

# Derby drag: Parodying sexualities in the sport of roller derby

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## Abstract

The roller derby revival has created a unique stage and community for women athletes. Using Helen Lenskyj's foundational work to frame the institutional oppressions on women in sports, I explore how marginalized spaces like derby engender performances and identities outside the male-dominated hegemony of mainstream sport. In parodically dragging sexualities, derby skaters expose and critique institutional constraints for women athletes and their sexualities. Moving beyond traditional drag, skaters enact sexualities that both tempt and terrify the male gaze across bodies often cast outside that gaze. Thus, derby creates critical commentary by and for the skaters who drag the sexualities that the hegemonic male gaze uses to objectify or dismiss them.

## Keywords

Drag, parody, performance, sexuality, sport

In the past decade, the resurgence of roller derby has created a space for strategic, spontaneous, and subversive sporting performances. The women of roller derby parody hegemonic scripts of sexuality through embodiment, costume, play, and language. Throughout my critical exploration of derby culture, I aim to understand performances of sexuality within this growing phenomenon. Taking up the foundational framework of Helen Lenskyj and others who have noted institutional oppressions on women in sports, I look to extreme sports, like roller derby, which engender performances and identities outside the male-dominated hegemony of mainstream sport. I suggest that in parodically dragging sexualities, derby skaters create commentary on the institutional constraints for women athletes and their desires.

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Institutional frameworks of mainstream sports have negated the threat of athletic women by objectifying them for the hegemonic male gaze or ignoring their sexualities outside that gaze. Moving beyond the drag queen as emblem of gendered transgression, I interrogate the possibilities of derby skaters in using female sporting bodies to perform tabooed sexualities. Working as a resistant parody against socio-political structures, drag trips the cultural wire binding sex and gender to expose the myth of this heteronormative bond (Butler, 1990). When women athletes perform exaggerated sexualities, it reveals the construction of institutional ideals of women and desire; the parody as imitation and woman as performer mocks expectations of women athletes and sexualities. While drag queens trouble gender through anxieties surrounding the man-performing-as-woman, I suggest a more compelling parody emerges in women athletes who drag the sexualities that the hegemonic male gaze uses to objectify or dismiss them.

While I do suggest that derby skaters create drag performances of sexualities and desires, it is important to note that these particular performances function differently from traditional drag. For example, in the epochal era of 1980s drag houses (most notably in New York City), drag became a survival strategy against the HIV/AIDS epidemic, hate crimes, and further cultural, economic, and political marginalization (Halberstam, 1998; Munoz, 1999). Underground drag balls had been happening in and around the city since the 1930s, yet with the growing fear surrounding HIV/AIDS and the subsequent (and misplaced) vitriol against the gay community, many gathered at these havens. Drag performers and houses also educated their communities about the growing presence of STDs; thus, the drag ballroom community utilized expression in conjunction with empowerment. Similarly, modern drag in cities like San Francisco, New Orleans, and Key West demonstrates that beyond surface entertainment lies the potential for blurred boundaries: as straight tourists interact with gay lifestyles and representations they learn about the fluid nature of desire and identity. Thus, considering drag in the comparatively privileged context of sport and roller derby, there are different socio-political issues at stake. Perhaps these issues are not cast in terms of survival as broadly as the drag houses; yet when the issues of identity, body, sexuality, and desire are made visible in public sporting performances, this illustrates the possibilities of survival outside of institutional, heteronormative demands.

There are many approaches to drag besides the cultural image of the drag queen: drag kings are typically female-bodied individuals performing masculinity, transgendered performers enacting masculinity or femininity, and female-bodied women exaggerating femininity. These performances have multiple aims yet all reveal the malleability of sexualities through performer identities and audience desires. Much of the work on drag has discussed the reiteration of masculine privilege and gendered assumptions (Dolan, 1985; Gagne and Tewksbury, 1996; Schacht, 1998, 2000; Strübel-Scheiner, 2011; Tewksbury, 1994). Further work suggests that drag functions to upend dichotomies of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1993; Halberstam, 1998; Lorber, 1994, 1999; Munoz 1999; Rupp and Taylor, 2003; Shapiro, 2007; Troka et al., 2002). In a study of drag queens and drag kings,

Rupp et al. comment on how different performers use entertainment to educate: “The acting out of complex sexual desires can also help us to understand the significance of doing gender and sexuality in everyday life” (2010: 290). Yet the traditional drag queen returns to the binaried “cross-dressing” performance; it functions subversively as it involves the male body dressed in traditionally feminine attire, using feminine gestures and speech patterns to excess. Much like hyper-feminine performances across the male body, performances of excessive, objectified, and pariah sexualities across the bodies of women athletes mock and undermine the institutional dictates of appropriate sexualities for women athletes. The anxiety thus shifts from the drag parody of cross-gender to a trickier parody of sexualities both exploiting and empowering the women performing them.

Sports have become increasingly integral to socio-political life, sparking growing scholarship on women’s roles in the sporting world (Crawford, 2006; Heywood, 1998, 2003; Messner, 2002). In Finley’s study of gender in derby she states: “Explorations of ways in which sexuality may be embedded in pariah discourses, and the ways alternative femininities engage with sexuality also need further development” (2010: 383). Thus, I aim to contribute to this academic volume by critically assessing the performances of tabooed sexualities taken up by roller derby skaters and culture. I argue that these performances – whether unintentional, complicit, or resistant – create drag parodies that appear to sell sexualities while subversively provoking the anxieties surrounding silenced desires.

Roller derby creates a canvas of expression that simultaneously comments on the punitive institutional framework confining sexualities for women athletes. Derby women enact drag performances and identities which enact several silenced or tabooed areas: derby women take up performative elements of sadomasochism to strip the shame of these practices; derby women recuperate and reproduce pariah sexualities for women athletes in a defiant act of choice; derby women parody prostitution for league sustainability while simultaneously creating commentary about the institutional commoditization of women athletes; derby women include and display bodies of difference<sup>1</sup> that defy traditional scripts of desire for women athletes; finally, derby women queer institutional conventions and expectations of women athletes’ sexualities and relationships with an inclusive spirit typically shunned in traditional sports.

## Tracking institutional frameworks

Lenskyj (1986, 1991) outlines the framework of institutions to reassert how sports are not merely play or entertainment but billion-dollar industries. Decisions made in exploiting women reflect profitable choices that reassert male hegemony. Thus, sports teams are represented by Pirates and Tigers while women’s teams are “diminutive such as Tigerettes ... or contradictory such as Lady Rams, Lady Bulldogs” (Eitzen and Zinn, 1989: 362). This perpetuates the notion that “men’s activities and men’s power are the real thing ... women’s sports, like women’s power, are second-class” (McDonagh and Pappano, 2008: x).

As men hold the majority of ownership and coaching positions, the glass ceiling in sports remains much more embedded than in greater society. Yet as Nelson suggests, women athletes can “create unity through diversity, laying the groundwork for empowering political change” (1994: xi). Despite the potential for women athletes to unite, many disassociate themselves from feminism or any controversy as it is viewed as a cost to their athletic participation. This emerges as women athletes repeatedly insist on their femininity and heterosexuality (Blinde and Taub, 1992; Eng, 2008; Heywood, 1998, 2003; Lenskyj, 1986, 1991; Plymire and Forman, 2001). As Krane et al. (2004) suggest, the hegemonic masculinity driving sports forces women athletes to live in paradoxical identities. When “living the paradox,” athletes must cast aside femininity to be considered legitimate even as these same women assume exaggerated femininity in larger society. This reasserts female athletes as “women who play sports rather than athletes first and foremost” (Mean and Kassing, 2008: 127).

The hyper-heterosexuality of men in sports has become a cultural marker of masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005; Kimmel, 1994; Lipsyte, 2004; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Thus, mainstream sports valorize sexuality in men’s sports if it is heterosexual<sup>2</sup> and preferably with many faceless women or one famous woman. Kimmel (1994) speaks to this as a strategy for men to prevent others from shaming or dominating them; Lipsyte (2004) suggests this hypermasculine ritualization (re)produces a culture of homophobia and sexism. Thus, women athletes eluding the heteronormative male gaze are under constant suspicion, reified through jokes and stereotypes linking lesbianism with women athletes (Griffin, 1998). Thus, the institution of sports requires women athletes accommodate the hegemonic masculine desires supporting it. It is not only about lessening the threat to masculine dominance by diminishing women athletes or emphasizing the inferiority of women’s sports. It is about recasting women athletes as objects of hegemonic masculine desires and ignoring women’s desires outside that gaze. When women athletes demonstrate heterosexual femininity in dress, language and action, corporate sponsorships often follow (Krane et al., 2004). When women athletes assert their homosexuality this frequently comes at a cost – a cost in endorsements and mainstream popularity (Lenskyj, 1991; Mean and Kassing, 2008).

Yet research into lifestyle or extreme sports may offer a different view. These sports often develop at the fringes of sporting activities and draw marginalized participants (Rinehart, 2000; Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003; Wheaton, 2004). As Duncombe notes regarding the DIY ethic of marginalized communities, it is “a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture” (1997: 117). Similar to the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, roller derby encourages skaters to express their identities and desires (Pavlidis, 2012; Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2012). Much as Riot Grrrls became a defiant response to the male-dominated punk scene, derby skaters create sport and identity through performative resistance against institutional sports. Sports on the margins, like derby, look beyond the mainstream sports

looking-glass representing hyper-hetero sexualities for men and objectified, invisible, or suspected sexualities for women.

## Justification and methods

Scholars have addressed the derby phenomenon for its DIY ethos (Beaver, 2012); its ties to Riot Grrrls (Pavlidis, 2012; Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2012); television representation (Kearney, 2011); the debate surrounding spectacle and professionalism (Malick, 2012); and derby's implications for gender (Breeze, 2010; Carlson, 2010, 2011; Finley, 2010; Sailors, 2013). However, these analyses have stopped short at an interrogation of sexualities in roller derby. Thus, I work with and against existing scholarship on roller derby and institutional sports to suggest derby enacts new possibilities of desire by exposing controls on feminine sexualities deployed by women, specifically women athletes. Through drag performances, derby women alternately reinforce and implode heteronormative performances of sexuality in sports. Furthermore, in locating derby within the margins of extreme or lifestyle sports, I contribute to this burgeoning field as studies of these sports have yet to be placed in conversation with sexuality. A large part of my project is to understand how performances of sexualities in extreme sports or marginalized cultures offer strategies of resistance to and critique of mainstream institutional constraints on desire.

The story of roller derby has been documented in accounts of the development of the sport (Brantley, 2011; Coppage, 1999) and its modern revival (Cohen and Barbee, 2010; Joulwan, 2007). Beginning in the 1920s as roller skate races, this format evolved when Leo Seltzer developed the Transcontinental Roller Derby in the 1930s; its physicality provided the blueprint for the modern sport. While the sport's popularity varied throughout the following decades, the early 2000s saw a women's roller derby rebirth in Austin, Texas. Beaver notes how quickly the phenomenon has grown, "from one league in 2001 to more than 300 today . . . driven by the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic" (2012: 26). Acting as owners, managers, and operators of the leagues, the skaters have reimagined the once scripted spectacle into a women's sport functioning outside the phallogocentric model of the mainstream sporting world. According to the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (2008), 59% of skaters are between 25 and 34 years old; 84% hold at least some post-secondary education and 24% hold graduate degrees; 30% have children under the age of 18, and 37% of skaters are married. As of 2012, over 40,000 skaters in 16 countries had registered names to the International Rollergirls' Name Registry.

Popular culture has also paid attention, as evidenced by multiple media treatments: the documentaries *Roller Derby Dolls* (2008) and *Roller Warriors* (2009); the fictional film *Whip It!* (Barrymore, 2009); ESPN's "Roller Derby Revival" feature on its flagship Sportscenter program (2008), and various newspaper and magazine articles from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to the *New York Times*. Television programming has also spotlighted derby: *Only in America with Larry the Cable Guy*

aired a segment on the Sin City Rollergirls, *Dinner Impossible* chef Robert Irvine catered a South Jersey Derby Girls event; and *CSI: Miami* featured a derby plotline.

After a decade of derby revival, its women are again transforming the sport toward an era of professionalism. Malick suggests this change follows “the way women’s roles in derby are defined and how sexuality is accepted in institutionalized sports” (2012: 2). Sexuality is the price to gain spectators yet it is placed at odds with being “real athletes.” In *Blood on the Flat Track*, Basket Casey says, “we’re a bunch of girls in short skirts beating the snot out of another bunch of girls in short skirts! That alone is a theatrical element.” As one example, many leagues are taking away the penalty wheel because “it just slows things down.” As one skater stated: “It’s a fine line between entertainment and distraction. We take our sport very seriously.” Another major change has been in the appearances of the skaters, as several leagues have moved toward a more functional, less sexualized style. One skater responded: “I always loved it ‘cause it doesn’t look like other sports. We aren’t clones. Being different from that whole thing is what we’re about.” And another skater made a point that resonates not only for derby but the larger sporting world: “Who says we can’t dress sexy and be hot to be athletes?” To answer such questions and address these debates, I approach roller derby with a multilevel methodology.

My methodological approach merges critical analysis of mediated texts with an ethnographic exploration of derby. In addition to textual analysis, I engaged with skaters and spectators online and trackside to account for the needs, desires, and performances not addressed in mainstream representation. I gathered information from over two years of attending league bouts, fund-raisers, and public appearances. I observed and participated as a derby “fan,” conducting semi-structured informal interviews with league members at live events and online. I used unobtrusive observation at public events, taking field notes and later expanding this work in more detailed questions via email or in-person interviews. These interviews worked through prepared, open-ended questions and dialogue introducing the topic of sexuality in representation, performance, sport in general and derby specifically. As Finley notes, “much of the success of derby as a sport is due to the ability of small groups with few resources to communicate through online networks and web pages” (2010: 370–371). As such, I used online team websites, blogs, and chats to understand the construction of derby personas as well as the cultural network communicating the norms and rituals of derby (Garcia et al., 2009). I prefaced my interviews – both in-person and online – by identifying myself as a researcher and my project as examining sexualities in derby. Through email, I gathered information from 11 leagues across North America; however, my observations and in-person interviews focused specifically on the Tampa Bay Derby Darlin’s and the Ft Myers Derby Girls of Florida. Skaters were generous with their time and opinions. Many stated that their motivation to share related to misrepresentations or stereotypes of roller derby.

I assessed mediated texts that sustain and subvert the hegemonic male gaze on women athletes. The Bad Girls Good Women/Texas Roller Derby (BGGW/TXRD) league sparked the revival and created the model for contemporary derby; thus, I looked at Bob Ray's *Hell on Wheels* (2007), which documents these early years. I also explored the 2007 documentary *Blood on the Flat Track: The Rise of the Rat City Rollergirls*, which followed a newly formed league based in Seattle. Directed by Laney Bagwell and Lacey Leavitt (2007), this text captured diverse representations of sexualities not central to many mediated depictions. I also looked at A&E's reality series *Rollergirls* (Auerbach and Auerbach, 2006) to assess how women athletes become situated within the commercial media structure. In Kearney's analysis of *Rollergirls*, she notes the portrayals are built on "practices long used to trivialize women sports figures" (2011: 283). I also looked at websites, fanzines, and fictional representations to understand the parodies of sexuality, the bodies and voices of difference, and the queering of convention across derby. Many representations focus on the heteronormative sexualization of derby skaters, rendering sexualities outside that heteronormativity invisible. This is another motivation for my work with and away from textual analysis; I found that sexualities, ignored in media, can and do become spoken for and embodied in loosely structured interviews, ongoing conversations, and live performances.

## Reward and punishment: Dragging S&M

Western culture has inscribed sexuality within a punitive framework which follows blatant and subtle controls (Rubin, 1984). Traditional women's sports have followed these guidelines regarding the presentation of body and performance of sexuality. Roller derby flips this script, through drag performances of: sexualized demonstrations and imagery of tabooed acts like S&M; exaggerated pariah sexualities for women athletes; parodies of prostitution speaking to the commoditization of all women athletes; inclusion and representation of bodies of all shapes, sizes, and ages; queering that not only embraces homosexuality within the sport but creates new strategies to queer convention and upend traditional sporting expectations of women athletes and their relationships.

Perhaps most visible in derby performances of desire is the embrace of sex and violence together. Several leagues feature penalties and punishments teasing audiences with sadomasochistic performances. The derby penalty wheel is an S&M spectacle, as offending skaters must spin the wheel and submit to punishments like "What a Jackass!" requiring skaters to sing while bent over for the audience. This enactment of embarrassment links with S&M practices in which participants surrender their bodies in acts of degradation. "Pillow Fight" keys into adolescent girl-on-girl fantasies yet emphasizes the aggression central to both derby and S&M. In *Hell on Wheels*, Sara Rodgers (aka Miss Conduct) addresses "Spank Alley", saying, "I've been spanked before, I'll get spanked again." While these remain fairly mild performances of sadomasochism, the merger of sexuality and pain in

the sport plays on the cultural imagination of S&M practices. In playing with sadomasochism on a large cultural stage, derby not only helps strip the taboo from these practices but also playfully enacts S&M as normal, healthy, and fun.

Yet the drag of S&M remains under the skaters' control with punitive reminders for those crossing the lines of parody. In *Hell on Wheels*, a skater is grabbed in the crotch during "Spank Alley." Immediately, "Wheel Girl/Penalty Mistress" Amber Diva Stinson demands the offender identify himself. Embodying the "Mistress" position of punitive dominatrix, Amber Diva cuts a powerful figure emblematic of the S&M lifestyle. Amber Diva chastises the offending audience member and throws him out with the admonishment that "you walk a fine line between sexy and slutty, and crotch-grabbing is slutty." Derby skaters change the game of reward and punishment by rewriting the rules on their terms; they challenge the silencing of sadomasochism in performances that parody the acts and language on a sporting stage.

Expressed through the desires and bodies of women athletes, drag performances reveal the fluctuation between sexualized fantasy objectification and reclamation of tabooed desire. When these parodies are performed through the female body, it accomplishes something beyond traditional drag – it allows recuperation of silenced or tabooed sexualities by the women rather than a further appropriation or objectification by masculine bodies. Derby skaters allow tabooed desires to be seen and heard differently, creating a new visual economy in which they can be seen as women, athletes, and sexual subjects of their own making and their own gazing.

### Taking back the "Putas"

According to *Forbes*, the five highest paid women athletes of 2013 included: Maria Sharapova, Li Na, Serena Williams, Caroline Wozniacki, and Danica Patrick. These multimillion-dollar endorsement holders tend toward the conventional attractiveness typical of hegemonic desire; they neither exhibit nor perform the dangerous sexualities that would destabilize masculine desire. Derby women take up the sexualities that men desire *and* the sexualities that terrify men; they perform both positions to an extreme, exposing the fallacy of institutional expectations for women athletes. According to Finley, derby skaters enact "versions of unacceptable femininity such as the sexually assertive seductress, the dangerous witch, the femme fatale, the bitch, and the sassy, uncontrolled misfit" (2010: 372). These typologies cull from and resist hegemonic masculine desire; however, derby performances of identities are taken up outside institutional constraints to illustrate how these typologies fall apart outside the male gaze. The derby femme fatale goes home with her wife and their daughter. The derby bitch carries her injured teammate off the track. In the *Rollergirls* episode "Warriors," Chola introduces herself and her team, the Putas del Fuego. She immediately addresses the title "Putas," a derogatory Spanish term for "whore" or "slut." The team, as do many subcultural and oppressed groups, "takes back the word" to mean "sisterhood . . . we're tough, we're tight." In dragging tabooed or pariah sexualities on a public stage, derby

women strip the shame from these acts and identities to confront institutional controls on women athletes' sexualities.

Connell's (1987) articulation of "emphasized femininity" assumes sexualities limited to the scope of male desire. This is significant within institutional sports as women are relegated to sexualized hetero fantasies or "butch" lesbians, replicating societal tendencies to cast women as fantasy objects or ignore their desires altogether. When women attempt to perform desires for themselves and others, they often become relegated to what Schippers (2007) calls "pariah femininities". As Finley notes, "a woman exhibiting defiance, physical violence, or authority in a patriarchy is destabilizing for male dominance . . . a 'bitch' (authority), a 'slut' (sexually noncompliant), or a 'bad-ass girl' (physically violent)" (2010: 361). These pariah femininities are further stigmatized in traditional sports; however, a sport springing from the margins creates new opportunities to destabilize male dominance and reappropriate expressions of authority, sexuality, and violence. I suggest derby skaters not only recuperate pariah femininities but further rescue and embrace tabooed sexualities through performative parodies. The sexually androgynous "trannie," sexually active "slut," lesbian "dyke," and dominant "bitch" bear these labels because they enact something sexually threatening to the hegemonic order. Yet in roller derby, these are exactly the types of labels taken up and celebrated on jerseys, in bios, in action. With their derby monikers, skaters "Trans Em", "Slut HerThroat," "Dyke Tyson," and "Anita Bopabitch" exemplify the rescue of once punitive language and identities; derby skaters exhibit identification and pride in expressing these tabooed desires and sexualities.

Derby skaters take up objectified positions of hegemonic desire and amplify these ideals through drag. This offers a critique on the constraints of the traditional, masculine-driven sports world which only recognizes the desire affixed to women by the male gaze. Yet in derby, the sexualized pin-up girl imagery is brimming with the danger of violence and athleticism, the threat to hegemonic masculinity like a dagger sheathed in an alluring package. The juxtaposition of these temptations and terrors creates a mockery of institutional attempts to construct appropriate sexuality in women athletes. Derby skaters are not being fixed by the gaze or erased for falling outside hetero-masculine desire; these women are dragging desirable and dangerous sexualities and in doing so, recuperating these positions for their own desires.

### **Parodying the oldest profession**

Derby women not only drag pariah sexualities on a sporting stage, they use that stage for a critique with and against the exploitation of sporting women. Subverting the objectifying gaze, they perform exaggerated sexualities to turn a profit for their leagues.<sup>3</sup> In *Hell on Wheels*, Anya Jack states: "Sex sells . . . we're going to play along with that . . . be sexy and be fun, and be kind of a fantasy." The skaters embrace their on-rink personas, offering tongue-in-cheek sexuality, dragging sexualized images and actions to financially sustain their leagues.

A correlation might be drawn from derby and its throngs of skaters willing to exploit themselves with that of the madame/pimp collecting a cadre of prostitutes to turn tricks for her/his profit. Yet these skaters work not for a controlling boss, they work for the financial health of their leagues and sport. This might seem a necessary compliance to the capitalist sporting imperative. I suggest it can be read for its subversive potential; as derby skaters create parodied exaggerations of sex-for-money, they undermine typical commoditization by and for the male gaze.

In utilizing parody and drag to earn money for their leagues, derby skaters also illustrate strategies of commoditization for women athletes of traditional sports. The monetary rewards and career sustainability for these athletes often hinges on their appeal to the hegemonic male gaze. Traditional athletes often comply in subtle ways to maintain normative expectations of “good girl” athletes; the overt drag of derby skaters illuminates how women athletes become entrenched in these institutional mechanisms. Derby women who parody prostitution disrupt the historical and cultural tradition of objectification and reclaim it for themselves.

Skaters artfully straddle the border of publicity and objectification. This precarious space can be seen in contests in which skaters are auctioned off as prizes for fans. In *Rollergirls*, an episode features ChaCha preparing for a date with a fan who has won a night with her. While this offers a performance of the escort transaction, *Rollergirls* subverts this as ChaCha’s date cancels and she instead takes her teammates out for a night of drinking in the limo paid for by the contest sponsor. Derby leagues also work campy fundraising events, where they have wet t-shirt contests and oil wrestling matches to raise money. While these exploitive performances invoke the sense that skaters sell out sexuality for quick cash, these skaters remain keenly aware of the transaction and enact a sense of play at these events. Even with pressure to appeal to the male gaze for financial success, traditional women’s sports respond with performances that normalize or hide the sexuality of the participants (Heywood, 2003). Conversely, derby women embrace the profitable power of their sexuality through a dragging of sex work that reveals the oppressive structural assumptions regarding women athletes’ sexualities.

## **Breaking the mold through bodies of difference**

Sport accentuates the gendered body to reassert masculine and feminine poles of power and weakness, active gaze and passive object. Women are taught to disappear by shrinking, slimming, silencing themselves. Women are then disenfranchised when they inevitably fail to disappear and deny all that they can be in the world. As skaters discuss issues regarding their own body image or sexuality, it reflects millions of strong, competent women who still pause before the mirror to doubt the image before them. One skater responded: “In derby we act really cocky . . . but yeah, before I came here I felt like how I am, look, didn’t fit in anywhere, especially athletically.” Another skater said: “I was too short for basketball and volleyball. I was too ‘husky,’ as my mom said, for gymnastics. So I never felt like my body could do the stuff it should do in a sport.” The tough physicality required for roller

derby empowers these skaters to embrace themselves in new corporeal ways of being that differ from traditional women's sporting bodies. Moreover, in its playful parody and daring drag, derby allows women of all sizes, shapes, and ages to perform as bodies of desire.

As a space of corporeal difference for women athletes, derby generates possibilities of desire for and by bodies outside the hegemonic male gaze. While much discourse surrounding traditional drag addresses the male body performing exaggerated femininities, I believe that derby skaters' bodies open up new possibilities for dragging sexuality and desire. Much as male drag queens frequently perform with full acknowledgement and humorous references to "their large clitorises and 'manginas'" (Rupp et al., 2010: 286), derby skaters create exaggerated performances of the desired object while in bodies typically cast outside that hegemonic ideal. As a 45-year-old skater dons fishnets, a lesbian skater blows kisses to a male fan, and their audience clamors for more, they dismantle the institutional perpetuation of the ideal athletic woman's body. Taylor and Rupp suggest that even the most beautiful drag queens do not actually look like women as "they are too tall or have muscled arms or men's waists and buttocks . . . alongside other girls who are old or overweight or do not shave their chests and who perform numbers that criticize traditional feminine ideals of beauty" (2006: 14). Similarly, derby skaters that fit the hegemonic ideal may find themselves fixed as objects of the male gaze; however, they skate with a ferocity and violence that opens their bodies in ways that destabilize the control of the gaze. Moreover, the diversity of bodies in derby simultaneously critiques the institutional expectations of women athletes' bodies and conjures new performances amplifying sexualities across bodies that speak to the greater population of women and desire. These are the performances that push derby spectators and the greater sporting culture to rethink what it means to be a sporting woman, a sexual woman, a desirable and desiring woman.

Many skaters addressed the variety of bodies visible along the track. "Remember that Olympic swimmer [Dara Torres]? Forty-something, won all those medals? And the pregnant volleyball chick [Kerry Walsh Jennings]? Everyone made this huge deal but I remember thinking – we're already doing this! Moms, daughters, girls of all ages." Another skater spoke about the early success of Venus and Serena Williams, saying: "Everyone was amazed by these muscular, powerful women. They broke that mold, and you can see us breaking molds of every shape and size." When sexualities are written across bodies that more closely represent the diversity of women's bodies in the world, it exposes how the institutional gaze of sports constructs desirable and desiring bodies.

While traditional women's sports often conceal the grueling and injurious labor involved in athletic strength and excellence, derby bodies show their work, athleticism, and pain (Crawford, 2006). Battle scars were a common theme in media representations, websites, and interviews. In *Blood on the Flat Track*, clips of skaters listing injuries compile a montage of pride and pain. From the scarlet cuts and violet bruises to pink flaps of flesh exposing white bone, these are visible emblems that contradict cultural expectations of women's bodies. These derby

badges of honor are reminders that our culture expects women's bodies to be under constant protection and control. These exposed, open bodies jar with western anxieties surrounding the out-of-control woman's body and sexuality. Derby women open themselves symbolically through injury; the visibility of open wounds merged with sexualized images offer new commentaries on bodies of desire, especially when this desire is written across bodies of all shapes, ages, and sizes.

The embodiment of desire outside the institutionally idealized woman athlete's body permits a broader scope regarding the preconceived scripts of sexualities and desires. For years, women athletes were forced to combat the gender myth of biological weakness or emotionality. They trained harder and became "even more focused and single-minded than our male counterparts . . . fit bodies and athletic performances were the outward expressions of our abilities to transcend biology and gender limitations" (Heywood, 2003: 3). Derby offers a different space to perform the body, desire, sexuality, and sport. Throughout interviews and alongside the track, I became aware of these performative elements: one openly lesbian skater boasted about her large male following; one married skater with two grown children was amused when one of her daughter's former high school classmates propositioned her after a bout. Mirroring the work of traditional drag, the intent is not deceit. It is play, mockery, complicity, and often an upending of those institutional scripts deciding which bodies deserve the gaze and which bodies destabilize that gaze. While traditional drag originated and still functions as a powerful performative strategy for survival, derby is sport. Yet what it can do beyond sport is accomplish a very different performative survival strategy for women starving, carving, and dying because their bodies do not fit what their institutions, sports, or culture tells them is desirable. When "drag shows have the potential to arouse powerful desires that people perceive as contrary to their sexual identities, they have a real impact on people's thinking about the boundaries of heterosexuality" (Taylor and Rupp, 2006: 16). Similarly, when derby skaters enact, exaggerate, and parody the sexualities and desires surrounding traditional thinking about women athletes, they call up desires that skew the boundaries of that institutional gaze and idealized body.

### **"Trying to clock her . . . and I love her": Queering convention**

While hegemonic masculine desire often contains women's sexuality in the domestic sphere, derby alters domesticity through derby wives and marriages. The RollerCon Annual Derby Wedding began in 2005 at the first international derby convention when a small group wedding turned into hundreds of women (and a few brave men). According to the RollerCon website, a derby wife is the "one person in this whole sport of roller derby that the very instant you looked at her, you felt like you'd known her since you were a fetus" (Kasey Bomber, 2013). A derby wife is the person you call to bail you out of jail, ride with in the ambulance after a tough bout; she's got your back, and also, in the words of one

skater: "She'll make her actual husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, whatever, understand that if they love her, they'll be putting up with you, too." Derby wives and derby marriages reproduce domestic roles yet rip these roles from the hegemonic, heteronormative domain, exposing the construction of institutional norms.

In parodically queering normative conventions, roller derby opens up possibilities for desires outside these confines. In an episode of *Rollergirls* entitled "Love Boat," ChaCha asks Lunatic if she ever thinks about getting married. Luna responds, "What? To you? Or to some dude?" ChaCha spontaneously announces: "So let's do it. Let's get married." When the pair discuss wedding details, ChaCha points out the to-do list in a bridal magazine, saying: "This is supposed to be a wonderful day of some lady's life . . . do you see all the shit you have to do?" Her rejection of mainstream rituals mirrors the ceremony: skater bridesmaids wear bikinis with cigarettes and drinks in hand, ChaCha emerges in black sequins and Luna follows in rhinestones and fringe. Every vow is marked by the minister saying "before all roller derby." The brides exchange engraved brass knuckles, kiss, and throw cake at each other before diving off the side of a boat. In these scenes, ChaCha and Lunatic create drag performances queering heteronormative domestic traditions.

In representation and interpretation there remains adherence to historical codes; even as ChaCha and Luna queer heteronormative wedding rituals, the representation of open lesbianism and bisexuality remains silenced in *Rollergirls*. One skater who identifies as lesbian spoke about this need to contain threatening sexualities: "Yeah, we're all just hot chicks and we only go home together because our fans fantasize about it. That's the problem when people start telling us what we're about." In discussing the *Rollergirls* wedding, many skaters expressed concerns that it might mock gay marriage. However, these concerns of openly gay skaters were brushed aside in favor of the wedding celebration in this mediated representation. Documentaries like *Hell on Wheels* or *Rollergirls* or fictional representations like the 2009 film *Whip It* may allude to homosexuality or bisexuality yet only in relation to the heteronormative. In another example from *Rollergirls*, Lux tells her boyfriend that she woke up next to a naked ChaCha after a night of drinking. Lux offers an abbreviated apology, yet *Rollergirls* only whispers of the possibility in the context of Lux' heteronormative relationship. The void around Lux' apology speaks to the historical silencing of lesbians that recalls Valenti's articulation that women's sexualities fall under "bizarre arbitrary guidelines: only if you're married; only if it's for procreation; and only with another girl if guys can watch" (2007: 20).

Conversely, *Blood on the Flat Track* shows the collection of bodies, sexualities, and relationships available in roller derby. The interviews are not with the most attractive, media-ready skaters as in *Rollergirls*, but with skaters that create a wider array of identities, sexualities, and images. One of the most intriguing aspects of both this documentary and the interviews I had with derby skaters was how they self-identify with pariah typologies and sexualities. As Miss Fortune suggests "we kinda sunk into our personas and our team, and what we project." For example,

the descriptions of the Sockit Wenches are “prissy, pretty girls . . . love or hate them for that.” When describing the DLF (Derby Liberation Front), Kitty Kamikaze said: “DLF is the lesbian team . . . the statistics are getting skewed with every round of fresh meat, but historically speaking, they’ve always had the highest concentration of women lovin’ ladies.” And the DLF skaters agree, as Lorna Bomb says “we’ve always seen ourselves as sort of the smelly lesbian hippie team.” Away from a glossy series like *Rollergirls*, this open discourse of sexualities and identities resonates much more closely with the lived experiences skaters shared with me.

Burnett Down and Basket Casey have been together for four years and *Blood on the Flat Track* focuses on their relationship which grew in and through their sport. Shovey Chase and Kitty Kamikaze are also together; they explain the intricacies of relationships on and off the track. As Shovey says, “a year ago I was benchwarming and just meeting her for the first time, and now, I’m trying to clock her . . . and I love her.” Setting these relationships as centerpieces of the documentary repositions lesbianism as a central bond for many skaters rather than something pushed to the margins and called upon only to tantalize spectators. Yet acts of queering do not rest with skaters who identify as lesbian. A mother and daughter duo and twin sisters also share their experiences in negotiating familial bonds and competition. The mother says: “When I see her go down (with an injury), it’s all I can do not to rush over to her . . . but I gotta keep skating.” The sisters discuss their competitiveness: “It’s the best form of sibling rivalry! We get to fight it all out on the track then go home and it’s all good.” These performances queer the notion of institutional sporting women and the bonds they are confined to in that realm.

When asked how or why media often misrepresent derby skaters’ sexual experiences and identities, many skaters I spoke with dismissed this as irritating but unimportant. One skater suggested: “it’s not what we do in bed that matters. It’s what we do on the track, for our teams.” This follows institutional pressures for women athletes to separate public and private identities (Lenskyj, 1991). While many media depictions reiterate that lesbian and bisexual skaters cannot speak their identities unless marketed, represented, and interpreted for the male gaze, interviews with skaters suggested a different embodiment of sexual identity. As one skater said, “I’m a rollergirl, I’m a dyke, I look hot, and I kill on the track.” Derby skaters illustrate how articulating desire need not exist outside the construction of the athlete; derby is reproducing all of who you are to excess on a larger sporting stage. In continued work embodying acts of rebellion, derby is a visible sphere where silenced sexualities can be reproduced in resistant performances that queer norms and indeed, take the “Put a” back.

## Calling the jam: The power of parody

Women in traditional sports often emphasize their sexuality for the male gaze or avoid performances of sexuality that fall outside that gaze. Yet derby skaters perform sexualities written across bodies of all shapes and sizes. The clothing, language, monikers, and posturing of sexualized femininity creates a drag

performative which mocks the objectification of desire by revealing it as a mask, a performance, a construct. Independent of mainstream articulation of sexualities, derby skaters disrupt traditional sporting reproductions of available sexualities and desires for women athletes. Derby proves that women can take up “pariah” sexualities exploited and shunned by the male gaze and used to divide women under that institutional control. In rescuing objectified and silenced desires, derby skaters assert the fallacies in these constructed identities within the institution of traditional sports.

Functioning outside mainstream society, derby escapes its regulation and punishment to expose and mock the paradoxical mechanisms of institutionalized sports (Butler, 1990). As Malick suggests, “ideas like masculinized female athletes, sexualized athletes, or women in positions of physical power are brought to light and their stigma diminished with humor” (2012: 4). Derby publicly uses the performative power of drag, creating hyper-spectacles of tabooed and normative sexualities that elide and comment on the regulatory frame. Whereas traditional women’s sports are set aside and subordinate to men’s sports, derby skaters reclaim a marginalized space apart and elevate it. Traditional women’s sports hide labor, violence, and competitiveness to reify the woman’s body as naturally graceful and beautiful. Derby skaters reclaim their bodies and “if in that process female bodies look unladylike – if they become bruised or bloody or simply unattractive – that seems irrelevant” (Nelson, 1994: x–xi). Additionally, derby skaters embrace their sexuality as a personal choice rather than a mechanism of oppression and objectification. BGGW co-founder Haggerty discusses the empowered sexuality and feminism at work in derby: “It’s maybe making a new bridge for people who have struggles with sexuality versus feminism or think that there’s a wall between the two . . . you can either be sexy or a feminist but you can’t be both. Maybe this will help make a link.”

Despite tendencies to defang sports as entertainment or “just a game,” the public discourse surrounding Welsh rugby star Gareth Thomas’s coming out or US golfer Tiger Woods’s sexual exploits reasserts how significant we find our sporting figures’ sexualities outside the game. As Califia stresses, “institutions that provide amusement always come under attack by puritans and fascists” (1988: 15). The tradition of silencing those who seek pleasure illustrates how these “games” threaten the status quo. Rather than join the spiral of silence surrounding sexuality in sports, roller derby uses a megaphone. Derby skaters parodically drag sexualities and queer institutional scripts for women athletes and sexualities. Derby functions as a performative survival strategy illustrating how marginalized subjects might resist and transform oppressive conventions of sexual embodiment and expression. In a society that values women for what they are not, derby allows women to be all that they are in every complex, transcendent way. On the track, women are made visible in all of their athletic, strong, corporeal glory. On the track, women indulge in fantasies of identity, sexuality, and spectacle. On the track, women reclaim themselves and rescue each other.

## Notes

1. In the development of extreme sports, the representation of race remains extremely limited; this has engendered criticism for the overwhelming whiteness of these sports (Rinehart and Sydnor, 2003). As for differently abled bodies in derby, there are a few compelling stories: Tammy Wheeler (aka Hot Wheels) calls herself the “Original Roller Girl” and serves as flag bearer for the Rat City Rollergirls in Seattle, WA; and Kaitie Falk, who details her “Tales from the Disabled Roller Derby Queen” under her blog as Fibro Girl! These narratives should be further explored to illustrate the inclusive nature of fringe sports for bodies often cast to the margins.
2. Until the May 2013 announcement by Jayson Collins of the NBA, no professional male athlete in the USA’s “big four” sports had come out as openly gay while playing professionally.
3. As an amateur sport, derby skaters do not typically earn profits for themselves; the money they raise contributes to the financial sustainability of their teams and leagues.

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