

2013

## All-women's flat track roller derby : gender, psychoanalysis, and meaning

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ALL-WOMEN'S FLAT TRACK ROLLER DERBY:  
GENDER, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND MEANING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by  
Matthew Newsom  
B.A., Valdosta State University, 2007  
May 2013

This thesis is dedicated to my loving and supportive parents, Ron and Dolores; to my four radical brothers: Jimmy Killbilly, El Dave (and his lovely wife, Reneé), Nicholas the miraculous, and Robert the little chub; to all my Zigray relatives, especially my Grandfather and late Grandmother; and to all my Newsom relatives, especially my beloved Gramsie and late Pops. I choose not to name everyone else individually because even theses have length restrictions. I also devote this thesis to the memory of Dolores Zigray, Sara Richard, and Caanan Bond.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not be possible without the unwavering support of my thesis committee: Helen Regis, Kathe Managan, and Jill Brody. I would like to thank Dr. Regis especially. Not only did she encourage me to apply to LSU, but she has given invaluable guidance and mentorship every step of the way. Dr. Regis granted me the freedom to pursue my interests and supplied the encouragement to explore areas of cultural and feminist anthropology I never intended, and these factors mean more to me than I believe she realizes. I would also like to acknowledge that my post-graduation debt is considerably smaller due to the West-Russell research award I received. I thank those responsible for funding this award, and Dr. Kent Mathewson for managing its affairs.

Additionally, I would like to thank all the women of roller derby who inspire me as a young scholar, and more importantly, provide living role models for future generations of women. Every skater who was kind enough to lend her time, knowledge, and sincere friendship made my research experience rewarding in ways beyond the reach of academia. I would also like to thank Kiley Kirksey, M.D., for the free lodging, vegan meals and baked goods, and genuine Southern hospitality she gave me during my stay in Helena, Montana. I will never forget her immediate and unparalleled generosity or her kindness. Rachael Milne, a very dear longtime friend and rising derby star, was also essential to helping me adjust to life in Big Sky Country, and deserves noted mention here.

I would also like to thank my cohort in the LSU Department of Geography and Anthropology, especially Audriana Hubbard and Emley Kerry. I value their willingness to critically engage my thoughts and work almost as much as I cherish their friendship. I thank all of my dear Valdosta friends who encouraged me to leave town and pursue my

academic goals. My Goon Squad brothers, Joel Snodgrass and Jared “Hank” Hall, are the best friends I could ask for. Ol’ Hank and his exceptional family were particularly supportive, even though my anthropological endeavors meant breaking up the band. Sorry, dude. Megan Gatchell is another irreplaceably close friend who I must name individually. She knows better than anyone what this research means to me, and I cannot express how grateful I am for her presence in my life. The various other friends who I do not name here are not forgotten or missed; I am just saving their names for the acknowledgement section of my dissertation.

Finally, I must thank Dr. Matthew Richard at Valdosta State University. If not for him, I would never have discovered a passion for anthropology. He has introduced me to every opportunity that has come my way in this field, from my undergraduate studies to my future PhD pursuits at Washington State University. I credit much of my worldview and capabilities to his inspiration and mentorship.

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## **Abstract**

For over a decade, women's flat track roller derby has grown to reach thousands of women in various countries around the world. Through roller derby, these women are engaging in a full-contact sport that has no comparable male counterpart, making this rapidly-growing sport an interesting arena for gender and cultural research. This thesis uses ethnographic information collected from two U.S. derby teams in order to demonstrate the dynamic interplay of culture and psychology in the making of cultural and personal meaning. In so doing, this research validates the role that psychology—and specifically, psychoanalysis—can play in cultural anthropology, and demonstrates a clear means for understanding and interpreting individual models of gender.

## Chapter 1: Awesome Punk Rock Feminists on Wheels

*Derby is something that's not monotonous, this is something that's special, this is something that's different. I'm definitely scared of not living my life to its full potential, and this is how I'm going to get an edge on that. I'm making sure that if I die tomorrow, it's totally worth it. [...] There is something a little bit wrong with you if you do this sport. –Smack*

Any cultural space that allows the opportunity to interact with a tax judge, a water quality specialist, a professor of mathematics, a video game tester, a police officer, and countless other titles, professions, and statuses, all of whom find meaning in the same cultural practice—and more importantly—all of whom are women, is worth studying. Roller derby, after three quarters of a century and at least a dozen radically different incarnations, is one of those cultural spaces. Since the beginning of its current revival in 2001, all-female flat-track roller derby has provided thousands of women with the opportunity to participate in a full-contact sport—one without a comparable male counterpart. This thesis explores the sport of roller derby and the women who play it. I give special consideration to a few key cultural components, the most important of which is the concept of gender: what it means to my interlocutors, how it becomes meaningful to them, and especially *why* they explore it through roller derby.

There are several reasons why I chose to focus on gender throughout my fieldwork. The first is obvious to me: roller derby is an all-female sport, and to ignore gender would devalue these women's voices and contributions to society, an ethnographic injustice characterizing much of our discipline's history (Slocum 1975 [2008]; di Leonardo 1991: 5-6; Lutz 1990: 612). The second was a personal one, in that much of my undergraduate coursework lacked a feminist perspective. I was determined to correct my lack of experience with feminist scholarship and theory through this research project. The third and most significant reason for focusing on gender came through my earliest fieldwork



experiences during which there seemed few (if any) clear boundaries of femininity, and the effects of the spectrum of femininity on display to the public piqued my immediate interest. For example, one of the first things I noticed at my first bout as a researcher was a young girl, probably age 5 or 6. She was sitting on her father's shoulders in the stands, holding a sign reading "Go RSRD" (Red Stick Roller Derby League of Baton Rouge, Louisiana), and cheering on a team member, who I later learned was her mother. I instantly wondered how such early experience with roller derby—a sport replete with strong, physically aggressive yet graceful women—might affect this young girl's understanding of her future capabilities as a woman. How might her interpretation of femininity be different from that of her peers? From that of her mother's when she was a child?

Roller derby presents drastically different models of femininity for young girls than more traditional models encountered through activities like ballet, gymnastics, cheerleading, or even Girl Scouts. While many of these activities are more prominent and accessible to younger women and girls than something like a junior derby league, these activities become increasingly exclusive with age. Because of this, derby represents an activity that adult women can participate in for themselves, not for their children's sake. This is not to indicate a political stance against these activities, but to note the fact that derby occupies a new cultural and athletic niche—one where women are encouraged to be physically aggressive and mentally improvisational while on the track. Rather than emphasizing a singular body type (such as slender and petite, as in ballet), roller derby indeed calls for a variety of physical builds and makes you "comfortable in your own body." As Slam Diego explains, derby changes one's perception of self until each skater accepts

that “this is my body. I’m used to it, and I’m a badass blocker. I’m a big girl and I’m a badass blocker. Or, I’m tiny, and I can get through the pack. I’m cool.” Bodies in derby are not reduced to looks, but capability. Her dietary habits have changed too, and she specifically mentions how happy she is to get fast food tacos that are “greasy and good.” With derby, she rejects gendered aspects of food, such as calorie-counting and dieting, and instead eats “whatever I want” because she figures she is going to “burn it all off anyways.”

Interestingly, the characterizing elements of beauty and aesthetics found in activities like cheerleading (accentuating make-up, mini-skirts, sparkly uniforms), much like the “common set of feminine beauty norms” typified by many Barbie Dolls, such as petite body shape, exaggerated eyelashes, and “glitter encrusted” accessories (Wohlwend 2009: 65), can be rejected, exploited or reconfigured into the multitude of elements found at any single derby event: tattoos, ripped pantyhose and leggings covered only by skimpy underwear, over-sized basketball shorts and conservative athletic wear, multicolored hair, zombie make-up, knee-high socks, piercings, exaggerated make-up, short skirts, bondage belts, and just about anything else one could think of. At the various bouts, local parades, 5K fundraisers, and other public performances by derby skaters, women of all ages can experience and produce a wide range of femininity models not found elsewhere in public culture.

My fieldwork has uncovered that this range of models includes women who adopt traditional, prim and proper behavior, clothing, and ideology; however, this lady-like model of femininity is the minority. One skater, Snakebite, explains how her experience with derby contradicts a model of femininity that is “concerned about appearances and always being proper”:

At derby we don't really have boundaries and I feel like I can talk about anything and not worry about it being an issue, like if it's not really a girl topic. Some of the girls will stand there, and they'll burp, and it's a little gross. But it's a group of us, and it shocked me at first, because I'm used to being around girls that their hair is done and their make up is done, and who don't talk about specific things. But in this group they talk about everything, nothing is off limits.

'In this group,' Snakebite is able to express herself in ways she otherwise would not be able to. Many of the women in derby happily proclaim their ability to "be myself" around their teammates. With this level of comfort comes the adage I have heard countless times that "there's no decency in derby"; bodily functions of all sorts are routinely referenced in casual conversation. Field notes from my first night of derby practice alone include quotes such as "Sorry, I'm really gassy tonight," "Hang on, I gotta burp," and the description of my "hand-me-down" pads as "smell[ing] like shit."

Because roller derby's atmosphere is full of a wide range of femininity models, I believe gender to be the most suitable concept to analyze here. I will connect ideas and theory from cultural and psychological anthropology as well as gender studies to demonstrate how and why gendered meanings are made at both the cultural and individual levels. Derby women actively create for themselves a model of femininity comfortable to them, a process that coincides with the creation of a new identity and personality. Derby names, the monikers under which skaters are called within and often outside of derby, are chosen by the skater herself. Most women earn these names after completing a training course known as "Fresh Meat," a term indicating vulnerability and inexperience. This name usually represents an aspect or component of the skater's identity and interests (such as the forensic anthropologist, "Little Miss Maggot"), and is usually mixed with references to

ferociousness or aggressiveness (“Val Killmore,” “Heidi Volatile,” “Schexorcist”) and/or cultural references (“Bambi Boozled,” “Dr. Wholigan,” “trAC/DC”).<sup>1</sup>

While some skaters believe their name embodies an “alter ego,” an identity through which a skater can embody a fantasy life, others have described the opposite:

I feel like my life outside of derby is my alter ego. My derby name and identity is where I can be free and show off my true self, especially as a lesbian. When I’m at work as a schoolteacher, I have to be more reserved and *normal*. When I’m skating, I don’t have to pretend to be something I’m not.

And while many skaters invest a lot of time and meaning into their derby names, still others attach little meaning to their derby names, claiming they are “not very inventive,” that they “just tried to come up with an easy name.” Even though derby is a sport with a stigmatized image of violence and impropriety for the women who play it—a result of decades of scripted and sensationalized versions of televised performance—most women have no problem being open about their participation. However, some skaters do not share their involvement in derby with their professional colleagues and certain family members to avoid any potentially negative reactions. This is one of reasons I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all derby names (including the aforementioned), and I am not including any personal names. I further discuss my choice to use pseudonyms later when detailing my methodology; for now, I would like to conclude the introduction by describing some of the questions I hope to answer through this thesis.

The process of identity creation—from choosing derby names to adopting a costume/uniform and crafting a skating style—exemplifies how women use agency to

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<sup>1</sup> These names are real derby names I have encountered in my fieldwork. I have reprinted them here because they are publicly available. However, all names used in direct reference to skaters and their responses are pseudonyms, a point I explain later.

embody their selfhood in derby. What aspects of derby represent gendered components of these women's identities? How is gender portrayed in derby, and how do skaters interpret, adapt, and respond to gendered meanings? What motivates these women to adopt these meanings—what goals, needs, or fantasies do they satisfy in doing so? Many of my research participants discuss aspects of their sexuality as inseparable components of their gender, and for many of them sexuality is a major component of that gender. For that reason, I include discussion and components of sexuality when the skater expressed her sexuality as an essential part of her involvement in derby.

I came into derby expecting a broad and easily recognizable feminist message. My own personal stereotype of derby women as awesome punk rock feminists on wheels came from my experience with women involved in alternative music subcultures. In fact, I first learned of roller derby in 2008 while touring in a rockabilly band and playing as the halftime show at a bout in Tallahassee, Florida. I watched as two teams of tough and tattooed women battled each other while skating and hitting their way around the track. The home-team was the underdog, and the fans packed themselves tightly in the desolate city warehouse to cheer their team to a valiant comeback attempt and near-win. The excitement was contagious, and I found myself able to identify with the sport because I recognized what looked like a group of my friends. That is, the women skating past looked like the same young women I have met and befriended over fifteen years of playing in various punk, hardcore, and rockabilly bands.

The women I met through music often identified with the *Riot Grrrl* movement of the 1990s, a musical genre with roots in punk rock and a focus on female empowerment and other women's issues such as reproductive rights, sexual equality, and denigration of

patriarchy. However, my characterization of derby women came from that single experience as a spectator, and I soon realized derby is much more culturally diverse. Moreover, as I got deeper into the research, I came across few skaters who self-identify as feminists. Of the 22 women I interviewed and asked if they consider themselves feminists, only five agreed to the label. A typical response comes from one skater who decidedly responded that “No, I’m not a feminist. I mean, with my background, I grew up on a ranch in Montana. Then I went to college, I mean, it *was* a liberal arts school.” Here, feminism seems to be tantamount to an urban women’s movement, or perhaps a college phase encouraged while under the psychosis of liberal professors. Tarin Uapart, who also happens to be lesbian, similarly concludes that she has

Never really thought about [being a feminist]. I think that empowering women is great and I think that we all should have a voice—men or women. But I don’t know if I’m necessarily a feminist. I believe that we’re all equal, and I don’t know, I think we’re getting treated more and more equal as it comes. But I don’t know if I’m necessarily a feminist.

This response validates fundamental tenets of feminist politics—that is, the equality of women; but to Tarin, being a feminist implies political involvement, and she is quick to mention she is “not political.” She constantly repeats to herself, “I don’t know,” and this indicates her ambivalence on the issue. As a roller derby player and as a lesbian, perhaps she believes she *should* be a feminist, but her lack of direct political involvement or political consciousness prevents her from living up to her own model of what a feminist is.

I encountered this ambivalence at several points in my fieldwork, particularly during personal interviews. Aggro Terra, who does identify as a feminist, explained her experience with the role of feminism in derby:

In derby I would hear feminist comments, but in a joking way, as if that weren’t really what was going on. You could sit down and ask a derby girl if she is a

feminist, and she would say no. Then you ask if she believes in equality and basic questions like that, and she of course agrees. She would answer the questions with one foot in and one foot out, believing in the tenets of feminism but not identifying as a feminist. Derby women joke, instead of saying 'kick him in the balls,' it's 'kick her in the ovaries.' It's women replacing men in powerful roles, but almost in a joking sort of way.

Terra's experience is comparable to mine, and her explanation illustrates that many skaters engage with gender and feminist concepts even though they might not think of it that way.

Although many skaters disagree with the characterization, I do consider derby a feminist sport because I have heard from women participants that derby empowers them in very real ways. Men in the U.S. and abroad have significantly greater access to full contact sports (Theberge 2000; Burnett 2001), and roller derby challenges this exclusivity—a challenge made more apparent by the fact that the majority of leagues are all-female.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, roller derby gives these women an opportunity where there was none, and that is feministic.

Self-identifying feminists were the only respondents who volunteered a definition for the label itself. One such definition, coming from Ginger Bitus, is strikingly similar to Tarin Uapart's response and focuses on women's equality.

My definition of feminism is all about equality and rights and, you know, no one being better than me just because I have ovaries—and me not being better than anyone just because I have ovaries. And also money: I would like the same amount, please. That would be awesome.

This variation on a characterization I assumed would apply to all derby women prompted other research questions with regards to the sport's political implications. For instance, do derby women consider the various social and political waves of feminism relevant to their

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I am considering full-contact sports as those in which contact is an intentional and strategic component of the game, an aspect of sport not traditionally associated with female athletes.

lives? Can derby change broader cultural understandings, stereotypes, and models of gender in society, particularly in the realm of sport? Do women see derby as a political statement, an affirmation of women's ability to compete in an aggressive, physically demanding, full-contact sport? If women do not come into derby with a pre-existing political agenda, I assumed that perhaps roller derby could impart a political consciousness on the skater as she develops through the program. Many women at practice and during interviews proclaimed, "roller derby saved my life." What does this mean—what are these women being saved from? What is it about derby that can be so life changing? What meanings can be found through derby and how can they have such a profound impact on the lives of its participants?

In considering derby women's common description of derby as "empowering" to the women who play it, the sport can be viewed as a cultural response to what Sherry Ortner described forty years ago as "the universal devaluation of women" (1972: 7). But do the women who participate in derby see it as such a response? This thesis explores gender and meaning making within roller derby, and attempts to understand what motivates this diverse group of women to invest their time, money, heart, energy, sweat, and blood in this unique sport. Such an investigation, combining elements of feminist theory with psychological anthropology, adds a new dimension to our understanding of gender complexity and meaning on the cultural and individual levels. In focusing on the individual, I hope to account for any differences in gender meanings by analyzing the life histories of each woman. Specifically, I hope to explain which cultural and psychological processes produce models of gender and femininity in roller derby, how and why those meanings are internalized and reproduced, and the effects they have on derby skaters and their teams.



For the purposes of this thesis, I consider femininity to be that component of the self that relates to each skater's subjective understanding of her womanhood. This womanhood is a meaningful product of each skater's myriad of accumulated psychological and cultural engagements with the world during her lifetime. But, before discussing these issues any further, it is first necessary to provide a better explanation as to what derby is, how I became involved, the details of my study, and the methods I use to provide answers to my many questions. I do this in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2: The Sport of Roller Derby

*Derby is an awesome thing. It is an amazing thing. It is a life-changing thing. It has changed me greatly, you know? I can actually look people in the eye now, and that's fantastic! But also, it helped me grow up a lot. It can teach all sorts of things.*                    *–Ginger Bitus*

The first part of understanding derby comes through understanding how the game is played. While a small portion of derby leagues across the U.S. skate under rules set forth by USARS (USA Roller Sports), the sweeping majority of leagues adhere to standards set forth by WFTDA, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association. In fact, one skater stated "you can basically qualify USARS as a bunch of white guys sitting around in a room trying to run derby. They don't actually know anything about the sport." If this characterization is true, then WFTDA is the complete opposite. This organization was created shortly after the revival of roller derby in Austin, Texas, at the turn of the century. In roller derby, as mandated by WFTDA, two teams skate around an elliptical track for up to two-minute sequences (called 'jams'). Each team is comprised of five players: one 'jammer' and four 'blockers.' The jammer attempts to pass and lap the opposing team's blockers, scoring points for each opposing blocker she passes. The bout is split into two 30-minute periods, and the team with the most points earned after the second period wins. This is a contact sport, so blocks and checks (as in football, soccer, hockey, etc.) are considered legal under specific conditions, and a system of penalties is used to regulate and maintain safe and orderly competition.

Official derby play is limited to players aged 18 and over, and skaters must be women. Men can participate as skating officials and non-skating officials, and help out with volunteering, organizing, serving on various league committees, training and even sometimes (albeit controversially) men serve as head coach to an all-female league. Men's

leagues, co-ed leagues, and junior leagues are starting to pop up and are met with varying levels of enthusiasm and popularity. However, all-female leagues represent the majority in terms of number of players, leagues, and fans.

Despite its rapid growth over the past decade, roller derby has received little attention from scholars in the social sciences. While posts on several online message boards indicate many currently active graduate student projects—theses and dissertations—only a handful of publications are available. One of these (Fagundes 2011) comes out of a law department and studies intellectual property rights and norms regarding derby names, and the few others are sociological investigations of gender (Storms 2008, Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Breeze 2010). I would like to take a moment to underscore the findings of these investigations, followed by an explanation of how my research adds to this conversation.

Carolyn E. Storms (2008) provides an historical review of the discrimination and stereotypes faced by women who roller skate since the earliest models of skates invented in the late 1800s. She demonstrates how this discrimination has persisted into the realm of derby, and claims that roller-skating has “been a source of female identity resistant to the restrictive standards of hegemonic male culture” (2008: 84). Similar conclusions are drawn in another study by Nancy J. Finley (2010), who notes the ways in which derby women embrace negative stereotypes of women and, in so doing, challenge gender hegemony. However, derby has also been found to merely expose some aspects of gender stereotypes while not “necessarily undermining the masculine feminine gender binary” (Carlson 2010: 428). Travis Beaver examines how the do-it-yourself ethic of roller derby “opens up access to positions of power within [sports] organizations,” particularly for

working class women able to meet derby's substantial time and financial commitments (2012: 46). Finally, the work of Madeline Breeze, a derby skater herself in Edinburgh, concludes that most gendered theories are incapable of adequately explaining the complexity of derby or the personal motivations and "agentic elements" of the individual skaters themselves (2010: 126). While Breeze makes a solid case against many mainstream theories found in gender studies, she does not consult psychological concepts and their applications. I specifically consult and utilize psychological theory, and believe it provides the answers Breeze was looking for.

I argue in this thesis that psychological—specifically, psychoanalytic—theories are best suited for uncovering and explaining the personal motives and goals of derby skaters. In this way, my research shifts the focus of the existing scholarly conversation on derby away from larger institutional issues such as gender hegemony and instead focuses on how gender is made personally meaningful to the women who play. In placing emphasis on the many idiosyncrasies of derby women, a more complex understanding can be gained regarding the spectrum of gender meanings present in derby. More importantly, my focus allows for a better understanding of how and especially *why* gender meanings are made psychologically. That is, I reject understandings of gender as externally created—be they performative as Judith Butler (1988, 1990) would have it, or discursive as in the Foucauldian tradition (for discussion on this see Strauss & Quinn 1997: 26-28). These theories leave little room for true agency and neglect any consideration of the power and importance of personal experience.

Aside from a particular theoretical approach, I also speak from a unique perspective as not just a researcher, but as a participating referee. My eventual involvement with this

research came out of my familiarity with niche and semi-underground cultural groups, or subcultures, and I have had an interest in derby since my first experience with the sport in 2008. I believe my familiarity with cultural phenomena like music and social issues helped me gain access to some of my interlocutors. For instance, telling one skater that her t-shirt of the legendary punk rock band, The Cramps, was “the best band shirt I had ever seen in derby” gave me an immediate point for conversation to bond over. I recognized another skater who came to practice wearing a shirt for one of Seattle’s teams, the Derby Liberation Front. Identifying this as a reference to such “extremist” (or necessary, depending on the point of view) activist groups as Earth Liberation Front (E.L.F.) and the Animal Liberation Front (A.L.F.) enabled me to start a discussion with this skater about our similar views on politics and social issues. Sharing similar tastes in music, politics, and social issues granted me a greater access to these women’s lives, and this access proved invaluable to my fieldwork.

However, my position as a referee allowed me to take part in a greater variety of social circles. Rather than forming closer relationships only with skaters at my age, skill level, on my team, or with one social group who might share musical or political tastes, as a referee I was able to remain socially untethered. During practice, I interacted with all the skaters, not just one team or one group within a league. As a male, my presence with the team was nothing extraordinary considering most other referees are also male. Although, at my second practice I was asked, “Who do you belong to?—Do you have a girlfriend on the team or something?” This question also made my entrance as an anthropologist easy because it gave me the opportunity to explain my presence on the team had no romantic connection to the team, that I was instead there for cultural research. An additional

problem I encountered early in my fieldwork is the fact that newcomers are sometimes met with an element of suspicion as to their commitment to the sport. The most common value I have been told it takes to play derby is “dedication,” and indeed, turnover rates are quite high. Some team members are reluctant to get to know new people until they have demonstrated their dedication. After a month of practicing, I introduced myself to the only ref whom I had not formally met. He indicated he had seen me around, but wanted to make sure it was worth his time to get to know me. As he explained, “We see so many new faces come and go here. I usually say, ‘stick around three or four weeks and then I’ll bother learning your name.’” As one skater told me, “some girls try out derby, and just decide it’s not for them.”

This study includes fieldwork done with two different leagues. I chose to expand my research to include a second league because derby networks are quite extensive, with news and ideas traveling quickly through the use of Facebook and other message boards. Thus, while I started my research with the Red Stick Roller Derby (RSRD) league of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I decided to spend the summer of 2012 (ten weeks) with the Hel’z Belles league of Helena, Montana. This latter group was not only culturally and geographically removed from the southern city where I began my fieldwork, but they are also much newer, with fewer participants and a slightly different organizational structure. Also, as one skater explains, “when you look at the Hel’z Belles in comparison to the other Montana teams, we tend to be a little more athletic, a little more clean-cut.” Engagement with this second team enabled me to contextualize the role of structure, community, and league ethos on the lives of the individual skaters. Both teams skate under the rules set forth by WFTDA, but only the Louisiana team is an actual WFTDA member league.

Membership in WFTDA brings with it many elements of prestige as well as responsibilities. For starters, membership grants your team official status; it means that a “mentor league” (a league already possessing WFTDA membership) has supervised your league through a year-long training process during which your league learns how to manage itself with standardized policies, processes, and maintenance of bout statistics. It is interesting to note that WFTDA membership requires a minimum of 75% of the leagues’ board of directors be women. Membership in WFTDA also gives your team a competitive status, and allows for things like ranking against other competitive teams, plus greater access to informational and training resources. Perhaps most importantly, WFTDA membership gives your league a voice in things like rule and other structural changes. Member leagues are required to meet minimum levels of participation by voting on different WFTDA initiatives. Because these votes are WFTDA-only, the results are supposed to remain confidential among WFTDA leagues until WFTDA publicly announces voting results. During the summer of 2012, significant rule changes—namely, the qualifications for penalty infraction and how individual jams are initiated—were under consideration and eventually passed, but I was under strict order by my head referee in Louisiana to not disclose this information to the league in Montana. Although to me this confidentiality seemed to be based less on practical reasoning and more on principle, I kept quiet while skating with the Hel’z Belles.

Most of my derby training came from the referees at RSRD. This league, situated in the capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, is able to draw from a large pool of potential skaters. Two major universities (Southern University and Louisiana State University), several community colleges, and economic opportunities attract a continuous flow of young

adult women to this city of over 600,000. Because of this, recruiting efforts are minimal. Moreover, considering there are several skating rinks in the surrounding metropolitan area, most “fresh meat” skaters can already meet some minimal level of skating. Despite hailing from a diverse city, the overwhelming majority of the 50+ skaters at Red Stick are white, with some variation regarding age, class, and education. One way in which diversity is most celebrated is through sexuality. “Half of this league’s skaters,” I am told, “are lesbians,” a fact made obvious through open discourse, displays of affection between partners, as well as stickers and clothing symbolizing gay pride or support for gay rights. Many women have told me stories of how, through derby, they found the strength to ‘come out’ to their friends and family as either lesbian or bisexual.

One skater on the Red Stick team did just that, and her story is recounted in another Master’s thesis written on the league by a former skater. Rock Bottom, who was raised in a traditional Catholic household, gave up a basketball scholarship at a prestigious university because she was unhappy doing it. She always thought she might be lesbian, but never had the courage to confront it until she joined roller derby and began a relationship with a teammate. As she explained, “I had survived all those basketball gays unscathed and unattracted. They were dykes. I was better than that. And then, just like that, I fell in love with a girl and into a pit of emo turmoil” (Duncan 2006: 39). Eventually, the secrecy of her sexuality became too much for her. “She came out to most of the team before she came out to anyone else, and that gave her the confidence to talk to the other people in her life” (Duncan 2006: 39).

This is also true for a referee at Red Stick, who was raised in a similar conservative, Catholic household. Many of the women on the team are “role models” to him, a reversal of



what he would probably find through sports like football or soccer, where male coaches or other players are role models. He notes, “each person on the team has had some profound effect on me.” He estimates that “at least half of our league is lesbian or bisexual, and I think the league attracts them because it’s such a supportive environment.” Being surrounded by so many women who are comfortable with their own sexuality has given him the confidence to come out to his teammates. He describes how, “when I told the team I was bi, no one was really surprised. But at an after party one time, a skater came up and said, ‘don’t let anyone stop you from being you,’ and gave me this mom-ish speech about being yourself.” This speech, along with the counsel and support of many other women on the team is described as mom-ish because he thinks of many skaters in a familial sense—either as sisters or as moms (“because they are actual moms!”). Indeed, many skaters refer to each other using kinship terms such as “sisters,” “family,” and as discussed later, “derby wives.”

This type of support can be crucial considering the description of Baton Rouge by one lesbian on the team as “lacking a really present gay community; it sucks.” The city of Baton Rouge does have a small gay community—there are a few known “gay bars,” and the Louisiana State University campus has a small yet committed gay, lesbian, and queer activist group. However, conservative and largely anti-gay religious groups are also vibrant. For instance, an anti-gay demonstration was recently (March 2013) organized to protest outside a concert by Elton John, the well-known openly gay pop singer.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of Baton Rouge is that the LSU football Tigers are what matters most to residents. The college football season brings Baton Rouge Tiger pride to a boiling point, and along with it the tradition of tailgating and the headache

of traffic jams. Local newscasts often have two or three individual segments on the latest Tiger football news and highlights, one on last week's game and one on the upcoming game. The city celebrates its nearby Creole and Cajun foodway traditions, with jambalaya, gumbo, boiled crab and crawfish, and other such foods commonly listed on restaurant menus. It is this city that inspires much of the red stick league—red stick, of course, is the English translation of *baton rouge*, and even derby names reflect these cultural components (for example, "Raisin' Pains," a pun on the name of a local fast food restaurant chain; or "Honey Badger Von Sparkles," a skater who recently transferred to RSRD and who shares her name with a popular LSU football player's nickname).

The Red Stick League is split into three main groups. The first is the "A Team" or "all stars" known as the *Diabes Rouges* (or, Red Devils). This is the team with the highest skill level, and the only team on the league whose bouts are considered "sanctioned," meaning that they help qualify the league for WFTDA status and ranking. The second team, the "B Team" or "Capital Defenders," consists of those skaters with proven skills and a year or two of experience in derby. The third group is the Fresh Meat, who come to practice and are spatially—and for the most part, socially—isolated from the other teams and skaters. All of these three groups practice on the same two nights a week at the same practice space: a local skating rink touted as having "the largest indoor skating area in the U.S."

Practices usually begin with an endurance/aerobic segment lasting from 20 minutes to a half hour, followed by 90 minutes of various drills designed to emphasize specific strategies and personal skills. Practices are lead by the elected members of the Training Committee, the most prestigious committee in the league. Because this league is typically boutng against fiercely competitive teams, training and practices maintain fairly rigorous

levels of seriousness. This is an important feature of RSRD, as there exists a strong focus on athleticism, described in the team's statement of purpose as a

Commit[ment] to the betterment of the *physical* and *mental* strength of its members through fostering the amateur *sport* of roller derby. Skaters are females aged eighteen or over who exhibit exceptional *athleticism*, leadership, and *sportsmanlike* conduct both on and off the track ("Purpose" 2009, italics added).

This emphasis on competition has resulted in conflict between team members who see derby as an arena of competition and those who see it merely as a place to have fun and skate. This is one contributing factor to the league's high turnover rate, and has ultimately led to the formation of a second league in Baton Rouge, the Grassroots Rollergirls (GRR), at the end of the 2012 season. Skaters on this second league have expressed a desire to have a "family" that is "free of personal conflict," a place where players "can just skate and have fun." As one skater explained it, "as things at Red Stick progressed, it started getting more competitive, and we tried really hard to get WFTDA [status]. And when we got WFTDA [status in 2011], things got even worse, and all the fun went away."

League splits are not unheard of in the derby world; in fact, one skater says they are "naturally occurring everywhere." They are usually the result of opposing ideologies over some aspect of league management or direction, and the internal conflict is often referred to as "growing pains." These instances of conflict are almost inevitable considering derby's philosophical mantras of "do-it-yourself" and "by the skaters, for the skaters." As Travis D. Beaver explains, "skaters maintain control over their athletic activity, their organizations, and the sport as a whole" (2012: 25). But, as one skater told me, "derby attracts a lot of type-A personalities, so you might get more conflict that way just because everybody has an opinion about how things should be done." Hel'z Belles are experiencing growing pains

in ways similar to Red Stick in that the league is growing very quickly, and the team is forced to meet increasing structural problems with the same unchanging resources. The Belles of Montana are a young team—barely 18 months old at the time of my fieldwork in the summer of 2012. However, despite the fact that they “used to be the baby team,” the Belles are quickly becoming formidable opponents to larger teams in the Northern Rockies. However, the Belles are struggling to maintain this newfound competitive edge without losing their team’s more recreational elements:

You want to be competitive, and you want other teams to want to play you. So you have to keep some sort of competitive element to it. But at the same time, you don’t want to take all the fun out of it. But some people aren’t competitive like that, so they just give up. And you don’t want to see people quit because they’re part of our family and our community. So you want them to keep trying but it’s really hard to balance that competitiveness and the community aspect.

The results of this conflict for the Hel’z Belles have been stagnant levels of participation and those in leadership are often taking on multiple positions to keep the league afloat.

However, “things are improving” for this small team of close to 25 active members nestled in the capital city of Montana. Without the luxury of large universities to draw from, the Belles rely on new skaters to “come out of the woodwork.” Helena also differs from Baton Rouge in that its residents typically live more active lifestyles, with outdoor activities like hiking, camping, rock climbing, mountain biking, canoeing, skiing, and other snow sports making up part of everyday life. Thus, many skaters in Montana opt for these activities over derby, especially during the summer season, the time of my fieldwork. As one skater explained to me, “it’s summer in Montana, and that means everyone kind of checks out a little bit.” This could have affected my study in that I had little or no interaction with many women who might be active with the league during the winter

months. Something that likely worked out in the favor of my fieldwork was the overall lack of available referees in Helena. During my period of study, I was the most active referee with the league and, because referee participation was so minimal, skaters were grateful for my presence simply because of the fact that leagues *need* referees to help them practice legal play. This, in turn, also made me somewhat of a novelty with the league, which helped me to establish friendships and social networks rather quickly.

It is worth noting that the average age for active skaters with the Hel'z Belles is much higher—around 30—than that of the league in Baton Rouge, with several women in their 40s and 50s. Helena is much smaller than most capital cities, and it is just as normal to see wildlife (especially deer) roaming the streets at rush hour in Helena as it is to see bumper-to-bumper traffic at the same time of day in Baton Rouge. One skater for the Belles who is not originally from Montana described the town as a place where

Everyone says 'hi.' They're friendly, and they're worried—like genuinely worried about other people. Like I noticed that people read the paper everyday, and they're like, "oh, so-and-so died," and they're genuinely sad about it. [...] People in Helena make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside!

The team enjoys a much stronger connection to the community than the others I have seen in the south, with bout attendance consistently reaching up to 1000 fans. As one skater put it, even though competing nightlife events are few and far between, many residents attend bouts because they say to themselves, "hey, this is my hairdresser who's killing it in the bout this weekend.' Or, 'my sister's kid's teacher is going, let's go—we gotta check this out.'" The Hel'z Belles do enjoy the fringe benefit of living in a small city in which "there is a lot more sense of the hometown, like small-town feel to it. If you're driving down the road and you just wave to people, most of the people will wave back." The skaters are aware of this, and are quick to show their support and appreciation for the community businesses

that sponsor the league. My first interview (and many afterwards) in Helena took place at a café that sponsors the team, and this locale was specifically chosen by the skater “because they’re our sponsor, and I want to give them whatever business I can.”

That community ethos is celebrated in the Belles’ mission statement, which emphasizes personal development over competition, and represents a stark contrast to RSRD. It states that the “main goal” of this league “is to *inspire* women, young and old, to form a healthy body image, live an active lifestyle, and gain *empowerment* through *learning* the sport of roller derby in a safe and *supportive* environment” (“Mission,” italics added). This focus on elements of personal enrichment is reflected by the greater level of diversity within the league, especially with respect to factors such as class, education, and especially age. Mixing personality types is also one of the team’s goals. As a veteran skater put it, “We gotta figure out how you’re going to implement the rancher wearing boots and the hippie wearing Birkenstocks.” These cultural models of the rancher and the hippie are significantly different from, say, the redneck and Cajun models of identity recognizable by the Louisiana team. In fact, the “Belles” in Hel’z Belles relates more to the pun on the AC/DC song “Hell’s Bells” than it relates to the southern belle model of femininity. Differences in models relate to differences in experience, but as I note above, my goal is not to focus on how these cultural models are different. Rather, I intend to demonstrate how the processes of meaning making are the same despite these differences in cultural models.

As with Red Stick—and most roller derby leagues—nearly every skater in the Hel’z Belles league is white. For some reason, this glaring racial homogeneity is left out of every “Annual Comprehensive Data Collection on Skaters and Fans,” a demographic survey that has been administered and published by WFTDA since 2010. I contacted WFTDA to

address this fact, but received no response. Although the racial makeup for WFTDA as a whole are unknown, 21 of the 22 skaters I interviewed were white, with one skater who self-identified as biracial. As Donna Haraway declares, “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (1988: 581). In order to understand the subjectivity of the derby women whose voices are present in this thesis, it should first be recognized *where* these women are speaking: as predominantly white women of middle class status who either live in the South or a small town in the Northern Rockies. In Baton Rouge, neighborhoods are largely segregated, and whites enjoy a greater socioeconomic position overall. In Helena, racial minorities are somewhat of a public rarity considering whites make up 93.3% of the city’s population according to the 2010 U.S. Census (“Helena”). The fact that WFTDA ignores race in its statistical report is disturbing, and through my fieldwork I encountered very little structural or individual recognition of the whiteness of derby.

So, why so few ethnic minorities in roller derby? This imbalance is perhaps due to the high financial cost of playing derby, a barrier many economically disadvantaged groups cannot or have no interest in trying to overcome. The minimum equipment required to participate, even that of the lowest quality, can easily cost over \$400 after buying skates, knee and elbow pads, wrist guards, helmet, mouth guard, plus a gym bag (or, in my case, reusable grocery bags) to carry everything to and from practice. After these costs for just minimum-required equipment, there is the mandatory insurance (\$65/year), dues (\$20-40/month), transportation to practice (2-3 times/week), transportation and lodging for out-of-town bouts (4-5 times/year), uniforms and practice attire, plus equipment upgrades (wheels, bearings, pads, and boots wear out, laces and axles break, etc.). According to the

demographic survey administered by WFTDA, a total average of \$1501 per skater was spent over the 2011 season on equipment, travel, and other support costs (WFTDA 2012: 3). These costs are easily incurred with moderate income, but for those without full-time employment, those earning low or minimum wages, and those with other priorities like children or college, the cost of derby can be insurmountable. The WFTDA demographic survey shows that 64% of skaters earn an annual income of over \$35,000, with 26% of total skaters earning over \$75,000 (WFTDA 2012: 5). In a society like the U.S. where class is racialized, it is not surprising that almost every skater on these two leagues is white when considering the average income levels reported on the WFTDA survey. It is always interesting for me to pull into the parking lot at practice and see the late-90s Dodge Neon parked beside a brand new luxury class SUV, and to know that these two women come from very different positions yet are involved in the same sport. The economic and racial positionality of skaters has been considered by Carlson, who concludes that

roller derby may provide a degree of gender negotiation at a relatively microlevel, [but] this does not imply that roller derby speaks to other lines of difference or structural issues, such as broad patterns of racial or economic inequality. [Carlson 2010: 432]

I agree with Carlson's assessment, and believe her conclusions should be considered a caveat to my interpretations and analyses below.

My initial expectation was that, considering the dichotomy of the mission statements—one stressing athleticism and competition, the other stressing personal development and community—the cultural processes of gender construction and their associated meanings would be different between the two leagues. My eventual realization, though, was that despite differences between the two cultural spaces, similar meanings are made using the same psychological processes of meaning making. I will discuss this point



later, emphasizing the importance of the individual in these processes of meaning making. I merely wish to summarize here my view of derby as a cultural space or arena in and through which women construct their identity and gender, and that cultural space is easily and continually shaped by one or a small handful of individuals. Through an encouraged sense of league-to-league and skater-to-skater collaboration, the annual derby convention in Las Vegas known as RollerCon, and various skills, referee, and strategy training sessions known as “clinics,” derby culture itself is shared across a tightly woven network of leagues and teams of all sizes. However, every team is a composite of all the individual identities on that team. It is on the individual level and within a single team that each woman is empowered to make derby whatever she wants—both for herself, and for her team.

## **Methods**

I came to this understanding of derby through a few basic ethnographic methods. I spent ten months as an active referee participant-observer with a derby name of Matty Gruesome; I attended 2-3 practices a week, various league meetings and events, acted as a skating and non-skating official in several bouts, traveled with the teams, and volunteered at whatever events I could. Many (if not most) referees are male, though women do make up a significant portion. In the two leagues I skated with, 6 of 7 referees were male; however, a number of women in both leagues were referees at one time, and a few alternate regularly between roles based on the level of participation they can commit to. Unless the league is coed or all-male, the only role men can take is as a referee or as a coach, the latter being quite rare and discussed further below.

My first step in becoming a referee was undergoing the 12-week long Fresh Meat program at Red Stick, where I learned how to skate and the basics of derby: hitting, maneuvering, drills, warm-ups, rules, simple strategy, etc. Although referees do not ever need to hit or know strategy, this active training is helpful for making better decisions regarding penalties and rule infractions. The added benefit of being a referee, as mentioned above, is the accessibility to all groups within the league. This, coupled with a relaxed atmosphere during water breaks and down-time between drills allows for casual conversation and the ability to approach just about anyone.

It is through these casual conversations and observation of events at practice that I selected potential interviewees. Though some interviews came as the result of snowball sampling, most of the interviews for both leagues came after conscious deliberation on my part to include members of the various social, skill, and age groups or “cliques,” as many skaters grudgingly call them. I did this so as to allow for variation in perspectives on derby, life, and especially gender. Thus, I conducted personal interviews with 22 skaters. These were very informal, usually lasted an hour or longer, and focused on the woman’s personal experience in roller derby, how that experience has impacted her life, and what that might mean for her as a woman. Perhaps one of the greatest aspects of interviewing derby women is their tendency to be highly educated: bachelor’s degrees are fairly standard, and professional degrees are quite common. As such, many skaters have experience not only with social sciences and specifically anthropology, but several also have experience with feminist theory in particular. Many of the women I spoke with articulated their responses using theoretical concepts and expressed that their thoughts and ideas are the product of many hours of thinking about their beloved sport. This gave me the opportunity to engage

in a somewhat reflexive analytical discussion about roller derby, and I must give credit to my interlocutors for helping me arrive at many of my conclusions.

Of course, it is also worth mentioning that, outside of actually playing derby, I have found that one of the most common pastimes for skaters is to *talk* about derby. Thus, most women were eager to be interviewed and give their views about something many consider a “part-time job.” Skaters typically ended interviews by thanking me for talking with them, an interesting act considering they were taking time out of their day to help me in my research. One example came from a skater who was just coming back from several months of recovery after a knee injury, and ended by saying, “well, thanks for wanting to meet with me. It came at a really good time for me in my life.” Still others, upon learning of my research, responded with some skepticism, as indicated in questions such as, “So you’re only here to do research? Do you even like derby?” I responded that I did, explaining that the greatest thing about cultural anthropologists is that we get to call “research” what most people call “fun.” Others ask, “Do you plan on sticking around when you graduate then?” These latter responses indicate a personal connection and ownership of derby by the speakers—they do not relish the thought of exploitation. This is further expressed through comments about a reality television opportunity for Red Stick: “We’re not a spectacle!” Although there is a visual aspect of derby that can be considered a “show” (i.e., flashy or skimpy “bout-fits”), derby *is* a very real sport. The questions regarding my interest in derby simply reflects a shared and frustrated awareness of derby’s marred history of staged performances and over-the-top theatrics. In fact, one of the easiest ways to anger a derby skater is by comparing her sport to so-called professional wrestling.

Despite the skepticism, my work never met resistance or disapproval, and the same goes for my requests for interview. I chose to record interviews in order to most accurately recount personal narratives and skaters' interpretation of their myriad experiences with the world. This interviewing technique typifies person-centered ethnography, a method in which "a primary focus is on the individual and on how the individual's psychological and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes" (Hollan 2000: 547). During interviews, I focus on how derby women understand their engagement with the world and the associated feelings generated during and by those experiences. Although the audio recorder might have influenced how respondents composed themselves and their answers, the eagerness with which they approached the interview suggests this influence was likely minimal.

Respondents were surprisingly forthcoming, retelling how derby has helped them to overcome instances of rape, abuse, addiction, and many other personal issues. A skater discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis assured me that her narrative of rape was printed elsewhere (Duncan 2006), and that "anything I said about myself is totally up for grabs." It is in this way that I believe many women see derby as having "saved" their lives. I developed an interviewing style that not only reflected the playfulness of derby, but also my own nonchalant personality. The following exchange with Claire, a Fresh Meat skater, demonstrates this informality:

Claire: I'm not worried that I might break some shit. Sorry, I shouldn't say that on your recorder.

Matty: Are you kidding me? You think that's bad? I got all kinds of French on that thing, most of it from me probably.

My relaxed interviewing style was culturally appropriate considering the “communicative patterns” (Briggs 1997, especially pages 94-97) of many derby women, which allowed my interviewees to remain comfortable and open about their lives and experiences.

As mentioned above, pseudonyms are used for all participants. All names are the creation of the skaters themselves, who supplied them upon my request. It is possible there are skaters on other teams using these names, an unintentional coincidence. There exists something known as the “master roster,” which lists every derby name used and submitted—some 8,000+ names (see Fagundes (2011) for an excellent analysis of the intellectual property rights of derby names). I specifically did NOT check the pseudonyms with this roster because these names are continuously updated, and trying to avoid using any of them or variations of such would be futile. That said, none of the pseudonyms I use were found on either team at the time of writing. Also, while I might mention an individual’s team/location in order to add context to their lives as individuals, it should be noted that most skaters have an identity or personality “doppelganger” on the other team I studied. That is, each team has at least one “staunch feminist” or a “staunch conservative,” tomboys and butch lesbians, “femmes” and heterosexual beauty queens, and many other stereotypical self- and other-imposed identities.

While some interview excerpts and quotes may be recognizable to others on the team, the use of self-given pseudonyms will hopefully allow for some level of reasonable doubt regarding skater identity. Some participants could not or did not want to think of a name—choosing a derby name is a difficult thing to do: “I was thinking of what my fake derby name could be, and that was almost as horrible as choosing my real one”; “Choosing a new derby name is really very difficult, as I am now more taken with my derby name than

my so called 'real life' name. I also find that I respond to it more quickly and with more joy.” This latter response shows how meaningful derby identity can be, especially to those skaters who feel they “fit in” better in roller derby than other cultural spaces.

A few other skaters requested I just choose their pseudonym: “Ummm, you do realize it took me over a year to pick my name right?! I think you should pick something for me.” I did so using specific qualities or inside jokes I shared with those skaters who, in turn, approved the names I chose. This approach was necessary despite the frank openness with which my interviews were met. Because Red Stick recently underwent a split, I do not want printed responses and opinions in this thesis to add conflict to what could still be a tense situation for some skaters. Similarly, some of the details of the narratives below are very personal (such as components of sexuality) and I do not want to make public anything that could embarrass or inflict emotional harm to the participant. This is a very real possibility. I spoke with one skater whose personal narrative is in published in a previous thesis (Duncan 2006) written on the Red Stick league, and told her how I found something interesting about her story. She responded immediately and with trepidation, “She used my name? You can still read that?” To avoid this, I have chosen to use pseudonyms. Lastly, my analysis may be disagreeable to some skaters. They may not consider their involvement in derby the same way I do. Although every interviewee gave me explicit informed consent, I believe this is the most safe and responsible methodological choice.

Before launching into the stories and responses of these women’s lives, I would like to first outline the theoretical framework guiding my analysis.

### Chapter 3: Theorizing Meaning

*I can be feminine, I can put on a pair of high heels and put my make-up on and do those things and play that part—and definitely part of me is like that. But when it comes to roller derby, I'm definitely more masculine. You will see me put headphones on and get in a totally different zone and there is nothing feminine about the zone I'm getting into to prepare myself before a bout. That's where I want to be mentally before a game. I just want to be pumped up and ready to kick ass. And there's nothing feminine about that. –Cagematch Queen*

The above quote provides an illustration of just one skater's perspective on her gender. This married, business-managing mother of three indicates how she negotiates between stereotypical traits of both femininity (high heels, make up) and masculinity ("pumped up," being in "the zone"). Earlier works on derby (Storms 2008, Finley 2010) observe the ways in which a shared derby culture challenges gender hegemony. But does Cagematch lace up her skates before each bout as part of a larger challenge to gender inequality, or does she satisfy more personal motives? How do we make sense of her actions? That is, how are her actions significant to her and her understanding of gender? The answer, I believe, is found through an understanding of gendered meanings as personal creations. As I will demonstrate, life experience and the psychological transference of meaning are the primary contributing factors to the creation of what gender *means* to my interlocutors. Before getting to that conclusion, though, I will first engage the sociological and gender studies theories used in many of the earlier analyses of 21st century roller derby. Later, I move on to explain how a feminist psychological anthropological perspective incorporates a greater appreciation of agency and personal motivation—both of which are essential when analyzing gender.

## **Sociological and Gender Studies**

As previously stated, Roller derby is a rapidly developing sport that provides interesting insight into the nature of gender and meaning making. An early assessment of the relationship between sports and gender comes from Erving Goffman, who explained that sports are

In short, a training ground for the game of life. [...] So, one could argue it is not that sports are but another expression of our human (specifically male) nature, but rather that sports are the only expression of male human nature—an arrangement specifically designed to allow males to manifest the qualities claimed as basic to them: strengths of various kinds, stamina, endurance, and the like (1977: 322).

This association of masculinity with sports still carries considerable truth; however, particularly following the significant passage of Title IX legislation in 1972, women's sports and the women who play them have taken on considerable cultural capital. Indeed, as L. Susan Williams notes,

A wide range of organized sports [...] provides alternatives to narrowly defined femininity. With sports come time, attention, resources, skills, role models, and exposure to a variety of life situations, all of which nourish a broader perspective of what women do (2002: 48).

Derby is a case in point here, particularly in relation to new skills, resources, and exposure to new life situations. What is more interesting is that derby does more than simply create a broader perspective of women's actions; it offers an interesting feminine contradiction to Goffman's decades-old masculine-centered outlook on the realm of sport. Many skaters boast of their newfound physical and mental strength and endurance, thereby appropriating for themselves the masculine qualities Goffman noted for being claimed as basic to men. In so doing, these women challenge what it has traditionally meant to embody gendered sports performance.



But how, theoretically, can participation in roller derby be adequately considered? Performative theories, such as those posed in the work of Judith Butler (1988, 1990), seem initially appealing when we take into account the corporeal experience in learning new skills. Emphasizing performance as Butler does, however, fails to account for the ‘why’ of performance—that is, why one might act in one way versus another—as well as the psychological processes that take place leading up to and during that performance.

In fact, Butler dismisses individual psychology as an essential piece in the making of gender, asserting that the “self is not only irretrievably ‘outside,’ constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication” (1988: 528). Yet, the feminist psychological anthropologists, Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, argue against Butler and her Foucauldian theory, stating that the “denial of the difference between the inner world of subjects and the outer world of objects goes too far” (1997: 28). Better suited for the explanation of meaning making are theories that not only recognize the difference between these inner and outer worlds but that also carefully examine the relationship between the two.

A second paradigmatic theorization of gender stemming from women’s studies and sociology is Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s (1987, 2009) concept of “doing gender.” These authors comment more deeply on the meanings of gender performance than Butler. When discussing “the meanings people attach to particular gender-[...] appropriate conduct,” they look to historically and socially contextualized practices (West & Zimmerman 2009: 115). However, even after twenty years of theorizing, ‘doing gender’ still offers little in terms of how to account for human agency and intentionality. Because

my first step in understanding gender in derby will come from an understanding of how and why these women are acting as social agents, I must first select a theory able to answer to these questions.

### **Agency & Intentionality**

Sherry Ortner's approach to practice theory makes a good starting point. According to Ortner, "What a practice theory seeks to explain [...] is the genesis, reproduction, and change of form and meaning of a given social/cultural whole" (1984: 149). This process of change and development in meaning is accomplished through practice, defined as "anything people do," and which places human agency at the forefront of analysis (1984: 149). Unlike Butler's performativity and West & Zimmerman's "doing," practice theory expands on agency in that it considers cultural production to be a product of what Ortner refers to as the "dialectical synthesis" between structure and agency (2006: 16). This synthesis involves the dual appreciation for how practice shapes structure, as well as how structure shapes practice. In the sense of a new and rapidly developing context such as roller derby, this entails the continuing genesis and reproduction of gender meanings for those women involved with the sport. Derby can also add to more recent literature seeking to fill the once-existing "deep divide" between feminist and practice theory (Ortner 1996: 3). As Ortner mentions, practice theory insists that cultural production can be "unmade and remade," an idea that gives "immediate political implications that connect [to her] feminist concerns" (2006: 17). Thus, practice theory enables me to engage with questions of how derby might affect the socio-political landscape of sports or women's roles on a structural level, but also how derby might affect subjectivity and gender on an individual level.

Where I break from practice theory as posed by Ortner is her insistence that focusing on the agent over the cultural whole “fall[s] into some form of free agency” and “lose[s] sight of the mutual determination(s) of agents and structures” (1996: 19-20). As I hope to demonstrate, emphasizing the individual does not require losing sight of this mutual determination. The structure of derby is such that individuals are granted a vast freedom to express themselves and their identity in a largely accepting atmosphere, from a chosen derby name to symbols of homosexuality. I will show how individuals engage with such things as a “do it yourself” ethos and appropriate for themselves the various cultural tropes found within derby (e.g., what one skater calls being “bad bitches,” or what others describe as “derby sisterhood”). Furthermore, if we focus on the cultural whole, as Ortner would have it, we obviate the need for any theory of motivation—a theoretical component necessary for explaining “what causes individuals to act in one way rather than another” (Frank 2006: 288). Cultural theory that does not account for motivation, as Katherine Frank suggests, leaves us with the understanding that “agency is ‘exercised’ but we cannot predict or explain why it has been exercised in such a manner or by one individual rather than another under similar conditions” (2006: 288).

In the case of my research, understanding motivation provides answers as to why these women choose to participate in derby. What reasons do derby women have for playing? What goals, needs, and desires do they satisfy through participation? Scholars have called attention to the fact that, “for the most part, [...] feminist and psychological anthropology have proceeded on separate tracks” (Seymour 2004: 423). The synthesis of these two theoretical fields, with the similar inclusion of agency and intentionality, is

necessary for answering my questions regarding gender and derby women, and Frank (2006: 297) notes one scholar who synthesizes these perspectives: Nancy Chodorow.

### **Psychological Feminist Anthropology**

Considered as “an independent mother of psychoanalysis” by one scholar (Apter 1995: 21), Chodorow and her text, *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (1999), detail an extensive psychoanalytic basis on which to theorize gender. Although she does not directly engage with sociological interpretations (Blum 2000: 200), Chodorow takes gender concepts that cite performance and meaning (i.e., West & Zimmerman 1987) and supplements them with individual action, motivation, and agency. As one scholar has noted, in Chodorow’s theory, “gender has not merely become performance à la Judith Butler, but neither does it have predictable resonance and agency” (Buhle 1999: 15). Instead of stressing one side or the other, Chodorow attempts to “situate [her]self right on the cusp” of personal and cultural meaning, insisting on the theoretical need for equal parts personal psychology and shared culture (1999: 8). She argues against the psychological determinism of most early psychoanalytic conceptions of gender, but also against the discursive determinism of many Foucauldian anthropologists—a process skeptically described by Anthony Elliott as “an intellectual sleight of hand” (2002: 36). This latter argument has been recognized for its opposition to many particularly American cultural anthropologists who either perpetuate cultural determinism (Stromberg 2001: 154) or are simply hostile to psychoanalytic interpretation altogether (Cravalho 2001: 203; see also Strauss & Quinn 2006).

Chodorow discusses the dangers of cultural analyses that do not include psychology, and intentionally splits from most feminist theorists by not placing an emphasis on the

cultural or political construction of gender. She warns that theories with such an emphasis and which

do not consider individual personal emotional and fantasy-related meaning cannot capture fully the meanings that gender has for the subject. They miss an important component of experienced gender meaning and gendered subjectivity. [...] Perception and the creation of meaning are psychologically constituted. As psychoanalysis documents, people avail themselves of cultural meanings and images, but they experience them emotionally and through fantasy, as well as in particular interpersonal contexts. [Chodorow 1999: 71]

A theoretical focus on the individual processes of meaning making, coupled with the inclusion of cultural, or 'interpersonal' contexts, allows for a comprehensive understanding of what gender means to the individual. Derby offers the opportunity for fantasy through a new identity. This fantasy can have a significant impact on the processes by which women construct their models of femininity within derby. Because these processes take place through self-other relationships, it should be clarified that the 'other' as it applies to my research can include both the cultural space of roller derby as well as the various individuals within it.

While emphasizing individual psychology, Chodorow is careful to maintain the existence and importance of culture outside the realm of the human mind, a distinction Strauss and Quinn refer to in their assertion that "culture is both extrapersonal and intrapersonal" (2006: 272; see also Strauss & Quinn 1997, Hannerz 1992: 3-4). In this way, she safeguards her approach from either the psychological and/or cultural determinisms I discuss above. Drawing on her experience as a trained clinical psychoanalyst, she looks to the process of 'transference' as a means for understanding the processes of meaning making in broader cultural settings. Chodorow differentiates transference from Geertzian interpretive anthropology by arguing against Clifford Geertz's view "of the person as a

privatized, psychological individual” (1999: 144). This perspective, as Chodorow asserts, relegates meaning as “exclusively cultural” (1999: 149), a concept she notes as informing Michelle Rosaldo (1984) and other so-called anthropologists of self and feeling.

As Chodorow demonstrates through her use of psychoanalytic theory, the Geertzian restriction of meaning to the public realm provides an incomplete understanding of how individuals engage with culture. She defines transference as the motivation by people to interpret their experience with the world “in ways that resonate” with internal

preoccupations, fantasies, and senses of self-other relationships. In transference, we personally endow, animate, and tint, emotionally and through fantasy, the cultural, linguistic, interpersonal, cognitive, and embodied world we experience. [Chodorow 1999: 14]

Through transference, then, experience with the world is psychologically negotiated with thoughts and beliefs of the psyche, and through that negotiation, meaning is made. With this understanding of transference, we can focus on the individual and her/his motivation as called for by Frank; the active process of creating and performatively or otherwise engaging with the world through agency as called for by Ortner; the recognition of difference between the psychical self and extra-personal reality as called for by Strauss and Quinn; as well as the feminist recognition that “gender cannot be seen apart from culture” (Chodorow 1999: 70).

Transference itself, though, is not a unitary process. Rather, it involves the three processes of projection, introjection, and counter-transference. Each of these processes will be described in greater detail below, and it will be shown that individuals utilize these processes independently of one another as well as simultaneously. Perhaps the most important feature of these processes—indeed, a key aspect of gender theory I intentionally emphasize—is that in using them we accept “gender [as] an individual creation, and [the

fact that] there are thus many masculinities and femininities” (Chodorow 1999: 69-70). As Finley (2010: 361) points out, scholars have not paid careful attention to the relationships between multiple femininities. Transference has the capacity to direct attention to these relationships and explain how multiple individuals might endow shared experience with personalized meanings. As the psychological anthropologist, Doug Hollan, argues,

Theories of culture must reflect the complexity of the psychological states that underlie the cultural process, and I suggest that even highly conventional models of action, thought, and feeling are rarely, if ever, internalized, appropriated, or reproduced without some degree of modification, refashioning, and personalization. [2000:538]

If even conventional models of action are personalized, it should be all the more expected that something like roller derby—indeed, an *unconventional* sport and subculture—to involve such personalization. I propose that derby women exemplify the personalization of gender, action, and emotional states (read: culture), and this continual process validates Hollan’s succinct statement that “the mind is both an organizer and a product of experience” (2000: 542).

Chodorow explains that this personal variation exists only in the *content* of the meaning transferred; the *processes* by which personal meaning is conferred are the same. Those processes—projection, introjection, and counter-transference—make up an “innate human capacity” that continue throughout the life cycle (Chodorow 1999: 76); that is, they are not fixed in early childhood or infancy, and thus the involvement with roller derby can be considered as a formative experience for women. But how can we organize all of this personal experience beyond having a scatterplot of individual interpretations? It is here that I believe an element of performance theory can be helpful. The sociologist and gender theorist, Mimi Schippers, recommends that we note “which features of femininity and

masculinity are put into practice, deployed as a rationale for practice, and institutionalized” (2007: 100). In taking this recommendation, I organize the behaviors found in roller derby along an imaginary continuum of femininity and masculinity. Similarly, Jeannette Mageo (2002) demonstrates how specific continua are useful in organizing the various elements of self and identity—such as embodiment, morality, emotion and cognition, attachment and need—and offers two poles in the realm of gender: temperament, or ‘inner nature,’ on one side, and performance on the other (2002: 345). I utilize continua in a similar way as Mageo and Schippers, and note how both temperament and performance in derby can simultaneously occupy a range of masculine and feminine traits.

On the one hand, the physicality of women’s derby aligns itself with what Nancy Theberge calls “the ideology of sport, which glorifies toughness and competitiveness” and earns sport the characterization as a “masculine training ground” (1990: 63). Derby glorifies toughness by the fact that skaters engage in a full-contact sport, an aspect typically reserved for “men’s” sports like football or hockey. In doing so, derby can challenge “the myth of female frailty” (Theberge 1997: 70; see also Carlson 2010: 430), a notion institutionalized in women’s counterpart sports with amended rules justified by stereotypes that women are not as physical or athletic as men (for example, the WNBA has shorter halves and closer three-point lines as opposed to the NBA). This myth is perpetuated discursively, with such loaded terms as a “girly push up” (using the knees to support the body instead of the toes) or “hitting like a girl,” both of which have come up in my fieldwork.

However, the performance of derby is feminine in that some women skate in clothing and accessories they describe as “sexy,” “girly,” and “skimpy.” These “boutfits”



emphasize the female form and make up an integral component of derby events.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while derby women challenge stereotypes of weakness and docility by celebrating aggressiveness through full-contact athleticism, their outfits enable them to do this “without eschewing femininity as a whole” (Carlson 2010:433).

Skaters also utilize communication, a value stereotypically associated with femininity in the U.S. through recent family sitcoms where the wife, who always seems to be a better listener, forces the reluctant husband to talk about his feelings (e.g., *King of Queens*, *The Simpsons*, *Still Standing*). In derby, communication is a key component at practice, where, during drills, skaters are encouraged to speak up, express, and discuss with the team what they believe is or is not working and how the drill might be improved. Often, in between drills, skaters break into groups and are encouraged to seek advice on aspects of the strategy they might be having trouble with. This makes good sense considering communication during a bout is considered essential, as players utilize offensive and defensive strategies simultaneously and alert their teammates where to move on the track (“On your inside,” “She’s going outside,” “Lane 1, 2, 3, or 4,” “Speed up/Slow down,” etc.). Similarly, the skaters in Montana are regularly asked to rate their own skills before bouts, one of which is the ability to communicate.

This aspect of derby is a stark contrast from the masculine forms of coaching typical of most sports, which are characterized by a hierarchical sense of power over players and a dictated, nonnegotiable training regimen (Theberge 1990). The coaching style of many derby leagues can be considered counterhegemonic. Rather than having a single coach, many teams elect about five skaters to make up a Training Committee. These women plan

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<sup>3</sup> Although, some teams opt instead for more “professional” uniforms that present the skaters as more “serious competitors” and thus are considerably less sexualized.

practices and drills, lead the league in endurance/conditioning, select skating rosters, develop strategy, and supervise most other aspects of preparing the league for bouts. Some teams do have coaches, and these coaches can be either male or female, but this can be problematic in terms of gender when it comes to criticism. According to Double Smacchiato.

While a female coach has to first soften the blow with, [high pitched, condescending tone] “oh, well you’re doing so great at this thing, but we should really do this—is that ok? Did I hurt your feelings?” That’s what I’m expected to do as a woman, and I understand that that’s how we’re brought up to perceive other women when giving us criticism. And I should probably just suck it up and coddle a little bit before I give criticism, but I don’t think we should have to act like women when we’re playing a competitive, full-contact sport and we’re going to compare it to things like football. If we got Les Miles [the LSU football coach] to come in and coach our roller derby team, he would not be soft and he would not coddle us; he would push us. So why should I act any different because I’m a female?

The fact that derby trainers should not have to “act like women” resists notions of what Smack refers to as women’s socialization of being “passively competitive” against one another. She is frustrated with the gendering of leadership, where men giving orders are “being direct and honest,” but women giving orders are “described as a bitch or a cunt.” Slam Diego also addressed this in stating “I feel like guys are more business-oriented. Or, not business-oriented, but like, straight shooters, and they’re not gonna sugar coat everything.” However, Slam does admit she is “still kind of leery about male coaches.” Many skaters go farther than just being leery, and will absolutely not consider male coaches as an acceptable solution to questions involving training. As told to me by Skatechel Maddow,

I adamantly don’t want a male coach. I just really hate the dynamic that happens in a situation where there’s one dude telling a bunch of girls what to do. I can’t help it. I feel like this is the one arena in my life where I don’t have to feel that power dynamic ever, and I don’t want to give it up.

Male coaches reproduce gender hegemony both symbolically and in practice. I share Skatechel's opinion with the many other skaters who believe the only acceptable role for men in all-women's roller derby should be as a referee. I have refereed bouts where teams have a male coach barking orders at the female skaters (and arguing with referees), and this reproduces models of male authority figures as well as contradicts the derby ethic of "by the skaters, for the skaters."

To summarize, skaters actively engage with derby and use their agency to create their own personalized models of femininity. These models exist on a broad spectrum of values (temperament) and behavior (performance), and are achieved and made meaningful through the psychological processes of transference. The life experiences and subjectivities I present below demonstrate the agentic and motivational aspects of participation in derby as well as the personalization and internalization of the meanings behind that participation. I organize the next few chapters around the processes of transference, and in so doing, I aim to demonstrate and elaborate on how the derby women with whom I skated make personal meanings of gender within the shared cultural space of derby.

## Chapter 4: The Projection of Meaning

Many derby women have told me that “with derby, you get out of it what you put into it.” For many this is the first opportunity at a full contact sport, but as one skater for the Hel’z Belles told me, “even if you’re not really athletic—if it’s not a natural ability for you, if you just keep showing up to practice and working away at it, you get there eventually.” But for those women who approach this opportunity with the level of “dedication” and “commitment” that are often cited as the number one qualities required to play, interpreting the experience often entails *projecting* ideas and beliefs about their gender onto derby. Projection occurs through the placement of internal “feelings, beliefs, or parts of our self into an other, whether another person [...], an idea, symbol, or any other meaning or entity” (Chodorow 1999: 15). In this process, derby is molded into an interpretation that fits with an individual’s understanding of femininity and what it means to be a woman. Through an analysis of projection we can begin to understand why one skater’s model of femininity differs from another’s, as well as to identify how the skater uses previous experience with the world to negotiate and interpret current involvement with derby.

One of the most salient examples of this comes from Aggro Terra. Terra works as the creative director for a midwifery magazine she started several years ago. This position allows her to move around the country every so often, but she will only move to cities with established roller derby teams. She describes her understanding of femininity as something developed through her training as a midwife:

A typical misconception about strong or athletic women is that they’re being masculine, but I don’t see it that way. You say other scholars see it as a feminist thing, or that all derby women are feminists, but that’s not true. It’s feminist at its core, but I know not all derby women are feminists. They all have their own ideas

about their femininity. Look at my profession: I'm not a practicing midwife, but it's my background. Child-bearing is a very physical act, so I see women and their physical strength, having a fucking baby and no one ever says 'wow, that woman's got balls.' So physicality is a trait typically deemed masculine, but women have always been just as physical, and through derby they find that strength.

Here, Aggro Terra demonstrates how her experience with women in childbirth has developed her understanding of femininity. To her, femininity is falsely associated with what she calls "stereotypes of being dainty," and she uses the corporeal experience of childbirth to refute those stereotypes. As Terra says, "derby is not about women doing something men can't or that women are stronger than you would have thought. It's about women finding their strengths without having to adopt masculine strengths." The toughness of women is proven to her through the pain and physicality of childbirth, and she challenges the typical association of strength with masculinity by projecting that belief onto derby's full-contact and aggressive components.

Emphasizing the toughness of derby is typical, as shown in descriptions of the sport as "a way to kick ass" and the online photographic databases, or "halls of maim," which show various injuries accrued by a single team on some team websites. In fact, the toughness of these skaters is epitomized by the many women who are injured during practices or bouts. In one season of skating and conducting fieldwork, I have witnessed three women get seriously injured—a broken collarbone, a shattered ankle, and torn knee ligaments—but have also met several others who have come back after serious injuries because they "love derby." These injuries are often serious enough to end college or professional athletic careers, but they are often downplayed by derby players, who merely put off skating for a number of months. One skater described her experiences and feelings after a serious knee injury, and gives a sense of her physical courage to return to derby:

Well, I knew that I could still work, I could still be a parent. It's not like my leg was cut off or that I had a terminal illness. I knew it would be ok. I was just so devastated that it meant I couldn't play roller derby for like 6 months because that's what they told me. I would have to hobble around, I wouldn't be able to participate fully. And my husband said, "I know how much you love roller derby, and it'll be ok. You can't *not* do things because you're afraid to get hurt. That's not who you are anyway. We'll get the surgery done and eventually you'll come back and it'll be stronger than it was before." So I was like, "alright!"

Another skater discusses the how the threat of injury is a source of conflict in her professional life:

Well the supervisor at our work has already given me grief. She's totally against it, she already said that, "you can't do that! If you get hurt you're gonna lose your job because we can't accommodate." And it's like, "pfffft. I'll jump over that bridge when it comes." [...] I see it as I've come to terms with the fact that if I'm going to break something, I'll heal. It's just a rehab and you get right back in it, right?

The risk of serious injury has always been a part of playing contact sports, but it is one these women have often longed for their whole lives. Hurt Blocker, a 50s-something librarian, discussed the longing she has had to play a contact sport since childhood.

Derby is great for us who grew up wanting to play contact sports. You know, I wanted to play football so bad because I had two big brothers. And it just wasn't an option. Contact sports were not an option. So now it's fun—I get to go out there and hit and stuff. Because, even in girls' hockey, you can't hit.

Hurt is projecting her long-held fantasy and desire for full contact sport onto derby. In satisfying this desire, she is presented with an opportunity for enjoyment she never had before, and Hurt alludes to her described feeling of "empowerment" through an activity that allows "everyone [to] have fun and play in the sandbox."

The empowerment of derby women with new skills—everything from on-a-dime stopping to organizational and non-profit management skills—is a common theme of discussion, especially with skaters bringing an explicit political agenda to their leagues.

Gloria Spine-Em, a university instructor and RSRD all-star who self-describes as “rabidly feminist,” posted the following note on her league’s online forum:

Dear Everyone,  
Y'all know me well enough to know that I'm rabidly feminist, right? Part of my feminism is about believing in the power of women to overcome problems and adversity. And sometimes that means overcoming our individual prejudices to enhance a greater common goal. When I joined roller derby, part of the beauty of it, to me, was watching a group of women (and some lady-friendly dudes too!) overcome their differences to make something athletic, encouraging, and powerful. [...It has] helped some people to genuinely believe in the power of their own gender.  
[Gloria Spine-Em, 31  
October 2012]

Here, Gloria projects an empowered model of femininity on her interpretation of the women and events found within the cultural space of derby. To her, league problems are not solved by the mere result of logical minds coming together to form solutions. Rather, there is a feminist edge to problem solving in derby, where conflict resolution represents a powerful potentiality of womanhood. In other words, Gloria is projecting what she calls her “feminist lens” onto the actions and goings-on of the women with whom she skates.

I initially expected this projection and articulation of feminist ideology to be more common than it was; however, I was surprised to find only a small handful (five; roughly one-quarter) of my interviewees self-identify as feminists. A typical response was given by Cagematch Queen, who explained, “While I support women’s rights, I don’t bring that [agenda] to derby.” Claire, a Fresh Meat skater who self-describes as “way not so feminine,” because “that kind of stuff just kind of turns me off,” speaks to an imagined feminist during our interview and says, “Really? *Get over it.*” She explains that she “doesn’t really think derby is a feminist girl-power thing,” although women in derby do “have some decent willpower.” It is interesting that Cagematch and Claire view feminists as those who support women’s rights and are typified by willpower, but feminism is somehow not

meaningfully associated with derby—a sport that embraces women’s rights (access to full-contact play, leadership positions, a forum for creativity and self-expression) and values such as willpower, courage, strength, and physicality. This perspective not only runs counter to the stereotype of all derby women as “overweight feminist lesbians,”<sup>4</sup> but it also offers interesting considerations for analyses of the political implications of gender within derby (Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Beaver 2012). Similar conclusions of women entering traditionally masculine realms without much real political gain or motivation have been found elsewhere, such as the Armed Forces (Silva 2008). What makes roller derby so interesting is, again, that it is a predominantly female sport lacking a masculine counterpart that could be considered the more “real” version of the sport. In fact, the tagline for WFTDA itself is “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.”

While the ‘revolutionary’ aspect of derby could be interpreted in various ways, the fact that most other scholars but only a handful of derby skaters in my experience interpret it as a feminist revolution needs to be explored. Claire is not the only skater to communicate a lack of interest in feminism or the political consciousness much of feminism entails. But, indicating feminist or political agendas are only one way in which skaters might interpret their participation in derby. As Poison Ivy told me, “as far as it being an all-women’s sport versus an all-men’s sport, I don’t really care. I don’t have a strong opinion about that one way or the other.” But Ivy’s perspective is quite interesting, as her viewpoint is informed by several experiences she has had in life. That is, she came into derby only after having already “spent a few years just travelling,” going to college, doing 27 months in the Peace Corps, then attending grad school and earning her Master’s degree.

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<sup>4</sup> An LSU graduate student volunteered this stereotype when I told him about my research.



After I recognized her for having the “best band shirt in derby,” she discussed her involvement with the punk-rock music subculture while growing up, saying she was not “exclusively” a punk. She explains,

I feel like derby is edgy, and when you meet other people, they see it as this little counter culture. But I just look at it as this little family, and this thing that we do. I don't look at it as this elite counter culture. I see why people look at it that way, but it's not how I look at it. And it's not what attracted me to it. I wasn't like, “oh, that's punk rock!” I was more, “oh, a team sport.”

For Ivy, the most meaningful aspect of derby is the tight-knit familial relationships it engenders. For her, the involvement in a “community” where “everyone can participate” is most important. And she believes this happens “because we're all going through this really hardcore experience together so you are the only people that understand each other, you know? It's more about having a group experience.” This group experience is something she has repeatedly sought and found throughout her life, and it is what she finds most meaningful:

I do feel like I'm part of something amazing. But I also think of it more in a team sport kind of a way and not as an underground culture kind of way. I think maybe because I've been part of a team sport and I've also been in a punk rock scene, I don't feel like they're a punk rock scene—at least not here. Maybe in L.A. or something they are. But once you get to know all the women you realize they all have families and jobs and stuff, and it doesn't seem as counter-culture to me. It seems more just like a team sport. But there is something to it that is so different and unexplainable to other people who are not in it. I think you're experiencing all this together, all this growth—whether it's physical or mental. And you're going through all the hardships together, you beat each other up.

Ivy continues her description by relating her interpretation of derby to past experiences she has had. As she does this, she focuses on the tendency for derby women to bond over mutual difficulties of isolation and personal growth.

There's definitely something about it that you can't explain to people. It's kind of like when I was in Peace Corps. You can talk about all the experiences and stuff, but

nobody really knows what you're talking about unless it's another peace corps volunteer who's been through it. I think because I've had other experiences like that, where you're kind of isolated with this group of people and you go through this really difficult thing—even grad school, where they break you down and tear you up, and then build you back up again. I'm sure it's like that. I like the counterculture, I don't feel like it's counter-culture, but everyone who talks about it sees it as counterculture. But I'm not totally convinced. I mean I wear fishnets and stuff like that, but I don't feel different when I'm on the track. It's just me; it's the same person out there.

Her references to her other life experiences—as a punk, as a member of other team sports, as a Peace Corps volunteer, and as a grad student—demonstrates how she conceptualizes her participation in derby: as a member of group undergoing meaningful experience. In this way, Ivy reflects on derby as a rite of passage in the Victor Turner (1969) sense, complete with a sense of solidarity and togetherness, or *communitas*.

Rather than latching on to a political edge or a subcultural affiliation like many other women who experience these things for the first time through derby, Ivy instead projects the most meaningful part of her previous experiences onto her derby experience: that of a supportive familial environment. What makes derby different for her is that she “doesn't mind being in a room with 30 women.” She goes to practices where “all these *mothers* drive up in the mini-vans they use to haul their *kids* around,” they all “go through this really hardcore experience” and “support each other and encourage each other.” Other skaters are constantly referenced using kinship terms so that: “derby sisters,” “derby wives,” so-and-so is “like a mother to me,” or she is “young enough to be my daughter.” Thus, a familial model of femininity is created. The focus on nurturing and support while “beat[ing] each other up” engenders *communitas* and through this experience, Ivy establishes meaningful relationships with other women. One of the lighter drills used by the Hel'z Belles when warming up or cooling down is called “happy family skate time,”

where all the skaters bunch together to form a giant “pack” and practice skating in very close proximity to each other. This familial model becomes all the more relevant to Ivy when considering the rest of her family lives thousands of miles away, and she divorced her husband around the time she joined roller derby.

The relationships found through derby are a commonly cited element of derby that women find attractive, something especially true for those who have not had many meaningful friendships with other women. This is something many skaters touched on. As one woman told me, “90% of these girls are girls who can’t be friends with other girls. And somehow you put us into the mix, and if we don’t kill each other we’re friends.” This view alludes to the belief held by many (though not all) skaters that “women are brought up to be competitive with [and hostile toward] one another.” One likely source of this competitiveness is the prevalence of an emphasis on beauty standards in the U.S., an easy example found linguistically through the term “beauty pageant.” And, as Erica Reischer and Katherine S. Koo note, “feminists have long argued that beauty pageants perpetuate the commodification of women as objects of display” (2004: 312). Although these authors cite and discuss the arguments against this view of beauty pageants, which emphasizes a focus on talents or career goals, the perspective that women are socialized to compete with one another deserves consideration. For instance, a simple comparison of the prevalence of current and historical television shows documenting women’s and young girl’s beauty pageants (Toddlers in Tiaras, Miss America Pageant, Pageant Place, Crowned: The Mother of All Pageants, America’s Next Top Model) to the apparent lack of such shows involving men indicates a serious gender imbalance.

Moreover, despite what the social reality might be, the *perceived* competitiveness is internalized to the point that one skater attests, “women are awful! Awful! They’re horrible, and it’s taken me years to figure this out.” She believes derby women are no different from this, that

if you get in a fight with a girl, they still hate you after ten years. But the guys? They get in a fistfight with someone and five minutes later they’re getting a beer. You know, it’s gone—it’s done. Girls? Not so much. It’s never over.

As this skater indicates, the competitiveness between women is *always* a factor, and transgressions are not easily forgotten. And yet, despite a perceived belief in the impossibility for women to get along, roller derby exists as a distinctive space in that the women somehow do get along—they don’t kill each other.

Another skater offered an explanation for why friendships between derby women work, arguing that derby women are in fact different from other women: “We’re different because we all have the same mindset that we don’t want the bullshit. We’re not all prissy like, “oh, my hair, my nails.” We’re like, “let’s get in this, let’s get dirty.”

Another skater, Semper Activa, describes the role of friendships in derby and how she sees them:

For some women, they just want to come and skate and have a place to be with friends. And to me, I want to come and I want to work out and I want to get better at skating because I want to kick our rival team’s ass. That’s where I’m coming from, but I like being a part of seeing someone else just feel happy to come and skate with their friends.

For Activa, competition and athleticism are what she most enjoys about derby. While to her, “the pieces of the sex appeal, getting all dolled up in short shorts” is what makes derby feminine, “the sport part of it is universal.” When asked what femininity means to her, she responded how “hard” the question was, that for her, that she does “what makes me

uncomfortable and not uncomfortable.” She concluded by noting she has “always been kind of back and forth in the worlds of masculinity and femininity.”

Activa’s professional career involved long stints of coaching and personal training, as well as four years in the Marines. She describes herself as “the kind of person who likes rough and tumble kind of sports, and who’s always looking for some sort of challenge.” So, she “went and played G.I. Jane for a couple years” in the Marines, a branch of service where all the women are “either lesbians or they have something to prove.” But she described her motivation for joining, saying, “I just thought it was really challenging, and I wanted to be a part of it. And it was hard. I mean I wanted it. That was part of the draw for me—this is a really hard thing that a lot of people can’t do, and so that’s why I have to do it.” But after four years, she realized that “family was more important to [her] than the Marine Corps,” and so she left the service despite her disappointment in leaving behind the “camaraderie” so typical of the Marines.

I believe Semper Activa finds in roller derby what she lost by leaving the service: she projects the challenge and camaraderie of the Marines onto her derby league. In a similar way as Ivy, she explains why such strong bonds are established in derby:

Well, I think it’s the same camaraderie that was so important to me in the Marine Corps, especially because we kind of grew together. We started this project together, this roller derby project. And so we just learned a lot through that process, and we’re all so committed to making this work. And I think that’s remarkable. And when you have to make so many sacrifices for this sport, it’s not like club soccer or club volleyball. You have to be committed to showing up to practice; my track is that I want to play, and so that means I need to be at practice and be committed to that. For the good of the team. And so I think that’s connecting us, and you’re just working so hard, and it’s hot, and it’s tiring, and every piece of your body hurts, and you’re doing that together—that’s what’s gluing you together.

She later told me, “I definitely still have that Marine still inside of me, it’s just that my husband meant more to me.” In this way, I propose that Semper Activa is projecting onto

roller derby that part of her 'self' that strives to be a Marine, complete with its embodied physical and psychological challenges of overcoming pain, suffering, and commitment. Derby gives her an opportunity to explore and satisfy that component of her self while still being able to stay close to her and her husband's family in Montana. As a woman in derby, she does not "always have to work harder to show that 'I'm capable, I'm smart, I'm strong'" in the same way as she did as a woman in the Marines where she felt she had to prove herself to her male peers (and her chain of command). She is still committed to working hard, improving her skill and fitness levels, but she is doing it for herself as well as the good of the team. After her knee injury (described above), she had difficulty in recovering this aspect of her identity:

But the first month when I was in this gigantic cast hobbling around and watching everyone skate, I just felt useless. I think a lot of it was my identity is tied into being so active and so when everything comes to a screeching halt, it's like, "well, who am I really if I can't run, I can't skate, I can't do all those things I used to do?" 'Who am I' was a big question for me. It was depressing.

After learning to be involved in ways other than skating (coaching, training, volunteering, etc.), she continued to persist and find ways to do the things she loved. Her model of femininity reflects this aspect of her personality, and it is made meaningful in various ways through roller derby, something she loves "way more" than the Marines.

In Activa's case, as in the other skaters presented in this chapter, meanings established in prior life experiences are projected onto roller derby. In this way, they are personal, but still reflect aspects of derby culture that all skaters are familiar with—everything from wearing fishnet stockings to working until every part of your body hurts. However, meaning is not always projected onto derby. The second key process of

transference, introjection, describes meaning as being made in the opposite direction, and is the topic of the following chapter.

## Chapter 5: The Introjection of Meaning

The process of introjection is the creation of meaning in the opposite direction of projection. According to Chodorow, this occurs when “aspects or functions of a person or object are taken into the self and come to constitute and differentiate an internal world and reshape the ego” (1999: 15). In other words, shared cultural meanings found in derby and/or other derby skaters are appropriated by the self, to be ultimately transformed into personal meaning.

One example of this internalization occurs through the value of sociability, a trait stereotypically associated with women through linguistic phrases like “Chatty Cathy.” This stereotype also gains legitimacy through texts like *The Female Brain* (2006), by Louann Brizendine, a major finding of which was reported in an online article titled “Women Talk Three Times as Much as Men, Study Says” (MacRae 2006). Although Brizendine’s book is refuted by academics (Fine 2010; Fuchs Epstein 2007), it continues to perpetuate the stereotype that women have “the gift of gab.” In fact, some of the same figures that substantiate Brizendine’s work were used in a February 2013 episode of Good Morning America on the ABC network (“Researchers” 2013).

Although I disagree with the stereotype and scoff at the so-called research that contributes to its perpetuation, I do think it useful to recognize how this stereotype and the quality of sociability itself are present in the cultural space of derby. For instance, Claire, a Fresh Meat skater, describes roller derby as a “good, fun way of exercising and socializing.” A more established skater on the Hel’z Belles asserted that her team members “pride themselves on being the happy friendly derby girls.” Another Fresh Meat skater described how this sociability is not so friendly, but can operate on the level of “petty” fighting and



gossip: “Whenever you get a group of women together, or girls, all the way back, all the way down to third grade, you’re gonna get that ‘ne-ne-ne-ne’ [squeaky, fighting or bickering noise made while moving her hands as though they were puppet mouths]. It’s just girls.”

On the other hand, this quality can enable other skaters to become empowered with the ability to socially interact in ways when they otherwise would not. One skater who demonstrates this process, Facial Relations, admits to having a previous history as a “hermit.” Although she asserts that “being female does not necessary play into what roller derby is,” she appropriates the stereotypical quality of sociability and uses it to open up to a new group of friends. She described an experience from one of her first practices, where she saw Poison Ivy wearing the same Cramps T-Shirt I had seen, and was motivated to act in a new way:

I saw her at practice wearing that. And I was like, “um...I don’t know you at all and this is gonna be really awkward but I think I wanna be your friend.” Which was weird for me because I don’t communicate like that to anyone ever. I’m pretty quiet.

For someone who is “a little bit of a misanthropist” and who “maybe made one phone call a week” before derby, this experience was likely the first of the many through which Facial has reshaped her selfhood. The T-Shirt not only prompted Facial to talk to Ivy, “it’s what made me marry her!” In derby, the concept of a derby wife is “supposed to be like a buddy system.” A derby wife is someone who “looks out for you,” “is always there for you,” “helps you with working on your skating or drills,” and often ends up being your “best friend.” Derby wives are “proposed” to, sometimes in a traditional down-on-one-knee sense, sometimes not. And, most derby marriages between wives are not romantic, but they do entail a very deep and intimate friendship. Many skaters have derby wives no longer involved in the sport, but they maintain those friendships and will not “remarry.” In fact,

on several occasions my interviews were interrupted by the calls and text messages of my interviewee's derby wife. This adds a deeper understanding of derby's kinship model of femininity because, while all fellow skaters are "sisters," most skaters will "marry" only a single derby wife. The relationship between wives is perhaps the closest friendship in derby.

So, for a complete self-described introvert like Facial, jumping into a very close relationship demonstrates a significant point of her introjecting one of the most meaningful components of derby. She discusses her continued exploration of social interaction, culminating in her nomination onto the training committee, a leadership position requiring her to run practices and drills.

I had absolutely no prior training experience. And it was horrible when I was first drafted into the training committee. I was terrified; I would read my training plans off a little piece of paper, and I would be like, 'oh God, please!' [...] So it's been good for me to get past that. Like saying 'this is what we're gonna do,' and put a positive spin on it—like, 'I know you girls can do it! It's hard, but we can do it, and we'll do it together. If it's hard for you, it's hard for your sister there, and there, and there.' And that makes you grow stronger as a team. But yeah, it's not a natural thing for me to tell people what to do at all. I don't like it.

Facial is empowered with the confidence and ability to perform her leadership role because she has internalized those qualities necessary to do so. It is not that derby is the only cultural space in which a woman can learn things like confidence; rather, it is where Facial is creating this meaning for herself. As she says, "derby kind of saved [her]": it enabled her to get over the fact that she is "really, really great at miscommunicating [her] thoughts." Because she not only adopts this confidence through *introjection*, but also *projects* that same quality to her fellow skaters—or, *sisters*—she illuminates the simultaneity of these psychological processes in the form of her encouragement and reassurance during practice.

In this way, Facial is actively and consciously reinforcing the shared culture of confidence and empowerment she herself has internalized. What is interesting is that she secures a kinship model of femininity, which utilizes aspects of sociability typically deemed feminine in order to embody the values of leadership and confidence, which are traditionally associated with models of masculinity (“alpha male,” “G.I. Joe,” etc.). This highlights the importance of the relationship between veteran and newer skaters, a crucial component of roller derby culture. As a do-it-yourself (“d.i.y.”) community, leagues are responsible for their own recruitment, training, and skills development (as well as management, operation, and the host of other responsibilities necessary for running a large sporting organization). This includes league-wide as well as more one-on-one interaction, which can serve to empower women in very meaningful ways.

Cagematch Queen, a self-described “tomboy” who “always grew up being the tough one and having a masculine side,” illustrates the appropriation and personalization of derby’s more pedagogic and empowering cultural component. Her background in sports includes a college soccer scholarship and what she describes as going “9 for 9,” a reference to her undefeated streak in mixed martial arts (MMA) or “ultimate” fighting. Following these experiences, she “did the whole mom thing for however long,” until she finally saw roller derby for the first time and “thought, God, I’d love to do that! Roller skating and fighting, I can do that—that’s right up my alley!” So, she joined derby and has been skating for a few years. She shared some thoughts about the learning that takes place within derby.

I know that I’m not a great player by any means, but I’m not a horrible player either. And I think I can help teach newer skaters and bring them up to where I was before, bring them up to speed. For instance, I got my friend to try out for Fresh Meat, and I’ve helped her a lot one-on-one. And she’s like, “Thank you so much!” And I’ve taught her stuff, and it’s improved her confidence not just in derby but period—her confidence period. I think that I have that to offer; I can help people that don’t have

confidence in themselves to realize they can do more than they think they can do. And if we have newer people coming in, there's going to be people out there that can teach me things. Everybody can teach everybody something. And I'm not ready to stop learning yet.

For Cagematch, this aspect of roller derby is one of the main reasons she continues skating, and her experience in the teaching role represents her introjection of a shared component of self-actualization and mutual empowerment in derby. This component is reinforced through such things as derby wives and training clinics, where women help other women in various arenas: personal, professional, and derby.

Cagematch is not used to this teaching role—a role typically associated with women (particularly up through secondary education)—and it makes derby different from all the other sporting experiences she has had. Whereas with soccer and fighting, there was strict discipline and tough coaching; however, in derby she gets to be the coach, and she is empowered by that fact. She continues in derby in large part because she believes she still has a lot to offer to her teammates and the sport in general. After several years of skating, derby is still meaningful because she is empowered by the ability to empower others. She explained this further, saying

I never knew that I could teach somebody else something or that people would look up to me. I've had so many people tell me, 'I look up to you,' and that just blows my mind. So for me, I've learned from derby that I do have something to offer other people.

Through introjection, Cagematch has taken this component of derby culture—teaching skills to newer skaters—and appropriated it as her own. The personal experience of hearing from other skaters who look up to her “blows [her] mind” and shapes her understanding of self. When she is teaching other skaters to hit, block, and engage in the full-contact aspect of the sport, she is cultivating their toughness. This toughness,

necessary for derby's full-contact play, is what she believes indicates "there's something masculine in all of the women who play derby." As she teaches derby to newer skaters, she nurtures what she sees as each woman's masculine side. In teaching how to hit and be hit, how to skate faster and stronger, and how to develop values like confidence, Cagematch teaches new skaters how to empower themselves with what she sees as masculine qualities; in this way, she is teaching them to develop empowered models of femininity.

Another skater who illustrates the process of introjection is Double Smachiatto, or Smack, a veteran skater who loves derby for its athleticism and competitive elements. She believes there are two major groups of skaters, those women for whom derby is "an escape from their lives or from the strains of being a mother," and those women "who like to be pushed athletically." She declares herself as "obviously" in the second category, but also admits that, because derby "is something special, something different," she is also able to "escape the monotony of [her] life." Smack joined derby at a time when Red Stick was well on its way to WFTDA status. Many skaters have discussed with me the implications WFTDA status brings in terms of competition and physical training, and this is precisely what Smack found most attractive about the sport. As she says, "I signed up for a WFTDA league [...] when I started. I signed up for a competitive league. And I knew that, and that's what our mission statement says."

The recent league split is completely understandable to someone like Smack, who believes the "schism" between fun and competition is "naturally occurring everywhere" in derby. In her eyes, there is nothing wrong with those skaters who "leave the league" because they want to explore a less serious and more community-oriented derby league; that type of league is just not for her. As she explains,

I want to compete, I want to push myself, and I want to be very, very athletic. So I'm going to find a league to try out for that has those goals. If I read a mission statement for a league and they just say "oh, we just play for the love of the sport. We play for fun and camaraderie and we love fishnets." I'm not signing up for that. That's not what I want.

As she later says, "we should not have to act like women when we're playing a competitive, full-contact sport." Here, Smack is expressing her belief that what she sees as the more feminine and sexualized components of derby—the fishnets, or "coddling" players when they mess up—are significantly less important than the sport's competitive aspects.

Smack has signed up for a league that can satisfy the various athletic goals she has set for herself, and believes there "is no compromise" on the ideological divide of fun and competition. Rather, women should "pick the league based on what the league can provide." For her, Red Stick Roller Derby provides an opportunity for athleticism, rigorous physicality, and a mental challenge by way of developing complex strategy.

Smack is introjecting these competitive elements into her life in a slightly different way than *Semper Activa*, who, as discussed in the last chapter, projects competition onto derby. Whereas *Activa* came into derby after losing a sense of competition when she discharged from the Marine Corps, and later found that same competition through derby, Smack's situation is slightly different. Rather than losing competition and then finding it again through derby, Smack actively sought out that competitive element, and ultimately found it through derby. This element is so important to Smack that, as she explains, "If the league, God forbid, said 'we're getting rid of the mission statement. Fuck WFTDA. It's just going to be fun,' I'd be like, 'see ya. I'm going to a league that's WFTDA. See ya.'" In other words, she is not only dedicated to playing derby simply because she enjoys the sport of

derby. Instead, she is playing to accomplish goals, to satisfy motivation, to challenge herself, and to achieve meaning in her life.

In this example, we see agency in its plainest and most salient sense: the active choosing of which team to play for, the satisfying of goals and needs, and intentionality of action. Smack, and the other women discussed here, make conscious decisions to participate in derby for personal reasons. Through their individual participation, they create gendered and other personalized meanings. These meanings can shift and change over time, just as the derby leagues can, leading some women to make the decision to transfer leagues or quit altogether (and still others to carry on with the direction of their league). The future of derby is a constant and excited topic of discussion. Conversations about the potentiality of derby as an Olympic sport were common during the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. The presence of derby in the public sphere—newspapers, reality television and network news broadcasts—are usually touted as being “good exposure.” In fact, the popular film by Drew Barrymore, *Whip It*, is said to have inspired a chain reaction of startup leagues after its release in 2009. With a tagline of “Be your own hero,” this film’s induced growth spurt in 2009 and 2010 is affectionately referred to as “the Whip It generation.”

Now, new questions and ideas for the sport’s direction are a hot topic of debate. Many skaters believe that, if derby is ever to gain such things as professionalized status, larger sponsors, televised events, or the glorified and prestigious inclusion in the Olympics, many aspects of derby culture should be left behind. Some consider derby names to detract from the seriousness of the sport and might wrongly convey the fact that these are not characters on skates but real women doing amazing things. Others look at the costume

and playful aesthetic as juvenile and silly, and believe derby should grow out of them and adopt standardized uniforms with a more professional look. This more professionalized, legitimate version seems a real possibility considering the sport's rising popularity. And, after seeing the amount of time and energy these women put into their sport, I predict they will make this happen. At the same time, though, many leagues—both new and old—continue to emphasize more communal aspects of derby, and cherish their sport's unique history.

Smack explained her position on the future of derby and the role that its trademark cultural elements should play:

I would just like it to progress to the point where fans are attracted purely based on their interest in the sport, and not interest in the culture as much, or the perceived culture of it. But if you're in it for fun and you're in these recreation leagues or whatever, I would love it if they would maintain all of that. And I'm not going to change my derby name to my real name as if "oh, I'm so cool, I'm so athletic, I have my last name on the back of my jersey." But I would like to one day be a part of a team that collectively decides that's what we're doing. I love my derby name. I love it. I love it. But I would have no problem putting my last name on the back of my jersey to play for a team that has opted to use real names.

Her ideal future for derby involves the professionalization of the sport to the point that it is recognized as a serious forum of competition and athleticism. Smack does not play derby for the "perceived culture" of derby—the objectified and less serious aspects of the sport; she plays it for what she considers the truer form of derby, found through strategy, athleticism, and competition. In this way, she is a woman who should also be taken seriously as a participant in a serious and legitimate sport. She is not out there for "fun" or to "party," but to compete. She has created for herself a model of femininity that boasts strength, achievement, and determination—not typical qualities attributed to other common cultural models of femininity. For instance, Southern Belles are still a celebrated



component of white southern gentility; “soccer moms” are so-called because their children’s activities are prioritized before their own; and sorority girls, who bring to mind images of a single body image, young and fit. The fact that many derby women possess southern manners, place derby stickers next to the soccer stickers on their SUVs and minivans, and have been sorority members does more than simply challenge the validity of stereotypes. First, it demonstrates the openness of derby in that women of all types and from all backgrounds participate. Second, it shows that derby women are successfully negotiating and reconfiguring gender roles by occupying various positions on the spectrum of gender—from masculine to feminine and everywhere in between.

For women like Smack, Facial, and Cagematch, cultural meanings found within derby become appropriated and personalized. These meanings encompass their understandings of their identity as individuals and as women specifically. By incorporating cultural elements of athleticism, sociability, and mutual empowerment into their lives, these three skaters create for themselves new models of femininity and illustrate the role of introjection in the meaning-making process. This interaction between personal experience and cultural meanings validates Chodorow’s (1999) claims to the equal value of both shared culture and psychology. Furthermore, it demonstrates the complexity of gender for the individuals involved in derby, a broader point I discuss at greater length in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 6: Reorganizing Subjectivities and the Future of Derby

*The importance of being a woman-led organization is to allow women to build their skills in management and leadership and take that expertise out into the rest of the world. –Hail Skatin’*

### The Simultaneity of Transference

The processes of transference are not unconnected from each other. Projection and introjection are simultaneously taking place, suggesting the actor and her community are in a constant state of interplay. In the above quote, Hail projects her ideas about the importance of the all-femaleness of derby; at the same time, this importance defines those values that women should take away from derby—what they should introject. As individuals interact with each other and negotiate specific social contexts, each builds upon her lifetime of experience to create new meanings. Roller derby provides a new framework for these women to cognitively reorganize their gendered subjectivities.

To further illustrate the simultaneity of the processes of transference, I will return to Gloria Spine-Em (Chapter 4), the skater who described her interpretation of derby women’s potential for conflict resolution in a note posted to her league’s online forum. In this note, Gloria is projecting an empowered model of femininity to her league. However, by uncovering how past life experiences have made derby meaningful to her, we see the role that introjection has played in her creation of the empowered model.

Shortly after earning her Master’s degree at UC Berkeley, Gloria was date-raped, an unfathomably traumatic event that caused “all of the structural things [she] managed to build, everything just fell totally apart.” As she explains, she came back home to Louisiana and “didn’t know what to do with myself.” At this time, she had not yet confronted her sexuality, and entered into a relationship with an abusive male partner. Luckily, a long-

time friend dragged her out of the house to a derby bout. Even though “past versions” of herself would have thought the sport “too dangerous,” she explains that “everything was in such shambles, I was like, ‘aw, fuck it.’” In derby, she began to rebuild a stronger sense of self. “What I got attached to is that everybody [in derby] is a little bit of a mess. Nobody cares if I’m a mess because everybody is a mess.” Gloria began to build meaningful relationships with the women she met through derby. As she says, “the personal reasons that I have for skating have everything to do with a community of people that I can count on.” This new sense of self and the relationships she forged brought her to a point in which she was capable of leaving her abusive partner—a significant feat for anyone in an abusive relationship, and a formative event that further validated her newly empowered self.

The way in which this feat took place is worth describing here, as it further illustrates the level of support she received from her teammates.

When I had to go back to North Louisiana to go get some stuff out of my now-ex-boyfriend’s apartment, four or five derby girls drove with me and waited outside while I walked up grabbing stuff, and they were just standing by the car. It was fantastic. They were like, “No, you’re not going by yourself. We’re coming with you.” It was cool, and things like that are everything. We take care of each other all the time. I’ve gotten way more support from my friends in derby than from anyone else in my life—including my family. “Call us any time.” “When are we gonna know how you’re doing?” There’s instant support.

The relationships she developed helped give her the strength to confront her situation, and ultimately her sexuality. She was empowered to recognize her own strength through the support of her fellow skaters. It is not that she thought women were weak before, but rather, through the experiences of derby, she has developed a stronger belief in herself through introjection. She now takes that belief and projects it onto the league, as indicated by her post to the forum. What Gloria loves most about derby—indeed, what makes derby

“a genuinely feminist activity”—is the fact that women are forced to come together and find resolutions to “competing ideas.” She believes that “what is so often pinned on women” is the notion that “we can’t do anything together because we’re all just going to fight with each other all the time,” but roller derby proves this belief wrong.

Gloria’s story is powerful, but it is not the only one that demonstrates the simultaneity of the processes of transference. Ginger Bitus, another skater on the Red Stick team, illustrates how the same empowered model of femininity can be appropriated under completely different circumstances. Ginger grew up in a household that moved around the south and the northeast for much of her adolescence. After she experienced “a very traumatic beating in the sixth grade,” one in which she was “tag-teamed in P.E. class,” Ginger’s mother placed her in a variety of private parochial schools. She summarized this upbringing: “You could definitely say I had a lot of unpleasant and awkward experiences with private, religious schools.” These experiences include a “super fundamentalist” middle school in Pensacola.

I had to wear an ankle-length skirt, and they even had separate water fountains for boys and girls. It was fine because I’ve always felt more comfortable in dresses, but the kick-pleat on my dress went too high so they actually safety-pinned my pleat together and made me have to hop around all day as punishment. And one time I tore the ligaments in my ankle, and so I was on crutches. But I couldn’t use the elevator because it was only for boys, and I couldn’t use the easy stairwell because that was for boys. Girls can’t be on elevators because, I don’t know, it might mess with their—something? We couldn’t use the same water fountains, dude. They were not operating on a normal level. You should have seen the gym uniforms!

Ginger continued moving in and out of private schools through high school until she got to college, “which was awesome!” She majored in anthropology at Millsap’s College and moved back to Baton Rouge after graduating.

Ginger also described herself as “a really shy, shy person,” but derby has helped her overcome this to a large extent. It is through this development that she has internalized a new and empowered model of her femininity.

Like, now I can shop. But I used to have a terrible time going into a clothing store because I didn't want to make eye contact with the salesperson, I didn't want to talk to them because I would get really shy. So I would spend a lot of time hiding in clothing stores, like ducking behind the racks.

She describes herself as an introvert, “as a really nerdy person.” I propose the years in religious schools did little to encourage her otherwise. Ginger has always loved roller skating, and “used to get a new pair of skates every year.” After college, she “just decided to go check out roller derby, and it looked awesome!”

She recounted the night she introduced herself to the derby skaters she found online, saying “I actually had to go up to someone and be like, [shy, very slow, soft voice] ‘Hi, I’m guessing you guys are the roller derby? I emailed y’all.’” That night, she was told to try out a new skill in front of the other skaters, and she thought to herself, ‘oh my God! I’m going to vomit!’ The voice in which she recounted her dialogue was passive, timid, and altogether different from how she presents herself now. I have seen her speak up on several occasions with overwhelming confidence, and not just in the safe space of derby. At an all-league meeting one night, at least 40 women were packed very awkwardly around a few tables in a highly visible section of a sports bar-and-grill restaurant. She stood up on her chair and loudly projected news, updates, and her ideas to the rest of the group. This public performance would not have been possible without her introjection of an empowered model of femininity.

She also projects that model using her leadership role with the league, a role I do not explicitly identify in an attempt to maintain her privacy. As someone who thinks “it’s really

creepy when someone in derby is all, ‘well, I’m not a feminist,” she stops them in mid sentence because of how “apoplectic” she gets. As a self-described feminist who believes derby to be a feminist sport, she refuses to allow her league to be represented as anything but assertive.

Within the league we have to try and not be too political because we have some people saying not to advertise using social media that we are taking part in the Baton Rouge Pride Fest. But I’m like, ‘no, screw that!’ you know?  
Half the team is lesbian!

In this way, Ginger is using her leadership position to project her ideas of how RSRD should be presented to the community. She does this in spite of the minority fraction of players who disagree with this position.

Thus, the processes of transference are not singular or unrelated. As women like Gloria and Ginger are incorporating an empowered model of femininity, they are simultaneously projecting that model back onto the group. Similarly, processes do not cease at some point—they are not fixed. They are just as relevant to formative experiences, such as gathering belongings from an abusive partner’s house, to more current instances like how to present your league to the community via the ever-changing social media newsfeed.

### **The Impact of Countertransference**

Another theoretical process discussed in psychoanalytic research is that of *countertransference*. Countertransference is most often used as a means for theorizing the clinical encounter, and it is in this way that Chodorow (1999) includes the concept in her book. However, a much more specific explanation is given by Katherine Pratt Ewing. She defines this concept in relation to the interviewing process, and offers a more explicit

demonstration of how the term applies to ethnographic investigation. Ewing defines countertransference as

the term often used to refer to implicit reactions that are based on the researcher's unacknowledged conflicts and unacceptable feelings that arise in the interview process—reactions that are not consistent with the identity the researcher is attempting to project in the situation. [Ewing 2006: 107]

Ewing discusses how this phenomenon can include felt (whether self-imposed or not) “threats to one’s identity as a researcher” (2006: 107). Here, then, the countertransference occurs by way of the ethnographer’s emotional investment in the analytic situation at hand. This includes both the ethnographer’s emotional reaction to the interlocutors as well as the interlocutor’s emotional reaction to the ethnographer.

The most salient example of this phenomenon occurred during my attendance at a meeting of the faction of RSRD that would eventually break away to form the Grassroots Rollergirls. My presence at the meeting made me feel as though I had taken some side in the conflict that had developed over the final few months of my fieldwork. Even though I committed myself to remaining neutral, I felt as though I was betraying some kind of allegiance to RSRD. A group of 15-20 women were packed in a living room to discuss how to proceed with starting a new league in Baton Rouge. Because everyone had notepads, I decided to take field notes during the meeting. However, because I felt some element of guilt for being there in the first place, I kept my notes close to my person. My behavior was apparently odd enough to prompt the referee sitting beside me to joke as though I was spying somehow. I explained the situation to him, and he said, “Hey, I ref where I want to ref. I don’t ref exclusively with one league. I have friends all over in derby, so if someone doesn’t like that, that’s their problem.” This explanation made me recognize the continued possibility of my neutrality, and I eased up a little.

My emotional involvement in the meeting clearly affected my presence, so much so that my change in demeanor prompted the suspicion of another individual present. According to Nancy Chodorow, recognizing the implications of countertransference enables us to better understand “the complex and continual creation of interpersonal and intrapsychic meaning” (1999: 19). As an ethnographer, I tried to limit the effects of my presence, but the effects of my presence as well as my emotional response to those effects are very real and deserve consideration. It is possible that by asking women to discuss issues of femininity, feminism, and the gendered aspects of roller derby, I altered what Ewing refers to as “the dynamics of revealing and concealing in identity negotiation” (2006: 117). Perhaps, despite the preventative measures discussed in Chapter 3, my presence as a male ethnographer was enough to elicit specific responses in one direction or another. This is a potential weakness of my study. Similarly, it should be recognized that each derby league is unique: different league policies are put in place each year as leadership roles are filled by skaters with a multitude of different personal, athletic, competitive, and social goals. The data presented above could easily differ from a study on derby leagues elsewhere in the U.S., or even the world. More research on derby will only add to our understanding of the complexity of gender and other cultural components found within this space. Despite these potential limitations, there are several conclusions that I believe can be drawn from this ethnography.

### **Final Thoughts and Warnings**

From my analysis of the above narratives, it is clear that subjectivity is not the mere product of language or culture alone. Feelings, identity, gender, and selves—all of which contribute to the creation and interpretation of meaning—are a direct result of both



cultural as well as psychological forces. As Chodorow (1999) and others note (Strauss & Quinn 1997; Quinn 2006; Frank 2006; Luhrmann 2006), many ethnographic endeavors have ignored the importance of psychology in their analyses, and this includes previous scholarly work on roller derby. The tools afforded us by psychoanalysis enable ethnographers to capture those personal investments in gender meanings, and I have attempted to synchronize this with roller derby research using the processes of transference. I agree with the notion that “the concept of agency [...] requires a basis in psychology” (Frank 2006: 298). In order to understand what motivates these and thousands of other women to participate in derby, I must understand the fears, anxieties, and goals of each skater in my analysis. These subjective feelings compel action, and meanings are made in response to those feelings and actions through transference. As Chodorow notes, “transference is psychologically necessary,” that without it, “our experiences of the outer world would be empty and devitalized” (Chodorow 1999: 23). I hope my research has helped shed some light on these perspectives.

Also through my research, I hope to further validate the claims to multiple, individually and psychologically constructed models of gender. I have tried to demonstrate how these models can exist within the same cultural context and space. While these models exist in the same context, the models as well as the meanings behind them can vary. Roller derby and derby women challenge stereotypes of what traits are typically considered masculine or feminine. These skaters use derby, a sport that proudly proclaims itself as “all-female” while incorporating the full-contact status often reserved for men’s sports, to appropriate both masculine and feminine traits. In derby, each woman’s gender

is her own personal, subjective combination of these traits as related to individual experience.

However, despite this variation in personal meaning and even the variation in regional models like the rancher and the southern belle, the processes of transference—projection and introjection—are the same. Moreover, by examining individual histories and life experiences, it is clear that these models of gender can change and shift over time. Despite early psychoanalytic tendencies to stress the more infantile and formative years of childhood, it is clear that experiences well into adulthood can impact the psyche in many ways, particularly experiences touching on gender and sexuality. Lastly, these models and their associated meanings can generate opposing motivations and incite conflict between groups and individuals, in this case contributing to the splitting of the roller derby league. Greater ethnographic focus on this conflict could result in a better understanding of the motivational and appraisal forces behind models, and offers one potential avenue for further research in derby.

I began this investigation in order to understand gender and gender meanings so as to provide an explanation for why these women invest their hearts, bodies, and souls in roller derby. I believe in the power of roller derby to enable women to believe in themselves. I have witnessed empowerment first hand, and it makes derby all the more endearing. I will return for a moment to the young girl I witnessed in my early fieldwork, and my questions about how derby might shape her models of femininity. Although I did not conduct fieldwork with any children in my research, I did consult several women on what it is like to be a mom in derby.

I am proud to call one of these mothers, Facial Relations, my friend, especially after she explained how she re-conceptualized her understanding of the relationship between body image and gender:

When I was 15 or 16 there were these fashion magazines everywhere and I would eat them up. Because I would think that's the end all be all. Like If I do not look like this girl who has been airbrushed and the boob job, I am not a female. And it's just the opposite. If I can save anyone from that body image, I will do it. And especially since I have a daughter. That is bullshit. I don't know who comes out with it, but I don't want that perpetuated.

Knowing that this consciousness is present among those derby women who have children validates my belief in the power of derby to instill change, even if just one woman at a time. As the subjectivities of the women in derby are empowered, so too, I hope, will that empowerment extend to their daughters—the future generations of derby women.

My fieldwork experience is similar to a description once offered by Loïc Wacquant after reflecting upon his research at a Chicago boxing gym in that “I [felt] so much pleasure *participating* that *observation* becomes secondary” (2004: 4n3). Re-learning how to roller skate was fun, and I consider many of the women in this study to be close friends. The last thesis written on the Red Stick league concluded with a warning to referees to “stay the fuck out of [the] way” (Duncan 2006: 46). I am choosing to conclude this thesis by warning skaters like her to watch those elbows; explain to her that I want to see a good clean game; and remind her that under section 6.16.8 of the new rule set, “The use of obscene, profane, or abusive language or gestures directed [...] at bout production individuals,” such as referees, earns the skater a major penalty and one minute in the penalty box (WFTDA 2013: 38).

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## **Vita**

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