

Gender and Bodily Transformation in Women's Flat Track Roller Derby

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ABSTRACT

Sports as a social institution reflects and reshapes social values and power relations in broader society, including gender relations. For instance, the ways in which bodies are used in sports produces gender; as such sport has been shown to reaffirm men's power over women and ritualize and embed aggression, strength, and violence into the male body. Roller derby, which is a full-contact, highly physical sport, offers women the opportunity to renegotiate these stereotypical gendered and embodied ideas of gender. Drawing on bodily theory, contact sport, and self-defense literatures this study explores how female roller derby players undergo such negotiations of femininity and womanhood and how one's body plays a role in this. This was done through the analysis of 17 semi-structured interviews with female flat track roller derby players in the United States. Findings show similarities to self-defense where skaters' notions of womanhood and femininity are transformed through a variety of ways and these are related to experiencing bodies in new and transgressive ways. One key finding demonstrates how these transformations are complicated by biological narratives and understandings of violence. These results speak to larger implications of gender, embodiment, and women's physical liberation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sports as a social institution reflects and reshapes social values and power relations in broader society, including gender relations. For instance, the ways in which bodies are used in sports produces gender (Young, 2005); as such, sport has been shown to reaffirm men's power over women and ritualize and embed aggression, strength, and violence into the male body (Messner 1995; Messner and Sabo 1990). Contact sport in particular exemplifies and highlights the importance of masculinity (Messner 1988). In contact sports, where bodies are a central tool, men are applauded for using their bodies in ways that are coded as masculine (e.g. hitting, pushing, demonstrating strength) while women are stigmatized for doing the same. The qualities and uses of the body that increase men's status as athletes (and as men) are not socially acceptable for women. Instead, women are often relegated to "display" sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, or as spectators such as wives to male athletes or fans, where their bodies can perform appropriate feminine tasks (Boyd and Shropshire 2000; Messner 1988).

When men and women cross gendered boundaries of how bodies should perform in sports (i.e. use their bodies transgressively) they face repercussions. My research focuses on women who cross these boundaries—women playing contact sports. I am interested in exploring the use of women's bodies in roller derby and whether this might lead to new experiences of their bodies and gender. First, I discuss issues of gender in contact sports in greater detail. Because of the interconnections between gender and sexuality, I also consider issues of stigma and sexuality in contact sports. Noting that theories of bodies are generally lacking in the sport literature, I then bring a theoretical discussion of bodies to bear on contact sports, drawing from scholarship on self-defense where the body has been well examined. Finally, I use these literatures to examine roller derby from my current research questions.

As I discuss below, I focus on and study roller derby to fill some of the empirical and conceptual gaps in the literature on contact sports, bodies, and gender. To do so, I ask the following:

1. What challenges do women in roller derby face in regards to gender and sexuality?
2. What strategies do they employ to respond to these challenges to gender and sexuality?
3. Does using bodies in different ways (i.e. engaging in physical contact) encourage roller derby players to re-think their notions of what it means to be a “woman”?
 - a. In what ways do they re-think these notions?
 - b. How are their bodies related to such negotiations? What roles do their bodies play?
 - c. Does roller derby transform women’s bodies in ways similar to self-defense (i.e. does participation in roller derby lead women to see their bodies as physical/powerful/violent)?

To answer these research questions I conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current female flat track roller derby players in the United States. In-depth interviews allowed participants to share their perspective on the topic, which permitted a wider range of challenges, strategies, and their experiences with issues of femininity, bodies, and sexuality to emerge from the interviews. Additionally, it allowed me to ask questions directly related to my research interests. Exploring roller derby through in-depth interviews is appropriate because the lack of research on roller derby in relation to bodies. Therefore, there was a need for more in-depth, exploratory work (Schutt 2001). Interviews allowed me to capture my participants’ point of view and gain rich descriptions which helped in examining their everyday experiences

(Denzin and Lincoln 2000). General topics that were addressed during interviews included: (1) demographic information and background information on why and how players got involved with roller derby, (2) challenges and strategies that players may or may not face as a result of their participation and how these are related to issues of gender and sexuality, (3) how players feel about their bodies or changes therein, and (4) how players feel about femininity and womanhood and potentially how that has changed.

To obtain participants for my study I used a convenience sampling method. As a member of the roller derby community, I used my social network to recruit initial participants. After my initial recruitment, I used a snowball sampling method, gaining recommendations from my original participants for potential participants. To analyze my data, I engaged in open and then more focused coding (Bailey 2007). I then related these findings to the larger issues of gender, sports, and bodies and extend the current literature by examining the potential transformative experience contact sport can be for women through the body when it is performing transgressively.

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

Contact sports are part of a larger social institution of sports which reflects and reshapes power relations in society, including gender relations. Masculinity is applauded and celebrated in the highlighted arena of contact sports (Messner 1988; Messner 1995; Messner and Sabo 1990). This is seen in the type of bodily behaviors which are central to contact sports; aggression, strength, hitting, and the like, all of which are stereotypically masculine traits. These bodily behaviors produce and sustain gender and therefore reaffirm men's power over women because of the seemingly "naturalness" of these traits in men's bodies, but not in women's bodies (Lorber 1994; Messner 1995; Messner and Sabo 1990; Young 2005). Because of this women are often relegated to "display" sports such as gymnastics and figure skating or as spectators (Boyd and Shropshire 2000; Messner 1988). When women do demonstrate qualities and uses of "masculine" bodily traits by participating in contact sports they are stigmatized and socially sanctioned therefore, skaters must navigate this stigma and related challenges. Studies have generally concluded that contact sports highlight masculine attributes, resulting in female athletes being stigmatized as unfeminine while men are celebrated for their participation (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Ezzell 2009; Kauer and Krane 2006; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005; Knapp 2011; Krane 2001; Migliaccio and Berg 2007; Pelak 2002b; Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly 2004; Roth and Basow 2004; Theberge 1997; Wimmer 2008). Similarly, researchers have found challenges to sexuality where female athletes are stigmatized as lesbians (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Ezzell 2009; Kauer and Krane 2006; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008; Pelak 2002b; Roth and Basow 2004; Shockley 2005). What contact sport literature often overlooks is the role of bodies in these findings. Self-defense literature, on the other hand, has commonly pointed to the transformative effect the activity has on bodies and understandings of gender addressing many of

the power relations within broader society (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998).

Roller derby is an ideal site for interrogating theoretical understandings of gendered embodiment and gendered and sexualized challenges and transformation; however, little research has examined this sport. Roller derby is a contact sport which is not male-dominated, yet is particularly aggressive and violent. In forming connections between contact sport and gender embodiment, I first discuss the previous research on gender and sexuality in contact sports and how the performance of gender and sexuality pose specific challenges to female athletes. In addition, I explore how female athletes respond strategically to such gendered and sexualized challenges. Then, I examine the current theory on bodies and its connections with gender. Finally, I will connect theories of the body to self-defense and explore how self-defense has been characterized as a transformative experience.

Gender and Sexuality: Challenges and Strategies

In this project, I consider gender and sexuality as distinct power relations, but are deeply interconnected (Jackson 2006; Lenskyi 1994). They are interconnected in that both binaries demonstrate a means of organizing power which is distributed unequally in society. For example, to be of a lesser status (e.g. woman or homosexual) is to be seen as and treated as inferior and to have fewer claims to power. Stigmatization is a tool used by those in positions of power to sanction threats to the status quo or current power structures and institutions by discrediting or spoiling the identity of the other (Goffman 1986). Therefore, stigma is used to keep women and homosexuals in subordinate positions. Even with this interconnectedness I conceptualize these concepts differently.

First, I conceptualize gender to be the social and cultural divisions of man/woman and the characteristics that identify one as masculine/feminine. Although these binaries are not the only categories with which people identify, they are the most prominent and expected. On the other hand, sexuality refers to “erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices, relationships, and identities” (Jackson 2006:106). Both gender and sexuality are sets of power relations which organize people within society and are enacted both through individual interactions and structural or institutional process (Calasanti 2009). Gender and sexuality are based on relational understandings; man is understood in relation to woman and heterosexuality is understood in relation to homosexuality and vice versa, but these are unequal relations. Not only do people often identify as man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual, but these categories and statuses organize and govern people’s lives. Identifying as a certain gender (e.g. man) and sexual orientation (e.g. heterosexual) offers one more or less status which comes with certain rights and privileges which is essentially an issue of inequality (Heaphy 2007).

The relationship between gender and sexuality is best seen through the lens of heteronormativity. In order for heteronormativity to be sustained heterosexuality must be naturalized and this occurs through naturalized gender roles (i.e. the belief that gendered behavior is natural or a matter of biology) (McLaren 1999). In particular, heteronormativity rests on the notion that man and woman are complementary genders and that sexual relations are most fitting between “opposite” genders. These power relations allow for and become imbedded in institutions and organizations such as sports—resulting in the creation of gendered and heteronormative institutions.

Besides this basic interconnection as power relations, the interconnection that is of most importance to this study is the belief that to be feminine is to be sexually attracted to men, or

heterosexual. As Lenskyj (1994:362) explains, "...feminine women are assumed to be heterosexual because they behave and present themselves in a way that men judge to be conventionally attractive and appropriate for heterosexual women. Unfeminine (or masculine or 'mannish') women must be lesbian, so the argument goes, because they behave and present themselves in a way that men judge to be inappropriate and unattractive" Overall, "liking men" is viewed as an attribute of femininity in a heteronormative society. In contact sports, where many women are deemed unfeminine, women are also deemed lesbian, whether or not this is the case. So although gender and sexuality are distinct analytical constructs, in the sporting environment (as with the rest of society) femininity is equated with being attracted to men and is lived in ways that make this distinction difficult to recognize (George 2005). Because of this association, female athletes face challenges based on gender and sexuality and these challenges are often interrelated. Even so, each needs to be separately understood while still recognizing how these sets of power relations are connected.

Gendered Challenges

Overall, female athletes encounter negative treatment by both athletes and non-athletes based on their participation in contact sports. One of the well-documented challenges female athletes face is the stigmatization they receive based on their assumed lack of femininity. Women who defy the accepted gender norms and cross boundaries of socially acceptable forms of femininity are stigmatized and devalued (Blinde and Taub 1992a; George 2005). Female athletes' participation in contact sports almost immediately crosses such boundaries because athleticism, aggression, and violence, all of which are seen in contact sports, are deemed as masculine attributes. Some players are accused of being men or of being masculine (George

2005; Kauer and Krane 2006). For example, in George's (2005:327) study on the female athletes on a Division I soccer team, an informant of hers recounted a story where one female player commented to another, "My god, she's ugly. Is that a man?" This type of behavior or accusation is not uncommon among players as well as outsiders. Female athletes are scrutinized by male peers and described as "masculine, manly, boyish, butch, tomboy, like a guy" (Kauer and Krane 2006:46).

At the other extreme of being accused of being a man, female athletes can be put on display and sexualized (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008; Migliaccio and Berg 2007). Instead of focusing on the women's athletic ability and performance, people focus on the female players' attractiveness. Laurendeau and Sharara's (2008) study described the explicit sexualization of female athletes in snowboarding and skydiving, and male peers harassed the women by asking to see their breasts. While this may be an extreme example and these were not contact sports, these findings indicate that women athletes are seen as sexual objects. In part because of this sexualization, women's participation in contact sports is trivialized (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008; Migliaccio and Berg 2007) and this trivialization leads to limited access and exclusion (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005; Krane 2001; Pelak 2002a; Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly 2004). An example of this trivialization can be seen in Pelak's (2002a) study of female hockey players where her participants explained how they had trouble receiving access to sporting facilities because of the focus on accommodating the men's team. In the interactions with administrators to get more rink time, female players noted that the administrators' behavior was hostile towards them reinforcing their belief that they felt women's ice hockey was trivial in comparison to men's.

Seeing women as unfeminine or focusing on their feminine bodies are both ways of trivializing and lessening the potential threat of seeing women as capable of participating in male realms. And together, such stereotypes/responses point to the impossibility of being an embodied female athlete – one cannot be too mannish or too woman-ish; both are sanctioned. This sanctioning limits women's power and keeps them in subordinate positions.

Research has pointed to several specific strategies that female athletes employ in response to such treatment. The most widespread strategy is the “apologetic”, whereby female athletes put on a show of “hyper-femininity” (Ezzell 2009; Lenskyi 1994). That is, they will go to extremes in order to demonstrate that they fulfill the stereotypical notions of femininity, primarily through appearance and gestures. Examples include wearing heavy makeup, feminine clothing such as skirts and dresses or the color pink, wearing jewelry and perfume, and having their nails painted (Blinde and Taub 1992b; Cox and Thompson 2000; Ezzell 2009; Halbert 1997; Kauer and Krane 2006; Krane 2001; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008; Lenskyi 1994). In addition, female athletes will highlight feminine mannerisms such as giggling and/or twirling their hair. This strategy of hyper-femininity is used both inside and outside of the sports arena. For instance, in Halbert's (1997) study, female boxers preferred to wear pink, fringe skirts during their boxing matches. Another example of appearance seen both on and off the sporting “field” is through hair styles. The soccer players in Cox and Thompson's (2000) research relied on their long hair to avoid being seen as “mannish.” Of course, this strategy can lead to female athletes being perceived as “too” feminine, leading to trivialization, thus creating a double bind for women attempting to avoid discrimination.

Similar to emphasizing femininity, some female athletes will deemphasize their athletic identity (Halbert 1997; Kauer and Krane 2006). If few people know about one's athletic

participation, or if this identity seems to only be a small part of one's overall identity, then the chances of facing stigma is lessened. Another strategy is avoiding spaces where the stigma could be heightened (Halbert 1997; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008). Again, if one does not have the opportunity to be stigmatized than the challenges are lessened. In some instances, when other strategies have failed the eventual strategy could be to drop out of the contact sport (Halbert 1997). Finally, a rare, but important strategy is to just ignore the challenge and continue playing without altering one's behavior (Halbert 1997). While Halbert (1997) does little to expand on this strategy it is central for demonstrating the potentiality in creating or imagining a space where women could use their bodies to their full potential without those uses being seen as "transgressive."

Sexuality Challenges

When boundaries of gender-appropriate activities are crossed both femininity and sexuality are questioned, based on the heteronormative assumption that women's attractiveness and attraction to men is "natural". To the extent that playing masculine sports violates gender norms and makes women "mannish," people might also see such women as more like men—unattractive and therefore lesbians (Lenskyi 1994). If women are like men it disrupts the notion that men and women are naturally different and complementary which in turn upsets power relations. In Pelak's (2002b) research on female ice hockey players, she described how male ice hockey players would call the female athletes, "The Mighty Dykes" and other derogatory names related to sexual orientation and, by extension, gender. While the term "dyke" is not considered derogatory to everyone it is used in this way to disparage the female athletes in this situation. The situation Pelak (2002b) describes is not uncommon among female athletes. Again, we see a

lot of the same descriptions and name calling previously mentioned. Female athletes are labeled as “she-males,” “scary, butch lesbians,” “lesbian man-beasts,” “not real women,” “butch,” and “mannish” (Caudwell 2003; Cox and Thompson 2000; Ezzell 2009; Halbert 1997; Pelak 2002a). Not only are they labeled lesbians, but players are also warned about lesbianism when they join sports, or they are questioned about their sexuality and the sexuality of the members of the sport (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Cox and Thompson 2000; Ezzell 2009; Shockley 2005). In their study of female soccer players, Cox and Thompson (2000) noted that their informants recalled experiences where coaches, mothers, and peers warned them to watch out for lesbians or warned them that they might become lesbians if they played the sport. Additionally, players were consistently asked “are you a lesbian?” or “isn’t that a dyke sport?” when they reveal that they play a contact sport such as hockey or football (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Ezzell 2009; Shockley 2005). Because of compulsory heterosexuality within current U.S. culture, these assumptions are seen as negative, prompting players to derive strategies to combat them (Lenskyi 1994).

As with the discussion of gender challenges, highlighting femininity is one of the more prominent tactics female athletes employ to combat questions about sexuality. Not only do they consciously accentuate their femininity as discussed above, but they also avoid clothing that might be seen as masculine or lesbian attire, such as Doc Marten shoes and baggy jeans (Cox and Thompson 2000). Female athletes also highlight their heterosexuality in more explicit ways, particularly by showing obvious interest in men. In Blinde and Taub’s (1992b:528) research on a variety of Division I female athletes, they found that the female athletes wanted to be seen with men or having boyfriends, “hanging on men in public or establishing a reputation as promiscuous with men” in order to avoid suspicion and confrontation.

Another strategy female athlete may use is to avoid female athletes who are lesbians or are seen as “masculine.” A related tactic is to avoid spaces where their sexuality could be on display or where lots of women (and particularly, assumed lesbian women) would be. They also engage in specific othering of “masculine” women by separating themselves in non-physical ways (e.g., saying “lesbians don’t bother me as long as they don’t hit on me”), attacking them verbally with homophobic remarks (e.g., “mannish”), and using out-group language (e.g., “they,” “them”) (Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008). A final, relatively rare strategy mentioned in the literature is “shrugging” off accusations or, in some even rarer cases, confronting the stigma (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; Pelak 2002a).

Roller derby presents a particularly interesting case for exploring female athletes’ challenges and response. Roller derby differs from the other contact sports discussed in that; on the one hand, it is a contact sport in which women engage in what might be seen as particularly aggressive and violent behavior. On the other hand, it is not a male-dominated sport, even though these behaviors are themselves coded as masculine. These potentially contradictory aspects—“masculine” behavior in a female-dominated sport—make the study of potential gender and sexuality challenges and responses especially interesting. Therefore, roller derby is an ideal setting for interrogating the theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality because women are highly concentrated in this space, whereas men are rare except for as coaches and referees. Being in a primarily female space may give women the opportunity to work out issues of gender and sexuality in a different way than in spaces that are male-dominated. However, roller derby is not exempt from the larger patriarchal and heteronormative institutions and structures even though there are few men. And third, roller derby is a sport that has an explicit set of rules

involving transgender athletes. The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), the governing body of women’s flat track roller derby, has a gender policy which states that transgender and intersex athletes who live as a woman and have sex hormones within the medically acceptable range for female are eligible for sanctioned game play.¹ Such gender policies as this one are interesting analytically because on one hand it attempts to symbolically expand the definition of woman and be inclusive while on the other hand it rigidly defines woman through sex hormone ranges without taking into account other ways womanhood could be defined. This matters because roller derby is an arena where women may already be engaging in expanded definitions of womanhood, but this policy may limit or complicate what can be imagined for women outside of the “sex hormones that are within the medically acceptable range for female” (Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2013).

The Role of Bodies

Bodies play an important role producing and displaying gender in all aspects of people’s lives, including the arena of sports, where bodies play an obvious and key role in participation. The centrality of bodies to gender is generally overlooked in sports literature, however.

To comprehend the body and its relation to gender, we must understand that gender is something we “do” (Butler 1990). Through the notion of “gender performativity,” Butler (1990; 1993) explains that gender is performed habitually and/or ritually (Butler uses the term “iterably”) through the bodies of people, specifically through gestures, movements, and styles of bodies. Bodies are marked through their use as an ornamental surface, displaying gender through clothing, makeup (or lack thereof), and body size (Bordo 1993; Butler 1990; McCaughey 1997;

¹ For entire WFTDA gender policy see: <http://wftda.com/wftda-gender-policy>.

Theberge 1991). They are also marked by their gestures, movements, and postures that a person “does,” and which are marked as “appropriate” or inappropriate based on their gender (Bordo 1993; Butler 1990; Butler 1993; McCaughey 1997). In other words, gender is marked in and on the body. Walking, talking, and occupying space, for example, are all what Butler (1993:95) would refer to as “a regularized and constrained repetition of norms.” The iterability Butler discusses instills people with the belief that such bodily inhabits of gender are “natural.” Due to the assumptions created by what is “natural” and/or “biological,” men and women’s bodies become imbued with social meanings. However, these social meanings are different and unequal between men and women’s bodies (Caudwell 2003; West and Zimmerman 1987). These inequalities and supposed differences in men and women’s bodies are highlighted in sports, where the body is front and center.

Bodies are presented as “naturally” suited for performing some activities over others; this is apparent in notions that men’s bodies are naturally suited for contact sports whereas women are not (Lenskyi 1994). However, biology is not the only factor in shaping bodies; social influences play a significant role as well (Bordo 1993; Dworkin 2001; Lorber 1994; Young 2005). Although I will not delve significantly into the nature/culture debates on gendered bodies (Dworkin 2001), I will briefly describe some of the literature in this area in order to clarify how bodies are an important component of my research on roller derby players and their negotiations of bodies and femininity.

Generally speaking, people see men’s bodies as active and women’s bodies as passive. Much of this perceptions stems from assumptions about that which men and women’s bodies are biologically capable (Bordo 1993). The common idiom “boys will be boys” claims that boys are just naturally physically assertive; that there is something within males’ Y chromosome that

makes them strong, physical, violent, or any other stereotypically masculine trait (Lorber 1994). Conversely, the idiom “she throws like a girl” assumes that females, carriers of XX chromosomes, are biologically inferior in throwing abilities to males, whose Y chromosome contributes to an innate ability to throw, or more generally, to be physically superior. In many ways it is easy to see the physiological, bodily differences of men and women. For example, the average man is 10% to 15% larger than the average woman (Roth and Basow 2004); relative to size, men’s strides are typically larger than women’s (McCaughey 1997; Young 2005); and men, on average, have more upper body strength, while women’s strength lies in their lower body (Roth and Basow 2004). However, some researchers have noted that these seemingly biological differences might not be entirely biological, but potentially small differences that are exacerbated (or potentially created) by social and cultural influences on the body (Bordo 1993; Downey 2009; Dworkin 2001; Lorber 1994; McCaughey 1997; Roth and Basow 2004; Young 2005).

Young (2005) is one of the foundational theorists on this matter, explaining how girls and women “learn” to “throw like a girl” outside of biological or natural givens. She argues that learning to “throw like a girl” is a gradual development wherein movements that are hampered become manifested in the gendered dispositions on the female body (Young 2005). Women are taught implicitly and explicitly to constrain their movements, withhold their potential strength, not to use full spatial and lateral possibilities, to fear getting hurt, and to be timid while men are not. This can be associated with the belief that women’s bodies cannot do what men’s bodies do, or said another way, that men and women are biologically different and therefore should not use their bodies in the same ways. Because of the associations of what is “natural” for men and women, women are not afforded the opportunities to use their bodies freely and openly at their full capacities while in contrast men are highly encouraged to do so (Young 2005). However, if

given the same opportunities and practice that men are given women's bodily comportment can be similar to men (Downey 2009; Roth and Basow 2004; Young 2005). Lorber (1994) demonstrates this notion as well explaining if a boy and a girl begin training for tennis at the same age and are equally encouraged to become champions they learn to use their bodies similarly. In sum, given equal opportunities and training men's and women's bodies become more similar than different (see Roth and Basow 2004, Young 2005).

As Young (2005:144) notes, women experience their bodies as a "fragile encumbrance." They learn that they are frail and weak and therefore use their bodies in ways which demonstrate femininity and protect their frailness. Such feelings of ineptness or incapability lead women to develop a lack of confidence in their bodies (McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998; Schorn 2013; Young 2005). Women do not develop a relationship with their bodies as strong tools to be used, often because they see their bodies as fragile. In relation to this, injury is an important component to understanding the notion of women's supposed frailty. In her review and analysis of the literatures on injury in sport, Theberge (2012) found that researchers discuss women's sport injuries in terms of their biological deficiencies. She explains this is a part of the larger gender power relations which highlight and construct women's frailty where men are supposed to take the pain while women should shy away. Notions surrounding injury such as who should and can get hurt and what are the appropriate or inappropriate responses to injury based on gender can become imbedded in women's bodies.

Women can experience their bodies in new, transformative ways, as seen in self-defense (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Finley (2010) briefly mentions that roller derby players in her study taunted danger and injury, specifically, when they were injured they complained that they just wanted to get back to skating and playing roller

derby. Similarly, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) demonstrated a complex relationship roller derby players have with pain and the pleasure that can accompany it. With the high incidence of injury in roller derby (Kneer, Colliver, Hung, Pepper, and Willick 2010), this may be a place where women rebuff the notion that their bodies are frail and experience their bodies in transformative ways.

As previously stated, training can have an important impact in creating women's bodies as strong, physical, and aggressive. The outcomes of such training or just general use of bodies in non-stereotypical ways demonstrates that the body is not a stable entity, as Butler (1990, 1993) argues. Agreeing with this notion, Caudwell (2003) believes that women's bodies can be sites for rearticulations of gender. These arguments assert that bodies have a certain amount of malleability, and that women have the potential to reshape their bodies from the frail, constrained bodies to a new form of femininity which allows for more possibilities. Lorber (1994) argues that gender is such an ingrained part of peoples' daily lives that it takes a deliberate disruption of our notions of man/masculinity and woman/femininity to see that we have the potential to shape it differently. If women can view their bodies as malleable, they have the ability to shape their bodies and the gendered expectations of their bodies in new ways, leading to a transformative experience of self and femininity. This transformation has been researched and demonstrated in the self-defense literature, but has not been explored in contact sports (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998).

Little previous research connects the role of the body and contact sports, however, two aspects of the body that have been the central focus in the current literature include: (1) how the female body looks (muscularity) and (2) if women like contact in sports (this is usually an outcome of research, not the main focus). The first topic of muscularity explores how women's

bodies look and how this is regulated rather than the uses or physicality of women's bodies, my primary research interest. Most authors in this research area concentrate on the constraints on women's bodies as they become more muscular either through contact sports, weightlifting, and/or body building (Boyle 2005; Dworkin 2001; George 2005; Shea 2001; Theberge 1991; Theberge 1997). Ideas of women's bodies have changed from the ideal of a tiny, slim body to include allowances for more pronounced muscular and toned bodies (Bordo 1993). However, this does not mean that women's bodies are not constrained. As Dworkin (2001) notes, women face a glass ceiling of sorts when it comes to their muscular bodies. There is a cultural upper limit which restricts the amount of musculature that is acceptable for women to have. Research thus demonstrates how women strategize to meet acceptable standards or, in the case of body builders, how they negotiate going over cultural boundaries of acceptability (Boyle 2005; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009; Schippert 2007; Shea 2001).

The second source of research on sports and bodies is more closely aligned with my research focus; however, it is only one step in that direction. Researchers have generally concluded that women find satisfaction in using their bodies in physically aggressive ways (Cox and Thompson 2000; Knapp 2011; Migliaccio and Berg 2007; Shockley 2005; Theberge 1997). Throughout the literature, respondents say repeatedly that they receive a sense of pleasure by giving and receiving body checks (Theberge 1997), that they enjoy hitting people (Migliaccio and Berg 2007), and they enjoyed the physicality their sport offered them (Knapp 2011). Such research stops short of addressing the larger impact of statements such as these, however. That is, what do these declarations of liking to hit other people with their bodies say about women's own understandings and larger understandings of femininity, especially as it relates to violence and aggression?

Self-defense research takes this next step by unpacking the implications of such satisfaction in gender bodily transgression along with the transformation women self-defenders undergo as a result of such transgressions (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). By drawing on studies of women's bodily changes in the self-defense literature, I can explore the extent to which a similar transformation also takes place in contact sports, where women's bodies are being used in ways they have not been before.

Transformations in Self-Defense

As mentioned, current contact sport literature has missed the opportunity to explore the ways in which using bodies in different ways can have transformative effects on women's bodies and understandings of womanhood. Fortunately, this opportunity has not been missed in the literature on self-defense. The range of self-defense types examined empirically are primarily focused on self-defense with a physical component. This includes self-defense classes with padded attackers, martial arts, and fire-arms. Additionally, there has been a focus on feminist self-defense classes. Most of these self-defense classes occur over many hours across several days or weeks. A majority of the research on women who take self-defense classes, called self-defenders, have found that self-defense can have a major impact on self-defenders' lives (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Researchers have found that self-defense helps to increase women's general self-confidence and confidence in thwarting assaults or dangerous situations, reduce fear, increase women's general self-worth, and help women to feel more comfortable in interactions (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Self-defense also influences the

ways women view and use their bodies, which impacts how they understand womanhood and femininity.

Self-defense is an arena where women can rehearse a new bodily script (McCaughey 1998). In this arena, self-defenders are able to use their bodies in ways that they have not before, they are allowed to take up space, to yell, to transgress with limited or no repercussions. Because of this greater latitude, women are able to develop or find a new confidence in their bodies: developing positive feelings about their bodies and confidence in their physical abilities (Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997). Women in Hollander's (2004:221) study exemplify this with some of their responses about their feelings about their bodies: "I love my body [now]." "I used to feel uncomfortable taking up space because I'm bigger, but now I don't." "I see my own power and strength." "It is able to hurt someone and protect me." "I feel much stronger and more in control of my body." Not only do they gain confidence, self-defenders begin to see their body as powerful and use it seemingly powerful ways. They speak of a new sense of agency in their bodies, which allow them to feel powerful and in control (De Welde 2003). This power allows them to feel as if their bodies are strong weapons and are capable of fighting. In conjunction with this newfound capability, women derive pleasure and pride from using their bodies in ways they thought unfeasible (McCaughey 1997). As a result, women begin to see new ideas of what they are capable of as women and in relation to femininity; they begin to reinterpret and reembody what femininity is (De Welde 2003).

Such women's gender narratives are shifted in part because self-defenders are using their bodies transgressively. Researchers consistently show that this "new" narrative rejects stereotypically feminine ideals for stereotypically masculine ones, although many self-defenders do not frame them as masculine (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey

1997; McCaughey 1998). In constructing new notions of womanhood, including notions of femininity, self-defenders attempted to reject and discard stereotypically feminine ideals. Specifically, they wanted to reject the ideas that they were passive, innocent, hesitant, physically incompetent, and other ideas associated with the “nice girl” they were raised to be (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1998). These feminine bodily schemas then were replaced by a fighting bodily schema or what McCaughey (1997, 1998) called the fighting spirit. Women involved with self-defense imagined new possible selves and womanhood. According to many researchers, women desired a future self who was independent, capable, confident, self-reliant, assertive, aggressive, and physical (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Overall, they imagined a more liberated self; one that was not bound by the stereotypes of womanhood. And although the fighting spirit is currently a transgressive female body, self-defenders hope and believe that one day it can be acceptable.

Such research clearly demonstrates that there are larger implications for this type of transformation beyond self-defense. This potential might also accrue to contact sports, such as roller derby, in which participants might experience similar bodily transgressions. Additionally, these transformative acts and spaces may be small steps to larger and more general changes to women’s physical liberation. Self-defense is an arena where the mechanisms that create and sustain gender inequality are exposed (McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Once exposed in self-defense classes, women have a better ability to challenge traditional gender norms which will hopefully enable an empowered self to infiltrate all aspects of their lives (De Welde 2003). From this there is a hope that a new embodied code is developed, one which continues to disrupt current gender ideology, but eventually becomes a new aspect of who women and men are, which is not unequal or limited, and which includes women being seen as capable in contact

sports, such as roller derby. Potentially, a new space is developed which prompts us rethink assumptions about women and men's physicality and capabilities for violence and the associated social roles that correspond to these capabilities (McCaughey 1997).

Roller Derby

Previous research on roller derby hints at the transformative nature of roller derby, but has yet to fully explore it, particularly in relation to skaters' bodies (Carlson 2010; Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 2012; Finley 2010). What has been demonstrated by researchers is that roller derby is a space where female skaters can play with femininity, similar to that seen in self-defense, though this connection, and to what extent they are similar, has yet to be made clear (Beaver 2012; Carlson 2010; Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 2012; Cohen 2008; Finley 2010; Kearney 2011; Pavlidis 2012; Wehrman 2012). The emerging literature on roller derby generally draws from feminist perspectives and attempts to explore the negotiations of femininity in the sport (Carlson 2010; Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 2012; Finley 2010; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014). What this emerging work is demonstrating is the often contradictory nature of the sport in potentially both undermining and reinforcing stereotypical ideas of femininity through the sexualization of the sport. For example, Cohen (2008) argues that roller derby is selling sex rather than physical ability which as discussed earlier has been a challenge to female athletes. She claims roller derby is "no different from Olympic teams that sell calendars of its players in skimpy swimwear" (Cohen 2008: 33). Wehrman (2012) criticizes Cohen (2008) for overstating the selling of sex in roller derby and asks her and readers to think about the potential functions of such sexualized clothing such as to reduce or prevent bruising, rashes, and other injuries that a skater gets from falling or sliding across the floor. Additionally, neither researcher

addresses the choice of wearing such clothing or the purposefulness. In the documentary *Derby Baby! A Story of Love Addiction and Rink Rash* (Bond and Wruck 2012), Rocket Mean, the Executive Director of the Rose City Rollers and Sponsorship Chair for WFTDA explains:

And there is some sex in there and...you know what, that does matter. It gets you in the door, it really helps and it draws the fans in. I mean a lot of male fans if they get drawn into the sport because of the fact that they think they're gonna see some girl's ass sliding across the floor, fine. If they get there and they fall in love with the sport then we just made our case, that's really what's gonna do it for us.

This demonstrates a potentially functional nature of the sexualization and objectification of roller derby players' bodies where these constraints are not imposed on them, but chosen which shows how players are already engaging in complex gender and sexuality play though this has been under developed and theorized in the current literature. While the self-defense literature suggests some important questions that have not been addressed by literature on contact sports, I believe that roller derby can serve as a platform to make the connections between the two distinct, yet potentially similar literatures. On one hand, roller derby is a relatively new contact sport which has received little attention from the contact sport researchers, such that researchers have yet to explore the extent to which roller derby skaters encounter gender and sexuality challenges and what strategies they use as seen in other contact sports. This is especially important given that roller derby has been especially open to so-called sexual minorities, including lesbians and transgender athletes (Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 2012; Wehrman 2012; Women's Flat Track Derby Association 2013). Roller derby's roots in Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos (Beaver 2012), music subcultures such as riotgrrrl (Pavlidis 2012), and for some third-wave feminism (Chananie-Hill, Waldron, and Umsted 2012) potentially lends itself for defining the sport and its members in more expansive ways. Also receiving little attention in both contact sport literatures and roller derby literatures is the role of the body in renegotiated femininity and womanhood, as

seen in self-defense. Roller derby is an ideal setting for exploring these gaps in the literature of and between contact sports and self-defense because of its contact nature (as seen in both contact sports and self-defense). But in addition, the differences between roller derby and other such sports—it being a space dominated by women while participating in “masculine” bodily behavior, its seemingly inclusive gender policy, and DIY roots—makes it all the more interesting.

Chapter 3: Methods

To address these research questions, I used qualitative methods, specifically; in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current female flat track roller derby players in the United States. I choose qualitative methods because of the emphasis on process and meaning (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Qualitative methods typically focus on human subjectivity or the meanings that participants attach to specific events or to their lives (Schutt 2001). In this way, research then revolves around answering questions which “stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:8). These individual meanings are derived socially which allows me to speak to larger sociological issues and theory. This is important to my own work and influenced my choice in choosing a qualitative method because my research questions are attempting to understand how participants understand gender and sexuality and the meanings they give to these constructs. Because these are dynamic and unstable concepts having participants speak to their meanings helps my own understanding and enables me to answer my research questions. Additionally, transformation of the body and of notions of gender and sexuality is a process itself. Therefore, because my research focuses on a process and my participants may be at different points in the transformation it is important I use a method which emphasizes this.

In addition to the emphasis on process and meaning, qualitative methods are also well-suited for exploratory research. Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, exploratory research involves understanding the “how” and “why” which emerges from a research setting (Schutt 2001). Because roller derby participants are a little-studied subject, and the links between bodies and gender in contact sports, specifically roller derby, have not been previously examined, taking a qualitative and exploratory approach allows me to achieve an understanding of my research

questions. My research considers the process and meanings within the culture of roller derby, but speaks to larger issues and understandings of gender and theoretical understandings of bodies. In particular, my research enables me to better understand the process of changing notions of womanhood within roller derby and the meanings players give to their bodies which helped me to better understand broader issues of gendered embodiment. Therefore, qualitative methods were well-suited for this pursuit.

The specific qualitative research strategy that I used in my study is in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In interviews, participants are able to discuss selected topics in their own terms, from their own point of view, and in contexts specific to their own situations (Cuadraz and Uttal 1999; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Schutt 2001). This allows for meanings and processes to be identified, interpreted, and conveyed from the source. This is important because I am able to be given case scenarios and examples which are useful to the analysis process. Additionally because of the potential personal nature of my project and the difficulty people often have in discussing gender, carefully constructed, open-ended interviews allowed me to get at gender in ways surveys or other methods could not (Cuadraz and Uttal 1999). Having the ability to follow up with a participant and probe about specific experiences enabled me to zero in on gender and bodies in ways I would not be able to if I were using other methods.

I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews rather than structured or unstructured interviewing, as this allowed me to draw on the strengths of both (Fontana and Frey 2000). That is, semi-structured interviews allow for important aspects of structured interviews in that there is an interview guide with some predetermined topics and questions, while also involving the flexibility that unstructured interviews have in that the interview guide does not have to rigidly be followed, allowing for a conversational flow (Bailey 2007). While the interview guide was

there for reference and as a reminder to address certain topics, questions, and ideas that I would like to know about, I was able to go with the flow in the interview, bringing up questions when it seems appropriate, asking follow-up questions, and ad-libbing questions. Conducting semi-structured interviews enabled me to more actively engage with participants and have a give-and-take interaction, which also helped to build rapport so that participants feel comfortable sharing the potentially personal information needed for my research. In addition, notions about bodies and gender are sometimes difficult topics to explore. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to first build a connection with the participant in which they felt comfortable recounting particular incidences which may reveal gender and sexuality in less overt ways while also giving me the ability to probe with additional questions. Overall, in-depth, semi-structured interviews constitute a suitable method for answering my research questions because this approach allowed for a conversational tone which enabled participants to speak candidly about experiences of challenges, strategies they have used to combat said challenges, and their perceptions of their body and gender in overt and less overt ways also allowing for better analysis (Cuadraz and Uttal 1999).

Finally, because I am a member of the roller derby community, participants may feel more comfortable with me as I have at least a general working knowledge of roller derby (Bailey 2007). Overall, my insider status helps my research in that it gains me easier and expedited access to the group, provides me with unique insight and knowledge of the roller derby culture, and potentially an ability to understand nonverbal cues and nuanced language because of my understanding of members of the community (Bailey 2007; Chavez 2008; Dwyer and Buckle 2009). However, there are potential disadvantages as well, particularly, the potentiality to be overwhelmed by my researcher and insider roles and having difficulty in recognizing patterns in

my data due to my familiarity (Chavez 2008; Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Similarly, because of my familiarity with topics or language it is possible that my interviews and thus findings may not be clear to someone outside of the roller derby community. All of these challenges can be mitigated through being reflexive about my status and reminding myself of my position to better understand and address potential biases. In addition, when interviewing participants I need to be vigilant in ensuring that they and I talk about roller derby in a way that someone outside the community could understand. This ensures more thorough and better analysis. Therefore, as long as I recognize my position within my research my insider status should be more of a benefit than a hindrance.

Interview Guide

Interviews began with a series of questions to elicit demographic information as well as to understand why and how participants got involved in roller derby. Then I moved on to queries that delved more specifically into their experiences in roller derby that relate to my research questions. My full interview guide can be found in Appendix I, but I provide examples and a rationale for my interview questions here. Examples of interview questions which addressed my first question about challenges included:

1. How did people react when they found out you were playing roller derby? What kinds of things did they say (probe as needed for particular people, e.g., family members, friends, etc. and responses)?
2. In your experience, what do people say about roller derby players?

By asking people to recall experiences where they may have encountered challenges, I attempted to elicit concrete examples of challenges without fishing for a specific one. It was also

that some participants did not experience challenges or very limited challenges, in which case they told me a story meaningful to them without my leading the responses.

Interview questions that addressed my second research question about strategies players use to deal with challenges were dependent on the responses I got to the previous interview questions. As noted, semi-structured interviews enable the interview to be more conversational, making it easier for me to say “tell me more about that experience” or “how did you respond to that.”

To understand how players feel about their bodies or changes therein (aspects of research question 3 and subset questions), I asked a number of questions relating to their bodies such as:

1. What kinds of bodies are best/most suited for roller derby?
 - a. Do you think your body matches this?
2. Have you seen any changes in your body?
 - a. What changes have you seen and how do you feel about these changes?

These questions directly asked participants to talk about their bodies and asked more generally about bodies in roller derby. This enabled me to get at multiple levels and instances of bodies both personally and within the larger culture. In doing this I can give specific examples of how participant’s bodies have changed and how roller derby facilitates this in similar ways to that of self-defense in my findings section.

Similarly, to understand how players’ feel about femininity and womanhood, and potentially how that has changed (aspects of research question 3 and subsets), I asked both direct and general questions. Examples of such questions include:

1. Do you see yourself differently since you joined roller derby? In what ways?
2. Have your ideas about femininity/womanhood changed since you joined roller derby?

3. What are your opinions about WFTDA's gender policy?
 - a. What are other reactions you've seen to the policy?
 - b. Have you played against teams that had a transgender person on the team?
Can you tell me about that experience?
 - c. Are there any policy changes you would recommend? If so, what? Why?

The first two example questions are clearly more direct. They required my participants to think about how they have experienced gender within roller derby and how that has influenced them personally. The third question is less obvious and direct, but potentially speaks to deeper, underlying notions of gender that the participants might not fully realize and therefore could not articulate if I was more direct. Additionally, the sub-questions speak to personal experience. Experience gives me small case scenarios to critically analyze gender in seemingly un-gendered moments. Looking at experiences with transgender persons may unearth gendered ideals that participants would not outwardly say due to fears of possible repercussions but in fact speak loudly to gendered issues.

Finally, many of the interview questions above helped me understand how self-defense and roller derby are similar in the transformation of women's bodies. Gaining an understanding of how participants feel about and experience their bodies allowed me to contrast their answers to the current literature on self-defense. In addition, to the previously mentioned questions I asked the following:

1. Do you ever see roller derby as aggressive? Violent?
2. How does the physical nature of roller derby compare to other contact sports (i.e. football, basketball, self defense)?

Asking about violence specifically gets at an aspect of the self-defense literature that has not been asked about in other areas of my interview guide. McCaughey (1997) focuses much of her attention on women's capacity for violence in self-defense and how understanding and accepting this capacity can be transformative in many respects. Therefore, asking about violence addresses one area roller derby and self-defense might be similar in addition to bodily and gender transformation.

Sample

For the purpose of my study, I interviewed seventeen current female flat-track roller derby players in the United States. I made this decision based on my ability to make contact with participants and my belief that I could come to appropriate and suggestive conclusions (Schutt 2001). I used a convenience sampling method to obtain participants. This was a multi-step process. First, as I am a member of the roller derby community, I used my social network to recruit initial participants. After my initial recruitment, I used a snowball sampling method, gaining recommendations from my original participants for potential participants. All potential participants were asked to participate via a standardized letter of inquiry that was given via face-to-face, email, and/or Facebook. Once the invitation of participation was received and agreed to interviews took place at various locations and times based on the participant's availability, including via phone and Skype, and were conducted by the primary researcher. All interviews were digitally-audio recorded. Interviews were then transcribed and the digital audio files were kept in a password protected computer in order to protect confidentiality. All steps were made to protect participants including proper informed consent and other requirements based on my Virginia Tech IRB approval. All legal and derby names (pseudonyms which players skate under)

were changed to protect participants' identities. In addition, any other identifying information were removed and coded. All information was and still is kept in password-protected computers and locked cabinets if in hardcopy. Transcriptions of interviews served as my primary data source and were analyzed accordingly.

Again, my sample consisted of seventeen current female flat-track roller derby players in the United States (see Table 1 for demographics). Players were mostly skating in the South, but the West and Midwest are also represented in my sample. All, but one skater identifies as a female, with this one skater identifying as a trans-woman. Along with providing general information on my sample, I will also be comparing it to WFTDA's 2012 Demographic Survey to demonstrate how it matches up to the general WFTDA population.² I use the 2012 Demographic Survey because it is the most recent survey conducted by WFTDA. Looking at previous years of surveys in 2010 and 2011, there are little significant changes from year to year meaning potentially the demographic information could be very similar to the demographics of the current year. Using WFTDA's 2012 Demographic Survey as a comparison, my sample is relatively similar to their demographics.

The range age for my participants is 25 to 59 with an average age of 33. My sample is older than that of WFTDA's in their survey with no skaters under 25 and one skater over 55 years old. My sample is also more single and less married/living with a partner with 10 single, 5 married, and 2 living with a partner or divorced. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association survey did not have a question for if the skater had children, but did ask if skaters were living with children 18 or younger. Thirty percent of my sample had children. My sample is highly educated with all participants having some college education. Two participants have some college, eight have Bachelor's degrees, one has some Master's degree, five have a Master's

²For entire 2012 WFTDA Demographic Survey see: <http://wftda.com/files/roller-derby-demographics-2012.pdf>.

degree, and 1 has a Doctorate degree. Seventy percent of my sample identifies as straight or heterosexual, while 30% identify as lesbian, bisexual, open, or queer. This is similar to WFTDA's demographic survey where 75% identify as straight and 25% as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other. In terms of race my sample is relatively diverse given as some my participants note roller derby is a "white sport". Eleven skaters identified as white, 2 as black, 1 as Asian, and 3 as Hispanic, Latino, or other. I have no comparison to WFTDA as they do not ask about race on their survey. This potentially speaks to the "whiteness" of roller derby as they do not even ask about skaters' race which I will discuss later in my findings. While I do not ask specifically about wealth or class status, the range of occupations participants mention leads me to assume players are middle to upper class. This is because the types of occupations are those that are consistent with middle to upper classes and roller derby is an expensive sport requiring participants to have some disposable income. Finally, participants in my sample have played in roller derby from a range to 2 to 8 years with the average being 4.75 years. In general, my sample is similar to that of WFTDA's demographics as seen in their survey leading me to believe that my conclusions are representative of the larger population. However because of the small nature of my sample it may not be generalizable.

Analysis

To analyze my data I undertook a thematic coding process, by using a process of coding described by Bailey (2007). This multi-step process of coding and analyzing data began with the first step of initial or open coding, followed by focused coding. Open coding required me to take the text and code it into more manageable segments by grouping them together along similar themes. The goal was to code text into as many categories as necessary. In the next step, focused

coding, I took the initial codes from the first step and made them more manageable by conceptualizing them as parts of larger thematic categories. These thematic codes served as part of my findings. Within these codes I looked for similarities and differences among the participants which spoke to my specific research questions. While I could not predetermine my codes because I did not have precise knowledge of what I would find, I looked for themes implicitly and explicitly related to gender, sexuality, and bodies. Because of the nature of open and focused coding I ended up with many main codes and sub codes. For example, under a general, focused code of bodies I had nine sub codes related to bodies such as confidence, liking physicality, and sexuality. This is the same for such codes as challenges, strategies, and violence. It is important to note that I used qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, to aid in the analysis of my data. This helped me to analyze data as if I was doing it in paper copy or on the computer without software, but with the added benefit of doing key word searches or specialized queries if needed. For example, if I wanted to see every mention of aggression I could do so with the software.

Additionally, it should be noted that the coding and general analysis process was under a continuing cycle of revision (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp 2001). One of the specific reasons qualitative methods and interviewing in particular was suitable to answering my research questions because of the reflexivity it offers me as a researcher both during the data gathering and data analysis processes. Therefore, as I found more appropriate or useful coding strategies I modified my analysis.

Based on my analysis, my findings address the connections between self-defense, women's bodies, and contact sports. My research addresses this gap by attempting to understand the bodily experience of roller derby players and how these experiences relate to gender and

sexuality. In this way, I am exploring roller derby as a contact sport, which has yet to be addressed as such in the literature, by looking at challenges and strategies that is of high topical importance to contact sport researchers. My findings speak to literature on gender by exploring renegotiations of womanhood and bodily transformation documented in relation to in self-defense. Doing this extends what self-defense literature has done by examining the potential transformative experience contact sport can be for women through the body when it is performing transgressively. Additionally, the findings developed from my analysis speak to larger issues of gender, sport, and the body. As McCaughey (1997) notes, the gender work taking place in self-defense has the opportunity to alter our general understandings of women's bodily capabilities and gender in general. By adding to this scholarship, my research has the potential to continue investigation on these larger issues of women's physical liberation.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overall, I found that roller derby is a space where participants challenge, reaffirm, and negotiate their understandings of femininity and womanhood. This is done particularly through the gender transgressive use of one's body and seeing teammates and competitors use their bodies in gender transgressive ways (i.e. shoulder, hip, and body hitting/checking, juking, falling, etc). Although most participants note how transformative roller derby can be to their notions of womanhood, femininity, and their relationships with their bodies, I will also demonstrate that there are limits to this.

Before I delve deeper into the specific transformations and negotiations of womanhood, I address the challenges that players faced to their femininity and sexuality and the strategies that they employ when they begin and as they play roller derby. These challenges are in accordance with stereotypical notions of women as docile, small, non-aggressive, and heterosexual. They speak to larger societal ideals of who women are and what they can do with their bodies which players come to re-think during their time playing roller derby. Such challenges and the accompanying stigma can be used as a way to maintain the status quo or current power structures and institutions that may be threatened by such transgressive acts. However, players confront such challenges in interesting ways that potentially minimize these effects.

Challenges Faced Playing Roller Derby

Throughout my interviews, few participants mentioned experiencing challenges without me probing them further; instead they expressed very supportive experiences. This may be in part because skaters expressed they did not care about negativity so they choose to ignore it or

they do not experience or perceive these challenges as negative even though to an “outsider”³ they read as negative. When asked directly if they have had any negative experiences or responses from people respondents simply stated:

Chloe (31, white, queer): Everyone’s been super, super supportive.

Gigi (31, white, heterosexual): I’ve never had like a bad or negative reaction to it. Never. Just an unknowing reaction.

Gina (29, white, heterosexual): No, a lot of people think it’s really neat that I’m doing something so, you know, not mainstream. At least nobody has been negative to me directly about it. They may be talking about it behind my back, but I don’t know. If they are TFB [*too fucking bad*].

In general, when asked about how people (i.e. family, friends, coworkers, strangers, etc.) responded, participants explained how excited or interested people are that they play roller derby. Ashley (25, white, heterosexual) explained, “They’re [coworkers] fascinated by it...they’re really into it and they want to know all about it so they’re really, really supportive and just kind of, you know, they’re not from the roller derby world so they find it fascinating and they want to know all about it.” Similarly, Meryl (37, black, bisexual) also mentioned how supportive her co-workers were: “My coworkers feel pretty cool about it. They came to some of my bouts so they’re excited and they’ll see stuff in the paper and tell me about.” Kate (30, white, heterosexual) talked about how non-coworkers reacted. She said, “everyone is normally, who doesn’t know about it, is really excited and wants to know everything and is like they put you up almost on like a little pedestal...like you see their eyes light up a little bit so I think that’s awesome.” People show interest in players’ stories, know about the sport, or come to bouts. However, even if skaters do not perceive challenges or issues in relation to their participating in

³ Outsiders are nonmembers of roller derby. This can include, but is not limited to family, friends, co-workers, spouses/partners, acquaintances, strangers, etc.

roller derby *per se*, analysis of their interviews makes clear that they do experience challenges on other grounds.

Challenges that roller derby players face are very similar to those outlined in my review of the previous literature on female athletes in contact sports. These challenges fall under three interlocking categories: presumed masculinity/unfemininity; presumed lesbianism; and being viewed as sexual objects. This culminates in the sport and the athletes not being taken seriously or being seen as illegitimate. A final challenge which was not foreseen in the literature was an expressed concern by outsiders that participants would get hurt.

Gendered Challenges: Presumed Masculinity/Unfemininity

As previous studies on female contact sports have demonstrated, roller derby skaters are stigmatized as unfeminine or masculine because of their participation in a contact sport. Participants noted that when they talked to outsiders they often expressed stereotypes about skaters, including the belief that players were tough, strong, volatile, rude, brass, and aggressive, all descriptors normally applied to men for their “masculine” connotation.

Alex (26, Hispanic, heterosexual), for example, stated that people “assume that roller derby players are really, really big, really volatile, very loud females, just, you know, out there to kind of, thinking it’s very violent and a lot of girls covered in tattoos and booty shorts and all that.” Similarly, Anne (34, Latina, heterosexual) also experienced this challenge when she said, “Well of course it’s usually, ‘well you must be pretty tough because you hit people and you get punched in the face’.” This stereotype is even more apparent in Gigi’s quote:

...when people think roller derby your stereotype is still like your bigger badass chicks, tattoos, biker babes. It sounds like a big, intense, aggressive, violent, physical sport. It sounds like something more akin to wrestling where you expect people to almost get hurt and you’re not gonna have like a prissy kind of little girl playing in a sport where you’re

gonna get hurt and like get thrown around and stuff. You're gonna have like you're tough women, you're bigger badass women.

Gigi's quote, like Alex and Anne, illustrates the belief that feminine women or "a prissy kind of little girl" cannot play roller derby; rather, a masculine woman is needed. Notions of acceptable forms of femininity and masculinity govern the ideas of who and what a roller derby player can be.

Because of this assumption that roller derby players are big, strong, physical "girls," when women tell outsiders they play roller derby, responses can range from surprised to unsurprised depending on the skater's body size or personality characteristics. Small, polite, or "nice" women usually provoke the greatest amount of confusion or disbelief. On the other hand, outsiders were less surprised when a skater exhibited the reverse. Both Molly (33, Asian, heterosexual) and Alex are good examples of this confusion. Molly said:

When I first started working at [name of workplace] I had to do an...orientation thing with...all the new [workers] and we had to say an interesting fact about ourselves so mine was, "I do roller derby" and you know, so everyone was like ha-ha that's kind of cool. Then we had this break thing when you can go and mingle with all the [workers] and this woman came up to me and she said, 'aren't you a bit small to be doing that.'

For Alex, it was not only her size, but her personality as well. She said:

Well a lot of people are surprised just because of my size. I mean I'm pretty short, I'm pretty small and again with my job I am very polite and I'm super sweet and everybody just has this crazy persona with derby that I'm just a badass bitch who throws punches and you know, just very gimmicky. And so I get that a lot.

This is a challenge in that skaters had to constantly dispute these stereotypes of roller derby players as masculine. Women are supposed to be polite and sweet which goes against outsiders' beliefs that skaters would be unfeminine and therefore not these things. The challenge that players face is the notion that they cannot be both feminine and masculine, both tough and aggressive, while being small and polite at the same time. In this way, players have to combat

this belief in the dichotomous relationship between masculinity and femininity which underlies this surprise among outsiders.

Some participants, such as Jocelyn (39, white, bisexual) and Noelle (34, Hispanic, sexually open), faced the opposite reaction of Molly and Alex where people were less surprised by their participation. Noelle explained this “less surprised” response to me:

Noelle: Most of my friends and family were just like, most of them literally were like, ‘yes that makes sense’ or like ‘that’s awesome!’ ‘That’s perfect for you! I can’t believe you haven’t done this earlier!’ Most people were just like, ‘yep, uh huh.’

Interviewer: Why did your family and friends say, ‘oh roller derby is perfect for you’? What is it about you that garnered that response?

Noelle: I’m a fucking rebel and I’ve always been really into sports. I had an older brother who was a really good athlete...I always competed with him. I always strived to fucking be the best and I was just really super competitive and I was head strong. I didn’t listen much to authority so I was just always just gonna do what the fuck I wanted to do anyway.

Jocelyn explained to me that these reactions were in part because she is 5’10”, “rough and tough”, and she is intimidating partially because of her job in the military. Jocelyn and Noelle received the opposite reaction than Molly and Alex because they are in many ways not stereotypically feminine, so to outsiders it would make sense that they play a masculine contact sport. Because they display stereotypical masculine traits of competitiveness, toughness, rebellion, and are tall this yields to an unsurprised response because they epitomize outsiders’ notions of skaters as unfeminine. Their perceived lack of femininity contributes to the challenges of who and what a roller derby player is. Outsiders can use Jocelyn and Noelle as examples as to why people like Molly and Alex do not fit. Overall, these responses demonstrate that skaters face a similar challenge to what other female athletes experience, that of stereotypes of female athletes as masculine. Players are seen as not being able to be both masculine and feminine, or neither.

Sexuality Challenges: Presumed Lesbianism

As described earlier, notions of gender (i.e. femininity and masculinity) are deeply linked to ideas about sexuality, particularly through the lens of heteronormativity which is sustained through naturalized gender roles that rest on the notion that man and woman are complementary genders and that sexual relations are most fitting between opposite genders. Thus, the challenges based on masculinity/femininity influence challenges roller derby players experience based on notions of sexuality—if one is masculine than one must also be a lesbian. Roller derby players are thereby stigmatized as lesbians. And though research has demonstrated that female athletes in other sports feel stigmatized by such labeling, most roller derby players I interviewed did not view it this way; they viewed such labeling or questions as irrelevant or warranted little or no attention.

Alex explained, “They just, you know, assumed that I was a lesbian or they assumed that roller derby was full of lesbians. [Name of ex-boyfriend/father of child] actually used to tell me that a lot which always bugged me, you know. So yeah people would just assumed that I was either gay...” Correspondingly, Gracie (25, white, heterosexual) experienced jokes about being a lesbian: “people do like make jokes sometimes where you’re like oh I play roller derby and they’re like oh are you a lesbian now? It’s like no (laughs) why would you say that? But I think there is a stereotype.” Hilary (28, black, heterosexual) recalled a specific moment where she faced this stigma:

...I’m remembering a specific time when I was out with a friend of mine who is a lesbian and this guy was asking us about roller derby and we were being very nice to him and then he started hitting on us and we like shut it down and he started like shouting at us that we were all lesbians anyway.

These quotes demonstrate how skaters experience stigma about presumed lesbianism from outsiders and this stigma pushes me to question how it may be used to limit threats to the status quo.

Although many of my participants reported being called lesbians, the majority viewed such encounters or stigma irrelevant, inappropriate, or unnecessary. Because of the belief that such questioning is not acceptable; when people make these assumptions skaters pay little attention to them or confront them in order to demonstrate their unhappiness with the challenge.

Carol (27, white, lesbian, identifies as a trans-woman) explained:

I've heard a considerable stigma about most of them [skaters] being like super butch lesbians and I also jump to correct that one. Someone will be like how many lesbians do you got on your team and I'm usually like I don't know some teams have more than other...so I always try to correct people that way and in as joking way as I can.

Tonya also experienced what she calls, the “stigma for lesbians in roller derby” and has had colleagues make jokes about her and the sport being lesbians. Like Carol, Tonya chooses to be proactive rather than defensive, using it as a teaching moment to educate others about who is playing roller derby. However, Tonya takes this a step further and critically analyzes why this stigma exists.

I think...it's kind of sad that any time you do something that's out of the norm of a cutesy, fragile little girl people all of the sudden people go to the lesbian jokes and it's like that with everything. I mean Hillary Clinton, she's a strong, powerful woman, she's intelligent, lesbian. Everybody calls her butch, says she's a dude, that's just something that goes with the territory...it's always oh you're a lesbian 'cause you're strong and independent.

Tonya's quote exemplifies the ways in which others attempt to regulate women's behavior through stigmatization; by identifying with Hillary Clinton, she chooses to deflect the stigma. In this way, instead of viewing lesbianism as a relevant concern or challenge, players in roller derby come to accept and appreciate diversity. Gigi explained, “in here [roller derby] it's [lesbianism]

almost celebrated, you know, it's almost celebrated in roller derby as opposed to taboo in a way. So I think it's an acceptance thing. I think that's why those girls gravitate towards roller derby because they feel accepted." Roller derby is a space that is accepting of all types of individuals including those who identify as lesbians, therefore, when skaters experience this challenge they do not perceive sexual orientation as something that needs to be proved or as something that needs to be discussed which may allow for a different relationship with sport and sexuality to be developed.

Sexualized Challenges: Sexual Objects & Trivialization

Roller derby players experience a focus on their attractiveness or selves as sexual objects rather than on their athletic ability and performance. However, this sexualization goes both ways. That is, skaters experience sexualization from outside sources, but they have also experienced skaters sexualizing themselves in order to profit from it. First, I will examine how players might be contributing to their own sexualization then look at how skaters experience outsiders' objectification of them and the sport.

In my literature review I questioned the potentially functional nature of the sexualization and objectification of roller derby players' bodies where these constraints are not imposed on them, but chosen. I suggested that this showed how players are already engaging in complex gender and sexuality play. Given the responses from my participants, however, my hypothesis does not appear to be entirely true. There is a complexity to their own sexualization where the participants in my study are in fact attempting to distance themselves from it in order to legitimize themselves, but also recognizing the historical benefits of selling sex. This complexity also comes from roller derby's history which has allowed for variation and sexuality in uniforms

including fishnets, booty shorts, and low cut tops. Roller derby is at an impasse with whether the players want to continue to have a variety of clothing and uniform options which can range from the sexy side with booty shorts and fishnets to the stereotypical athletic look.

Noelle explained the role of sexuality in clothing throughout the resurrection of roller derby:

I think in the beginning in the resurrection of roller derby there was a lot of skaters that just assumed, okay, this is time to dress up and be really sexy and exploitative which I think there are leagues that do do that... So I think that maybe in the beginning when it was resurrected some of those images might have done something to the psyche of the sport in general, but I mean nowadays it just seems like it's pushing so much more professional.

However even within this impasse or push towards the "professional", Tonya has realized the importance of sexualization in getting people to come to bouts:

... The sad part is there are some teams within the sport that do that [sexualize sport] because I mean sex sells and they make more money and people come to their bouts, but they oversexualize it a little bit... but that's just all money making. I don't know sometimes I think that does take away from the actual sport itself.

For some teams, sex sells, which can be a benefit to making money, but at what cost? This is a highly contested debate within roller derby with people standing on both sides of the line. Even with such a history players are making a conscious decision to move away from this in order to be viewed as a real or legitimate sport.

Even with a past and to some extent a current participation in their own sexualization, skaters have expressed negative experiences with outsiders objectifying and sexualizing them and the sport. Hilary told me about an experience where she was participating in a radio interview to promote her roller derby league when the DJ asked, "does anyone ask you to keep your skates on in bed?" She explained, "I feel like that response is a little bit typical, like, just the kind of fucked up, creepy sexualization of the sport". Rather than focusing on her as an athlete,

the DJ focused on her as a sexual object. Hilary continued, “I’ve had a lot of experiences like that where it’s like an immediate, like, sexual comment or some kind of inappropriate sexual comment will come from that. And it’s almost like those people are trying to show you like where you and your body belong.” Anne also mentioned this sexualization when she said, “It’s a female sport that involves hitting so yeah, there’s some creepy dudes there that are really creepily into that stuff because maybe you’re gonna see a boob, you know, who knows. So, yeah I think all that stuff is a part of it.”

For Hilary, the sexualization is experienced through direct comments, while Anne experiences this as an understanding that outsiders want to see “boobs”. Tonya described a “feeling” of sexualized stigma rather than direct verbalization. She recounted times when she would go to eat with her teammates after practice and be given disparaging looks by outsiders at the restaurant. When I asked what these looks signified to her she said, “I always get the feeling they just mean like, ‘trashy chicks in skates,’ you know, slapping each other and pulling each other’s tops off and stuff like that.” In any of these circumstances, women’s bodies are viewed as sexual objects not as athletic persons. If women can reclaim their bodies as Hilary does through roller derby this could lead to women challenging their positions in their daily lives and broader society.

These three overarching challenges of presumed masculinity, supposed lesbianism, and sexualization combine to make the sport seem to be one that need not be taken seriously or be seen as legitimate. The sexualization of the sport contributes in part to the perceived illegitimacy of the sport. Carol said, “I think they also remember like Whip It! or that Raquel Welch movie, so there’s also a sex appeal kind of angle to it as well...that image still exists and gets in the way of it being viewed as a legitimate sport.” However, according to Noelle, notions of womanhood

and femininity also contribute to the lack of legitimacy. She said, “I think for the most part it poses the same sort of challenges that you know, you’re a woman and yes you can be an athlete, but you’re not *as* good as an athlete as the men are so therefore you probably shouldn’t get paid as much because you won’t draw as many crowds.” Because women are not understood as capable athletes in the same way as men, women in roller derby, like in other contact sports, are not taken seriously enough for money to be invested in them. Players realize that they are not taken seriously and, as I will demonstrate later, take measures to demonstrate their worth.

Roller derby is unique in that it is not only issues of gender and sexuality which contribute to the sport not being taken seriously, but it is also in part to their 1970’s past. Anne exemplified this idea when she said:

Well I think typically when you talk to somebody about roller derby and they don’t know what it is they always assume it was how it was in the ‘70s...So I think there’s an element that it’s not taken seriously as a sport because in the past it wasn’t really a serious sport...But I think because of all the old stuff it’s hard to separate from it and I think that that’s a challenge for the sport.

Because roller derby’s past is filled with staged fights, pre-determined winners, and limited rules, skaters have to prove to outsiders that the sport is real, which pose an additional challenge onto skaters that other sports do not face.

Injury Challenges

Another final challenge that is not unique to roller derby, but was not evident in the review of the literature on contact sports, is that of overcoming concerns for injuries. A majority of participants’ family members, as well as some non-family members, expressed considerable worry that the participant would get hurt while playing roller derby. Meryl explained, “I guess there wasn’t any big reactions other than my family don’t want me to get hurt because I’m not

saying I'm prone to injury, but I have torn certain ligaments during my time playing sports. That's about the only reaction, don't get hurt." Alex's mom also struggled with notion of injury: "My mom on the other hand I think she wanted to be supportive, but knowing that I was small she just assumed I was gonna get hurt a lot. Yeah, my mom has only seen one of my bouts, she's terrified of watching me get hurt." Likewise, Kate said:

I think it was just about injury. There was no, I don't think anyone was worried about anything else it was just like they didn't want me to hurt myself, but that's not gonna make any difference and I'm gonna, also I'm so clumsy normally that I'm gonna hurt myself no matter what.

While I did not collect comparative data to men's roller derby players or other comparable male athletes, it is not out of the realm of possibility that this concern for injury is due to the skaters' gender. This gendered narrative and challenge serves as a way to remind women that their bodies are breakable in a way that men are not reminded or experience. Stereotypes which govern women's bodies—for Meryl this is proneness to injury, for Alex it is her smallness, and Kate her clumsiness—help to construct the narrative that women are more likely to be injured and thus we should be nervous for them when they play a contact sport.

In her interview, Ashley also demonstrated this gendered narrative when she said:

Well my family's never seen me play (laughs), but they're just like, 'do you really want to do that,' like, 'you're gonna get injured,' so they're still, even though I've playing for a few years they're still kind of iffy about it 'cause they're afraid of me getting hurt and I mean that's a reality. 'Cause people break bones all the time. But I mean they know that I really enjoy it and they think it's good for me so, but they don't really understand it.

Injury is a "reality" that both men and women experience when playing sport, but this concern may be exacerbated because of skaters' status as women and while skaters' relationships and understandings of gender and bodies change throughout roller derby this does not disabuse them from previous beliefs. Skaters can see themselves as strong or empowered, but can also be

influenced by gendered cultural narratives of “clumsiness,” “proneness to injury,” and smallness. Therefore, this is a complicated gender negotiation even with changing understandings.

Roller derby is in many ways like other women’s sports in that player experience challenges based on stereotypical notions of gender and sexuality which are expressed in various forms (i.e. perceived masculinity, assumed lesbian, sexualization). While these challenges may differ slightly from sport to sport or even person to person, they emerge from the same power relations.

Strategies for Dealing with Challenges

Although the roller derby players I studied are often faced challenges similar to those other female athletes in contact sports experience, they often respond to them differently. Except for one particular case, skaters chose to change other people’s mind about them and the sport rather than focus on changing themselves through dress, body positioning, or the people they surround themselves with. They do so by employing several strategies: (1) explain to outsiders that roller derby is a *real* sport; (2) educate outsiders on who plays roller derby both verbally and visually; and (3) shrug off or defend themselves. The one strategy that takes a different track involves changing uniforms and clothing in order to achieve legitimacy.

This is a REAL Sport

Jocelyn simply states, “I mean yeah we wear booty shorts, but we are athletes at the same time...[I’m] just trying to promote that athletic side to the sport.” When faced with sexualization or trivialization challenges, skaters’ go-to strategy is to emphasize that roller derby is a real sport and promote it as such. Emphasizing and promoting roller derby as a real sport means players

stress the physicality, the rules, the risk of injury, and themselves as athletes. When I asked Carol about how she responds to people who do not believe roller derby is a legitimate sport she explained:

I talk about my experiences and practice. I'll usually say something like oh no it's a real sport. We still do all the showing off stuff but it's a real sport. I get knocked around so much at practice and there's so many nights where I get done and I can barely walk.

Likewise, Tonya emphasized the physicality through training. She said: "I try to explain to them one of our work outs so they understand the training aspect of it...we do strengthening and endurance and we do like squats and jumping jacks and suicides and laps and we do a lot of really physical, physical work and we work hard at it." For Carol and Tonya, emphasizing the "realness" of the sport and them as athletes is in demonstrating that the sport is a physical workout which causes pain and soreness. On the other hand, Gigi focuses more on the rules which signals to her that the sport is real. Gigi said, "...we have rules and regulations, we're not allowed to hit like with elbows or push people or clothesline or anything like that. It is has become over the last decade or two a very legitimate structured sport and we want to be recognized as that." Similarly, Chloe inquires with outsiders if they understand the game or not in order to help them learn more about the game. She said:

I tend to also ask if they understand the rules and they're like, 'oh wait there are rules, not just skating around and hitting each other' and I'm like no. And so any time I have a chance to be like oh here's how the game works it actually does change a lot of people's thoughts around it...

Both emphasizing the physical aspects of the sport and the rules are seen as something that all *real* sports should have. By highlighting this in conversations, skaters are demonstrating to outsiders that the sport is like any other sport and thus deserves respect and little or no stigma.

The focus on rules can also be about comparing current flat track roller derby to its 1970's past. Julie explained, "I get to tell them that it's not like what they remember back in the

olden days and that it's still full contact, still people can get hurt, but it's a much more competitive, strategic, mind-involved game than just going out there and pushing and bumping and hitting." Chloe agrees with Julie's assessment in that roller derby is not like it was in the past or "olden days". She says, "I feel like it's a lot of education of people to what roller derby looks like now and like it's a completely different sport than what we had back in the 70s, but that's what people typically will think of is like the 70s." Anne exemplifies Julie and Anne's feelings. She explained:

Well I think typically when you talk to somebody about roller derby, and they don't know what it is, they always assume it was how it was in the '70s like when they would watch Raquel Welch movies and that sort of thing. So I think there's an element that it's not taken seriously as a sport because in the past it wasn't really a serious sport and that's where a lot of people kind of think that's how it is. So when you explain like the different rules and all the different things that are a part of it now, it's kind of like oh, that is kind of different. But I think because of all the old stuff it's hard to separate from it and I think that that's a challenge for the sport.

Roller derby players combat notions of the sport's past by demonstrating to outsiders that the current roller derby is very different from before and is very real versus the stunts and theatrics of the past. By doing this comparison players are actively trying to dispel notions that they or their sport are illegitimate or not real which in turn would lead to less stigmatization.

This real sport strategy is quite prevalent when skaters are trying to combat against their families' fears of injury. Roller derby being seen as a real sport means that injury is okay or at least not too big of a deal because all sports have a risk of injury and all legitimate athletes have faced injury. Therefore, if other athletes get hurt, they can also get hurt and it is potentially not quite as stigmatizing. Gina, recently fractured her ankle playing roller derby. This injury required surgery during which seven screws and a plate were placed to secure her bones. Gina mentioned how her family, especially her father, was resistant to her going back to roller derby. This is how she responded to them: "I'm like Derek Jeter and I have the same injury and he's back...nobody

questioned him when he said he was going back. So if he can do it why can't I? What's the difference other than the fact he makes millions and millions of dollars and I don't (laughs)."

Chloe used a broader example to demonstrate the realness of the sport and herself as an athlete. She said:

...Football players don't care that they're gonna get hurt, I mean they get paid a lot more money to do what they do, but people don't think about the danger side of it...I think it's also when people think it's a performance it's another way of being no, no, no it's real, that was a skate that just kicked me and this is what happens.

Like football players or Derek Jeter, skaters face real dangers of injury, but unlike them, skaters in roller derby face significant stigma about the potentiality of injury. By comparing themselves to other athletes, specifically male athletes, Chloe and Gina are seeking to legitimize roller derby as real and dispel notions that they should stop playing because of the risk of injury. Overall, the real sport strategy is useful because skaters are comparing themselves to a male or masculine standard of sport which is viewed as more valuable than a female centered sport. By doing this they are attempting to alleviate some of the negative stigma that they and their sport experience because they imbue value in their sport by looking like a masculine standard. Once again, we see the gendered nature of sport which imposes certain challenges and strategies onto differing gendered bodies.

Education of Who Plays Roller Derby

Although the real sport strategy relies heavily on educating outsiders of the realness of the sport, education is also used in explaining to outsiders the various kinds of women that play roller derby. In this case players are responding to challenges which confine players to stereotypes, particularly as big, butch, lesbians by highlight the diversity of skaters. In my interview with Gracie she mentioned that people joked about her being a lesbian because she

plays roller derby. When I asked her how she responded to someone who said that she said, “I’m just like no. Not everyone in roller derby is a lesbian and in fact people are varied and they have kids and it’s diverse. Hopefully someday people will get that.” Anne agrees with Gracie’s sentiment that roller derby is diverse. When I asked her how she responds to stereotypes she explained:

Well I usually just say, well, actually, I mean everybody plays roller derby. And then I’ll give them examples of like my team. I’ll be like, well, there’s one girl on my team that’s a stay-at-home mom and she has three kids and she takes them to soccer practice, and then there’s me who maybe yeah I could have weird hair and I wear weird makeup sometimes, but then I also have a professional job so I don’t look like that all the time and then, you know. I have a nurse practitioner on my team, I have a transgender person that’s on my team. There’s students on my team. Really you can look like anybody and play just like any other sport, you don’t have to be a certain way.

Like Gracie and my other participants, Anne responds to stereotypes by facing them head on and dispelling the myth of a certain type of skater. This is about dispelling misconceptions of sexual orientation, motherhood, and occupation, but it also means challenging the assumption that there is one certain female that can play roller derby—that of the big, burly woman.

Julie, who in many ways fits this stereotype as a taller, heavier set woman, confronts the assumption that everyone in roller derby looks like her. And, Molly, who has a shorter, smaller body type, also points to the wide variety of bodies in the sport. They explained:

Julie: ...I tell them right off roller derby has all shapes and sizes and there’s no one size for roller derby. Sometimes the small players you would stereotype as not being good in roller derby are the best jammers and are so agile and quick in their movements that they can score lots of points. That’s their role just like in football you would have 350 pound linemen and you’d have the 180 pound wide receiver.

Molly: I just usually just kind of say well...pretty much anyone can do derby right and it’s not like you want a whole team of like Beyonces on the track or you don’t want a whole team of I don’t know someone really small, Rice Rockets [small skater from Australia] or whatever. So you want to have the mix between like different body sizes and that sort of stuff.

While Julie and Molly are at two ends of the spectrum in terms of body type, they both are confronted with stereotypes about players and chose to point to the diversity of women in roller derby in response. Using this strategy helps to diminish stigma based on gender and sexual constructions and create new relations of power.

If education proves to be less than successful or if skaters need supplementary tools besides verbal explanation to highlight either the “realness” of the sport or the diversity, skaters opt to show outsiders through pictures or inviting them to games. When asked how she responds to negative challenges Chloe said:

Typically I’m like, let me show you actually what we do and I feel very blessed that we have amazing photographers out here... and they post all their photos everywhere so it’s like I can actually show exactly what I mean to people. Here is what we do. Does this look like what you expected? And that typically takes care of a lot the questions.

Being able actually to show someone what roller derby is, either through photographs or in person, is a way for outsiders to be confronted with what the sport really is.

Jocelyn was one of my few interviewees who explained that her family expressed negative views about her playing the sport, and this strategy was shown to be fruitful for her. She told me:

My family didn’t like it so much. They thought I was setting a bad example for the kids. I’m like “well...why don’t you just watch it, see what it’s like before you pass judgment.” So we took them to a bout, and they were like “Oh! Oh, yeah I like this” so I’m like okay, there we go. There we go. So that was good.

Like Jocelyn, Kate believes that inviting outsiders to bouts helps to breakdown stereotypes. Kate explained, “There’s very much a stereotype of like the fishnets, but then when people come and see they realize. And like people who know me know I’m not like that so they don’t have that, but like I think it’s slowly diminished, like going down.” Players hope that by being able to see Kate and Jocelyn in athletic, performance wear, being physical, outsiders will see a new vision of

roller derby. Through both verbal and visual education skaters attempt to respond against many of the challenges that they face for the ultimate goal that outsiders begin to love and appreciate roller derby as much as they do and will no longer have to face said challenges.

Shrug Off or Defend

In a smaller number of cases participants mentioned that they would shrug off or defend themselves against outsiders' negativity and challenges. These strategies were rare in the previous literature on female athletes in contact sports (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; Pelak 2002a). While about half of my participants mentioned this strategy, it could relate to the larger tendency for skaters to state they do not experience negativity. Meryl explained, "I don't really pay any mind to other people's reaction if it's negative." Similarly and more expansively, Jocelyn expresses a comparable assessment of shrugging off negativity. She said, "I thought they were being judgmental and I dismissed their statements and carried on. Because it's our life and it's our family and it's our decision." Alex experienced a similar situation as Jocelyn. Alex told me:

I just like shake it off because you want that fire inside of you, you have that desire to want to play and that you want to do it and I just kind of shake off. People are always gonna have something negative to say. I didn't really let it get to me or change my opinion.

In many ways outsiders and the accompanying struggles do not change participants' minds or actions, but confirm that skaters want to continue playing roller derby. Instead of acting in a more direct strategy of demonstrating the "realness" of the sport or education, players simply ignore the challenge and continue on playing the sport.

As mentioned earlier, skaters do not view lesbianism as relevant as such when confronted with this challenge some skaters forgo explaining the diversity of the sport in lieu of dismissing

these stereotypes or defending themselves or lesbians. Hilary explained a situation where a man accused her and a teammate of being lesbians. She responded:

I think when people assume that everyone is gay they feel like being gay is like a negative thing and that's the part of that offends me and bothers me and is like the part that I'll react to I guess. So I don't really feel like when people ask about that that it's even a valid question that deserves a direct response, but I think my response is usually does it matter to you what sexual orientation the people that you watch playing the sport are, like why do you care.

Ashley demonstrated a similar situation and response to Hilary, explaining that this assumption or accusation of lesbianism is something that “doesn't even faze [her] anymore” so she responds by saying, “no I'm not a lesbian, next question.” Both skaters are not “fazed” by such questioning of sexual orientation in that they do not view it as something outsiders should be concerned about. Whether they respond or not skaters do so in a defiant way rather than trying to assume heteronormativity.

Hilary not only mentions confronting the challenge of the stereotype of lesbianism in roller derby, but also the stereotype of skaters as sexual objects. During a radio interview, the radio DJ asked Hilary about her sex life which led us to discussing about how she responds in such situations. She explained:

I think that I was a lot more polite to the interviewer than I would have been outside of the recording studio, but I just said like no comment, and but otherwise I'll get pretty angry and I mean I'll usually take people to task before I'll walk away from them and then let them know that it's not okay.

This is similar to Tonya when I asked how she responded to outsiders who made comments to her about the sport being “slutty”. She said, “I'll be like no, that's crap, that's just stupid like notion, you know what I'm saying, it's just like, I don't know, I just don't have time for it.” Both Hilary and Tonya seek to confront people when they sexualize them or the sport as a way to limit their attempt to control or sanction their behavior.

A final example of defending oneself comes from Ethel (white, heterosexual), who was my oldest participant at age 59. Ethel faced a unique challenge of being perceived as “too old,” where outsiders told her she could not play roller derby because she was not the appropriate age. When I asked her how she responded to this challenge she said, “I said, where does it say what a person my age is supposed to do? Where is written down what I’m supposed to do? Where’s it written that I’m supposed to sit in that rocking chair and knit or crochet? Nothing against people who do that, [but] that’s not me.” This defiance was a strategy to combat notions of (un)acceptability and rather than shrug it off or stop playing her direct confrontation allows her to challenge other people’s understanding of age.

Changing Uniforms

While most strategies skaters employed were focused on changing outsiders’ opinions about roller derby rather than the players or the sport changing itself, one strategy was different. A smaller number of people talked about changing uniforms as a result of the need to be taken seriously as a real sport and to be seen as legitimate. Roller derby is unique from other sports in that it allows for some flexibility in uniforms and clothing. Usually only tops are somewhat standardized among members of a team, but not sport-wide; and there is much flexibility in the choice of bottoms, helmets, and other stylings. However, the belief is that if teams, leagues, or the association moves away from non-standardized uniforms to more standardized “athletic” uniforms, the sport and its players will receive more legitimacy because they will look like other sports and other athletes. While not all skaters practiced this, they did mention that this was an option and change that they had seen throughout roller derby. Both Ashley and Gigi explained this shift in uniforms:

Ashley: ...When I first started playing roller derby I wanted to wear like the tights and everything 'cause it's fun, I mean it's a fun thing, but now I think a lot more people wear like more athletic gear, we're kind of moving away from wearing the little skirts and tights and all of that...to more athletic stuff and partly I feel like it's so that we can be taken more seriously.

Gigi: ...My first couple years with the team everybody wore freaky outfits, like the socks! I have so many pairs of socks that just like don't match or do match and hardly anybody on my team wears socks anymore, like big, tall socks with things on them, like skull and cross bones. You know a lot of people don't wear those anymore on my team, but like the first couple years I was playing everybody wore them...

Like other skaters, Tonya explains, "we're not about the outfits...it's not about that like we want the sport of it to be appreciated." The belief behind this strategy is that if players begin to look more like the stereotypical athlete and sport they will get the recognition and be taken seriously as a real sport. This strategy also demonstrates the contention skaters may have at enjoying and appreciating the DIY ethos of the sport (also seen in Beaver 2012) and transgressive behaviors with the feeling and notions of legitimacy and their own stereotypes. This feeds into the complicated and sometimes conflicting notions roller derby players struggle with in terms of their understandings of womanhood and femininity.

Negotiations of Femininity and Womanhood

My third research question asked, does using bodies in different ways (i.e. engaging in physical contact) encourage roller derby players to re-think their notions of what it means to be a "woman"? A simple answer would be yes. However, like most gender-related understandings it is more complicated than that. First, it is not only about using one's body in gender transgressive ways, but also seeing other women's bodies engaged in these different ways. Noelle highlighted this when she said:

I mean I just think that strong, loud, women who speak their mind, I've always thought that, but it's like now I *see* them. It's like when I was young I thought oh these women

exist and that's how I want to be and now it's like I'm actually around them. I'm actually there. I'm actually doing it.

While Noelle has always considered herself a feminist, seeing other women do something outside the bounds of traditional acceptability of womanhood were important components of renegotiating and reaffirming what it means to be a woman for her.

Second, while roller derby contributes to providing a space to renegotiate women as capable beings, not strictly confined to pre-determined notions of femininity, this is complicated or limited by two main factors which include assumed biological narratives of gender and women's capability (or lack thereof) for violence. However, first I will discuss the ways in which skaters re-think notions of what it means to be a woman and how bodies are significant tools in this transformation. Then I will address some of the biological narratives of sex differences skaters discuss which can be limiting to this transformation. Finally, I will address how roller derby compares to self-defense. I will argue that while they are similar, I will also demonstrate how negotiations of gender and violence in roller derby are starkly different from self-defense.

Re-thinking Notions of Woman

Skaters in my study mentioned four ways in which their notions of what it means to be a woman had changed: (1) re-thinking what women are capable of; (2) re-thinking women's abilities compared to men; (3) re-thinking what is attractive in women or notions of beauty, and; (4) re-thinking the aspects of masculinity and femininity. In opening, I will explore the four new notions of womanhood skaters undergo during their time playing roller derby and then unpack how this can also be attributed to the accepting nature of roller derby which leads to an expansion of skaters' notions of what is possible for women.

First, skaters re-think what they and other women are capable of; particularly realizing their bodies have more potential than they thought before joining roller derby. Through roller derby and using their bodies in different ways, skaters come to believe that women can be powerful, move their bodies, knock people down, and other bodily tasks. Hilary explained:

...Mom's mother is always all about being delicate and like that being feminine means being delicate and gentle and all that kind of stuff and, you know, they're all of the other messages that you get about that too, so there was some moment for me where I was like you know, holy shit, I can fall down really hard and it's not a big deal.

Kate also experienced outsiders (and insiders) viewing her as fragile especially now that she is pregnant (she was roughly five months pregnant at the time of the interview) and still skating in some capacity. However she responds to them by saying, "I'm not as fragile as people think I am and that frustrates me. But I know they just don't want to hurt me in anyway, they're just worried, which is nice, but it is frustrating." Kate has realized through roller derby that women and especially pregnant women are not fragile, but are capable of strength, toughness, and durability.

Alex agreed with Hilary and Kate when she told me, "I truly believe that woman can do anything that guys can do and I realize that again from derby...society I feel like still wants us to be these sweet little stay-at-home moms and you know more power to women that want to be stay-at-home moms, but that shouldn't be our only option." And like Alex, Gina believes there are many more possibilities to womanhood. Gina explained:

I think it's one of those, I've always felt it, but then seeing it in action, there's so many different types of women on our team from all different walks of life and backgrounds and career choices and it really solidified, hey, we can do this. You know, we're girls, look what we can do. We don't need to be dainty and elegant. We can get out there and get sweaty and be bad ass.

Women are capable of much more than delicateness, and action and roller derby is influential in players realizing this. Whether it is pushing the bounds of women being seen as gentle, fragile,

and mothers to women as strong, tough, and durable roller derby is helping to expand these participants' possibilities of what women can be. Interestingly Ethel said, "I really believe that you can do anything you set your mind to. And if you want to play derby or if you want to do some other sport or you want to do some other thing in this world you set your mind to it you can do it." This quote demonstrates that this is potentially about more than just roller derby, but about "some other thing" that women might want to be a part of. It begs us to ask the question: can we see this transformation in other spheres?

The second area of womanhood that skaters in my study re-thought was their abilities in comparison to men. They began to think of themselves as just as capable as or strong as or tough as or otherwise similar to men. Alex expressed this sentiment to me when she talked about watching men and women play together in co-ed scrimmages. She said, "I've seen in derby, you know, girls can lay these guys out. Like girls, I mean, can be just as powerful and just as strong." For Gina this transferred into notions of women not being frightened by men saying, "just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I need to be intimidated by the guys so it's kind of helped me feel more comfortable." Molly feels so un-intimidated that she could feel comfortable hip checking her own male bodied fiancé. She told me:

I like threatening to hip check people because I can...it's really empowering that you know you can do that if you want to. I used to do it with my fiancé, so we'd do this thing where you both squat and then you hip check the other person and so once I did that and he fell down some stairs... I was like yeah I did that!

In these instances, players were face-to-face with men and were able to prevail, which proved to them that they, as women, are just as capable as men. This enabled them to feel empowered and un-intimidated by men, which could significantly alter their interactions with men outside of roller derby.

Carol stood out in my sample as she was the only person who identified as a trans-woman. She has a unique standpoint from which to compare the abilities and relationships of men and women because she participated in co-ed scrimmages and tournaments before and throughout her transition. Carol explained:

Once you get your ass beat enough times you start to maybe think, alright, so apparently women can be stronger than men. That's probably been the biggest part of it though. I mean going into co-ed bouts, oh this will be fun...and I'm on the ground, I'm pretty sure there's gonna be a bruise there tomorrow (laughs).

While Carol's experience is distinctive, it speaks to these same notions of abilities among men and women, and the realization that women can be as capable as men whether in terms of power, strength, or ability. Even in the most unique or standard situations, by playing roller derby, these women understand their relationship to men in ways different from before. Although, as I will demonstrate, this can be complicated in some ways by skaters' biological narratives, there was compelling evidence that they are at least challenging these ideas of men and women as different or opposites.

Players re-think notions of what it means to be a woman in a third way: by renegotiating what it means to be an attractive woman. Attractiveness was transformed from ideals of beauty that were skinny and delicate to muscular and strong. Ashley explained her own transformation:

I think that you can be a strong woman and smell really...bad (laughs), and just be like really beautiful 'cause I think that I find strength to be more attractive now and so when you see...like a strong woman who's to say that that's not feminine and that's not attractive...so my ideal has definitely changed 'cause I used to think that skinny girls were the ideal whereas now I think that muscle and strength and strong looks better.

Alex also underwent a similar transformation. She said, "I can tell you that before derby...I definitely had a complex about my body...you thought skinny was attractive, I mean that's what you've seen in the media, that skinny is attractive. Derby has really, really changed my opinion of what's attractive because curvaceous, strong, muscular women, to me that's attractive." What

skaters are finding beautiful or attractive are attributes that are not generally afforded to women: strength. Roller derby enabled skaters to see women as being capable of strength and finding beauty in that, which expands our understandings of women as more than one certain stereotype.

Chloe remarked about how much she loved this aspect of the sport. For her, beauty is so varied and different for the women in roller derby and that stood as something that needed to be recognized. At the end of our interview I asked Chloe if there was anything she would like to add that she maybe did not get to say or wanted to reinforce and her response was this:

I just think how remarkably beautiful the women who play this sport are. I don't know if I got to say that actually, but there have been so many, like just watching people reflect back their own beauty in certain ways has been like really amazing to watch and everyone does it in a very different and unique way.

I use Chloe's quote to highlight the variety in roller derby and how seeing these transformations does something to the women who participate and potentially the women who are fans and watch these women. By expanding notions of beauty, players develop of confidence in themselves that channel into all aspects of their lives. However, these definitions of beauty are very much tied to notions of white beauty.

The fourth way in which players negotiated what it means to be a woman was through re-thinking aspects of masculinity and femininity. In particular, skaters understood that they could have both masculine and feminine attributes and that such attributes can exist in women simultaneously. This is different than dissolving the binaries all together because the binaries of femininity and masculinity remain intact, but what can be feminine has expanded; incorporating stereotypically masculine attributes as feminine. An example of this can be seen in a quote from Jocelyn, who said, "...we can do this. Women can be strong and sexy at the same time; that those two things don't have to be separate. And what it means to be sexy is completely being redefined with roller derby." For Noelle, this blurring of the attributes was one of the reasons she

was interested in joining roller derby. Like most players Noelle had a visceral response when she learned about roller derby that resulted in her need and desire to play. When I asked what about roller derby sparked that kind of reaction she said, “I think it was just seeing, the fact that these women and girls were just being really, really tough, but maintaining their femininity at the same time...” These characteristics do not have to be separated into male bodies and female bodies, but can coexist in Jocelyn or other women and this is intriguing to the women in my study. In this way we see a redefinition of “what it means to be sexy” or put another way what it means to be attractive. Expanding understandings of womanhood and femininity allows for this new appreciation and understanding of beauty and of what woman can be.

Chloe, who identifies as queer, spent a lot of our conversation demonstrating she had a very flexible imaginary when it came to gender roles and identity, and roller derby was a part of that. When I asked her if her ideas of femininity or womanhood had changed since joining roller derby, she responded:

I think I’ve become more femme. I mean when I started derby I would have put myself as fairly butch and now like I wear makeup and heels and have dresses...I feel more comfortable doing that, but I think it’s also that sense of it’s okay to be tough and burly and feminine at the same time...[It’s] kind of a fun realization to start playing with your own idea of your personal femininity and masculinity.

Roller derby is a space which highlights masculinity and femininity as constructs and allows for more maneuverability and fluidity within gender. As with all of these negotiations and re-thought notions of what it means to be a woman, skaters are able to experiment with their bodies and use them in different ways in roller derby which enables them to have new understandings of themselves and womanhood.

Roller derby spurs these new understandings of womanhood by giving skaters the opportunity to use their bodies in gender transgressive ways, and also because of the accepting

nature of the sport. Because of gender and sexual diversity, skaters are able to see different types of women; especially in terms of sexual orientation and trans-identified persons who are seemingly more prominent. However, diversity is also seen in age, occupation, body shape and size, and other points of difference (though as I will note below, not in terms of race). Gina said, “I mean I think, especially with our team we kind of accept people for who they are and we don’t force them to be somebody else and so, you know, you can be any age, any height, any weight and do it.” Similarly, both Gigi and Carol recognize how accepting roller derby is:

Gigi: I think the girls who don’t look like your traditional athlete, clean, cut, long hair in a pony tail, no tattoos, like I think those girls who might feel a little unwelcome or an outcast going out for like a volleyball team or a softball team feel welcomed at roller derby...

Carol: Everybody is completely open to any and all possibilities. Over my travels I’ve met I think any and all possible varieties of sexual orientations or gender identity and some combination of both and everybody as a collective just kind of rolls with it... it’s something about the almost countercultural style that everybody is welcome...

All my respondents recognize that there is something special about roller derby where anyone can come to the sport and be accepted even if they cannot quite conceptualize what it is, even if this is not fully true given the racial and class limitations. Ashley tried to explain the acceptance as part of roller derby’s overall “kooky” nature and the subcultural aspect. However, whether it is the subcultural nature of roller derby, the DIY roots, the physical aspect, or something else, roller derby is a place of acceptance, according to the skaters in this study. Chloe explains why this is important:

I think there’s a lot of empowerment in roller derby and I wonder how to harness that. How do we bottle that and share that with the world more for people who aren’t gonna strap on skates or are too afraid or don’t think it’s their cup of tea? How does it translate or maybe it already translate and I just don’t understand that language right now.

Through roller derby, skaters’ imaginations are being expanded to new possibilities and the participants, like Chloe, want to share this with women outside of roller derby. Not only do they

want adult women to see this, but young girls like their daughters. Alex, who is the mother of a two year-old daughter, told me, “I’m doing something that, again, I’m surrounded by amazing females that like I want to be like, and so therefore, hopefully my daughter can see that.”

Likewise, Gina, a mother to a five year-old daughter, wants her daughter to be inspired in similar ways. When I asked her if she thought it was important that her daughter saw her playing roller derby she said, “I think it is. That way she can do whatever she wants. You know, she doesn’t need to do what society’s stereotypes say she needs to do. That she can do whatever she wants.”

Julie, a mother of two girls and one boy, has all three of her children involved in junior roller derby leagues. She recounted a story about a time when her daughter received negativity for her involvement in the sport, but the daughter felt confident enough to not let the stigma bother her. By encouraging children at a young age to use their bodies, to explore different challenges, and to strive to be better roller derby is expanding the possibilities of woman at a younger age and skaters feel this is a positive thing. That maybe, like Chloe suggested, the empowerment of roller derby can be harnessed into other activities and people and change existing power and gender relations.

Re-thinking Women and Race

Roller derby is a sport filled with primarily white women. While WFTDA provides no data on race in their demographic surveys it is clear from my interviews with women of color and my own experience as a skater roller derby is predominantly white. The fact that WFTDA is not keeping racial statistics speaks to part of this problem of roller derby ignoring issues of race. In my sample, women of color were similar to white women in that they both re-thought notions of womanhood in mostly the same ways. This only differed in terms of notions of beauty. While

many of the women of color expressed new understandings of what is attractive, there was still some contention in this. Hilary, a woman who identified as black, explained to me the difficulties of finding her sense of beauty in a league where she was the only black woman. She said:

I think that I started off as someone who was trying really hard to find like an identity that fit into a really like mainstream idea of what was feminine and also, like, as a black woman I think you kind of find a way that my body and my hair and my looks fit into a culture that's dominated by white women and people who don't look like me for the most part. And I think that definitely seeing other people and knowing that I really value them as strong women has changed how I look at myself and...expanded my idea of what that can be.

Roller derby served as a space where other forms of diversity could be prevalent which allowed her to come to appreciate her own beauty and diversity even if it did not fit into white standards. On the other hand, Meryl, another woman who identified as black, talked about having limited transformative experiences in terms of beauty, but also bodily and femininity, simply saying no or responding similarly when asked about changing experiences of these topics which may be in part to issues of race in roller derby.

Race was a prevalent issue for the women in my sample who identified as black or Asian, but race was less so or not at all for those who identified as Hispanic or white. Both Hilary (black) and Molly (Asian) mentioned being the only or one of the few women of color in their leagues.

Hilary: I think that it's kind of a little bit of a community that excludes people. There are definitely teams that make an effort to like foster diversity and recruit women of all races, but I know that I see my own teammates and I am actually the only person of color in my entire league.

Molly: I think that, very roughly speaking, roller derby is a very "white" sport. The vast, vast majority of people in the derby community seem to be white, although of course there are exceptions. In my league, for example, you've got what, 2.5 minority people?

While skaters and the larger roller derby community pride themselves on how accepting roller derby is to diverse populations, this seems to only be true for diversity in relation to identities of

sexual orientation and gender, and not race. The few skaters who discussed race attempted to understand how roller derby could be diverse in other respects but not in terms of race, and often questioned why roller derby was so white. Meryl pointed to several reasons why roller derby lacks women of color which included issues of visibility (“you gotta see somebody do it, for me to do it”), the cost of roller derby, and racism, either implicit or explicit, but particularly my participants experience this in interactions with white teammates and in recruitment practices.

Like Meryl, Molly sees the expense of roller derby potentially being a deterrent for women of color to join roller derby, saying, “If we think, for example, that race and socioeconomic status has a correlation, that might explain why we see fewer historically-poor races being represented. Derby gear is expensive!” She also notes this is similar to other expensive sports, such as ice hockey, which is dominated by white bodies. While I have no data to prove Meryl and Molly’s theory right, it is not out of the realm of possibility. Indeed, my sample participants are all highly educated, and have stable incomes either provided by themselves or partners which enables them to pay for equipment, insurance, and monthly membership dues.

Molly also agreed with Meryl’s assessment that visibility might influence the ability to recruit non-white women to roller derby. She said:

Suppose I go to practice and I'm fresh meat, and I don't see anyone like me. Maybe I will feel like I don't fit in, especially if there aren't that many other fresh meat with whom I can otherwise connect to. Or I look in FiveOnFive or on DNN⁴ and see very few people that look like me... And so if I don't see people that look like me, I'm not going to connect as well or be inclined to stay in derby.

Because roller derby is already viewed as being “white,” this may contribute to the difficulties in recruiting new skaters who identify as women of color. Issues of recruitment are not only about

⁴ FiveOnFive is the official magazine of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association and Derby New Network (DNN) is the “world's #1 destination for coverage of the sport of modern roller derby” (<http://www.derbynewsnetwork.com/>).

issues of visibility, but who are you actively trying to recruit. Leagues may consciously or unconsciously be recruiting only white women and excluding women of color in their recruitment techniques. Hilary explained her experience with this:

... When we're at a beer festival recruiting people and ten black women have come over and said that they really, really want to play roller derby and can we talk to them about it and we talk to them for a minute and then we yell across the room at the white woman who's like covered in tattoos and she's like I'm not interested, you know (laughs) and we spend like ten minutes trying to explain to her why she would love it.

White skaters might not see themselves as racist because they talk to women of color, but there is a disparity in the time and attention marketed towards white and nonwhite women. But why would those "ten black women" want to join roller derby when they clearly are not wanted as badly? This may be a reason women of color have, similar to the issues of visibility, for not joining roller derby.

Another form of racism which may also be unintentional or implicit is through the interactions of white skaters and nonwhite skaters, where white skaters say or do things that are perceived as racist or a way to keep women of color out of roller derby by nonwhite skaters.

Hilary recounted a moment when she experienced what she understood to be a racist encounter with teammates. She said:

I think none of my teammates would consider themselves in any way racist, but they don't realize the things that they're doing to keep people of color out of our league. Like there's this Mexican restaurant that was by our old rink that they would go to and they would say do you want to go dirty Mexicans because it was a Mexican restaurant and it was dirty and they didn't understand how that was racist. And like I have to explain that...

Molly has also experienced racism within her interactions with teammates. She said:

Sometimes, for example, at practice people will confuse me and [name of skater], and laugh it off not because we are both about the same size or we're both on the B team or we're both jammers, but because we're both Asian and "you know, all Asians look the same". And of course you're just supposed to laugh it off or something, but it still looks

like race is doing something there, even if nobody intends to be malicious or anything. I've actually had that done to me at my current league multiple times, by different people.

Both of these interactions demonstrate ways in which women of color might not feel comfortable or welcome in roller derby which may contribute to the whiteness of roller derby. However,

Meryl told me:

I went to WFTDACon the past two years and some of the sessions that I've sat in they're looking to see why more black people are not playing in the sport... It was more of like heavy thinking what can we do, not necessarily an action that we could take home and like bring so it was just up for discussion.

This demonstrates that there might be some recognition among WFTDA that racial diversity is a problem and they are working towards some sort of resolution to this. In general, it is important to keep in mind how experiences might be divergent based on race. While the experiences recounted by white and nonwhite women in my sample were for the most part similar, instances like the discussion of notions of beauty is one where it differs. Although this discussion of race is brief and not all encompassing, it demonstrates that race is a point of contention in roller derby and influences experiences of players. Expanding the racial composition of roller derby skaters could expand players' notions of racialized womanhood.

The Role of Bodies in Negotiations

Through using their bodies in gender transgressive ways, players experience the capabilities of their own bodies. This challenges them to re-think notions of womanhood and femininity because until then, most women have only experienced their bodies as fragile burdens (McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998; Roth and Basow 2004; Schorn 2013; Theberge 1991; Young 2005). Players come to experience their bodies and therefore their gender in different ways through (1) developing a different relationship with their bodies, (2) encountering and

enjoying physicality through their bodies, and (3) enduring injuries and pain; all of which are stereotypically masculine bodily connections.

To begin with, skaters' develop a different relationship with their bodies as bodies that "do" which allows them to learn to manipulate their bodies, eat correctly, see it as a machine or understand the mechanics of it, participate in off-skates conditioning, and trust their bodies. In this way, skaters learn that their bodies and themselves as women have more potential than previously thought. Kate explained:

It's like knowing what your body can take and also like learning I can actually handle that and moving your body in ways that you didn't...think was possible and it's learning how to use your body and your body can do amazing things if you just let it. I think that was one of the biggest things I had to learn is like not fighting against my body and just letting it do what it can and trusting your body.

Meryl also experienced this new trust and awareness of her body. She explained, "[Roller derby] makes me more aware and to try to stay physically fit and recognize when you're getting tired or not getting tired...So it was more of awareness and be conscious of it." Similarly Julie said:

I think of it in terms of what do I need to do to make this body part stronger to prevent an injury or with my most recent shoulder injury what do I need to do to continue to train around this injury until I'm strong enough to train that body part again. It's kind of looking at me as almost a machine.

These types of relationships with the body—either as a machine, being aware, or trusting it—are stereotypical of male bodies, so developing these relationships through experience in using them is a significant step in other negotiations of gender. By seeing and experiencing one's body as having potential and being capable of more, one can see women as capable of more.

Two participants expressed to me how roller derby helped them to develop new relationships with their bodies which in turn helped them to overcome eating disorders. Hilary's eating disorder got in the way of her playing roller derby because the lack of nutrition would lead her to faint or get sick while playing. She explained, "Roller derby was something that helped me

get healthier and start to recover from that,” because she wanted to excel at the sport and passing out during bouts or practices was no longer sustainable if she wanted to improve. Roller derby served as an arena for Hilary to see the importance of feeding her body so that she could accomplish her goals within roller derby. Roller derby also made her “value” her body as something that is capable of doing things which also contributed to her overcoming her eating disorder.

Gracie had a similar experience to Hilary’s, wherein roller derby helped her to overcome issues she had about her body and develop a different relationship with it. She explained, “I never would have been able to survive with those habits and instead like now it’s like I’m fueling my body.” In order to succeed in roller derby one needs to adequately fuel their body. Gracie described her “borderline eating disorder habits” as “stupid female issues” which implies that these issues are gendered which may be related to the fact that women generally do not develop relationships with their bodies as tools that are capable of doing things, but as things to be looked at by outsiders. However, roller derby served as an arena where Gracie and others could develop that relationship of their bodies as tools and could see the value and importance of their body in allowing them to do things like hitting, pushing, or skating and they could enjoy it.

The physicality of roller derby is also important to skaters in re-thinking notions of femininity and womanhood because they can see that they can actually do these things: that they can actually play roller derby, and they can enjoy it. Hilary explained this when she said:

I mean hitting was definitely one of those things, and hitting your friends and they’re happy that you’ve knocked them off of the track, like ten feet off of the track because they know that your team is gonna do well in the game, like that’s really cool to me and I think that, like I watch my brothers and guys in general get to like kind of have that relationship with their bodies and like their friends and it seems so foreign to me, but I mean I also really, I would never have thought that I could do. I mean I would never have thought I could roller skate, like I would have never have thought that I could do any one

thing that I do on skates. So I still get a lot of satisfaction even from just skating or like you know, turning around.

Alex and Carol both experienced a similar satisfaction from using her body in very physical ways. They explain:

Alex: I like that just the shift of your hips can cause somebody to fall down. I love the physicality of it. I love the way it makes us look. I mean I love how powerful you can feel by using your butt to kind of make somebody do what you want them to do.

Carol: There's a great sense of power that comes from hitting someone and knocking them over. It just fills you with just so much confidence and intensity, just a rush, just like a huge adrenaline rush...

Roller derby players are exhibiting gender transgressive bodily behavior by participating in general physical activity, but especially hitting and they are enjoying such behavior. Men, like Hilary's brothers, are afforded this opportunity with their bodies which puts them in positions of power over women. However, Alex and Carol find power in their ability to use their body to knock someone down and in this way they are contributing to their negotiations of what women are capable of and breaking down gendered barriers. The fact they can use their bodies in such way and enjoy it helps to change and reinforce their new understandings of womanhood and themselves as women.

A consequence of the physical nature of roller derby is the potentiality of injury. Throughout my interviews skaters recounted various injuries they have incurred while playing roller derby from more minor bumps and bruises to larger bone breaks. But few of them regarded them as devastating experiences. Instead they viewed injuries and pain as "badges of honor" or "trophies" which demonstrated to themselves and others that their bodies could come back from injuries. Stereotypical notions of woman posit that women would avoid situations where they could get hurt; and if they were to get hurt, it definitely is not something they should honor or

find pleasure in. Therefore, when players hurt themselves and find pleasure in it, they are subverting gender norms of what it means to be a woman.

Gina fractured her ankle during a practice and it required a plate and seven screws. After she had two of the screws removed she asked a friend to make them into a zipper pull for her derby bag. For her the screw was a “neat souvenir” and served “as a reminder of what happened, but that [she] can come back from it.” On the other spectrum of injuries, Ethel described to me a time when she got a large bruise which covered a majority of her thigh and side of her butt after taking a hard fall. She explained that “sometimes you like to show off your bruises” because it showed that despite her age she can play this sport and because it is “one for the team.” Injuries serve as a symbol to themselves and others that their bodies are capable of catastrophe, but that they can also move past them. Their capabilities or potential of their bodies are expanded by injuries and their eventual return. Ethel also points to how these bruises are part of a larger meaning to the overall community, that she is connected to her team through her bruise.

Similarly, Julie understood this connection when she said:

I think in general we're proud of them like war wounds and so we have a tendency to always post them facebook (laughs), we name them often, we attribute them to the people who gave it to us, so we're always proud and saying look what you did to me but not in a mean way more in a thank you for making this bruise show up on my body (laughs).

A sense of community is developed through the common experience of injury demonstrating that all women are capable of this and expanding what is possible and acceptable for women.

Because women having self-inflicted injuries are non-normative outside of their community, skaters encounter situations outside of roller derby where outsiders assume they are abused or battered women. In this way, skaters have to negotiate their feelings of badges of honor with the notion that women only get bruises or injuries from abusive relationships because women are not encouraged to harm themselves in potentially positive ways. Julie has

experienced this encounter first hand when she had a black eye and went to the grocery store to pick up some ice cream with her children. While she was standing in the ice cream aisle a “woman came up put her hand on my arm and went, ‘I’ll pray for you and your family’ and then walked away.” Julie then had to explain to her children that the woman thought their father abused her which they found hysterical. For Julie this was a funny story to share with people, but also gives her the opportunity when situations like this do arise to educate people on the sport that she plays.

Alex and Ashley also experienced the assumption that they were being abused because of visible injuries sustained in roller derby. For Alex this was with people at her work who were relieved to find out she was playing roller derby not “one of those women getting beat up by their boyfriends.” And for Ashley this was during a dentist appointment where the staff their made comments about abuse to her. Even as a funny story or a sigh of relief, these experiences are very telling to how we view women in society. They are not active agents who could attain these bruises on their own through physical work outs and sport, but rather inactive agents who are acted upon in a way that they would receive injuries. Our understandings of women as agents of pain or harm are limited, but through roller derby we can see an expanded view of what it means to be a woman.

As a whole, bodies are an important site for skaters to negotiate what it means to be a woman whether that is through developing a different relationship with their bodies as something that can “do,” enjoying physicality, or enduring physical pain. Through these bodily experiences skaters are able to challenge stereotypical ideas of what women are and can be and experience themselves as capable agents, as having abilities comparable to men, as being attractive even if they do not conform to standards of femininity, and experiencing both seemingly masculine and

feminine attributes. However, as stated earlier there are constraints to this transformation of self and understandings of womanhood.

Biological Narratives and Negotiations of Gender

While many participants talk about women being just as capable as men and the boundaries of masculinity/femininity being blurred, this rhetoric hits a wall when it comes to biological narratives of sex differences. In particular, many participants see men as being “built differently:” having more upper body strength, and having more testosterone which makes them stronger and more aggressive than women. These understandings of biology or inherent differences in men and women are contradictory to their new notions of women can do anything and in turn complicates their new sense of self. Both Alex and Carol, early in their interviews and as seen in earlier sections of this thesis, expressed that through roller derby they re-thought women’s abilities in relation to men, seeing women as just as capable as men. However, in the two excerpts below, we see Alex and Carol renegotiating this with their biological narratives of natural sex differences:

Alex: I think that’s it’s different in the fact that, um, obviously a guy’s body is different than a woman’s body. I think guys do a lot more tricks, and guys, you know, obviously guys have pretty hard hits just like girls, but I don’t know.

Carol: Apparently men and women bend very differently so that’s something I need to work on and, uh, also the fact that my hips just don’t bend side to side. I’m about as flexible as a two by four so we’ve come up with some ideas. I might start doing Zumba or Yoga or something to actually get some, some flow in my hips like some hula dancer.

Alex shows her ambivalence towards women being fully empowered with her belief of biological narratives which tells her men and women’s bodies are different in her speech patterns with her use of “um”, “you know”, and “I don’t know”. This uneasiness is also seen in her

original quote where stating, she confidently proclaimed, “girls can lay these guys out” but now said “obviously guys have pretty hard hits, just like girls” with less certainty.

Carol’s statement is interesting because she is a self-identified trans-woman who has experienced roller derby through both male and female bodies as she transitioned. Earlier Carol noted that she experienced firsthand that “women can be stronger than men” through getting her “ass beat enough times”, but in this quote above we see her struggle with her biological narrative that says women’s hips are naturally different than men’s hips. In both Alex and Carol’s statements we see this strain or contradictory message of sameness, but difference.

WFTDA has in some ways a revolutionary gender policy which allows transgender skaters to play on WFTDA leagues and teams provided that they are living as a woman and have sex hormones that are within the medically acceptable range for a female. Because of this policy, skaters are participating in the sport alongside women who were assigned the sex of male at birth which brings issues of biological and physiological narratives to the forefront. As such, when skaters talk about their experiences with trans-skaters they are often confronted with issues of biological sex differences which come against their new understandings of what it means to be a woman. And while most players talk about being supportive of WFTDA’s gender policy, players struggle with being accepting of trans-skaters and liking them as people with the feeling that they are not quite fully women. Trans-skaters explicitly push up against the cultural and biological narratives which say men and women are different biologically and physiologically which makes it difficult for skaters to negotiate their new understandings of themselves with what seem as fundamental notions of sex differences.

Like many of the participants, Gracie re-thought notions of womanhood and femininity through her participation in roller derby, but this came in conflict with her ideas of biology or

“science” as she puts it. She said, “it can be frustrating as a skater if you know that someone has transitioned and like they just have this brute strength and like size to them that you know come from the fact that maybe they used to be, um, a man” because “scientifically men are bigger and taller and have more muscle mass than women.” However, this was complicated when she explained why she was supportive of the policy even as she was frustrated with her experiences.

She responded:

Just personally I feel like people, you should be able to be what you want to be and I’m accepting of the fact that if you’re a man or a woman and you feel trapped in your body you should be able to change that and if you’re living as a woman you should be able to participate in anything that a woman is allowed to participate in.

Skaters must negotiate their womanhood or their gender by claiming the other skater has an advantage because of a biological, inherent disposition, but this contradicts their need for equality and personhood and their expanded understandings of woman. If skaters view women as capable or at least having the potential to be capable, which comes from their new found and expanded understanding of womanhood and femininity, than why could they not be capable of playing against a trans-skater at equal ability?

Jocelyn’s experiences with playing against and with trans-skaters also involved negotiations and it served as a way to affirm that men and women are different even if some of the trans-skaters could “pass”. Some of the attributes she mentioned which were affirming were communication styles (“their communication is different, guys tend to be closed and protective of what they say”), aggression and competitiveness (“I see much more aggressive competitiveness with males”), and body or bone structure (“defined jawline...shoulders were more broad...just squared...distance between the waist and the hips”). Although, Jocelyn felt the trans-skaters “acted like women” she could tell they were different because “didn’t look like women.” She explained, “you can just kind of tell” when probed why the trans-skaters did not look like women

which demonstrates the complicated negotiations of what is a woman's body and what is a man's body. These characteristics are loosely defined and skaters know it when they see it. Therefore, she used what characteristics she could as markers within her interactions with trans-skaters to negotiate what it means to be a woman and basically compared trans-skaters to this criterion to make a case if they were woman enough. Because these trans-skaters exhibited stereotypical feminine qualities, ones that Jocelyn and other women had, their gender and Jocelyn's gender were affirmed as women. However, Jocelyn notes the trans-skaters she was competing against were not quite women because they looked like men with their "masculine" and squared bodies. With this cis-skaters, like Jocelyn, can say trans-skaters are women, but not quite fully women which serve to affirm their status as real and biological women.

In doing this, skaters come to realize that the biological differences they perceive do not necessarily help trans-skaters or men skaters be better in roller derby. However, if you can hit harder than everyone else or have higher levels of aggression that can be advantageous no matter the circumstance. Gracie, whose teammate is currently transitioning, has noticed deficiencies in her teammate because of biological qualities saying, "women traditionally are stronger in like their core and their hips, whereas men are stronger like upper body and I think there's a lot of advantages to having that lower body strength in derby that she's struggling with right now."

Noelle, who has experience playing against both men and women, has noticed that they play differently. She explained:

...in general I've seen that women play better as a team and that their center of gravity is lower, a lot of their strength comes from their lower body and it's so much harder to move or get around them or hit them out of your way whereas men sort of do a lot of reaching and they're easily juke-able, they tend to go for big hits.

Within these quotes we see understandings of women as communicators with lower body strength and men as aggressors with upper body strength which reaffirms social understandings

of gender. Although skaters see women as potentially better than men and capable of beating men in a game of roller derby, they are still essentializing or naturalizing women and men and attributing this to biological narratives; contrasting their newer understandings of gender.

Meryl had an extreme aversion to men, including trans-skaters, playing roller derby because of her naturalizing gender, but she was not the only one. She explained, “I mean who wants to skate with a guy, you know, they’re not a girl. If their estrogen levels are supposedly where it is for women in the back of your mind you know he’s still a guy and he thinks differently.” This difference was particularly true for her when it came to issues of testosterone and aggression where she said, “the aggression level is different. It is *so* different. I guess I didn’t have enough testosterone in me to continue playing with them. I just couldn’t do it.” For Meryl, men are intrinsically more violent than women and even if women are showing aggression through roller derby it is at a different level than that of men. This was also seen in Jocelyn’s earlier comments on trans-skaters where she saw a “much more aggressive competitiveness with males” than in females. As I will explore later, aggression and violence is another area where gender is negotiated and complicated.

What is also important to note is that knowing trans-skaters in their own league can expand skaters’ view of what it means to be a woman past notions of biology or inherent difference. However, even with an expanded view there are often still residual feelings of struggle with the cultural and biological narratives and their own experiences. Kate, whose teammate is transitioning from male to female, explained her changing ideas: “On the whole everyone has been accepting and I think when you know someone who’s going through that you definitely become more accepting of it when you know somebody. It’s really strange adjusting to it, you know, saying she instead of he.” Similarly, Ethel explained her own journey of

transformation on her views of trans-gender skaters and WFTDA's policy which was very much influenced by having a trans-skater join her team. Before a trans-skater joined her team, Ethel viewed trans-skaters who were opponents as "the male species" who were "stronger" and "could just knock women out of the way", but after getting to know her teammate during their transition she now feels "different." She explained, "I think he ought be able to do what he wants to do so that made me see what I should have saw to begin with. They were a person out there playing a sport. They were a woman out there playing the sport...She should be able to do it."

Like Ethel, Gigi had issues playing other teams with trans-women on them, but after discovering one of her team's male referees was transitioning and becoming a female skater her perspective started to change and was complicated. Beforehand, Gigi noted having "feelings about not being cool with it," but when she learned of the transition she tried to be supportive because she's "always liked her" and knew how much "*she* wanted it". Gigi is still struggling with this complicated understanding of gender. While she likes her transgender teammate, she feels conflicted over whether or not she is fully a woman. This puts a lot of guilt and feelings of "weirdness" onto Gigi as she is trying to navigate what it means to be a woman. While many skaters still feel weird or struggle with pronouns—Kate being forthright in admitting that, Ethel's flip-flopping of "he" and "she", and Gigi emphasizing she—this may be a step to a more expanded view of what it means to be a woman. It should be recognized that the difficulty with pronouns may also be attributed to the belief that trans-skaters are not fully women yet which demonstrates that even as they attempt to be more accepting there is still ambivalence. However, in all of these examples being accepting is a step towards potentially renegotiating understandings of womanhood to more fully include transgender people in definitions of woman

although the conflicts between biological and cultural narratives must be faced before larger change can be made.

While some skaters really struggled with understandings of gender especially when confronted with trans-skaters, a few participants demonstrated an expanded view of womanhood and gender and were little influenced by the “biological” narratives. These participants are pushing for more acceptance and even greater notions of womanhood or personhood. For example, when asked about her opinions of WFTDA’s gender policy Anne responded with, “I think that they [WFTDA] just need to continue to be open-minded. I think that they also need to acknowledge that the policy may need to continue to evolve and be fluid as things continue to evolve with how that’s working out for everybody right now.” Chloe agreed with Anne and said:

I think it’s as inclusive as possible for right now. I think they’re definitely trying to be on the forefront of women’s sports and...I think it’s great that WFTDA is tackling gender identity ‘cause that’s part of our community. It’s part of roller derby, like, you know, people realize who they are or people become who they are I think more wholly in roller derby than other places sometimes ‘cause you’re allowed to be.

Later in our conversation she explained that she has had friends who begin skating and decided “to transition to be male and had to stop skating and it may not be because they’re on hormones, it’s because they identify as a man and that’s why they can’t skate and that’s a really weird place to be.” And she questions how WFTDA can reconcile “still respecting people’s choices as to who they are gender-wise” while also keeping it the *Women’s Flat Track Derby Association*.

Both skaters recognize the complicated nature of gender and have expanded their ideas of what is possible “gender-wise” while also recognizing that this is directly related to the space roller derby offers to skaters. Roller derby is a place where gender is questioned or where players are allowed the opportunity to question gender which leads to this expansion of what it means to be a woman. In their view, roller derby and WFTDA in particular must continue to realize this

and expand the possibilities of who counts as a woman for the Women's Flat Track Derby Association. And although biological narratives can complicate these negotiations, players still undergo some transformation in their understanding of gender and this is in part due to the role their bodies play in roller derby. By being physical in ways generally not afforded to them, women are experiencing the full capabilities of their bodies as active agents which have transformative effects on their notions of womanhood.

Comparison to Self-Defense

My final research question asked if roller derby transforms women's bodies in ways similar to self-defense (i.e. does participation in roller derby lead women to see their bodies as physical/powerful/violent). Simply put, yes, both roller derby and self-defense offer women a transformative experience fueled by using their bodies in gender transgressive ways. For the purpose of this thesis I focus on three ways in which roller derby is similar to self-defense which include (1) an increased confidence in self and bodies; (2) learning to view their bodies as strong and powerful and; (3) having experiences in roller derby that influence their everyday life. However, one difference came to light. Whereas women in self-defense came to view themselves as capable of violence, in roller derby, skaters distanced themselves from notions of themselves or the sport as being violent. Before I delve too deeply into this difference in conceptualization of violence I will first address the similarities of the two physical activities.

Through self-defense women are able to develop positive feelings about their bodies and confidence in their physical abilities while also reducing fear, increasing the comfort in interactions, and increasing their general self-worth. Much of this has already been made clear throughout this thesis through the players own recounting of how roller derby, especially through

the use of their body, has challenged them to re-think notions of womanhood in a variety of ways, but it is important to highlight how these are linked to increased confidence. Noelle said:

I just think that I'm way more confident... I remember the first time I had a game... and thinking there's no way I can do this, what am I doing, I can't believe I'm doing this and then you just do it and after you do it you realize not only *can* I do, I can do pretty well at it.

As seen in women who engage in combat in self-defense, Noelle's notions of her bodily capability and her confidence in these capabilities are expanding through playing in roller derby bouts.

In Hollander's (2004:221) study she quoted participants saying "I used to feel uncomfortable taking up space because I'm bigger, but now I don't" and "I feel much stronger and more in control of my body" which are tied to self-defenders increased confidence. These sentiments are very much seen in my own participants, particularly Tonya. She said:

... I'm not as self-conscious about what my body does, like it gives you a sense of like pride and like self-confidence so it's like if I sit down somewhere and I like cross my legs and it's not all prim and proper... it doesn't bother me. I'm not as self-conscious of where I put my hands or making sure that I am all in my space. I don't mind to like take up as much space as I want...

Likewise, Julie expressed to me how transformative roller derby was to her body and confidence particularly because prior to roller derby Julie underwent a dramatic weight loss, but through roller derby she began to gain muscle and strength in her body. She explained:

I was happy with what my body could do and how strong it was and that came about with the addition of roller derby in my life because now my physical size and how I use my body is something that I kind of became revered for and after years of being made fun for my body and not feeling good about my own self-image all the sudden my size and my power became something that I was cheered for and so that and just feeling good about you know what I could accomplish with my body became this just new thing and that again isn't something women usually get to experience.

Both Tonya and Julie, like a majority of skaters in my sample, developed a confidence in their body that they did not have prior to roller derby which was also seen with women in self-

defense. Julie also mentioned, “when you feel that you’re good at something, anything, it doesn’t have to be roller derby, when you feel more confident about yourself you probably portray yourself in a different way” which stressed that this increase in confidence could happen in other arenas other than roller derby. Potentially this could include self-defense or something researchers have yet to explore.

Related to increased confidence, self-defenders spoke of a new sense of agency in their bodies which allowed them to feel powerful and strong (De Welde 2003). Similarly, skaters came to view themselves and their bodies as powerful and strong, both mentally and physically. When I asked Anne if she viewed her body differently now that she has been playing roller derby she simply said, “I see it as much more as a, you know, just like a powerhouse...” The term “powerhouse” highlights this overall strength and toughness which allows her to push past barriers, recover from injuries (she has suffered many injuries including, but not limited to cracked ribs, sprained knee, broken bone in hand, and whiplash).

Becoming strong, or at least recognizing that she was strong, was a very transformative experience for Julie. As I mentioned earlier, Julie underwent a bodily transformation before entering derby in terms of losing a significant amount of weight, but as she progressed throughout derby she not only maintained her weight loss she also gained muscle and overall strength. However, it posed a threat to her job as a weight loss group leader for a company which specialized in products and services to assist weight loss and maintenance and required her to maintain a certain weight to keep her job. She explained:

I told my boss at the time I love how strong my body is and I said I’ve never felt that way before and that’s kind of a revelation for me from someone who’s grown up with a lot of body issues being overweight, got teased a lot, we get obsessed over our weight and how we want to be thinner and things like that and this is the epiphany I had that moment it’s that the number on the scale wasn’t what I was happy with. I was happy with what my

body could do and how strong it was and that came about with the addition of roller derby in my life.

The physical strength that roller derby afforded players like Anne and Julie was something rarely experienced before most likely because of the gendered nature of strength. Strength is often experienced by men because it is stereotyped as masculine therefore when women experience this feeling they are able to develop a relationship with their bodies as something to be used rather than looked at. This gender transgression can be transformative for women in negotiating their femininity.

While Alex experienced this physical strength, she also mentioned mental strength as important, saying, "...Playing derby it's a lot of juggle, it's a lot to balance...so I do see myself as mentally strong...I mean being able to go out there and...get a hard hit from somebody and being able to get back up and keep going I mean I think that's power." Getting hit and knocked down is not only about the physical strength of actually being able to take the hit with your body and pull yourself back up, but also the mental strength of being able to tell yourself, "I can do this, my body is capable of getting back up". Roller derby allows players to become familiar with both. In roller derby it is inevitable that skaters will fall down, but having the confidence, the strength, and the power to get back up is very transformative for women.

These transformations of womanhood, femininity, and their bodily capacities were not just isolated in the sphere of roller derby, but expanded outwards to other parts of their lives. This was seen with Alex as her mental and physical strength helped her with her duties as a mother and as a certified nursing assistant working in a retirement community. She explained, "I see myself as a better mother because I'm doing something and taking care of myself I'm doing something that I love." She also later recounted that her increased physical strength has been

helpful in lifting elderly patients. Tonya and Hilary also expressed to me how roller derby has changed them wholly as a person, covering many spaces. She said:

Tonya: ...since derby I'm not afraid to be big and I'm not afraid to be tall and I'm not afraid to be loud and I'm not afraid to wear heels that make me over 6 feet tall, I'm not afraid, you know, I don't walk with my head down, I walk with my head up, like I just have a better sense of me basically.

Hilary: I feel like I use space differently and even within the last year of skating have noticed that I'm less likely to hunch over and curl my shoulders in...and I like kind of think about the ways that I move through the world as like a person who has a body that should be like respected and given the same, I think also given like the same kind of respect that men's bodies are given.

Like the self-defenders that McCaughey (1997) studied, skaters are not afraid to inhabit their body and space differently which is something that not all or many women get to experience if they are not in a physical activity like roller derby or self-defense because these are masculine or male identified qualities.

This blurring of boundaries in terms of roller derby and other parts of a skaters life was also prevalent in their identities as sexual beings. As skaters developed a confidence in their bodies and began to view them as strong and powerful their sexual selves inhabited those qualities. Not only did Hilary experience a new way of inhabiting space, she began to view her body differently in sexual circumstances. She explained:

I would say that I was more I guess socialized to the idea that my body is just this thing that men are going want access to even when it's not in like a coercive situation or like when there's not assault involved or anything just that it's normal and that's what they'll try to do...And the stronger that I got and the more that I developed as a person too I think that I recognized that that is not acceptable and that I can decide what I want sexually and how I want people to treat me in that context.

Roller derby influences skater's bodily self-worth in which they can recognize they have more control in sexual situations than she had thought before. With new found ownership and control in their bodies provided from roller derby players can translate that into sexual situations.

Skaters, like Hilary, do not have to be the stereotypical woman who has to let others (for Hilary this is men) access their bodies whenever they please and roller derby helps skaters learn that.

Both Chloe (who identified as queer) and Alex (who identified as heterosexual) expressed to me that through roller derby they learned to be less submissive and more assertive in their sexual encounters saying, “I think from that perspective I just allowed myself to not sensor what I’m feeling or saying or wanting or needing from a sexual perspective;” and “I’m playing roller derby, and you’re definitely not submissive and so that definitely translates into sex because again like, I don’t know, I just realized how good it feels when I get physical and I think I’m a lot more rougher,” respectively. As skaters became more confident in their bodies as capable beings they saw that this capability did not only serve in roller derby when they are hip checking or pushing competitors and teammates, but can be useful in sexual relations.

However this is not just about sexual encounters, but relationships too. Both Tonya and Noelle expressed to me how roller derby shaped their feelings of worth in their previous or potential relationships.

Tonya: I’ve definitely found that...it’s [roller derby]...given me the power to say this is my life, this is what I do now we can fit together somehow and you can integrate into this but I’m not gonna give up certain things for that and it doesn’t scare me if that means they’re gonna walk away. That’s fine. I got derby I don’t need you (laughs).

Noelle: ...My ex-fiancé and I broke up and I’m pretty sure it was due to roller derby...We were together for 6 and half years and we lived together and then one day I just sort of woke up and I was like this isn’t what I want out of my life and I’m really sorry and I left and I think without having roller derby I wouldn’t have seen that or made those decisions.

In these ways, roller derby is about much more than just skating and playing, just like self-defense is about more than combat. Roller derby, through the act of community, acceptance, and physicality, challenges skaters to re-think notions of womanhood and femininity and to develop a relationship with their bodies that helps to breed confidence, strength, and power to many aspects

of their lives. Like self-defense, roller derby serves a larger purpose and has the potential to be influential in other areas of women's lives. However, unlike self-defense, roller derby players have a more contentious relationship with aggression and violence. While self-defenders find a power in self-defense which enables them to feel as if their bodies are strong weapons capable of fighting and violence, skaters do not have this relationship with violence.

Violence and Negotiations of Gender

Three participants explicitly stated that roller derby can be violent, but generally is not, while every other skater explicitly stated roller derby was not violent. On the other hand, most participants viewed roller derby as aggressive. This is starkly contrasting to self-defenders who see the capacity of violence and aggression in themselves and the physical activity of self-defense (De Welde 2003; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998; Schorn 2013). The contrast is largely due to skaters' difficult negotiations of gender which stereotypically mark women as incapable of violence, but men as the aggressors of violence. While I will discuss this negotiation between violence and gender throughout this section it will be made clearer towards the end, but first, I want to discuss how players define violence and aggression which fit into this larger negotiation of womanhood and femininity.

Skaters do not see roller derby as violent for two main reasons: (1) roller derby has an explicit rule set which is enforced by referees and (2) skaters say that they do not intend to harm other skaters. If individual skaters were to act outside of the rules or intended to harm another skater they could be deemed individually violent, but as a whole this is seen as rare, therefore roller derby is generally perceived as non-violent. Aggression has a more fluid definition than violence, but often involves physicality which is controlled and purposeful to benefit the strategy

of game play and reach the ultimate goal of the sport. Aggression also involves a sense of urgency and passion as seen in knowing what you want and acting upon it for the love of the sport and the good of the game. Both Gigi and Tonya provide a typical example of the “definitions” of violence and aggression outlined and why roller derby fits one, but not the other.

Gigi: So aggressive...is physical contact that's not intended to cause harm...As opposed to like MMA [mixed martial arts] fighting where you are intending to cause harm to your opponent; that is a *violent* sport 'cause you are intentionally trying to hurt your opponent. In roller derby the goal is not to hurt your opponent...you are trying to bump them out of the way, you're trying to move them aside, you're trying to hold them back, you're not trying to hurt them...

Tonya: Aggression comes, I think goes hand in hand with passion and competitiveness and it's aggressive on the aspect that it is competitive and it is contact, but to me when I hear the word violence I associate it with anger or destruction and that's not what it's about...I mean we have legal and illegal hits and our hits are legal to the point where it's not gonna hurt anybody. We're not out there breaking bones.

By focusing on these markers of violence skaters negotiate themselves as non-violent which is an acceptable characteristic of womanhood. Skaters can remove themselves from potentially being viewed as violent because they do not fit these definitions of violence they have laid out.

While skaters in my study do not perceive roller derby as violent, players recognize the likely possibility of outsiders viewing roller derby and themselves as violent. Alex demonstrated this understanding when she said, “They [outsiders] assume that roller derby players are really, really big, really volatile, very loud females, just, you know, out there to kind of, thinking it's very violent.” Gracie and Hilary also expressed to me that outsiders might view them and the sport as violent, but explained to me why this would be wrong.

Gracie: ...People think it's very violent and intense and not everyone gets that it's also very like organized and strategic and there's a lot of interesting stuff about it, but I think people, it has like shock value at first for some reason...

Hilary: ...People outside of the sport might see [hitting] as the violence part of it, like I see that as strategy and I feel like you don't usually see anymore the skater who is like out to get one person and she wants to be on someone and hurt them.

According to skaters, because outsiders are uneducated about the sport they mistake what they call “strategy” for violence. To combat or negotiate understandings of violence and to distance themselves from it players employ this logic of replacing violence with “strategy” excusing any violence as a part of the game, which distances them from being unfeminine.

Viewing roller derby as violent is not a radical notion because theorists have long questioned the nature of sports as an arena of violence (Messner 1988; Messner 1995). While it is not my goal to decide whether roller derby is violent it is important to my conversation on gender negotiation to demonstrate how someone might conclude that roller derby is violent. My definition of violence is in part taken by McCaughey (1998) who is influenced by Campbell (1993) and Katz (1988). She states that violence is “defined as physical force exerted with the intent of damaging, controlling, or stopping someone” (McCaughey 1998:10). For me the issue of intent is a tricky one where violence can occur without full intent. If someone is physically harmed, but there was no intent is the action still violent? I believe so. In this way I define violence as exerting force which causes physical injury or harm regardless of intention, although intention is not completely dissolved of importance. Therefore, if we understand violence in the most basic sense of causing physical injury or harm, then in that sense roller derby may be deemed violent. Look at the lists of injuries skaters have gotten, given, or seen happen to others through the physical play of roller derby: bruises, scrapes, blisters, gashes that require stitches, soreness, cracked ribs, broken fingers, bone bruises, sprained knees and ankles, pulled muscles, whiplash, fat lips, concussions, rink rash, broken wrists, bursitis, loss of toenails, dislocated shoulders, bloody noses, broken tail bones, black eyes, collar bone injuries, pulled groins, torn ligaments, broken ankles, and broken legs. While skaters claim they are hitting to achieve certain

goals and do not intend to harm, they know that harm does happen even if that is not the end goal. Jocelyn explained:

I mean, you're gonna get hurt playing roller derby, that's gonna happen. You're on wheels, you know you have wheels strapped to your feet, you're gonna fall down or you're gonna get knocked down because I mean that's the point of how the sport plays, is that you use your body to impact gameplay. We're not throwing a ball around, I mean our bodies are the sport, so they are gonna get hit.

If someone were to define violence as physical injury or harm regardless of intentions, roller derby would fit that definition because there is an understating that during one's career in roller derby, skaters will sustain minor and major injuries and potentially contribute to others sustaining injuries if you are the one "knocking people down". However, Gigi argues against this by explaining that the level of injury expectation is different from others sports, specifically football, which she deems as "bordering violent".⁵ Gigi said:

...It's just more of a like a known fact that you're going to get injured when you're playing football. Like the way they hit each other, the way they're trained to hit each other, the amount of padding they're *required* to wear, the inherent risks with football are a lot higher than your inherent risks with roller derby... You expect injuries with football, you don't expect, you know it's a possibility, you know there's a chance with roller derby, but you *expect* injury with football.

Football is primarily played by male bodies, especially at the professional level, so it would stereotypically be appropriate from these male football players to be violent, but not female roller derby players. Highlighting the differences of expectation and level is a way to distance skaters from the masculinity of violence and negotiate their femininity or womanhood.

A few skaters explicitly said that roller derby was violent, but then later when directly asked if roller derby was violent they retracted their original responses. This demonstrates the ambivalence skaters have to the idea of roller derby being violent or potentially more so of

⁵ Most skaters did not view most sports as violent including football, soccer, karate, and self-defense. However, most skaters did view Mixed Martial Arts as violent and a few mentioned hockey as violent because of the fighting aspects of the sports where players intended to harm their opponent and/or the perceived lack of rules and regulations.

viewing themselves as violent. Therefore, when explicitly questioned about violence, skaters have the opportunity to negotiate violence and non-violence in a way which distances themselves from violence and maintains their femininity.

Ashley was one of my participants who had the most vividly complicated relationship with violence throughout our interview. In the first minutes of our interview she mentioned violence after I asked her how she learned about roller derby. Ashley mentioned that her former roommate played and had tried to get her to join for some time, but Ashley's response was, "oh my gosh like I don't believe in violence, like why would you want to do that (laughs)". After much coaxing by her roommate, Ashley witnessed her first bout which led her to finally joining. Ashley called roller derby violent a second time when she was describing to me why roller derby is empowering for women. She said, "I think it's empowering to women because...they're in a sport that's kind of seen as being mostly for women and yet it's one of the most violent sports out there (laughs)." However when I directly asked her if she ever viewed roller derby as violent she told me, "no, not anymore" because "there's a reason to hit somebody and there's a reason to knock somebody out of bounds" and the only reason she saw it as violent before was due to her not "understanding anything about it."

In this ninety-minute interview, we see Ashley's evolution where as an outsider she views it as violent, but once she is a part of the sport and as it is a part of her identity she distances herself away from roller derby as violent. This is a negotiation of Ashley's gender in that she does not view herself as a violent person therefore once she enters the sport she has to re-script roller derby as non-violent and this is true for skaters throughout my sample. Skaters want to distance themselves from ideas of roller derby as violent because if the sport is violent

than they themselves are violent which is related to notions of gender in that skaters biological narratives tell us that men are capable of or inherently violent, but not women.

While through roller derby, skaters undergo transformation which allows them to see women as capable of many things, particularly as strong and aggressive, women still have difficulty seeing themselves as capable of violence. The question remains, if strength, aggression, and violence are on a continuum, why do skaters stop at aggression? I found that participants are negotiating their understandings of themselves, aggression and violence, with their new sense of self. Participants recounted hitting people or injuring themselves or others and thriving on this, but categorizing this as aggression, rather than violence whereas others might not. Aggression, while gender transgressive, is not quite as transgressive as being violent.

Women are not seen as capable of violence, or put another way, violence is not seen as feminine and therefore women should not partake in it, unless it is in the realm of fighting back against some sort of assault in a defensive manner. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine women being violent from an offensive point of view and enjoying it like in roller derby where it is clear that skaters enjoy the physicality and are seeking out an outlet where they can hit people within a controlled sphere. Because of this skaters must negotiate ideas of femininity with the potential perceptions of violence through the discourse of not intending to hurt others, the limits within the legality of the rules, and the strategy of the game. In this way skaters attempt to distance themselves from being viewed as violent and keep in line with their status as feminine and a woman which contrasts self-defenders who come to realize that violent and feminine/womanhood are not mutually exclusive.

Kate, Gina, and Carol demonstrated this line of acceptability for women as aggressive, but not violent under the notion of “controlled” and “acceptability”. For Kate she talked about

liking being able to get her frustration out through hitting, but that she's "doing it in a very controlled manner and safe kind of." She continued this by saying:

It's the fact that I know that I'm allowed whereas I don't want to hit somebody like down at the bar, but there it's perfectly acceptable to go up to somebody and hit them in derby. And also being able to hit someone you might want to punch in face but we get to hit them in a manner that's allowed and accepted.

Similarly, Gina and Carol said, "I think it's [roller derby] aggressive, but it's kind of a controlled aggression 'cause you kind of leave in on the track as it were...the aggression kind of stays on the track, it doesn't follow elsewhere" and "...it ends at the whistle," respectively. Roller derby provides skaters with that space to hit someone, but they understand that this aggression would otherwise be unacceptable behavior for a woman if participated in other parts of their lives, like at a bar. Therefore, for skaters to be able to be aggressive, but also maintain her femininity they must perform aggression in a very particular way. This particular way is in the confines of roller derby in a controlled manner and in the ways allowed in the rules. The idea of the track or the whistle in roller derby helps to contain a sphere where aggression is acceptable, but it should not cross this line into other spheres or it is unacceptable and threatening to their femininity.

Overall, players must balance perceptions of aggression and violence within the confines of acceptable forms of femininity. A final exemplary demonstration of this was Tonya when I asked her why people "could totally see her playing roller derby". Her response was: "'Cause I'm aggressive and I like to like wrestle and fight and like not like, you know, fist fight. I don't go around to bars and fight people...I'm aggressive, I'm physical and I like to compete...'" Tonya fully embodies this characteristic of aggression, but she is unwilling to be seen as violent. Being physical in roller derby is acceptable because it can be deemed aggression through the definitional strategies skaters impose, but fighting in a bar is violent and unacceptable. She makes it clear that she is unwilling to do the later because that is unacceptable behavior; it is

violent. Although, Tonya, like other skaters, underwent a process of re-thinking notions of womanhood which opened up their ideas that women are capable, but aggression is the threshold for this. This may be in part to the biological narratives where men are seen as inherently more aggressive and inherently more capable of violence, but also the negative connotation of violence which they can pass off as a male bodied characteristic.

When I asked Noelle if she ever sees roller derby as violent she said yes, but only in the case of men's roller derby. Noelle explains that the violence in men's roller derby has "something to do with ego and it's more than just revenge hitting or this or that it's sort of almost like I want you to die." For Noelle there is something inherent in men, particularly their ego, which drives them to be more violent in game play. However, women apparently do not have the same type of inherited ego or "alpha-ness" which drives them to be "that aggressive" to which they reach a point of violence. This continues to demonstrate that there is an understanding that men are more capable of violence than woman and to discern themselves as women, skaters must negotiate that line between aggression and violence. By calling their physical activities in roller derby aggressive rather than violence, skaters get to appear as if they can do it all, but still are contained within more acceptable assumptions of womanhood.

While new understandings of what it means to be a woman or new notions of femininity and womanhood can involve such traits as confidence, strength and aggression, violence is not one of the expanded capacities of woman. This larger barrier is in part to skaters understandings of gender which dictate that men are "biologically" or inherently more aggressive and therefore violent than women. Because biological narratives and assumptions of violence are linked, it is not surprising that both are spaces in which players have the most difficulty negotiating their new understandings of femininity and womanhood with perceptions of themselves and what is

acceptable. Roller derby is unlike self-defense in that skaters do not become empowered with the notion that they are capable of violence and enjoy it. However, there is still potential for skaters to develop this sense of being capable of violence. While Ashley struggled with ideas of violence and gender, often going back and forth between calling roller derby violent and non-violent, she asserted that “roller derby is empowering” and violence may also be influential to that even if skaters have yet to recognize and adopt it because it is a place where biological narratives can be confronted. Even as skaters struggle to negotiate their gender with violence, they one day could re-think this relationship as they has re-envisioned many other aspects of womanhood.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

My goal with this thesis was to connect the seldom linked literatures of contact sport, bodies, and gender through the lens of roller derby and investigate the embodied and fluid aspects of gender which can serve to physically liberate women and have larger societal implications. I have been able to fill these gaps in the literature and examine these gender and body issues by better understanding how roller derby is both similar to and different from other contact sports thus demonstrating the gendered challenges female athletes face, how players re-think notions of womanhood, and how bodies play an important part in these negotiations among skaters. In addition, I described how roller derby plays a role in expanding the possibilities of women's capabilities and what factors might limit this process. As a whole, roller derby serves as a case study concerning how women can come together, use their bodies in different and potentially gender transgressive ways, and expand their understandings of gender. In this way, roller derby exemplifies how gender is embodied, not a static reality, and can enable larger change across many spheres.

In general, I found that through roller derby, "people realize who they are or people become who they are... more wholly in roller derby than other places sometimes 'cause you're allowed to be" (quoted from Chloe). Roller derby is a space that allows for experimentation and this is particularly true as players navigate new notions of what it means to be a woman.

Although it is important to note that roller derby only facilitates in the expansion of womanhood and femininity, but does not dismantle binaries of gender. Through the use of their bodies, possibilities of womanhood and femininity for skaters were expanded in four ways: (1) skaters began to see women as more capable of a variety of tasks; (2) they re-thought women's abilities as compared to men; (3) they expanded their notions of beauty and; (4) in some ways, they began

to see masculine and feminine attributes as not entirely separate constructs. This is in part because players (1) develop a different relationship with their bodies as “do”-ers; (2) they use and enjoy using their bodies in different physical ways (i.e. hitting, falling) and; (3) they experience the reality of pain and injuries endured in roller derby. Even though skaters’ understandings of womanhood and femininity are expanded, they still face challenges because of their participation in an arena which is deemed gender inappropriate to outsiders. However, according to previous research, skaters respond to these challenges in very different ways than other female athletes which may speak to their expanded notions of what they as women are capable of.

Women who defy accepted gender norms or cross boundaries of stereotypical feminine acceptability are stigmatized for their behavior, and female athletes have been particularly vulnerable to such stigma. In keeping with this, skaters also faced stigma because participating in roller derby required them to demonstrate athleticism, aggression, and strength, characteristics which are viewed as socially unacceptable forms of femininity. Skaters were less likely to be accused directly of being “men” than the female athletes who participated in soccer and various sports including softball and basketball in the studies by George (2005) and Kauer and Krane (2006). Instead, my respondents were stereotyped in terms of masculine characteristics such as strong, volatile, or big. However, overall, players experienced the similar stigma of being viewed as unfeminine as other female athletes in male-dominated sports and this was especially seen when outsiders expressed surprise when a player was “too feminine” for roller derby.

While previous literature has found that outsiders sexualize female athletes, roller derby differed in that the sexualization occurred from both outsiders and insiders. Like in Laurendeau and Sharara’s (2008) study, where men hoped to see the breasts of female skydivers and

snowboarders, men (outsiders) often hoped to see the proverbial “boob” pop out in roller derby. However, within roller derby, skaters note that some teams attempt to use sexuality to sell the sport. That said, this is quite contested practice: some skaters see a benefit in such sexualization, while others believe it takes away from the sport.

In this way I agree with Wehrman’s (2012) argument that Cohen (2008) overstated the selling of sex in her examination of roller derby. Sexualization in order to sell sport is not as widespread as Cohen (2008) leads us to believe and players in my study explained that if sex is used the goal is to get outsiders into the door, but then that they stay because of the physicality. According to the skaters in my study, the sex should not outshine the athleticism. Although this demonstrates a strategic nature of sexualization to which I hypothesized, skaters may not be as actively engaged with this sexualization as I previously thought. Though sexually provocative clothing could be a space where players are engaging in complex gender and sexuality play, it seems to be that this is not fully the case. I make this assertion because of the diminishing use of provocative clothing in favor of more traditionally athletic attire. Through the diminishment of sexualization potential gender play is lessened in favor of being seen as “legitimate” athletes and sport. While the female “apologetic” was a strategy heavily used by other female athletes in contact sports, this was not expressed in my study of roller derby. And although skaters may have dressed in sexually provocative ways or wore make-up, the purpose may be more complicated than combating challenges to their femininity and again this style of dress is disappearing rather than increasing. This disappearance could also explain the difference in my study and Cohen’s (2008) in that the data collection periods are more than six years apart and during that time roller derby has evolved considerably. It should also be noted that this may be because of the sample I have, all of whom are members of full WFTDA leagues who have made

active choices to dress in a more stereotypically sports-like fashion. Perhaps if my sample had newer leagues or apprentice leagues versus more established leagues this may be different.

Halbert (1997) found that the female boxers in her study changed their uniforms to be pink and fringed skirts in order to be viewed as more feminine. This strategy is the opposite of what is going on in roller derby. Instead of enacting a strategy which highlights their femininity, skaters are moving away from potentially feminine uniforms (i.e. fishnets, skirts) to more “athletic” looking uniforms (i.e. standardized, wearing Under Armour). However, this poses a new set of challenges or questions. Why can’t roller derby skaters sell sex and sport? Why do players have to change their former ways of dress in order to be taken seriously as sport? Can players be athletic and taken seriously, while still being dressed in non-traditional ways? These questions point to the importance of the complexities within both highlighting femininity, like other female athletes have done, and emphasizing athletic identities that are potentially masculine. Women are put into a double bind where they cannot be successful unless they conform to standards of “legitimate” (masculine) sport while still being women. Sport, including the look of sport in uniforms, has highlighted and valued masculinity and by choosing to dress in these stereotypical athletic or legitimate ways it imbues men’s bodies with legitimacy and women’s bodies with illegitimacy. To gain value skaters have to emulate men; which is a reflection of broader society. If roller derby were to continue to be successful, but keep its diverse and unconventional style of dress, it could expand our views of what an athlete looks like.

Not surprisingly, roller derby players faced challenges similar to other female athletes in terms of being deemed lesbians and then stigmatized (Caudwell 2003; Cox and Thompson 2000; Ezzell 2009; Halbert 1997; Pelak 2002a). This is not surprising because they also faced the

challenge of being stigmatized as masculine or unfeminine, and gender and sexuality are inextricably linked even if analytically distinct. Therefore, when the skaters, like other female athletes, defied gender norms and were stigmatized as masculine, it was easy to predict that they would also face stigma as being seen as lesbians because to defy gender norms also means you are defying norms of sexuality. Even though skaters were similar to other athletes in that they were called lesbians or variations of this, they viewed these assumptions as irrelevant in a way that other female athletes did not (Lenskyi 1994).

Unlike other female athletes in male-dominated or contact sports (Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008), the roller derby players in this study did not view sexuality as something that needed to be addressed or that they needed to prove their heterosexuality; therefore, they responded to this challenge very differently. Roller derby players were likely to confront the challenge of lesbianism as relevant to their athletic status or they would shrug off stigma as if it did not matter. Skaters also sought to educate outsiders about the diversity of skaters, including the differences in sexual orientation, and how accepting the sport is of this diversity. Again, this is very different from other female athletes who would fight this challenge by being seen with men or having boyfriends (Blinde and Taub 1992b), avoiding female athletes who were lesbians or seen as “masculine” (Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008), engage in “othering” of lesbian or “masculine” athletes in a variety of ways (Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; George 2005; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008), or dressing in “non-lesbian” looking attire by highlighting femininity.

Skaters highlighted the accepting nature of roller derby in relation to sexual orientation. Skaters applauded roller derby for being so open to diversity and giving them the opportunity to

learn about different sexual and gender identities and become friends with people with differing identities. While confronting stigma or shrugging off accusations was a strategy used by my participants in my study, it was only briefly mentioned in the previous literature and seldom expanded on (Blinde and Taub 1992a; Blinde and Taub 1992b; Ezzell 2009; Halbert 1997; Pelak 2002a). In my study, this was an important strategy because it demonstrated the larger tendency for skaters not to address challenged or stereotypes they viewed as irrelevant to their athletic status and sport. By participating in this strategy skaters are creating a space where it is okay to transgress without having to feel they need to address certain challenges. This in a sense allows skaters to expand their notions of what is acceptable behavior. When skaters confront stigma or shrug it off they are telling outsiders that their perceptions of them as women or women in general are wrong. This strategy can contribute to larger changes in social institutions, such as sports, which reflect and reshape power relations in society.

This strategy, like others, can work, in part, because of the community or group qualities of roller derby. As a group skaters can point to the qualities of the group (e.g. its accepting nature) and the other members to justify their participation or protect themselves from or respond to challenges. Community in a sense then can act as its own strategy against challenges, negativity, and stereotypes. In addition, as a community, skaters can define insiders and outsiders designated by certain qualities (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation) which may help negotiate challenges and their transgression behavior. Community can also distinguish higher status members and marginalize others as seen with skaters of color. In general, community is an important quality in many ways and contributes to the larger narrative of the members and deserves mentioning.

Like in other contact sports with female players, gender, sexuality, and sexualized challenges, help to contribute to the trivialization of the sport. However, this trivialization did not manifest in limited access or exclusion like it did in other contact sports, rather the trivialization was seen in a general lack of being taken seriously as a *real* sport. Based on participants anecdotes relayed to me during interviews, this may be in part due to women being seen as sexual objects and women being seen as incapable of being athletes by outsiders, but also because of roller derby's 1970's past, which was more spectacle than sport. Because roller derby's past is unique from other contact sports, in which it served as primarily a form of entertainment with limited rules, skaters in the current era have greater difficulty demonstrating that it is a real sport with rules and regulations. Additionally, because roller derby is primarily played by women and they were responsible for the resurgence of the sport, trivialization or lack of legitimacy may be exacerbated because there is no male standard to which it can be compared. However, female skaters are participating in a tremendous amount of strategizing against this by highlighting the "realness" of the sport. While female athletes in other contact sports deemphasized their athletic identity in order to emphasize their femininity (Halbert 1997; Kauer and Krane 2006; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008), one of the main tactics my respondents used was to emphasize their athletic identity as a way to underscore that roller derby is a real sport. However, it is important to note that the standards of real sport that the skaters were pointing to were male sports. Skaters attempt to gain legitimacy and value by positioning themselves in relation to men and men's sports and essentially they must emulate them. This serves as a way to highlight how men and masculinity in sports, and in general society, are deemed more valuable and therefore legitimate or real. While this does not necessarily problematize my findings, it does

beg the question of if and how women can create their own space or sport that is real or legitimate in its own right, not because of its likeness to men.

The experiences of skaters and other female athletes in contact sports were similar in terms of the challenges they experienced, but less so in their responses with strategies. However, one challenge that emerged that was not explicitly discussed in previous literature was the risk of injury. This challenge to their participation in roller derby is not surprising given the stereotypical understandings of women's bodies. As Theberge (2012) discusses at length, women's bodies are viewed as frail due to their presumed biological deficiencies; and because we construct women's bodies in this way, we feel women should shy away from activities that would cause pain and injury. As such, outsiders, such as family members, worry about skaters getting hurt because their female bodies are seen as incapable of taking the physical contact of roller derby due to the construction of women's bodies as frail and easily injured. Skaters respond to this challenge by demonstrating that other athletes, female or male, get injured playing sports, and that it is an aspect of any real sport. By emphasizing the legitimacy of the sport skaters attempt to combat the notion that they are frail. Additionally, through roller derby skaters develop a different relationship with their bodies which enable them to feel pain differently, and in some ways enjoy it. As Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) explained, and which I found in my own study, players develop a relationship with pain as pleasure. This enables them to expand their notions of womanhood and femininity through their bodies. Just like the women in self-defense, they no longer view themselves and women as fragile beings (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). Thus, participating in roller derby serves as an arena where players can rebuff the notion that their bodies are frail and experience their bodies in transformative ways. So although the challenge itself is not surprising,

the result is informative and speaks to the larger question of my project: it demonstrates the deep relationship between gender and bodies and the fluidity of such a relationship.

Bodies play an important role in producing and displaying gender, but as my research also demonstrates, bodies play an important role in transforming gender in all aspects of women's lives. Butler (1993:95) explained that gender is marked in and on the body through "a regularized and constrained repetition of norms". But roller derby, like self-defense, demonstrates a breakdown of some of these regularized patterns in bodies which reinforce gendered notions. By "doing" the "inappropriate" based on gender (Bordo 1993; Butler 1990; Butler 1993; McCaughey 1997), skaters' notions of womanhood and femininity are altered.

Young (2005) argued that girls "learn" to "throw like a girl" through social forces that hamper their movements, and not biological realities. According to Young (2005), girls and women learn to constrain their bodies, withhold their potential strength, not to use full spatial and lateral possibilities, to fear getting hurt, and to be timid. While women learn these bodily compartments, they can also learn to use their bodies differently. In roller derby, players learned to use their strength, use full spatial and lateral possibilities, and to get hurt and in some cases enjoy it which helped them to expand their understandings of womanhood. No longer did they view women as physically inept, but as strong, physical, and aggressive which challenged stereotypes of womanhood. Many theorists have noted that, given equal opportunities to use their bodies in ways that are seen as stereotypically masculine, women's and men's bodies become more similar than different (Downey 2009; Lorber 1994; Roth and Basow 2004; Young 2005), and skaters come to view this as true in some ways, particularly, skaters re-think their abilities in relation to men. Although this is limited in some ways as players still struggle with biological

narratives and notions of who can commit violence, participating in roller derby does impact women's bodies by allowing them to see and be strong, physical, and aggressive.

Roller derby thus can be a space for rearticulating gender (Caudwell 2003). Through their new bodily comportments and changing relationships with their bodies, skaters re-think what it means to be a "woman". Through their bodies, players re-thought notions of what it means to be a woman in the following ways: (1) women are capable; they can be powerful, move their bodies, and knock people down; (2) women are just as good/strong/etc. as men and are able to "lay guys out;" (3) women who are muscular and strong are beautiful; and (4) women can exhibit both masculinity and femininity. Roller derby allowed for the reshaping of bodies, and hence gender, that Butler (1990), Caudwell (2003), and Lorber (1994) describe. And while this had been explored in the self-defense literature (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998) it had not been explored in the literature on contact sports. And although the scant work on bodies and contact sport dovetails with my findings by demonstrating that other female athletes enjoy their muscularity and redefine ideas of beauty (Boyle 2005; Dworkin 2001; Shea 2001; Theberge 1991) and receive a sense of pleasure from being physical (Knapp 2011; Migliaccio and Berg 2007; Theberge 1997) my study demonstrated the ways in which using bodies in different ways can have a transformative effect on women's bodies and understandings of womanhood.

McCaughey (1998) explained that self-defense is an arena where women can rehearse a new bodily script; roller derby provides a similar avenue. In roller derby, skaters can use their bodies in ways that they have not before; they are allowed to take up space, to hit, to skate, to be physical with limited or no repercussions. And again, like self-defenders, skaters are able to develop or find new confidence in their bodies because of the greater latitude they are allowed to

practice in roller derby. While skaters did not entirely reject notions of stereotypical feminine ideals like self-defenders they did create new narratives where femininity and masculinity could co-exist in women. Like self-defenders, skaters began to view themselves as independent, capable, confident, aggressive, and physical. Overall, self-defenders and skaters are similar in that they imagine and embody a more liberated self outside of the confines of stereotypical notions of womanhood and femininity. Both groups hope and believe that this transformation should be experienced by all women of all ages.

As similar as roller derby and self-defense are in terms of providing women with an avenue to cross boundaries and to re-think notions of what it means to be a woman, they differ in one key way—violence. While self-defenders come to see themselves and their bodies as strong weapons capable of fighting and being violent (McCaughey 1997), skaters in roller derby do not come to this same conclusion and embodiment. Skaters did not view themselves and their sport as perpetrators of violence. On the other hand, skaters did view themselves and their sport as capable of aggression. Skaters' notions of what women were capable of expanded, like that in self-defense, but reached a limit where women were not capable of violence, only aggression and even aggression was limited by biological narratives. That is, their understandings of femininity and masculinity contain the belief that violence is embodied in men, while vulnerability is embodied in women (Aaltonen 2012; Gill 2007; Hollander 2001; McCaughey 1997). But as theorists and researchers of self-defense have noted, there is great potential in violence being embodied in women. By embodying violence and engaging in stereotypical masculine bodily comportment or behaviors, women redefine what it means to be feminine and what it means to be a woman (Gill 2007; Hollander 2001; McCaughey 1997; Schorn 2013). So this is not just about roller derby or even self-defense but is about a larger shift in defining one gender as

vulnerable and the other as dangerous. Violence is used as a means of policing gender, but it could also be used as a way of subverting gender roles. There has been plenty of research which has examined the ways in which violence, particularly sexual violence, has been used as a tool for control and power; but what about the ways in which violence can be used to re-imagine power relations (Bart and O'Brien 1993; Marx Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999; Russell 1975)? What is at stake is women viewing themselves as not vulnerable victims, but powerful women capable of violence which allows them to not only fight back, but take on offensive positions in violence, for example within the military. By being violent or at least recognizing the capability of being violent, women have the potential of destabilizing gender norms and larger social structures which rely on them. As Stanko (2003:3) explains, “what violence *means* is and will always be fluid, not fixed” (emphasis in original). Recognizing this can lead to this larger change.

Self-defense has been an arena for this shift, but roller derby is resistant to seeing the sport and the players as violent. Why? Given that skaters' views of femininity have shifted and expanded in other ways, why does violence serve as a limit to these changes? One major contributor is the biological narrative, which proved very prevalent among skaters, especially in terms of how cis-skaters viewed and interacted with trans-skaters. Many theorists and researchers have explored the ways in which gender has been naturalized in bodies even if social influences play a significant role in this as well. Because of the deeply held beliefs that the bodily inhabitants of gender are “natural” or “biological,” skaters may use this as a way to explain why they are incapable or less capable of violence in men. Aggression and violence have been naturalized in men's bodies so much so that women, including the participants of the study, believe that this is a biological part of men, but not women. Due to the fact that biology is rooted

in “science” skaters may use this as a “fact” to why they are not violent. According to skaters, there is something innate in men whether it is testosterone or Y chromosomes which make men more capable of committing violent acts. This cultural conflation of masculinity and violence may be too deep for women to negotiate their femininity around. The internalization of biological narratives may play an important part to why skaters can see themselves as capable of some bodily actions, but not others.

Additionally, violence stereotypically has a negative connotation, more so than aggression. Skaters discussed this openly in their interviews saying that violence is negative or when defining aggression stating that they were aggressive, but not in negative way. There is an understanding among skaters that violence is bad, hurtful, and negative which may lead skaters to rely more heavily on biological narratives than they otherwise would because they do not want to be seen negatively. Understandings of violence exist in a contested space and there are discussions among theorists and researchers about whether or not any person should be violent. Potentially, some may argue that a more progressive society would be one with less violence instead of more violence. Therefore, for some this is not a discussion about gender, but one of personhood. Should anyone be violent, man or woman? While I can understand this position I believe there is an importance in women recognizing the capacity in their bodies for violence even if they are not actively being violent. According to McCaughey (1997:10), men have used violence “as a form of control, to redress something the aggressor sees as a moral wrong” particularly in the realm of rape and battery against women. She also explains that violence against women reaffirms that women are incapable of responding because of the gendered nature of violence and the negative connotations associated with violence. And if women do commit violent acts they are seen as pathological, deviant, or as victims of trauma (Babcock, Miller, and

Siard 2003). While a world with less violence may be a more conventional and progressive understanding it is also important to see the gendered aspects of violence and create subject-subject violence in which women and men can equally engage in combat (Marcus 1992). We need to first dismantle the assumption that women and their bodies are victims and come to understand that women are capable of violence even if they do not act upon it in order to disassemble patriarchal notions which violence and nonviolence rests upon.

A final reason for why roller derby players avoid being deemed violent, but self-defenders do not, may stem from the actual physical acts they are committing and how these are conceptualized. In roller derby, one of the ways players negotiated potentially being violent, but not identifying it as such, was by calling it strategy and within the confines of the rules of the game. Therefore, the physical acts are committed under the guise of sport which is very different from how self-defenders conceptualized their actions. In self-defense, women are hitting, punching, and being physical under the understanding that this is fighting, this is defensive, and this *is* violent (De Welde 2003; Hollander 2004; Hollander 2010; McCaughey 1997; McCaughey 1998). The realm of self-defense has a more direct and purposeful relationship with violence, unlike roller derby. Self-defense is understood as a sort of combat even if there are rules or courtesies involved. Although skaters mentioned how playing roller derby is like going into battle or a form of combat, their reliance on rules and intentionality kept them from seeing themselves as engaging in violence.

Thus, the relationship between gender and violence and the negotiations within and among both is complicated. It is both influenced by understandings of naturalness and biology in gender, social connotations of violence, and constructions of sport and body. Even if skaters do not engage with violence in the way self-defenders do, it still tells us something about

embodiment and gender. Gender is complicated by biological and cultural narratives and embodiment and violence serves as a case where this is all too relevant. While the possibilities of being able to break through these limits are plentiful for the physical liberation of women, skaters are still undergoing significant transformations of their understandings of womanhood and femininity.

Even though skaters do not experience violence in transformative ways, they still have been able to re-think notions of what it means to be a woman. These transformative acts and spaces are small steps to larger and more general changes to physical liberation because they expand women's understanding of what it means to be a woman and what woman can do with their bodies. This is significant in that the ways in which skaters re-think notions of womanhood and femininity were seen to infiltrate other aspects of their life, and demonstrate the potentially larger impact of bodily transgressions. This newly empowered self, developed in the confines of roller derby, influences other aspects of their lives and helps to develop a new embodied code of gender which may continue to expand. If more women get involved with roller derby or similar physical activities, like self-defense, the lines of what is masculine and what is feminine could be further blurred. Through this there are new possibilities.

Conclusion

Throughout this research I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do women in roller derby face in regards to gender and sexuality?
2. What strategies do they employ to respond to these challenges to gender and sexuality?

3. Does using bodies in different ways (i.e. engaging in physical contact) encourage roller derby players to re-think their notions of what it means to be a “woman”?
 - a. In what ways do they re-think these notions?
 - b. How are their bodies related to such negotiations? What roles do their bodies play?
 - c. Does roller derby transform women’s bodies in ways similar to self-defense (i.e. does participation in roller derby lead women to see their bodies as physical/powerful/violent)?

I addressed these questions by investigating the idea that femininity can be transformed through sport, and demonstrating the relatedness of gender and bodies, particularly, how bodies can serve as an impetus to re-think notions of what it means to be a woman. Additionally, in respect to research questions one and two, I filled a gap within the current contact sports literature by speaking to the challenges that skaters face because of their participation in a contact sport. Like other contact sports, roller derby skaters face challenges based on deep societal beliefs about gender, sexuality, and bodies. I also spoke to the strategies players use to combat such challenges which were significantly different from the strategies other female athletes used. Each aspect of this study demonstrates the embeddedness of stereotypical understandings of gender within sport and society, as the institution of sport reflects broader social values and power relations. At the same time, my findings also suggest the powerful and transformative influence of using bodies to disrupt such understandings of gender.

In relation to my third research question and the sub-questions, I found that through the use of their bodies in new and different ways, skaters re-think and expand their notions of womanhood and femininity; but this is not just confined to the arena of roller derby. My findings

illuminate the potential for other activities and bodily transgressions to challenge stereotypical understandings of gender. Negotiating gender is a complicated task and this is particularly seen when women are confronted with their preexisting biological narratives. However, even with these complications larger and lasting changes are still possible. Again, this thesis speaks to larger implications of women's physical liberation and the ways in which women (and men) can deconstruct notions of femininity and masculinity in order to expand our imaginations of what is possible.

While I believe my findings are far reaching, additional questions arise. The most pertinent question relates to how junior roller derby leagues might encounter similar experiences and what it would mean to begin such bodily transformations at younger ages. Additionally, research on women who are fans of roller derby, but do not play it themselves, has some intriguing possibilities. How does roller derby influence the women who watch roller derby? Is it in the same ways that the sport influences women who play roller derby? What are the differences in seeing transgressive bodies versus being the transgressive bodies and does this lead to a similar transformation? This is an especially interesting area to pursue given that skaters in this study asserted that it was both the act of doing and seeing others do which led them to rethink ideas of femininity and womanhood. Although I hope to answer these questions some day and expand my research to differing populations, the current work was important in adding to the literature which demonstrates the fluidity of gender, especially through embodiment, and speaks to the opportunities we have in everyday life and activities to alter our understandings of women's bodily capacities and gender in general. And as Tonya so nicely states, "you can do it [roller derby or any activity], we can do it ourselves...they can't take it away, they can't destroy

it because it's ours and it will always be ours and it's amazing. It's the most amazing thing ever on the planet. Just make sure you tell them that."

Table 1:

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Marital Status	# of Children	Highest Education	Employment	Race	Sexual Orientation	# of Years Skated
Gina	29	Female	Married	1	Bachelors	Unemployed	White	Heterosexual	4
Kate	30	Female	Married	0 (pregnant)	Bachelors	Housewife	White	Heterosexual	3
Carol	27	Transwoman	Single	0	Bachelors	Mechanical Engineer	White	Lesbian	5
Gigi	31	Female	Married	0	Bachelors	Resturant Worker/Student	White	Heterosexual	6
Tonya	30	Female	Single	0	Masters	Sales; Motion Technology Company	White	Heterosexual	3
Gracie	25	Female	Single	0	Bachelors	Communications Coordinator	White	Heterosexual	2.5
Meryl	37	Female	Single	0	Masters	Chemist	Black	Bisexual	7
Ashley	25	Female	Single	0	Bachelors	Education Supprt Specialist	White	Heterosexual	4
Alex	26	Female	Single	1	Some College	Certified Nursing Assistant at Retirement Community	Hispanic or Multi-Racial	Heterosexual	3
Chloe	31	Female	Single	0	Masters	Contract Consultant for Non-Profits (Fundraiser); Life Coach	White	Queer	2
Noelle	34	Female	Single	0	Bachelors; Some Masters	Behavioral Therapist and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA Therapy)	Hispanic or Other	Open	7
Ethel	59	Female	Divorced	3	Bachelors	Accountant	White	Heterosexual	3
Julie	39	Female	Married	3	Bachelors	Weight Loss Group Leader	White	Heterosexual	6
Molly	33	Female	Engaged	0	PhD	Professor	Asian	Heterosexual	5
Hilary	28	Female	Single	0	Masters	Non-Profit Program Manager	Black	Heterosexual	6
Jocelyn	39	Female	Married	4	Associates	Active Duty Military; Navy	White	Bisexual	2
Anne	34	Female	Single	0	Masters	Manager, Customer Service Center at National Retail Store	Latina	Heterosexual	8

Appendix A: Interview Guide

- I. Demographics
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender identity
 - c. Marital Status
 - d. Children
 - e. Educational level
 - f. Employment/Occupation
 - g. Race
 - h. Sexuality/sexual orientation
- II. Introduction Questions
 - a. How did you learn about roller derby?
 - b. How and why did you start playing roller derby?
 - c. How long have you been playing roller derby?
 - d. Have you ever taken any time off? Has your playing roller derby been continuous?
- III. Challenges and Strategies
 - a. How did people react when they found out you were playing roller derby? What kinds of things did they say?
 - i. Friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances, etc
 - ii. Can you tell me how you responded to [fill in the blank based on their answers to previous questions]?
 - b. In your experience, what do people say about roller derby players?
 - i. How do you react/respond to this?
 - ii. What is the stereotype of RD players?—Is there a negative stereotype?
 - c. Have you ever received a negative response from people based on your involvement in roller derby? [Allow for more than one response/experience]
 - i. Can you tell me about them?
 - ii. Is this experience rare/common?
 - iii. How do you respond to these perceptions/situations?
 - d. In your experience, does RD face similar challenges to other women's sports? [masculine, sexualized, lesbian/butch, not taken seriously]
- IV. Bodies/Femininity/Sexuality
 - a. How would you describe a roller derby player?
 - i. Do you feel like you fit this description? How so? How not?
 - ii. What kinds of bodies are best [Most suited to? Most likely to excel at?] for roller derby?
 1. Do you think your body matches this?
 - b. Have you seen any changes in your body (view/use)?
 - i. What changes have you seen/felt/perceived?
 - ii. How do you feel about these changes?
 - c. Have you ever hurt yourself while playing roller derby? Have you ever witnessed someone get hurt?
 - i. What were these hurts/injuries? [Try to get at range of injuries—bruises/broken bones/etc]

- ii. Can you tell me about the first time you were hurt or witnessed someone else get hurt? What about other times you were hurt?
- iii. How did that influence how you thought about your own body and its capabilities?
- iv. What is like to play when you're hurt?
- v. Why did you want to continue with roller derby even after you got hurt?
- vi. Have you ever considered not playing because of being hurt either for a short period of time or longer?
- vii. How did people respond to you being hurt/injured? [Teammates, family, friends, etc?]
- d. How did you see yourself before playing roller derby? [As a person and body image]
 - i. How do you see yourself after you've been involved with roller derby?
 - ii. Do you see yourself differently since you joined roller derby? In what ways?
- e. What do you get out of playing roller derby? [Competition—what about it?]
- f. What would you miss if you didn't play roller derby?
- g. Have your ideas about femininity/womanhood changed since you joined roller derby?
- h. Have your ideas about what women can do changed?
- i. Do you find that you look at women/men differently now?
- j. Have your relationships or interactions with men changed? Women?
- k. Has your sense as a sexual being changed since playing roller derby?
- l. Has derby changed your ideas about sexuality?
- m. What are your opinions about WFTDA's gender policy?
 - i. What are other reactions you've seen to the policy?
 - ii. Have you played against teams who had a transgender person on the team? Can you tell me about that experience?
 - iii. Are there any policy changes you would recommend? If so, what? Why?
- n. Can you describe the physical nature of roller derby?
- o. Do you ever see roller derby as aggressive? Violent? When?
 - i. Do you see a difference between aggression and violence?
- p. What other contact sports have you played?
- q. How is roller derby different from other contact sports you've played?
 - i. Do you get to engage in more/different types of physical contact?
 - ii. Has that influenced you in any ways? What ways?
 - iii. How does the physical nature of roller derby compare to other sports (i.e. football, basketball, self defense)?
- r. Is there anything else you would like to add?
- s. Why did you want to be a part of this study?

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