

# BODIES AS STORIES IN WOMEN'S FLAT TRACK ROLLER DERBY

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## **ABSTRACT**

ELIZABETH ASHLEY THOMPSON: Bodies As Stories in Women's Flat Track Roller Derby

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As the fastest growing women's sport in the world, roller derby begins with the efforts of groups of everyday women. This paper explores the motivations and experiences of a roller derby league in the Triad region of North Carolina. Borrowing theories from performance studies, gender studies, and folklore and anthropology, this paper considers how participants shape, negotiate, transgress, and play with identity through three central concepts: community, performance, and body. Though roller derby participants come together to take part in a fast-paced, contact team sport, they talk of themselves as a distinct "community," meaning their relationships extend beyond shared athletic practice. At the center of the roller derby experience is the way the roller derby community and emergent identities are enacted within and through shared athletic performance. Lastly, this paper considers how participants construct a skater owned-and-operated, "women's space" in order to critique, explore, and re/imagine the physical body.

To the inspiring women of the Camel City Thrashers.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

On a Sunday afternoon in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Camel City Thrashers began one of their weekly roller derby practices at the Sportsplex gymnasium. Recovering from a sprained knee from a previous practice, I watched my teammates and took in the sights and smells that typically escape my attention when I am focused on practice drills, exercises, and scrimmaging. I felt the damp heat against my skin from many active, sweaty bodies moving throughout the space as I observed the familiar faces out on the track: Kam N' Getit, Gothzilla, Jenny Junk Puncher, Baby Bird, Suella De'Ville, Salmonella Poison, Dreads, Outrage, Ballista Blockhart, Hailstorm Trooper, and Shortstack Paincakes. There were several new skaters, or "fresh meat," as well, women wanting to "try on a new, fearless identity," a skater once put it, by strapping on a pair of quad roller skates and participating in an activity they likely never imagined themselves doing.

Amidst the whistles and cheers from a volleyball tournament, Baby Bird's shouts led the group through a series of stretches, lunges, kicks, and sprints before they put on their skating gear. Twenty women as well as several men who assist with the Thrasher's practices donned pink, black, blue, gray, green, and red helmets covered with a hodgepodge of stickers, including favorite brands for derby gear, the logo for Suella De'Ville's store Derby City Skates, acerbic quips such as "My derby mom can beat up your soccer mom," as well as a number of other graphics that make roller derby helmets visually engaging objects. Bulky knee and elbow pads, wrist guards, and mouth guards bulging behind lips contrast with derby's other aesthetic dimension: colorful clothing, tights, and an assortment of knee-high

socks. The juxtaposition between protective gear, quad roller skates, and audacious clothing, all external markers of women's flat track roller derby, never fails to capture the attention of outsiders, which was the case on this particular afternoon.

As the Thrashers laced up their skates and glided onto the track to begin laps, a crowd formed around the Plexiglas that separates their practice space from the rest of the gymnasium. A group of men, women, and children attending the volleyball tournament turned their attention to the Thrashers as they swiftly skated counterclockwise around the track. I noticed a young girl step closer to the glass, a look of concentration on her small face as her eyes followed the women's fluid movements. Meanwhile, Professor, the Thrasher's coach, shouted "skate hard" as each derby "girl" completed twenty-five laps.

"Do you all practice every week," a middle-aged man sitting nearby asked me. When I replied "yes," he commented that he had no idea roller derby skaters take their sport so seriously.

"We put a lot into it," I laughed knowingly. I thought of Professor's comment: "Derby is a commitment. It's not a hobby you show up to whenever you want. You're either all in or you're not."<sup>1</sup> Roller derby may have a reputation for being staged, but after a year of exploring the contemporary revival of roller derby through observation, conversations with participants, as well as my own first-hand participation in the sport, I have seen, heard, and felt how real it is.

Wanting to explore the intersection of gender, identity, and bodily performance in a community's enacting of their "groupness," I first began ethnographic work with a

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<sup>1</sup> Steve VanTol (Professor) interviewed by the author, Greensboro, North Carolina, 11 September 2012.

neighboring league, Greensboro Roller Derby.<sup>2</sup> My interest was piqued by a participant's entry on the league's blog that expressed the idea that, "Modern roller derby is not just a sport, it is a feminist movement."<sup>3</sup> Greensboro Roller Derby formed in 2010 and now consists of three home teams: The Battleground Betties, Elm Street Nightmares, and the Mad Dollies, as well as one all-star team called the Gate City Roller Girls, which travels to "bouts," or public matches, throughout North Carolina and neighboring states. This first experience introduced me to the world of women's flat track roller derby.

During public bouts, each team's "jammer," the skater who scores points, attempts to make her way through "the pack," or group of four blockers from each team, during a two minute "jam." A jammer scores points for each blocker from the opposing team whom she passes after her initial successful pass through the pack. Each team has four "blockers," including a "pivot," a blocker who both directs the other blockers on her team and who is eligible to become jammer. Blockers use various strategies to assist their team's jammer as she attempts to gain "lead-jammer" status. The lead-jammer is able to end, or "call-off," the jam, preferably before the other team's jammer can accrue points. Bouts are divided into two, thirty-minute periods consisting of an unlimited number of jams. While bouts share similarities with other public sporting events, roller derby participants share a unique sense of camaraderie that develops throughout their practices and performances both on and off the track. Their activity coalesces groups of roller derby participants into a distinct community that shares motivations, experiences, and stories.

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn Hinson and William Ferris, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 14: Folklife* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Miller Lighnin, ' "Men's Roller Derby: Oh My!" *Greensboro Roller Derby* (blog), January 10, 2012 (12:17 p.m.), <http://greensbororollerderby.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2012-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2013-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=16>.

After three months of observing Greensboro Roller Derby, I ultimately chose to become a participating member of the Camel City Thrashers. The Thrashers are a smaller league with one team and approximately twenty members, so I can regularly interact with all active members. In 2012, Greensboro Roller Derby became a Women's Flat Track Roller Derby Association (WFTDA) apprentice league, meaning that the group is well established and is able to be more competitive within the organization, which has grown to become international in scale. While this is an excellent opportunity for league members to advance their status and to be recognized within a broader organization, I was ultimately seeking a smaller roller derby league that would appeal to a variety of women, some who might be deterred by larger, more competitive leagues. While participants must be at least eighteen years of age to participate on the Thrashers and there are significant monetary and time commitments that may limit membership, women of different heights, shapes, ages, and educational and professional backgrounds are all participating members. Women in the group have differing athletic skill levels, from first time sports participants to women who have been athletes for a number of years. No matter what sports background one has, the Camel City Thrashers accept women who skate well and those whose first time trying on roller skates is the evening of their first practice.

While some participants' initial exposure to roller derby is through popular culture, others learn about roller derby through face-to-face interactions with skaters and fans. Professor explained how he watched the L.A. Thunderbirds and other roller derby teams on television in the 1980s and thought it "was interesting because it was a sport men and women were doing at the same time."<sup>4</sup> Betty Jean Bruiser, a former member of the Thrashers,

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<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. VanTol.



described how she first learned about the sport from a reality television show on A&E called *RollerGirls* (2006), which explored the motivations and experiences of members of the Lonestar Rollergirls league in Austin, Texas. After renting *Whip It* (2009), a film about a young woman drawn to the “alternative” derby scene in order to escape the normative feminine ideals of beauty pageants, Hailstorm Trooper “wonder[ed] if roller derby was actually a sport that exist[ed] around here, [in Greensboro, North Carolina].”<sup>5</sup> According to statistics conducted by WFTDA, however, skaters are largely attracting fans and new skaters by word of mouth, thus lending the sport a close-knit, grassroots feel.<sup>6</sup>

Baby Bird learned about the Thrashers from her mother, Suella De’Ville, and although she is a university student living an hour away from the Thrasher’s practice space, she and her mother have had the opportunity to see each other more frequently because of their shared commitment to roller derby. Kam N. Getit “never played sports, and [her] friend was asking [her] to join.”<sup>7</sup> Despite some initial reactions from other friends who looked at her like she was “crazy” when she told them she was going to participate on a roller derby team, she has been with the Thrashers since the team’s start in 2008. The support and encouragement of the roller derby community ultimately keeps participants active despite the hard work, commitment, and ever-present risk of injury.

Women remain active in roller derby week after week for reasons both simple and complex. Some members of the Camel City Thrashers discuss the personal challenge of

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<sup>5</sup> Christina DeVincenzo (Hailstorm Trooper) interviewed by the author, Greensboro, North Carolina, 16 September 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, “All About WFTDA,” *WFTDA*. 2009-2012. <http://wftda.com/about-WFTDA>.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Alva (Kam N. GetIt) and Susan Acesta Konczal (Suella De’Ville) interviewed by the author, Greensboro, North Carolina, 7 October 2012.

participating in roller derby, others the connections and relationships they build, still others describe the activity as therapeutic, personally meaningful, and empowering. Wanting to do something “big” for her fiftieth birthday and reminiscing about her experience working at a roller skating rink in Long Island, New York in the 1970s, Suella De’Ville “craved getting back into an adult skating community.”<sup>8</sup> She explained that this is the best time for her to do roller derby; before, “[her] commitment was to [her] children, [her] family.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, some women who are mothers explain that roller derby is an activity they do for themselves when much of their time is committed to caring for others. As General Sew from Greensboro Roller Derby put it, “This is the time for me.”<sup>10</sup>

Women in their thirties and forties frequently prefaced their roller derby experience narratives with stories of personal or professional challenges they have confronted in their lives. Discussions regarding participation on roller derby teams became a way for women to explain how personal transformations from points of feeling insecure to feeling confident and capable happened when they developed strong bonds with other women by sharing the experience of roller derby. Women in their twenties who attended public bouts prior to joining roller derby teams perceived the activity they observed on the track as a performance of fearlessness and women’s empowerment, and felt they wanted this in their own lives. Roller derby participants, in other words, offer important reflections and observations about possibilities for women that accompany their membership on roller derby teams.

Through a thick descriptive reading, I will explore the way in which women’s flat

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Gina Hicks (General Sew) in discussion with the author, Greensboro, North Carolina, 19 February 2012.

track roller derby creates meaning for participants both on and off the track. As Baby Bird explained: “A lot of people on our team will say, ‘I go to work so that I can do roller derby.’ It is kind of their life and their identity.”<sup>11</sup> Borrowing theories from performance studies, gender studies, and folklore and anthropology, my paper considers how participants shape, negotiate, transgress, and play with identities through three central concepts within roller derby: community, performance, and body. Though roller derby participants come together on teams and leagues to take part in a fast-paced, contact team sport, they talk of themselves as a distinct “community,” meaning their relationships extend beyond shared athletic practice. As the Thrashers’ by-laws proclaim, “The Camel City Thrashers exists to provide the opportunity to build positive relationships within our community through the sport of roller derby.”<sup>12</sup> At the center of the roller derby experience is the way the roller derby community and emergent identities are enacted within and through shared athletic performance. I consider several theories of performance and related concepts in order to interrogate the, often, blurry border between artistic performance and on-going performances of identity as they relate to women’s roller derby participation. Lastly, I consider how participants construct a skater owned-and-operated, “women’s space” in order to critique, explore, and re/imagine the physical body.

Roller derby is a shared practice through which women’s bodies become stories; their bodies speak of relationships, newly acquired abilities and skills, bruises, and the overall sense of empowerment that develops through their participation in the sport. Like other traditional practices associated with women, such as quilting bees and intergenerational

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<sup>11</sup> Erica Konczal (Baby Bird) interviewed by the author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 27 September 2012.

<sup>12</sup> “Camel City Thrashers Triad Roller Derby By-Laws,” (Organizational by-laws, Winston-Salem, NC, 2012), 1.

storytelling, roller derby allows women to both overtly and privately critique, negotiate, and playfully engage with hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality, consumer culture, and social norms, expectations, and relationships, which are all cultural inscriptions women “wear” on their bodies. This paper considers how women manage such cultural inscriptions as they embody an emergent roller derby self. I hope this paper contributes to understandings and conversations about practices contemporary women like members of the Camel City Thrashers are engaged in and how such activities create broader meanings for participants.

## II. METHOD

When I first began studying women’s flat track roller derby, I wondered how to go about conducting ethnographic fieldwork that centers on an experience of the physical body. Studying Greensboro Roller Derby, I was an observer looking in on a community of which I was not a part. In the group’s practice space, I often sat talking with skaters before practice, between their exercise drills, or for a few minutes as they were taking off sweaty helmets and protective gear and digging car keys from purses and backpacks. Through observation alone, in other words, I was missing important conversations sparked by shared frustrations or accomplishments on the track as well as the opportunity to challenge my body alongside others, a shared practice that builds the sense of community central to participants’ roller derby narratives and experience. I agree with Dwight Conquergood’s (1991) assertion that, “Ethnography is an *embodied practice*; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing. The embodied researcher is the instrument.”<sup>13</sup> There are both public and private layers to roller derby where being present as a participant implicates one in an intersubjective process; for a fieldworker “cannot be present in a social field without participating and becoming a

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<sup>13</sup> Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards A Critical Cultural Politics,” *Communication Monographs*, vol. 58 (June 1991), 180.

significant author of events.”<sup>14</sup> Rather than continuing to watch from the sidelines, I became the “author” of my own roller derby experience: I practice twice a week with my teammates; I passed WFTDA’s basic skills assessment test after several months of practice, and I donned my own roller derby alter-ego identity, “Wildcat Strike,” as I prepare to participate in monthly bouts.

Throughout my experience as a roller derby participant, I came to realize I am engaged in an “embodied ethnography.” My ongoing work with the Thrashers, like much ethnography, situates the body as the locus of experience and knowledge. Through participation rather than observation alone, an ethnographer privileges senses other than vision. As anthropologist Sarah Pink (2009) explains, “sensory ethnography” involves attending to the senses in order to more closely understand how others “experience, remember and imagine.”<sup>15</sup> Sharing the experience of roller derby with other participants allowed me to establish deeper connections with teammates as I share in all of the frustrations, challenges, and accomplishments of a dynamic team sport. Roller derby participants no longer merely convey for me what the experience is like; rather, we co-construct understandings within and through a shared athletic performance.

The understandings that inform the writing of this paper as well as the selection of concepts, therefore, were shaped by this experiential, embodied ethnographic approach, while the narratives themselves are from informal recorded conversations with six teammates: Professor, Hailstorm Trooper, Baby Bird, Suella De’Ville, Kam N. Getit, and Betty Jean Bruiser. While these interviews were casual and open-ended, the basic questions that guided discussion were: “What brought you to derby?” “What keeps you active in the

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<sup>14</sup> Aaron Turner, “Embodied Ethnography: Doing Culture,” *Social Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (February 2000): 53.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 23.

sport?” “How has your experience been, so far?” “Has this experience challenged any assumptions you might have had about what you are able to do?” The skaters I interviewed represent the experiences of participants ranging from twenty-years-old to fifty-two-years old. Personal and professional backgrounds consist of women in their early twenties who are navigating a number of educational and professional choices, full time employees, professional women running businesses, women working multiple jobs, as well as the experience of male league members, such as the Thrashers’ coach.

### **III. ROLLER DERBY OVERVIEW**

Talk about what it means for women to participate in roller derby circulates both inside and outside of the derby community. Roller derby narratives are layered with a number of significations and are always gendered. Popular memory and discourse about roller derby often focus on the sensational aspects of the sport and its participants. Betty Jean Bruiser pointed out, for instance, that others frequently do not understand what she means when she tells them she plays roller derby: “They’re like, ‘I thought it would maybe be like the ‘70s. You’d be punching each other in the face.’”<sup>16</sup> One significant factor contributing to both popular and vernacular roller derby narratives alike is the sport’s long, complex, and ever-evolving presence within American culture and imagination.

Roller derby has taken a number of forms since entertainment businessman and marathon promoter Leo Seltzer founded it in Chicago during the early 1930s. Over the course of nearly a century, roller derby has gone from endurance marathon, contact sport, televised sensation, staged theatrical spectacle, to the fastest growing women’s sport in the world. Seltzer brought together the American pastime of roller-skating with the Depression-

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<sup>16</sup> Rachel Sam (Betty Jean Bruiser) interviewed by the author, Greensboro, NC, 8 October 2012.

era popularity of marathons. From its inception, Selzer's Transcontinental Roller Derby consisted of coed teams made up of five women and five men. Men and women did not compete against each other; however, the rules set forth were the same for both; and, in addition to having equal roles in the sport's play, women made up over half of the audience at games. A point system was eventually introduced and roller derby went from flat track to banked track, from marathon to full contact sport. The first televised roller derby game was broadcasted out of New York City by CBS on November 29, 1948, and was followed by a thirteen-week run on the network.<sup>17</sup> During this time, roller derby's fan base continued to grow as the sport was featured in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States.

The televised success of roller derby began to decline in the early 1950s, though the sport maintained a fan base for the next four decades. Selzer's son eventually took over his father's business and roller derby became increasingly sensationalized. Like professional wrestling, roller derby had characters and plot lines about skater romances and rivalries, such as the rivalry between roller derby skating legends Joan Weston and Ann Calvello. Calvello, notorious for her outgoing personality and outrageous hair that was dyed platinum blonde and a number of other striking colors, can be regarded as an early example of the contemporary derby girl stereotype: unconventional in both attitude and appearance.

Preceding the contemporary roller derby revival, TNN briefly aired a derby inspired television show, *RollerJam* (1999-2000). *RollerJam* maintained the sport's theatrics and banked track, though skaters competed on inline skates popular at the time as opposed to traditional quad roller skates. Some members of roller derby's most recent and most

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<sup>17</sup> Keith Coppage, *Roller Derby to RollerJam: The Authorized Story of an Unauthorized Sport* (Santa Rosa, CA: Squarebooks, Inc. 1999), 20.

influential revival noted their familiarity with the show.<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary, all-women revival of roller derby took place in Austin, Texas in 2000. When the founding group divided between Bad Girl Good Woman (BGGW) Productions and the Texas Rollergirls, the newly formed Rollergirls became a flat track league. While banked tracks have to be moved from place to place and assembled before each bout, flat track roller derby can be played at local skating rinks and gymnasiums. The accessibility of the flat track approach allowed roller derby to quickly spread to other cities across the United States, by word of mouth, growing fascination with derby, and increased media coverage of the sport. Women's flat track roller derby has now spread throughout the world, with women's leagues in Europe, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Egypt, and a number of other locations.<sup>19</sup> WFTDA currently has 172 full member leagues and ninety-three apprentice leagues; however, it is difficult to get an exact figure of how many roller derby teams there are in existence, as many form and dissolve without joining the organization. The Camel City Thrashers, for instance, abides by WFTDA's rules and regulations, but is not a WFTDA league or apprentice league.

As its history suggests, roller derby is the only women's sport that is not merely a feminized version of a men's sport modified to accommodate women's "physical inferiority." As one scholar writing about roller derby puts it, "men's versions of sport are seen as the 'real thing;'" however, this has never been the case with roller derby.<sup>20</sup> Hailstorm

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Mabe, *Roller Derby: The History and All-Girl Revival of the Greatest Sport on Wheels* (Denver, CO: Speck Press, 2007), 58.

<sup>19</sup> Matt Moffett, "As the World Turns, So Do the Wheels of Roller Derby," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY), February 3, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy J. Finley, "Skating Femininity: Gender Maneuvering in Women's Roller Derby," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39, no. 4 (2010): 367.



Trooper described roller derby as:

[A] mix of speed, strategy, being really strong, being able to hit and take hits while looking flashy in fun outfits. At the last bout, I heard [a skater] say, “Do I have time to do my makeup?” I have never before heard that at a sporting event by athletes. The women who play are strong; they’re fast; they’re really strategic and intelligent with their moves and the plays they run, but they also look good while doing it.<sup>21</sup>

Gender performance and presentation within roller derby is complex and seemingly contradictory to the sport’s goals. On one hand, like many other women’s sports, roller derby appears to “tone down” the physicality and strength of a contact sport when participants’ emphasize femininity through their clothing and makeup, or “looking flashy” as Hailstorm Trooper put it. Some contemporary roller derby teams play with traditional roller derby motifs, particularly through costumes that allude to a previous era of “pin-up girls,” which participants playfully invert. On the other hand, the exaggerated presentation of gender makes clear that roller derby is a sport constructed by and for women who do not attempt to neutralize the role of gender within the sport’s play. In fact, participants’ emphasis of gender during roller derby bouts often goes beyond the presentation of femininity within their everyday lives. As Mary Russo (1995) posits, “To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.”<sup>22</sup> Such audacious presentations of femininity, in other words, can be read as a resistance and a claiming of power when athleticism is largely considered to be gender-neutral and especially a masculine domain. Further, the tension between rough play juxtaposed with feminine ideals presented through clothing and makeup scrambles gender role norms and expectations, and suggests there is more to femininity than what “meets the eye.” Roller derby participants’ carnivalesque femininity—“feminine

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<sup>21</sup> Op cit. DeVincenzo.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 70.

performance, imposture, and masquerade”—challenges the suggested cultural politics for women: “radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility.”<sup>23</sup> I will consider gender as a cultural inscription negotiated by roller derby participants via the body later in this paper.

Popular culture continues to shape perceptions of roller derby and participants. Actors such as Mickey Rooney (*The Fireball*, 1950) and Raquel Welch (*Kansas City Bomber*, 1972) starred in films about the sport, and contemporary roller derby also has films, television shows, and material culture that construct popular perceptions of the sport and its participants while also presenting roller derby in a way that may appeal to women who have never participated in sports. While roller derby of the past was business owned and derby audiences could not play the sport in their own homegrown leagues and teams, contemporary roller derby leagues always begin with the efforts and organization of everyday women and have remained skater owned-and-operated.

There are, therefore, points of comparison as well as a number of significant differences between roller derby’s past and present. In fact, Professor pointed out how much roller derby has changed during the two-and-a-half years he has been the coach for the Thrashers. “I still don’t know everything,” he began:

I’m always learning. It’s a progressive sport. There’s always different strategies coming about and rule sets are changing. So, it’s a very progressive sport; it keeps everything fresh. That’s always very interesting, and it keeps my interest.<sup>24</sup>

Suella De’Ville similarly said:

I truly, truly, truly believe that this is the tip of the iceberg. [Roller derby] is absolutely in it’s complete infancy, and it’s about to explode. Derby will be mainstream. It might be ten years from now, but I really think we’ll have church

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit. VanTol.

leagues. You know what I'm saying? It'll be the soccer of the new millennium. And, not just women, men and kids too, because anybody can do it. There's no restriction.<sup>25</sup>

Professor and Suella De'Ville's comments point to one of the significant aspects about roller derby: it is not a new sport, but it *feels* new as it has continued to change over time. The increasing attention and recognition of roller derby continues to bring a number of transformations to the sport. Participants I interviewed expressed their desire to have roller derby continue to grow and to have greater media representation, though they want the sport to maintain the unique spirit of expressivity and inclusiveness that has characterized their own experiences. Many are excited at the prospect of the sport's inclusion in the 2020 Olympic games, though some were not convinced roller derby's inclusion as an Olympic sport would generate greater interest. All participants interviewed were careful to point out that if roller derby continues to grow in popularity, they do not want their community's particular ethos to be compromised as a result. For example, Betty Jean Bruiser said, "I would love for derby to keep growing and growing and growing. My only fear, I guess, is that it's going to lose that grassroots kind of feel."<sup>26</sup> Kam N. Getit similarly acknowledged, "I definitely want it to get bigger. I know there's some teams starting up that are taking it more seriously, using their real names and not having a lot of say in their team's decisions. I don't like that."<sup>27</sup>

Those drawn to the sport participate for reasons that go well beyond the opportunity to take part in a physical activity; many characterize it as a support network, the place where

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<sup>25</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

<sup>26</sup> Op cit. Sam.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

their deepest friendships develop, and even as their other family. Betty Jean Bruiser commented that derby is “the biggest family [she’s] ever had,” while Kam N. Getit said: “It’s like a big family for me. I have friends outside of derby, but I feel like my derby friends are my best friends, my family, the people that will be there for me when I need them.”<sup>28</sup> Popular culture representations of the sport, such as the film *Whip It*, contribute to understandings that roller derby is an alternative activity where one can work through and negotiate larger goals, motivations, identities, and relationships. Participants’ experiences and emergent identities within the roller derby community are, in fact, shaped by meaningful face-to-face interactions, including shared athletic performance and dialogic exchanges with other participants. Such “interactions between women have defined the rules and built the organizations.”<sup>29</sup> As the Thrashers’ by-laws inform:

We are owned and operated by the skaters, for the skaters; our members are from all walks of life and strive to demonstrate that women can be strong and independent while maintaining careers and personal lives. Our league strives to empower women by challenging them both on and off the track; to establish and maintain roots within the Piedmont-Triad community, and to create a physically demanding sport that inspires us to embrace our inner strength while entertaining our fans.<sup>30</sup>

In the sections that follow, I will discuss the nexus of identity, community, and performance in women’s flat track roller derby.

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<sup>28</sup> Op. cit. Sam, Alva, Acesa-Konczal.

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit. Finley, 367.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

#### IV. ROLLER DERBY COMMUNITY

Students, waitresses, housekeepers, teachers, business owners, graphic designers, and a mother and daughter duo are all participating members of the Camel City Thrashers. “It’s a great community to figure out life with,” as Betty Jean Bruiser expressed, “because everyone has got different experiences, different backgrounds, and you can get everyone’s take on an issue.”<sup>31</sup> As members of the Thrashers, we refer to ourselves as a “community,” but this is not limited to our own team. As Baby Bird pointed out, “It’s the *entire* roller derby community that you become close to, even if you don’t know people.”<sup>32</sup> Roller derby has remained a “grassroots” sport since the 2000 revival; organizing teams, finding sponsors, planning bouts, and contributing to non-profit organizations and charities are experiences shared by participants across roller derby leagues in the United States. Further, members of roller derby leagues and teams have occasional opportunities to participate in derby invitationals, where teams are made up of skaters from various leagues and teams. Roller derby skaters get to know each other through their participation at invitationals, bouts, as well as during social activities that accompany such events.

The spirit of competition based on allegiance to home teams or even national identity, in the case with the Olympics, that defines many other sports does not have the same importance within the roller derby community, particularly for smaller, non-WFTDA leagues like the Camel City Thrashers. Teams aim to win, of course, and work hard at practices to be able to do so. As a skater from Greensboro Roller Derby was careful to point out, derby is not just about wearing costumes; participating in the sport requires skill and physical

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<sup>31</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.

endurance. Winning or losing, however, is not necessarily what shapes one's experience within the roller derby community. As Suella De'Ville put it, "win or lose, it's nice to go out afterward and go to after-parties and enjoy each other's company."<sup>33</sup> In this section, I will examine the roller derby community participants' construct via their personal experience narratives, and I will consider the common identity participants believe they share with other roller derby skaters.

During our conversations, members of the Camel City Thrashers tried to find the right expressions to characterize the shared identity among roller derby participants; words like "misfits," "outsiders," "crazy," and "weird" were often used. Such expressions make clear that this group of women differentiate between roller derby participation and normative social roles, that they see their involvement in a physically challenging contact sport as a transgression of hegemonic constructions of gender norms. Following perceptions of roller derby shaped by popular cultural representations, derby girls often exhibit characteristics of an "alternative femininity" such as, unconventional hairstyles and colors, tattoos, and face and body piercings.<sup>34</sup> Betty Jean Bruiser and several others characterized the roller derby community as being "crazy," "progressive," "open," and "free-spirited." Baby Bird explained:

[A] lot of these people have kind of been outsiders their whole life, and to be able to find a group of people who are the same as you—you don't really let that go. You don't want to lose the opportunity to meet those cool people.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

<sup>34</sup> Mimi Schippers, "The Social Organization of Sexuality and Gender in Alternative Hard Rock: An Analysis of Intersectionality," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 6 (December 2000): 747-764.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.

Outside of the Camel City Thrasher's weekly practices and monthly public bouts, however, one would never suspect some of the women on the team are involved in a fast-paced, hard-hitting, "crazy" sport like roller derby. While there is a reclaiming of such expressions so that they become positive signifiers among roller derby participants, some members of the group may not feel that these descriptions accurately describe their experiences or motivations as roller derby participants. For example, Baby Bird explained:

[I'm] not really one of those girls who are like, "Yeah, I just want to hit people! I just need to get my aggression out..." [Roller derby] has got an alternative culture about it, and that was never really my style...I guess it kind of goes to show that everyone can fit in. I mean, every kind of person.<sup>36</sup>

Baby Bird posits roller derby as an activity that allows participants to play with and negotiate social expectations and gender norms, and as a space where many participants are part of an "alternative culture" that allows them to imagine and perform confrontational "alternative" identities. On the other hand, her comment also suggests that expressions like "crazy" and "outsider" do not characterize her own experiences or goals as a roller derby participant. Despite the diverse realities of skaters and their multiple constructions of selfhood, however, roller derby participants also frequently emphasize that one will "fit," both in terms of personality and body. Looking closely at Betty Jean Bruiser's description of the roller derby community elucidates this seeming paradox.

Betty Jean Bruiser's description of the roller derby community begins much like Baby Bird's notion of an outsider community: "It's just a bunch of weird, crazy people."<sup>37</sup> Afterwards, however, she acknowledged differences between participants, citing an example

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<sup>36</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

of differences between herself and another skater on the Camel City Thrashers:

People who probably wouldn't get along outside of their mutual love for skating and derby are best friends now, which I think is really cool... Would I really hang out with [Salmonella Poison]? What are the odds that me and [Salmonella Poison] would be really close if we hadn't met each other through derby? I think it's such a great foundation to build relationships on.<sup>38</sup>

To look more closely at Betty Jean Bruiser's comment about the unlikely relationship she has with Salmonella Poison, consider the following: Betty Jean Bruiser is a skater in her early twenties; she has a shaved head, tattoos, and facial piercings. Salmonella Poison, on the other hand, is a professional woman in her forties, a mother, and a small business owner. Through a shared commitment to roller derby, however, skaters like Betty Jean Bruiser and Salmonella Poison who have different beliefs, backgrounds, and personal motivations are able to form relationships and become valued members of their leagues as well as the broader roller derby community.

Despite participants' narrative constructions of themselves as an outsider community, there are, in fact, many different motivations and experiences to be found even within a small league. As Professor said, "I love the idea that we have such a unique group of people on our team from so many different walks of life. [I]f we didn't play derby, the majority of us would never know each other."<sup>39</sup> The shared experience of *doing* roller derby, coming together for practices, bouts, and the various interactions in-between, is what ultimately shapes the derby community. As Baby Bird put it, "Just devoting yourself to something and doing it alongside someone kind of creates that bond [of community]."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Op. cit. VanTol.

<sup>40</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.



## V. ROLLER DERBY PERFORMANCE

The commonality shared by participants that shapes the roller derby community then, is located in the very process and experience of doing roller derby. What it means to perform and the implications of performance are of central importance to a discussion of women's flat track roller derby. Roller derby exhibits the typical features of a number of sporting events, though an examination of roller derby performance considers various aspects of the derby community and experience beyond roller derby as an athletic performance. Baby Bird explained:

Each league is different as far as performance goes. I feel like the Greensboro Rollergirls really try to put on a show for their fans, and you'll notice most of the people who go to their bouts are people who are not involved in roller derby and are looking for a show. Whereas, there's a team in Charlotte, the Speed Demons, they don't even use derby names. They want to be seen as respectable athletes and so they use their legal names. They don't put on any kind of show at all. They're just into playing roller derby.<sup>41</sup>

Here, two styles of play are discussed: "putting on a show" and "playing roller derby." One description points to roller derby's theatrical past while the other characterizes a reaction to that past by some contemporary participants wanting to advance roller derby as a "legitimate" sport. While theatrically engaging with roller derby is not necessarily at odds with playing derby as a "serious" athlete, some of the typical roller derby conventions that set it off from other sports continue to be assessed and redefined by WFTDA, as well as by individual leagues. These differing constructions of roller derby often relate to choices surrounding gender performance and presentation during public bouts.

To explore the range of complexities and possibilities regarding roller derby performance, I will consider multiple theories of performance, as well as several related

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

concepts. Theories of performance help to situate roller derby as an activity that straddles the, sometimes, blurry border between artistic or framed performance and everyday performances of social identities and relationships. For example, while sociologist Irving Goffman, in his seminal text *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), broadly conceives of performance as any number of social interactions, folklorist Richard Bauman (1975) differentiates between artistic performance and reiterative performances of identities. However, he also calls upon us “to consider performance roles and the social and behavioral relationships between such roles and other roles played by the same individual.”<sup>42</sup> Responding to Bauman’s call, folklorist Patricia Sawin (2002) considers the relationship between artistic performance and performers’ gendered self-constructions. To advance her argument, she discusses Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of “performativity” as well as the theory of “flow” as discussed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1974). Butler’s theory of performativity considers everyday discursive processes through which identities are enacted and performed. Butler explains how “[she] sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical,” and I agree with her assertion that, “the two are invariably related.”<sup>43</sup> Turner defines flow as “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement,” the “merging of action and awareness,” a “centering of attention,” and he adds that flow “seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself.”<sup>44</sup> Turner’s notion that flow can occur in “communitas” helps to explain how performance norms surrounding gender may also be temporarily suspended within a group context.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (June 1975): 299.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990/1999), xxv.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminal To Liminoid, In Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology,” *The Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 87, 89.

Women's flat track roller derby, whether participants intend for it to do so or not, transgresses normative social roles and expectations, though not because one is cast as the "misfit" or "outsider." Such expressions, however, may be the underlying result of broader implications regarding women's roller derby participation and gendered performance norms. Turner's theory of liminoid activities and *communitas* is important to a discussion of community and performance in the case of a women's leisure activity like roller derby, as it points to some of the social implications surrounding athletic performance. Socially constructed notions of work, play, and leisure are central to defining liminal and liminoid activities. Turner defines liminality as "a complex series of episodes in sacred space-time, [which] may also include subversive and ludic events;" these events invert one's typical social roles where "separation [and] blurring and merging of distinctions" make one's social status "temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure."<sup>45</sup> As one temporarily suspended from structural norms, an individual has no rights over others, but this also "liberates them from structural obligations."<sup>46</sup> Liminality can be found in societies where work is divided between the sacred and the profane, rather than work being separate from leisure. Liminoid activities, on the other hand, occur in societies where work and leisure are separate spheres.

Similar to liminality, leisure is a "betwixt and between" state; it "is a non-work, even an anti-work phase in the life of a person who also works."<sup>47</sup> While liminality characterizes obligatory rites of passage, liminoid activities are optional. As Turner points out, "'liminoid'

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 67.

*resembles* without being identical with ‘liminal.’”<sup>48</sup> While liminality is a reversal of the status quo, it does not subvert it; as Turner argues, the liminal “can never be much more than a subversive flicker.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast, liminoid activities “are often *subversive*, lampooning, burlesquing, or subtly putting down the central values of the basic, work-sphere society, or at least of selected sectors of that society.”<sup>50</sup> Liminoid activities can “repossess the character of ‘work,’” but “can [also] be an independent domain of creative activity,” for “leisure-time” is both a “freedom-from” and a “freedom to.”<sup>51</sup> An individual engaged in liminoid activities is *free from* “a whole heap of institutional obligations,” and is *free to* “enter [or] generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment, sports, games, diversions of all kinds” that can “transcend social structural limitations.”<sup>52</sup> An individual is ultimately *free to* play “with ideas, with fantasies, with words, with pain, and with social relationships.”<sup>53</sup>

Sports are one example of a liminoid activity, and though governed by rules in much the same way as one’s work situation, one chooses to participate in a sport. Thus, sports, as Turner suggests, can be part of an “individual’s freedom, of [her] growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence [because] [l]eisure is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticize or buttress the dominant social structural values.”<sup>54</sup> For participants, roller derby is an activity they enjoy not only because of the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

relationships they develop and the physical challenge they confront, but also because they are invested in co-constructing an accepting, “women’s space” where they can play with social expectations and structural obligations and, importantly, learn something about themselves. As play theorist Brian Sutton Smith (1972) suggests, “we may be disorderly in games either because we have an overdose of order, and want to let off steam...or because we have something to *learn* through being disorderly.”<sup>55</sup>

Within their personal experience narratives then, the Thrashers posit roller derby as an activity shaped and negotiated by groups of women. This sets roller derby off from most dominant social structures. Roller derby involves transgressions of gender, and occasionally sexuality, via derby alter-ego names, costumes, and other signifiers that often playfully engage with heteronormative and feminine constructs, but there are also more subtle and meaningful relationships between skaters that allow them to transgress and/or challenge the status quo. Baby Bird, for instance, explained how she feels “a lot more confident” because she participates on a roller derby team. Hailstorm Trooper also described how roller derby has made her more confident: “I’ve been able to take the confidence from roller derby and put into real life.”<sup>56</sup> She went on to discuss how participating on a roller derby team “has been a big step of just coming out of [her] shell [by] taking the competence of roller derby, breaking down mental and physical barriers, and taking it into other aspects of [her] life.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Betty Jean Bruiser emphasized how she has become more independent because of roller derby; she explained how the support she receives from the roller derby community

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Op. cit. DeVincenzo.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

even allowed her to end an unsatisfying relationship:

Before I started playing, I probably would have been like, ‘Oh, this relationship sucks, but I’m going to stay because I’m not really sure what to do.’ But, I was like, ‘Fuck this guy. I have roller derby.’<sup>58</sup>

Participants often discuss how roller derby provides a space for women to comfortably take risks within a supportive group context. As Baby Bird put it:

People are kind of afraid to show who they are in the normal world, but derby allows them that confidence to get out there and really be themselves and not be afraid if someone is looking at them funny. They don’t need to try to appease people...because they have this community where people are going to accept them.<sup>59</sup>

Participants’ descriptions relate to Turner’s notion of “*communitas*,” or attachments between members of a group separated from dominant social structures. Baby Bird, for instance, posits roller derby as a women’s activity set apart from their everyday social relations, or the “normal world.” Her use of “normal” suggests roller derby is not a typical activity for women, and that participants are able to “be themselves” within this supportive group context. As Turner writes, “[A]lmost anywhere, people can be subverted from their duties and rights into an atmosphere of *communitas*.”<sup>60</sup> *Communitas*, he informs:

[M]ay be said to exist more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more ‘liberated’ way of being socially human, a way both of being detached from social structure and also of a ‘distanced’ or ‘marginal’ person’s being more attached to *other* disengaged persons.<sup>61</sup>

This description applies to women’s roller derby: participants receive support and encouragement from a community “detached” from normative social roles and

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<sup>58</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

<sup>59</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.

<sup>60</sup> Op. cit., Turner, 82.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 82.

relationships—i.e. a *leisure space* that is also *women's space*. As Betty Jean Bruiser explained:

I think a lot of women need encouragement because, you know, society kind of sucks. So, you can come to derby and you feel comfortable. You can build up some confidence that you probably otherwise wouldn't have, which I think is really nice.<sup>62</sup>

Betty Jean Bruiser's comment suggests that participants foster an environment that contrasts with social structures and relations that leave women with a lack of confidence. Hailstorm Trooper also expressed the idea that roller derby provides a space for women to challenge normative social roles, or at least escape them temporarily:

It's an outlet, I think, for a lot of women who typically wouldn't get to do this sort of thing because a lot of the people you see have full jobs, kids, businesses to run. They need somewhere to let out that aggression in a controlled environment and still be loved at the end of the day.<sup>63</sup>

Solidarity with other women within and through roller derby practice and performance ultimately allows participants to confidently display developing skills and competencies—a “more liberated way of being socially human,” as Turner put it.

Turner's discussion of “flow” also helps to explain how roller derby allows participants to temporarily suspend normative social roles and relations. “Flow” is a state where the ego is temporarily suspended as an individual's action and awareness become one. Flow is an intensification of experience; one could achieve this state while singing in front of a crowd, taking part in a roller derby bout, or any number of other experiences, individual and/or communal. Patricia Sawin regards the possibility of flow in women's performance as being problematic because it entails a loss of ego—“The ‘self’...simply becomes

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<sup>62</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

<sup>63</sup> Op. cit. DeVincenzo.

irrelevant”—which she regards as being incongruent with the way gender is experienced.<sup>64</sup>

To lose oneself in performance as a women is threatening to social norms, and women who give themselves over to performance are taking a risk. Importantly, Turner observes that while flow is individual, it also has the potential to occur among individuals in *communitas*. A supportive group context explains how subjects may be able to give themselves over to the flow of performance despite gender being a category that influences women’s performance norms. Suella De’Ville, for example, explained how the “chaos and fast-pace” of a public bout requires strategy to become “second nature,” and how she is not considering an audience during a bout, only her teammates.<sup>65</sup> Her comment points to how participants must merge action and awareness to become one—multiple bodies acting as a single bodily force—which is ultimately the underlying goal of roller derby. Baby Bird put it this way:

It’s hard to think what I’m feeling or what I’m thinking about in bouts because I think it becomes automatic at that point, like muscle memory. I don’t really *think* while I’m skating.<sup>66</sup>

To summarize, roller derby is a liminoid, or leisure, activity in which participants transgress normative social and gender roles and relations through and within a shared athletic group practice and performance. In this group context, women who play roller derby may experience the “flow” of a performance event. This allows them to temporarily suspend the ego, or “self,” to take a risk that, in turn, may contribute to performances of emergent identities—both on and off the roller derby track. While roller derby as a “women’s space” means that it is set apart from other social spaces, participants also described how the

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<sup>64</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminal To Liminoid, In Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology,” *The Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974): 88.

<sup>65</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Ascesta-Konczal.

<sup>66</sup> Op. cit. Konczal.



ongoing performance of identities during roller derby practice and performance influences other everyday performances of identities.

Roller derby, I discovered, provides a particularly useful case study for Bauman's call for us to consider performance alongside other social roles and relationships. The remainder of this section considers the inextricable relationship between artistic performance, roller derby participation at team practices and bouts, and ongoing constructions of identity, how roller derby influences other performances of identities. Bauman defines "performance roles" as formally keyed and patterned events set off from other everyday performances. When keying a performance, the performer draws attention to himself/herself before an audience that will comprehend and assess the performer's skill and credibility. There are recognizable keying devices that mark artistic performance off from more quotidian performances—beginning a story, "once upon a time," for instance, creates a heightened intensity characteristic of the performance frame. In women's flat track roller derby, participants' descriptions of their experiences before and as public bouts begin are, in many ways, complimentary to the performance frame put forth in Bauman's formulation.

A sporting event is a particular type of performance that consists of framed and patterned characteristics a sport's audience comes to know and anticipate. For instance, the beginning of the Camel City Thrasher's bouts, like most other American sporting events, begins with the singing of the national anthem. Roller derby bouts cost money to attend, and throughout a public bout, there are merchants' booths set up where audiences can purchase team t-shirts, mugs, key-chains and other items. Consumer practices, as anyone who has attended a public sporting event knows, are also typical. Considering that contemporary roller derby is new to many observers, derby participants theatrically stage one lap around

the track during which the roles of jammers, pivots, and blockers are explained to the audience before a bout officially begins. Outside of such sporting conventions, however, participants describe other personal keying devices that help them step into their athletic performance roles during a public bout.

Several participants interviewed discussed the heightened experience that accompanies stepping into a performance frame. In the examples that follow, the physical roller derby track serves as a tangible space where one transitions from an everyday identity to her performance role. Baby Bird discussed how she is uneasy before every bout, “but as soon as [the Thrashers] get out on the track, it’s all gone.”<sup>67</sup> In this example, once the performance role has been established, Baby Bird is able to step from her everyday self into her roller derby alter ego, which does not experience the same concerns and anxieties characteristic of other daily experiences that may cause such feelings. Bauman (2007) points to the power of performance to transform the performer’s social status: “in the special emergent quality of performance the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest to the community.”<sup>68</sup> This feeling of being in control of an emergent performance situation may explain Baby Bird’s feeling of competency when participating in a public bout. Kam N. Getit described her experience similarly to Baby Bird:

I still get nervous to this day. No matter how many bouts, or invitationals, or scrimmages I’ve played in, I get nervous. I get shaky. I’m like, “Oh gosh! This is going to happen soon. What am I going to do? How am I going to feel?” Then, as soon as I get out on the track for the first jam, it all kind of goes away and I’m just

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Richard Bauman, “The Emergent Quality of Performance,” in *A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication: Essential Readings*, eds. Leila Monaghan and Jane E. Goodman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 37.

ready to play. I kind of ‘cheese’ it up during intros. I want to give everybody a high-five. I’m like, “Alright, let’s do this!”<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly, Kam N. Getit explained how it “terrifies” her to speak in front of a large crowd, but when confronted with the knowledge that a large audience attends a bout to see her and the others play derby, she finds herself highly motivated, “charged up,” and even eager to interact with the audience as the announcer introduces each of the skaters by their selected derby names as the bout begins. Stepping into one’s roller derby performance role then, is a heightening of intensity unlike other everyday experiences, which may evoke feelings of dis-ease.

Bauman’s call for us to consider performance alongside other social and behavioral roles also suggests a relationship between performance roles and ongoing constructions of identity.<sup>70</sup> In this vein, Irving Goffman defines performance as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by [her] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.”<sup>71</sup> According to this definition, performance consists of any number of roles an individual takes on while interacting with others, including performances in the workplace, public spaces, and the home. What differentiates one performance from another, though they often overlap, is the “front,” or “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during [her] performance.”<sup>72</sup> A performance front consists of “setting” and a performer’s “personal front,” which is divided between one’s appearance,

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<sup>69</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (June 1975): 299.

<sup>71</sup> Irving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959), 22.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

“insignia of office or rank; clothing, sex, age, and racial characteristics, size and looks,” and one’s manner, “posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, bodily gesture, and the like.”<sup>73</sup> According to Goffman’s criteria, roller derby is a particular type of performance that has its own expressive equipment to establish roles for all involved.

On the day of the Camel City Thrashers’ public bouts, participants, including both roller derby skaters and audience members, understand from the skating track, merchants’ booths, and overall ambiance of the physical space that the setting has been constructed for a sporting event. The track is typically constructed with rope and/or brightly colored duct tape to separate skaters and the track from an audience whose seating is arranged outside of this space. Derby participants, referees, and other officials at bouts are marked off from audience members by uniformed clothing and by wearing skates and other sporting and safety equipment. Derby skaters themselves change their gestures and postures depending on whether or not they are on or off the track. While skating, participants get into “derby position,” i.e. bent knees and straightened back, which allows for more stability and balance and enables the use of core muscles. An audience’s relationship to setting and their own personal fronts, meanwhile, are differentiated from roller derby teams and officials at bouts. Audience members understand from caution tape and other signs that they must maintain distance from the track. While such conventions create the setting and personal fronts typical to a public roller derby bout, participants, according to Goffman’s definition, are also engaged in performance when they are practicing, interacting with one another outside of practice and public bouts, as well as when an individual roller derby participant is away from teammates and is in the company of coworkers, friends, or family members. Goffman suggests, however, that “an individual may be taken in by [her] own act,” and it is the

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

“mask,” the “mask [of one’s] truer self, the self [she] would like to be” that has particular implications for participants outside of public bouts and the roller derby community.<sup>74</sup> The way roller derby affects other social and behavioral roles, or the relationship between various performances of identities requires further consideration.

Bauman’s criteria for how performance is formally keyed as well as understood and assessed by an audience leaves subtle, everyday performances left unexplored. A number of feminist folklorists problematize his formulation, arguing that many of the private, collaborative performances of women do not neatly fit within his definition.<sup>75</sup> Patricia Sawin, for instance, revisits Bauman’s performance theory from a feminist perspective. For Sawin, “performance theory and feminist epistemology are incongruent” because of the criteria for performance put forth by Bauman. She sees performance practices such as drawing attention to oneself and displaying competence before an audience that will assess one’s skill and credibility as a performer as being incongruent with women’s gendered self-construction.<sup>76</sup>

She asks:

What kind of subject does Bauman's formulation of performance posit or assume?  
What kinds of roles and responses does he assign to both performer and audience? To  
what extent does the theory promote or discourage attention to the necessarily  
gendered construction of self?<sup>77</sup>

For Sawin, what is lacking in Bauman’s formulation is a deeper consideration of identity as a political category that determines performance, as well as greater attention to “feeling” with

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> Rosan Jorday and Susan Kalcik, *Women’s Folklore, Women’s Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Sawin, “Performance at the Nexus of Gender, Power, and Desire: Reconsidering Bauman’s Verbal Art from the Perspective of Gendered Subjectivity as Performance,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 455 (Winter, 2002): 29.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

regard to both performer and audience. In her analysis, Sawin brings together Bauman's performance theory with Butler's theory of performativity. Performativity serves in contrast to Bauman's formulation of artistic performance in that it concerns on-going performances, i.e. constructions, of our identities. That identity is performed through reiterative acts (1) implies that there is no "natural" identity (2) suggests that identity is fluid, in process, and at issue, and (3) allows for the possibility of transgression of norms, of gender etc., via slippages that occur within and through reiterative acts. Before moving on to a discussion of Sawin's notion of feeling, I will first consider the relationship between artistic performance and gendered self-constructions in women's flat track roller derby.

One of the purposes of Sawin's reworking of Bauman's criteria for performance is to "[theorize] the role of such esthetic communication in gendered self-construction."<sup>78</sup> To consider her argument, Sawin discusses her ethnographic work with Bessie Eldreth, a traditional singer and storyteller from Boone, North Carolina. In a number of conversations with Sawin over the years, Eldreth dialogically constructs herself as a gendered subject and performer. Ultimately, Eldreth's gendered self-construction is inseparable from her role as singer and storyteller. Similar to Eldreth, roller derby participants' narratives regarding their performance frequently involved descriptions of others gendered reactions to their activity and their attempts to account for transgressions of hegemonic gender norms. Roller derby participants' personal experience narratives, in other words, are also constructed around gender.

To playfully engage with and transgress gender norms sets roller derby up for a number misconceptions about both the sport and its participants. While some of these misunderstandings are the result the sport's theatrical past as well as more recent pop cultural

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

constructions of roller derby, many point to the social implications of women participating in a sport that challenges hegemonic constructions of gender. As Betty Jean Bruiser explained:

The first thing I always get [when saying she participates on a roller derby team] is, “Well, can you punch people in the face? Is it like *Whip It*?” I’m just like, “No, no...No, I can’t punch people in the face. No, it’s not just a bunch of lesbians hanging out.” That’s the general consensus for some reason.<sup>79</sup>

While Betty Jean Bruiser begins by pointing out that contemporary roller derby is different from the roller derby of the past as well as portrayals of the sport put forth by popular cultural representations, her final point gets at what it *really* means to some individuals when women transgress gender norms: if women take on so-called “masculine” gender roles by participating in a contact sport, then their sexuality must also be at issue. As Betty Jean Bruiser put it: “It’s a contact sport. Then, it attracts the *misfits* I guess, which people automatically go, “You’re weird. You’re probably a lesbian.”<sup>80</sup> Hailstorm Trooper similarly described others’ reactions when she explains to them that she participates on a roller derby team: “I get a lot of weird questions like, “So, everyone is a lesbian and you get to punch people in the face while you’re on skates?”<sup>81</sup> Such comments put forth by participants within their personal experience narratives express not only the views of outsiders, but also some of the concerns and anxieties of participants attempting to negotiate their participation in a hard-hitting, contact sport with other social roles and relationships. In the story that follows, I will discuss a particular example regarding the complexities and tensions between participants’ derby selves and their everyday selves and how participants account for and manage these multiple performances.

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<sup>79</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Op cit. DeVincenzo.

When the Thrashers were getting their start in 2008, participants met at a roller skating rink in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. According to their stories, the owner of the skating rink eventually passed along word to the rink manager that the group could no longer practice in the space. Participants tell the story again and again, and through their tellings of the story, they emphasize outsider perceptions of women who transgress hegemonic gender norms. Such tellings and retellings also suggest some of participants' own ways of compensating for transgressing or playing with social norms and expectations. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Kam N. Getit, Suella De'Ville, and myself.

Kam N. Getit: We started... in Winston-Salem, and we practiced there a couple times a week. Then, it got to the point that they didn't want us there because they thought we were bad people, a bad influence... When we had all of our gear on, they said it wasn't very family friendly... They didn't want us doing hitting drills and scary things with all the kids [present at the skating rink]. We were very aware of the kids; we wouldn't do dangerous things.

Author: What was it about this person that you definitely got the perception that they were not ok with what they were seeing from all of you?

Kam N. Getit: I think more of our looks than our personalities. We'd never seen this guy. The skate manager loved us, but his boss didn't want us there. We never saw or heard from him at all. It was just word of mouth from the manager. Unless somebody else had talked to him, but not that I know of... If he would have come and talked to us and learned about what we do, I think it would have been totally different.

Suella De'Ville: Rumor has it, and this is only hearsay, he's a pretty hardcore Christian. And the stigma, what he perceived—I mean, it is kind of Halloween-y when you think about it. You get dressed up, and I think that's the whole appeal to some extent. It's like Halloween every weekend. But, he didn't understand that wasn't—that might have been what they were trying to do that day or at a practice or bout, but they still go home and change diapers, do homework, and a lot of them are students.<sup>82</sup>

In our conversation, Kam N. Getit begins by explaining how there was a problem at the skating rink that was presented to the Thrashers as being a safety issue with children at the

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<sup>82</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesa-Konczal interview transcript.



rink during the group's roller derby practices. The issue of children's safety is interesting in that women's social roles are often constructed around family relationships, such as motherhood. For the rink owner to suggest that the women posed a threat specifically to children, that their activity was not "family friendly," was perceived by participants as the manager questioning not only the appropriateness of roller derby performance roles for a group of women, but also their other social roles. Kam N. Getit and Suella De'Ville's reactions to the owner described in their narratives also express tensions between women's roller derby performance and women's social roles. As Suella De'Ville pointed out, "[roller derby performance] might have been what they were trying to do that day or at a practice or bout, but they still go home and change diapers, do homework, or a lot them are students." Suella De'Ville makes clear that roller derby performance may be a temporary transgression, but it does not necessarily *subvert* the status quo by permanently removing women from normative social roles and relations. However, as I have previously discussed, women's roller derby participation does influence the way they act in the world outside of roller derby, just not in the way the skating rink owner supposed.

As Sawin suggests then, we "need to go farther 'inside' performances to explore psychological and emotional dimensions of the experience of the performance event...to locate the genesis of the sociopolitical in the most minute and mundane interactions," such as the interaction, or absence of interaction, between the roller skating rink owner and the Camel City Thrashers.<sup>83</sup> I find Sawin's call to consider feeling complementary to folklorist Katharine Young's *Bodylore* (1993) and her more recent work with bodily gestures. Both Sawin and Young call into question the boundaries of artistic performance, bringing artistic

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<sup>83</sup> Op. Cit. Sawin, 30.

performance into consideration alongside the performative, experiential, and the phenomenological. Young states, “How we are inserted in our own bodies, the hold we have on them, the sort of thing we suppose the body to be, its metaphysics, are both in flux and at issue.”<sup>84</sup> Scholars who have begun writing about roller derby do so by discussing bodies—what they do and how they signify. While there are multiple narratives surrounding roller derby, the common emphasis is often the body: how and why it is presented/performed the way that it is, what the implications are for women’s bodily performance of roller derby, and how roller derby bodies fit or do not fit within certain social spaces.

## **VI. ROLLER DERBY BODIES**

Through roller derby performance, the Camel City Thrashers and other roller derby teams emphasize, display, transgress, and re-imagine the physical body and what it can do. Kam N. Getit was careful to point out that the owner of the skating rink was reacting to roller derby participants’ physical appearances rather than their personalities; however, the two often become conflated and/or juxtaposed within skaters’ personal experience narratives. For roller derby participants, perceptions of physical bodies are often tied up with other feelings: about themselves, others’ reactions to them, as well as the way they act or do not act in the world. Suella De’Ville described roller derby as a “melting pot of crazy personalities [and] body types,” while Betty Jean Bruiser explained how physically transforming her body by participating on a roller derby team ultimately led her to feel more independent and confident.<sup>85</sup> As she said:

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<sup>84</sup> Katharine Young, *Bodylore*, (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), xxiii.

<sup>85</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

I'm so toned now, and I feel physically a lot better and stronger and just capable of more things. I don't feel so—I don't know. I feel like I can do a lot of things for myself now that I probably wouldn't have had the confidence to try to do before."<sup>86</sup>

Betty Jean Bruiser's comment makes clear that being toned and feeling good physically, for her, are equated with being "stronger" and more "capable," which she used to describe both her emotional state and her developing physical strength. As she goes on to say, physically challenging her body has ultimately made her feel something new and powerful about herself. To note another example of the juxtaposition of bodies and identity, consider Suella De'Ville's observation:

I don't think there's anybody who wouldn't bring something to [roller derby]. You look at the different body types—look at our team. Look at [General Knox 'Em] versus little [Shortstack Paincakes], right? Both have such an advantage on completely different sides of the spectrum... So, the cool thing about it is each individual has a different gift that they bring to the team, where all those different body types are important—even the personalities. We've got girls who you can't get a word out of them—quiet, meek girls. Then, you've got the big mouth, crazy people. Yet, it all just kind of blends together and makes this crazy community.<sup>87</sup>

Similar to Betty Jean Bruiser's discussion, Suella De'Ville begins by discussing body types; specifically, the way that various body types each have important roles to play within roller derby teams. These ideas of body are expressed alongside a discussion of the various personalities one can also find on a roller derby team. Talk about bodies by roller derby participants, therefore, is wrapped up with other narratives regarding identity and performance.

While researching women's flat track roller derby, I encountered a number of texts that consider roller derby as a performance of gender and sexuality that centers on corporeality. As Katharine Young suggests, "[g]ender is a cultural inscription" on the body,

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<sup>86</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

<sup>87</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

and the way women wear the cultural inscription of gender during roller derby performance as well as within the roller derby community has become the particular interest of spectators, including academics. With the exception of one article, the majority of scholars borrow concepts from Raewyn Connell, “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized femininity,” and Mimi Schippers, “hegemonic femininity,” “alternative femininity,” and “gender maneuvering,” to discuss women’s flat track roller derby. Like my own methodological approach, each of the writers describes how she participated in/embodyed the activity, or became *immersed* in the roller derby community in order to better understand women’s relationships with and within the sport.

Natalie Peluso (2010) examines the related worlds of burlesque and roller derby, and discusses how each embodied practice allows women to challenge gender, sexuality, body, and identity. In her dissertation, Megan Murray (2012) also considers the way roller derby challenges gender stereotypes and heteronormativity through her examination of roller derby spectatorship and the phenomenon of “derby wives,” or the close friendship that develops between skaters who then publicly announce themselves to the rest of their team as “derby wives.” Jennifer Carlson (2010) considers how roller derby skaters engage with “emphasized femininity” through their athletic performance. Nancy Finley (2010) argues that derby girls use “gender maneuvering” to interact with other femininities and to advance their own “alternative femininities” within and through athletic performance. Ruth Chananie-Hill, Jennifer Waldron, and Natalie Umsted (2012) posit women’s flat track roller derby as a “third-wave model of sport,” which they explore in their article. In this section, I will consider the published articles of Carlson, Finley, and Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted

in order to respond to their arguments with an alternative reading based on my own experience and ethnographic fieldwork.

Through her experiential ethnography, Carlson considers how roller derby challenges “emphasized femininity” in women’s sport. Emphasized femininity “encompasses an idealized version of Western womanhood that posits that women be physically inferior to men, weak, docile, concerned with their appearance, and attentive to enhancing their heterosexual desirability.”<sup>88</sup> To critique emphasized femininity in sport, derby girls “play” with feminine stereotypes in three embodied ways. 1) The derby persona, or the alter-ego name by which skaters come to know each other, is often “playfully aggressive, menacing, raunchy, lewd, and clever,” and they express, “raw violence, sexuality, and feminine prowess.”<sup>89</sup> Derby names, in other words, are ways for skaters to connect evocative language with bodies. 2) Carlson describes how clothing, too, becomes a way for skaters to problematically juxtapose emphasized femininity and aggression. Lastly, 3) Carlson discusses “the derby body,” or how “the size and appearance of bodies in general” are evaluated on how they “move rather than how they look.”<sup>90</sup> While Carlson argues that derby girls take part in an interrogation of norms related to both gender and athleticism, she sees derby girls’ stigmatization of feminine stereotypes, particularly those surrounding “girly behavior,” as problematic.<sup>91</sup> For instance, Carlson points out how “skaters derogatively use phrases like ‘cattiness,’ ‘girl drama,’ and ‘too much estrogen,’” and how skaters are

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<sup>88</sup> Jennifer Carlson, “The Female Signifiant in All-Women’s Amateur Roller Derby,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27 (2010): 429.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

“discouraged from being ‘too emotional.’”<sup>92</sup> Despite embodied modes of transgression, Carlson ultimately concludes that derby participants’ critique of gender is complex and she sees gender negotiation in roller derby as being limited.

Through what she describes as her “ethnographic immersion” into women’s roller derby teams throughout the southern United States, Finley considers how multiple femininities interact in roller derby allowing for “gender maneuvering,” “or the “patterned face-to-face interactions [that] can disrupt the rules of gender within a particular [localized] social setting and create alternative gender relations.”<sup>93</sup> Like Carlson, Finley examines “emphasized femininity,” however, Finley, building on the work of Schippers, refers to emphasized femininity as “hegemonic femininity,” noting the existence of a hierarchy among a number of different femininities.<sup>94</sup> “Pariah femininities,” categories such as “bitch” or “slut,” pose a threat to hegemonic masculinity but are stigmatized.<sup>95</sup> “Alternative femininities,” however, have the ability to disrupt hegemonic gender relations, because they do not carry the stigma associated with pariah femininities.<sup>96</sup> Multiple femininities, as Finley points out, “are not just performances; they are *relations* with masculinity and other femininities” that can “affect the life chances for the women who enact them and could affect individual women’s motivations for compliance in a patriarchal system or for gender maneuvering.”<sup>97</sup> Importantly, as women negotiate among these multiple femininities, the

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>93</sup> *Op. cit.*, Finley, 360, 362.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

stigmatization or acceptance of certain femininities remains fluid and unfixed. This process of changing relationships, or gender maneuvering, within the “internal dynamics of femininity” occurs within the space of women’s roller derby.

The “face-to-face interaction” that occurs in the localized setting of a roller derby league or team may even impact “gender meanings and practices” at a regional level.<sup>98</sup> Intra-gender relations among femininities become scrambled in roller derby as the boundaries between various femininities, including unacceptable ones such as the bitch, seductress, and misfit, become blurred. Further, the distinction between a “masculine” athlete and “feminine” supporter are redefined. In other words, the gender maneuvering that occurs in women’s roller derby can potentially “disrupt hegemonic gender relations” in which men are the active, physical athletes and women are the supportive and passive spectators.<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, Finley also notes that derby theatrics and humor simultaneously “express rebellion” and “soften the rebellion,” and she points out that many of her interviewees do not identify as being feminist.<sup>100</sup> Finley’s findings point to the complexity of derby participants’ gender performances and transgressions. Derby provides a skater-negotiated, women’s social space where participants can critique social expectations and structures of domination and form friendships and networks of support with other women. This being the case, Finley posits that derby participants “negotiation of hegemonic gender relations focuses more on the constructions and positioning of femininities than a directed

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 364.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 365.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 376.

confrontation with hegemonic masculinity.”<sup>101</sup> While the gender order may be challenged it will likely remain, in other words. Finley concludes by stating, “Women can now kick ass, but it might not bring the society any closer to societal support of child care or equal pay.”<sup>102</sup>

Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted’s “qualitative content analysis” of the way eight of the top leagues in various regions across the United States represent themselves on league websites explores “the [third-wave feminist model of sport]’s paradoxical, transgressive, transformative, and reinforcing possibilities for structural gender relations.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, the authors explain how a third-wave feminist model of sport: combines both traditionally masculine and feminine traits; emphasizes aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality and race; is inclusive; privileges individualism over structural inequalities, though it often lacks the media coverage necessary to “transform the center of sport.”<sup>104</sup> They believe the effects of such a model are complex and often contradictory. For instance, while a third-wave feminist sports model emphasizes inclusiveness, the authors note instances when this is not the case for derby participants, such as instances when women who represent hegemonic femininity (i.e. “girly-girls”) are critiqued and excluded from the roller derby community.

Based on the criteria put forth by their model, the authors consider four analytical discourses that roller derby embodies: (1) stealth feminism through alternative sport, (2) social justice and inclusiveness, (3) rebelling and reflecting identity performances, and (4)

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 379.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 384.

<sup>103</sup> Ruth A. Chananie-Hill, Jennifer J. Waldron, and Natalie K. Umsted. “Third-Wave Agenda: Women’s Flat-Track Roller Derby,” *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 37.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.



“violent action chicks.”<sup>105</sup> To clarify two of these descriptions: stealth feminism aims to advance a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) philosophy and “collective empowerment and sisterhood,” but intentionally does not characterize this as “feminist,” possibly in order not to deter commercial sponsors.<sup>106</sup> “Action chicks” are “cultural female icons who can be tough, strong, and aggressive, who do not need men to save them, and who do not accept their place as women in society.”<sup>107</sup> Action chicks may also “use aggressiveness and violence to overcome patriarchal and abusive men.”<sup>108</sup> While the authors posit roller derby as an activity that allows women to resist feminine ideals, they also point out that its portrayals “mirror commercial, individualized aspects of the model.”<sup>109</sup> The authors conclude, “Taken together, this third-wave model of sport has the potential to both transform and reinforce existing hegemonic gender relations.”<sup>110</sup>

To summarize, contemporary scholars examining women’s flat track roller derby do so by focusing on the appearance and performance of gendered bodies, with all of their layered meanings, implications, and contradictions. Roller derby as a skater owned-and-operated women’s space allows for interactions among multiple femininities, where hegemonic femininity tends to be regarded disapprovingly. While derby girls critique hegemonic constructions of gender and sport, they occasionally do so in problematic ways. A number of the authors also believe that roller derby as a phenomenon must continue to be

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 43.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

examined “amidst growing popularity and commercialization,” a claim with which I agree.<sup>111</sup> Each authors’ conclusion is ultimately that roller derby is complex, with many aspects of the sport being contradictory and at odds with other facets of the experience. In the remainder of this section, I will offer my own reading of the complexities of roller derby with respect to the body.

To begin, like several of the authors discussed, I also found that some interviewees expressed hostility towards behaviors, such as gossiping and “drama,” often associated with women. Betty Jean Bruiser, for instance, said:

There is so much girl-hate going on here [referring to herself]. Normally, I just can’t stand other girls. I’m like, “You’re so whiny. What is wrong with you? Not everything is about you. Tone the drama down.” There’re aspects of traditional, annoying, girly—“everything is about me”—I mean, it exists, to some extent in derby, but not so much. You can really focus on your relationships with other people and skating, and not really have to worry about—“What is she saying behind my back?”—All that kind of stuff.<sup>112</sup>

Most participants that make such claims, however, are also quick to point out that roller derby has allowed them to become friends with more women than they have ever had as friends, which is expressed as one of the most positive aspects of their participation in the sport. Like the authors discussed in this section then, I, too, found participants’ relationship with gender to be complex and, occasionally, contradictory. However, while this contradiction leads the authors to the conclusion that roller derby might not have a substantial impact on social norms and relations outside of the roller derby community, I argue that roller derby participants “make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules,”

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>112</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

to borrow Michel de Certeau's (1984) description of everyday practices, tactics, and 'poaching' that disrupt the dominant cultural economy.<sup>113</sup> Rather than focusing on the deliberate undermining of the dominant cultural economy or how it imposes itself within our everyday lives, De Certeau considers the way in which an "art of using" disrupts this system "thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices."<sup>114</sup> "Poaching" is another expression de Certeau uses to describe the efficacy of "use" for silently disrupting dominant structures. I find roller derby participants "use" of their bodies within their shared athletic performance complimentary to de Certeau's formulation. Roller derby participants' "body poaching" and "re-reading of bodies" has implications that may not be immediately quantifiable and therefore not easily managed by dominant social structures. As the body itself is objectified within consumer culture, derby participants' "re-readings" of the body through performance constitute a "silent production" and an "art which is anything but passive."<sup>115</sup>

One such re-reading of the physical body through roller derby participation came from Kam N. Getit, who said:

I've gained a lot of self-confidence from doing derby. I hated myself. I hated—not everything about me, but I just wasn't happy with who I was. I am bigger than normal people, and that was really getting to me. Now with derby, that's a good thing. I can be effective in different areas... I love it. It's made me happy.

Emergent perceptions of the body pervade the roller derby experience. I find Kam N. Getit's comment to be complimentary to participants' repeated emphasis that one will "fit" in with

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<sup>113</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984): xiv.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

the roller derby community. Professor said, “You don’t have to *fit* a mold to be able to play [roller derby].”<sup>116</sup> Hailstorm Trooper also passionately explained, “If you want to try roller derby, you’re doing roller derby. There’s no, ‘You got to lose ten pounds before you can get on these skates.’ Nope. You put on the skates and you try out!”<sup>117</sup> Participants’ use of “fit” is typical within roller derby conversations and has significant implications with respect to how women feel about themselves because of their participation on roller derby teams. Kam N. Getit’s statement that prior to roller derby she was not happy with who she “was” points to the transformational potential of women’s roller derby participation. Her use of “was,” in other words, indicates that she now regards herself as someone “new” because of roller derby. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (2005) point out how:

The objectification of women is particularly intense in [consumer culture]... For women are not only the principle targets of many consumer goods (goods which are integral, for instance, to the work of femininity, in which each and every part of the body can be broken down and rebuilt), but are also the privileged sign in commodity aesthetics. Subject and object, women are both consumer and consumed, consumers, indeed, of themselves (as commodities).<sup>118</sup>

Thus, roller derby participants’ particular use of the expression “fit” becomes a counter reading of the word’s typical uses and connotations within dominant discourse, such as consumer culture. “Fit,” for roller derby participants, becomes a way of expressing the idea that bodies belong rather than there are changes or modifications, breaking down and rebuilding, that must be made for one to “fit,” or to be accepted. As Hailstorm Trooper put it, anyone can fit in with the roller derby community, “because there really isn’t anything to

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<sup>116</sup> Op. cit. Van-Tol.

<sup>117</sup> Op. cit. DeVincenzo.

<sup>118</sup> Mariam Frasier and Monica Greco (Eds.), *The Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 27.

fit.”<sup>119</sup> Women who never thought athletics was for them discover then, that they can find a sense of belonging within the roller derby community, and they often become valued team members because of what their bodies bring to their leagues. As Carlson points out, the way roller derby bodies move is more important than what size or shape a participant is.

Discussions about how roller derby participation makes women feel about themselves are familiar within the derby community. To listen to women talk about the confidence that emerges alongside their participation in the sport makes clear that such emerging self-perceptions are significant within their lives and relationships on and off the track.

Another important way in which roller derby participants re-read physical bodies is through a reclaiming of bruises and other physical injuries that occur because of their participation in the sport. Hailstorm Trooper explained:

I would never have imagined having so much fun falling and getting back up and falling and getting smashed into a wall and thinking, “I can do this! I can keep doing it!” I mean, bruises are trophies in the derby world.<sup>120</sup>

Images of a bruised women involve discussions that typically center on domestic violence. The voices of women who are the survivors of intimate partner violence, meanwhile, are too often silenced, while images of the abusers themselves are often absent, they remain ghostly figures not present to be held accountable for their acts of violence. As folklorist Elaine J. Lawless (2001) argues, “The *given* of male violence against women is producing a mega-industry based on domestic violence, an industry being played out *on the backs of battered*

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<sup>119</sup> Op. cit. DeVincenzo.

<sup>120</sup> Op. cit. DeVincenzo.

women.”<sup>121</sup> For roller derby participants to “show-off” bruises and other injuries as a platform for storytelling is a re-signification of images of bruised women. This is not to suggest that women’s bruised bodies be read in a positive light; however, women claiming narrative authority of the body disrupts prevailing narratives of women’s victimhood. If, as Professor suggested, many members of the Thrashers “have some kind of incident or thing that they’ve come to derby for as a form of therapy,” then this phenomenon is all the more significant.<sup>122</sup>

Roller derby bruises have stories to tell. An expansive, yellow bruise stretched out on my left thigh that spoke of my effort and desire to become a member of the Camel City Thrashers. Other fresh meat skaters and I had been practicing blocking and passing. To try out our new skills, each of us had to pass Jenny Junk Puncher, one of the “grannies,” or veteran skaters. When it was my turn, I was determined to pass without getting pushed out of bounds. As I skated onto the track, I felt a mixture of resolve and tension branching out in my muscles—I was either going to speed past her or get hip-checked trying. My ears filled with the sounds of others’ cheers and my own quickening pulse as I came close to passing her. *I did not pass her*, but I managed to knock her down—on top of me. I had already landed incorrectly, spinning off balance to one side and crashing down on my left thigh. The added weight of having another person on top of me crushed my leg forcefully against the floor. “That’s going to leave a mark,” I thought to myself before hobbling back over into line with the other new skaters. However, it was an opportunity to tell a story.

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<sup>121</sup> Elaine J. Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001): 11-12.

<sup>122</sup> Op. cit. Van Tol.

Only a few months earlier, I had just begun to explore the roller derby community. One evening, I sat huddled on a couch in Greensboro Roller Derby's practice space with several participants before their practice began. One participant was intently drawing in her notebook when I asked her what brought her to roller derby. She responded that it is the fearlessness that it takes to be a derby skater. She explained how she is the shy, quiet type and she wanted to try on a new identity. Several months later, I found myself trying on this new identity, taking new risks, and sharing new stories.

As roller derby participants, we characterize our shared activity as one that is personally "empowering." Participation on roller derby teams ultimately allows women to use the body as an instrument for community building, performance, and for narrating our experiences. "Getting into shape" with others through roller derby participation becomes part of a woman's bodily performance of emergent narratives, which are performed within and through a shared athletic practice. The body plays a central role within women's narrative process of creating meaning. Roller derby bodies become stories, in other words: of our performances on and off the track, of bruises and newly acquired skills, of new found confidence to speak up and act out, and, of time spent in the company of other women. As Suella De'Ville explained, "The physical challenge [of roller derby] is the best stress relief [she's had]... [This challenge] encourages you to keep going."<sup>123</sup> Betty Jean Bruiser put it this way: "The bonds that I have with people are like no other bonds that I've got anywhere else in my life, which I think is really cool. That, plus I'm getting in shape, which is really nice."<sup>124</sup> Bodies, performance, and community become entwined in women's personal

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<sup>123</sup> Op. cit., Alva, Acesta-Konczal.

<sup>124</sup> Op. cit. Sam.

experience narratives of their roller derby participation. And, “The telling of women’s stories,” as Lawless points out, “helps the narrators to develop a sense of ‘self.’”<sup>125</sup> The transformations that result from roller derby may not be immediately quantifiable; however, within the everyday lives of the women who are a part of the sport, how they feel as a result of their participation and the self they become goes beyond the track into their social relationships, indeed, it is felt within their very bodies.

This paper has come full circle: women create meaning through an activity that allows them to be a part of a broader community that is shaped by doing an activity alongside other women. Roller derby participants’ doing or performance of a team sport demonstrates how leisure activities that occur within a group context relate to performances of other social identities and relationships. Roller derby performance, for instance, is tied up with constructions of gender, which is inscribed onto the physical body. Derby bodies are of particular interest to spectators because they carry a number of complex and, occasionally, contradictory meanings. Importantly, however, roller derby participants read their own bodies within and through a shared athletic practice; they find a place where they “fit” and can share stories and performances with others regarding what their bodies can do. Roller derby is an activity where community, performance, bodies, and narratives are all tightly entwined as part of a process characterized by participants as “crazy,” “empowering,” and “one of the best things [they’ve] done.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Op. cit. Lawless, 17.

<sup>126</sup> Op. cit. Alva, Acesa-Konczal.



## **VII. CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES**

This paper has explored the motivations and experiences of a small roller derby league in the Triad region of North Carolina. The motivations and experiences of members of other roller derby leagues may point to other important concepts and narratives. Several members of the Camel City Thrashers pointed to the league's location in the South, or the "Bible-belt," as one of the factors that determines their need to belong to an accepting community; they find support and encouragement from teammates that they do not experience in many other social spaces they encounter in their daily lives. Members of leagues in other regions of the United States or elsewhere likely have various other factors and motivations that determine their participation and goals. An exploration of leagues in other regions, in other words, would likely yield different stories. The way groups of women around the world shape roller derby as a cultural export would also yield interesting cross-cultural comparisons. Ultimately, as roller derby continues to grow and rule sets continue to change, the personal experience narratives of participants will need further consideration and attention. As Suella De Ville observed, roller derby is about to explode.

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