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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

NEITHER BUTCH NOR BARBIE:  
NEGOTIATING GENDER IN WOMEN'S  
ROLLER DERBY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

KALEY MULLIN  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
DECEMBER 2012

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I would like to thank Judith Wittner, the head of my thesis committee, for teaching me to always be healthily critical but not cynical and to show rather than tell. To Talmadge Wright, whose enthusiasm for play is both contagious and inspiring.

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For my parents, my greatest cheerleaders

It's funny, people ask me that a lot. They say, 'it must be great to hit someone.' And I say, 'Well yeah, I guess,' but I mean, I just don't think of it that way. Sometimes it feels good, it just depends on the day. I don't know, I mean I still feel that I can go home and be a housewife. I don't think I have to turn anything on and off to do that.

-Lucille Brawl, Midwest Roller girl

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## ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic methods, I began this project with the goal of understanding the full experience of what it means to be a derby girl. This included examining how the sport dictates performances of gender and how derby girls perform gender on and off the rink. Additionally, I paid special attention to how the women negotiate femininity and beauty. I found that roller derby girls maneuver through the world of gender dichotomies skillfully by means of their actions and words in the derby space. Unlike at the inception of derby, current derby girls engage less consciously with the feminist movement. Instead of that being a failure or corrosion of initial guiding principles, the current crop of derby girls embrace the sport because it is a place where they can be themselves, regardless of whether their behavior falls into traditional masculine or feminine categories. I argue that new derby girls represent a compelling example of the new breed of modern woman who rejects traditional gender norms and reaches across the aisle to masculine qualities without contradicting their feminine qualities.



## CHAPTER ONE

### DERBY GIRLS

#### **Introduction**

I am a female athlete. I am tough, driven, and insanely competitive. My favorite color is blue and I have tattoos. I wear makeup and shave my armpits. I wear almost exclusively sundresses in the summer and get manicures once a month. I am an example of the new breed of modern woman and I am a derby girl.

While I highlight myself to exemplify my argument, it is true that I have never been what could be described as a butch girl or a Barbie. I have always fallen somewhere in the middle. I do not fit so easily into the dichotomous extremes of what is considered “feminine” and “masculine.” I maneuver through traditional gender norms fluidly and without much conscious thought. To my excitement, I found kindred spirits among the derby girls I observed and played with. Girls who vacillate wildly and without contradiction from talking about the blood on their knees to talking about their manicured toes. Roller Derby girls are a distinctive breed of women who negotiate and perform gender in unique and revealing ways.

As a sport, roller derby has grown leaps and bounds within the last ten years and acts as a unique avenue for women to express themselves physically. Studying these women’s lives in sport in the context of contemporary gender scholarship is informative in explaining why roller derby has become a pop-culture phenomenon that draws in

thousands of players and millions of spectators worldwide. I begin this thesis by reviewing related literature on roller derby and women in contact sports. Next, I introduce the methodology, the analytical strategy I used to inform my outcomes, and outline some limitations of the methods. I then present my findings using narrative accounts of roller derby girls as the main evidence. I conclude by discussing the current study's implications and needs for further research.

Using ethnographic methods, I began this project with the goal of understanding the full experience of what it means to be a derby girl. This included examining how the sport dictates performances of gender and how derby girls perform gender on and off the rink. Additionally, I paid special attention to how the women negotiate femininity and beauty. I found that roller derby girls maneuver through the world of gender dichotomies skillfully by means of their actions and words in the derby space. Unlike at the inception of derby, current derby girls engage less consciously with the feminist movement. The current crop of derby girls embrace the sport in part because it is a place where unselfconscious fun reigns, and individuals can move past invidious gender dichotomies into a world beyond gender. I argue that new derby girls represent a compelling example of the new breed of modern woman who rejects traditional gender norms and reaches across the aisle to embrace masculine qualities without contradicting their femininity.

### A Review of Derby Literature

Overall, the sport of roller derby has not been studied by many sociologists thus far. This may be due to its relatively recent rise in popularity among young women, or simply because it is still less popular than most American sports. Of the articles that do address it, most have been written from a feminist perspective and deal with issues of

gender. However, there is still much to be examined within the sport and among the players. Before I detail my own research, I will present a summary of the relevant literature.

When researching roller derby, one comes across many references to its heyday of popularity when it dominated primetime television and was watched every week by millions of viewers. However, the sport actually goes back much further - all the way to the late 19th century. Carolyn Storms "There's No Sorry in Roller Derby" details the history of derby and its relevance to women's embodied resistance (2008). Storms argues that from its very inception, roller girls (first skating as a hobby and then with a team in an organized sport) challenged ideas of femininity. She details how the rise of roller skating dovetailed with and complimented the first wave of the feminist movement. Storms echoes many sports sociologists, saying that women's athletics encouraged women to subvert traditional gender norms and reject hegemonic male culture (2008). Storms argues that roller derby changes women by teaching them "overtly aggressive strategies" that go along with engaging in a contact sport. In derby, these strategies include using one's speed and strength to physically push past competitors for prime positioning. Additionally, Storms discussed how derby girls engaged in conscious discourse with ideals of the feminist movement. These included wearing sexy outfits, but "owning" the imagery, and never allowing themselves to be exploited. Storms echoes many sociologists of sports (Hall 1996, Messner 2002) by saying that playing and observing sports has a socializing function for all those involved. She details how early participants in the sport changed the discourse around the female athlete from a woman who was

viewed by society as insubordinate and unaccepted, to one who was largely celebrated for displaying strength and violence (2008).

Storms' piece is an excellent jumping off point for my research project. While she primarily focuses on secondary sources in order to detail the fascinating history of the women who pioneered the sport, my research focuses more largely on the women participating today. My research also departs from hers in that I argue that while the space and sport may act as a conduit for women to engage in traditionally masculine behavior, they may bring those tendencies in to begin with. Examining what brings girls to derby shows evidence of this. For example, in my interview with Midwest Roller captain Kat-A-Tonic, she explains what brought her to derby:

Kat: [when I first saw derby] it was like a very, more like, counter culture punk-rock affair than it is now and there was fake fighting, and the uniforms were like little dresses, they weren't like sporty uniforms, but it was still skating and hitting and I was like 'This looks really cool, I know how to roller skate. I like hitting people, I could do this.'

Here Kat expresses that she already "liked hitting people." She saw derby as a place where this was socially acceptable and joined in. Another interviewee, Shortney Love, stated, "It's like-minded people that come to derby." This seems to indicate that something about these women may be different than the population at large before joining the sport. Or at least, derby girls feel that they are different from other people, which is equally relevant. I intend to examine what makes these girls slightly different than their peers.

Multiple scholars of roller derby have argued that the sport provides an outlet for "alternative" women who seek to subvert traditional gender norms by interacting in

ways that consciously emphasize and satirize these gender norms (Peluso 2011; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010). Nancy Finley uses Schipper's (2007) term "pariah femininities" when discussing this subversion of traditional gender norms in roller derby (2010). She argues that they embrace and subvert the pariah femininities of "slut," "bitch," and "bad-ass girl." I agree that these pariahs depend on context and can be seen in the derby space. Like Finley says, success in derby partially depends on women's ability to embrace these pariah femininities (the women must be aggressive, strong and competitive to win). Finley's research highly focuses on derby girls' promotional materials and outward displays in public when discussing their gendered presentation. My research emphasizes the intra-gender relations between teammates. I argue these microinteractions in the "backstage" area show a different, but still relevant aspect of the derby girls' gender presentation.

Another sociology of sport scholar who studied roller derby is Jennifer Carlson. Like Finley, Carlson also emphasizes derby girls' outward presentation to the public. When discussing their ironic displays of gender, Carlson argues that "Skaters do not cross the boundary between masculinity and femininity but rather self-referentially engage contradictions within femininity" (2010, p 437). She points to the girls humorously violent nicknames and promotional posters as an example. While I agree that puns and ironic pop cultural references are an important part of derby girls' onstage behavior, it is less important backstage. In my research, derby girls did not appear to self-consciously address femininity or behave in any sort of satirical manner in their interactions with each other. Instead they earnestly committed themselves to practice a sport which they appeared to enjoy with abandon. Rather than consciously commenting on gender, the

girls seemed to embrace unselfconscious fun, leaving feminine restrictions behind.

As I mentioned above, the exception to the lack of witnessed satirization of gender norms was their often humorous nicknames and public promotional materials. Although I realize both onstage and backstage presentations (to use Goffman's terms) are important for analysis, I was more interested in derby girls' backstage behavior than how they presented themselves to spectators (1959). I argue that the girls' spontaneous and off-the-cuff micro-interactions backstage are an area of their behavior that has been addressed less often than their "front stage" behavior.

As Kat mentioned, the sport of roller derby has changed from what it once was. It is no longer frilly dresses and fake fights. Players now take the sport very seriously. Perhaps the mentality of satirization or subversion of gender norms has also gone mainly by the wayside. Women now play the sport for the simple reason that they enjoy it. They enjoy the competition, physicality and camaraderie of their teammates. It is a place for them to express themselves physically and interact with their friends. The fact that it may subvert traditional gender norms is a happy byproduct.

Carlson also observed derby girls policing behavior which was perceived as too "girly" (2010). I did not observe this. In fact I saw many girls being very girly without any censure whatsoever. For instance, I observed a girl unironically showing off her new pink mouth guard to squeals of appreciation from her teammates. On another occasion, a player named CitizenPain took off her sweatpants to reveal hot pink leggings. The player closest to her exclaimed, "Ohh, pink! Hot pink! I like." Later, a player searched frantically for her wedding ring and when she found it, compliments a purse someone left on the table:

A girl from the first practice comes back in. She's in a hurry and looks panicked. She tells me she left her jewelry which included her wedding rings and is "freaking out." She walks to the end of the gear area and searches frantically. She finds her jewelry and walks back my direction. She notices a multi-colored purse sitting on a table next to me and asks if it's mine. I tell her that it isn't and she says, "It's so cute and funky! I love it!" She leaves, looking relieved to have found her jewelry.

This "girly" seal of approval for a feminine item, the purse, was not censured by any of the other derby girls milling about the gear area and was not said in any satirical way. These examples do not connote behavior that is censorious. The players I observed genuinely did not seem to care whether girls seemed feminine or masculine, as long as on the rink they played hard and aggressively. In these examples, I intend to show that the current crop of derby girls have gone beyond the feminism that is represented in the media. The days of ironic frilly skirts as commentary on subverting traditional gender norms seem past. As Kat expresses in the following excerpt, the common notions used in articles to write about derby girls are too simplistic and fail to entirely encapsulate the true derby experience.

Kat-a-Tonic: There are tons of articles and news clips, that usually go, [dramatic voice] "By day, so and so is a teacher or a lawyer or a mother, police officer, by night, she is a dangerous derby dame, hitting people, blah blah blah." So that's a very common trope for articles.

I: So how do you feel about that?

Kat: Everyone is sick of that. But hey, that's what writers use as a hook for the articles, so I understand why they do it.

Derby girls like Kat have moved past these dichotomous views of gender and have embraced weaving together their identities with pieces of feminine behavior and pieces of masculine behavior to become a postmodern pastiche - a woman who has moved past gender.

Previous scholars of roller derby have presented the players as a homogenous group of tattooed, alternative rebels (Peluso 2011; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010). As seen here in my interview with Kat-a-Tonic, this stereotype is changing because it does not apply to all derby girls:

Kat: I think the stereotypical roller derby girl like wears fishnets and has tattoos and has kind of a punk rock background. And that is true of certain individuals but also there are really straight-laced girls in the league who are like high school athletes who don't have any tattoos or piercings and weren't really part of the counter culture. So I think the stereotype is like this counter-culture fish netted girl, and that's just not everyone. Certainly it's some people.

Lucille Brawl, another interviewee, also reflects this change when talking derby and tattoos:

I: What do you think of the connection between derby and tattoos?

Lucille: I think it kind of goes hand in hand. It's just usually who is playing derby. It's usually people who are really alternative, although I think that is changing a lot. I think it used to be people who were off the beaten path. Now you have a lot more moms, teachers, I don't want to say more "normal" but people who are more mainstream. More mainstream people are playing and those people might not have tattoos.

My research more accurately reflects the current crop of derby girls who may be less "alternative" and less explicitly engaging in the sport because of its rebellious stigma. The derby girls I observed seem to play the sport because it is something they enjoy, as lead EasyDerby Co. instructor Leggs Beater reflects in the following interaction:

I: Can you describe the average EasyDerby Co. girl?

Leggs: Nope. That's like saying 'what's the average woman like?'



I: Everyone is different?

Leggs: Completely. And that's what's so cool about it. It's not just your typical, "Oh, she'll do derby. She's tattooed or she likes to be rough and tough." You realize that the only thing they have in common is that they like to put roller skates on.

The final relevant piece I would like to address is Risman, Lorber, Holden Sherwood's 2012 article "Toward a World Beyond Gender: A Utopian Vision." Risman et al. describe a gender utopia where social institutions do not "embed invidious gender distinctions" on individuals and where everyone is "equally free to live comfortably in their own skins without social requirements to be feminine or masculine" (p.3, 2012). For instance, they rail against universities that spend unequal amount on men's sports than women's or employees who value male workers' lack of caretaking responsibilities. A world beyond gender would mean that everyone would have the social freedom to choose their own paths as separate persons and would not be constrained inside one gender. Risman et al. assert that there is evidence that there are already strategies in action that have begun to dismantle gender as we know it. For example, they point to "gender queer" individuals who have decided to consciously opt out of the gendered system. I argue that derby girls are further evidence of these strategies in action. They have created an organization where women can bring together what was once seen as divergent ways of being. In this they have begun to move past gender.

Risman, Lorber and Holden Sherwood argue that the classification of behavior into masculine and feminine oppresses all human beings and renders social institutions inherently unequal (2012). They point to Ridgeway's (2011) assertion that gender framing reproduces gender because it enforces interactional expectations of one another

based on stereotypes. Ridgeway argues that gender is the primary frame for which social interactions are molded. She states, “We need a shared way of categorizing and defining “who” self and other are in the situation, so that we can anticipate how each of us is likely to act and coordinate our actions accordingly.” Gender is one of a very small group of “cultural-category systems” that can quickly and simply be applied to strangers in order to define the present situation and thus begin the interaction process. Readings of gender are accompanied by expected behavior, for instance passivity in women and dominance in men. Readings of gender frames also intersect with institutional contexts that continue to refine the definition of a situation (Ridgeway, 2009). Although I acknowledge Risman et al.’s point and agree that gender scholars must push beyond these labels, in order to do so we must address the individuals who are making this happen. While derby girls are not free from stereotyping, they do flip the idea that men are leaders, women are empathetic creatures on its head. The women run the organization by themselves and essentially lead without men (minus a few male referees and bench coaches). They are socialized to not be empathetic to other players’ pain. The authors encourage “traditionally gendered folks” to take the risk of behaving in ways that are not traditional for their gender (2012). They emphasize that the time is ripe. I argue that this is because of pioneers such as derby girls, who are pushing past the harsh dichotomy of femininity and masculinity, into a world beyond gender.

As I said, I acknowledge that the labels “masculine” and “feminine” do not do justice to the complex gender work being done by derby girls and the many other women and men working to move beyond gender. However, I continue to use these dichotomous terms as shorthand in order to describe derby girls’ behavior. I would also like to note

that although I use “masculine” to describe some of the derby girls’ behaviors, I do not necessarily mean that their behavior is “like men.” I simply mean that their behavior often falls into what would traditionally be labelled masculine. However, I argue that they perform these masculinities in slightly different ways. For instance, their aggression and competitiveness is less domineering and more playful than a label of “masculine” might traditionally connote. While I acknowledge the shortcomings of this language, it is the best we have thus far. As Risman et al. and other gender scholars like Dorothy Smith (2009) would agree, these categories are simply not enough and we must push further in order to create language that more precisely reflects new presentations of gender. It is my hope that works like this will help to provide the evidence necessary to continue the move beyond gender.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CURRENT STUDY

#### **Methodology**

I began this project in a qualitative methods course and continued it for my master's thesis. I argue that the data I have collected supports the Risman et al. thesis and is relevant to the study of gender. The scope of the project included two different qualitative methods: eighteen participant observation sessions and three semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Additionally, I informally interviewed many players as well as two fans who were about to attend their first roller derby bout. For five weeks, I observed the Midwest Rollers (MWRs) as they practiced and scrimmaged. Once my five weeks were completed, I observed one bout. For my research with the MWRs I observed practice by watching from the gear area. For five months, I participated in EasyDerby Co., a company that teaches roller derby skills for beginners and intermediates with no contact and focuses on the health and fitness aspects of derby. I skated and participated in practices as a new skater.

For the participant observation portion of the project there were no real parameters of inclusion/exclusion. Anyone who was part of the MWRs and attended practices at the field house or went to the bout was included in my research. Similarly, any women who were in my EasyDerby Co. classes were included in my research, including the instructors. For the interview portion, I sought out certain women because

of their position within the hierarchy of derby and their willingness to be interviewed.

The two informal interviews took place before the bout with acquaintances who attended the event with me. All interviews were voice recorded, transcribed and hand coded for relevant themes. There were no financial incentives to participate in any portion of the project and informants could opt-out at any time. I have used pseudonyms for all organizations and players names to protect their confidentiality.

### Research Questions

This thesis supplements past research on women in roller derby by providing an in-depth analysis of how roller girls maneuver through gender in less dichotomous ways than is traditionally acceptable for women. The current study also adds to the dearth of research on how roller derby girls interact and play on a day-to-day basis. Broad research inquiries include: 1) What draws women to participate in derby? 2) Do roller derby girls present themselves in gendered ways? 3) What do these gender presentations tell us about women engaging in contact team sports?

### Analytical Strategy

I chose to pursue a qualitative methodology for my research in order to capture rich, complex perspectives on women's experiences within the sport of roller derby. My research questions also seek to advance theory regarding gender presentation in contemporary society. Therefore, qualitative was the appropriate methodological choice. Specific themes were not predetermined prior to conducting interviews and respondents were encouraged to narrate their experiences within derby however they wished (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

As can be already seen within my introduction where I discussed my allegiance to the term “female athlete,” I have opted to partially use Carolyn Ellis’ method of Auto Ethnography and “story as analysis” (2004). Because I took copious field notes regarding my own lived experience within derby, which included everything from strapping on skates for the first time to skating in my first parade, I argue that my own experience is valid and credible as a new derby girl.

#### A Note about Terms

In qualitative ethnography, members’ terms are important and must be analyzed. Within this paper, I interchange the use of gendered words such as “women” and “girls” when talking about roller derby players. I do this specifically because roller derby players also interchange terms. Outside of derby the general social consensus is that female-bodied individuals over the age of eighteen are referred to as “women.” Because all players must necessarily be over eighteen to participate in derby, they are socially considered “women.” However, the fact remains that players most often referred to themselves and each other as “girls.” Therefore, taking my cue from Barrie Thorne’s *Gender Play* (1993) and her discussion of the use of “kids” instead of “children,” I will be referring to the players most often as girls. The use of the word “girls” is not unilateral in the sport of derby or even within the Midwest Rollers organization. For instance, on the official website of the MWRs, they used “Women’s Flat-Track Roller Derby” to describe the sport as well as the phrase “Get to know the women of the [MWRs]” on their bio page. How can one explain this contradiction in terms? Perhaps it is simply an accident or maybe there has been explicit conversation over the use of “women” or “girls” and the

choice is deliberate. Perhaps on more “official” outlets, such as the webpage, the players prefer to refer to themselves in a more professional (read: older) way. As of the writing of this paper, I do not have the knowledge to accurately report why there is incongruity over gendered language in speech and writing, but it is something I intend to examine in the future. For the moment, I interchange the use of “women” and “girls,” with the knowledge that they do so themselves.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study are mostly pragmatic methodological problems. For instance, often while sitting in the gear area of the Midwest Rollers field house I was unable to hear what was happening on the rink due to the loud sounds of skates whizzing past me. I also remained an outsider throughout my time with the MWRs due to the fact that I was not part of any team and was not geared up. Rather, I was sitting on the side in street clothes. Thankfully, during my time with EasyDerby Co., this ceased to be a problem. I began skating as a beginner with all the other beginners and participated completely in every drill and off-rink event I attended. So in the beginning of this study I was a “complete observer,” and during my time with EasyDerby I was a “participant observer.” However, even as an outside observer, I overheard many conversations that were highly relevant to my study. The other limitation of my study that I would like to mention is that my standpoint in the intersections of society influenced my experiences within derby and my conclusions about the interactions I witnessed. Following the feminist tradition, I will now highlight my positions to provide context to my own interpretations (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2009). I am a young, heterosexual, upper-

middle class female-presenting woman. I have been college educated, am a fully abled, naturalized citizen of the U.S. with a white Anglo-Saxon background. I have been involved in (contact) sports since I was in elementary school and am almost six feet tall. I have been told I have “natural athletic ability” and “great hands.” My stance in these intersections informed my study at every turn and I am conscious of how this social position affected my participation in this research.



## CHAPTER THREE

### FINDINGS

#### **Roller Derby in Context**

Oftentimes it appears that the derby field house is a space isolated from the issues of the outside world. On the surface it seems to be a cheerful, stress-free space where women come to engage in a sport they enjoy with teammates whom they respect. However, to fully understand derby, it must be placed in a wider context that takes into consideration time and history. I take my cue from Kimberley Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2009) in my emphasis that where one stands in the intersections of social life plays an important role in what one sees. First, a broad description of the demographics of the MWRs may be illustrative to understanding the particular world derby girls inhabit. The majority of the women were white, with less than 10% (in my estimation) minorities, (Black, Asian, or Pacific Islander). Two players spoke Spanish to each other; otherwise all appeared to be native English speakers. All players were over 18, and I would estimate that most were approximately 30 years old. It was often difficult to ascertain which class players fell into as they all wore similar gear, but the expense of derby is high. League dues are \$30 a month and gear can run from between \$200-\$700 and needs to be replaced often. In my own short derby career, I spent over \$550 for gear, rink time and instructor fees. Additionally, players often had to pay for their own travel expenses to attend tournaments. Therefore, it is relatively safe to assume

that due to the disposable income players invest into derby, most of them fell into middle class and upwards. They all inhabited an urban or suburban area of the Midwest and most of them were employed. Roller derby girls' status as mostly young, white, upper-middle or middle class women permeated the ways in which they related to gender and wider society.

### Gender and Sport

Roller derby is a high impact, contact sport played almost exclusively by women. As far as I am aware, no teams allow men and women to play together on the same team competitively. Although there are a few men's-only teams across the country, roller derby has been a sport dominated by women since its reintroduction in the 1980's (Storms 2008). Therefore, it is known as a "women's" sport. However, roller derby inarguably has qualities that are most often associated with "men's" sports. For instance, it is a highly skilled, highly competitive team sport in which the goal is to physically block opponents from scoring points. When asked to describe players, two of the fans I interviewed used the following words: big, tough, rowdy, aggressive and not timid. Most of these qualities go along with traditionally male sports and "masculine" behavior (Thorne 1993). I would argue, however, that this contradiction (that it is a women's sport with "masculine" qualities) is precisely the reason that both players and fans are drawn to the game. It is novel to see strong women purposefully hitting other women with the intent to knock them down. When asked what makes roller derby "rebellious" in her eyes, Kat-A-Tonic gives a revealing answer into what she feels draws people to derby:

Kat: I think that it's a women's contact sport, and that's not common. I think a lot of people see it that way. You know what else is not common?

For women to have a sport that you can play as an adult that you can play in front of people, that you can charge tickets for, that you can go to nationals in, that you can go to regionals in, that you can compete. It's a more charged atmosphere than like the local softball team.

Here, Kat addresses the physicality and the highly competitive nature of the sport as being uncommon, especially for adult women. Thus, she views it to be rebellious. I would go further and say that the uniqueness of these qualities is perhaps the biggest draw for women looking to participate in the sport. From this starting point, we move forward acknowledging that roller derby is a female sport with masculine qualities that attract certain types into its ranks. What these women look like and how they negotiate gender is the subject of the remainder of this paper.

### Rebellion and Alternative Behavior

In the literature review section of this paper I criticized previous scholars of roller derby for presenting a monotonous picture of derby girls explicitly engaging with the sport in order to be “rebellious” or “alternative” to mainstream culture (Peluso 2011; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010). Because the idea of rebellion came up in my first interview with Kat-A-Tonic, I followed up and asked about stereotypes of derby as rebellious in my next interviews.

I: Some people have said that derby is kind of alternative, and you used that word yourself to describe some players. Others use the word rebellious. What do you think about that term?

Lucille Brawl: I wouldn't say it's rebellious. It is alternative, in a sense. As in an alternative sport. But I don't think it's “rebellious” against the norm. I mean, it's rebelling against the norm if you think women are supposed to be demure and stay home, then yes it's rebellious. I mean yes, we are very strong women. We are running our own business, in a sense. So to that stereotype, we are rebelling.

Lucille hedges around the word rebellious, saying at first it is not, and then it is, but dismisses it by using the word stereotype. She very dismissively says that it is rebellious if you adhere to the “old-fashioned” idea that women are “supposed to be demure and stay home.” She admits that derby girls may be viewed as rebellious because they are strong and entrepreneurial, two commonly “masculine” traits, but it does not appear that she thinks she is being explicitly rebellious by participating in derby. Similarly, Leggs discusses the idea of derby as rebellious:

I: And there is the rebellious stereotype that is interesting to me.

Leggs Beater: I think that as women, we can be physical, but we’re kind of conditioned like ‘don’t get hurt.’ Because we are the nurturers, we are supposed to take care of the people who are hurt, our men, our kids, whatever. So that’s why I think sports for women, especially physical sports for women are a great thing. Because we’re breaking down that stupid wall. And doing something we’re not supposed to do and just being human.

Leggs does explicitly state that she likes the idea that in derby, girls can throw off their socialized gender identities as nurturers, and get hurt rather than care for the hurt. She dismisses the idea of categorizing behavior into female or male by saying that through derby, girls can just be human and do what they want to do. This echoes Risman et al.’s description of a gender utopia where they envisioned a world beyond gender. Like many sports scholars (Messner, 2002; Storms 2008; Hughson 2008; Peluso 2011; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010), Leggs agrees that sport has the power to change gender norms. In the next section, I argue that sport and derby in particular has distinct qualities that make change possible.

### The Power of Persona and Play

Thorne discusses the separation of gender qualities where an individual can typically be successfully either masculine or feminine but not both (1993). Pascoe labels the shifting between traditionally “feminine” and “masculine” qualities as “gender maneuvering.” I argue that derby may provide an outlet for some women to more easily navigate a less dichotomous vision of gender or to dismiss gender altogether. A huge component of this is that derby allows women to take on a different role than they do in the rest of their lives. For instance, in my interview with Kat, she addresses this “unleashing” of traditional masculine qualities within the derby space:

Kat: There are tons of articles and news clips, that usually go, [dramatic voice] ‘By day, so and so is a teacher or a lawyer or a mother, police officer, by night, she is a dangerous derby dame, hitting people, blah blah blah.’ So that’s a very common trope for articles.

When asked if she thought that was true of some players:

Kat: I definitely know it’s definitely common in roller derby for somebody to say, ‘Oh, in my daily life I’m kind of this meek, quiet person and on the track I unleash my rage.’ So, yeah, some people might feel that way. Other people might feel like they are the same on and off the track.

Derby acts as a space in which women can embrace traditional masculine qualities without social sanction. The sport in fact rewards women for taking on qualities such as strength, competitiveness and aggression. Whereas previous gender scholars have classified these qualities as “traditionally masculine” or even deviant (Thorne 1993; Pascoe 2007 for instance), derby is a space set apart in which fans and players encourage, praise, and normalize these traits. Play scholars like Huizinga (1971) would argue that the fact that this gender maneuvering happens within a sport is crucially important.

Huizinga argues that within play there is a powerful boundary he dubs “The Magic Circle.” The “Magic Circle” is a place partitioned from the rest of the world where special rules apply (1971). Derby, and all sports one might argue, are played within the “Magic Circle.” For instance, in derby it is acceptable to hip check another player to the ground. This act would be deemed socially unacceptable outside the derby space and social sanctions would be given to the individual who did the hip checking. The “Magic Circle” acts as a shield to protect to an extent the girls’ interactions within the sport from the outside world. However, play scholars have noted that the Magic Circle is not sealed. Rather, it is porous and the girls’ interactions and behavior cross the boundary of play to affect their outside life. In this way, as sports sociologist John Hughson (2008) postulates and Peluso (2011) echoes, non-conventional sport subcultures like derby have the potential to challenge relations of gender and sexuality. This acts as an example of the dismantling of gender that Risman et al. referred to (2012).

The Magic Circle and the adoption of a derby persona go hand-in-hand to make roller derby a special place for non-traditional gender relations to present themselves. An important part of the derby persona is the adoption of derby names. Nicknames continue the idea that players can shed their “feminine” daytime persona and adopt a more “masculine” persona when engaging in derby. Kat-A-Tonic sees derby nicknames as both a draw to fans and a way for players to reinvent themselves.

I: Do you think the name is an important part of derby?

Kat: Many people feel that it is. It’s fun, it’s a way to reinvent yourself, it’s an aspect of the derby culture that fans are drawn to... It’s a really good way to connect with fans, and some people like we were talking earlier, they have to be this meek persona daily and have to unleash their

rage on the track, they might feel their name is, yeah, a different person. That's like the common trope, that your derby name is a different person that you can be that's not your daily life. Some people don't feel that way.

This transition between outside person and derby girl was echoed by many of the women I spoke to. For instance, after completing my first interview with Leggs Beater, she emailed me later that night to add a few thoughts that had occurred to her on her drive home:

“[Leggs] can do all these things that [Mindy] can't get away with. For instance, I don't like wearing shorts or short skirts (very self conscious) but as [Leggs] I am waaaaay too comfortable in my booty shorts. You may be surprised that I don't actually wear my derby skinz to work, not even on casual Friday. Don't know why it is.”

She goes on to say,

“Doing EasyDerby Co. (and roller derby) is definitely a way for women to be something we are not and get away with it. We can create personas that may not appear to be anything like ourselves, but might actually give a glimpse into what we truly are at heart. Sort of lead a double life for 2 (or more) hours a week.”

Leggs addresses a crucial part of the derby experience. Derby gives women the opportunity to adopt a persona that is different from how they present themselves in everyday life, but which allows them to claim that they truly are that way “at heart.” It allows them to adopt traditionally masculine traits such as strength, competitiveness, and physicality without having to adhere to a “masculine” presentation all day everyday. This kind of acceptance of gender maneuvering is a special part of derby that allows women to live more comfortably in their own skin.

### Living Comfortably in One's Own Skin

My experience in derby provides an excellent example of what Risman, Lorber

and Holden Sherwood put forth as their utopian vision of gender at the 2012 American Sociological Association Meetings. As I previously noted, they describe a utopia where social institutions do not “embed invidious gender distinctions” on individuals and where everyone is “equally free to live comfortably in their own skins without social requirements to be feminine or masculine” (2012). Both derby organizations I observed were both explicitly LGBTQ friendly and the women I interviewed expressed that all women were welcome, regardless of gender identity, presentation, sexuality, body size, or athletic skill. The organizations were an excellent example of the happiness individuals can find when social institutions resist conforming to invidious gender distinctions.

“Living comfortably in one’s own skin” plays an interesting part in roller derby. As many previous authors have noted, and as is easy to see when attending a game, roller derby girls often wear quite “skimpy” clothing, typically short-shorts (AKA hot pants) called DerbySkinz and fishnets. While some authors have noted this as a kind of satire against “emphasized femininity” (Peluso 2011; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010), I argue that while this may have initially been the case, it goes beyond simple satire. There is something about the space or the sport that liberates girls to embrace their bodies as they are and ignore what others think of them. Classical play scholar Johan Huizinga would describe this phenomenon as part of the “Magic Circle of Play.” As I described above with the adoption of derby personas, the power of play allows women to be who they want to be without social sanction. I witnessed many examples of this liberation in my time observing and playing derby, but experienced it most powerfully myself when skating with my EasyDerby Co. team in the city’s Gay Pride Parade. It was the first time



I had donned the unofficial uniform of short-shorts and fishnets and felt incredibly nervous about walking out of the house and onto the city bus wearing so little. However, when I found my group standing by the float made-up to look like a laced-up roller skate, my self-consciousness quickly disappeared. For over two hours, I skated in front of tens of thousands of people wearing what amounted to little more than underwear and hardly gave it a second thought. There were no thoughts of subverting and satirizing traditional gender norms, I was more concerned with not falling down on the uneven gravel streets and getting enough water to survive the heat. The only way I was able to do this was because I was surrounded by fifty other women wearing the exact same attire. I also argue that beyond the companionship of other half naked women skating next to me, the derby gear facilitated my comfort. The helmet, knee, elbow, and wrist pads, along with the skates enabled me to feel like I was strapping on emotional armor along with physical armor. I was not Kaley Mullin, gender sociologist who is always trying to lose ten pounds, I was GuilloTina, for whom thousands of LGBT-friendly fans were cheering.

Leggs Beater sums up this comfort-through-camaraderie best, saying:

The great thing about EasyDerby Co. originally is that you could come here, be goofy, do all this stupid ridiculous stuff that you're never going to do outside of here. And act like a fool and fall on your butt and skate really fast and look like a goober. And fall down, bump into each other, and it didn't matter because you were laughing. And everybody supported you, no one was malicious or made fun of you. And if you fell down and looked like a goober, usually someone would fall down next to you cuz you tripped em. [Laughs]. And they didn't care, it was all in good fun. And that support and camaraderie, it's cliché, but it really does instill confidence in you. So you're not hesitating or holding yourself back from doing something outrageous. In a safe environment.

Although Leggs is talking about EasyDerby Co., where players are beginners, the

sentiment behind this statement applies to derby regular as well. While there is more commitment and pressure to be a good player in derby regular, players can still goof off and act however they want around their teammates. This comfort with teammates allows players to present themselves in whatever gendered way they desire and keeps others from sanctioning them too harshly.

### Social Accountability of Gender Presentation in Derby

While I have described roller derby girls embracing some traits that were once considered “masculine” (i.e. strength, leadership) through sport, I have yet to mention others’ reactions to this. In West and Zimmerman’s piece “Doing Gender” (1987), the authors argue that individuals are held socially accountable for maintaining proper gendered presentations. Roller derby may actually be a place in which gender performance is held less accountable than most social environments. There seems to be a general laissez-faire attitude about gender and sexuality within derby. Risman, Lorber and Holden Sherwood hoped for this in the gender utopian vision they described (2012). Derby as an institution does not embed invidious gender distinctions and lets everyone present themselves in the way they desire. Many derby girls have short hair, wear little to no makeup, and present themselves in a somewhat androgynous way (by wearing men’s clothing, walking in a masculine way). I have never observed any negative social sanctions directed at these women nor seen any discomfort over being in the presence of gender or sexually-ambiguous women. In the following conversation, Kat-A-Tonic expresses that the sexuality of one’s teammate is not an issue within derby.

(Kat mentions that derby attracts politically like-minded people. I asked her if politics comes up explicitly very often and she replies):

Kat: Well, I don't know. I don't know how explicit. But for example, there are tons and tons of queer and lesbian women in roller derby and that's like not a big deal at all. And in roller derby it's, you know, I haven't encountered any weirdness about sexuality issues like at all.

I: Do you think sexuality comes up a lot?

Kat: No, I don't think it comes up a lot. Like I don't think most people care. I don't think most people in the league care if they are hitting someone of a different sexuality than them, it just doesn't come up.

Kat saying that "sexuality just doesn't come up" is evidence that derby girls can behave in ways that may be seen as deviant by outsiders without receiving censure from their teammates. As I said before, this laissez-faire attitude about gender performance and sexuality permeates the derby space, regardless of whether the girls are behaving in masculine or feminine ways.

So far in this paper I have presented evidence that supports performance of "nontraditional," gender-ambiguous" or "masculine" qualities are acceptable, but have yet to address that femininity also has its place. The fact that both masculinity and femininity exist in equal abundance is testimony to the fact that derby is a place for women to move beyond gender dichotomies into the gendered utopia that Risman et al. describe. Femininity is doubtlessly still a part of the roller derby performance. Although the league has long abandoned overly-sexualized frilly, small dresses as uniforms, the uniforms are in some ways still relatively "sexy" as far as sports uniforms go. They are skin tight, show cleavage, and gape at the sides near the armpits. In the following excerpt, a handful of derby girls try on and discuss a sample jersey:

The girls are trying on a sample jersey. They are talking about how their boobs look in it. Feral Streep says the jersey is kind of gapping at the underarms, but

she likes it because it's nice and long. The shirts are very tight. She says "I like it to be bigger. I don't want it like sausage casing." (This refers to her stomach looking bulgy because the shirt is too tight.) They start talking about breasts again and the way the jersey makes their cleavage look. Manic Panic is talking to Fern Bully about it being "Too tight around my muffin." Fern responds laughingly: "It's called a vagina." Manic is bending over so her tummy is scrunched up and looks unattractive. Feral Streeper asks her why she's standing like that. She replies, "Well when you're on the track it's not like your standing up straight. You're bending over, so it bunches. Feral: "Well I love your boobs in that." Feral is now walking over to someone else and talking about how since she has started derby her legs have gotten a lot thicker from the muscle and she loves it.

In this excerpt, it is interesting to see how roller derby girls view and discuss their bodies. Clearly they are concerned with how their bodies look in their derby gear. They put themselves down when their stomachs look too fat. They have a relationship to their bodies (at least in terms of weight) that is not unusual for 25-30 year old white, middle class women. However, they support each other and complement each other's bodies. And as I described in my own experience, when it comes down to actually skating in front of people, the camaraderie of dozens of girls skating together helps derby girls forget about traditionally feminine bodily concerns and just skate. This does not conflict with the traditionally masculine traits they also present.

There are even times when derby girls embrace a sort of "emphasized femininity." This can be seen most often in the ways they discuss bodily accoutrements. As Millian Kang describes in *The Managed Hand* (2010), beauty ideals and the third shift have been ramped up for all women in the twenty-first century, roller derby girls included. For instance, I witnessed one roller derby girl, a big-bodied, boisterous player named Red Beard discuss her toe nails:

Red Beard sits down in front of me and takes off her skates. She notices that her big toe on her right foot has popped out of her nylons. She says "Oh! Hello toe!"

She begins to talk about her perfectly manicured toes.

To see this player discuss her manicured toes was interesting. In many ways, she performs gender in traditionally masculine ways. She has a loud deep voice which she describes as “manly.” She swears profusely and often discusses her love of red meat. She uses her body in derby as a powerful bulldozer to keep other players out of her way. However, she wears nylons and paints her toes a bright pink. She is the prime example of the postmodern pastiche that derby girls embody. It is apparent in this example that derby girls are not immune to the powerful sway of normative femininity. Similarly, when discussing gender norms with Lucille Brawl, I asked her whether she feels she conforms to any traditional gender norms:

Lucille: I like clothes, bags, fashion.

I: And what about in derby?

Lucille: I wear skirts, put my hair in pigtails when I play.

Like Red Beard, Lucille does not seem to see any contradiction between these actions. She says she does not “have to turn anything on and off” to switch between masculine and feminine presentation of self. Which is why I argue roller derby girls are an excellent example of the new modern woman, one who is less constricted by traditional gender norms and is at times rewarded by society for engaging in non-traditional gender presentation. These women have pushed beyond traditional gender dichotomies and embraced a postmodern mix of feminine and masculine, just as Risman et al. described (2012).

It is apparent from these examples that roller derby girls' negotiations of gender performance are actually much more dynamic than may originally appear. There is not a mentality of "leave your femininity at the door." Although at first it is easy to pigeon-hole them as "girls who act like guys" (Pascoe, 2007), they actually maneuver through gender dichotomies more skillfully. Roller derby girls provide an interesting parallel example to Pascoe's Gay/Straight Alliance Girls. They are similar in that the majority of them present themselves in a way that some would call "alternative." However, they differ in that roller derby girls appear to be more successful in their maneuvering of gender and their alignment with "alternative" culture. While the GSA girls were largely unpopular and sometimes bullied, derby girls are generally seen as fun and cool, more like the basketball girls Pascoe describes. Like the GSA girls, roller derby girls refuse to strictly adhere to normative femininity, but also do not entirely dismiss it either. They cross the line between femininity and masculinity in a way that Pascoe dubs "gender maneuvering" (2007). Roller derby girls' relation to their bodies is another way in which they rewrite what it means to be 21st century urban woman navigating gender.

### **Discussion and Implications**

During the writing of this paper, I asked myself this question: Have I changed since I started playing derby? I do not think so. Am I more competitive, tough or out-for-blood than I was when I first started? I am not. I have only found like-minded individuals whose expression of gender I can see in myself. Girls who, like me, do not adhere to strictly feminine presentation of gender or masculine. Like them, I brought my own non-traditional gender presentation to a space that acted as a conduit to continue this

behavior. Derby girls, myself included, sometimes gleefully embrace our masculinity and display it proudly for others to see (e.g. in posters that declare “Blood is the new black”), and at other times, non-ironically discuss our love for “girly” things like fashion. I argue that we do this less self-referentially than many previous scholars have stated.

We, and by we I include derby girls, myself, and all other women of my generation who have grown up in a slightly less sex-dichotomized society, are in debt to the feminists who have gone before us. Today young girls are encouraged to play sports, to compete with boys in school, and to develop their muscles in a way that previous generations were not (Messner 2002). Those who consciously subverted traditional gender norms in the first waves of feminism enable us to not have to fight so explicitly today. The postmodern mix of femininity and masculinity derby girls display and embrace is possible only because of the fight that preceded us.

In this paper I have tried to present a comprehensive picture of the various ways roller derby girls negotiate gender. It is easy to assume that derby girls all fall into the same stereotypes of big-bodied, tattooed, butch women who “act like guys” on and off the rink. Many previous scholars of women’s roller derby have presented them as such. However, this does not show the complete picture of roller derby girls’ behavior. In my findings, roller derby girls embraced both femininity and masculinity and “crossed” between the two with ease and without social sanction. Similar to C.J. Pascoe’s GSA girls, roller derby girls negotiate and maneuver through the dichotomies of gender in skillful ways that are informative to a broader and non-dichotomous study of gender (2007).

Continuing to investigate the ways that derby girls perform gender can tell us more about how feminist sociologists ought to discuss gender presentations. It may provide more evidence for the elimination of a dichotomous understanding of femininity and masculinity, like Risman, Lorber and Holden Sherwood imagined in their description of gender utopias. Roller derby girls' gender maneuvering has the potential to close the gap between feminine and masculine behavior until it gradually disappears.



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## VITA

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