. By doing so they simultaneously blur and push the boundaries of contemporary sport, sexuality, and notions of gender, bucking the cultural constraints often bestowed upon female athletes and women in general. Looking at these strategies and tactics that skaters use can significantly add to the literature on how oppositional movements become political.

The WFTDA's rapid and continued growth suggests that there is something very attractive about roller derby culture. As I found, part of the attraction is rooted in the mix of gender, sexuality, and identity play in derby, uniquely set in a sporting context. Players and spectators see themselves as consciously carving out a cultural space where they challenge traditional gender roles, explore, sexuality, and resist a range of other social constraints. Recent work on the intersection of gender and sexuality, along with the steady growth of third wave feminist theorizing, particularly by Heywood, Dworkin, and Drake (Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Heywood 1998; Heywood and Drake 1997) reveals that current expressions and understandings of gender and sexuality are infused and shaped by cultural contradictions. Third wave feminist theorizing highlights how actors may use contradictions to expose socially constructed categories of gender, femininity, and sexuality. By simultaneously embracing feminism and the feminine roller derby players and fans illuminate and reshape gender meanings and notions of femininity.

No one predicted roller derby's twenty-first century vigorous resurgence, especially as a women's-only sport. The WFTDA has transformed roller derby into a grassroots-organized,

women's-only, competitive contact sport that blends athleticism, aggression, and sexuality – a combination that is clearly compelling to many. The present-day incarnation of women's roller derby draws thousands of participants and spectators worldwide. Roller derby clearly provides a unique cultural space and offers a unique set of social experiences for its participants. So how do participants explain their involvement? Is roller derby a realm where gender, sexuality, femininity and identity are being consciously challenged? If so, what does that mean for how women challenge conceptions of gender, constructing and deconstructing ideas of femininity, formation of identity, and for understandings of cultural change? While previous literature has focused on the making and shaping of women's identity in music subcultures dominated by men (Leblanc 1999; Schippers 2002) as well as those representations within popular-culture (Usher; Holland 2004) there is little research that explores how women challenge, adopt and subvert femininity within predominantly female-generated and female dominated spaces, particularly within in sport. In this research, I highlight the ways in which women do this, and more specifically, how femininity is constructed, deconstructed, and queered in spaces produced by women, for women.

How rollergirls define, construct, and practice alternative forms of femininity, rather than reify normative feminine ideals is an important component of both roller derby culture and my study. I am especially interested in examining how skaters modify and subvert the western, heteronormative model of womanhood, and counter the hegemonic femininity that is the standard representational model for female athletes in Westernized organized sports. On this level, women's roller derby reflects aspects of recent shifts in the rethinking of what contemporary movements, activism and resistance might look like. In fact, the sport of roller derby reflects central issues of new social movement theory (NSM) – the role of identity in

modern collective action, and the role of collective identity in less formally structured movements (Haenfler 2004; Melucci 1989, 1996). According to Melucci (1996), NSMs challenge dominant prevailing cultural codes, often through expressions of identity. In doing so they simultaneously evoke questions about, and highlight how, certain spaces and cultural expressions hold various forms of power.

To explore these central conceptual issues, I draw from recent theorizing on femininity, gender and sport, gender and sexuality, identity, and social movement theory. Specifically, I engage with Mary Bernstein's concept of identity deployment, Mimi Schipper's (2002, 2007) work on alternative femininities, Michael Messner's (2002) work on gender and sport, and Steven Buechler (2000) and Alberto Melucci's (1996) theorizing about identity and cultural change in new social movements. Taken together, this literature, in addition to third-wave feminist theorizing, provide the broad conceptual foundations for the ways that roller derby sets the stage for new ways of looking at how femininities, and more broadly gender, can be resisted, performed, dismantled, or re-constructed, forcing changes in how we gaze at the terrain of sport, gender, the body, and even sexualities.

Research Questions

In this dissertation, I ask how and whether women's roller derby is a present-day form of social and political resistance to normative gender identities and feminine sexuality. I examine the ways in which derby participants construct, accomplish, and display varying types of femininities, construct and manage their identities, and how they frame this as a challenge to the entrenched gendered boundaries in and out of sport. My research finds, as I will demonstrate, that, these strategies used by the skaters consciously challenge masculinity's dominance of

physically violent sport, but they also position roller derby as a site to further develop of a wide range of meanings, identities, and relationships around issues of gender and sexuality. Roller derby allows possibilities for women to transgress social and cultural norms around gender, sexuality, and the presentation and use of one's body.

In the next chapter, I highlight the conceptual framework guiding my analysis, and review the literature central to roller derby and this mix of sport, gender, sexuality, identity, and resistance that I see at play within the sport. The site of roller derby is a rich space to explore these intersections and the social and cultural transformations in contemporary understandings and redefinitions of gender and sexuality. These themes are threaded throughout the body of literature that has developed around contemporary roller derby, as well as in the bodies of research in the areas of gender, sport, and resistance.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE – RESEARCH ON GENDER, SPORT & CULTURAL RESISTANCE

I have identified three bodies of work that can help us better understand how skaters have used roller derby's gender, sexuality, and identity play, to resist gender rules in this sporting context. First, I review the recent body of research that has grown around the resurgence of women's roller derby. The diverse array of literature around derby is a testament to the richness of the sport. A focus on how gender is contested, identity constructed, and sport created weave through much of the research. These areas are crucial to understanding the space of roller derby. I add to this body of work by highlighting how participants in roller derby understand themselves in these contexts, by focusing on whether or not skaters understand themselves as subversive, or even as political. While there is research that explores gendered resistance and the making and shaping of women's identity in male-dominated spaces and subcultures, there is little research that explores how women simultaneously challenge and adopt femininity and other identities as a form of resistance, within a predominantly female generated and female dominated space, particularly within sport.

Next, I highlight three areas of literature central to framing my research. I begin with the literature about femininity, and gender and sexuality, focusing on meanings, understandings, and reconfigurations of gender and sexuality in contemporary culture. I focus on the ways in which femininity has been theorized, on the concept of performativity, and on third wave theorizing about gender, sexuality, and resistance. These perspectives offer useful concepts for strategies and tactics skaters use to challenge conventional notions of femininity.

Second, I draw from literature that address aspects of the mix of sport, gender, sexuality, identity, and resistance that I see at play within derby. In the U.S., sports reflect—overtly and

subtly—our social and political worlds, often mirroring back to us dominant culture’s identities and ideas of and about gender, sexuality, race, and class. The canon of literature on sociology of sport untangles these terrains by examining the intersections of gender, sexuality, sport, the policing of gender and sexuality within sport, and sport as a site of resistance. More recent studies of sport have also begun to explore the development, growth, and implications of “alternative sports,” such as snowboarding, free-style skiing, skateboarding, and rock climbing. These studies have primarily focused on sport as subculture, on gendered media images, or the development of masculinity. When combined, both these facets of the sport literature provide background and a point of entry for my research.

Along the same lines, useful concepts of identity formation, resistance, and cultural change can be culled from new social movement literature. A new social movement framework helps link ideas of third wave feminism, resistance, power, and cultural challenge within the male-dominated institution of sport and provides a framework to explore whether or not roller derby is a political cultural challenge to prevailing normative ideals about sex, gender and sport.

Roller Derby Research: Past and Present

When I first became interested in contemporary roller derby— first as a participant and then as a researcher—scholarly research on any roller derby was minimal, and indeed, in its early stage of development. Until 2010, literature on derby focused on the historical development of the sport (Michelson 1971; DeFord 1971), it’s particularly kitschy, spectacle, and staged aspects (Coppage 1999), and the intersections of violence and aggression within the sport and working class spectators (Wilson 2002). Mabe (2007) and Joulwan (2007) add to the literature and historical overview of derby by detailing roller derby in its various incarnations, from roller

derby's time as a popular depression era sport, to its Roller Jam days, to the current revival. Storms (2008) similarly describes the history of the sport, and also details the ways that roller derby, from its inception, is positioned outside of dominant gender norms for women in sport via athleticism on a "professional" sports circuit. What sets these latter three works apart from their predecessors is that, while still historical in their overviews, they are written by skaters who are part of the latest derby revival, providing first-hand accounts of developing leagues, clearing way for a dearth of research to follow.

Contemporary roller derby has been examined in a variety of ways. There are studies that explore roller derby and media (Adele and Simone 2012; Kearney 2011), roller derby and femininity (Peluso 2010; Finley 2010; Carlson 2010; Storm 2008), the relationship between roller derby and the concept of seriousness (Breeze 2010), the relationship between sport and music (Pavlidis), and the commodification of roller derby (Whitlock 2012). Within this literature, many authors highlight derby participants' appearances (uniforms, tattoos, hair), femininity, and elements of performativity that are common in a many of the leagues. Peluso (2011), Carlson (2010), and Finley (2010) broadly contextualize roller derby as a space for women to subvert traditional gender norms by emphasizing and satirizing those norms. Finley (2010) applies Schipper's (2007) concept of pariah femininities, arguing that skaters both embrace and subvert archetype pariah femininities like that of bitch, slut, or bad ass. Finley suggests that success in derby partly relies on the skaters' abilities to embrace these "pariah femininities."

Based on these observations and my own experiences as a participant in the sport, I agree with these findings. Finley, however, goes on to discuss how this serves to reinforce gender hierarchies rather than open new space. She points to the ways many skaters use imagery like

skulls and crossbones to construct their images and convolute femininity, yet will adorn that same skull and crossbones with a bow in order to downplay masculinity and feminize the tough-looking image. She concludes that while skaters may create a different type of femininity in this context, ultimately gender is preserved, and certain gender stereotypes are reinforced. Carlson (2010) similarly examines the ways skaters engage with femininity, specifically with the construction of an emphasized femininity. In her examination of skate names, for example, she notes that while many skate names may have aggressive overtones, many are still feminine in nature. She suggests that while this practice exposes contradictions within femininity, it still does not challenge the gendered boundaries or hierarchies around sport and athletics. Ultimately, Finley (2010) and Carlson (2010) conclude that roller derby presents a challenge to gender, but because the challenges to gender, and concurrently femininity continue to happen in a more broadly feminized realm, roller derby is not an empowering arena of or for change.

Most skaters I interviewed, however, experience the sport of roller derby as empowering. The DIY aspect of roller derby, for skaters, plays a crucial role in this; roller derby is a sport for women, formed by women. Equally as critical are the reclaiming, re-valuing, and embracing of a spectrum of femininities, gender identities and orientations, the celebration of sexuality, and a focus on variety of gender specific issues concerning career, relationships, sexuality, parenting, the body, violence, beauty norms, and health—all aspects, traits, and characteristics frequently devalued or silenced by and within masculine-dominated sports and culture.

It is important to note that while leagues are all part of roller derby as a sport, they are not all the same. What works with one group of leagues may not work for another group of leagues. It is, however, safe to say that the construction of identity and the contestation of gender, femininity, and sport are now staple parts of roller derby and the growing canon of derby

research. That research, however, stops short of investigating whether or not skaters see and understand themselves as subversive, resistant, or even as political. My aim is to fill this gap in the literature. Do skaters within roller derby use similar strategies that we see being used in other cultural movements? In other words, how do the skaters understand their actions—the construction and negotiation of femininity, of sexuality, of pushing and exposing boundaries around gender and the gendered boundaries of sport and physicality? Analyzing how skaters construct their sporting identities and the ways they negotiate and create “alternative” femininities reveals how transformations of embodied identity practices can link to new forms of political participation, engagement and cultural change, and helps refine sociological knowledge and research in the areas of identity formation and socio-cultural resistance.

Femininities: A New Frontier

In her book, *Pretty in Punk* (1999), Lauraine LeBlanc explores the world of girls’ gender nonconformity and resistance of normative, prescribed ideals of femininity in the predominantly male subculture of punk. She notes that the “game” of femininity “conceptualizes gender as a set of norms and practices, the rules for the ‘game’ and the actions that girls and women perform to conform to them” (LeBlanc 1999:139). Altering those rules, she concludes, requires drastic overhaul of the ways we understand, perceive, and construct gender, and by extension, femininity.

As theories of gender have become a key part of the sociological canon, numerous articles and books have been written on the subject of masculinities. There has been, though, relatively little written in the same manner about femininities. Even as discussions of femininities become more and more integrated into sociological research (Schippers 2002, 2007)

a reliable canon of work on *femininities* has yet to solidly emerge. For the most part femininity is still discussed as a static, monolithic concept. There have been many analyses and critiques about the ways in which expectations around femininity, women's bodies, and behaviors are shaped in relation to the desires and needs of men, as well as the binary system(s) of gender and sex. More recently, though, there has been a growing body of feminist literature and analyses—third wave, queer, and poststructuralist theorizing—that explores how femininity might be done differently. Moreover, this growing body of research examines the feminine, and femininity, as an identity and a site of resistance, asking what it means to perform, subvert, queer, and/or reclaim the feminine. This growing body of literature is most relevant for examining the issues of gender and femininity and specifically, how femininity is constructed and deployed in flat-track roller derby.

By examining how skaters understand and perform alternative femininities within derby I address the questions of how skaters “do gender,” and more specifically, what various femininities are emerging from derby and where do they fit in with larger understandings of a hegemonic femininity? Within this context, are conventional ideals of femininity and women's bodies subverted, and alternative femininities accomplished within woman-established and woman-dominated spaces? The skaters in derby perform gender on a personal level and on a public level, through activity and ritual on and off the track.

R.W. Connell (1987) posits that women who conform to culturally expected (and often mandated) subordination of women, and whose behaviors are anchored in complying with men's desires exemplify “emphasized femininity.” I argue that rollergirls grapple with, but do resist, “emphasized femininity” and instead tactically perform alternative “femininities” (Schippers 2002, 2007). As Schippers (2007) notes, this is achieved by displaying types of femininities that push the boundaries around typically feminine traits, such as being promiscuous, being

aggressive (including sexually aggressive), butch, commoditizing sex or sexuality, or by taking on recognizable characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, such as physical strength, aggression, violence, or desire for the feminine “object.” The women involved in derby tread these lines and do indeed challenge this hierarchical and seemingly naturalized dichotomy between masculinity and femininity.

Doing Gender

Ethnomethodologists Don West and Candace Zimmerman (2002) offer that gender, rather than being a static biological characteristic, is an act of *doing*, suggesting that gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment... A situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (4). For West and Zimmerman gender is something that is accomplished through ongoing social interactions that people have with one another. Being a “man” or a “woman” (socially) is not a natural, inevitable result of one’s biology, but a result of one’s social interactions. In other words, gender is not an innate attribute, but one that is constantly being reshaped and reproduced through social action and interaction—an interactional accomplishment at which people are constantly working.

Interestingly, the work of West and Zimmerman also reveals how this ongoing, interactional depiction of gender also creates and legitimizes a binary sex-gender system that is anchored in the idea of biological-based differences between males and females—that social and hierarchical arrangements and divisions around gender are based on the category of sex seeming normal and natural. In this sense, “doing gender means creating differences between boys and girls, men and women, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological” (West and Zimmerman 2002:13). At the same time, “to ‘do’ gender is not always to live up to normative

concepts of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment” (West and Zimmerman 2002:13). In essence, one can still be a man without being masculine, or a woman without being feminine—but there are, of course risks associated.

While West and Zimmerman are speaking of what is at stake for individuals who do gender differently, an important question to consider is what might be at risk when groups do gender “differently,” or more specifically, do gender in ways that disrupt the status quo? West and Zimmerman (2002) remind us: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce and render legitimate the institutional arrangements based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals—not the institutional arrangements—may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)” (22). What if, however, subcultures, collectives, scenes, or even social movements began calling out these cultural and institutional arrangements and performed gender *differently* at interactional and individual levels? Social change, as West and Zimmerman note, “must be pursued at both the institutional and cultural level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender” (22). I believe that participants in women’s roller derby are doing gender differently and also creating change in individual, institutional, and cultural realms. Recalling the words of LeBlanc (1999), skaters may very well be changing the rules of the “game.” West and Zimmerman (1987) claim that when women engage in behavior that is usually associated with men, they are often under strong social and cultural pressure to prove that they are still “essentially” feminine, despite actions and appearances otherwise. In derby, the skaters use differing femininities to mock and parody conventional feminine notions. It is possible that the type(s) of feminization and performances of femininity seen in roller derby draw not from an “emphasized femininity” as Connell (1987) might suggest, but rather as ways of challenging, even subverting, gender hegemony.

Gender, Identity, and Performativity

Over the past decade postmodern and Queer theory sociologists have focused on the ways in which gender 1) intersects with realms of personal life and the public social world; 2) is intertwined with sexualities, calling into question the process and stability of gender categorization; and 3) intersects with broader areas like identity, globalization, and social movements. Postmodern and Queer theory highlight processes of deconstruction and make visible the gender and sexual performances in what may otherwise be considered normal and natural. Both perspectives focus on the fluidity of gender and sexual boundaries, and on subverting binary genders and sexual categories. Importantly, both have contributed to the concept of performativity – broadly, the notion that gender does not exist without gender display.

Performativity is a central concept that I use in exploring how skaters construct, accomplish, and display varying types of femininities, and ultimately, is central to strategies skaters use to challenge and resist the entrenched gendered boundaries in and out of sport. Judith Butler (1990) notes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Butler (1990) thus argues that gender is established in and performatively produced through ongoing routine activities like writing, speaking, and reciting. In short, Butler argues that the concept of gender is “performed” through discourse and must “be understood as not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1990:2). Butler suggests that by dismantling essentialist constructions of “woman” gender may be seen as a social practice, but without a “natural” core.

Butler's (1990) work concerning gender as a "performance" or as a relational act is pertinent to my research on derby. According to Butler, masculinity and femininity are constructed as a binary. They are categories contingent upon each other but are also arranged in a hierarchy where masculinity holds more value than femininity. Accordingly, "the category of woman achieves stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990:5). In this "matrix," femininity is positioned as opposite to masculinity. The association between the two is thus naturalized, and ultimately heteronormative. "Gender performances, for Butler, are always shaped by and seen in relation to an understanding of (hetero)sexuality" (Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002:202). Butler's work, here, highlights that, whether spoken or performed, performances of gender are intimately tied to performances of not just sexuality, but specifically heterosexuality. This aspect of Butler's research is particularly relevant to how skaters in roller derby have potential to "queer" various gendered performances and rituals by "troubling" gender as well as engaging or producing subversive forms of cultural (like the rituals of derby wives and derby weddings).

Alternative Femininities

Schippers (2007) demonstrates, that "incorrect" performance of femininity is often conscious, purposeful. In this sense, this is not a failure to do gender correctly, but instead, a purposeful "accomplishment" of an alternative femininity. Based on this notion the meaning of femininity can be manipulated, subverted, or queered, thus moving markers and expanding the category. So, women who have been excluded or relegated to the margins of femininity because of the very narrow and strict markers and/or definitions—queer women, fat women, aging women, sporting women, butch women—are creating for themselves, within the realm of derby

in particular, alternatives to the hegemonic version of femininity. The creations and performances of different (alternative) types of femininities within derby are one of the key ways it directly confronts perceptions of women's sports and female athletes. By investigating how gender, and by turn sexuality, are performed and presented differently in derby than in other sporting spaces, we see how roller derby can become a new and important site of resistance. Roller derby becomes a sanctioned space in which to enact performances that resist and subvert cultural norms around femininity, and more broadly, culturally mandated definitions of womanhood.

Modern Understandings of Sport

The institution of sport is a major component of U.S. culture. It is a cultural institution that is quite deeply and profoundly woven into the economic, political, and cultural fabric of society (Eitzen and Sage 2009). Sport has traditionally been one of the most gender specific spaces in popular culture—an outcome of being predominantly organized and played by men. As Whannel (1993) points out, contemporary sport had its formative moments during the second half of the 19th century, and to this day most of the governing bodies in sports are still marked by these early roots in patriarchal structures and attitudes. However, increased growth in women's sports over the past three decades has challenged these attitudes and established structures in many sports. As such, this mix of sport and culture becomes the inevitable site of gendered struggle and resistance.

Because sport constitutes such a broad swath of explanations and images, I will first untangle the often complex definition of what actually constitutes “sport.” I also provide an examination of the established, conventional boundaries of sport. More specifically, I focus on

how these boundaries develop, maintain gender norms and binaries, reinforce certain gender hierarchies, and the ways in which these norms and hierarchies have become contested within sport.

Sport itself reflects the society in which it is situated. And while sports have historically been a part of every culture—each culture with its own definitions of sport—there are common characteristics across cultures. For example, in that most sports are physical contests pursued for the goal and challenges they entail. According to sport historian Allen Guttman (1978), the most useful definition of sport then, is one that clarifies a sport’s relationship to the concepts of play, games, and contests. Guttman (1978) describes play as “purposeless activity, for its own sake, the opposite of work” (69). He notes that “humans work because they have to; they play because they want to” (Guttman 1978:69). In other words, “play,” when compared to work, has a different set of goals. Play, for one thing, is voluntary. Given this understanding of play, reluctant children that are persuaded by family, peers, or other important adults to participate in sports, are not necessarily engaged in sport. Neither are professional athletes who are play because of the money. Guttman’s definition nonetheless helps define what constitutes “play.”

According to Guttman (1978) there are two principle types of play. The first type, mentioned above, is spontaneous and unconstrained. These are actions that are not premeditated and happen relatively free from constraint. The second type of play is regulated, where rules are in place to determine which actions are legitimate and which are not (Gutmann 1978). These rules transform spontaneous play into “games,” which then become rule-bound or regulated play. Guttman (1978) offers the examples of leapfrog, chess, “playing house” and basketball as examples of games, some with simple rules and others governed by more complex regulations (74). He notes that as games, chess and basketball differ from leapfrog and playing house, in that

the first two are competitive and the second two are not (Guttman 1978). There can be winners and losers in basketball or chess, but not in playing leapfrog or in playing house. Basketball and chess are thus contests.

Contests are the third necessary component in Guttman's attempt to define sport. Contests are also divided into two types: Those that require at least some minimal physical skill and those that do not. Most contests require some amount of intellectual skill and effort, but not all require some form of physicality. Think shuffleboard and board games. Most sports that ignite a passionate following and allegiances from their fans have required some type of physical prowess. Sports, then are physical contests played for their own sake. A sport and its athletes require, at the very least, a modicum of physical skill for winning a competition. As Guttman surmises, "The physical component is what distinguishes some contests as sports. . . . The animal joy of human movement and the opportunity to test one's physical skills against another person's are certainly among any sport's intrinsic pleasures" (68).

Within these rubrics and descriptions, flat track roller derby is indeed a sport. Roller Derby is a form of organized play. It is a competitive game and a physical contest with rules and regulations, played for its own sake. Derby participants have a physical prowess. Skaters demonstrate strength, speed, stamina, endurance, coordination, balance, and dexterity. Competition takes place between two teams and physical skill is required for winning the competition.

Sport as a Masculine Space

The rapid expansion of organized sport in the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century is noted by many sport sociologists and sport historians as a substantial point of cultural

change that cemented contemporary sport as a bastion of masculinity (Messner 2007). More specifically, scholars point to the changes in the division of labor between men and women directly resulting from the expansion of industrial capitalism—structural changes that ultimately created a new basis for male privilege (Hartmann 1976; Zaretsky 1973). At the same time, women’s growing involvement in some social spheres like work and school—those opportunities also and effect of expanding industrial capitalism—created a crisis of masculinity (Messner 2007). Consequently, men sought out space in new social realms. Organized sport thus became an important space in which men could claim, assert, and validate their masculinity (Dubbert 1979).

The hegemonic masculinity that the realm of sport is built upon and embodies is about men’s domination in ways that oppress and omit women (Connell 1987; Miller 2001). Beyond the obvious sexism, this notion encompasses subtle efforts of domination in sport, like the exclusion of women from sports teams, and sport spaces in general. This fits with sports ideology where characteristics like athleticism, agility, competition aggression, and bodily force are linked to masculinity (hetero masculinity). The sport of roller derby is, and has been, antithetical to this notion. Derby is, in effect, a realm where women can assert and validate femininity, but in the context of strength, athleticism and competition. Popular media has often emphasized women as females first, athletes second. Skaters simultaneously celebrate being skilled athletes and women. They emphasize the hallmarks of femininity to expose the constructedness around cultural notions of women as passive, delicate, weak.

Eitzen and Sage (2009) argue that in Western society women and girls are, through social and cultural controls, discouraged from experiences of achievement and success, and development of physical skills is underemphasized (316). These attitudes have been especially

present in the institution of sport. There are three reasons according to Sage (1970): First, women's cultural tasks were situated in the domestic realm, in a framework of child rearing and homemaking, leaving little time for participation in sport. Second, there was a deeply held belief that sports were unhealthy for women, potentially damaging reproductive capabilities due to vigorous activity. And third, social norms and expectations linked to understandings of sex roles (e.g. masculine or feminine roles and behaviors) discouraged women from physical activity (288). These cultural assumptions label women and construct femininity as passive, submissive, nurturing, and weak, rather than as competitive, aggressive, physical, and strong—traits commonly used to construct masculinity. These characteristics and accompanying beliefs are then reinforced through socialization at home, at work, at school, with peers, and especially in the media. Despite women having made enormous progress in gaining exposure there continues to be, in almost all forms of media—television, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, and the internet — a significant gap in the coverage of men's and women's sports, including the ways in which men's and women's sports are covered. These cultural forces perpetuate stereotyping.

Even with greater gender inclusion over the last decade, the landmark implementation of Title IX, the expansion of women's professional sports, greater media attention to women's athletics, and greater participation, the institution of sport remains marked as masculine domain. Michael Messner (2002) notes that sport has been “one of the less contested, core institutions in which heterosexual men's embodied power was enabled and celebrated in ways that supported and naturalized patriarchal beliefs in male superiority and female fragility and dependence” (xx). Even with the growing prevalence of female athletes and the incredible development of women's sports, core images and beliefs about masculinity and femininity, about men and women, remain in varying degrees embedded within the realm of sport and continue to shape understandings and

conceptualizations of what is and who is a male athlete or a female athlete and the proper roles which accompany each. More broadly, these ideas, accompanying images, and parameters strongly dictate our social and cultural norms of masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, and body and beauty. In short, sport mirrors our culture.

Scholars of sport and gender have thus focused on the institution of sport as an important arena for examining the production, reproduction and, sometimes, the contestation of gender, sexuality, masculinity, femininity. Through sport, men have been constructed as active, aggressive, competitive, strong, challenging, forceful, courageous, and of course, heterosexual. Sport delivers a strong message about what manhood *should* be and by extension what femaleness should not be (Messner 2002). Sport has thus been shaped, perceived, and maintained as one of the most male dominated institutions. Even with the strides made by women, sport remains, at its core, a site predominantly organized by and for men, where masculinity is assumed not only to be heterosexual but also intertwined with socially acceptable and legitimated forms of aggression and power (Griffin 1998; McKay, Messner and Sabo 2000; Messner 1992, 2002; Theberge 1997; Trujillo 1991).

For women, many sports are cultural arenas that are as much about normative femininity, heterosexuality, and maternity as they are about play, competition, and athleticism. Women who play sport must still perform sports according to the characteristics of masculine play, adhering to many of the same values, notions and traits. Yet, even when demonstrating these values, women's sports are subordinated to men's sports; they are often considered less competitive, less exciting, and less socially-acceptable. Female athletes are simultaneously compelled to exhibit traits that reinforce specific Western standards of femininity, and less overtly, heterosexuality. Within these standards, being feminine has to do with sexual morality and attractiveness, as well

as “lady-like behavior” (Clasen 2001). Promoting hegemonic standards of beauty and behavior offset the typically masculine characteristics associated with sport. In other words, being feminine is contradictory to being athletic. Consequently, many female athletes still experience challenges, both on and off the fields and courts, that include extra scrutiny of their abilities and their worthiness to play sports as well as questions about their femininity and sexual orientation (McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple 2005).

Clearly, sport is an arena where feminist questions can emerge (though it has not always been considered as such). While not all athletes necessarily consider themselves feminists, and many feminists would not consider themselves athletes, female athletes are giving feminism a platform. Sport, through a feminist lens helps highlight questions and topics such as “equal access to institutions, self-esteem for all women and girls, and an expanded possibility and fluidity within gender roles that embraces difference” (Heywood and Dworkin 2003:51). The intersection of athletics and feminism is important and necessary. The same issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exist in sport, and inform what happens in sport, though often in much subtler forms. For women, that means navigating these sets of issues along with gender specific issues, like access, differential resources, devaluing the abilities of girls and women in comparison with men, sexual harassment, and having one’s sexual orientation called into question if one gets too strong or is perceived as too athletic (Heywood and Drake 2003).

Sport as a Space of Resistance

Sport, like any social practice, can be rethought and reconstructed, and thus the same holds true for sport as a gendered space – the constructions of masculinity and femininity. The research that deals with femininity (and masculinity) in sport thus focuses on the many

contradictions that surround women's increased participation in sports. Several studies focus on the ways in which both men and women experience pressure to adhere to or support appearances of "hegemonic masculinity (Aitchson 2007; Messner 2002; Griffin 1998; Connell 1987), which construct and present men as being stoic, physically strong, buff, with a "win-at-all-costs" ethic, and that women appear uninterested in sports. If women participate in athletics, however, they must "emphasize" femininity (Connell 1987) through having long hair, wearing makeup, and wearing soft, feminine style clothing. A significant way that these constructions of masculinity and femininity are held in place, according to Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) is through televised sports commentary, which reinforces ideas about gender norms and hierarchies by positioning female athletes and women's sports as "other." Female athletes' accomplishments and activities are presented less overtly and prominently than men's accomplishments. Messner et al (1993) argue that these dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity often dictate unequal norms for athletes' behavior and appearances.

That said, sport has also provided sanctioned spaces for women to challenge conceptions of gender. For example, Broad (2001, 2008), suggests that women's participation in sport represents a type of resistance that can be understood as a queer resistance, albeit also gendered. In her ethnographic study of women's rugby in the U.S. in the early 1990s, Broad (2001) found that participants adopt a queer "unapologetic" by transgressing gender norms, destabilizing the categories of heterosexual and homosexual, and through direct, 'in your face' confrontations of stigma (182). Shea (2001), in her study of women body builders, notes how participating in sports both blurs and highlights the lines between femininity and masculinity. Body building requires female athletes to simultaneously play the role of muscular athlete and feminine woman. McGinnis, McQuillan & Chapple (2005) describe somewhat similar tensions in, of all sports,

golf, noting that women face barriers and constraints in the male-dominated game. Golf does not innately provide physical advantages to men or women, yet men have significantly higher participation rates in this sport. In particular, driving distance and speed of the game are used to frame women as less accomplished golfers, and as mark who deserves to be on the course and who does not. McGinnis et al (2005) found that women golfers use several strategies to overcome the sexism they experience in golf. They limit play to women friendly places, play mainly with other women, and namely, they challenge stereotypes of women golfers by embracing the differences in the styles of play seen between men and women. Although the authors note that golf needs to change on the macro-organizational level, they also suggest that the “micro-adjustments” propel change on a local level and shore up some of the gender inequality common in the sport.

In short, sport is a site of “cultural struggle where gender relations are simultaneously being reproduced and sometimes resisted” (Hall 1996:90). Sporting activities therefore become important arenas in which to examine construction, maintenance *and* resistance to hegemonic ideals of masculinity and normative femininity (Lowe 1998). Roller derby provides a unique cultural space and offers a unique set of social experiences for its players and participants, in which these dynamics are at play.

A Sport of One’s Own

As one of the most important locations for the production and expression of gender, competitive, contact sports provide a solid terrain on which to study tensions between maintenance and resistance of masculinity and femininity (Messner 1988, Theberge 1997). Connell (1987) notes that, “images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted most

systematically through competitive sport” in which “the combination of skill and force [in athletic experience] becomes a defining feature of masculine identity.” (85). But women's entrance into the realm of competitive sport, especially that of contact sports, challenges those notions, as well as raises questions, specifically around issues of gender, sexuality, and femininity. What exactly are “manly” and “womanly” qualities, and are they limited to men and women respectively? How can women be as tough as men, yet still remain “attractive” (Cahn 1994:3)? Should they? Contact sports in particular strive to reaffirm masculinity, but an exploration of the intersections of sport, gender, and sexuality, with an emphasis on the ways in which performances of, or resistance to, notions of prescribed gender and sexuality for female athletes can upset these questions and destabilize hegemonic (and heteronormative) understandings of femininity within the realm of sport.

Gender and the Organization of sport

R.W. Connell's (2005) work on the concept of a gender regime offers a useful lens for examining the ways in which gender is organized in institutions. The organization and unfolding of gender relations in any institution is referred to as a “gender regime” (Connell 1987) and, historically, the ‘gender regime’ of sport reinforced the ideas of men as dominant and hegemonic masculinity. Understanding the gender regime within sport has been a central focus of feminist research within sociology of sport, and crucial in highlighting how men have, and continue to, dominate the institution of sport. One of the most central ways in which men maintain this control and power in sport is by denying women access, or at the very least making it difficult, to participate in sport and or hold high ranking positions in sport organizations (Beaver 2012; Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994, Messner and Sabo 1990).

As Connell (1987) notes, however, gender regimes are historical in nature and shift over time as cultural and social meanings of gender change over time. Connell (1987) defines gender regimes as “the state of play in gender relations in a given institution” (120). That the institution of sport, like other social institutions, is dominated by men, is not the result of a fixed set of circumstances that cannot be changed or altered. On the contrary, the gender regime in sport is actively supported through a variety of collective efforts that allow men to retain dominance. This legitimacy of male hegemony in sport, however, is becoming more exposed and contested, as feminist scholarship and research draws attention to women’s efforts to gain not only access to sport, but access to power within sport’s gender regime. A significant body of research thus focuses on pathways to obtain gender equity in sports and sport organizations—through opening spaces for participation and creating opportunities for leadership roles (Beaver 2012; Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994).

Though inequities between women and men still remain with regard to access and funding, since the implementation of Title IX in 1972 there has been increased funding for women’s sports, expanded opportunities for participation, and extraordinary growth in the participation of women and girls in sport (Coakley 2004; Messner 2002). While greater rates of participation and more opportunity indicate some movement toward gender parity, it is also important to recognize that the gains do not uniformly impact all women who participate in sport. For example, poor and working class women disproportionately encounter obstacles to participation, often due to budgets that decrease or altogether cut funding for sport programs (Coakley 2004). Yet, even with increased participation and involvement, women lack visibility in key power positions and decision making areas in sport organizations. In an unanticipated twist, there has been a decline in women’s leadership in and control over athletic programs since

the implementation of Title IX, partly because it spurred the incorporation of women's sports departments into men's sports departments. In 1972 approximately 90 percent of women's intercollegiate athletic programs were led by a female administrator; as of 2008, women comprised just 23 percent of athletic directors (Acosta and Carpenter 2008), and according to the most current figures from a 2014 national longitudinal study of women's intercollegiate sport, that number has shrunk even more to 19 percent for all NCAA divisions (Acosta and Carpenter 2014). Since 1972, coaching positions held by women have also significantly dropped. In 1972 nine out of ten coaches for women's college teams were female, while in 2013 only one in two coaches from women's teams were female (Acosta and Carpenter 2014). Although advocates for women's sports have successfully broadened opportunities for women's participation, the analysis of power and of employment opportunity, particularly in collegiate and professional sports, exposes ongoing male hegemony within the gender regime of sport.

The figures stated above focus on high school and college sport programs, and while the data listed above offer a glimpse of the gender regime at the "core" or "center" of traditional sport and sport spaces, we do not get a clear picture of the gender relations or gender regime in "alternative" sports and sport spaces. More recently, scholars of sport note an increase in participation in sports like skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, BMX biking, and motocross. These sports, considered subcultural, are often labeled lifestyle sports (Wheaton 2000), alternative sports (Lavolette 2007), extreme sports (Rhinehart and Sydnor 2003) or edgework (Lyng 2005). There is also the question of whether these sport subcultures challenge the gender regime and structure of power that is characteristic of more conventional sports. Research indicates that even with potential as alternative sport spaces, windsurfing, wave surfing, snowboarding, skateboarding, ultimate Frisbee and ultra-marathoning do not provide a different

structure of gender relations. Similar to conventional sports, “alternative” sports and sport spaces are also characterized by male dominance (Beal and Wilson 2004; Beal 1995; Booth 2004; Heywood 2008; Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998).

Alternative sports, like those mentioned above, may not have the same formalized structure and organization as more traditional sports, but female athletes still often experience marginalization in these sports through dynamics produced by the male athletes (Beal and Wilson 2004; Booth 2004; Thornton 2006). In male dominated alternative spaces and cultures such as these, female athletes still are positioned as “other” and their participation and accomplishments are often minimized or overlooked. Additionally, any disparities in athletic performances between men and women are frequently naturalized through participant’s attitudes toward sport and gender, and sexist jokes are often used as a source of male bonding. Moreover, men control the various media that focus on these alternative sports and the promotion of related events. Women athletes are generally shut out of this alternative sports media, reinforcing the relationship between masculinity and alternative sport. While more and more women participate regularly in these spaces, research suggests that for the most part gender relations within alternative sports and sport spaces continue to mirror the gender regime that is the at the center of traditional mainstream sport (Messner 2002)

Social Movement Research and Cultural Resistance

How can we understand the forms and strategies of cultural resistance? Within social movement scholarship, historically, cultural movements and political movements are positioned as separate phenomena. Accordingly, social movement theorists argued that cultural and political movements each developed their own strategies, tactics, and goals, which reflected either the

cultural or political nature of the movement (Duyvendak and Giungi 1995; Melucci 1985; Bernstein 2002). This distinction between cultural and political movements has been challenged recently by scholars who study the role of identity in social movements, and more directly, identity-based movements where the cultural and the political are often connected (Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Melucci 1996; Katzenstein 1998; Buechler 1999; Bernstein 2002; Taylor and Rupp 2003; Bernstein and Armstrong 2004). As Kuumba (2001) notes, “Even cultural expressions and art take on political significance in the context of a liberation struggle. New social movement theories place greater emphasis on the significance role of culture and symbolism, collective identity, and ideology in the process of collective resistance efforts” (112). This is important because through the lens of NSM scholarship, the connections between cultural and political movements are found within identity itself and the personal and the political are intertwined; they cannot be separated.

Specifically, NSM theories situate contemporary movements as a means to retain control over areas of life becoming more mired in state control (Bernstein 2005; Cohen 1985) and hidden forms of power that “colonize” the “life world” by defining parameters of morality and normative ideals specific to a society (Habermas 1985; Cohen 1985; Melucci 1996; Buechler 2000; Touraine 1981; Bernstein 2005; Inglehart 1990). Political efforts and collective actions that fall under the rubric of NSMs “fight to expand freedom, not to achieve it; they mobilize for choice rather than [state-based] emancipation, and focus primarily on expressing identity” (Cerulo 1997:393). Similarly, Poletta and Jasper (2001) argue that NSMs seek “recognition for new identities and lifestyles” (286). In other words, more contemporary movements emphasize a shift from collective action within the state or political sphere to collective action in cultural and civil spheres (Melucci 1996). As Melucci (1996) explains, contemporary movements

increasingly address cultural issues and tend to distinguish themselves from “older” movements by using new modes of cultural and political action that move away from previous forms of protest. In focusing on the importance of identity in contemporary movements, some scholars argue that identities can influence strategies and tactics (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Bernstein 2005) and, crucially, used as forms of cultural and political and resistance (Bernstein 1997, 2002; Buechler 1999; Peluso 2011; Rupp and Taylor 2003).

The third wave of feminism has shifted discourses and discussions around conceptualizations of power, sites of struggle, of political change, and methods of activism. While the political, cultural and economic realms have always been important sites for social change, third wave scholars, influenced by Queer theories, post-structuralism, and postmodernism, argue that the cultural realm is a crucial site of political change (Heywood and Drake 1997). Third wave feminism takes the production of cultural meaning and creation of sexual politics as key areas of struggle. In addition to more traditional forms of collective action, third wave scholars point out that activism also involves destabilizing categories (i.e. gender and sexuality), performing parodies, and reinterpreting identities in ways that expose their socially-constructed, contradictory, and non-essential character (Herrup 1995; Heywood and Drake 1997; Baumgardner and Richards 2000). Heywood and Drake (1997) note that, “even as different strains of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other... they are all part of our thinking and our praxis: we are products of all the contradictory definitions and differences within feminism...” (3).

It is these contradictions that are at the heart of the cultural performances and strategies of resistance created by participants in roller derby. Traditional means of evaluating resistance are not particularly effective in understanding, or addressing, the specificity of gender in and to

this particular culture. Roller derby offers a new spin on third wave feminism. Third wave provides a more useful lens in examining how elements like fashion, behavior, an erotic politic, the body, parody and mockery are used to invert cultural notions of appropriate feminine conduct and draw into question hegemonic constructions of femininity and sexuality.

In addition to using a third wave lens to examine strategies of resistance used by skaters, I also draw upon a theoretical model constructed by Rupp and Taylor (2003). In their book, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, Rupp and Taylor (2003) offer a rubric to evaluate the ways in which the performance of drag might also be positioned as social protest. Through their model Rupp and Taylor examine the larger question of what makes certain types of cultural expressions political. The aim of their investigation is to identify the characteristics that “determine to what extent not just specific drag performances, but other cultural practices as well, function as protest tactics” (Rupp and Taylor 2003:213). Ultimately, they come to understand drag as a form of strategic collective action and drag performance as a political strategy.

The three measures Rupp and Taylor (2003) use to discern a cultural performance as “oppositional or political” are *contestation*, *intentionality*, and *collective identity* (217). For a cultural performance to be oppositional or political, it must, according to the three criteria: subvert rather than maintain dominant relations of power; intentionally and strategically use (cultural) entertainment/performance for political change; function as a catalyst for establishing collective identity (Rupp and Taylor 2003:217-219). I use these criteria to measure roller derby to better understand if and how the skaters and the derby community can be characterized as “oppositional,” and their actions as “political.”

The first measure, in Rupp and Taylor's (2003) model, "contestation," suggests that, "the discourse—or the symbols, identities, and cultural practices—conveyed by a cultural performance subverts rather than maintains dominant relations of power" (217). I argue that the participants in roller derby interact with, engage, and perform alternative femininities, genders and sexualities in ways that, according to Rupp and Taylor (2003), make these cultural performances disruptive. For their second measure, "intentionality," Rupp and Taylor (2003) ask, "to what extent are drag queens intentionally thinking and acting consciously about goals and strategies for challenging dominant constructions of masculinity, femininity, and the gendered heterosexual family?" (218). I ask a similar question concerning derby: How intentionally and consciously are skaters thinking about and acting on their goals and their strategies for challenging dominant constructions of femininity, sexuality, and ways in which bodies are gendered? The third measure Rupp and Taylor (2003) use is "collective identity." Collective identity, in this model, refers to the "shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests and solidarity" (Rupp and Taylor 2003:219). In short, it is a sense of "we-ness" that both forms and sustains collective identity and a sense of solidarity. Does roller derby foster collective identity—a sense of we-ness—between the skaters?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork, at its core, is a long social process of coming to terms with a culture. It is a process that begins before one enters the field and continues long after one leaves it. (Van Maanen 1988:117).

Researcher's Background

Using a grounded theory approach, I focus on the processes involved in “how” women play roller derby, experience their subcultural roles, and accomplish gender, femininity, sexuality, resistance, and identity formation. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, I enter the field with a set of broad questions: What is roller derby and what cultural, social, political factors and phenomena are driving the rapid growth of roller derby? Roller derby is expanding rapidly and has now become an international phenomenon. I want to understand why roller derby is growing so rapidly. Specific broad questions I will explore are: Who is participating in roller derby? Why are they participating? What is drawing women to the sport? How is roller derby organized? What are the meanings and ideas in the context where roller derby occurs? Is roller derby a feminist phenomenon? Is roller derby a realm where gender, sexuality, femininity and identity are being transformed? If so, what does that mean in terms of spaces for women to challenge conceptions of gender, constructing and deconstructing ideas of femininity, formation of identity, and for understandings of cultural change?

I approach this research from an interpretive/interactionist, and feminist perspective. To explore these questions, I observed how rollergirls interpret or assign meaning to issues like gender, sexuality, femininity, feminism, and the sport of roller derby itself, and how they construct perceptions of roller derby in relation to their interpretations and stances on these key

issues. While circumstances and context provide shape for those interactions, interpretations attached also depend on the cultural meanings derby skaters have about these same issues. I thus focus on the mechanisms women use to define themselves *as* rollergirls/skaters and engage with conventional definitions of sport, gender, sexuality, femininity, and the body. As a feminist researcher, I am interested in meanings participants attribute to their identities as derby participants and their understandings of gender, sexuality, identity, and their bodies, and the ways in which these issues may connect to gender inequality and strategies of resistance.

Access

I officially entered the sport and cultural phenomenon of flat track roller derby in 2006, when I briefly encountered four rollergirls at First Friday as they skated through the crowd at the night time street festival. Less than a week later I met members of the Sin City Rollergirls at a local bar, where I was with a group of local scholars, activists, artists, performers, poets—in general producers of local feminist culture—called the Feminist Drinking Club (FDC). A friend, who had just joined the very new (and still forming) Las Vegas Neanderdolls team, mentioned FDC to her teammates. Members of SCRG joined us at Feminist Drinking, that evening. SCRG was there to recruit, and to see if FDC wanted to be a local sponsor. A few days later I went with my friend to meet up with the newly forming team at another local bar near campus, where several skaters held a recruiting/fundraising event. Ten days later I accompanied my friend to her evening skate practice. After watching the skaters practice sprinting, stopping, side-step turning, blocking, and falling, I wanted to know more about this sport, this league, and these skaters. At practice I met even more members of this newly forming team. They were welcoming and encouraging, and I exchanged contact information with several skaters before the night was over.

After seeing that first practice, I decided to join the Neanderdolls, work on my skating, learn derby, and become a part of this growing sport. At that point, there were ten skaters on the Neanderdolls, and only four were what could be considered skilled, competent skaters. Over the course of the next few weeks I acquired the requisite gear (4-wheeled skates, elbow and knee pads, wrist guards, a mouth guard, and a helmet) and began attending practices. Like a few other skaters on the team, I had an athletic background and some prior skating experience from childhood. I had played both individual sports and team sports, including hockey as a young child. Because of my athletic and childhood skating experience, it turns out that I still had pretty good balance. I also had agility and speed, though not necessarily at the same time. Even with my prior skating experience and fairly good balance, I spent more time than I'd like to have spent, flailing and falling. This was surprising to me. There was a specific skill-set required to effortlessly gliding and navigating on four-wheels. I did not have that skill-set yet; it took me several more rigorous practices to adequately master.

After informally attending a month of practices I became a league member and began regularly going to weekly practices—on average four times a week— as well as team meetings and social events (primarily focused on building and promoting the league). I gained access to an online message board that was, at that time, the main form of communication by skaters outside of practice or related derby events. I also gained access to a listserve, connecting members of the rapidly growing derby community throughout the United States, and eventually derby communities outside of the U.S.

Over the course of the time I spent at practices, bouts, events, and parties with other skaters, I developed friendships—some especially close-- with many of them. These skaters became my key informants for the SCRG. Some of these same skaters, within a year, moved to

new cities and skated for other teams. Two of my key informants on SCRG moved to Portland, OR. It was through them that I gained access to Portland's derby leagues. The two skaters who founded SCRG leagues also founded the Arizona League (AZRD). Over the course of my time with SCRG I became good friends with both skaters and gained access to members of AZRD as well.

All in all, I skated as a Sin City Rollergirl for almost seven months, faithfully attending weekly practices, often four times a week. However, I decided to officially end the skating part of my derby career two weeks before our first official bout. Due to the increasing demands of my graduate program and ensuing time constraints I simply could not carve out the necessary time to be involved with the skating, social, and organizational aspects of the growing league and sport. While I ceased to skate, I decided to pursue research on the team, and remained close to the members of the team. I also became involved with the league in more ancillary supporting roles in order to conduct my ethnography: Score keeping, ticket taking, merchandise selling, and occasionally fundraising.

Population and Sample

This research is based on ethnographic data and interviews gathered between 2006 and 2011. The population sampled for this research is women participating in the sport of Roller Derby. My primary subjects are involved with the derby league in Las Vegas, Nevada, the Sin City Rollergirls (SCRG), which, at that time, consisted of two teams – a total of 29 skaters and six support staff (who began as skaters). Subjects are also drawn from RollerCon, an annual event where over 1,000 skaters from around the world gather in Las Vegas for a week of networking, workshops, training, competitions, and social events. I conducted follow up

interviews with skaters from leagues in Portland, OR and Phoenix, AZ. Skating with SCRG in its first year, working one season as a score keeper for the Las Vegas league, and having friends in the league since its inception, helped me establish contacts with local roller derby participants and key figures on the local derby scene and access to roller derby spaces for participant observation. I also regularly attended practices, team meetings, social events, fundraisers, derby matches, and RollerCon. I was also able to connect with members of the leagues in Portland and Phoenix through informants in Las Vegas. While I have chosen the SCRG league as a primary site for convenience, I am also focusing on this league because the Las Vegas teams were established early in the resurgence by two renowned players who were catalysts in igniting the current regeneration of the sport—in and outside of the U.S. These two players are also key founders of the Arizona leagues, RollerCon, and the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). As my research progressed, I also had the opportunity to practice with, and observe, leagues in Portland, OR and Phoenix. AZ.

My interviewing focuses on actual derby participants’ experiences. All of my informants actively participated in roller derby. While I also interacted with different members and groups within the derby community, (emcees, referees, audience members, volunteers) I limit my formal interviewing to those actively skating within leagues in order to immerse myself in the scene of roller derby and focus on the experiences of skaters, how they define themselves as athletes, create community and derby-specific identities, and engage femininity, gender, sexuality, and the body. For future research projects I do plan to interview other community members, and eventually audience members, in order to broaden the scope of the research project.

The Skaters

I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of thirty-five skaters: Nineteen from SCRG League; five from Portland's Rose City Rollers; five from AZRD, and six from skaters attending the yearly Roller Derby convention known as RollerCon. All 35 participants with whom I conducted formal interviews are women, between the ages of twenty-one to forty-seven. Most of the women I interviewed identify themselves as white; five identify as Hispanic, one identifies as African American. It is significant to note that my sample includes few women of color, which reflects the demographics in the sport of roller derby at the time of my data collection. As mentioned previously, my study focuses on the early, developmental years of the derby resurgence. Given derby's roots in punk and rockabilly—two music subcultures with predominantly white participants—it is not surprising that the initial participants in derby's resurgence reflect those predominantly white demographics. There has been increased participation in derby by women of color as derby has grown globally. There is however, still a predominance of white skaters. In terms of occupation, though, interviewee's occupations are diverse in range: veterinarian, hairstylist, real estate agents, graduate students, graphic artist, case-manager for Big Brothers and Sisters, social workers, teachers, retail sales, an assistant district attorney, fitness instructor, certified public accountant, service industry employees, a heavy machinery technician.

Twenty-six out of 35 skaters identify as "heterosexual;" 4 identify as "bisexual;" and 5 identify as "lesbian." This is somewhat consistent with the overall demographics of flat track derby. According to demographic information collected by the WFTDA (2012), approximately 75 percent of skaters identify as straight; the remaining 25 percent identify as queer, lesbian, bisexual, or "other." In my sample the average skater had been participating in derby for three

years, with the longest participation at seven years, and the shortest length of participation at less than one season (approximately eight months).

Sampling Methods

To select the population relevant for my research I use a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is appropriate as it allow for access to specialized populations. There are over 400 roller derby leagues spread across the U.S., with multiple teams comprising most leagues. The large number of leagues and varied geographical distances, combined with players dropping in and out of play or moving from city to city, make it very difficult, if not close to impossible, to come up with a list all participants in roller derby and then sample randomly. Through purposive sampling I can select cases that fit criteria for selection.

Because rollergirls are also part of a larger interconnected network, I used snowball sampling as well. This sampling method allows for an examination of, and access to, that interconnected network and consequently, the wide range of people within them. The key here is the direct linkage between the players. Players within networks and leagues are able to recommend other subjects they know. The women I met through FDC, who soon became my teammates, connected me with skaters they knew in other cities. As a member of the league I had access to multiple events, where I met skaters. Through my derby involvement and my work with Trish the Dish and Ivanna I could participate in events at RollerCon and meet skaters from across the U.S. and abroad. I thus begin with purposive sampling to select cases, and then use a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to expand the sample. I am able to interview the skaters I meet, and skaters introduced to me by Trish and Ivanna. As part of the interview I

also ask each person to recommend other skaters who might be interested in the project and open to being interviewed.

Data Collection

Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of documentary materials such as team websites, list serves, blogs, and league promotional materials, the goal of this project is to uncover understandings, interpretations, and accomplishment of these key issues, and of the sport itself, by those who participate in Roller Derby. These methods offer a useful and relevant approach to this project in that they will provide abundant data on a myriad of aspects through first-hand accounts from those participating.

Interviewing, in general, can provide rich insights into people's biographies, opinions, experiences, attitudes, feelings, and values. We interview to learn what is meaningful and relevant (in this case, to those who participate in derby). Lofland and Lofland (1995) note that, "Intensive interviewing is a guided conversation whose goal is to elicit from the interviewee, rich detailed material that can be used in qualitative analysis... the intensive interview seeks to *discover* the informants *experience* of a particular topic or situation" (18). I use the semi-structured interview, where a framework of questions is pre-determined but one is also free to seek additional information and ask follow-up questions when needed (Lofland and Lofland 1995; Fontana and Prokos 2007). The semi-structured nature of the interview allows me to seek clarification and elaboration on a number of responses to my questions. I am able to prod for additional information beyond the answers, and importantly, enter into a dialogue with many of the interviewees. Establishing a dialogue with the interviewee not only helps create a more

relaxed and reciprocal interviewing process and environment, but also allows respondents to tell their stories and describe their experiences in their own words and helps facilitate and expanded conversation on issues raised during the interview. Because the interview questions remain in a solid framework, the semi-structured interview still provides reliability.

For this project, I conduct 35 in depth interviews with skaters. Interviews range from one to three hours in length. There is one interview with three founding members of the derby scene that is done over the course of two afternoons, totaling approximately seven hours. My interviews are intentionally relaxed and conversational. The goal is to create a less formal and more open environment, where conversation is free to flow. Just as I ask my informants questions, they are free to ask me questions as well. Feminist researchers note this reflexive measure and style as a way to equalize the power structure of interviewer-interviewee, and as a way to develop a sense of connectedness (Reinharz 1992). As Carpenter (2005) suggests, “Conversational interviews enhance rapport, making it easier for people to share the intimate details of their lives” (210). This form of reciprocal or interactive interviewing challenges traditional approaches to the interview process which have been described as impersonal, unemotional, and detached (Naples 2003; Cancian 1992). By listening attentively and being fully “present and engaged” in the conversation, I encourage my informants to confide in me about their experiences and their lives (Harding 187). All formal interviews take place in person and are conducted in either my home or my respondent’s home, or a public setting of their choosing (like a local restaurant, coffee shop, or park). All formal interviews are recorded using either a digital audio recorder or a microcassette tape recorder. All formal interviews are transcribed.

My interview guide [Appendix 1] includes a range of questions regarding general demographic information, the interviewee’s background in sports, questions regarding past or

current involvement with broader social-cultural movements, skater's relationship with the term and identity of feminism and feminist. I also include questions that focus on the performance of gender and sexuality in sport, interviewee's own relationship with gendered and sexualized identities, use of physicality and the body in derby performance, the concept of community within derby, and the identity of "rollergirl."

Participant Observation

Lofland and Lofland (1995) emphasize the importance and mutuality of interviewing and participant observation as central techniques of ethnographic study. Participant observation is a method that encourages researchers to immerse themselves in the day-to-day activities of the population they are trying to understand. Ideas and theory are thus developed inductively from observations. As defined by Lofland and Lofland (1995) participant observation is, "the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association" (18). In other words, developing a long-term relationship with groups or individuals in their own setting, joining their events, and systematically studying their practices.

The effect of setting on interaction is important. Observing colors, lighting, sounds, spatial arrangements, temperature, and even the smell of a setting is integral to describing the scene. As a participant observer in roller derby, I am able to provide detailed description of the scene. I am also able to record the social demographics of the scene (players and fans) in terms of age, race, gender, class, marital status, etc. In describing the physicality of the game and the membership and organization of the teams, I can convey how the players look, dress, and move

their bodies. I can also describe aspects of communication: what is being said, not being said, facial expressions. I am able to observe how ads are written, posters are drawn, promotional material displayed, websites designed, and the design of team logos, and importantly, the choosing of one's derby name (i.e. identity). Communication and language, whether written, spoken, or drawn, is always symbolic. Participant observation, as Goffman notes, is a technique for penetrating a social situation (passage from a transcribed recorded presented by Goffman at a PSA meeting in 1974. Transcribed by Lynn H. Lofland in 1989). In his talk, Goffman stresses the importance of being immersed in the setting one is researching, so that the researcher may experience the setting in same ways as his or her research participants experience the setting Goffman reiterates that as the researcher, "you are in a position to note their gestural, visual bodily response to what's going on around them, and you are emphatic enough—because you've been taking the same crap they've been taking—to sense what it is that they are responding to (Goffman 1989:125-126—as transcribed Lynn Lofland).

In order to capture organization, culture, and performance of roller derby, I carry a small Moleskin writing journal with me at all times—either in my pocket or my bag— during bout, practices, and derby-related events. I routinely make notes about the settings I am in, activities taking place, and central phrases I hear. I also make notes on my phone when possible. When and where it is appropriate, I use my small digital recorder to capture details among the league's more private functions, like team get-togethers or league meetings. I transcribe and organize all of my field notes either directly after an event, later in the day, or the following day.

Analytical and Interpretive Strategies

For my research I follow the methods of grounded theory, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), but also follow guidelines and criteria put forth by Charmaz (2006) that focuses on coding data, memo writing, theoretical sampling and finally, integrating analysis. As Charmaz (2006) suggests, theory development begins with the process of coding. From the interviews and my notes from during and after the interview sessions, I first use open coding, examining each line of data and defining actions or events within it. This process helps to build ideas inductively and helps to develop sensitizing concepts that serve as starting points for developing my analysis. Open coding is also important in that it allows for making constant comparisons, and thus connections between categories so that ultimately I can code the data into distinct categories that best describe emerging themes.

I analyze the patterns that emerge from the data using selective coding. From interpretive notes and transcribed interviews, I look for repeated themes, words, and actions that span the data (Charmaz 2006). By focusing on the relationships among the codes and them among the categories, I can filter out less productive categories and retain the prominent ones.

Once the data are coded and organized into themes and larger categories I write memos linking themes and concepts that have become apparent within the data. These memos explain the organization, characteristics, causes, consequences, extremes, and even exceptions within each category. As a repeated process this is an integral part of data analysis. Not only does memo writing help me (the researcher) think about the data, spark ideas, discover gaps in the research, clarify and define categories, and make comparisons between categories, it ultimately links coding to the first draft of analysis (Charmaz 2006). This is an essential step in the research process and analysis. It helps me not be too overwhelmed by the data, and importantly, it is

integral to initial process of linking my interpretations to an empirical reality (Charmaz 2006). As categories become more refined I use theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006) to fill conceptual holes or gaps in the data I find, by sampling specific issues through additional interviews. Lastly, by integrating the analysis I determine which memos to use by selecting those that fit the analysis as well as the perspective audience. Organize my findings ultimately serves as the backbone of my dissertation.

Validation

As researchers we have a responsibility to faithfully represent the phenomenon we are studying. For this reason the issue of validity is important. For assessing validity I follow the three-part standards of ethnographic validity put forth by Althiede and Johnson (1994): Validity-as-reflexive accounting; reflexive accounting for substance; accounting for ourselves.

Because research and interpretation are enmeshed (Gergen and Gergen 2000) it is important, as a researcher, researcher to be fully cognizant of one's place in the field. This includes understanding our own individual social histories and perspectives (Fontana and Frey 2000), our historical and situational contexts, biases and processes (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Under validity-as-reflexive accounting, I, as the researcher, recognize my role and position in the research process. While in the field and conducting interviews I am always aware of and accounting for the relationship between myself (as the researcher) and participant, and my place in the setting.

Using reflexive-accounting-for-substance I try to faithfully and accurately re-present the experience. History, context, time, setting and key individuals are all necessary to help readers understand what we want them to know (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). Along these lines

Althiede and Johnson (1994) suggest, and as I noted earlier in this section, it is important to reveal things like context, history, setting, environment, key individuals, practices, temporal orders, specific hierarchies, significant events and their origins and consequences, social rules and patterns and other organizing norms of the field. In short, I use and provide as many details and dimensions as possible in order to paint a vibrant and realistic picture of “the field,” which is the sport of women’s roller derby.

Under the guideline of accounting-for-ourselves, I account for my representation and role as a researcher in multiple ways, which include: Detailing my initial contact with gatekeepers, entry into the field, contact with interviewees, awareness of presence and presentation, my thoughts, perceptions, and emotions during the interviews, mistakes, misconceptions, preconceptions, and biases. Feminist researchers (Charmaz, Ellis, Gilligan) also remind us of the importance of self-reflexivity. I feel it is essential to provide these insights into the research process, the readers can also engage in the work from my perspective, better understanding the problems and complexities of the research.

To further ensure validation of the process of data collection, I use comparative analysis and comparative sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), a method that relies on comparing categories of data for similarities and differences. Since I have some knowledge of my topic, I use theoretical sampling to guide my data collection. Glaser and Strauss (1967) do not cite a specific number of interviews or observations but note that a researcher should continue until theoretical saturation is achieved. Here, I follow Charmaz’s suggestion that theoretical sampling be conducted later in research in order to allow relevant data and analytic patterns to emerge and thus avoid premature closure of analysis.

Ellis and Berger (2002) discuss that it is vital for qualitative researchers to be fully aware of their place and role within the setting of their study. Within my research, I self-reflexively write about my participation and experiences in the field involving my skating, my interactions with teammates and other rollergirls, my thoughts and feelings regarding my time spent at various derby sites, and in general how I see myself within the social world of roller derby. In my own experiences in this regard, I have to say that to initially participate on the team and in bouts, and later participate in an organizational capacity, while researching has been simultaneously challenging and rewarding.

During the time of my research project, time in the field ranged from 3 to 20 hours per week—not including travel time. This includes the scope of my participation in facets of the sport and organization. Though I spent only six and a half months practicing with SCRG in their inaugural year, I progressed fairly quickly from slowly rolling around the track to being able to sprint, dodge, hit, and skate backwards. Having spent most of my life participating in sports—Little League, softball, soccer, judo, hockey, skiing, and climbing—I have good coordination and balance. I was initially surprised, though at how different *and* difficult gliding around on four-wheeled skates was. This required a different type of stance than anything that was familiar to me, and a new way of centering my balance.

These early months of establishing and skating with the team served as a solid base for continued participation in the field and a profound understanding of all the physicality required to fully and successfully play derby. While the focus of my research is primarily directed at the more performative facets of derby, at its very core roller derby is a physically demanding contact sport that requires training in endurance, physical strength, balance, and agility. As previously mentioned derby is as much about the skill and athleticism as it is about the performance; roller

derby is so very unique in that it has succeeded in effectively intertwining those elements. I have a deep respect and admiration for the skaters and the sport. I find the sport itself not just enjoyable, but vibrant and exciting. It is also an incredible physical workout and outlet. I am thankful to have maintained my involvement with derby for nearly eight years, but did feel frustrated and disappointed that I could not integrate both my academic schedule and the league's practice and bout schedule in order to immerse myself fully in the physicality of the sport and remain an active skater.

CHAPTER 4: SPORTS AS RESISTANCE: PUTTING THE FEMININE AND SEXUAL INTO CONTACT SPORT

“One thing that really chaps my ass is how the notion of roller derby being an actual sport isn’t considered legitimate unless men are doing it... Now that’s some kinda patriarchy if I ever heard it!” (Lady Quebeaum via meanfeminism blogspot)

In the era of sports dominance in the U.S. sports have long been a metaphor for and a defining reality of masculinity. Easthope (1990) notes that “strength, aggression, competition, and violence” are the ultimate markers and idealized characteristics of masculinity. Not surprisingly, they are also the hallmark characteristics of baseball, basketball, football, and hockey—the four most popular and prosperous sports in the United States. These are also the traits most frequently attributed to men and associated with masculinity. As more women enter and participate in the athletic arena however, this reality is challenged, making sport a key socio-cultural institution for examining the production, reproduction *and* contestation of traditional sports and sporting identities and importantly, of the ways in which gender and sexuality shape and inform those identities. The rapidly growing sport of women’s flat track roller derby offers a rich space for examining these transformations.

In this chapter I explore the ways in which roller derby, and those who participate in it, contest traditional boundaries of sport and frame their resistance against gendered norms that silently and not so silently shape and inhabit contact sports. Derby participants have constructed roller derby as a sport that combines strategy, agility, and physicality on traditional four-wheel skates. Competitiveness, aggression, and even violence are inherent in women’s derby, even though these are generally masculine attributes we associate with men and not women. Female athletes are often bound by narrow definitions of womanhood which still rest on notions of

women being more passive—although not sexy or overtly sexual (at least not on the field, court, or track).

In the sport of roller derby, however, I find that skaters consciously contest the boundaries of acceptable appearance, performance, and behavior for female athletes by adopting a sexualized, feminine identity while at the same time as embracing aggressive competition. Derby participants talk about the sport as a blend of athleticism, aggression, and sexuality. By combining physical strength, aggression, and bodily contact with hyperfeminine [and sometimes suggestive] attire, contemporary skaters are simultaneously blurring and pushing the long established boundaries of contemporary sport (and sexuality presented within sport). I find that skaters interact with and perform gender in novel and inventive ways, and by doing so, disrupt conventional gender constructions and accompanying stereotypes. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the new incarnation of the roller derby, the sport itself and its phenomenal growth, and discuss the ways in which roller derby participants challenge many of these long-established boundaries so prevalent in sport.

A sport or Not a Sport

The whistle blows and the 10 women gathered on the oval shaped track merge into a single entity, jostling, jabbing, pushing, and hitting—hard—as they whirl counterclockwise around the flat track. Another whistle blows, and two low slung skaters—the jammers—with stars on their helmets break into a rolling charge toward the pack, their arms and fists swinging through the air to grab momentum and chunks of speed. The pair hit the pack; there is instantly the sound of quad wheels scraping the floor. Half of the skaters—the blockers—hip checking and shoulder shoving help their team’s jammer aggressively weave, twist, and dodge her way

through the moving pack to the front, while trying to prevent the other jammer's progress. Suddenly, a skater crashes, hard, skimming along the floor, in a tangle of air spinning wheels and flailing limbs. She bowls over another skater who does the same thing, which almost looks like a tumbling routine. At that point another skater on the team pulls up and lends her downed teammates a hand. Whistles blow. The pack re-forms. Take two, and the second jam is underway...

Throughout my study, one of the most common questions asked about roller derby by outsiders is whether or not it is a “real” sport. At the same time, one of the most significant claims to identity among skaters was their identity as athletes. Is this a reaction against popular perceptions or a core element of their resistance?

Certainly, the perception that roller derby is not a “real” sport derives from its past. One of the most popular recollections of roller derby, especially women's roller derby, harken back to the 1960s and '70s when roller derby, centered on spectacle and women, was wildly popular on television as weekend and late-night entertainment. Within this incarnation of roller derby we often saw skaters partaking in staged acts of violence, initiating faux fights, fixing bouts, and engaging in a range of many other behaviors considered un-ladylike—behaviors more characteristic of productions of masculinity familiar in sport. While the women participating in roller derby attracted a whole new audience to the world of sport, there was also skepticism from the media: How could female skaters be both feminine and athletic? Who wants to see women doing manly things in manly places—like in the arena of sport? Through roller derby, though, women finally had publicly recognized role models in the world of sport. At the same time, however, there were those who were intent on dismissing their participation a novelty or a sideshow. Combining sport and femininity, it seemed was a double-edged sword.

That is a battle we still see raging today in women's flat track roller derby (and many women's competitive sports in general). The tensions between popular cultural ideals of sport and culturally accepted hegemonic versions of femininity comfortable for the public's consumption continue to provide fuel to that fire. Because of the performative aspects of derby—namely the hyperfeminine attire, skate names, the literal plays and physicality executed on the track, and some of the campier off-track entertainment features of the sport—the public often compares derby to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), a privately owned company that is currently the world's largest professional wrestling promotion. Like other professional wrestling outfits, WWE shows do not feature legitimate sporting contests. Instead, its programs feature story-line driven combat sport matches with pre-determined outcomes, scripted finishes, and fighting sequences that are worked, all promoted as legitimate bouts (Oppliger 2004). The WWE Women's Championship is the all-female component within the WWE. The scripted fight sequences are slightly less violent than those that appear in the men's bouts, with much of the action driven more by a combination of camp and heavy sexual innuendo, including sexualized behavior and scantily clad costuming. It is within these contexts that the question of whether derby is a "real" sport still looms in the background. Contemporary roller derby, unlike its predecessor is not staged, rehearsed, or scripted. Skaters, even in the context of pushing establish boundaries of sport, identify as athletes. They take their sport seriously. They train weekly. They develop game strategies and work to perfect those strategies on the track. They proudly display their bruises and broken bones. And importantly, through the WFTDA, skaters have put into place rules and regulations specifically to maintain the fairness of the game, and their safety on the track.

Challenging Norms

As she skates around the oval track, her normally blonde pigtails are bright blue this evening, and are the only visible portions of her hair peering out from under her black helmet. Brightly colored tattoos crawl down her right arm, and also appear through several rips and tears in black fishnet stockings, and a short black and orange tiger-striped skirt reveals ruffled black panties that match her black t-shirt, sliced, diced and altered to provide an ample view of cleavage. This image portrays conventions of sexuality typically associated with punk-rock, pin-up, or burlesque like images. Yet, knee, shin and elbow pads, a mouth guard and helmet complicate assessments of a sexualized femininity, as do the ways in which she forcefully and adeptly powers her way around the skating track, with a scowl on her face that says she is serious about the game and ready to take on, and take down, her opponents.

Skaters understand themselves as contesting the normative boundaries of sport, and as such they see derby as providing a space for a new type of female athlete. The skaters that I interview, and indeed in most of the other leagues that I observe, welcome women of all shapes, sizes, and skill levels, staying true to roller derby's underlying DIY ethic and creating space for women. As my interviewees told me, the rigorous training offered by leagues is a great alternative to the culture of gyms. As a result, derby has attracted women who might not otherwise consider themselves athletic—many of the same women who are responsible for much of the punk-rock edge of the sport.

The women interviewed for this project suggest that it is the blend of athleticism, aggression, competition *and* sexuality that drew them to the sport. This mix of traits has not been part of other sports available to women (even in football and hockey). But what is clear is that

this combination is appealing precisely because women have been excluded from contact sports.

In other words, as the following quotes illuminate it is the physicality that appeals to them.

Women really have not had enough of a presence or place in physical sports, save for boxing or rugby. I think derby is appealing to women because we get to showcase [our] strength, agility and speed like the guys (Tera Hyman)

The whips [a strategic play] are fun and skating real low, ducking under people and bobbing and weaving is exciting to the crowd, but the catastrophic hits, I mean I love knocking people out [of bounds]; but I love knocking people out more when there is a crowd. If I, as a blocker, can nail somebody into the front row of the crowd and get them to land in their laps, that's pretty fucking cool. If the crowd was not there, I might not do it because I wouldn't want to hurt somebody. But at the same time, I wouldn't be as proud about it because there would not be a thousand people cheering because some chick just landed in their lap (Trish the Dish)

Nancy Theberge (1997) points out that when women were initially admitted to contact sports it was on restricted terms and according to an adapted model [of sport and play] whereby events were adjusted (races shortened, rules altered, physical contact limited) to conform to the view of women as fragile and weak (69). But in Roller derby there is no, and has been no, equivalent of a men's sport. Roller derby, this version in particular, has not been adapted to, but formed from the ground up, by women:.

This sport is being built from the ground up, by women for women. It's a sport that allows for all sizes, and it's a game that you have to play with your head. That's one of the reasons that men love to watch this sport—they are not only seeing something new and dynamic, but they are seeing it packaged in short skirts and tights. It's cute. But they are also seeing all of the blood and guts, and the effort and commitment that they want to see in sports (Trish the Dish)

In roller derby, then, we find mainstream ideals of femininity and sport both challenged and embraced. Team uniforms reflect more traditional conceptualizations of feminine dress but at the same time, body types and sizes of the players vary greatly, negating hegemonic norms of femininity and images of mainstreamed female athletes. Moreover, the tension of enforcing

gender appropriate behavior and beauty norms, so often inherent and purposeful in women's sports, is one that is subverted within roller derby. Ironically, there has been critique of roller derby for reinforcing and conforming to traditional Western beauty standards, whether through players' attire or their campy performances incorporating notions and images of traditional femininity. Yet there is great diversity among the women who play the sport, in terms of height, weight, age, body type, hairstyle, sexual preference, etc.

That women of all shapes and sizes participate in roller derby is unique to the sport, and unique within the realm of women's sports. The players' physiques on many of the derby teams I have observed range from rubenesque to string-bean thin, from short statured, to tall. And all use the physical attributes to their advantage. The heavier players block and clear pathways and the smaller players to move through the pack. It is on these grounds that roller girls challenge normative ideals of gender, beauty and femininity, and further subverts it by taking pleasure in playing up the ideals and the gender performances. The physicality and competitiveness of the sport positions rollergirls as having strength, confidence and capability. At the same time, the athleticism, aggression and competition are infused with sexual innuendo and a form of empowerment which is also linked to expressions of sexuality and femininity, rare in women's sports.

I love to wear the fishnets, and I am happy to be around women who accept that about me. I joined roller derby to be tough, independent, feminist, sexy, and feminine all at the same time. We are often told that we cannot have all of the qualities at once. But this is not the case [in derby] (Bo Toxic)

Why should [skaters] be punished for celebrating beauty? I like to dress up in short skirts and fishnets to skate. But I certainly don't do it for any man. Not even my husband. I dress up for myself and for my teammates, because it is fun and like to take part in celebrating our bodies (Glam Bamm)

Sexuality and Sport

This open sexuality in roller derby stands out at a time when mainstream women's sports have, at best, a tenuous relationship with sex(uality). Female basketball players in the U.S., for example, face pressure to look sexually attractive in spite of their athleticism rather than because of it. The WNBA, during their rookie training camps throughout the first decade of the 2000s, often brought in coaches for both makeup application and for jump shots. Regarding this decision, the Vice President of the WNBA explained, "You are a woman first. You just happen to play sports" (*Chicago Tribune* May 3, 2008). For those who play derby, there is no either/or. As Thora Zeen, a member of the team, the Los Angeles Derby Dolls stated, "There is some connection between that sports high and sexuality. When you score five points, that's hot... we feed off of this hotness" (RollerCon 2007).

The contradiction between the glamour, antics and sexy uniforms on one hand, and the tough appearance and physicality of the game on the other, serve to break down the connection between hyper-feminine and passivity, and articulate the physical aspects of the game, the sport, and the agency of its players. This is a unique aspect of roller derby. Many female athletes, in order to gain acceptance in a male dominated bastion, often downplay traits associated with masculinity and emphasize a hegemonic femininity, where feminine characteristics are sometimes showcased over athletic ability (Clasen 2001:40). For example, Feder (1995) notes that the theatrical elements of figure skating, with its costume, makeup, and gesture, serve to reinforce femininity in the arena of competition, which helps to "soften the athletic prowess required for executing triple jumps and flying sit-spins" (24). For the women in roller derby, however, the focus is as equally on the physical aspects of the game as it is on the performative aspects and athleticism, and the "costuming," gestures, and other feminine adornments displayed

by rollergirls are meant to emphasize the athlete, her skills *and* performance. So, while skaters do emphasize traits associated with femininity, it is not done in order to gain approval and acceptance in a male dominated space, but in order to highlight their athletic prowess and resist the idea that femininity equals being “softer,” weaker, or less capable.

The actual bodies of the athletes also play an important role and have a focus within roller derby. Rollergirls wield their bodies through athleticism, contact, and performance. They do so in ways that make their bodies highly visible, through their uniforms, a variety of tattoos, visible body piercings, even hair colors. The deployment of the body, and subsequently the display of sexuality and an exaggerated femininity, whether in performance of sport or spectacle, emphasize the body and can be seen as counteracting objectification. Skaters criticize conventional ideas about “natural beauty.” They adhere to hegemonic ideals of femininity through attire and performance, but by refusing to hide their bodies that do not necessarily conform to those ideals they not only demystify the female body but negate the image and idea of the passive sex object:

I think that a lot of derby women are quite self-conscious about their performances as subversive acts. There are lots of women over Size 12 and wear the small skirts if they want. There is something glorious about all those shapes and sizes of bodies on show (Vixenvangogo)

This is not a sport of super models. We are real women, in all shapes and sizes. I have never felt so empowered and gorgeous. And I think others on the team feel the same. We are strong athletes; we practice hard, three or four times a week. We cross-train, work out, just like any other athletes. Since when do we need to look at what men are doing to validate what women are doing? Or who we are (Peachy Queen)

Indeed, the institution of sport has been integral in naturalizing gender differences, relying on ideas about “nature” rather than “culture” thus reinforcing beliefs about biological differences between women and men. These beliefs tend to support existing gender regimes. The

new incarnation of women's roller derby, however, expands gender regimes in sport. Women's roller derby adds another dimension to the institution of sport, rendering it an important site to reexamine gender and sexuality in the sporting realm, and along the way, an alternative type of femininity and female athlete. Between skate names, campy performances, non-traditional athletic bodies, and suggestive attire, rollergirls interrupt the traditional images associated with femininity. Further, by ironically playing off of cultural definitions of attractiveness and desirability, reflecting back iconic images of "womanhood" and by consciously celebrating these images, they co-opt the patriarchal gaze often imposed upon female athletes (and women in general), thereby reclaiming the objectification of femininity as well as offer a critique.

Using fashion, behavior, and their bodies, rollergirls are inverting cultural notions of appropriate feminine conduct and images of female athletes. But the skaters do not necessarily reject this femininity. Instead, as Judith Butler (1990) might suggest, rollergirls, by vamping it up at bouts show how unnatural, highly constructed and performed femininity really is. In this respect the performance does not reject femininity but undermines the assumed naturalness; femininity can be taken apart and then reconstructed.

Conclusion

By expressing sexuality within the realm of roller derby, women celebrate and indulge in the glamorous hallmarks of womanhood. Mixing these expressions with hardcore physical play highlights just how performative gender norms are. Pushing boundaries of acceptable female behavior, the skaters are forceful, aggressive, competitive and athletic—traits typically associated with masculinity. Concurrently, the skaters also embrace conventional, Western standards of beauty and attire.

Skaters thus embraces a female sexuality and form of femininity that adhere to certain gendered norms around beauty, the female body and heterosexuality, while they also subvert traditional gender roles and images – especially those assigned to female athletes— by challenging the existing dichotomy of femininity/competitive strength. By doing so roller derby and rollergirls contest the boundaries which have culturally shaped and dictated the parameters of acceptable appearance, performance, and behavior for female athletes, rendering flat track roller derby a site of resistance to set notions of gender and sexuality, and a site that can potentially destabilize hegemonic and heteronormative understandings of gender, sexuality and femininity within sport.

A critical component that positions roller derby as a space of resistance and contestation to many of the cultural norms so long inherent in sport is the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethic upon which roller derby is founded and has been built. In the following chapter I provide an in-depth discussion of the DIY ethic that has been so central to the development and sustained growth of roller derby, and positions derby as a space for resistance to facets of the commercial, corporatized structure and organization of sport, and challenges cultural productions and representations of whom and how female athletes should be, appear, perform, and behave inside *and* outside of those structures.

CHAPTER 5: DIY AS A STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE IN ROLLER DERBY

On a warm fall evening in 2007, I sat inside of the chain-link fence area of a city park on the West side of Las Vegas, along with about 100 other people. We were all gathered to witness the birth of flat track roller derby in Las Vegas. After almost a year of recruitment, practices, training, and scrimmages, SCRG's was about to heave their first official bout. Fans crowded around almost every inch of the oval track, with the exception of the area providing benches for the skaters. Setting up a track can be done on any surface suitable for skating—parking lots, skating rinks, basketball courts, even old airplane hangars. Tonight, we were in an area next to the basketball courts, normally used for skateboarding and inline skating, an area cordoned off by a chain-link fence. Kids on skateboards, families with strollers and dogs, and folks just out walking in the park were also lining up along all sides of the approximately four-foot-high fence to catch a glimpse of the brightly colored action about to take place. All in all there were probably close to 200 people – about 100 inside the fence and what looked to be an equal amount of people outside the fence, looking in or milling about, waiting for the action to begin.

That night, the Las Vegas Neanderdolls skated against the Smash Squad, one of two Arizona derby teams. The Neanderdolls, as the name suggests, embrace a “cavewoman” theme. As the skaters took to the track, each introduced by the announcer, they held up clubs—most homemade from papier-mache projects—in one hand, shaking them at the crowd, and chanted “Ug, ug, ug.” Their uniforms consist of orange and black tiger-striped mini-skirts, black fishnet stockings, orange and black knee-high socks, and black t-shirts or tank tops, sliced and diced to personal taste. I'm not sure of to whom or what the Smash Squad was paying homage. They were

dressed in black mini-dresses with pink stitching around the neckline, a pink skull and crossbones logo on the chest, pink or black tights, and pink and black striped knee high socks.

Skaters on the Las Vegas team have names like Ivanna S. Pankin, Trish the Dish, Ann Gre-feminist, Bo Toxic, Shawna th' Dead, and Mike Litt. My friend Sharon is Mike Litt, and one reason why I, and nine other friends, were at the bout that night. We were just a small group amongst a crowd of heavily tattooed rockabilly boys, young hipster queer girls, die-hard muscle-bound sports fans, suburban looking families with young children, and the husbands, partners, parents, grandparents and co-workers of the rollergirls.

While we waited for the bout to begin we snacked on wine, cheese, crackers, dry Italian salami, chicken salad and artichoke hearts that our group had brought from home. After a bit of a wait – actually, a long wait – it was game on. A lot of points were scored by both teams tonight, and each time the Neanderdolls' jammer scored the crowd went wild. Ultimately the Neanderdolls pulled off the win. I was buried in the crowd as we all leapt to our feet while the Neanderdolls took victory laps and high-fived each other. Trish the Dish, the star jammer was skate-dancing, playing to the crowd, encouraging even more cheering. The team was waving their Neanderdoll clubs in the air and again chanting, “ug, ug, ug.” Eventually the Neanderdolls left the track and volunteers from both teams began removing the chalk lines and thin ropes that marked the boundaries of the oval shaped track. We waited for our friend, and then headed to a local bar for the after-party to celebrate the beginning Las Vegas Roller Derby with both teams.

As I will show, roller derby is inspired by and has come to constitute the very essence and spirit of a do-it-yourself ethos and sport. This DIY ethic is a key strategy in derby's gendered resistance. The participants in derby create distinctive identities, leagues, and skate

sites that reflect their local communities. Derby began in 2003 as a grassroots effort of a few women in a handful of U.S. cities to define and organize a female-only sport and is now an international phenomenon. The majority of the leagues in this derby resurgence were started and organized by women who had either seen a bout or heard or read about derby. Rather than waiting for someone else to start a league, those interested in playing roller derby followed the ethic of “Do It Yourself.” While derby has shed its proverbial training wheels and has grown into full-fledged organized competitive sport, the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic upon which derby is founded remains intact, and continues to be foundational to the growth, development, organization, continuity, and identity of the sport and its participants. In this chapter, I analyze how DIY discourse positions derby as a space for resistance to facets of the commercial, corporatized structure and organization of sport, and how derby participants are changing cultural productions and representations of whom and how female athletes should be, appear, perform, and behave inside *and* outside of those structures.

The resurgence of women’s roller derby as I observed it has been driven by the DIY ethic. As I will show, it is the ethic upon which derby is founded and is a primary mechanism that has allowed the sport to organize and to grow so rapidly and has served as a key tactic for producing an alternative model for sport and a unique roller derby identity. The majority of contemporary leagues are owned and operated by the participants, which means that the women in roller derby own and operate their leagues—a noteworthy accomplishment for a few reasons. First, few athletes have a stake in the day-to-day operations of their organization, or to decision making processes (Messner 2002). Second, sport organizations have historically been controlled by men. Though women’s visibility and participation in sport has rapidly increased since Title IX came into effect in 1972, they still have less access than men to positions of leadership or

ownership within sport organizations (Beaver 2012; Messner 2002). Contemporary roller derby is a sport initially created for women, by women. As such, the contemporary derby offers a unique opportunity as it presents an alternative to male dominated sport.

In this chapter I explore the gender regime of sport and the DIY ethic as a strategy of resistance. I address the questions of how the DIY ethic functions in roller derby, and how DIY is integral to the current resurgence of the sport. I argue that the DIY ethic is not simply motivated by necessity, but for the skaters it is an important, foundational value of the sport and component of their identity in their efforts to resist masculine dominance of contact sport. Doing it themselves ensures that skaters maintain control over the organization, imaging, and promotion of the leagues, their play and competition, and the sport of roller derby itself. “By the skaters for the skaters,” the philosophy upon which the WFTDA is founded, is not about individualism, but rather about the collective effort of derby participants to create social cohesion between skaters on local, national, and international levels. The DIY ethic pushed women to create a sport that they control, clearing way for a unique space in sport for women to explore new ways of being athletic, sexy, powerful, violent, entertaining, and importantly, unified in a shared collective identity.

Doing It Yourself

Do-it-Yourself, or DIY, describes the creation of something *without* the aid of professionals. It offers an alternative to the idea of consumer culture, mostly by blurring the boundary between who consumes and who creates. DIY culture creates a space where anyone, however amateur, can produce something—often something that will be valued as a finished product.

DIY refers to a wide range of elements in non-mainstream society, such as grassroots political and social activism, independent music, art, film, crafts, and writing, but it is most often associated with punk subculture. Some scholars point to subcultures as being important for progressive politics because they provide spaces for alternative ways of thinking and being that challenge the dominant culture (Carrington and Wilson 2004; Duncombe 1997). Indeed, one lasting organizational ethic that arose from punk underground culture is the DIY ethic. Whereas most industries are shaped by and valued for their profit margins, participants in DIY culture often just want to exchange information about bands, gigs, zines, activities, art, etc. that they have found exciting. The primary aim is to build unique networks in which anyone can participate (Spencer 2005). As a zine writer and a founding organizer of Ladyfest London, Amy Spencer (2005) notes that participants in DIY culture are not "...fixated with the promise of money, they are people who want to do something just to see it happen" (11).

Similarly, Stephan Duncombe (1997) defines the DIY ethic as "make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you" (2). For Duncombe DIY is an intentional endeavor. He notes that "Doing it yourself is at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important; the active creation of an alternative culture. DIY is not just complaining about what is, but actually doing something different" (Duncombe 1997:117). For sure, DIY has a long history and comes in many forms, but the commonality is that it started with people sharing a similar (DIY) ethos: Wanting to create a new cultural form and transmit that new culture to others on your own terms (Spencer 2005).

The origin of the term DIY as we are most familiar with it today, can be traced to the Punk movement of the 1970s (Duncombe 1997). Punk is a key site because punk celebrated the amateur approach that championed the idea that *anyone* can create *anything*. DIY carries with it

the message of rejecting certain rules and social values, an assertion of the need for change and a call to be oneself. While doing-it-yourself was often necessary for punks, the DIY ethic was, and still is, about much more. The foundation of DIY is the rejection of an “inauthentic” mass produced consumer culture and the call for an “authentic” folk culture. Fundamentally, DIY is about having control over one’s own cultural production (Duncombe 1997; Schilt and Zobl 2008; Spencer 2005). Those who embrace the DIY ethic are not generally motivated by commercial success, as attaining commercial success usually requires giving up control over the production of their cultural objects and messages.

While girls and women have been absent from most broad (and historical) studies of subcultures, recent work shows that the DIY ethic has been a strategy of gendered resistance (Duncombe 1997; Schilt and Zobl 2008; Spencer 2005). In the late 1980s and early 1990’s the Riot Grrrl movement rose out of the ashes of the post-punk era reclaiming the power, vitality and grass roots, DIY philosophy which had defined much of the early punk scene (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998). Riot Grrrls were loud, and through art, music, spoken word and fashion, blatantly and straightforwardly expressed and promoted themselves. Although punk had provided a forum for misogyny and a potent combination of sex and anger, it opened a fertile space for feminist interventions and for the politicization of sexuality and female identity (Wald and Gottlieb 1993:14). In essence, Riot Grrrl emerged in reaction to women feeling marginalized in, or altogether locked out of, the male dominated punk scene (Schilt and Zobl 2008), and the emphasis on DIY became the backbone for forming their own community and collective voice.

Riot Grrrls formed bands, started record labels, organized music festivals and community events, produced and published zines, and designed posters. The Riot Grrrl movement, according to Schilt and Zobl (2008), “inspired young girls and young women both nationally and

internationally to express resistance against restrictive expectations of girlhood, femininity, and traditional gender roles both in the punk scene...and in mainstream society” (171). Schilt and Zobl further argue that Riot Grrrl was a political movement and that the DIY ethic underlying and propelling this movement was not just about empowering the individual, but about furthering the politics of the movement because it encouraged cultural production that spread feminist consciousness and linked together an international community of young feminists.

I found plenty of evidence to suggest that the resurgence of the women’s roller derby is linked to the feminist politics of Riot Grrrl movement. As I will show, key leaders of the Sin City Roller Girls had been active in the DIY punk movement. Roller derby’s DIY ethic is a primary mechanism in pushing women to carve out social spaces that they control in sport while also creating strong bonds between the athletes. Importantly, this ethic functions as a mechanism and tactic for shaping derby as a space of resistance, and for shaping a unique skater identity.

The DIY In Derby – DIY League Operation

Many, though not all, of the women who founded derby leagues had been part of the punk scene where DIY is one of the primary subcultural values. Ivanna S. Pankin, founder of Arizona Roller Derby (AZRD), home to leagues in Phoenix and Tempe, and the Sin City Roller Girls (SCRG) which encompasses teams in Las Vegas, highlights the link between punk rock and roller derby as she describes how her vision of starting a roller derby team came to fruition:

I had a tiny obsession with old roller derby—probably akin to somebody’s obsession with pin-up girl art. One day I was kind of daydreaming, trying to get ideas for a painting, and I decided, well, I’m going to paint a roller derby girl—only what a roller derby girl would look like now. And so I started that painting and got about halfway through and got really mad—because there I was painting about things I wanted to be doing. So I set down my paintbrushes and ran to my computer, and I posted on a local punk music board “who wants to join my roller derby team?” Six or seven girls replied and we met at a local bar and started from there. It didn’t even occur to me at the time that you need more than one

team to play—or a set of rules, you know?! I'd played in a few bands, written a few fanzines, and raised myself in the punk rock scene, where it's just a short jump from wishing you can do something to deciding you're going to just do it. So, just like starting a band, I recruited girls (in Tempe) to play derby.

This quote illustrates two very important tenets of the DIY ethic as a strategy of resistance: She created her own culture rather than consuming a manufactured culture and, she embraced the idea that anyone can produce culture even if they lack experience or skills in that specific area.

When Ivanna founded AZRD and SCRG leagues, there was little information available on roller derby, how to play roller derby, let alone start a league. AZRD skater and then co-founder and captain of SCRG, Trish the Dish remembers:

We [were] progressing slowly at first because we were teaching ourselves the game and figuring out the game and figuring out the rules as went and figuring out strategies. But now there is a larger and larger body of women who've been playing long enough that they can give those experiences to new teams, so new teams are coming up faster and better than ever.

Currently, internet message boards, blogs, other social media, and skaters in established leagues provide information to burgeoning leagues. Although advice may help with the process of forming a league, many league founders have no prior organizing experience. Yet, true to the DIY spirit, lack of experience does not deter them from trying.

The DIY ethic, of course, extends beyond the founding of leagues. Participants buy their own gear and health insurance, and often cover their own travel expenses. The rules and regulations of the game are written and codified by the skaters. The leagues are not part of larger corporate owned sponsorship, nor are they coach or school-owned and operated. League members perform nearly all of the work that keep the leagues running, as well as promote and produce the bouts. Although volunteers sometimes serve as referees, announcers, scorekeepers, and security, the rollergirls themselves design and post flyers to advertise the bouts, set up the track and seating at the bouts; sell and take tickets for the bouts; design, manage, and sell

merchandise; secure league sponsors, handle public relations; train new skaters; organize practices; handle league conflicts; find and book half-time entertainment, music, and emcees; find charities to sponsor, and often serve as league travel coordinators. Because league maintenance and bout production require a great deal of labor, skaters in each league serve on committees that oversee these tasks and procedures. As Ivanna notes:

Unlike earlier incarnations of the game, where the teams were all owned by one family or a business, this one is in fact owned by us, the skaters. We formed the league, we figured out the training, we raised the funds, we file the paperwork, we take the tickets. I think that everyone on some level or another feels like the more we put into the sport, as individuals, as skaters, as a board member or a committee head, the more it's going to move the sport forward. We move the sport forward.

For many skaters this DIY ethic is a strategy of resistance. It is a means to control their athletic activity and the actual labor that goes into producing their “product,” which includes the production process, bouts that they produce, and their leagues in general. Like Ivanna, F-Bomb of Portland's Rose City Rollers also extols the importance of skater involvement in the sustenance and growth of derby, as well as highlights the role of DIY in rollegirl identity:

It's DIY, volunteer run, so who are the volunteers? A lot of them are skaters. Some of them aren't, but we're a 501-C 3 non-profit, like a lot of leagues, so that means we have a board of directors, we have by-laws, we have a 90-page handbook that includes all of our policies. Someone has to enforce those policies; someone has to do strategic planning. Where do we want to be in 20 years? How do we get there? That's the board's job. And so I take that really seriously. So, yeah, that's definitely part of my identity as a member of this league.

The DIY in Derby – DIY League Ownership

In addition to being run by the skaters, a majority of the leagues that we see in this resurgence are collectively owned and importantly, democratically controlled by its members. While the board makes recommendations, most major financial and organizational decisions are

voted on by league members; all skaters potentially have a voice in the decision-making process, as opposed to decisions being handed down by an owner or an executive board.

On their website, the Texas Rollergirls explain exactly what it means to be skater owned and operated:

Every skater in the league has a vote on everything from financial decisions to charities we support, from where we play to when we practice, to what we wear. Texas Rollergirls is a direct democracy—majority rules and every voice is heard. That means that what Texas Rollergirls is now and what it becomes in the future is decided by the skaters.

Trish the Dish provides a more thorough discussion of the skater owned and operated philosophy and its origins:

This difficult thing, the thing that we all had to figure out, was how to operate. We have many examples of how things *should* be, like the government. The government was set up to be democratic and fair, and it ended up not being fair or representational at all. So we had to figure out, how do we operate in a democratic way with a group of women that are from such different and diverse backgrounds, with such different and diverse points of view? So, we have an advisory board. It's basically picking people who you really respect, and respect their opinions, and you put them in a position to steer. And we have business meetings which are helpful because everybody gets a chance to speak and express their opinion. And then we vote. It's a great model."

Because voting is time consuming, league members do not vote on every decision. However, most of the skaters I spoke with were comfortable with their league's decision-making processes and felt like they had a voice in the process. Voting on major decisions, in addition to skater control over the board of directors and other league committees ensures that derby leagues are truly "for the skaters."

"By the Skaters for the Skaters" DIY and the WFTDA

In 2004 selected skaters from 20 of the newly formed leagues across the U.S. met in Chicago and founded what was originally called the United Leagues Coalition (ULC). It was

renamed a year later, with an international scope in mind, as the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). The renaming was intentional, and the global scale and growth of the sport of roller derby was a major goal of WFTDA founders and Arizona Roller Derby and Sin City Rollergirl founders and co-captains, Ivanna S, Pankin and Trish the Dish, which they elaborate on in one of my first interviews with them in 2007:

The first name of the organization was Unites Leagues Coalition. The whole point of changing it to Women's Flat Track Derby Association was to make it acceptable on a global scale, not limit it to just national level stuff. (Ivanna S. Pankin)

Two years ago we would have never dreamed that there'd be teams in Canada that we could go play. Two years ago it was just Arizona and Texas. And now it's 130 leagues, with five in Canada, one in Germany, one in Australia, one in France, one in London. I mean everywhere. And it's growing fast, and we're trying to figure out now, how are we going to play these girls? (Trish the Dish)

So the WFTDA became the official name and umbrella organization for the largest segment of organized women's roller derby. WFTDA is an all-female, self-organized association of leagues and teams formed specifically to foster and promote the sport of roller derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship, and goodwill amongst league members (wftda.com). The WFTDA formalized rules and competitions, standardized the track layout, and expanded participation in the sport. The WFTDA also sets the standards for rules, regulations, seasons, and safety, dictating the guidelines for national and international competitions and leagues. The WFTDA is founded on the grassroots DIY ethic, which is specifically in WFTD's mission statement: "The governing philosophy is 'by the skaters, for the skaters'. Women skaters are primary owners, managers, and operators of each member league and of the association" (WFTDA 2008). The governing philosophy is also reiterated in WFTDA bylaws. To become a full WFTDA member, a minimum of 51% of league owners must be skaters, and the skaters must comprise at least 67% of the league management. The governing

body itself symbolizes derby's DIY ethos. Not only was the WFTDA formed by skaters, it is controlled by skaters from member leagues as well. All significant changes in the WFTDA, like rule changes, are voted on by league representatives.

This difficult thing, the thing that we all had to figure out, was how to operate. We have many examples of how things *should* be, like the government. The government was set up to be democratic and fair, and it ended up not being fair or representational at all. So we had to figure out, how do we operate in a democratic way with a group of women that are from such different and diverse backgrounds, with such different and diverse points of view? So, we have an advisory board. It's basically picking people who you really respect, and respect their opinions, and you put them in a position to steer. And we have business meetings which are helpful because everybody gets a chance to speak and express their opinion. And then we vote. It's a great model. (Trish the Dish)

On the one hand, the WFTDA and the local leagues are "skater owned and operated" out of necessity. Although some leagues currently provide cash prizes for local tournament competition, and there has been one cash prize regularly given out at a major Midwestern regional tournament since 2012, many leagues do not create significant enough income to do the work currently done by the skaters. Most of the income leagues generate is used for operating costs, including the rental of space for practice and bouts, bout production costs, travel costs, and more recently, team health insurance. Skater note that derby does not yet generate enough profit to entice, investors, or others to purchase leagues. Yet, regardless of the necessity, when leagues proudly claim that they are skater owned and operated, they are not just turning a necessity into a good value. Doing the work themselves also makes certain that participants maintain control over their organizations, image, identities, athletic activity and labor, and the future of the sport.

The Collective Ethic – Group Control over Activity and Community

Although doing it yourself at an organizational level was essential for the women I interviewed, the DIY ethic fostered community and collective values as well. Underlying this ethic for many

of the skaters I interviewed is the desire and ability to control the production of their athletic activity and the creation of their “product” – their image, teams, leagues, and bouts. This created a collective consciousness, in a sense.

Derby is a team sport and a group effort, though, and as such, rollergirls do not entirely have full autonomy. Coaches, team captains, and trainers still work with participants for strength training, skill building, and strategizing for bouts. For many skaters, however, this is still not the same as having an outside person control how derby should be played, organized, or promoted.

As Trish the Dish highlights:

If you’ve played a sport your whole entire life, you already know the rules of it, you already know the basics of it, you’re either good or you’re not because you were either good as a kid or you weren’t, you know, you were either sitting on the bench or you were playing. And so, but like it’s all those things wrapped into it. You’re not going to get any better. And that’s completely not true of roller derby. Anybody can do it if you want to. And finally with the coaching is that, you’re used to listening to a coach. If you’ve played your whole life, you’re used to a coach screaming in your face. And it’s usually a male.

So while the skaters I interacted with stress the importance of having control over their athletic activity and self-expression in derby, they also recognize that operating their own leagues requires a collective effort. When asked about the primary responsibilities that skaters take on for their leagues, F-Bomb replied, “you help with the operation of the business, which is anything from selling merch, to working the door, to building the track, special events. It’s kind of like a co-op. We’re a social business and with that is really takes a whole society, or community I guess, to run it.” In other words, operating a roller derby league is not about just doing it yourself. It requires a collective effort from all participants.

Interestingly, this means that though teams compete against each other on the track, they must act cooperatively off the track. For this reason, leagues actively work to foster a sense of not just unity, but also community, among all the skaters in the league. All of the skaters I spoke

with said their leagues operate according to the motto “league first, team second.” Prim Reaper of AZRD league explains this significance: “We’re a league, so we are in it together. Without a league, you don’t have a team you know. So we’re all in it to keep the league prosperous and moving forward and keep the games going. It doesn’t matter what our team is doing—it’s all about the league.” F-Bomb from the Rose City Rollers more broadly contextualizes the same sentiment about league first, team second, in terms of growth and community:

I have a dedication to my team, my league, the sport, and also to the community that we have.... And I think that everyone on some level or another knows that the more we put into the sport, as individuals, as skaters, as leagues, or like myself as a board member, or a committee head, whatever, the more it’s going to move the sport forward. Because we’re serious about it being a DIY, skater owned and operated type of sport, we have to do it.

Tyger Bomb, who is in the same league as F-Bomb followed up her teammate’s response saying that she always reminds skaters: “You can’t have a team if there is not a league. We’re a league first.” An important point implicit in these quotes is how doing it themselves requires skaters’ navigation of the pervasive “win at all costs” attitude in other sports that creates divisions between athletes and teams. Trish the Dish explains, “Our model is so different than any other kind of sport, and our rivalries are so different than any other kind of sport because of our ownership mode.” Cooperation and camaraderie between rollergirls are key elements of this discourse and surface in a majority of the interviews I conducted, and is aptly illustrated by Domesticated Violence and F-Bomb in their discussions of the Championship tournament for their league, Rose City Rollers. When I ask about team cooperation and camaraderie between skaters, Domesticated Violence provides this example: “So when the High Rollers won, what happened? All the other teams came in to celebrate with them and cheer them on because that’s

just, I mean, that's kind of like the idealistic way of thinking about it." F-Bomb, who was on the team that lost that championship bout, elaborates further:

You know, we [Break Neck Betties] have two championships under our belt and many of the fans didn't want us to get a third. They wanted the High Rollers to win because they've always been the underdogs. And when the High Rollers won we were just as happy for them as everyone else because there are a lot of friendships there and we want them to succeed. I guess that's the difference between roller derby and other sports is that we don't – we want to win, but it's like – it really doesn't matter who wins. At least on a home team level. It really doesn't matter. So, those really intense rivalries and hard feelings and drama that can sometimes crop up, isn't really necessary. It still happens, but ultimately you know what? We're here to have a good time, we're here to play a sport that we love, we want our friends to have a good time and to succeed and to kick ass. When my friend knocks me over into the crowd, I think it's awesome.

Another important part of this discourse of cooperation and camaraderie is the way derby leagues actively work to create bonds between skaters across team lines through social events involving the entire league. This can happen several ways. Many leagues have monthly meetings involving the whole league and discuss business. Frequently a potluck occurs in conjunction with the meeting, or social outing happens after discussion of league business. Additionally, most leagues, post bout, have "after-parties" where the entire league (including the teams who just bouted) can socialize. Some leagues have yearly retreats, and some have organized camping trips or other organized outdoor activities. In a motivational exercise, for example, teams in the Texas Roller Derby league engage in thrill-seeking or high-risk activities together, like ziplining, bungee jumping, or skydiving, to prove that solidarity and fearlessness can carry them to victory. The team co-captain, La Princessa, for the Putas del Fuego proudly tells me that, "every league has its personality, and our personality is about being a league." In one small, simple sentence, Domesticated Violence perhaps best articulates the collective bonds between the skaters: "Yeah, so we're all very close—it's a family for sure." She encapsulates a sentiment mentioned by almost every skater I interviewed:

I see myself as staying involved with this after I can't skate anymore. I'll probably try to stay on the board or be involved in some way. Because I can't imagine just walking away from it. It's always going to have to be part of my life, somehow. Or maybe I'll be a coach, or something. It's like—you can't just step away from family (Tyger Bomb)

With the derby team, it gives me kind of a rush that I have never had before—it's an experience that I never thought would have this big of an impact in my life. We rough each other up, and at the end of the day we still love each other (MinDy Stroyer).

As the above quotes suggests, cooperation is necessary for league survival, but the collective nature of the DIY revival of roller derby is more than instrumental. Almost every participant I spoke with stressed of the importance of community within derby. In fact, community is so fundamental to derby that many skaters enjoy being a part of the roller derby community as much as, if not more than, playing the sport itself. Peachy Queen, when asked about what drew her into roller derby, and now after a long recovery from a back injury, what keeps her in derby, took a very long pause and then responded:

Roller derby is my life. And it was an instant community. It took me out of a horrible situation and made me remember who I am and learned that I kind of liked it... And then creating relationships with women on a level that's not about school, and it's not about who's fucking who and who's doing what, it's about meaningful things that are positive and enduring and empowering, and not a bunch of bullshit about, you know, I don't like the way you looked at my boyfriend. That's not the focus of our relationships. That's why I got in. That's why I'm staying in it, just for that.

For Montreal Roller Derby's Georgia W. Tush, the meaningfulness of community and connection is one the fundamental draws to the sport: "Anywhere you go, anywhere around the world, if you meet somebody who's in derby, it's like BOOM! Instant connection. And I love that. I just find that appealing on so many levels."

F-Bomb responds similarly:

... It is that instant feeling of community. Immediately you have a hundred friends that you didn't have before. Just because you play roller derby. I mean that's like a common link between people. When skaters come to Portland just to visit family or whatever, and

they contact us and are like, “hey, I want to drop in on practice, is that ok?” And we’re like “sure!” And even though we don’t know these people, we take them in as family. Even if they’re only going to be here for a day. Just the fact that it’s another derby skater, it’s like – a lot of people use the term sisterhood—it really is. It’s like the biggest, craziest, type A sorority that ever existed on the planet.

Based on the above responses, and for nearly all the skaters I spoke with, roller derby demonstrates sports’ potential to create strong social bonds between participants. And the sense of community bonds between players in roller derby extends beyond the individual leagues. F-Bomb may only be slightly exaggerating when she says that she immediately had “100 friends” that she didn’t have before. Rollergirls across the country, and across continents, are connected in a multitude of ways: Through inner-league bouts, regional competitions, national and international tournaments, social media, internet message boards, and the annual roller derby convention, RollerCon.

Beyond the social bonds it creates, though, the DIY ethic and the resulting collective labor in roller derby also serve to challenge stereotypes about women’s cattiness and the inability to work together smoothly. That said, the challenge is not one that embraces feminine “playing nice.” On the one hand, some of the skaters I spoke with talked about this gendered stereotype of women as catty as if it was a known universal truth. SCRG’s Bootsy Call has the job of handling disagreements between skaters. When I asked about the types of disputes that arise Bootsy told me: “Name it. I mean there are 70 women involved so imagine what comes up. We’re women, we fight, it happens.” Angela Wings said: I think there’s always going to be drama in our league—well, all leagues—you get this many women together, playing a high speed contact sport, you’re probably going to have major drama.”

Queen Elizabitch had a slightly different take on the trope of catty women and derby drama:

Well, it's not always about some sort of peaceful sisterhood where we all braid each other's hair and live in our utopia. It's really about us getting to be who we are, even if that's abrasive, discouraged, or whatever. It's about working with and through the differences, not about sameness. The fact that there can be, or there is, a dark side to derby just means that we get to be *whole*, many-sided personalities. It's a pain in the ass sometimes, but it's ultimately a good thing.

In other words, they were crafting a work together ethic that seemed to work against the feminine discourses. Shawna 'th Dead, another founding member of SCRG, uncomfortably acknowledges that there are fights in roller derby. She wonders if disputes within and between leagues could foster negative stereotypes about the sport of derby, rollergirls, and women in general:

I think my main complaint about the evolution of the sport—an all-girl sport—is that yes, there is this ugly shit that can come up, which is the exact opposite of what this is all about. To me, I think we're defying the stereotype of what women are: Women are petty; they can't work together; they're just gonna cat fight. Blah, blah, blah. We're not. We're a solid group of women that are running a really great, solid business, having a lot of fun, and creating family at the same time. It worries me that there are leagues coming up that are not embracing that, and unfortunately, letting some stereotypes come true.

Disputes, of course, occur within every organization. Yet, as Shawna 'th Dead points out, fights between women in organizations can be misconstrued as “proof” that women often undermine each other and have an inability to work together. For Shawna 'th Dead, however, women in derby can potentially counter this stereotype. She notes that many leagues are accomplishing this simply by showing that women can, in fact, work as a “cohesive group.” I similarly argue that this stereotype is countered just through the longevity of the leagues alone. At the writing of this document, for example, AZRD is entering its 12th year, Portland's Rose City Rollers their 11th year, and SCRG its 10th year. Additionally, the continual growth of leagues, on national and global levels severely undermines the stereotype about women's inability to work collectively, as friends and or in the realm of business. There are now nearly

500 leagues that are members of the WFTDA, and an additional 600 established leagues in cities across the globe vying for admittance (WFTDA 2015)

A Sport of One's Own (Again)

There is reacting to something and there is creating something, and in a beautiful, incredible, gorgeous way, the beauty of roller derby is we created it, it's ours, we're not reacting to society, we're not reacting to men's opinions, we're not reacting to a man's sport that's already out there. It's ours. We get to figure it out and do whatever we want (Ivana S. Pankin).

Women's control over the sport of roller derby is notable, given men's dominance within the overall institution of sport. Rollergirls have built an organizational structure that does not reproduce the hierarchies and hierarchical arrangements found in other sports. Within this latest roller derby revival women working together to build the leagues, create the rules, promote the bouts, and grow the sport does more than challenge a stereotype, thus subverting the gender regime so characteristic of sport in general. While a few leagues allow men to sit on the board of directors, a majority of the board is still controlled by women. And because women also comprise a majority the leagues' membership, they outnumber men in voting power. Women also manage and control the national governing body, which means they have power over the future flat track roller derby. This is an alternative narrative to the hierarchal, competitive performance standards that have existed (and still do) in sports.

There is currently no other sport in which women control the structural, organizational, and creative features of the sport, as well as its image and its future. This makes roller derby unique, and that women's control over roller derby makes the sport so unique is not lost on the skaters. As Tiger Beatdown of AZRD says, "Roller derby is one of the only sports in which "men's" is the qualifier. We say "men's or "co-ed" derby—like the typical usage of women's basketball or women's soccer. For women to be perceived as the dominant in almost any sport is

an anomaly.” Of the skaters I interviewed, about half readily identified as feminist. But even amongst rollergirls who did not consider themselves feminist, they did point to women’s power within the sport:

My hope is that people can see how empowering and DIY this sport is. I mean, it’s really a wonderful thing for women because women are taught that we’re not supposed to be physically aggressive. I think it’s amazing to be in a sport that says yes, you can be aggressive, and that doesn’t mean that you have to be douchebag. If I could summarize the message that derby puts out there, it’s that roller derby really is about a new kind of femininity, about women as Amazons—women finding their most powerful self and expressing that (Georgia W. Tush)

I had this debate about whether roller derby was feminist with my best friend when I first joined the league. I can’t remember which sides we took, but I can tell you that at the time, the women in the league were the same women I remembered from the personal-is political DIY hardcore Riot Grrrl scene of the early 1990s. Now, I’m three years in and it’s at least as feminist as any other sport in which women had to fight for recognition as athletes.... I don’t see why we need to be seen as making any statement other than we’re strong, we’re fast, we fight for our team to win. To me, the very idea of a bunch of grown women training hard, working together on a team, working to help each other through a high speed, high stakes human obstacle course is enough a statement to the fans and media about the power that results when we work together (Strawberry Shortkick)

Like Georgia W. and Strawberry, other rollergirls talk about the importance of roller derby being women owned and operated, a sport specifically for women, and a sport and experience that is empowering. In what ultimately lead to a conversation about the significance of team uniforms, Ginger Tonyx told me: “What I love about [roller derby] is that it’s the whole do-it-yourself thing, with women at the helm. I think doing something and excelling in it and feeling great about yourself is very empowering.” Envi MiYoni did not use the word empowering, but she echoes Ginger Tonyx’s sentiment: “Roller derby has changed my life for the better. It enables me to be a powerful, competitive player with an amazing league of diverse and intelligent women while retaining some of the individual expression that has been a guiding imperative in my life.” Tyger Bomb does label herself a feminist, but she is ambivalent to call roller derby an

explicitly a feminist endeavor; she does though, enthusiastically discuss derby in the framework of empowerment, too:

I think empowering women is definitely a goal. I think showing women that this is something you can do, too – it's not one of those sports where it's like look I can do this and you can watch me, but you can't do this. It's not like figure skating; not everybody can get out there and do those jumps. And it's not like gymnastics. These are sports that I'm thinking of where everybody likes to watch them but very few people can actually do it. This [derby] is very accessible. Anybody with a couple of hundred bucks to buy some gear, and time to take some lessons, can learn how to do this, as long as they are physically able. So, I would say empowerment is really one of the main goals. I mean, it's in our mission statement and I think especially with all of the junior leagues popping up, and even leagues for little girls, it's like trying to get that message to them – to women and girls—that you can do this, and be strong and powerful and still feminine. And you can do it yourself.

Ultimately, I suggest that roller derby is feminist, and parallels contemporary feminism and feminist movements like Riot Grrrl. As it was with the punk inspired Riot Grrrl movement, the DIY ethos was (and is) fundamental in the reincarnation of derby and development of flat track derby – because it was largely based on its effort to create a female space rather than attempting to enter pre-existing male institutions based on its non-hierarchical philosophy and DIY ethics. The roller derby revival fits squarely within the ideological underpinnings of the anti-corporate punk culture, and the Riot Grrrl movement's reclamation and reworking of power, vitality, grass roots, and DIY into a specifically feminist space. Although Peachy Queen describes her draw to roller derby by using empowerment discourse, her ongoing participation in roller derby as a skater and a national WFTDA board member reflects this feminist narrative:

It's the empowering—that it's unconditional levels of empowerment. You don't have to fight to be heard. It's a place where natural-born leaders can exist unconditionally, where we're not fighting this like glass-ceiling effect...

As mentioned above, Tyger Bomb identifies herself as a feminist but is hesitant to directly identify roller derby as an explicitly feminist sport and space. But in the quote below, she is

initially very direct about the connection between feminism and roller derby, and the benefits of derby as a woman owned and operated sport and space:

[The] fact that it was all started by women, for women, there's definitely that whole feminist thing there. And I think it is very empowering to women. I think a lot of women have really come into their own just from playing this sport. I've seen the changes... This one girl in particular that I am thinking of, she was so quiet when she joined Fresh Meat. I mean you would never even know she was there. She would just never say anything, and very, very shy. And she's still pretty quiet, but now she just has this different presence about her. She's much more confident. More active, more involved in our community-- I mean you can see the changes in people as they learn to use their body to do things. It's like they become more confident. It's amazing to watch. I think it's great. You learn what a group of women can do together and what we can accomplish. I mean, we are running this organization; we are raising hundreds of thousands of dollars to keep it going and to donate to other organizations. To work for change within our communities. It's fantastic.

Regardless of the initial intent, the DIY ethic that has guided and sustained the revival of derby has catalyzed women to develop a sport that they not just own, but also control. Derby thus provides a space where women can largely avoid the male gaze, male domination, and the marginalization women often experience in other sports, as athletes and executives. The 'by the skaters for the skaters' ethos in derby, however, has allowed women access to positions of power within the sport organizations they created. Within the institution of sport, leadership positions, at almost all levels, are overwhelmingly filled by men. Roller derby's organizational structure dismantles those hierarchies, and importantly, provides pathways into this sector of the sport that is rarely accessible to women. These aspects of roller derby are highlighted by Peachy Queen:

...It's our organization. It's run by women. We don't have to worry about trying to beat out men for these positions and trying to take over, you know, fighting for the rights that we have as women. It's a given.

In addition to having access to roles and positions in leadership, many roller derby participants have never been involved in running organizations. Some skaters note that their involvement in derby has helped them to develop certain skill sets and greater confidence around leadership:

I've learned a lot about my leadership qualities. I'm a committee head... You know, that's the other really good aspect of it, is that there's so much work to be done, because we do everything ourselves. It's all volunteer. I mean it's a huge opportunity to build your resume or learn new things. I mean you can learn about budget and finance, you can learn about marketing. You can learn pretty much about anything you want, just from being on one of our committees (Tyger Bomb)

We've got girls that in their early 20s; it's a great place to get some kind of job experience, something to put on their resume. I have to keep reminding them. Pick a committee that gets you where you want to go, develop new sets of skills (F-Bomb).

The DIY ethic encourages participants to become producers of culture. Women's involvement in roller derby supports McRobbie's (1993, 2000) argument that participation in subculture can be empowering for girls and young women. In the current incarnation of roller derby, it is the DIY ethic that constitutes a key strategy of resistance for the players. The emphasis on doing it yourself gives women opportunities to learn new skills and gain confidence that comes from creating and sustaining groups and organizations. As is similar to other DIY movements, participants resist allowing professionals or experts to decide, create, or produce their culture for them. Participants of roller derby manufacture their own culture as a way of resisting a culture/sport they are forced to accept. Roller Derby's "from the ground up" philosophy allows women full participation in their sport on multiple levels, in a unique cultural space. In this sense, skaters have made roller derby a space to resist the corporatized structure and masculinity model of sport. They see themselves as creating a gender/sexualized revolution. The tactics we see within the roller derby revival resist the hierarchical structure of the corporate sport industry. The all-female owned leagues, so far, persist outside of traditional sport league structures, resisting co-option, commodification, and corporatization that is often seen accompanying the growth and popularity of newly developing "alternative" or "sub-cultural"

sports. Derby leagues remain independent from a larger governing, commercial regulatory body, with skaters creating their own rules, regulations, and business structure as they go.

As women's flat track roller derby continues its phenomenal growth on national and international levels, it is clear that the DIY ethic remains foundational as part of the identity of the sport and of its participants. Present from the (re)inception of the sport, DIY is one of the primary mechanisms that has allowed derby, not unlike punk rock and the Riot Grrls, to organize and to grow so rapidly. DIY also plays a significant role in identity formation of the skaters and maintaining feminist underpinnings as the sport grows. DIY ethic appears foundational to the how the players view themselves as participants and organize themselves in the league, how they view derby, their roles in derby and how the skaters build spaces in their local communities. Importantly, the DIY ethic in women's derby provides a route to positions of power within the organization of the WFTDA for many women who might not otherwise have the opportunity, experience, or qualifications needed to run existing sport organizations. The "by the skaters for the skaters" ethic offers roller derby's participant's a potential voice in how their sport is organized. As Birrell and Richter (1994) have emphasized, endeavors to expand positions of power, leadership roles, and participation within the structure of sport and its organization must examine alternative ways to organize sports. The DIY ethic can serve as a tactic for producing alternatively structured and organized sports for and by women.

It is also important to recognize, however, that the DIY model undergirding roller derby is not without its challenges. The financial cost of playing roller derby for women on a tight budget, for example, can be burdensome. Some leagues charge monthly dues. Other leagues reduce or wave altogether their dues for skaters who work a minimum of four hours per month for their league. Still, skaters can spend a significant amount on equipment (initial investments

range between \$100-\$200), and for skaters with limited income, replacing broken equipment can be very costly. The irony here is that while the DIY ethos offers possibilities for some women to create derby leagues without the formal education or experience required for certain positions of power in other sport organizations, the same ethos also produces circumstances that can hinder certain groups of women's participation in the sport.

Additionally, as discussed by almost every skater interviewed, roller derby requires an enormous time commitment. Like all athletes, the skaters spend time conditioning through strength training and cardio exercise, as well as practicing and competing. For some skaters, like F-Bomb, it is not unusual to spend 20-30 hours per week on derby. F-Bomb estimates that she practices as a single skater and then in scrimmages with her league approximately 6-8 hours per week and spends an additional 6-8 hour per week of non-skating training—cycling, cross-fit, yoga, Pilates, boxing. F-Bomb tells me, “At least a quarter of the skaters put in extra time outside of practice. Because they’ve learned that to be a really good athlete you can’t just train doing your single sport all of the time. You have to cross-train.” Add into that mix the league activities, WFTDA responsibilities, travel, bouts and tournaments, the hours a skater devotes to derby can rack up. “With a zillion hours of practice and board meetings, and league meetings and events,” F-Bomb tells me, “it definitely has taken a chunk of my life.” This work, of course, is in addition to skaters’ full-time “day” jobs.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, the DIY ethic in and organizational structure in roller derby allows skaters to resist organizational and ultimately commercial control of their sport. The leagues remain independent, creating rules, regulations, and their governing structures as they

go. For most of these leagues, being organized, owned, and operated by the skaters is still a financial necessity and brings with it the challenges of long hours and extensive responsibilities; still the skaters acknowledge that anything different could lead to lack of control over not just the bouts that they produce, but their athletic activity and the overall culture of roller derby. In this way, DIY and its associated tactics critique and resist the structures of the larger corporate sport industry. The all-female owned leagues thus remain outside of traditional sport league structures, resisting co-option, commodification, corporatization. I think it is important to note here, that this roller derby revival is part of this new discourse and is firmly situated during a time of seemingly immense social, cultural, and political progress for women. For the first time, control of the means of production of roller derby—of the sport—is in the hands of the participants of the sport—the skaters themselves.

The DIY ethic, so integral in roller derby, is a primary mechanism in pushing women to carve out social spaces that they control while also creating strong bonds between the participants. In what ways has roller derby been created as a space to find a meaningful existence, to create an identity, to levy a cultural critique or to enact resistance? In other words: How do derby participants understand power in these contexts? And, in this context, what are the ways in which alternative femininities are constructed, challenged and reinforced within women's flat track derby? In following chapters I address tactics, strategies, and social practices skaters use that further position roller derby as a site of resistance.

CHAPTER 6: PARODY & PERFORMANCE AS STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

So far, previous chapters focus on the ways derby participants have created a culture of resistance against male domination in sport through 1) infusing athleticism with femininity and sexuality, and 2) the DIY ethic in their organization. In this chapter I more closely explore the strategies of resistance involving camp and parody, including rituals like derby wives and derby weddings, or social practices like the development of the Vagine Regime.

In this chapter I will show how the tactics, policies, strategies, and social practices used by the participants within derby are forms of cultural and political social movement tactics. In this context, using parody, irony, and camp, or performing the unique rituals of the derby wife and the derby wedding, or the continued expansion of the Vagine Regime are strategies of resistance, and by engaging in these strategies, skaters perform politics on the track. Taken together, these strategies of resistance can create oppositional and/or political cultural performances that challenge the organization, structure, and the hetero-gendering and hetero-sexing of sport and sport spaces.

Social Protest

At a bout between the Wheels of Justice and Axils of Annihilation, both teams in Portland's Rose City Rollers, I sat on creaky old wooden bleachers that were part of overflow seating brought into a space called The Hangar, watching women of all shapes, sizes, ages, and talent levels whiz by me. The bout was part of a larger three-day event called Hometown Throwdown. The Hangar, with a capacity for about 400 spectators, is considered one of the smaller derby venues in Portland, but because it allows for floor seating mere feet from the action on the track, it is one of the more popular venues at which to watch derby.

It was the beginning of June, and the lively crowd at this sold-out event spent a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday packed into this relatively small non-air-conditioned space, breathing stale air re-circulated by two industrial sized swamp cooler fans, all to catch a glimpse of their favorite teams and skaters. In addition to the Portland teams, Hometown Throwdown also brought in teams from San Diego, Los Angeles/Hollywood, and Seattle. The competitions also included smaller exhibition bouts for your skaters in middle-school and high school. The junior skaters in training, members of RCR's junior roller derby leagues (Rose Petals and Rosebuds, respectively) donned gear in the style of their older idols and adopted skate names like "Habenero Romero," "Psycho Kitty," "Smackie Kennedy," "Cup Quake," and "Barbarian Librarian." Looking around, I realized that this subcultural phenomenon was like a bolt of lightning to the cultural imagination: Derby does not just run into, but slams, smashes and crashes into traditional ideals of womanhood, dominant conceptions of gender, and the gendered arrangement of sporting spaces and organizations.

Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue that, "athleticism can be an activist tool for third wave feminists and can have important social consequences...relegating to the cultural dustbin mythologies of the 'weaker' sex of female incompetence" (45). They go on to note that sport, like any other social practice, can be rethought and reconstructed. The scene above, describing the Hometown Throwdown, certainly reflects this notion. So, the larger question is how does women's roller derby stage and reconstruct a different kind of space where women can subvert, queer, and perform gender, femininity, and sexuality in more diverse ways? How does it embody Rupp and Taylor's notions of contestation, intentionality and collective identity using performance as a strategy of resistance?

Performance as Politics: Parody, Irony, Camp

Studying the roles of parody, irony and camp is another way of examining an oppositional or political cultural performance. In accordance with Butler's (1998) notion of performativity, I find that derby participants do gender in innovative ways, playing with normative conventions around gender and sexuality, while simultaneously making and subverting the traditional borders that mark femininity (and thereby womanhood). The institution of sport is a space that is steeped in the historical weight of conventional norms around gender, sex, and sexuality. Like sport in general, roller derby provides us a glimpse as to how gender is made: Butler (1988) notes that gender is an exaggeration, parody, resistance, or product of performance, through its "manufacturer." In this sense, by consciously refusing mainstream convention, derby becomes one possible arena where strategies of gender that mark the site of sport as a natural and assumed male space and endeavor, can be exposed. Roller derby unsettles this pervasive masculine gaze and reflection that is infused into our cultural understanding of sports.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler writes, "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony..." (176-77). Butler offers that parody, the performance of drag, for example, is a way to destabilize and expose the invisible assumptions about gender and gender identity. Thus, according to Butler, by re-engaging with identity, and by actively revealing failed attempts to "become" one's gender, a transformative politics can occur.

This dynamic is also present in roller derby, where parody simultaneously works with irony and camp – the latter which employs exaggeration, appropriation, and outrageous gender

performance (Halberstam 1998). Parody, then, in context with camp and irony, becomes a “political” act. Going back to Butler’s (1988) notion of performativity, this suggests that performance allows for a potential critique of identity(s). Taken together, parody, camp, satire, and irony are important strategies of resistance within derby, and serve as critical commentaries on normative, hetero-gendered structures of sport, language, bodies, and performances.

Uniforms, War Paint, and Skate Names,

As roller derby continues to grow in size and popularity, pressures to professionalize are bearing the down upon the sport and its participants. Still, derby continues to grow as a crucial space for women in sport to explore identities and ways of being athletic, sexy, powerful, violent, entertaining, and importantly, unified in a shared collective identity. These multiple identities and positionings do not fit neatly into normative expectations of women, in or outside of sport. Within derby, however, skaters expose varying constructions of gendered identity through their performances on and off the track. These performances chip away at the expected behaviors of female athletes and expectations around femininity. Similar to the ways that professional wrestling parodies hypermasculinity, the use of skate names, campy costumes, and dramatic antics disrupt traditional images associated with femininity, cultural definitions of womanhood, attractiveness, and desirability, and create parodies of violence and sexuality.

Fashion

Bordo states that “no body can escape either the imprint of culture or its gendered meaning” (1993:212). In roller derby, however, skaters mock, celebrate and challenge bodily and gendered meanings. One way they do this is through team uniforms. In this sense, fashion becomes a key element of the sport and a form of cultural critique. Skaters embellish common

markers of femininity, like make-up, by wearing bright theatrical stage blush, eyeliner, and lipstick, and poke fun at feminine markers through the exaggerated wearing of things like tutus, or fishnet stockings, and heavy application of makeup. Blush, eye-liner, and lipstick are often described as “war paint.”

“War paint,” along with a team’s uniform gives teams and their leagues their distinct identity. Uniforms (also known as “boutfits”) typically symbolize a mix of sport, punk rock, burlesque, or rockabilly fashion. While there is a standard sleeveless pullover shirt that has the teams name and logo that all skaters wear, each skater can also choose how they want to further modify their “boutfit” to represent their unique, self-fashioned skate identities. Some skaters choose to go sleeveless to show off tattoos and/or muscles. Some modify their tops by slicing and dicing their shirts, allowing for holes that strategically reveal or show off tattoos or piercings. Some skaters also wear sleeves or tighter body undergarments (like various types of shapewear), noting that it makes them feel sleek and faster on the track. Skaters also have free rein in how they want to “dress” their lower body. This includes options that range from hot pants, mini-skirts, longer basketball or football type shorts, to fishnets, tights, and/or colorful knee-high socks. Until very recently boutfits almost universally consisted of fishnet stockings and/or knee-high socks, and for many players, short skirts. Rollergirls often resemble cultural images of punk rockers and pin-up girls more so than popular, mainstreamed images of traditional female athletes. As the sport mainstreams, though, via the growth of national travel teams, coverage of bouts on local news stations and ESPN stations, so do the boutfits. However, by combining physical strength, aggression and bodily contact with the various forms of hyper-feminine, suggestive attire, skaters are simultaneously blurring and pushing the boundaries of

contemporary sport and sexuality, bucking the cultural constraints often bestowed upon images, appearances, and behaviors of female athletes, and women in general.

Skate Names

In addition to the outfit, skaters adopt a persona for their competitions through the use of skate names. Skate names usually play on words that create double entendres with satirical, faux-violent or sexual puns, and plays on pop culture. Ivana S. Pankin, Anne Gre Feminist, Bette Noir, d'jen irate, Shawna th' Dead, Skid'n Nancy, Sandra Day O'Clobber, Penny Trate, and Mike Litt are examples of some of the skate names for members of Las Vegas' SCRG. This is an old tradition which has its roots in punk rock, where women often adopted names as a critique of the masculinity which was prevalent within the movement, naming their bands Pork, Thrust, or Weenie Roast, for example. Naming was thus a tactic of deflating masculinist terms and reclaiming certain words seen as "unseemly" for women to use or speak about in public. In this respect, skate names offer a cultural critique of the larger patriarchal structure, but at the same time they also allow for the establishment of "rollergirl" identity (on the track and off the track):

I think a lot of the whole thing of what you're going to wear to skate in is part of the self-expression—that's part of what derby is. You know, you get to pick your name, you get to pick your persona. Maybe you are a librarian by day and you want to be a Valkyrie by night, and this is your chance to do it (F-Bomb)

What I love about derby is the ability to create an alternative persona. In my day-to-day world, I cannot act like I do in derby—be aggressive, be outspoken, but I love putting on my uniform and transforming into this other person. I feel like a badass. (Deck Her).

Skate names are different from our real names. We thought we should be larger than life. Naming yourself gives you that extra inspiration to fill out that character. The first name I chose was Queen Destroyer. April couldn't be a face-stomping, choking grabber, but Queen Destroyer could! (Queen Destroyer).

For F-Bomb, Deck Her, and Queen Destroyer, choosing their skate names allows them to engage in behavior they may not otherwise engage in, in effect, giving them permission develop

different personas and to be someone they may not be off the track. For some skaters, this allows them to step out of certain roles and often resist the more constraining aspects of life:

In many ways, derby is antithetical to what we do in our professional lives or in our family lives. You've got to be, you know, super conformed and dress a certain way at work and behave a certain way and say all the right things and be a proper lady and all that, and you get out on the track and it's completely a different persona...when you are at practice with your team, and skating, you get to be that person, and you don't have to be the other person that's confining (Peachy Queen).

From my experience I've found that your "derby persona" is just who you are, but freer. Derby gives you a new world wherein you don't have to let people talk down to you any more, you don't have to try to be something to impress people, you have the freedom to be the person that has always been inside you but could never quite make it out. And in many cases I think it's great if that version of you can make it back into your other world. I don't let my coworkers treat me like crap any more. I'm not aggressive about it, but I have more self-respect and I'm assertive by sticking up for myself when they put me down. Now that I respect myself more, they respect me more too (G-Wrex).

Derby is definitely different than my work persona—I am definitely aggressive and outspoken on the track. Though it's starting to be useful for my work persona. When I'm running the drug and alcohol testing program I have to go out and talk to these guys who operate heavy equipment—they're driving dump trucks or whatever, and I'm just the chick from HR—as soon as they find out I'm a roller derby girl I get all of this street cred. (Tyger Bomb)

As these skaters articulate in their statements, skate names and uniforms are central to their derby identities. The intentionality in choosing uniforms and skate names highlights the significance of roller derby as an important site for women to simultaneously have control over their sport, *and* contest, adopt, and subvert femininity. More broadly, roller derby becomes a site of cultural resistance for skaters to push back against some of the rigid boundaries around gender that frame, and sometimes stifle, their lives on and off the track. In this respect roller derby holds a great deal of reflexivity in that it is a woman-generated and dominated space where skaters can contemplate life, find ways to respond to its less fulfilling aspects, and respond in ways that generate more meaning. In creating their derby identities, skaters begin to establish collective

identity, enact power, and challenge and resist various rules, markers, and narratives that construct and control women's appearances, behaviors, gendered boundaries, and identities. "Power in late modernity," Buechler (1999) writes, "has penetrated and saturated the interstices of everyday life in a new and historically specific way. As a result, the terrain of social conflict has also shifted, both provoking and necessitating localized forms of activism that are often fought on the battleground of identity" (153).

Refocusing the Gaze – Sexuality in Bouts

A common thread throughout the body of research on sport and gender focuses on the ways in which female athletes are positioned as "sexy" and objectified, whether they want to be seen that way or not. Historically, female athletes have been judged more for their appearance than their athleticism (Cahn 1994; Messner, 1998; Clasen 2001; Eitzen 2003, 2012; Weber and Carini 2012). Likewise, this can sometimes be true in the culture of roller derby, where bodies are on display for the audience. Derby skaters, however, use this as a way to flip the script, so to speak—through combining traditional notions of sexualized femininity with strength, athleticism, and quite often, the aggression, physicality and brutality of contact sports. As Ruthless Benedict stated, "Come for the babes, stay for the beatings." Other skaters echoed this sentiment in one way or another:

I HATE when I hear it compared to mud wrestling or some cheese like that. Trust me, we don't have to wear t-shirts and athletic shorts to be taken seriously. When the whistle blows, and girls start hitting the ground, people know we mean business. The girl who's jaw I supposedly dislocated isn't hurting any less because I was wearing a skirt when I did it. (And, yes, it was an accident. It's a rough game).

If we want to fucking wear our fishnets, we're going to. But understand that this is a real sport that we're putting a lot of effort into, that we're putting a lot of time into, a lot of commitment, and a lot of blood, sweat, tears, MRIs, bruises, broken bones, casts. And that is something that's really trailblazing about our sport as well, because it's defined by women (Ivanna S. Pankin)

Women really have not had enough of a presence or place in physical sports, save for boxing or rugby. I think derby is appealing to women because we get to showcase [our] strength, agility and speed like the guys. (Tera Hyman).

The whips [a strategic play] are fun and skating real low, ducking under people and bobbing and weaving is exciting to the crowd, but the catastrophic hits, I mean I love knocking people out [of bounds]; but I love knocking people out more when there is a crowd. If I, as a blocker, can nail somebody into the front row of the crowd and get them to land in their laps, that's pretty fucking cool. If the crowd was not there, I might not do it because I wouldn't want to hurt somebody. But at the same time, I wouldn't be as proud about it because there would not be a thousand people cheering because some chick just landed in their lap. And if I'm wearing a short skirt while doing all of that, well... (Trish the Dish).

As we see in the quotes above, the contradiction between the glamour, antics and sexy uniforms on one hand, and the brutal physicality of the game on the other, can serve to break down the connection between hyper-feminine and passivity, and articulate the physical aspects of the game, the sport, and importantly, the agency of the skaters. This is a unique aspect of roller derby. Many female athletes, in order to gain acceptance in a male dominated bastion of sport, often downplay traits associated with masculinity and emphasize a hegemonic femininity, where feminine characteristics are sometimes showcased over athletic ability (Clasen 2001:40). For the skaters within roller derby, however, the focus is as equally on the physical aspects of the game as it is on the performative aspects and athleticism, and the "costuming," gestures, and other feminine exaggerations and adornments displayed by rollergirls are meant to emphasize the athlete, her skills *and* performance

This game is so dynamic right now, and it's a game that you have to play with your head, and that's one of the reasons why men love this sport— because there's a lot of men who've been watching sports their whole lives, they're not only seeing something new but they're seeing it packaged in short skirts and tights. It's cute, you know, but they're also seeing all the fucking blood and guts and like effort and commitment that they want to see in sports, and they're seeing this whole dynamic of strategy that is so new...

Some of us are more provocative than others. I, for one, weigh 210 pounds, lots of it muscle, but chunk too, and frankly appreciate the fact that I get to wear something cute

when I knock the hell out of somebody. Makes me feel a little less butchy since I'm close to six feet tall on skates. (Malicious D)

I like being able to feel sexy without having to give up my toughness. I'm pretty butch in most cases, but in derby I can be hot, and kick butt (Junk Drawer).

As if [other] female athletes aren't subjugated to the patriarchy! Often times, more so! How many WNBA teams are women-owned & operated? Tennis banks on the exploitation of the sexuality of women in a much more gross way to me than roller derby... More conservative costumes wouldn't make roller derby less exploitative, it would just make it less fun. I love the showmanship involved in derby and I love the sport. I don't think that in any way compromises my status as a skater, or as a feminist. (XXX)

The very fact that people question the outfits shows that they're thinking of it from a man's point of view. When I dress up for practice or bouts do you think it even crosses my mind what anyone else thinks? It is ZERO (emphasis) to do with sex and all to do with having fun, working out, and skating hard (Martha)

In this context, uniforms (and skate names) yield a certain amount of power and cultural commentary around the construction of gender and gendered presentation of athletes. Skaters intentionally display their bodies for the audience—whether through presentation via uniforms or physicality on the track—mixing the feminine with athletic, displaying aggression, or embracing normative markers of femininity. By ironically playing off cultural definitions of attractiveness and desirability, reflecting back images of women as icons, and by consciously celebrating these images skaters co-opt the patriarchal gaze thereby reclaiming the objectification of femininity as well as offering a critique. Between skate names, campy performances and suggestive attire, derby participants interrupt the traditional images associated with femininity.

Performances

The fashioning of uniforms and the creation of skate names is not the only way skaters utilize parody, irony, and camp. The following sections exemplify how the performing of gender in derby incorporates parody, exaggerations of femininity, sexuality, and sexual empowerment to

comment on commodification of sexuality, reclaim violence, embrace marginal identities, and queer conventional sporting traditions.

Skater's "boutfits" and the adoption of skate names highlight two important examples of how the performance of sexuality within roller derby is simultaneously objectifying and empowering, as well as integral to creating derby identity and to the performance of gender. These processes are also central to the ways in which derby provides a space in which women can embrace and enact performances that both resist and challenge cultural norms and gendered expectations of womanhood. These performances of gender in roller derby are important in that, through parody, they play upon exaggerations of femininity, sexuality, and commodification of sexuality, as well as reclaim violence through athletic play, embrace marginal identities, and ultimately, queer the conventional sporting space.

Taking on the Tropes

In her essay "Thinking Sex," Rubin (1994) says that it is necessary to "denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression" (275) and discusses the silence and broader cultural oppressions that often confine and condemn sexual practices like pornography, the selling of sex, homosexuality, and even the sexuality (and sexualization) of minors. Roller derby cracks the silence around these various areas of oppression that are so stringently controlled. In fact, derby directly addresses these taboo topics; through the use of camp and performative parody roller derby embodies and emphasizes performances that toy with the boundaries of pornographic imagery, sex and money through the parody of prostitution, the sexualization of young girls through the familiar Catholic school girl uniform imagery, and homosexuality through rituals like derby wives and derby weddings.

The Selling of Sex

An early promotional video for the newly emerging sport of roller derby in 2002 features four team captains from Texas Roller Derby League (TXRD) dancing against a wall in a throwback to the film genre of “sexploitation”—low budget films that usually exploit the idea of sex films. Films may focus on material sexual in nature, but usually feature non-explicit sexual situations, with the occasional gratuitous nudity. The clip in TXRD’s promotional video followed this form, showing some of the skaters in pin-up girl type poses, juxtaposed against clips of their skates. The caption reads, “Get ready for all-girl action” (clip featured in *Hell on Wheels* 2007). Four years later I played my first bout with the SCRG’s Neanderdolls, Las Vegas’ first roller derby team. It was pre-season, so we were scrimmaging, that is, having a non-official bout, with Arizona Roller Derby’s Tent City Terrors. The half-time show at this bout was a performance by AZRD’s “drill team,” a group of six skaters from the Tent City Terrors who performed, in burlesque attire complicated by knee pads and wrist guards, a choreographed dance routine that was more strip tease than *A Chorus Line*. The routine included high kicks, but also equal amounts of hip thrusting, gyrating, grinding, seductive strutting, booty rolling, come hither looks, and... power drills as props. Two years later, as a spectator, I was fortunate to witness the entire AZRD league doing a half-time performance of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. On skates. Their dance skills were still on point. There was less burlesque and more zombie in their performance this time, and though donning full-corpse makeup, skaters were still in their pink and black short skirted uniforms, lending a subtle sexiness to their portrayals of the living dead. While these examples might seem like the selling of sex rather than the selling or celebration of a sport, skaters do not see it this way. As Diana Saurus Wrex explains: “Well, you know, sex sells. So what we’ve decided is that we are going to play along with that,

somewhat. And be sexy and be fun, and be kind of a fantasy, if you will.” Ivanna S. Pankin takes this sentiment several steps further:

[W]e know what sells. It’s a woman’s sport, owned by women, run by women; therefore, we know what sells, we’re making the money off of it. The leagues are growing because we know how to get guys in the door, and we’re the ones that can make the money off of it and not some cigar-munching owner making money off of [us].

Skaters embrace their on-track identities and personas, fashioning and customizing sexy images to bouts and/or to suit their individual personalities. Derby participants play with images of sex, pornography, and even violence on a cultural stage. Using strategies of camp and parody in this setting not only de-stigmatizes and de-objectifies these practices, but also rethinks them as fun, healthy, and normal.

Of all of the derby rituals, the penalty wheel probably holds the most significant space, is one of the most contested symbols, and provokes the most debate amongst skaters. The penalty wheel was not and is not used by all leagues, but it was central to the initial development of the sport and cohesion of the leagues. The use of the penalty wheel also exemplifies the ways in which roller derby engages yet mocks traditional sport etiquette.

The derby penalty wheel is a spectacle in and of itself, and draws on embellished performances that link sex, violence, pleasure, and punishment. The skater who draws the penalty must spin a large wheel that contains a variety of punishments that vary from “what a jackass” where the skater sings out loud while bent over before the audience, to “pillow fight,” to “arm wrestling,” to “spank alley.” Penalties like the pillow fight and spank alley plug into larger cultural tropes and fantasies about “girl-on-girl” action, though at the same time emphasize the aggressiveness and violence central to the sport of roller derby. While many skaters I spoke with expressed a dislike of the spectacle of the penalty wheel, they also realized that it is a crowd-

pleaser. F-Bomb recognizes the role of the penalty wheel in terms of audience engagement: “Our fans know that roller derby isn’t wrestling on skates; in fact, our fans love the penalty wheel. It gives them a sense of interaction with the game.” Miss Conduct directly addresses the “spank alley” and says, “I’d probably do my own bending over for the crowd anyways. I’ve been spanked before, I’ll get spanked again.” While these are relatively tame examples and performances of sexualized, borderline fetish behavior, the fact remains that these sexualized performances are central to the sport and play on the cultural imagination of various sexualized and fetishized practices. The skaters give voice to practices that are not only sexualized, but often silenced and taboo. That these portrayals are played out in public spaces is illustrative of the rebellious sexuality skaters personify and inhabit on the track. Navigating the performance(s) of sexual identity and accompanying practices is a way for skaters to address sexuality, reclaim sexuality and sexual practices positioned outside of normative conventions, and create commentary on normative assumptions of women in sport.

Not only do skaters perform gender and highlight constructed gender dynamics by using sexuality in a variety of ways, they also perform gender by using (performed) sexuality to create profit (almost literally). Skaters disrupt the objectification and scrutiny that is so often sharply focused on female athletes (and women in general) and perform displays of sexuality and exaggerated acts for money. This parody of prostitution, the exaggeration of sex, or at least the idea of sexual fantasy in exchange for money pokes directly at the objectification and oppression that surround the concept of prostitute and the act of prostitution.

In a bout between the Neanderdolls and the Boston derby Dames, one of the Dames wallops a Neanderdoll. The penalty wheel comes out and on the first turn of the wheel the needle lands on “Sold to the highest bidder.” The skater poses, struts, and preens around the track and

through the audience. The wheel “mistress” begins the bidding at \$10 and roams the audience, acknowledging the audience members as they call out their bid. Eventually the skater goes to the highest bidder for \$55, money which then goes back into the league. This is one example of how fantasy is commoditized—the bidder receives the honor of interacting with the skater. Derby leagues also raise money through campy fundraising events at local bars in their cities, often staging wet t-shirt contests, oil-wrestling matches, or auctions for dates with a rollergirl. While these performances appear exploitative and allude to the exchange of sexuality for cash, skaters are very aware of the meanings behind these events and transactions, and purposefully play with the borders and margins of these contested practices. Even in choosing their derby names and identities—names like Mike Litt, Klymaxx, Penny Trate, and Ivanna S. Pankin—many skaters create their identity with the knowledge that sex sells.

Conclusions

Traditional women’s sports normalize, hide, or altogether erase the sexuality of athletes (Heywood 2004), but in roller derby women embrace sexuality through derby names, their ‘boutfits,” and various sexualized performances. These processes uncover the layered, oppressive structural arrangements of and assumptions about women athletes’ sexuality. Derby thus highlights alternate ways of doing “sex” in the arena of sport. Skaters positioning themselves as sexual fantasies is definitely in line with the ways in which sex is commoditized. The parody of prostitution, though, is integral in sustaining leagues’ success by building an audience and fan base and generating revenue, and the skaters are in control. As Trish the Dish aptly notes, “there does not need to be a dichotomy between sexy and sell-out.” In roller derby, acts of resistance are embedded in the merging of sexuality and physicality, identities created by the skaters, and their loyalty to their leagues on and off the track. Performances of gender and

sexuality, in this context, directly confront conventional ideas about womanhood and femininity in sport, and the sexualized performances, antics, and identities demonstrate how roller derby does gender differently, and defiantly.

The use of camp, parody, and irony in derby “performance” are strategies that are used to resist heteronormativity, the gender binary, and are integral to skater identity. Skaters use parody, irony and camp in in fashion, through their uniforms and makeup, and around and sexuality and gender in their skate names. Skaters discuss the ways in which they embrace sexuality in their performances at bouts, in half-time shows, and in promoting bouts. The penalty wheel plays on sexuality, tropes often used in pornography, and BDSM. Taken together, these are all strategic practices that resist institutionalized norms, challenge conventional definitions of femininity, subvert and reinvent femininity, and challenge heteronormativity and traditional, established gender and sexual norms. In the following chapter I continue to expand on the ways that roller derby and its participants challenge heteronormativity by exploring the various acts and rituals skaters use to queer and subvert the hetero-sexing and hetero-gendering of sport and sporting spaces.

CHAPTER 7: QUEERING THE TRACK

In previous chapters I have examined the ways in which the sport of roller derby and its participants disrupt, resist, and challenge how the larger institution of sport dictates and shapes hegemonic ideals of masculinity and normative femininity. These hegemonic ideals also shape, maintain, and naturalize a hetero-normativity and hetero-normative standards of gender pervasive in sport. In this chapter I address how contemporary roller derby challenges this hetero-gendering and hetero-sexing of sport and sport spaces. I highlight specific ways derby and its skaters construct and perform queer acts that challenge conventional norms and ideals of gender, sexuality, athleticism, and ritual, in and out of sport. I focus on the unique derby rituals of derby weddings and derby wives, and the development of the Vagine Regime, a league comprised of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender skaters from the US and abroad.

Obviously, not all skaters identify as queer (according to 2013 WFTDA figures about a quarter of skaters identify as LGBTQ), and the rituals of derby wives and weddings are not necessarily about making a ‘queer statement.’ They are performative rituals, and though they are performative rituals which utilize strategies of camp and parody, they are rituals which integral to the cohesiveness of the sport and skaters’ collective identity. The Vagine Regime is about creating queer space and visibility. When taken together, these three components of roller derby most definitely push back against the stringent gendered boundaries of sport. I find that even as derby inches down the path to commercialization, the tactics, policies, strategies, and social practices—like derby weddings, derby wives, and the growth of the Vagine Regime—deployed by participants within derby also position it as an emergent site of queer space and queer resistance.

Within the institution of sport questions, constructions, performances, and understanding of sexuality in particular, are woven into its history. These same elements have also, historically, positioned women as either “assumed heterosexuals or as demonized lesbians” (Murray 2012:20) and often used as reasons for women’s exclusion from sport—particularly contact sports. Generally, female athletes must act “in conformity with the patriarchal rules that ensure she is first and foremost recognized as a heterosexual feminine being” (Choi 2000: 8). If a female athlete cannot be recognized and/or proven heterosexual, additional markers of heterosexuality can be used, like femininity, which Griffin (1998) notes, “... is a code word for heterosexuality. The real fear is that women athletes will look like dykes, or even worse, are dykes” (68). Women’s roller derby, from its inception, has worked to embrace these questions, constructions, and challenges head on. Women’s appearance and athleticism in many sports is often feminized and thus heterosexualized, through uniforms, and presentation of the body—whether through hairstyle, makeup, less emphasis on muscle, or other feminizing (and sexualizing) features. For sure, these processes play out on the track in derby as well, but through multiple social practices and rituals, these processes become part of forming queer space and resistance in derby. Roller derby participants have managed to accommodate both masculinity and femininity within the sport, as well as address and create a queer politic.

Defining Queer

The term “queer” is a complex term, a contested word, and is not a concrete or bounded category. Queer describes “multiple identities, social relations, politics, and fields of study” (Taylor 2013:2). So it is necessary to understand the different ways in which the term is applied. Briefly, queer is an umbrella term that describes a variety of sexual and gender identities such as

lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, gender-queer, transgender, intersex, butch, or femme. Queer is also used to describe certain “lifestyle” practices and communities, like polyamory, kink, or BDSM. Finally, Queer can be understood from a postmodern or poststructuralist perspective as a critique of identity. Queer challenges essentialist notions of a fixed identity – challenges the notion that there is a fixed coherent and universal subjectivity. In this sense, Queer is a resistant identity (Munoz 1999) as it refuses the normalizing and privileging certain criteria we use for identity and enforcing related rigid identity categories. The work of Butler (1988, 1990, 1993), Foucault (1976), and ultimately Queer Theory and its theorists (Seidman 1996), suggest that identities are not normal or natural, but rather performative and discursively constituted. Meaning we understand identit(ies) as stable or fixed only through the repetition of acts—like correlating femininity with heterosexuality, biologically female bodies, certain styles of dress, grooming, or nurturing, for example. The only reason we think a category appears “natural” is because it is continuously visually represented and repeated over and over. The more acts and identities are repeated the more normal and natural they seem.

I use the concept of Queer in that it resists normalizing and privileging certain criteria that we use for identity and enforcing rigid, related categories. In this sense, queering is a means of action. When something is queered it counters the hegemonic textual readings and offers a critique of what Michael Warner (1999) calls “regimes of the normal.” Queering is the act of rejecting imposed definitions. Importantly, and in the context of derby, Queer also offers us a new way to think about the production of culture. Within the institution of sport, being queer or participating in acts that counter hetero-masculine culture and authority of sport allows a new way to consciously and actively disrupt the culture of sport and the perceived authenticity of power that often controls behaviors around gender, and especially sexuality. In women’s roller

derby, the rituals of Derby wives and weddings, and the development of the Vagine Regime are two ways we see a disruption of and a resistance to this power.

We're Here, We're Queer: Derby Wives, Wedding, and Rise of the Vagine Regime

Dearly Beloved, Ladies and Broads . . .

We're gathered here tonight to honor the union of these skaters in the grand tradition of derby marriage.

As you look to your future wife or wives next to you, know that you are entering a very unique and special union.

It is one based not only on friendship, honor, and loyalty, but also on tricking each other into ill-advised late night situations, reminding each other to always recall with relish your best take-down if ever you doubt your skill before a bout, and advising you to always select the daily digest option on all twenty-nine of your yahoo groups.

The skater or skaters beside you may not be your best friends, but they have that special quality that no other in roller derby possesses for you. They are the ones who complete you. They are also the ones who will not hesitate to punch you in the mouth if you ever said that out loud. So, without further ado, please join hands and repeat after me:

I, (state your name) take you, (state your partner's name), to be my derby wife.

I promise to ride with you in the ambulance if you ever break your arm in a bout even if the EMTs are all ugly.

I will always tell you when your pads start to smell like a goat's ass in summer.

I vow to always take pictures up your skirt at after-parties, and to hold your hair back while you puke on the sidewalk.

I will always be your first phone call from jail, even if I was the one who got you there in the first place.

I will always remind you about the amazing last bout if non-skating matters start to annoy you.

I promise to be your biggest fan . . . unless we face off in a bout. Then I promise to hit you harder than anyone else on your team, because I'd never insult you by going easy.

So, with the power vested in me by Ivanna S. Pankin, the Double Down Saloon, and Col. Tom Parker, I now pronounce you derby wives.

Ask any rollergirl and she will tell you that despite fierce competition on the track and heated debates off the track, there is a lot more love than hate in the sport of roller derby. Within the culture of derby, that love manifests itself in numerous ways, but nowhere is that manifestation more visible than in the rituals of derby wives and derby weddings. Derby wives are a culturally specific phenomenon that originated in 2003, with a now fairly infamous skater known as Kasey Bomber from the L.A. Derby Dolls. Kasey Bomber describes the moment of reckoning with her soon to be derby wife, travel partner and L.A. Derby Doll teammate in a book called *Down and Derby*:

[she] just looks at me and goes, "I love you, man." And I said, "I love YOU, man." And pretty shortly after that I said, "You should be, like, my derby wife." And that was that. But the thing about the whole thing was this feeling – like an invisible arrow pointing between us—we trusted each other immediately, we felt like we would be the ones to protect each other from whatever emotional or physical distress derby and life outside might have to offer. We were going through all of it at the same time. We weren't best friends, but we were each other's champions, and remain so now. ...There's a certain comfort knowing that someone in this derby family is choosing to embrace you, and be there unconditionally for you. And that, at the heart, is what you want in a derby wife—a social and emotional anchor in the melee of this sport and community (Bomber 2010).

Derby wives are now a solid tradition in derby culture, and have come to play a central role in supporting many skaters over their course of time in derby:

This is someone who has seen you struggle through practice, cry with frustration when you've had a bad scrimmage, learn something you thought you would never master, have a really good jam, beat your time for 25 laps. She knows what it means to you to play”
(Grace Under Pressure)

Another skater Murder Urs says that if her derby wife, Jack Attacks, were not part of her sporting world, “I would still love roller derby, but jack makes it even better, and makes me even stronger.”

Clearly, the derby wife highlights how participants can embrace and support each other. This gives us fresh ways to think about female friendship *and* the concept of marriage.

Skaters choose their own derby wives. As Evil E, Kasey Bomber's derby wife puts it, "A derby wife is like your Lavern to your Shirley, Siegfried to Roy." Another skater notes:

She's the girl who reminds you of all the things you ever liked in anyone else. Your derby wife is the girl who will always talk to you about anything both on and off the track. She's your competitor, but still appreciates your talents and skills. Your derby wife never judges you—even when you get drunk, fall off a bar stool, and smash your eye open, all while laughing maniacally (true story!). Starry Flight (Arch Rival Rollergirls, St Louis)

Choosing a derby wife is not a mandatory part of the sport, though it is a ritual in which many skaters participate. And, there is no one specific way to choose a derby wife, though most commonly there is a proposal where one skater "proposes" to another skater (and some skaters take multiple wives, often from different leagues). Not all derby wives have derby weddings, though the derby wedding is a significant ritual in roller derby.

Derby Weddings

Even before same sex marriage was legalized in all 50 states, weddings did occur, and as seen above, have their very own set of Derby Vows. There is nothing warm and fuzzy about the nuptials, and derby weddings are not generally romantic events, as evidenced by the exchange between Kasey Bomber and her eventual derby wife, Evil E. Instead, the ceremonies reflect one more way that skaters use camp and parody to engage in cultural resistance through their sport, and to create bonds and solidarity amongst the skaters. This is first and foremost evident in the actual derby vows, which encompass core characteristics that undergird derby along with the gender-rebellious aspects of the sport embraced by the skaters—essentially the performance of gender and creation of identities outside of male-dominated institution of mainstream sports. The

derby vows reflect the glorification of the violent physicality of the sport and celebration of resulting injuries (*I promise to ride with you if you ever break your arm, even if the EMTs are all ugly*); the promotion of the body and technical elements of sport (*I will always tell you when your pads start to smell like a goat's ass in summer*); the adoption of bad-girl iconography centered around sexuality, excessive drinking, and criminal activity (*I vow to always take pictures up your skirt at after-parties, and to hold your hair back while you puke on the sidewalk; I will always be your first phone call from jail, even if I was the one who got you there in the first place*); and most importantly the support, camaraderie, and respect skaters have for each other (*I will always remind you about the amazing last bout if non-skating matters start to annoy you; I promise to be your biggest fan...unless we face off in a bout. I promise to hit you harder than anyone else on your team, because I'd never insult you by gong easy*). The vows are campy, ironic, performative, and mock and expose the constructedness of women's roles (and sexuality?) in a hetero-normative domestic sphere.

Weddings sometimes are arranged by leagues as after parties to bouts, or performed as short ceremonies during halftime. The most famous derby weddings, though, are in the form of a mass wedding ceremony held annually at RollerCon in Las Vegas. The tradition began in 2005 with a very public ceremony on the infamous Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas, where 100 derby couples were wed. With the brides dressed in an array of attire—ranging from traditional white wedding gowns and formal tuxedos to sequined sailor suits, Saran wrapped gowns and bikinis—that inaugural mass wedding was both a celebration and a performative spectacle, turning heads of local Las Vegans and tourists alike. It has since become a yearly ritual, complete with a derby wives registration. Now, derby wives and weddings have become so popularized that weddings take place in large public spaces during significant events, as well as

throughout the derby season in more localized spaces. Most significantly derby weddings and wives have snuck into popular culture's collective consciousness. The television series *CSI Miami* (and many television shows since) featured a roller derby themed episode titled "Wheels Up," which focused on the investigation of the murder of a famous rollergirl, and included a monologue about and depiction of derby wives:

Deb: I wouldn't hurt Connie; she was my derby wife

Walter [a police officer]: Derby, huh?

Deb: Partner in crime. On and off track. She had my back and I had hers. I was supposed to have hers.

Walter: So, you guys were a couple?

Deb: *Not like you mean it.* We weren't sleeping together. Connie and I had a bond. She was a riotgrrl like me. We just got each other (emphasis in original; Hill 2011).

Roller derby culture presents an interesting phenomenon in the practice of derby weddings and derby wives, which I argue can be seen as a way of queering the idea of marriage and role of wife. The acts of queering function against traditional narratives. Jack Halberstam (2008) notes that "...queerness names the other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable future" (153). The women in contemporary roller derby (and I would also argue the generation of derby women before them to an extent) queer traditional assumptions of gender, sexuality, and ritual by playing with and resisting those same conventions. In essence, the rituals of derby wives and weddings reproduce longstanding domestic roles yet remove those roles from their normative cultural contexts. In doing so, these derby rituals queer and expose the construction of these seemingly immutable cultural institutions.

Yet, there are concerns from within and outside of the derby community that derby weddings and wives may trivialize and mock the growing institute of same-sex marriage. I argue that the wedding itself does not serve as a mockery of marriage, but instead functions as an

acceptance of an “other” ceremony, embracing women at the “fringe,” and queering the tradition of marriage and all of the assumptions and categories that go along with the institution. This has been quite visible in the derby weddings I have observed. In a private ceremony, I witnessed at RollerCon in 2011, bridesmaids wearing bikinis with cigarettes and drinks in hand gather at the “alter.” One bride emerges in rhinestones and fringe; the other follows in a short black sequined dress. Similar to their chosen skating uniforms (i.e. “boutfits”) the wedding attire mirrors each bride’s derby identity/alter-ego. The preacher officiating the ceremony, dressed as Elvis, inserts the phrases, “in all of roller derby,” and “before all roller derby” throughout the vows. After completion of their vows, brass knuckles instead of rings are exchanged between brides and the cake is cut, before heading for the hotel swimming pool and diving into the water. In this respect, the two bride’s performance of the wedding and ceremony effectively queer and resist those rituals and accompanying cultural meanings and narratives.

These declarations of devotion, friendship and love (we can think back to Bombers proposal) between the skaters break boundaries constructed by the institution of heterosexuality. As Murray (2012) points out, “By publicly proclaiming another woman their “wife,’ skaters,” especially in the context of sport, “risk the privileges of heterosexuality” (245). Indeed, skaters chance marginalization because, as much as it can be argued that there is not a sexual component to derby wives, those not familiar with contemporary roller derby will initially understand the concept through the “heteronormative” social and cultural conception of wife – a concept that has now been queered. Even with the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, the idea of marriage and the structure of marriage are still filtered through a heteronormative lens.

Wives in the derby community are different in that the roots of derby marriage are not part of the historical institution of marriage. In the context of derby, the heteronormative role of

wife is redefined, and the imagery of wifhood is used to highlight players' commitment to each other, specifically *not* in the context of domesticity:

I guess what surprises me most about the derby wife phenomenon is how vocal we are about our relationships we have formed with these partners. Instead of claiming that friendship is impossible, we openly claim that we cannot live without each other. We recognize that a blend of competitiveness and rivalry actually helps to cultivate these relationships we have...

During my first year, I went through some pretty rough transitions in derby. At one point in my rookie year, I was co-captain with her, she helped me through a pretty traumatic injury, and she was just someone who made me feel she would always keep me grounded in derby. After a while, we just sort of looked at each other and said "I guess we're derby wives." We never had a ceremony, or made a big deal of it, but she is my one and only derby wife. When she left derby...I was sad, but she still has my back and is my sounding board when I need to vent about derby, my life, or whatever in general (Elektra Q-Tion).

She is my best friend in the entire world of derby. Derby wives, I think, are ethically required to always have each other's backs, even to the point of arguing and fighting when they know their derby wife is in the wrong. It is, however, completely acceptable to bust the chops of one's derby wife later if one is forced to argue or fight in such circumstances (Riva Derci).

I love my wives! Yes, multiple... The quick way we describe it [derby wives] to people is: A derby wife is skater who will ride with you to the hospital in an ambulance if you get hurt. I guess I have a ready-made medical team! (Jacqui Oh)

She celebrates my accomplishments with me, both derby and life related, and...really is the one that picks me up when needed (Juke Skyblocler)

She is the person that knows the "I need a drink" look and insists on taking me to the bar for an after practice beer. The things we discuss over that beer are sacred and not to be repeated. Here's the deal, an after practice beer usually means you need to blow off some steam...Sure, you can vent to anyone, but with my derby wife, no one else will know –it won't get blown out of proportion, or cause a rift on the team, no one will get mad at you, etc. And your wife understands that tonight so-and-so is a bitch but tomorrow she's your teammate and friend (Chrissy Calamity)

The derby wife is a strange thing—some like it, some don't. I'm one of those people who does like it (obviously) as I have my own derby wife. I feel it's a magical thing to have someone who means that much to you and is there for you when life gets hard or when you just want to hang and just... laugh.

I also feel very strongly that, yes the derby wife is a lovely tradition and one which I have joined in with, and it should only act as a positive reinforcement in your derby experience. I'm very lucky and thankful that I have a derby wife who is not only a great person and there for me when times are both easy and hard, but she also kicks my butt and makes me a better person and skater/player. I genuinely could not ask for more. She is not just my derby wife, but she is also my best friend

The above quotes highlight how the ritual of the derby wife provides at least one avenue where skaters may embrace and support all women. T-shirts such as "I'm not gay, but my derby wife is" also speak to the co-existence of heterosexuals and queer skaters, who respect and support one another, in the world of sport. It is these declarations of love between skaters that smash boundaries constructed by the institution of heterosexuality and the gender regime of sport. Moreover, the ritual of derby wives allows an even better understanding of the component of friendship between women, and specifically, the significance of female friendships in sport. This is an understudied area in gender and sport—primarily due to the rampant homophobia that is often part of the conceptualizations and discussions of women in sport.

However, while rollergirls may queer and perform gender, sexuality, and associated rituals in ways that challenge expectations around womanhood, and the derby wedding may effectively queer the heteronormative concept of "wedding," *being* queer can hold a questionable space in the roller derby. Montreal Roller Derby league founder, Georgia W. Tush, and fellow skater Switchblade Siouxsie, in an article they wrote for the online derby magazine *Blood & Thunder*, addresses a common assumption that lesbians comprise a majority of roller derby participants:

Not all roller derby girls are gay. To be honest, Montreal Roller Derby is a pretty gay league, but all sexual orientations are represented. I've met plenty of gay, straight or queer identified derby players all over the world. One thing for sure, though, is we try to be LGBT friendly and do not discriminate. I'm positive that we are like most female sports teams — a mixture of gay and straight women working together for the purpose of ultimate awesomeness (July 2012).

In our current culture, women in sports might indeed continue downplaying or distancing themselves from the label of “lesbian,” as well as use heterosexuality (real or performed) for positive media coverage or to maintain sponsorship or ticket sales. Roller derby may be different though, as Breeze (2010) argues that one way roller derby challenges heteronormativity is in its presentation of “a queer public image, as well a visibly recognizing and celebrating marginalized sexualities and same-sex relationships” (127).

The Vagine Regime

Indeed, marginalized sexualities and same-sex relationships have an established space within roller derby, through an important growing subculture of the sport known as the Vagine Regime. The Vagine Regime (VR), is a league comprised of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer identified skaters from throughout the United States and abroad. The aim of the VR is to build an international community of queer derby folk. The group is committed to inclusive solidarity, to creating networking opportunities for the queer identified, to cultivating visibility and acceptance, and to promoting social justice.

The Vagine Regime started out as a social media page in 2005 on MySpace and quickly grew into a cohesive, active global community and network. Within the first week alone, the VR page had just over 300 “Friends.” Now on Facebook, the VR has approximately 11,200 followers. In addition to actually setting up and playing bouts, the VR promotes LGBTQ rights around the world, and provide a community that supports the skaters, their sexualities and gender identities. The VR league is a central feature in exhibition matches during RollerCon and provides opportunities for skaters who identify as queer, (and queer allies) to network, bout scrimmage, and hold events, international tournaments and competitions, and parties. Two

staples are “Battle on the Bent Track,” an international roller derby tournament held annually in Australia or New Zealand, and the “Pants Off Dance Off,” an annual party at RollerCon. Proceeds from both events, every year, go to LGBTQ organizations, particularly those which support or benefit queer youth.

The Vagine Regime provides an important space and forum for community, support, and points of connection for many skaters within derby. While it is often thought by outsiders that queer women (more specifically lesbians) comprise a large percentage of the skaters in derby that is not the case, especially in smaller, more rural communities. WFTDA demographics indicate that just slightly under 25 percent of adult female skaters identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or other (WFTDA 2013) and many times queer identified skaters feel on the outskirts of a community that doesn’t understand them. Being able to be a part of the Vagine Regime, in addition to their own leagues, is vital for some skaters. As three skaters from smaller towns in the eastern and southern parts of the U.S. who wished to remain anonymous, remarked:

It’s a way for me to stay connected to a larger community. It’s a way for queer derby folks to stay connected, to support each other, and to feel like a community.

Lots of us, especially in small towns, don’t have a lot of queer presence around us. When you connect the queer community with derby, for us, it’s pretty much heaven on earth.

I was 15 the first time I was called a dyke. Two girls were hiding in a bathroom in the basketball locker room so I couldn’t watch them change. And I quit the next day and didn’t participate in sports again until I discovered roller derby when I was much older. It offered an athletic community that allowed me to be me. Shortly after I discovered the Vagine Regime I officially came out and it was largely due to the fact that I knew I had a community of people that loved me no matter what.

The Vagine Regime was similarly instrumental for Go-Go Gidget. She notes that the queer collective of the Vagine Regime was what initially drew her to derby: “Its existence was instrumental with my own coming out of the closet and I am constantly inspired by what roller

derby is doing to celebrate diversity, and promote women and women's health in general." After a long moment of thoughtful silence, Go-Go adds: "There is a revolution happening in this country right now, with many groups pushing and fighting for basic rights. This [roller derby], I think, is one of the many. I'm not just glad, but grateful, too, to be part of this amazing collective."

Anyone who is queer identified and is involved with derby can be part of the Vagine Regime. According to Injure Rogers, the founder of the Vagine Regime: "We invite any queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, swinger, kink, identified person who is involved with derby to call themselves a member." Rampant homophobia and homophobic practices still exist in much of the athletic world, and even in small pockets of derby. I never directly experienced or witnessed homophobia during my derby participation, most likely a result of being in larger urban settings. At RollerCon, however, I did have conversations with skaters who did. Given that homophobia, the Vagine Regime creates a space in sport that embraces and promotes queer athletes, queer athleticism, and queer acceptance. These are important and ongoing themes mentioned frequently by skaters:

I never felt truly at home until I found roller derby and the Vagine Regime. We get to play a kick-ass sport, participate in an amazing, grass-roots built community, and be ourselves. I can't stress how incredibly important that is (Emily).

Just creating a culture that doesn't just 'accept' or 'tolerate,' but literally celebrates diversity in so many ways can have—has had—the most profound effect (Injure Rogers).

Sometimes, no matter how comfortable you feel about yourself or how awesome everyone in your life is about your sexuality, you need to know there are people to dress up like vaginas and run around on your behalf. And that—these people—are the Vagine Regime (Alex Krosney).

For me, and I think so many of the others, it provides a safe space for queer skaters to be who we are within this encompassing [roller derby] community. We put all this work every year into running our tournament to raise money for organizations that help our

younger generations feel safe to be who they are. And we have SO much fun doing it!
(Fifi Nomenon)

I was instantly drawn to derby, and even more so when I saw the Vagine Regime at my first RollerCon. I was instantly drawn to the grass roots culture and the women that were pushing this agenda forward.

The Vagine Regime has also been at the forefront of discussing, creating, and implementing gender policies for leagues in and outside of the U.S. The implementation of a Gender Policy within derby has opened the door for acceptance of trans skaters, though there is also debate within the community of derby about whether or not the policy is inclusive enough. When the WFTDA first proposed the gender inclusion policy in 2008, a number of leagues opposed the fact that Trans or intersex athletes had to produce health records upon request to prove that the athletes' sex hormones are in a medically acceptable range for a female, but that cisgender women did not. There are skaters who feel that the policy is transphobic. More recently, that policy has been amended and is now in line with the United Kingdom Roller Derby Association's more inclusive policy, where female refers to "an individual living as or identifying as female on a full-time basis" (UKRD 2013). What is reflected in both of these policies, however, is the way that sporting agencies heavily subscribe to the binary-gender model—the idea that we are either women *or* men. The construction of this binary, and of gender difference, is integral to heterosexuality, and to maintenance of gender hierarchies. And this is not something that is lost on skaters, as interviews with GoGo Gidget, Ivanna S. Pankin, and Injure Rogers indicate:

The WFTDA gender policy is really something for us to be proud of. Is it perfect? Well, that depends who you talk to. I could sit down forever and talk about the gender separation in organized athletics and what a crumbly foundation it sits on. For one, a strict dividing line between "maleness" and "femaleness" quite plainly doesn't exist. But I get irked even more by how easy it is to get agreement from folks on the topic of the need for the separation of women and men in sports. Why do we separate them? I don't see much of a push for short basketball and tall basketball. It's about the normalization of

a separation between genders and the permission we all give each other to default to that. But I digress... all that said, the WFTDA gender policy is the most progressive of any international, organized sport, and I believe that we as an athletic community are positioned to make those playing—and managing, promoting, funding—other organized sports take notice (Go-Go Gidget)

The Vagine Regime is just a representation of the culture of roller derby – OUR culture. A culture of inclusivity, whether that comes down to sexual identities, genders, body types, that WE have created, that really can serve as an example for other athletic communities, and can have a true impact on organized sports on a much larger scale. There is STILL homophobia in sports, regardless of the stereotypes about lesbian soft ball players or basketball players... There is still RAMPANT transphobia in sports. I mean, we've built a worldwide competitive athletic structure on the idea that there is a strict divide between men and women, and that just is not true. I mean look at the Caster Semenya case. No one gives a shit what someone looks like until they lose to her, then they start pointing fingers. The WFTDA gender policy really is ground-breaking in the world of organized sports...we are really capable of having a ripple type impact (Injure Rogers)

We are changing the world. We have found a way to crash all these like gender barriers and sexual barriers—barriers around sexuality. I mean literally like being a lesbian, bisexual, transgender is totally —how do I say it—there is just wide open potential here, to create something so different in sport (Ivanna S. Pankin)

The institution of sport, then, when trying to separate the sexes for competition, has in essence really been separating the sexes purely to enforce the gender binary. Other skaters discuss the WFTDA's gender policy, and the ways in which their leagues addressed the question of how "woman" is defined:

We're the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, so what does it mean to be a woman? How do we, as an organization, define that? How do we feel about these things? The fact that these kinds of conversations are happening says to me that this is about feminism, about breaking barriers, about changing the sporting game (Ginger Tonyx)

I think that it is something that is worth talking about, and worth having something down on paper in our bylaws showing that we are not thinking inside the box. That we as a sport, as a community—it's that derby mentality—that we get to make up our own rules. If other sports don't let transgendered athletes who don't have the right (use of air quotes here) hormone levels or parts, or whatever, play, that's fine. But we shouldn't get to decide that. We may say that you can self-identify as a female...and that's it. What more to it is there? (Domesticated Violence)

Montreal Roller Derby [in Canada] has a few skaters that are transgender, and they came up with a transgender policy (one of the first leagues to address it, I believe) just to clearly define that they don't discriminate against transgender skaters. That female doesn't necessarily mean that you were born female—a girl. Because the roller derby community has a lot of ties with the gay community ...so we want to make sure that anybody who identifies as a woman is able to play. Because that may not be the case in other sports (F-Bomb)

As the debate over language and inclusion in roller derby's gender policy continues, one thing is for certain—women's derby has opened an important conversation, and the Vagine Regime provides a vibrant forum for discussions of the nexus of gender, sexuality, and sport. In fact, in April of 2014, the first Trans* Awareness in Sports Week developed out of these debates and discussions in order to further explore and share research on the subjects of gender identity and gender expression within derby, and sport more broadly. Specifically related to roller derby, the aim was to open discussion on the good and bad of how gender is handled and treated by the leagues, governing bodies of those leagues, and individuals within the leagues. Additionally, the event allowed space for suggestions of how derby and other sport organizations could improve policies for transgender, gender non-conforming, and Intersex athletes, as well as provide space for trans identified individuals involved in derby and other sports communities to share their stories and experiences. The online forum component of the event drew more than 2,000 readers and participants from around the globe.

Conclusion

Indeed, “queer” offers different ways to think about the production of culture. The rituals derby wives/weddings, and the development of The Vagine Regime are socio-political ways that roller derby disrupts and resists the social and cultural acts of heterosexing and gendering that often occur in sport. Specifically, being queer in our leisure and sport provides an opportunity to

consciously and actively disrupt the legitimacy of heterosexuality and all of the social and cultural power that rests within that institution. By indulging in the practice of ‘taking wives,’ using camp, irony, and parody in the ritual of the derby wedding, and creating an open and safe space of the Vagine Regime, roller derby becomes a site in which skaters can resist heteronormativity and pose challenges to the gender binary that stubbornly persists in the organization and institution of sport. Moreover, deployment of these tactics and strategies, in tandem with official league policies of inclusion, creates a unity though diversity, in which there is empowerment and the spark of political change. In the following chapter I return to Rupp and Taylor’s (2003) framework and the three measures used to determine how or whether certain types of cultural expressions move beyond oppositional and in to the realm of political, and address the question of whether or not skaters experience and view their actions as political.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this dissertation I have explored derby as a site of cultural resistance. I have uncovered the strategies and challenges skaters, and the sport of roller derby in general, deploy in resistance to the gender binary and its mandates. In Chapter Four, for example, I focus on the culturally constructed norms that dictate the boundaries of sport and who is or is not considered an athlete (or athletic), and find that skaters consciously contest the boundaries of acceptable appearance, performance, and behavior for female athletes by adopting a sexualized, feminine identity while at the same time as embracing aggressive competition. In Chapter Five I explore the DIY ethic that undergirds the growth, development and organization of roller derby as a central strategy of resistance. Founding organizers and skaters view DIY as crucial in their resistance to, and efforts to remain outside of, the structure and control of corporate sports organizations, where they are able to establish and control their own leagues and the cultural production of their sport. In Chapter Six I examine how skaters use camp, parody, and irony within roller derby as strategies of resistance. Exaggeration, appropriation, parody, and outrageous gender performances via skate names, team uniforms, fundraising events, are pathways through which skaters enact critical commentaries on normative, hetero-gendered structure and language of sport and the presentation of athletes. In Chapter Seven I extend this lens to analyze how skaters queer long-standing assumptions of gender, sexuality and ritual, in and out of sport. Skaters resist the hetero-gendering and hetero-sexing of sport through the performance of rituals like derby weddings, the concept of derby wives, and the development of the all queer derby league.

Taken together, these findings provide an understanding of how derby participants resist institutionalized norms around gender and sexuality, challenge conventional ideas, standards and

construction of femininity, and thereby resist and reproduce normative femininity. Skaters use tactics of camp, parody, and mockery as strategies of resistance. Through team uniforms, skate names, rituals such as derby weddings and derby wives, and the formation of the all-queer derby league, The Vagine Regime, roller derby is a site of not only resistance, but politicized resistance—an arena in which the gendered construction and conception of women athletes, of the word ‘woman’ itself, and more broadly the organization, structure, and hetero-gendering/sexing of sport and sport spaces are challenged, reworked, and critiqued. Through the use of these tactics and strategies, the cultural performance(s) that are part of roller derby, at the very least, provides groundwork for the athletes to subvert rather than maintain dominant relations of power around the organization of the gender regime that is present in most sports. Within the context of roller derby skaters strategically and intentionally shape their performances, whether through skate names, uniforms, fundraising efforts, half-time entertainment, or all of those elements taken together. As summed up by JunkDrawer:

Look, we choose derby. We choose our uniforms. We choose how we want to present ourselves on the track. We also choose to create our own leagues and to write the rules and to form bonds with our teammates and with other leagues and women everywhere. This, in my opinion, is anything *but* propping up the Patriarchy.

I now return to Rupp and Taylor’s (2003) framework, where they use the measures of *contestation*, *intentionality*, and *collective identity* in order to determine whether certain types of cultural expressions are not only oppositional, but also political. Based on my research the sport of roller derby meets these three measures.

Contestation suggests that symbols, identities, and cultural practices (Rupp and Taylor 2003) expressed through cultural performance destabilize the prevailing organization and dominant power structure, particularly in the institution of sport. Derby participants do indeed “subvert rather than maintain dominant relations of power” (Rupp and Taylor 2003:17). As a

sport, roller derby contests the traditional order (in this case gender and sexual). Here, through derby symbols, identities and cultural practices derby participants subvert rather than maintain the dominant relations of power almost always present in sport and sport spaces. Roller derby leagues are organized by the skaters themselves and are thus female generated and dominated spaces that are able to remain outside of the corporate sporting structure. Because of its DIY ethic and organization, derby is an inclusive space where we see a range of athletic ability, a gamut of body types (derby is a sport where *all* body types are useful and encouraged) and a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities and presentations, all directly challenging the established boundaries and order around gender. Skaters understand roller derby as a sport, not a performance, but skaters do perform resistance through their sport. Exaggeration, appropriation, parody, and outrageous gender performances via skate names, team uniforms, the penalty wheel, and fundraising events are pathways for skaters to enact critical commentaries on normative, hetero-gendered structure and language of sport and the presentation of athletes. They smash cultural norms around the gender regime of sport, athlete, beauty norms, sexuality, femininity, gender, and the body through their skate names, uniforms, embracing of violence, and presentation of body. These are significant ways in which those who participate in derby, referring back to Rupp and Taylor (2003) “subvert rather than maintain dominant relations of power” (17), especially around gender and sexuality.

The second measure, intentionality, rests upon how skaters are thinking about their various strategies to challenge or subvert dominant constructions of femininity, sexuality, and the ways in which bodies are gendered. In terms of intentionality, it seems clear that the skaters do intend for their actions and performances to have certain outcomes. From uniforms, to on track antics, to the glorification of bruises and injuries, to the actual writing of rules, strategies and

policies, to the brutal athleticism within each bout, the existing dichotomy of femininity/competitive strength is challenged and flipped. Skaters are most definitely vocal about, and invested in, proving that women can play contact, competitive sports and be aggressive. While not all skaters directly state that they are intentionally challenging or “troubling” gender, per se, their messages and experiences created through roller derby and the types of resistance deployed are pushing and disrupting the gender binary and established gender order, in and out of sport.

Finally, skaters create and maintain a skater/derby collective identity, which is the third measure in Rupp and Taylor’s (2003) model. Rupp and Taylor (2003) note that the formation of collective identity, “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests and solidarity” (219) is crucial to marking a cultural performance as political. Within roller derby there is most definitely a sense of we-ness amongst the skaters. As a whole, skaters construct boundaries and classifications around the concept of authenticity, both inside and outside of derby. Patrolling the boundaries is a crucial step to establishing collective identity. Several of the skaters interviewed, for example, were at odds with wanting the general public’s awareness of roller derby to increase, but at the same time closely guarded the boundaries of derby against “outsiders”—people who they felt could compromise the growing sport and derby culture. Many skaters are wary of people who are not actual derby participants in some way, or those who are just altogether unfamiliar with derby culture. This list includes, but is not limited to: Photographers, booking agents, potential producers, writers, interviewers, filmmakers, television and other media personalities.

Over time, I also noticed interviewees begin to delineate between “rollergirls” (women who want to be to act and/or look “badass,” or edgy, or were simply in it for the social, the scene,

the image, the “coolness factor) from “skater/derby skater/derby skater” (those who love roller derby and are interested in all social and organizational aspects, but most especially *playing* the sport). As roller derby continued to grow exponentially and become more visible in some areas of media, questions arose about whether participants’ interests were superficial, fleeting or insincere. Authenticity is important here. Labels aside (as many skaters still refer to themselves as rollergirls), authenticity and sincerity derive from levels of commitment, participation, and solidarity to and one’s teammates, league and the sport. Thus, the common interests, solidarity, and networks within the sport continue to create a strong and far-reaching derby identity. Skaters forge a collective identity that constantly modifies and reinterprets their group boundaries. They do so by drawing lines between “insiders,” and “outsiders,” and symbolically, between and around societal sanctioned feminine images of athletes and derby’s reinterpretation of those culturally sanctioned constructions of femininity and heterosexuality.

Through Rupp and Taylor’s (2003) model, then, skaters and the roller derby community can most certainly be characterized as “oppositional” and the cultural performances that are integral to the sport of derby, as “political.” The larger question that remains, however, is whether the skaters themselves understand their actions as political.

Roller Derby as a Site of Resistance and Skating as a Political Act

*BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings.
BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential
if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the
status quo.*

*BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being AND making music,
friends, and scenes based on communication+understanding, instead of competition+good/bad
categorizations.*

*BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standards of what is or isn’t.
(Excerpt from Riot Grrrl Manifesto, Hanna 1991)*

Is roller derby political? Do the skaters view the tactics, social practices, and rituals—integral building blocks of the sport—as strategies of resistance and political in nature? Contemporary women’s roller derby reflects a microcosm of third-wave feminism—the wave of feminism that grew up intertwined with the punk inspired Riot Grrrl movement that revived and energized a new generation of feminists throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. As discussed in earlier chapters, the seeds of flat track roller derby were fertilized by a high-octane combination of punk rock principles and Riot Grrrl ethos, and so it is no surprise that the third-wave feminism and campy aesthetics in derby re-invoke the Riot Grrrl ideals of a feminist consciousness, punk style, and politics.

Through the framework of third-wave feminism, roller derby stands as a site of resistance and a form of politics through its tactics and performances. A significant third-wave strategy at play is the ways in which skaters simultaneously play with and subvert tabooed practices. In playing with and subverting tabooed practices, particularly around femininity and sexuality, skaters queer traditional language and performances and implode assumptions of identity. In queering gender norms and narratives skaters expose and embrace the labor, violence, and physicality of their sport and more broadly, for women in sport. By reclaiming and reproducing tabooed sexualities in the cultural arena of sport skaters expose mechanisms of control. By reasserting the power of standing together and creating community skaters bring marginalized women together in acts of transformation. Within roller derby, skaters find fresh ways of traversing the boundaries of sport.

Buechler (1999) suggests that there is virtually no arena of contemporary life in which the struggle between gender dominance and resistance may not be found (154). Roller derby is one such arena. Power, resistance and activism are embedded in the very existence of the sport

and within the roles and actions of its participants. Roller derby participants and the gendered performances enacted within derby use strategies of parody surrounding sexuality and empowerment, mix hyper-femininity, physicality and violence, perform identity, and queer mainstream sporting (and cultural) traditions. Within roller derby a sporting space has been created in which women may resist, queer, and perform gender and sexuality differently, as well as highlight multiple forms of femininity, while simultaneously celebrating athletic skill, team dedication, and competition. The performativity and re-creation of identity(ies) emphasizes empowerment (sexual and otherwise), individuality, and liberation from social and cultural mandates of how “pretty girls” and “good girls” should act and appear. In short, within roller derby resistance is operating from broader constructs down to everyday expressions. This, in and of itself, is political, and while skaters do not necessarily identify themselves as political, they do understand and describe derby in terms of a feminist movement, a social movement, a site of resistance and empowerment.

The third wave [of feminism] empowered us and that power moves us toward the future, which has yet to really be defined. I think feminism is on a continuum, and though there is speculation about what a fourth [wave] looks like, I imagine it to be a time not so much about equality and diversity but one in which feminism goes without saying. And without need for a label. Roller derby encompasses feminine strength without any apology or the need to emulate masculinity. Because I think derby is more than skating fast and knocking girls down. It's a movement—maybe *that* movement (Mara Tini)

I've heard roller derby described as like, the fourth wave of feminism. I think that it does speak to a lot of philosophies and qualities to what could be considered a feminist movement. It's not the Spice Girls, I think it's beyond that. Some people might think we're still in that moment, you know, 'Girl Power,' but roller derby could be part of that next wave. Sort of redefining what it means to be a woman. And what it means to be female...both on local and national organizational levels, are really having to look at questions of what it even means to be female. Like, literally, what does that really mean? (F-Bomb)

My hope is that people that people will learn something about how empowering and DIY this sport is, and also that they will start a league in their area. I mean, it's a really wonderful thing for women because women are taught that we're not supposed to be

physically aggressive. I think it's amazing to look a sport that says yes, you can be aggressive...If I could summarize the message, I'd like people to come away with, it's that roller derby is really about a new kind of femininity, about women as amazons—women finding their most powerful self and expressing that (Georgia W. Tush)

These quotes underscore an important point, which is that skaters identify derby to be political and socially significant in a variety of ways, and they speak of derby as a movement; more specifically, a grassroots movement that is by and for women. Roller derby is simultaneously a sport and a subculture. Moreover, at its origins, derby is a sport formed, organized, controlled, and operated by women and for women. These combined factors are crucial in understanding derby as a space of resistance. As Theberge (1987) wrote, “The liberatory possibility of sport lies in the opportunity for women to experience the creativity and energy of their bodily power and to develop this power in the community of women” (393). Almost all of the skaters I interviewed discussed just how unique derby was in the sense that it their own sport, not adapted from a men's sport, and organized for and by women. Feminist sport sociologist Jennifer Hargreaves (2004) notes that:

Young women are forgoing new possibilities for themselves in sport. Not in ways that are assimilated to the male-dominated system, or that are in opposition to male-defined practices, but on their own terms, ‘for themselves.’ There is a sense of authenticity about these developments—a recognition of agency and of self. Sportswomen are no longer necessarily ‘in the shadow of men’ or judge their performances in comparison with men, but participate in a range of activities as *women* and *on their own terms* (194-95).

In interviews as well as casual conversations with skaters, certain terms and phrases were reoccurring in the reasons given for joining *and* participating and remaining in roller derby: “Empowerment,” “enact power,” “aggression,” “physicality and liberation through sport,” “sisterhood,” “no glass ceiling effect,” “it's my own sport,” “it's just for me,” “it's just about me,” “it's on my own terms.” These phrases suggest that roller derby is not just simply a sport, but also

an important space of resistance to the social norms and power relations embedded in sport, more specifically around the boundaries of women in sport:

I think there are people that completely miss the point of roller derby. It is a *celebration* of women! What could possibly be more anti-patriarchal? Our league's very mission statement is "promoting the physical and mental strength and independent spirit of women." We are a registered non-profit organization run by the skaters, for the skaters. Our blood, sweat, and tears drive this endeavor... This is not a sport of super models. We are real women in all shapes and sizes, and we have never felt so empowered and gorgeous. We are strong athletes, practice hard, cross train, lift, at the gym—just like any other athletes. Since when do we need to look to what men are doing to validate what *women* are doing? This is ours, every step of the way. (Ufoolive)

Women's flat track derby revival is probably one of the most significant, positive events in the history of women's sports, and maybe even feminism, which is apparent to anyone who has seriously followed the history of the sport over the past five years. (Vixenvangogo)

In derby these frameworks are resisted by those who create the space—the skaters themselves and for many skaters the resistance also shapes derby as a space of empowerment. Peachy Queen perhaps says it most succinctly:

It's the empowering—that it's unconditional levels of empowerment. You don't have to fight to be heard. It's a place where natural-born leaders can exist unconditionally, where we're not fighting this like glass-ceiling effect. It's our organization. It's run by women. We don't have to worry about trying to beat out men for these positions and trying to take over, you know, fighting for the rights that we have as women. It's given, you know.

Many skaters, then, recognize that derby is, or at least has potential for them, as being a political endeavor in that it can be empowering. "Empowerment is a term often associated with sport and physical exercise and refers to 'the confident sense of self that comes from being skilled in the use of one's body'" (Choi 200:76). Skaters regularly describe how derby, on and off the track, positively impacts their lives, in terms of their physical well-being, and sense of self and body—which of course also ties into emotional and psychological well-being.

I used to feel fat, too tall, ugly, and awkward. Now I feel tall, strong, and healthier. I'm still big, but that's actually *valued* in a derby skater. I used to be unemployable and socially isolated, very much due to single-parenting an autistic child. Now I'm building my own business, living with my supportive and loving partner. My child is benefiting from having a saner mom...My child still has autism—roller derby can't fix everything. But the strength my involvement in my league has given me has allowed me to stop barely coping and start living (Angela Wings)

It's worth noting, that through this endeavor and involvement with the WFTDA, many of us, myself included, have developed serious business savvy and marketable skills. I've honed skills that have really helped me in my own career, and even developed ones I did not have before (Lady Quebeaum).

On a very personal note, I was in the middle of leaving an abusive marriage when I came to derby, and the experience has given me more strength and faith in my built-by-me community than I knew I was capable of having (Bo Toxic).

Roller derby... took me out of a horrible situation and made me remember who I am and learned that I kind of liked it...And then creating relationships with women on a level that's not about school, and it's not about who's fucking who and who's doing what, it's about meaningful things that are positive and enduring, and empowering. It's not about, 'I don't like the way you looked at my boyfriend.' That's not the focus of our relationships. That's why I got in. That's why I'm staying in it (Peachy Queen).

It's given me friendships that I never thought I would have. It's given me something to do in my life that I never thought I would be doing. I remember working and wanting to find an outlet for myself, but not really knowing what that would be. I never imagined in a million years that it would have to do with skating and using my body to stop people from getting past me. I never thought I'd be playing a contact sport. I'm *still* shocked by that, actually (PB).

Repeatedly, skaters discuss the ways in which their participation in derby boosts self-confidence and self-esteem in personal, family, and professional environments of their lives, helps them work through and even overcome difficult times in their personal lives, empowers them in both friendships and romantic relationships, and instills confidence in their physicality. For many women confidence in physicality is key. PB, in her quote above, is not alone in having never considered herself as being athletic prior to joining roller derby. Tyger Bomb shared similar thoughts:

I played softball through high school, but it was like an intermural after school kind of thing—totally casual. So I wouldn't even equate that with this [derby] at all. And I skated as a kid. I mean I was basically skating in the street or rink, from about ages eight through 15...but other than that, I never considered myself an athlete. Ever. If you had told me a year ago that I would be running, on purpose, I would have just laughed at you. I can't believe the things that I'm doing now. It's just bizarre.

Tyger Bomb goes on to say: “Now I can say I'm an athlete. And that's really cool. And I know all these other girls—little skinny girls, or girls bigger than me—that would tell you the same thing. And we all have that in common. Part of it is the whole Do-It-Yourself thing.”

Given that contemporary roller derby's roots stem from various alternative subcultural styles rather than pre-existing athletic programs, it makes sense that some of the women initially involved in the resurgence of derby had not previously taken on the identity of “athlete.” Roller Derby though, as a DIY space has shifted this narrative, and that narrative is also important to the empowerment that rests in the identity of athlete. Like Tyger Bomb, her teammate F-Bomb had some athletic background before joining the Rose City Rollers, yet never considered herself an athlete or was motivated to excel in athletics:

I was one of those kids who was kind of talked into/forced to go to sports camp. So I did a lot of swimming camps, tennis camps, that kind of stuff. In high school I sort of just naturally gravitated to volleyball and tennis. So I played volleyball and tennis for four years. I didn't really enjoy them. I mean, volleyball I kind of enjoyed a little more, but I was never any good. When I played on my tennis team—the top five seeds are the ones who always play and I was always like number five or six. I guess I didn't really think of myself as an athlete. I never really motivated to get better, or to do what it was going to take to get better. But with roller derby that's totally different. I am motivated to do the outside work to get better, and to actually become a competitive athlete.

F-Bomb continues to explain that roller derby and its organization and structure, unlike the sports she had previously participated in, makes sense to her. Here, the DIY derby has also been central in shifting identity from non-athlete to athlete.

The other sports that I've tried to play, I wasn't really invested in them. I feel like I am personally invested in roller derby. I have a hand in shaping the sport, in growing the sport, in claiming my space in this sport ...It validates the person I am. I identify as a

really outspoken person, I am an aggressive person, dedicated to my friends and things I believe in—I get super crazy passionate about things—and yeah, I guess it [roller derby] just fits, unlike those other things. I fit in the sport of roller derby. I feel like a part of roller derby. Like, *now* I'm an athlete.

The experiences of the skaters I have interviewed are in line with Griffin's (1988) early work about the ways in which sport "can be a catalyst for empowering women to become the center of their own experiences" (26). Skaters clearly feel empowered and inspired through their participation in roller derby. That roller derby changes lives is a theme present throughout a majority of my interviews with skaters. This theme winds its way through almost every roller derby blog, there is a song by Uncle Leon and the Alibis called "Roller Derby Saved my Soul," and, a short film by the same name successfully rolled its way through Canada's Fringe Festival in 2014 and 2015. The ways in which roller derby transforms the lives of its participants, at first glance, seem to differ: Gaining a sense of physical strength; gaining self-confidence; developing a healthy relationship with the body; leaving abusive relationships; recovering from traumatic relationships or past sexual abuse; coming to terms with being lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or just plain "queer." These changes, however, actually have a very common thread. Broadly they center on themes of living a truer life and more fulfilling life. More specifically, participation in derby offers its participants multiple ways to push back against personal, social, cultural, political, and physical boundaries.

Being involved in roller derby for many skaters is emancipatory, and for these very same reasons, roller derby is an emancipatory site. Inclusivity matters, and it is significant that the sport is created, managed, and led by the women themselves, where they control their recruitment of skaters, training, competitions, and daily operations, cannot be understated. Roller derby not only provides a unique sporting space for women, but re-imagines possibilities for what it means to be a woman. Fundamental to roller derby is that it provides a safe and encouraging

space for women of all athletic abilities to learn new ways of moving, experiencing, and having ownership in displaying their bodies. Most importantly, through a DIY ethos and performative strategies of resistance, skaters challenge and resist entrenched gendered boundaries creating a space where women subvert gendered norms in sport, accomplish and display varying types of femininities, and construct and manage their identities. Just as social movements provide resistance to dominant social and cultural structures, in these ways so can the site of sport.

Purpose of Study and Final Thoughts

In this study, I examined the organization of roller derby and the challenges and strategies that derby participants deploy in resistance to the gender binary and its mandates. I focused on the mechanisms skaters use to create derby-specific identities, and interact with and subvert gender and conventional definitions of sport, female athlete, and femininity. I have found that the overt ways in which skaters and their leagues use performances of drag, camp, parody, exaggerated femininity, and even sexual imagery are strategies that destroy the traditional masculinist model and structure of competitive, aggressive, consumerist contact sport. Through these strategies roller derby becomes a site of cultural resistance where derby participants pose cultural and political challenges to mainstream expectations of gender, sexuality, and femininity. I have demonstrated how derby participants collectively engage in contemporary forms of gendered and cultural resistance through the strategies they use, which allow them to construct and practice femininities differently, rather than reify normative feminine ideals.

The traditional institution and world of sport is built upon the gender binary and maintains hegemonic understandings of men and women as opposites—men are aggressive/women are demure; men are dominant/women are passive; men are virile/women are

chaste. Against this backdrop roller derby tells a different story, creating new narratives, performances, and commentary about gender and sexuality. I find that derby participants intentionally resist the rules, markers, and boundaries that construct and control women. Skaters do this through the ways that they define their athleticism, identities, appearances, and the organization of their sport. In this context, derby and its skaters pose significant challenges to gender regimes, and by extension hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Implications for Future Research

What began in 2003 as a grassroots effort of a few women to define and organize a female-only sport has now grown into a national and international sport and cultural phenomenon that draws tens of thousands of participants and spectators. As of 2015, there were close to 2000 leagues that spanned 54 countries. In this respect roller derby is an incredibly powerful grassroots collective, and it is continuing to grow. In my interviews, skaters discuss the ways in which they and their lived experiences are deeply impacted by roller derby. Skaters also discuss the multitude of ways that they are personally invested in their sport, find it empowering, and dedicated to maintaining and expanding roller derby as a space that is empowering to other women. That women's lives are profoundly impacted and transformed by the confluence of these processes suggests that the sport of roller derby, and participating in roller derby, has implications for how we construct and de-construct gender and identity, and how we do social change.

These broader implications concerning social change and challenging mainstream gender mandates are significant, because how we make social change counts. Skaters do not use traditional protest tactics and they are not striving for political, state based change or a

redistribution of resources, but they are challenging cultural codes around gender and sport. Roller derby exemplifies what social change looks like in the twenty-first century, and what movements can look like with increased roles of culture and identity.

Additionally, as a site of power, resistance and change, roller derby can be understood as a form of strategic collective action that draws its power from alternative types of femininities created within the sport, forwarding ideas and images that question conventional notions of femininity, masculinity, and expressions of sexuality. In effect, the more women who perform or inhabit alternative types of femininities or breakdown hegemonic femininity, the stronger the challenge is to dominant relations of power, the gender binary, and gender regime. Further, deconstructing (and reconstructing) femininity increases opportunities to reshape norms and/or expand spaces for people who do not fit into or are alienated from hegemonic femininity, as exemplified by the establishment of the Vagine Regime.

Finally, sports have played a substantial role in creating and reinforcing the discourse of natural gender differences. By drawing on the idea that gender differences are natural rather than cultural to explain and or justify differences in men's and women's athletic performances, sport continues to perpetuate and support particular gender regimes. This incarnation of roller derby, however, expands gender regimes in sport, and adds another dimension to the institution rendering it an important site to reexamine gender, sexuality, and identity. Derby is a site through which we can assess the construction of not only sporting identities, but also the ways in which players negotiate "alternative" forms of femininity. Consequently, continuing to investigate challenges and strategies roller derby participants deploy in resistance to gender and its related mandates, and how skaters use roller derby as a site of cultural resistance, can be a vehicle

through which we better understand how transformations of embodied identity practices can be linked to new forms of political participation, engagement and cultural change.

APPENDIX —INTERVIEW GUIDE

When did you join roller derby? Why?

What attracted you to the sport?

How did you first hear about roller derby?

Had you seen/known about roller derby prior?

Have you played for any other teams in (or out of) the WFTDA?

What do you like about roller derby? About being a rollergirl?

How long have you been involved?

How did you choose your skate name? Tell me about your on-track persona.

Describe a “typical rollergirl.” (Is there a typical rollergirl)?

Describe your team’s uniform. Team makeup (if part of your uniform and presentation)

How do you describe feminine/femininity? What does it mean to you?

How has roller derby impacted your life?

Did/has anything changed in your life when you joined derby? If so, what? How?

Have you always been physically active?

Did you participate in sports previous to roller derby?

Which sports? (Team, individual, both?)

How does roller derby differ from other sports you’ve played?

What do your family/friends think about you playing derby?

Do you call yourself a feminist? If so, what do you mean by feminist?

Are you politically active?

What do you see as the goal(s) of roller derby?

Why do you think people come to roller derby events?

Is roller derby a sport? Is it performance art? Something else?

Is there a political goal behind roller derby?

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Women's Flat Track Derby Association. 2015. Home page. Retrieved September 24, 2015,
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Destabilizing and Understanding Street Kids (DUSK): Stand Down for Homeless Youth; Department of Sociology & Hotel College; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; 2005-2007

Graduate Research Fellowship, *Center for the Study of Government and the Individual*, University of Colorado, 2002-2003.

Manuscripts Under Review:

“Fishnets and Femininities: Resistance, Construction, and Reproduction of Femininity within Sport,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issue*.

“Queering the Track? Forging Queer Spaces and Places within Contemporary Women’s Roller Derby,” chapter forthcoming in *Queer Absences and Presences: Time, Future, and History*, eds Mark E. Casey and Yvette Taylor. Palgrave Macmillan.

Professional Papers:

“We’re Here and We’re Queer: The Production of Queer Sport Spaces within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Southwestern Social Science Association Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, NV, March 2016

“From ‘Sage on the Stage’ to ‘Guide on the Side’: Effective Risk Taking and Creative Strategies in the 21st Century Classroom.” Paper presented at the Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Long Beach, CA, March 2015.

“Rolling Forward but Never Straight: Interpreting the Meaning of ‘Queer’ within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA, August 2014.

“Culture Jamming: The Role of DIY Culture, Third Wave Feminism, and Resistance in Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Portland, OR, March 2014.

“We’re Here and We’re...Queer? Forging Queer Spaces and Places within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in New York City, NY, August 2013.

“Wheels of Change: Re-focusing the Gaze at Gender, Sex(uality), and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting in New York City, NY, August 2013.

“A New Spin: The Role of DIY Culture and Resistance in Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the National Women’s Studies Association Annual Meeting in Oakland, CA, November 2012.

Roller Derby Resurrected: Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Resistance in the New Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting in Denver, CO, August 2012.

- “Your Roots are Showing: DIY Culture and the Local Community in Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction Couch /Stone Symposium Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, NV, April 2011.
- “New Movements and New Spaces: Gender, Sexuality, and Resistance in Contemporary Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, NV, August 2011.
- “As the Wheels Turn: Gender, Sexuality, and Resistance in the Cultural Dynamics of Contemporary Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Social Problems annual meeting in Las Vegas, NV, August 2011.
- “Fishnets and Femininities: Resistance, Construction, and Reproduction of Femininity within Sport.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA, August 2010.
- “Femininities and Feminisms: Identity within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Graduate and Profession Student Association Research Forum, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, March 2010.
- “Fishnets, Feminism, and Femininity: Gender, Sexuality, and Identity within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA, August 2009.
- “The Cultural Implications of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act: Incorporating a Feminist Bargaining Framework.” Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA, August 2009.
- “Bargaining and State Policy: The Implications of the TVPA for Women Sex Workers.” Paper presented at the International Association for Feminist Economics in San Francisco, CA, January 2009.
- “Place, Bargaining, and State Policy: The Implications of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act for Women Sex Workers.” Paper Presented at the Graduate and Professional Student Research Forum, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, March 2009.
- “Sporting Fishnets: Gender and Sexuality within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the 10th International Interdisciplinary Congress of Women (ISA) in Madrid, Spain, July 2008.
- “Fishnets, Fights, and Feminism: Reflections of Contemporary Sexuality Within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at the Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Oakland, CA, March 2007.
- “Contested Terrain: Narratives of the Nevada Test Site and Cultural Constructions of

Land, Nature, and Environment.” Paper presented at the American Society for Environmental History Conference in Baton Rouge, LA, February 2007.

“Las Vegas and the Modern World: Fissures and Bridges in the Narratives of Test Site Workers and Anti-Nuclear Activists.” Paper presented at the Biennial Conference on Nevada History in Las Vegas, NV, May 2006.

“Divided Ground: Fissures and Bridges in the Narratives of the Nevada Test Site Workers and Antinuclear-Protesters.” Paper presented at the Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Portland, OR, March 2005.

Invited Presentations:

“Fishnets and Femininities: Contemporary Complexities of Gender, Sexuality and Identity within Women’s Roller Derby.” Paper presented at UNLV Brownbag Lecture Series, University of Nevada Las Vegas, May 2016.

“Woman Enough? Sports History, Gender Testing, and the Olympics.” Paper presented for Gender Justice Nevada Community Forum Series, in Las Vegas, NV, November 2013.

“Fishnets, Fights, and Feminism(s): Resistance and Reproduction of Femininity within Sport.” Paper presented at Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, June 2009.

“Divided Grounds: Discourse, the Nevada Test Site and the Atomic Age.” Paper presented at the Nevada Council for History Conference in Las Vegas, NV, September 2007.

Awards and Grants:

Graduate Student Teaching Award, UNLV Department of Sociology, competitive, \$250, May 2016.

Patricia Sastunak Scholarship, competitive, \$2,500, Fall 2011/Spring 2012.

Graduate and Professional Student Research Forum Outstanding Presentation Award (Social Science division), 2nd place, March 2011.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Conference Presentation Grant, competitive, \$750, Fall 2010.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Service Award, competitive, \$300, March 2010.

Nevada test Site Oral History Project, Annual Outstanding Public History Project Award, awarded by the National Council on Public History, January 2010.

Graduate and Professional Student Research Forum Outstanding Presentation Award (Social Science division), 2nd place, March 2009.

Graduate Research Grant, Department of Sociology, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Summer 2009.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Conference Presentation Grant, competitive, \$750, Summer 2009.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Conference Presentation Grant, competitive, \$650, Fall 2008.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Conference Presentation Grant, competitive, \$750, Summer 2008.

Graduate and Professional Student Association Conference Presentation Grant, competitive, \$750, Spring 2007.

Selected Service:

Student Representative, Membership Committee, national Sociologists for Women in Society, 2013/2014-2016.

Reviewer for *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 2012-present.

UNLV Presidential Search Committee, GPSA representative, Fall 2008-Spring 2009.

Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA) Treasurer, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Spring 2006-Spring 2009.

Women Studies Curriculum Committee, graduate student member, University of Nevada Las Vega, Fall 2004-Spring 2006; Fall 2007-Spring 2009.

Parking Advisory Board, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Fall 2007-Spring 2009

Chair, GPSA Community Service Committee, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Fall 2007-Spring 2008.

University Commencement Committee, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Spring 2006; Spring 2007.

University Funding and Grants Committee, Spring 2007.

Professional Organizations:

American Sociological Association	Society for the Study of Social Problems
Pacific Sociological Association	Sociologists for Women in Society
National Women's Studies Association	Southwestern Social Science Association