

The Female Signifiant in All-Women's Amateur Roller Derby

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I analyze women's flat-track amateur roller derby by asking: how do derby skaters negotiate the requirements associated with emphasized femininity? By drawing on Hebdige's (1979) analysis of punk, I develop the term female signifiant to argue that roller derby is an aggressive contact sport with a theatrical edge. It provides a rich, adventurous space to satirize athletic and feminine norms. Specifically, skaters' sport participation is characterized by an interrogation of emphasized femininity without necessarily undermining the masculine/feminine gender binary.

Dans cet article, j'analyse le roller derby amateur féminin en demandant : comment les patineuses de roller derby négocient-elles les exigences associées à l'hyperféminité ? En empruntant aux analyses d'Hebdige (1979) sur le phénomène punk, je développe le terme « signifiant féminin » pour avancer que le roller derby est un sport de contact agressif avec un aspect théâtral. Il constitue un espace riche qui permet une satire des normes féminines et sportives. Plus spécifiquement, la participation des patineuses est caractérisée par une remise en question de l'hyperféminité sans nécessairement miner le binaire masculin/féminin.

In Drew Barrymore's *Whip It!* (2009), Bliss Cavendar evades her mother's pressure to win the Miss Blue Bonnet beauty pageant by joining a local roller derby league. Cavendar found herself in a world of fast-paced skating, hard hits, tattoos, short skirts, and "bad" attitudes that sharply contrast with the beauty-pageant ideals of femininity she rejects in the film. In this article, I argue that real-life roller derby indeed provides an aggressive, high-contact environment in which to interrogate femininity.

Played on indoor oval tracks, derby bouts (or games) draw anywhere from a few hundred to upwards of one thousand spectators and are designed to be fast-paced and hard-hitting. At the beginning of each jam (derby-speak for play), blockers from each team line up to form an eight-person pack; fifteen feet behind them, a jammer from each team lines up. Jammers speed-skate around the track; after their first pass through the pack, jammers gain points every time they pass a member of the opposing team. Blockers, who cannot earn points, assist their jammer through the pack and prevent the opposing jammer from passing. Although fist-fighting and elbowing incur penalties, skaters may move in front of other skaters ("body-" or

“booty-blocking”) as well as thrust their bodies against other skaters in hopes of knocking them to the floor (“body checking”). Thus, spectators are treated to fast-paced skating, hard hits, and body pile-ups. I argue that this aggressive environment allows skaters to engage in a form of gender critique I call the female signifiant.

I develop the concept of the female signifiant by drawing on Hebdige’s (1979) analysis of punk to indicate that in roller derby, norms surrounding femininity and athleticism are cited in ways that draw out tensions within these norms. I first discuss how femininity has been understood in the previous studies on women’s sport and then detail my methods before examining how roller derby skaters negotiate femininity.

Emphasized Femininity in Sport and the Female Signifiant

Scholars of gender and sport have examined how female athletes interrogate norms associated with femininity and masculinity through several theoretical perspectives. In this article, I draw specifically on Connell’s (1987) concept of emphasized femininity that highlights women’s subordinate status relative to men. Emphasized femininity encompasses an idealized version of Western womanhood that posits that women be physically inferior to men, weak, docile, concerned with their appearance, and attentive to enhancing their heterosexual desirability. As Connell (1987) argued, gender norms are linked to macro-level, structural inequalities that marginalize nonhegemonic masculinities and femininities according to class, race, and other lines of difference. Feminist sport scholars have employed emphasized femininity to understand the social demands and norms placed on women as well as elaborate ways in which these demands and norms are subverted (e.g., Hargreaves, 1994; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Messner, 2002; Messner & Dworkin, 2002).

While some feminist scholars argue that by sexualizing, trivializing, and marginalizing women athletes, sport continues to produce emphasized femininity (e.g., Blinde & Taub, 1992; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Disch & Kane, 1996; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008), others emphasize how sport may liberate women from the limitations of such femininity by engendering spaces in which to resist heteronormativity (e.g., Broad, 2001; Clarke, 1998), create community among women (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1994; Pelak, 2002; Theberge, 1995), and develop physical strength (e.g., Chase, 2008; George, 2005; Jamieson, Stringer, & Andrews, 2008; Roth & Basow, 2004). Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) have been particularly explicit in their analysis of the liberatory potential of sport. Arguing that “uncovering the unconscious fantasy images of femininity construction...does not change the bodily comportment accompanying them” (p. 137), they suggest that sports offer women the unique potential to directly engage embodied gender norms. Importantly, Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) point out that treating sports as “masculine” practice may consolidate rather than curtail women’s subordinate position in sports. Other feminist scholars (Dowling, 2000; Roth & Basow, 2004) have also explored the liberatory potential of critically engaging masculine aspects of sports, such as competitiveness and aggression.

Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) emphasize the liberatory potential of sport while also noting the ways in which (mainstream) sport may continue to constrain

women. They echo another group of scholars who have highlighted how female participation in sports has resulted in the simultaneous expansion and subversion of emphasized femininity (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Cahn, 1995; Caudwell, 1999; Ezzell, 2009; Grindstaff & West, 2006; Halbert, 1997; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Krane et al., 2004; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007; Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly 2004; Theberge, 2000; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). Though empowered to enter the masculine-marked realm of sports after Title IX, women are also required to engage in body projects such as sports to enhance their heterosexual appeal. Nevertheless, despite these demands, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) have shown that sport continues to provide an opportunity to interrogate emphasized femininity. Rather than viewing gender negotiation in an either/or binary of conformity and resistance, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) articulate sport as encouraging “both individual development and collective action...[and] the cultivation of traditionally masculine characteristics as well as traditionally feminine ones” (p. 22). They thus echo previous scholars (e.g., Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 1987) who claimed sport as a potential source of empowerment for women if they can engage in both masculine and feminine-marked practices in ways that enhance—rather than diminish—their capacity for self-actualization while also acknowledging that sports are not a panacea for addressing systematic gender inequality (or other inequalities, for that matter). Indeed, much like Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998), Heywood and Dworkin’s (2003) analysis is grounded in the notion that bodily engagement in sport engenders a particular kind of feminist awareness insofar as female athleticism undermines norms regarding feminine frailty.

I align my work with the perspectives offered by Heywood and Dworkin (2003) and Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) to consider the distinct ways in which the Nowhere Roller Girls remake emphasized femininity. I argue that all-women’s amateur roller derby is a space in which a critical engagement of emphasized femininity occurs. However, I expand this previous work by introducing what I call the female signifiant. I adopt the term “signifiant” from Hebdige’s (1979) analysis of punk subculture to suggest that skaters engage in practices that do not necessarily abolish norms surrounding gender and athleticism so much as expose their contingency. In his analysis of punk, Hebdige (1979) argues that “punk subculture... signified chaos at every level” in such a way that it nevertheless “cohered as a meaningful whole” (p. 112). Following a rule that “if the cap doesn’t fit, wear it,” members of punk subculture aimed to dramatize and dwell *within* the tentativeness of conventional norms related to dress, language, music, and other cultural practices (Hebdige, 1979, p. 108). Rather than *signifying* a solution to the social contradictions of 1970s Britain, punk of this era was a movement of *signifiance* insofar as it celebrated “the triumph...of the signifier over the signified,... gestured towards a ‘nowhere’ and actively *sought* to remain silent, illegible” (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 119, 120). For example, some punks dramatized feminine bourgeois markers such as facial make-up by hyperbolically wearing theatrical blush, eyeliner, and lipstick. As such, hyperbole became a technique with which to engage norms to indicate their flimsiness. Punk thus undermined the link between signifier and signified insofar as punk exposed the signifier’s (e.g., make-up) assumed correspondence with the intended signified (e.g., bourgeois femininity) as socially constructed. Thus, punk directly questioned the coherent, socially meaningful relationship between the signifier and signified. In a similar fashion, the subversive edge of roller derby comes

from a *signifiante* of femininity. As such, I explore how derby skaters, similar to punks, questioned socially meaningful relationships between the signified (i.e., emphasized femininity) and its different signifiers (namely, clothing, make-up, and sport practice). I now turn to my methods of study and then detail the specific ways in which skaters engaged in the female signifiant.

Methods of Study

I undertook participant observation (Sands, 2002) with a league I call the Nowhere Roller Girls located in a major metropolitan area in the U.S. Engaging in what Sands (2002) calls “experiential ethnography,” I joined the Nowhere Roller Girls and spent four months attending three-times-a-week practices and twice-a-month meetings. During practice, I fully participated in all drills and scrimmages for which I was athletically eligible. As note-taking was impractical during practice, I took notes immediately afterward and then composed a narrative based on my notes either that day or the day after observations. I coded my fieldnotes according to emergent themes and organized pertinent quotes into separate files by theme to develop my analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). While I did not approach the field with a specific hypothesis, I did employ a guiding, rather open-ended question (i.e., what forms of gender negotiation emerge in the context of roller derby?). Thus, like many other sociologist ethnographers (McDermott, 2006; Moon, 2004; Thorne, 1993), I engaged in fieldwork with a theoretically open mind while still maintaining a central focus. Using an open-minded, but explicitly gender-oriented perspective allowed me to develop and then connect the concept of the female signifiant to existing theories *only after* deriving an account of roller derby participation based on my fieldnotes.

Since I was interested in the practical, embodied ways in which skaters negotiated gender, this methodological approach allowed me direct access to these practices and the discourses in which they are articulated. This focus on embodied practices is also why I did not elect to conduct formal interviews but rather included the informal discussions I had with skaters during practice in my fieldnotes; thus, any quotes from skaters are directly from my fieldnotes, unless stated otherwise. It is also important to note that while I enjoyed the thrill of participating in derby practice, I chose not to actively participate in league meetings to fully observe—rather than become embroiled in—controversial League issues.

I also posted a multiple-choice survey to the League’s online message board (see Table 1 for results) to collect basic demographic information on skaters and better (if tentatively) situate my ethnographic data in terms of broader socioeconomic issues. While only 31 of the League’s approximately 60 skaters responded, the skaters most active on the board were also those most active in the League. Thus, the responses likely represent the League’s most active skaters. On average, skaters were 32.2 years old, and a majority held a Bachelor’s degree. In addition, a number of skaters had attended or were enrolled in postgraduate programs. The relatively high level of educational attainment among skaters is perhaps indicative of the general outperformance of women in education vis-à-vis men in recent years (AAUW, 2008). One might speculate that these educational opportunities have equipped an increasing number of women with critical tools to interrogate gender

Table 1 Demographics (N = 31)

Race	White 77%	Non-White Hispanic 13%	African American 3%	Asian American 3%	Native American 3%
Marital Status	Single 55%	In a Relationship (not married) 10%	Married 26%	Divorced 10%	
Sexuality	Heterosexual 61%	Lesbian 23%	Bisexual 16%		
Education	Less than a Bachelor's 16%	Bachelor's 58%	Some Graduate or Graduate Degree 26%		
Class	Working Class 32%	Middle Class 68%			

in leisure activities such as roller derby. In addition, white women (though not exclusively) appeared to interrogate emphasized femininity. They “outed” (Davy, 1995) femininity and athleticism, but whiteness remained unmarked. Indeed, middle-class, white females in sports may be seen as outsiders of sport with respect to their gender but insiders with respect to race and class (Cooky & McDonald, 2005). To apply Kenny (2000) to roller derby, the very whiteness of emphasized femininity may make gender interrogation possible, as skaters not only interrogated a privileged gender space but perhaps were also privileged by their whiteness. As Connell (1987) suggested, gender norms do not stand in isolation from other forms of difference but rather are tangled together. Thus, while roller derby may provide a degree of gender negotiation at a relatively microlevel, 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.

I now turn to an analysis of the female signifiant as it emerges in roller derby by focusing on both the derby persona and the derby body.

The Derby Persona

Skaters interrogate norms surrounding emphasized femininity by presenting a derby self that splices aggression, sexual assertiveness, and femininity in a way that exposes the contradictions inherent in emphasized femininity. Derby skaters call attention to the constructed nature of gender through the citation of feminine norms. They do not eschew femininity entirely but rather productively draw on the tensions of femininity in the context of sports to display themselves as threatening, aggressive, and fearless derby girls. This interrogation of femininity can be observed through the development of a derby persona, evidenced by a new name and costume-like feminine-punk clothing.

Derby Names

One of the most noticeable differences between roller derby and other women's sports is the use of a stage name, known within the League as a derby name. Within a few months of joining the League, each skater is required to invent a derby name for herself. In the Nowhere Roller Girls, skaters refer to each other almost exclusively by their derby names at practice, at bouts (where the public knows them only by their derby names), and outside of practice; most skaters do not know each others' actual names. Derby names are usually playfully aggressive, menacing, raunchy, lewd, and clever, such as A Cup Killer, Chesstosterone, Lolita LeBruise, Brick Shields, West Nile Iris, Lady Pain, Vicious Panties, and Clit Eastwood. They often satirize otherwise feminine names by implying a willingness to take or inflict pain, and in aggregate, they comprise that which should *not* be mentioned over the typically middle-class family dinner table: raw violence, sexuality, and feminine prowess. Just as punks (Hebdige, 1979) threw into relief bourgeois markers by citing them in recognizable (i.e., the markers were understood) but unreadable (i.e., the markers were unexpected, if not incomprehensible) ways, skaters bridge together antithetical notions in their names by presenting themselves as confusingly feminine. By presenting a violent, sexually raw femininity through derby names, they question the emphasized femininity that requires them to be passively sexually available and physically weak without actually eschewing femininity as a whole. Even the term "derby girl" itself demonstrates a charged femininity; skaters embrace the word "girl" only when modified by "derby" or "roller," since "derby" and "roller" presumably conjure up a threatening, aggressive skater. (Note that in other contexts, "girl" is used derogatorily.)

Clothing

To showcase their derby personas, the three intraleague teams of the Nowhere Roller Girls organize photo sessions that portray skaters as simultaneously aggressive, pain-friendly, and sexy. One team's public photo album includes a photo-roster that features pictures of each member's decaying, decapitated head as well as shots of skaters using chainsaws, whips, and quad skates as weaponry. Another team roster includes pictures of members holding guns while posing in bras and panties. The third team's skaters are dressed in miniskirts against bright, single-color backgrounds; many skaters hold weapons, show off actual bruises and/or wear make-up simulating bloody noses, missing teeth, and other injuries. As with derby names, these photos feature a significant self-presentation reminiscent of Hebdige's (1979) analysis of punk. The passiveness usually associated with emphasized femininity is reconstructed. While women marred with bruises and blood are usually represented as victims rather than aggressors, these skaters clearly signify themselves as active participants in their injuries insofar as they brandish weapons. Importantly, skaters are not simply women-turned-Amazons; their mini-skirts, bras, and panties suggest a sexually availability that is belied by the aggression implied by their weaponry and injuries. Thus, emphasized femininity becomes scrambled as skaters juxtapose antithetical attributes, namely, emphasized femininity (indicated by short skirts, bras, and panties) and aggression (i.e., weaponry and injuries).

Bouts become a venue in which to exhibit these derby personas. Although each Nowhere Roller Girls team has uniforms consisting of a dress or a shirt-and-skirt combination, skaters accessorize with fishnets, make-up, and other items. Skaters discuss with each other what they plan to wear and often make special purchases for upcoming bouts to embellish their uniforms, including belts, hot pants, tights, and fishnets. While there is an unspoken feminine-punk dress code to which virtually all skaters conform, *all* skaters—not just those with skinny bodies that fit the mold of mainstream femininity—appear comfortable in exhibiting their bodies.

Through their clothing, skaters give a significant nod to norms usually associated with emphasized femininity. The symbolic femininity, for example, of the miniskirt—stereotypically donned by the docile, child-sized, and sexually available female—is subverted in roller derby as it is worn by women of all sizes engaged in full-contact athletics. Moreover, while the uniforms of each League team include either a miniskirt or a mini-dress, hints of aggression significantly mark this otherwise sexualized clothing. Fishnets are ripped, uniforms are printed with skaters' menacing names, lifted skirts reveal panties printed with words like "Fuck your mom!" and as per League regulations, all uniforms are accessorized with helmets and knee, elbow, and wrist pads. While traditionally feminine sports "emphasize[...] beauty [and] the aesthetic side of athletics" (Cahn, 1995, p. 218) rather than aggression, skaters remake femininity by consciously integrating threatening aggression into feminine dress. Through their engagement in the "masculine" activity of full-contact sports, skaters embrace an aggressive femininity that at once cites and scrambles emphasized femininity.

The Derby Body

In addition to displaying aggressive femininity through a derby persona, skaters interrogate the normative assumptions of femininity by actively identifying parts of their bodies with aggressive possibilities. For example, "butts" are both venerated threats and physical weapons rather than a "problem spot" for physical appearance. As a threat, skaters often knock hips with opposing players as they line up for a jam, physically taunting them. In addition, the mere specter of the buttocks can be a debilitating sight, according to one jammer:

I just get so exhausted skating around and around when I jam. My first jam, I couldn't believe it. And then I had to get around [another skater's] ass – thank god she's on my team this time!

As a weapon, an entire move—the booty block—highlights the use of one's butt to block an opponent. Full body checks are mostly all hip and rear-end; thus, the posterior is responsible for many of the most dramatic moments in derby as well as some of the worst injuries.

In fact, the rear-end is one of the most widely discussed body parts in the League (the other, the elbow, is discussed due to its illegality of use). Skaters talk about their rear-ends in a myriad of ways: how useful they can be when they are big (e.g., "I need a bigger ass block to block her"), how fast they can move (e.g., "Move your ass in front of her!"), how well they block (e.g., "Look at that

booty block!”), and how soft they are when skaters fall (e.g., “It’s okay [I’m not injured], I just landed on my ass”). As such, skaters resignify butts in terms of how they can be used rather than simply how they look. Moreover, body size in the context of roller derby generally tends to be understood in instrumental terms, that is, with regard to use rather than appearance. The sizes of skater physiques are predominantly discussed with regard to player positions: smaller girls are often pigeonholed as high-speed jammers, while bigger girls are often earmarked as blockers.

In contrast, the size and appearance of bodies in general—and rear-ends in particular—are usually not discussed in normative terms. In fact, I never witnessed skaters expressing consternation regarding how their physiques “should” ideally look. In the rare instances in which skaters discussed size and appearance of their butts, they usually simply express satisfied surprise at their changing bodies. For example, one blocker commented, “thanks to derby, I now have an ass!” Likewise, another skater offered that “I know I have a huge ass... derby has just lifted it an inch or two!” While such commentary from skaters suggests that skaters may reference their bodies in normative terms (i.e., they are conscious that plump, lifted butts are a mark of attractiveness), this type of commentary is relatively rare. Thus, derby provides an alternate system of body evaluation based on how bodies move rather than how they look, thereby allowing skaters to experience their bodies in ways beyond the forms of passive embodiment encouraged by emphasized femininity, even if some attentiveness to physical attractiveness (as indicated by skaters’ comments on butts) residually remains.

The Limits of the Female Signifiant

Cahn (1995) noted that aggression and intense, rigorous training are often cited as distinguishing characteristics of the “masculine” nature of certain sports such as football or basketball. Other sports perceived to be less rigorous and less aggressive, such as synchronized swimming, are marked as feminine (Cahn, 1995, p. 270). Not only do skaters engage in signifiant gender practices as discussed above, but they also engage in a hyperbolic rendering of masculine aspects of athleticism. They, thus, hyperbolically highlight the problematic requirements of mainstream athleticism by interrogating aspects of sports participation often categorized as masculine. However, while they question the status of sports as masculine, they continue to stigmatize certain aspects of femininity. Similar to Heywood and Dworkin’s (2003) and Castelnovo and Guthrie’s (1998) research, athleticism emerges as a site of both subversion and consolidation of emphasized femininity.

Most prominently, skaters theatrically interrogate sports participation by hyperbolically highlighting injuries and risks associated with athleticism. Although derby leagues require their skaters to adhere to a number of safety rules as well as wear protective gear, the sport is often flaunted by skaters as inherently dangerous. As documented with respect to athletes in other sports (Theberge, 1997; Young & Dallaire, 2008), skaters expose the dangers of athleticism by frequently discussing pulled muscles, blood, and fractures as evidence that derby is a legitimate sport. Bruises serve as badges of honor within the derby community, and playing despite injuries represents one’s commitment to the sport.

This attention to injured bodies is for both public and private consumption. Publicly-distributed media such as fliers, web site content, and online videos often flaunt injuries. Privately among the Nowhere Roller Girls, injuries are discussed and exhibited, and the League even maintains members-only online photo albums that include pictures of injuries. In addition, the League discussed having a “worst injury” contest. By focusing on injuries, which are the concrete results of aggressive physical contact, skaters fetishize an aggressive physicality that is usually associated with masculine sports.

Yet injuries are deployed within roller derby not to signify derby as “masculine” but rather to denote roller derby as a legitimate sport. The words “real” and “fake” often appear on the online homepages of derby leagues at large as well as in questions posited to the Nowhere Roller Girls regarding the sport. This is partly due to roller derby’s previous history as a staged sport in the 1950s, during which time the outcomes of bouts were generally predetermined spectacles much like professional wrestling today. One long-time member in the league told me that as part of the struggle to establish flat-track roller derby as a sport, skaters must frequently dispel claims that “roller derby wasn’t invented to be played as a real sport” and that playing roller derby “for real” was irrationally “dangerous.”

This risk-taking ethos—namely, that roller derby *is* dangerous and *does* cause injuries—is used as evidence that roller derby is “real.” The question “is roller derby fake?” appears on the online FAQ of many leagues, with answers indicating that roller derby is “real” not only because of the danger of injury but also because it is not staged. On their official Web site, the Nowhere Roller Girls connect the “realness” of the sport to “fighting hard.” They maintain that the outcomes of bouts are “absolutely not...staged...that’s why we fight so hard...the fights are real...when we’re skating, we can be tough, competitive bitches.” With the “unexpected” of competition built into an already-dangerous endeavor, roller derby becomes legitimated as a risky sport. The Nowhere Roller Girls act out the overarching collective project of interrogating femininity—a risky endeavor in itself—by hyperbolically engaging in the risks associated with injuring their physical bodies, a feature often associated with sporting masculinity.

Overall, the Nowhere Roller Girls provide a context in which athleticism can be interrogated, as skaters are able to engage in a hyperbolic fetishization of the risks and injuries associated with contact sports. The obscenity of many athletes’ willingness to destroy their bodies for sports (Messner, 2002) is theatrically exposed by skaters as they flaunt their injuries and the risks thereof. Thus, the Nowhere Roller Girls engender an environment in which the problematic aspects of athleticism can be hyperbolically highlighted.

Participation in roller derby allows the double interrogation of norms surrounding both gender and athleticism: women are not supposed to engage in full-contact, physical activity that may mar their bodies with bruises, broken bones, and missing teeth. The price, however, of this interrogation is the stigmatization of certain feminine stereotypes. I observed skaters policing “girly” behaviors, where acting like a “girl” was used frequently as opprobrium against certain behavior. Gossiping, for example, is explicitly discouraged. In addition, skaters derogatively use phrases like “cattiness,” “girl drama,” and “too much estrogen” to explain disagreements. Furthermore, skaters are discouraged from being “too emotional.”

This policing of femininity can be illustrated by a League conflict involving a pregnant skater. The skater was three months pregnant and had obtained permission from her doctor to skate in an upcoming tournament, but the League voted against allowing her to compete, as several skaters were unwilling to play with a pregnant skater out of fear of injuring either the skater or the fetus. One skater recalled attending the meeting in which the pregnant skater's eligibility was determined:

It was really dramatic. [She] was crying and was hysterical. And then some other girl was yelling at her, telling her she didn't care about her baby. And I just remember this visual image – [she] was sitting in a corner, crying and screaming, and she put her hand out [she demonstrates with her hand out, palm upturned] and yelled “I am NOT a delicate flower!” I mean, it was very Shakespearean and all. Some girls were like, totally shocked, other girls were like [she puts her hand over her mouth, half-laughing], you know, trying not to laugh, because it was so dramatic.

In recounting the story, she sarcastically noted that the pregnant skater's words were so emotionally dramatic as to be “Shakespearean.”

If “girls being girls” is derogatory, what should skaters be? “Athletes” seems to be the default response, as illustrated by the social hierarchies in the league. As one skater told me, “there's always that one person that everyone shits on. It's just a huge popularity contest.” When I pressed her to find out how this popularity contest is judged, she said that skating ability is paramount: “If you aren't a good skater, no one will listen to you in the meetings.” This focus on athleticism and skill seems to belie the professed democratic, grassroots ethos of roller derby and suggests the limits of derby's potential critique of athleticism. Even though women can join the league without much athletic background, their integration into the League depends on the learning curve of their skating abilities. Skaters who join but do not attend enough practices to become recognized as “athletes” are condescendingly referred to being in derby “just for the party,” in one skater's words. Real skaters are athletes; bodies matter.

While roller derby provides space for gender negotiation, this space is not without limits. If bodily capacity provides the grounds for the legitimation of skaters within the derby community, derby falls short of Hargreaves's (1994) vision of feminist sports that encourages other aspects of sporting participation beyond sheer physicality and competitiveness, such as cooperation and mutual encouragement. Thus, the critical engagement of femininity and athleticism within roller derby entails the policing of excessive “girliness” and a rather crude valuation of bodily capacity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that by interrogating emphasized femininity, the Nowhere Roller Girls engage in a critical practice called the female signifiant. Skaters do not cross the boundary between masculinity and femininity but rather self-referentially engage contradictions within femininity. When skaters satirically and hyperbolically splice certain aspects of emphasized femininity (such as sexual availability evidenced by mini-skirts) with elements antithetical to this femininity

(such as the valuation of large bodies and aggression), they expose the contingency of emphasized femininity as a coherent system of gender norms.

However, the style of gender negotiation undertaken in roller derby is not without limits. First, certain feminine attributes are stigmatized within derby, such as excessive emotionality. Second, while skaters expose the risks associated with athletics through their theatrical portrayal of injuries, they also use athletic skill as a benchmark by which to discipline other skaters. Finally, although skaters engage in gender critique at the micro level, this critique does not speak to other lines of difference or to broader issues of inequality, such as class- and race-based disparities. This suggests the limits of the female signifiant: while exhilarating for the individuals that practice it, it nevertheless appears inadequate on its own to address the broader issues of inequality that—as Connell (1987) notes—perpetuate the emphasized femininity that derby skaters critique.

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