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‘Roller derby changed my life’: Rethinking Marxist theory of emancipatory praxis through a case study of women’s flat-track roller derby

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Abstract

This thesis develops upon theories of alienation, social reproduction, ideology and emancipation through a study of how roller derby changes skaters' lives. The thesis focuses on research participants' experiences of their bodies within a women-led sport that rejects mainstream conceptions of femininity. It demonstrates how a reimagining of the body through physical activity in an alternative, liberating and mutually-supportive subculture can lead to a renewed sense of power and a rejection of internalised ideological constraints.

The thesis describes a five-year, ethnographic case study of roller derby in and around Melbourne, Australia. The thesis draws upon observation of major events, and in-depth interviews with a selection of local skaters and visiting international coaches and organisers, all of whom identified with the saying 'roller derby changed my life'. The skaters' life changes are various: leaving abusive relationships; coming out as same-sex attracted or transgender; changing their appreciation for their bodies; or 'finally finding myself'. The thesis asks, why? It discovered several, inter-connected responses.

First, freedom and fulfilment come from becoming physically strong but also competent in a technically difficult sport. Skaters coming to understand what the body can do, for the first time in their lives, is common even to those starting out. Secondly, skaters perform within a subculture that reshapes gendered subjectivity in life-changing ways. The sport's culture is not only 'queer accepting' but often 'out and proud'. This leads to participants' deep reappraisals of intimate relationships and senses of self. Thirdly, the pattern of self-actualisation is connected to the sport's ethic of being run 'by the skater, for the skater'. Participants reported finding themselves and their 'people' for the first time. This is intimately tied to a rethinking of their bodies in action and to resisting the constraints of mainstream femininity in new ways.

Past debates regarding freedom from alienation within Marxism and critical social theory have focussed heavily on the resistance to estrangement of labour within

‘the economy’. In contrast, this thesis explores how participation in cultural activities such as sport, especially when run by the participants, may also provide examples of human flourishing. In doing this, the thesis discusses the intersections between production and social reproduction in both contributing to alienation – especially for women’s and feminised bodies – and in being catalysts for social change. The thesis follows in the footsteps of Marxists such as Harry Cleaver, CLR James and Stuart Hall in emphasising the forms of social change evident in alternative cultural practice. The thesis also stands within re-theorisation of social reproduction, particularly in the work of Tithi Bhattacharya and Lise Vogel.

That sport can provide radical practices of human flourishing is a rare finding in Marxist studies of sport. The thesis finds that subcultures such as roller derby provide an indication of conditions that contribute to freedom from alienation as well as of forms of social reproduction that contribute to human flourishing. The thesis concludes that conditions of freedom, mutual support and participant control must exist if alternative physical practices are truly to contribute to emancipatory praxis.

Keywords: Marxism, alienation, emancipation, praxis, roller derby, social reproduction.

Student Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy

I, Polly Lisa Bennett (nee Lisa Farrance), declare that the PhD thesis entitled *'Roller derby changed my life': Rethinking Marxist theory of emancipatory praxis through a case study of women's flat-track roller derby* is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma.

Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. Ethics approval was gained for all research interviews and event observations and is lodged with Victoria University under: HRETH 12/340.

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 23 November 2020

Prior Publications[1]

The following conference paper contains an exploration of theories now in chapter 2:

Farrance, Lisa (2009) 'Just Giving Voice to the Voiceless? An Exploration of the New Media Practice(s) of Social Movements'. European Consortium on Political Research Conference, Potsdam Germany, September.

The following contain early drafts of arguments that are now throughout the thesis:

Bennett, Polly (nee Lisa Farrance) (2012) 'Living the life within: on the radical potential of sport', Overland Literary Journal, 209 Summer.

Motta, Sara[2], Lisa Farrance and Natalie Zirngast (2014) 'Keynote Panel: Feminising Emancipation', Historical Materialism Conference: States, Reproduction, Capital. Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, Sydney Australia. 5-6 Sep.

Farrance, Lisa (2014) (peer reviewed) '"Roller derby changed my life": sport as emancipatory potential', Challenging Identities, Institutions and Communities, The Australian Sociological Association Conference, University of South Australia. 27 Nov.

The following conference presentations contain elements of early data analysis preceding thesis chapters 4-6.

Farrance, Lisa (Polly) (2015) '"Roller derby changed my life": on emancipation through physical action', Minor Culture Conference, Cultural Studies Association of Australasia, University of Melbourne. 1-3 Dec.

Farrance, Lisa (Polly) (2016) 'Gender, inter-subjectivity and self-valorisation in the sport of women's flat-track roller derby'. Australian Sociological Association Conference, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne. 28 Nov-1 Dec.

Farrance, Lisa (Polly) (2016) '"Overcoming the chaos": the moments of self-valorisation on a roller derby track'. Crossroads in Cultural Studies International Conference, Sydney University. 15-17 Dec.

I thank all conferences participants, panel collaborators, *TASA Conference* reviewers (2014), *Historical Materialism Australia* organisers and editors of the *Overland Literary Journal* for their generous feedback and advice.

[1] Formal name change was in 2017. Some publications have backdated this.

[2] See Sara Motta's later, related work in *Liminal Subjects: Weaving (Our) Liberation* (2018).

Acknowledgement of Country

This thesis was written primarily on the lands of the Kulin Nations. Specifically, I wrote and researched on *Boon Wurrung*, *Wurundjeri* and *Wathaurong* lands.

Sovereignty over this land was never ceded and the cities of so-called Melbourne and Geelong (Djillong) were founded on bloodshed, war and terrorism. These acts continue. As a white settler I benefit immeasurably from this colonisation. It is therefore a life-long responsibility to contribute to reparations and acts of de-colonising.

I also acknowledge the traditions of rebellion and emancipatory praxis which have existed on these lands for tens of thousands of years. I aim to honour these in my own contributions to praxis today.

I pay my sincere respects to all Elders of these lands, past, present and emerging.

This always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

General Acknowledgements

Any piece of work is never a solo project. As Karl Marx described (and I paraphrase), even when working alone, every piece of work is always already social.

Firstly I thank my two primary supervisors, Jamie Doughney and Nicole Pepperell. Both have a seemingly endless knowledge of *Capital* which has led to many excellent discussions and sometimes debates. These have deeply informed this project. In addition, their advice and support for early-career academics is really appreciated. This thesis would not be what it is if not for your careful and thorough guidance.

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This thesis could not have been conducted if it were not for the existence of modern roller derby and even more importantly, the incredibly generous contributions of all of those who participated in the research interviews. The depth of the stories you told were beyond what I had hoped for. Thank you also to those who reviewed draft material, particularly the critiques of racism within the sport. I am forever grateful. I am also indebted to that initially small breakaway in Austin Texas, who took roller derby onto the flat track and brought democracy and radicalism into the sport.

Thank you to Genée Marks for the excellent proof-read of the final draft. Colleagues and friends have also read drafts of my work, encouraged new lines of inquiry or provided excellent advice. I am especially grateful to: Tom Clark, Sara Motta, Julie Connolly, Rob Watts, Quinn Eades, Natalie Kamber, Claire Melanie, Gilbert Caluya, Elizabeth Humphrys, Lynda Memery, Joanne Pyke and Geoff Boucher.

Much of this thesis was written through Shut Up and Write (SUAW) networks. These networks of co-writing have profoundly changed the way I write and how I

understand my labours as an academic on the margins. They provide solidarity, support and that beautiful clickety-clack of people writing alongside each other. I thank Inger Mewburn, the *Thesis Whisperer*, for introducing me to this practice and Catherine Deveny for enshrining it through the *Gunna's Writing Workshops*. I also profoundly thank all those I have often written alongside: Natalie Zirngast, Quinn Eades, Sari Smith, Christina Hogarth, Amie O'Shea, Marie Cook, Sangeetha Thanapal, Lauren Piko, Clementine Ford, Ishita Akhter, Vicki Huang, Julia Dehm, Katie Buckley, Jonathon O'Donnell, Hannah Robert, Joni Meenagh and Monica O'Dwyer.

My early days of activism coincided with a shift from science to sociology. This activism changed my life and outlook. There are so many people I am grateful to for their patient teachings in those years. Some have forever shaped my understanding of praxis and social change: many members of Left Alliance, Natalie Moxham, Mark Hoskisson, Paul Mason, Kirstie Paton, Andrew Fernandez and Sean Kilmurray.

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A note on Gender and Language

Women and feminised people

This thesis takes a feminist and women-centred approach. Most of my participants were women but, importantly, not all participants were women. I invited any skaters to participate who identified as or had lived as a woman in their lives, even if not at the time of the interviews. This was a conscious decision. This decision was made, in part, to understand better the breadth of experiences of those who have been feminized or treated as a woman. I was honoured to have had both transgender and non-binary participants in my research, and they contributed significantly to my research findings. As is discussed in this thesis, particularly in chapter 3, the sport of roller derby is both led by women and often open to non-binary participation (details discussed within the thesis at the relevant points). Consistent with the over-arching policies of roller derby then I have acknowledged throughout the thesis that participants are not solely women and are certainly not all cisgender women. Where necessary I use the term feminised people, or simply *skaters,* to indicate this.

Gender neutral language

For all historic references and quotes where gender-neutral language would better express the meaning behind the text, I change all sexist references from the masculine to gender-neutral. For example, for all (often translated) quotes of Marx, where appropriate I substitute humans, human beings, people and use the pronouns *they*, *their* and *them* as both singular and plural pronouns.

Use of singular *they*, gender neutral language and the de-gendering of language are all supported by the October 2019, 7th Edition of the APA Publication Manual (2019; see also Streefkerk, 2019). I also consider this approach to be a more accurate linguistic representation of the meaning conveyed by the original author. The intended meaning is more important for this thesis. It is also more important that my language is consistent with the overall approach of my research: to undermine (particularly sexist) ideology and sharpen our practices towards emancipatory ones. This should include language.

Preface

When I was young, I remember seeing a ‘gymnastics display’ first at my school. A group had permission to take a day off school to travel to other schools to show off their abilities. It was magical.

Having always been good at obstacle courses, with an ability to sneak up and down through difficult spaces fast and powerfully, I already had a sense of what my body could do. But these gymnasts were different. They could do things with their bodies that I had never imagined.

I cannot remember which I saw first: the school gymnasts or Nadia Comaneci. I was awestruck both times. However, watching the school gymnasts flip and rotate across the mats was different. Those doing these things were my age; they looked like me. It meant I could do this. Watching Nadia on TV would become a favourite activity of mine. Yet she was far away in Eastern Europe where they trained especially for performance on a world stage. Here, now, I could do what these young gymnasts were doing.

I ran home and told mum. She said no or, at least, dismissed it initially. I do not know how long it was before I convinced her, but it was at least a year. It was after the gymnasts had been to our school again. That night I wasn’t letting go until she said ‘yes’. That agreement changed my life.

I had been a timid, very tortured primary school child. I have been told I was happy-go-lucky when younger, always running around, playing and smiling. I have hints at what changed, and bullying of peers contributed, as did a move between cities and unhappiness at home. I remember spending many lunchtimes alone or walking from group to group trying to find people to play with. I am sure that did not happen during all my primary school years, but it did during considerable parts of it.

I had also struggled to read and did not find the relief in quiet reading that others did. I did find relief, though, in physical activity: running, athletics and playing on the

bars. Hours of playing on the bars! I could lose myself in that sense of freedom and of the enjoyment of what my body could do, for me.

My entry into gymnastics was not easy: far, far from it. My first ‘competition’ – the local testing when family would come along – was messy. I shook and shook. The confidence that I had at school sports completely disappeared. Mum could see me shaking from afar. I think I partly feared that she would remove me from the sport should I not perform well.

My coach was awful: not unlike a lot of coaches, unfortunately, if my experiences are anything to go by. Unlike, luckily, some of my teachers at school, this coach was a bully. She lined up her favourites, trained them and encouraged them. She told me and others like me that we did not have ‘natural ability’: whatever that is. I mean, it is not like anyone is born with a ‘natural ability’ for gymnastics. It is quite an unnatural sport.

Anyway, I spent years torturing myself to become a good gymnast. I developed in those years an important sense of determination: ‘I’ll show them!’ I worked hard but, because of the bad coaching, I never really excelled. The shakes disappeared, but the sense of demoralisation at never ‘getting’ it continued. I trained like this for almost four years, from ages 10 to 14.

Something in me kept me going, though. It was partly the wish just to be ‘in’ myself: my body, for me, doing things that I wanted to do. It was an escape from the terrors of primary and then high school. It was an escape from the pressures of home. I made some friends who were equally ‘untalented’, and we gossiped and happily became the ‘bad students’ in solidarity with each other. I learnt both independence and solidarity. Also, I developed a fierce determination to push through the uncomfortable: being told I was hopeless but to continue anyway.

I look back and think maybe that taking four years to learn these things was not necessary. Nevertheless, I am still glad for those years.

Then it all changed, during one summer school at the other local gymnastics centre. I was new to them. No one had seen me train. No one knew I was ‘hopeless’. I just went there to have a break from my original gym. I came out thinking I could be Nadia. That day also changed my life.

The coach, over from the US, had set up a gym in Geelong that was to be of national standard. It had the biggest trampoline in the southern hemisphere at the time – a claim that, to this day, I am still not sure was true but was believable enough to be a huge drawcard. My original gym was located in various school gyms. We would have to set up and pack up every session. This new gym was huge and purpose-built especially for our sport.

But the main thing was that it was run by a coach who had taught internationally competitive gymnasts. If anyone were going to convince me that I was ok, it was him.

I do not remember anything from that summer school except this. We were tumbling. Bud – his name is Bud Gaiser – had us run through the basics first. As you are warming up, you start with handstands, cartwheels and walkovers, and you work your way up. Then come backflips and 'saults. Then anything else you can do.

I had been working on 'layouts' for a while. They are like flat somersaults: you rotate in the air but are flat. I was intermittently okay with them. I also knew that I had not quite reached a point where I could do twists: layouts with a simultaneous pivot and rotation. At the time, twists were the basics of higher-level competition. Once you had twists – like 'giants' on bars, where you circle the bar with your body straight – you had the foundations required for national and international competition. If you do not have these, you will never compete at these levels.

'Have you done twists?' Bud asked. 'Nope', I said. 'Why not?' he asked. 'Because I don't have layouts yet', I said. 'Rubbish', he replied nonchalantly. 'You can do twists.' We did some warm up twist jumps. We tried both sides. I already knew that I was pretty ambidextrous: both sides were good. We then did standing jumps and half twists into the air – the coach stands almost behind you to catch you, while you jump as if you are about to rotate. Bud could catch and hold gymnasts in his arms, but this is not entirely necessary. As the coach, you just need to break the fall. Practicing twists like this can be rather fun and amusing.

We did a few off the tramp into the foam pit. I had not been in a pit before. I love them to this day. They were revelatory, after all those years of training on hard mats on a wooden floor. You can do anything into them. Joints do not jar, your body can fling around and there is no hard surface on which to bruise yourself. I never, ever

injured myself in a pit, unlike the training on those hard floors. My joints still know that feeling of the hard floors 30 years later.

Then it was back to the tumbling floor for a real run. After all the breaking down of a twist, the accurate advice, the care for how I was going, the encouragement and the corrections, this was the easy bit. My first run was a bit of a laugh. Even with all the breakdowns, shifting back to a floor and running to do a round-off into a twist is a different movement. However, on the second run, I did it!

I remember a high five. I also remember feeling five feet off the ground emotionally. That day I broke so many fears. I broke all that demoralisation. I broke a complete mistrust in authority and coaching. I broke my self-imposed limits – the limits assimilated after years of being told 'no'. I was doing it. I was *actually* doing it. No-one, including myself, could ever tell me again that I could not do gymnastics. To this day, I cry giant soulful tears when thinking of this moment. I am as I write this.

After this moment — my first twist — *everything* changed. My life changed. All of it.

Many have asked me — and I have asked myself — if my life changed when I joined roller derby. In truth, it did not, not like it did in gymnastics. So, for most of my PhD research, I have wondered why I was studying such a topic. Roller derby had surely improved my life. It had changed it in minor ways, but it had not actually 'changed my life'. I wondered why I could see it in others and why this mattered so much to me. Why was it that I wanted to make this part of roller derby grow and develop and change more lives? Yet I could not understand why I maintained the interest when it had not done so for me.

That was until I did the interviews for the research, that is. There are so many stories like my moment of the twist: a moment of both self-realisation and ability, finally, to do something everyone had told you that you could not do. Very often, just like with Bud, the stories featured someone or some people alongside you saying the opposite: 'you *can* do this'. These stories are common.

While I do not believe at an intellectual level that you can locate a life change in a moment, I know that there are certain moments when something clicks. One popular roller derby coach, who has taught skate skills for more than 20 years, explained it the most clearly:

> *Nothing is better than when you see someone you know is struggling - because this is how women think. If we can't do something, it's because there is something wrong with us. If we can't do - you can't do a physical thing like a sport and you're struggling with it, you think you can't do it because there's something wrong with you. That's our first go-to…*
>
> *You have these insecurities; you can't do something, that's it. So, when I teach people and I can see it on their face, I know that they're struggling, I know what the thought is inside their head. So, if I can give them exact technical steps to complete the task and then they do it, and it works, and I see that switch off in their brain that goes from bug, I can totally do it. Oh my God. I can do it. It's that moment, that look on their face where you know that it's that moment that will push them way past and way forward. It's not someone telling them they can do it. Now they know they can do it; from inside they know…*
>
> *So, I just - I think it's the greatest thing to be able to be able to give people steps to do something, see it change how they feel about themselves. So, I've had people tell me, oh my God, I took a whole class and you told me that one thing and that's changed my whole way of thinking in roller derby.*

As this international coach described these experiences, she cried. As did I. The deeply embodied memories of the significance of these changes to the self rose from gut to chest to eyes.

Sport can and does change lives.

This thesis explores some of the examples of how.

Chapter One

Introduction

> *I think it's a freedom, I really do. I think it's a freedom to be oneself. You know, and to experience that freedom…physically*[3].

The love affair begins

A group of skaters lines up on the track. They know exactly where they are positioning themselves, having planned their initial moves before the last jam finished. Determined faces, some with aggressive make-up, bodies bent and crouched over as if in a sprint start but their feet tilted over onto toe stops. The positions look almost choreographed in their precarious stillness. Dressed in a mixture of standard team sports gear and theatrical additions, some with make-up, most with names on their backs that reflect chosen personas, the skaters have something in common: a sense of strength and fearlessness, at least in appearance, that is celebrated by the mixed crowds. In this sport, women dominate. This sport – from competitor through to spectator to trainee – is proud of that dominance (Finley, 2010). In this sport, the athletes rule. It is their sport and no-one else's.

Roller derby is one of the fastest growing women's sports in the world (WFTDA, 2019a; Wikipedia. 2019a)[4]. Re-forming in Texas in the early 2000s, the sport has undergone a complete makeover. The rules have changed, along with its

[3] As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3, all direct quotes from roller derby research participants are noted in italics like this. Names have been removed and not replaced with pseudonyms – this was a conscious part of de-identifying participants.

[4] As roller derby in its current form is relatively new, Wikipedia is one of the most reliable sources of current information about the sport. Even the official website of the governing association (WFTDA) recommends that histories of roller derby be retrieved from Wikipedia.

governance, its goals and even the type of track it is played on. In 2002, the track went flat, down from the previous banked track. This assisted in the democratisation of the sport, because being on a flat track made it possible to train and compete on almost any flat surface: indoor basketball courts, outdoor concrete courts and in warehouses, showgrounds, skate rinks and even bars with concrete floors. This period also marked the beginning of a truly athlete-run sport. The saying ‘by the skaters, for the skaters’ is still an essential point of agreement between roller derby leagues. Some form of democratic internal structure is a requirement of leagues that wish to affiliate to the central governing body: the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, 2019a). The representatives on WFTDA committees are elected. The rules of the sport are debated throughout the affiliates, and changes are decided on the basis of this discussion. Despite its substantial growth (WFTDA, 2019a; Wikipedia, 2019a) over the past 12 years, skater-run democracy has remained. This is possibly how it remains both accessible and a sport that promotes social change, particularly for women or feminised people and for those who are queer.

The whistle blows. Two skaters at the back of the pack begin to push. They have the jammer helmet covers on their heads, with a star either side. They are the point scorers. In roller derby, no ball scores the points, a skater does. This is the first difference between roller derby and other sports. The ‘ball’ can fight back. The jammers can shift, and dodge, and weave, and duck and even leap past an opposition skater. It is therefore one of the only sports in the world where defence and offence occurs at the same time for both teams. While trying to stop the opposing jammer from getting through, you must simultaneously try to help your own jammer get through the pack to score points for your team. This makes for a spectacular game to watch and an even more difficult game to play. The latter is what keeps skaters coming back, for mastering even a moment in the game is a rarely experienced thrill. Overcoming the chaos on the track can make you feel like anything in life is possible.

Roller derby is unique because of an even more important characteristic: it changes lives. The saying ‘roller derby changed my life’ is so common that it is almost trite. A song was written about it. The theme trails through almost every roller derby blog. At first appearance, the types of changes seem to differ: leaving abusive relationships; gaining a sense of physical strength; coming to terms with being gay or bisexual or transgender or gender questioning or ‘just’ plain queer; recovering from past

sexual abuse; changing careers; or, developing a healthy relationship with the body. When explored further, it becomes apparent that these changes have much in common. They are about finally finding the strength to live a truer life, to live a life where body and mind are reunited in a coherent self and to have the boldness to face challenges that were previously shunned or not even conceived of. In short, the changes reflect a shift towards living a more fulfilling life, one that pushes up against personal, social and physical boundaries and develops the self towards a fuller potential. For many, being involved in roller derby is emancipatory, even if this is partial and temporary.

The game on the track this night finishes on a tie breaker. I had been watching the local roller derby games – called bouts – for several months. I had appreciated so much about them: the themed nights with awards for best costume; the skater names; the early Saturday-night timetabling, which meant it was simultaneously a great family night out and a warmer for those wanting to hit bars and clubs afterwards; the variety of women's bodies fiercely competing on the track. The latter was a shock, even for a cultural studies student. It made me realise just how limited, sterile and constructed the public representations of women's bodies are. Representations of women and their bodies, including those of athletes, do not reflect the diversity of bodies that really exist. Yet here, in the hockey stadium in the northern Melbourne suburb of Reservoir, participants did not have to fit into a stereotype of what an athlete looked like in order to play a highly competitive and entertaining game. In fact, large hips and thighs are a distinct physical advantage on wheels because of the lower centre of gravity: large butts are symbols of strength and power. As one author notes, in roller derby *the butt is resignified* (Carlson, 2010). So are bodies in general.

This night was different, however. It was the bout that won me to roller derby. It was an interstate competition in mid-winter in 2009, before the release of the Drew Barrymore directed movie about roller derby, *Whip It* (Barrymore and Mendel, 2009). It was only about two years after the sport of roller derby had begun in Australia (Wikipedia, 2019c). The stadium was packed. Tickets were selling out for interstate games even then, and the hundreds of us now standing on our feet felt a little like we had discovered a secret: this intense game where women smash each other on roller skates.

Until a friend of mine joined, I had never heard of it. These were still mainly word-of-mouth days for the sport. It rarely made it into the newspapers, and then it was

only as spectacle. Tonight, though, we were celebrating roller derby not simply as spectacle but as serious sport. It was a grudge match between two leagues that had been battling it out for the status of top league in the country, but it was at a time before we had anything like a ladder. It was before the biannual Australia-New Zealand tournament, *The Great Southern Slam* (ADRD, 2019). The game was raw and mean and worthy of the name *bout*. As the standing crowd roared, one was reminded of other underground sports held down dingy streets and in warehouses: the fighting sports. That this was women-made meant that it was all the more exciting and that little bit rebellious. This sport was founded on a different terrain to those of so many others.

The Adelaide league won, but through a controversial referee's call. While this mattered to many of the skaters and long-term spectators, I was touched by how little it mattered to everyone else. I was in tears of joy and excitement. Others were, too. These kinds of events, in which the possibilities of the human body in movement are pushed and witnessed, are rare. They occur when the relationship between spectator and athlete become intertwined, and the room becomes something else. The cheering and the incredible skills of the athletes create the momentary experience of everyone being part of something bigger: a moment where we witness and feel human endeavour. It was reminiscent of concerts and festivals, theatrical performances, many art exhibitions and, for me, of united protest. It is, arguably, about that drive towards human emancipation.

Keeping the contradictions alive: social theory and sport's potential

Social theory has tended to treat sport as a cultural terrain that is anathema to radical social change (see, for example, the studies in: Coakley and Dunning, 2000; Giulianotti, 2004; Horne et al. 2013; Carrington and McDonald, 2009; Shilling, 2003); the exceptions to this are notable (for example, those who also discuss CLR James' contributions to Marxist theory and sports journalism: Cleaver, 2009; Carrington, 2009; Grimshaw, 1992; Stoddart, 2004; Smith, 2006; and Smith, 2011)[5]. Meanwhile sport is treated in social theory, particularly of the critical kind, as representing *many bad*

[5] It is worth noting here that long-time feminist researcher Jennifer Hargreaves provides a more complex understanding of sport, for example in the classic text, *Sporting Females: critical issues in history and sociology of women's sports* (1994). Hargreaves has argued that changes brought about by and for women athletes have been significant and contributed to social change more widely. However, Hargreaves (2004) also tends to conclude that the social changes have not yet been radical in the critical theory sense.

things, but two approaches are very common. First, sport is seen as a distraction from the main fields through which social change can occur. That is, it is seen simply as part of the corporatised leisure industry and seeks to distract people from the everyday exploitation and oppression they face with spectacles and events to watch passively and spend significant amounts of money at, as mere consuming audiences. Secondly, sport is seen as a propagator of capitalist and nationalist ideology. It promotes aggressive and even destructive ideals: of competitiveness between people and nations and of winning at all costs. It is almost militaristic at times in its nationalism, with sports events being run like military parades, celebrating distant heroes and encouraging hatred of national 'others' (Carrington and McDonald, 2009). Sport is also regarded as a promoter of the work ethic and of particular body types. In these models, there is very little room in sport for collectivity, mutual appreciation or forms of progressive change.

Jhally and Livant (1991: 395-96) summarise a common negative view of sport and some of the problems with this:

> It is because socialists wish to eliminate competition in practice (i.e., wish that it were not there) that they also tend to erase it in theory... This makes it difficult to consider competition dialectically, to examine the mutual relations, the interdependence of competition and cooperation in any particular sphere of social life. Nowhere is this undialectical consideration of competition clearer than in the critical analysis of sports, one of the areas of social life in which competition is most prominent and visible and to which it seems intrinsic under present conditions. Sports are an area in which the repugnance of critical socialists to competition is most manifest. Indeed, for a long time even the very importance of sports was ignored.

Ian McDonald (2009) rather pessimistically concludes his discussion of 'One-dimensional sport' with the view that even radical gestures at resistance are contained within the elite structures of the media-sports industrial complex. He suggests we denounce sport as a way of radicalising it. While I concur with both McDonald's (2009) criticism of the post-structuralist tendency, in for example Laclau and Mouffe, to see resistance everywhere (see also Boucher, 2009 for an excellent critique of 'Laclau,

Mouffe, Butler and Zizek' and their *Charmed Circle of Ideology*) I cannot agree that all resistance is contained. Neither would those roller derby skaters who adhere to their practice as 'real, strong, athletic and revolutionary'. In contrast to McDonald (2009), I denounce the denunciation of sport as a potential field of praxis[6].

So my response to these arguments is: of course, this is often what sport is; however, this is not *only* what sport is. In fact, to view any cultural or social terrain as merely the pure product of global capitalism, without internal challenge or contradiction, and without possibilities for change, is factually imprecise. It is also a dangerous political standpoint from which to critique; dangerous because the absence of recognition of potential for change within social phenomena signifies a deep pessimism about our capacity to challenge the power of dominant structures and ideologies. It is a pessimism, not just about sport, but one that could apply equally across other cultural fields. Moreover, sport need not be understood in such a one-sided way. I am often struck by the contrast between a theorist's view of sport and the expressed experiences of those who participate, either as audiences or athletes. My research explores why and how the critical traditions within social theory can and should be reapplied to an understanding of sport as potentially liberating. I also argue that such a re-theorising is important to a fuller understanding, not just of sport, but of the everyday contradictions we experience between freedom and oppression, alienation and fulfilment.

Following Raewyn Connell's general approach to theorising gender (Connell, 2009, 1985; Wedgwood, 2009) and Ben Carrington's (2009) call to return to Stuart Hall[7], combined with Harry Cleaver's (2009) excellent call to consider sports' alternatives – I argue it is worth *keeping the contradictions alive* with regards to sport and culture. This thesis argues that, within the contradictions of existence, social change towards human emancipation is always, already immanent. Change emerges from within contradictions, so it pays to make these visible. One contradiction is between ideology – the dominant ideas about how we are meant to think about the world – and

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[6] There is a somewhat sweet irony in the main contributors to Carrington and McDonald's (2009) excellent book on *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport* having met in Austin Texas preceding the book's writing. That is, they met in the home of modern roller derby, with its connection to the local alternative bar scene.

[7] Carrington's (2009) '(date) Sport without final guarantees' chapter within the edited collection of writing and case studies in *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, is a reference to Stuart Hall's important Cultural Studies piece on ideology and structure.

our actual existence, which lies in stark contrast. The classical contradiction is the one Marx observed between the notion that we are all free and equal participants in market exchanges and the reality of inequality and constraint (Marx, 1867 (1976): 280[8]; 1894 (1981): 957; Geras, 1971: 81). Another emerges when different sets of material, social realities do not align or are in conflict. An example is the contradiction between a world which is able materially to sustain all life on this planet yet constantly fails to do so, primarily through unequal power over the production, distribution and consumption of the world's material resources.

This thesis attempts to 'keep the contradictions alive' in writing up the research results and allowing skater-participants to articulate their life changes through participation in roller derby. The strength of this analytical method is in acknowledging complexity and empirical 'messiness' while simultaneously understanding the dominant power relations in operation. That is, I take a critical approach to sociology (see chapter 3), which includes acknowledging the immanent potential that exists within even everyday sporting activities.

The thesis began with a description of my own experiences of participation in the sport of gymnastics. While I only later became conscious of the full meaning of these experiences, they changed the direction of my life. For the first time I had both an activity and a sense of my body as truly mine. I reconnected my *self* with its embodiment. The environment in which I trained and performed supported this embryonic recognition. Nearly 20 years later, when I started to participate in roller derby, I became a witness to this experience in others. Women and feminised[9] people were describing what I had experienced when I was younger. Witnessing it in others helped make my own experience more conscious: that moving the body, for and with

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[8] 'The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of humanity. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will... When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities… a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. They who were previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as their worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back.' (Marx, 1867 (1976): 280)

[9] Treated as feminine or like a woman; emasculated. Those who are assigned female at birth are often feminised even after identifying as non-binary or transmasculine. Some cisgendered men are also feminised, as are many non-binary people but especially those who identify as femme. This term is used to acknowledge that not only women suffer under the ideological creation of a gender binary, of a 'lesser' gender expression, that is, the feminine.

the self, towards some form of communal goal – a goal at once collective and individual – is liberating and deeply fulfilling. For many women who play roller derby, this is the first experience of really uniting body and self as their own. I argue that this is a major contributor to the common saying 'roller derby changed my life', the focus of the research in this thesis.

I came to roller derby after many years of participation in activism: about 15 years of it. This activism involved not only participation in a range of social movements but reading from the classic texts of socialists and radicals. By the time I watched my first roller derby game, I had read many of the original Marxist texts, and I was particularly interested in the ideas around capitalism's contribution to human alienation. My involvement in both boxing and roller derby demonstrated for me, in practice, some of the ways in which we – as human beings and, particularly, as women – fight to reclaim our sense of our inner selves, in action, in our bodies, in concert with others. For me, sport was not the 'other' to social movements – a distraction or, worse, an 'opiate'[10] – but was absolutely connected to them. Each, in its own different way, is about trying to *live the life within*, as CLR James (2005) described it (this assessment of James on sport is described well in Smith, 2011). Outside critical social theory, authors have articulated the importance of sport for significant personal, social and political change as well, for example, Zach Dundas (2010), Dave Zirin (2008), Mischa Merz (2009, 2012) and Jan Stradling (2009).

After having experienced and witnessed the liberating and fulfilling possibilities of sport, I then reflected on Marxist theories and found them wanting. The original Marxist texts tend to focus on the particular forms of alienation that result from the sale of labour power to capitalists – estranged labour – and from its social consequences and accompanying ideology (e.g. Marx, 1844a (1992); McLellan 1995). That is, the traditional Marxist texts tend to focus on estrangement of both 'productive' labour (profit producing) and 'unproductive' labour (within the system of capitalism but outside direct forms of profit making). In order to understand women's alienation from social power, however, we must also take into account the estrangement of 'reproductive labour' – that is, in Marxist terms, the labour involved in producing,

[10] A play on Marx's (1844b: 234) description of religion, but see my remarks in chapter 7.

caring for, healing, feeding and tending to the bodies which are also labourers for capital (see Bhattacharya, 2017, 2019; Federici, 2004; Vogel, 2013 and 2000).

The understanding of political economy can be expanded to include the whole field of otherwise privatised and often invisible reproductive labour. Marx's early philosophy, and even the methodology demonstrated in *Capital*, can be extended to understand the simultaneously important area of reproductive labour. Indeed, the alienation of humanity from our bodies, each other, labour and social systems cannot be understood without understanding all of: the capitalist mode of production; the patriarchal systems of reproduction; and the colonialist systems of power relations that helped to generate and continue to maintain the profitability of capitalism. Capitalism cannot be understood without understanding how it acquired land and resources in the first place and how our society is almost completely divided along two gender lines. The latter division reinforced a system of unpaid reproductive or caring labour that is primarily the responsibility of one gender. The consequence ideologically of this reinforced social division of labour has been the violent wrenching apart of humanity into two gender types, with those responsible for caring labour oppressed and, despite the gains of second-wave feminism, still denied social equality and freedom on most measures.[11]

In short, throughout this thesis, I argue that culture and cultural understandings cannot be separated from an understanding of broader social conditions and political economy. I also argue, especially in chapter 2, that political economy cannot be understood properly without understanding social reproduction (Vogel, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2019[12], 2017; Farris, 2019). Social movements for liberation and emancipation, and away from alienation and towards freedom and mutual flourishing, also need to appreciate the close interconnection between the 'cultural' and 'the economic'.

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[11] I acknowledge that an understanding of political economy should be expanded on multiple fronts – also along geographic, global grounds – to both deepen and expand our understanding of colonialism and imperialism and the struggles of women in the Global South. However, such an analysis is largely beyond the scope of this thesis. I do attend to some of these questions in chapter 2, where appropriate.

[12] Bhattacharya's chapter in *Aspects of Marx's Capital Today* (2019) is aptly titled 'From the production of value to the valuing of reproduction'.

As Karl Marx (1844d) described in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (*Paris Manuscripts* or just *The Manuscripts*), that which makes us human – our ability to act in and on the world around us, fully and creatively – is constrained under our current social conditions. During much of our life our labour is bought and sold to others, who manage the work we do. The products of that labour, be they intellectual or physical, are owned by others or turned into commodities for sale. This in turn means that our ability to live truly fulfilling lives, through the full expression of our human ability to act in, be in and change the world, is limited. On the other hand, for Marx, 'our living labour (also) appears as the… source of whatever dynamism the system has. The possibility of our self-activity rupturing capitalist efforts to harness it appears as the… path to revolution' (Cleaver, 2009: xxix). This idea applies equally to the labour which exists within the system of 'wage-slavery' and outside of it: both within the capitalist systems of production and in fields such as leisure, protest, the arts or the home. Our labour outside waged work – that is, through sport, political activity, creative expression or even the labour of intimacy – is potentially an expression and a source of our liberation. It is, therefore, also part of any revolutionary drive, even if this revolutionary drive is not yet organised or politically conscious.

When this kind of labour happens under our current capitalist and patriarchal social conditions, it is always *both* alienated and emancipatory. Our labour is a site of constant tension, a dialectic within ourselves: one moment swings towards alienation and another moment is an expression of our freedom to act in the world. Like any dialectic, it pushes towards resolution, even if this leads to only temporary and partial relief. Playing sport, for example, can and does generate experiences of freedom and fulfilment. As is described well by Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald's (2009) *Introduction* in *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, this approach to sport is rare in Marxist Cultural Studies. In the forward to this edition, Harry Cleaver (2009) agrees.

This thesis looks, then, to roller derby as an example of a physical subculture that provides hints at what kinds of social conditions might lead to shifting life experience away from alienation and towards human flourishing. In a similar vein to Raymond Williams (2005), Stuart Hall (1986, 1978; and Hall and Jefferson, 1976) and the recommendation of Ben Carrington (2009), it is worthwhile noticing the forms of resistance and striving towards freedom from alienation that are everywhere to be seen. This is demonstrated through this case study of the skater-run, feminist-leaning, full-

contact sport of roller derby – the sport that describes itself as 'real, strong, athletic, revolutionary' (WFTDA, 2019a).

Why roller derby?

This thesis represents a culmination of a five-year ethnography of the roller derby leagues based in Melbourne and the nearby regional cities of Geelong and Ballarat. I collected a range of field notes at major events and workshops, including at *The Great Southern Slam* (2012 and 2014), *Rollercon Down Under* (2012), *Dirty Deb Does Daylesford* (2013) and *Battle on the Bent Track* (2012, 2013 and 2014). I have also attended and taken notes from many minor training and competition events in and around Melbourne. I intermittently wrote a personal diary of reflections as a skater (2009-11), as the Head of the Fitness Committee (2010-11), as a Bench Coach (2012) and, from 2012, as an Alumnus[13] of the Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL)[14]. It is important to note that the diary entries were personal reflections and that my views, and this thesis as a whole, in no way represent the views of the VRDL in its past or present form. My experiences have informed the design of this research and my critiques of roller derby, both as a subculture and as a sport. Where relevant I draw attention to these reflections.

The primary source of data for this research was the 23 semi-structured interviews of skaters, organisers and international coaches. Skaters were the primary interview participants and were sought because of their identification with the saying 'roller derby changed my life' and either being or having lived as a woman. I was explicit that life changes could be positive, negative, or neutral. Overwhelmingly, most participants identified with this saying positively, which is to say that roller derby changed their lives for the better. I do not claim that the skaters' experiences were the same as those of all skaters. However, organisers and international visiting coaches were also interviewed as a kind of 'check' of the results of individual skaters. I wanted to know whether these experiences could be generalised from roller derby in Australia to

[13] Alumnus can also be used as a gender non-specific term, as it is being used here.

[14] The VRDL is also one of the world's leading WFTDA leagues, having held the world league trophy in 2017. This was the first time any league outside of the US had won the 'Hydra' trophy. For more on the league and their history see: VRDL, 2019.

those in the United States (US) and other countries. While important differences between local league cultures exist – especially in terms of connections to local social movements or alternative subcultures and the particular league's 'queerness' or whiteness – the overall experience that roller derby changed lives was similar across leagues and between Melbourne and, at least some, major US cities. This is discussed in more detail in the results chapters 4-6.

From this case study, especially from the interviews, I discovered that certain conditions and experiences have particularly contributed to skaters' experiences of transformation:

1. the culture of conscious rejection of dominant femininity as a constraint on how people live;
2. a set of activities involving the body in movement and performance: training, competition and all the activities of sport;
3. confirmation that the body matters and in ways that challenge the ideology of the separate and non-corporeal self, as Fox (2015) describes it. We are corporeal beings, whose corporeality is not only ignored but actively repressed, and even abused, under current social conditions, especially for women and feminised people; and
4. a culture of mutual care and mutual self-development which aids a 'finding of the self within': a self that is not (at least, not solely) the neoliberal, individualistic, superficially agential self. Rather, it is a self that is free in its interconnectedness with others, with life in general and in terms of an inner life, with mind *in* body.

That is, this study presents a contrast between what theories of emancipatory praxis argue – that sport is not only a field absent of resistance but is inherently problematic – and what actually occurs. Resistance is everywhere, including in sport. Moreover, sport – with its potential for reunification between the self and its embodiment, in communities of mutual encouragement – can play a particularly important role in resisting or shifting some forms of alienation. It can provide a relief from this experience of alienation. Sport, after all, not only occurs in packed-out stadiums but on grass fields, in backyards and on beaches. It has even occurred

alongside and as part of radical social movements (Bennett, 2012). Further, the case study results show the complex relation between transformation of selves and our immediate social conditions and how these cannot be separated. Alternative subcultures, especially those that also attend to the body, provide radically alternative conditions for non-alienating practices. I argue, too, that they potentially provide for conditions of emancipatory praxis.

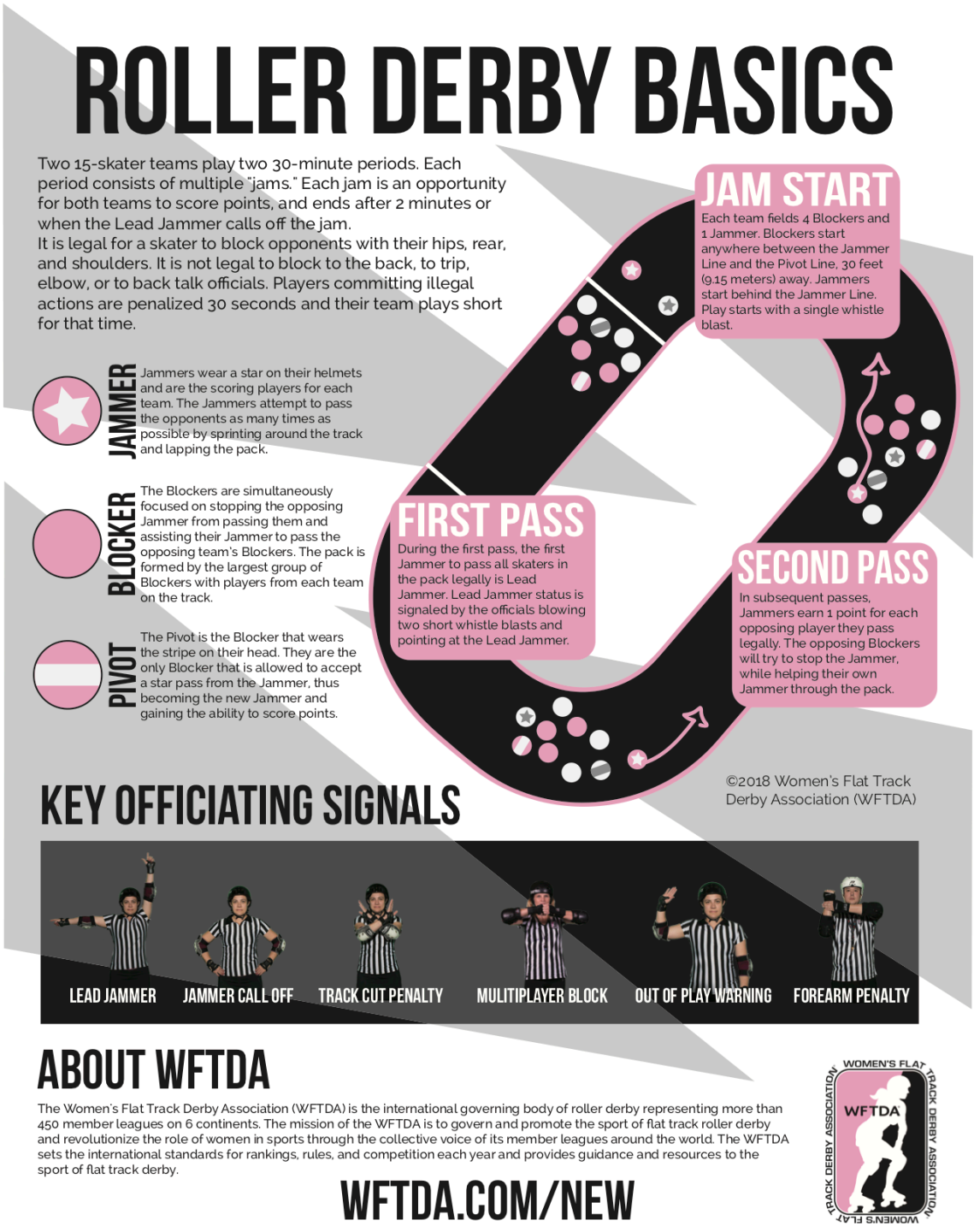
The choice of roller derby as the object of my case study was considered and deliberate. Roller derby provides a case example of *both* a sport and an alternative subculture (Dundas, 2010; WFTDA, 2019a; Wikipedia, 2019a, 2019b). From its foundation, roller derby has been variously connected to different alternative subcultures. This does vary from location to location. Each of these localised subcultures brings with it its own set of practices and ways of being. It has variously been connected to activist, punk, rockabilly, feminist, bar and band, sex worker, circus and queer subcultures (see also Pavlidis, 2013; Streeter, 2015; Paul and Bank, 2018). Whatever the unique local alternative practices, one thing seems to be common: there is a creatively productive intersection of several different subcultures which influence the running of many of the leagues.

The case study of roller derby was chosen for athletic reasons as well. Not only does the sport provide an interesting intersection of alternative cultures, but it is a *physical* culture which celebrates the strength, aggression and diversity of women's bodies and shapes. It is a physically demanding practice which requires a high level of skill. The sport is fast moving, technically difficult and aggressive (but in ways that put skater safety first). Safety training and the use of safety gear are taken very seriously. Also, as one research participant explains: *there is just something about moving on roller skates*.

The sport may be complex to watch and play, but the rules are relatively simple. As the diagram below shows, there are five members of each team on the track at any one time, that is, for each jam which runs for up to two minutes. For each team there is a *jammer* – the point scorer who wins points by passing the hips of opposing skaters – and four *blockers* whose aim is simultaneously to stop the opposing jammer and assist their own. Each half runs for 30 minutes (although sometimes for 20 minutes for early games in tournaments or demonstration games). The games used to be called *bouts*, reflecting the sense of connection to martial arts and the fighting sports. Bout is a term I

use throughout the thesis to be consistent with the timing of primary data collection. As is also shown below, the referees – there are seven on the track for each game – use hand signals to indicate skater penalties. Instead of the game stopping for a penalty, as is common in other sports, roller derby continues play but the penalised skater spends time out of the game. Penalties are for 30 seconds, which is a very long time in roller derby.

Figure 1.1: Summary of the rules, women's flat track roller derby (WFTDA 2019b)



Skater research participants described the reasons the sport of roller derby was unique for them:

1. Roller derby is a technically difficult sport to learn. This was not mentioned by all participants as a contributing factor, although it is emphasised by coaches and those who most recently joined the sport.
2. The focus on general health and fitness in a way which is fun and challenging.
3. Wanting to play a competitive team sport focussed on camaraderie and forms of supportive competitiveness (although, again, not all interview participants described this as their experience).
4. Wanting to play a contact sport run by and for women and that welcomes transgender women members. That is, roller derby is not only a contact sport which celebrates strength and aggression in women but is, largely, controlled by the women themselves. Participants say the sport is, therefore, less likely to slip into exploitative sexual objectification of women, trivialisation of strength and aggression in women and tends to reject the idea of 'natural' restrictions on women's strength and power. Therefore, it tends to challenge dominant ideas of femininity.
5. The rules of the sport mean that it is fast and challenging to play. There are no stops for penalties, and there are two-minute maximum jams. It is played on a small track with tight game play. There are two point-scorers on the track at once and 'taking the space' is one of the aims.
6. The sport is run by the skaters themselves, which is a similar model to that of other forms of radical and community organisation. It is led by women.

Nancy J Finley's (2010) detailed ethnography of roller derby in Texas similarly describes the importance of the sport being run primarily by and for women. Everything occurs 'by the skater, for the skater', from training and recruitment to the organisation of bouts. Even how the game is played, via giant debates over changes to rulesets, is 'by the skater, for the skater'.

The sport's subculture also provides – at least at the time this study was conducted – the opportunities for self-expression, for 'getting in touch with' one's own subjectivity. For me, the opportunity the sport provides to become one's own personal character – with pseudonym, dress, make-up and persona – is a critical part of its liberating practices. This contrasts sharply with the practices of many other sports, which constrain creativity and drain athletes of their subjectivity.

In part because of the uniqueness of the sport and its theatrics, roller derby has attracted many women who have never played sport before. When I started playing roller derby in 2010, around two-thirds of the women who joined the VRDL were not participating regularly in any sport or physical activity before joining. As the head of the Fitness Committee at the time, I would request a show of hands from new league members, and this was consistently the result over a period of about 18 months. The league then saw it as its responsibility to train those who had only just begun to skate all the way through to bouting level. Many leagues are still committed to this ethic of safety and access to the sport.

This case study focussed on the life changing experiences of participating in roller derby. The types of life changes differed but included:

1. leaving abusive relationships;
2. coming to terms with being lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender;
3. changing careers;
4. recovering from addictions or mental health struggles; and
5. completely changing approaches to parenting and caring.

As the results and discussion chapters will demonstrate, the overwhelming finding is that there is something about roller derby which contributes to participants, often for the first time in their lives, finally being free to be oneself through a new sense of physical power and in a supportive and radical alternative culture. This is not to gloss over problems of transgender exclusion, geographic inequality, ableism, access to resources or that the sport's 'whiteness' does not represent the ethnic and racial diversity of the cities in which its leagues are based (see chapter 6). Nevertheless, as I have noted above, the choice of roller derby as a case study was deliberate and considered. Having participated in the sport, I understood that it could be deeply transformative and that

alternative femininities, physicality and mutuality were important to this transformation. I understood that the sport created an alternative space in which women and feminised people experience a profoundly different way of being, one which honours the body and creates deep feelings of support and camaraderie that encourages skaters to take risks in learning new skills and making personal change. In addition, that change, once internalised, can be responsible for cultural and social shifts far beyond the practice of roller derby itself.

As skaters said:

> *Within two years (of starting derby) I was separated from my husband and living in a share house. No more dog. No more car. No more house. Feeling more like myself than I had ever felt.*
>
> *I think it's a freedom, I really do. I think it's a freedom to be oneself. You know, and to experience that freedom… physically.*

Individualised versus social labour: beyond alienation

There has come to be a profound cynicism among activists and left-wing thinkers towards ideas of personal change. These can be seen in the critiques of 'radical self-care', for example (see Jacobin Magazine for a good example of the argument: Dean, 2019; see Laurie Penny (2016) for a more nuanced view of the relationship between personal and political when it comes to care). While on some levels this cynicism is reasonable, it also leads to dismissing the social and political importance of personal struggle. That is, it elides the deep interconnection between the individual and the social. Put another way, this approach can neglect the experience of ourselves as social individuals – for we *are* both. As Marx often explained (e.g. 1858-59 (1973): 83, 84[15]), and as second-wave feminists confirmed, the personal is also always social and political. Within personal struggles, there are not only hints at, but loud cries against, broad systems of social oppression. As both Hegel and Marx described, as social beings, we are particulars of the social conditions in which we live, rather than separate

[15] 'The human being is in the most literal sense a 'political animal' not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.' (Marx, 1858-59 (1973): 84)

individuals who make up a society (Wood, 2004: 17; Meikle, 1991[16]; see also chapter 7).

Some of this cynicism towards 'the personal' is reasonable. Neoliberalism and related ideologies of contemporary capitalism have promoted – almost in a war-like-propaganda fashion – the idea that we are all alone in our ability to navigate the world, both social and 'natural', and to make improvements to our lives. There are two main drivers behind this. First, as workers, we *are* more isolated. This driver behind individualism is no accident of circumstances but has been the consequence of transformative attacks on workers' collective organisation. For instance, the decline in union density and influence in many OECD countries since the 1960s, but especially since the neo-liberal late 1970s, has been steep (see chart below)[17], particularly in Australia where this study is based. Moreover, the aim of the intellectual architects of neo-liberalism was to *individualise* us. In particular, Friedrich Hayek (1979) had noted that humans are not necessarily the natural, self-interested, 'rationally' calculating *homo economicus* of the neo-classical economic models. Rather, 'he acknowledged that market liberal behaviours… had to be created (Hayek, 1979: 75-76)', according to Marginson (1997: 103). 'The objective of the market liberals was to create the social conditions in which their particular brand of individualism would be universalised; in which the democratic political citizen would be replaced by the individualist economic "anti-citizen".' (see also Hayek, 1979b) In so doing, neo-liberal marketisation reforms enlisted the ideological contradiction that I identified early in this chapter. We purchase with our own individual money products that do not appear to us as the result of a whole system of social interactions. The very appearance of market exchange, which is true enough on the face of it, hides the systems of power that control this process of production and distribution (see e.g. Geras, 1971; see also Marx, 1867 (1976): 280; 1894 (1981)).

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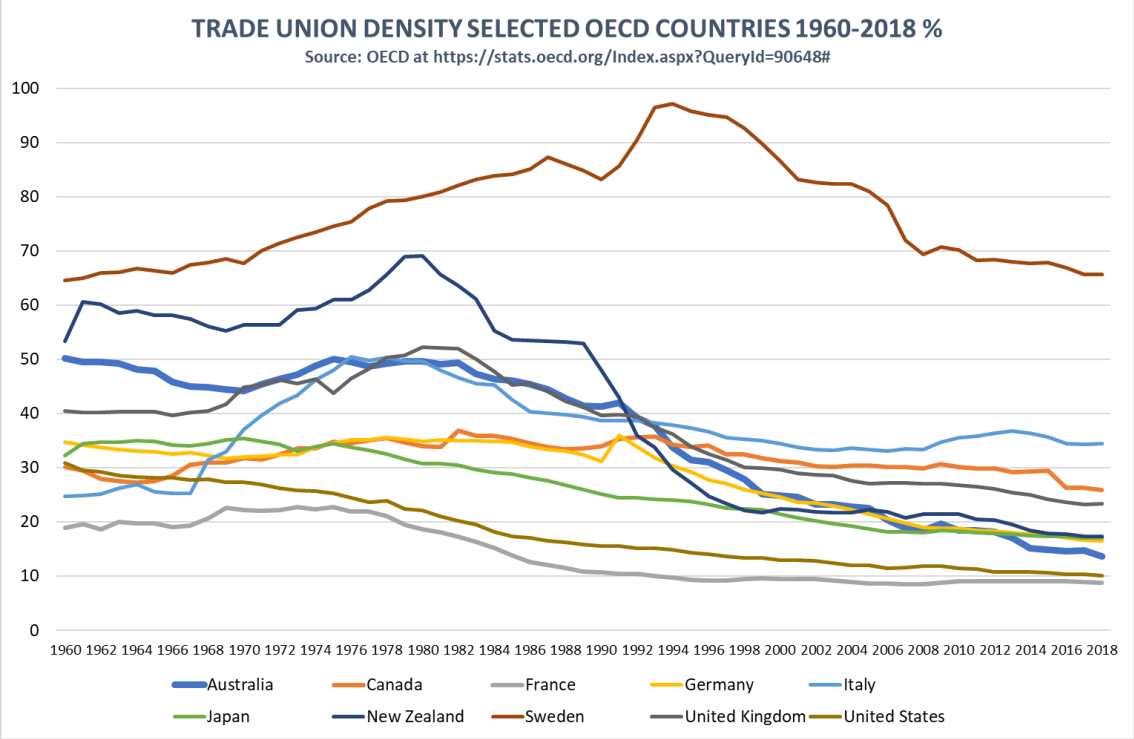
[16] Meikle's chapter, 'History of philosophy: The metaphysics of substance in Marx', in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (1991) speaks of Aristotle and Marx sharing the view that social reality comprises the sole substance of human beings in society.

[17] The ideology of 'individual worker's power' is a fundamental part of this deep change in our methods of organisation. So profound has our change been that, even within our unions, our methods of decision-making and of protest are very often down to 'insurance-like' systems of 'protection' (though really not protecting much at all) alongside the reification of leaderships that have often become solo decision-makers and taken on managerialist styles.

Figure 1.2: Union membership decline in selected OECD countries (OECD 2018)



The second main driver has been that the increasing disempowerment and individualisation of our communities of care also remains invisible, behind the appearance of 'fair trade' in caring labour. As I will discuss in detail in chapter 2, reproduction[18] has also become more of an individual responsibility. Worse, it is labour that is uncompensated. When individualised, or privatised, caring and reproductive labour is oppressive labour. As Federici (2004) has exposed, the separation of this form of labour from productive labour, and henceforth its invisibility, is no accident. One of the most extreme expressions of the ideology of individualism in the realm of caring labour is the idea that caring labour is a 'choice' which women (or anyone) can avoid. Therefore, our social systems of support – whether formally through the state or within our own social movements – are not at all responsible for mutual care. I argue in chapter 2 that this individualisation of gendered reproduction – in that broad, feminist-Marxist sense of the reproduction and care of life – is one of the strongest ideological victories for capital. It is simultaneously a loss for women, particularly women of colour and

[18] I am using the term reproduction here in the more general feminist Marxist sense, as meaning all the work that goes into reproducing not only people but our entire social relations.

lower-working-class women, and for anyone who is responsible for or receives care. It has turned that which is most human – our mutuality and communality and care for life – into that which is oppressive, exploitative, and the source of deeply-felt misery. It is not people's individual responses to these conditions that is the problem or the solution: it is the gendered *social conditions of individualisation* that is the problem. Furthermore, just as with the illusions created by markets in general, these conditions are then internalised and appear to be 'natural' or unchanging.

The internalisation of our social conditions of alienation is political. So, too, therefore, is resistance to this internalisation, which necessarily *also* occurs at the personal level. To change the self by rejecting these social and political conditions is a political act. It is often a first step for someone making change in their lives. This thesis will endeavour to show that the rejection of the ideology of patriarchal capitalism – that drains women and feminised people of their agency and dismisses the labour of care – exists alongside, and is often the result of, participating in material change. Internalised ideologies of dominant femininity, for example, are exposed as ideology *while* women – and those who have been read as woman – participate in activities which challenge them. Participating in a very physical and demanding sport such as roller derby, surrounded by a strong community of women who support each other in learning and in becoming who they want to be, is one such example.

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that such personal change is *necessary* to political change: that political change is immanent within personal change and vice versa. The two are intimately connected in the lives of this research's participants. I will also argue that there is a connection between theory and practice in all forms of personal and social change. Nearly all forms of practice are informed by broader understandings of the world at some level – a kind of theory of the world, even if not a politically conscious theory – and all forms of theory develop out of an assessment of practices. This thesis is structured in such a way as to show how this two-way relationship *already exists in everyday practices*. It begins with an introduction to the theories which inform my investigation. Then the thesis moves into a critique of an exemplary practice (roller derby). Finally, it resumes the theory-practice discussion, considering the implications of a re-theorisation of praxis based on critical analysis of roller derby practices. It asks simultaneously: *what do these practices indicate for theory,* and *how can theory help us to better understand such practices?*

The emancipatory potential of sport

As an activist, Marxist theorist and keen commentator on cricket, CLR James had a passionate appreciation of the role that sport can play in the lives of people (see e.g. James, 2005: 1992). According to Andrew Smith (2011: 496), an historian of CLR James, James argued throughout his work that 'the pleasures and longings, the flashes of wholeness and completion of which cultural forms at their best provide fleeting instances, were not the 'other' to political struggle' but the core of it. Further, Smith (2011: 487) sees in James an understanding that:

> The triumph of it [taking risk in sport], when it occurs, is that it demonstrates to the watching world for a moment something of the possibility inherent in human creativity, something of the human ability to transfigure and transform circumstance.

Other writers have described similar experiences. Zach Dundas (2010: 283), in his writings on 'renegade sport', draws the conclusion that:

> Sports exercise our higher social functions, fuel our dreams, and trigger the sensory animal pleasures that give our evolved consciousness its earthy roots. They remind us both of the body's capacity for excellence and its frequent and often hilarious fallibility.

Mischa Merz (2012), in one of her now two books on boxing, describes how she practices the sport 'like an artist, because I must, not to attain any particular goal, but because it is who I am'. This description runs in stark contrast to how much of critical social theory, especially that of the Frankfurt School, describes sport and physical activity, as running against the radical practices of art.

What popular sports commentaries often have in common is an almost radical assessment of the impact that participation has had on the writers themselves and on their communities. Sometimes, like the examples above, this assessment goes beyond simply increasing health and fitness and beyond simple involvement in a community, although these factors are also important. These stories very often refer to more

substantial change, of self-fulfilment, even of life-change. In a rare type of reflection for a critical social theorist, Harry Cleaver (2009), in his forward to the collection of writings on *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport* (Carrington and McDonald, 2009), tells his own story about involvement in mountain climbing:

> At first, climbing seemed like pure self-valorisation; it heightened my awareness, developed me physically, provided an opportunity for close bonds with others, taught me about a part of the earth I had never known and I love it. (Cleaver, 2009: xxx)

However, Cleaver recognises that there is a contradiction here, that this activity cannot be viewed in isolation from his other life activities. If the energy he gains from this activity goes into his paid work, for example, then it is also contributing to the reproduction of his labour and, therefore, to his own exploitation. Recognising this tension creates the space to turn this activity into a conscious political activity. I argue throughout this thesis that understanding this tension — between alienation and self-fulfilment in physical activities, particularly those that are radical and mutually-fulfilling — is critical to understanding the wider, emancipatory potential of not only sport but many forms of physical activity. That includes the many forms of physical activity we take-for-granted, as we assess them as merely escape or distraction from alienation. I argue instead that they can also be at the heart of our freedom and of praxis. Praxis in this sense is defined in more detail in chapter 2. However, for this thesis praxis is understood as more than the political change often described in sports studies (see e.g. Olive 2017 on feminist sports sociology). It also goes beyond the ‘celebration of contingent particularity’ (McNally, 2001: 7) and, instead, is about the combining of theory and knowledge of practice to assist in the overthrow of oppressive social systems and of labour as commodity (McNally, 2001: 6). This is also why this thesis makes particular use of the conceptual contributions of Marxist-influenced critical social theory and cultural studies in order to explore the meaning of sport more deeply. I now very briefly explain why I have not followed other approaches to this study.

One tendency within studies of sport is to focus on the body as object of health and fitness. As Fullagar (2017: chapter 40) explains, ‘It is now commonplace to read that “exercise is medicine” … (with) the physically active self… being mobilized

through converging mental health discourses to treat and prevent' what are defined by even the World Health Organisation as global health 'problems'. In this model then, sport is to be used as both 'treatment' for the 'body as problem' and, to put it simplistically, as a method of intensifying the rate at which labour can be exploited through employment. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 2, the treatment of the body as object has serious implications for our understanding of not only social structures but our very selves. Under our current social systems, this treatment of the body in mainstream sports studies has not only hampered critique of the bodily implications of oppression but it has contributed to the very ideologies of objectification and non-corporeality that I describe in the next chapter. Francombe-Webb, Silk and Bush (2017: chapter 55) also argue:

> Albeit with differing degrees and intensities within various higher education systems, 'sport' as an academic discipline – in a similar fashion to other disciplinary enterprises – has become enmeshed within the dictates of neoliberalism; namely the 'logics' of the market, and the privileging of centrally controlled, efficiency oriented, rationally predictable, empirically calculable modes of knowledge generation and, ultimately, epistemologically restricted ways of knowing (cf. Ritzer, 2004; Giroux, 2010a, 2010b). Such processes have further wed the 'science of sport', the university and implicated subjects (students/professors) to the logics of the capital. Almost out of necessity there has been a tendency to downplay pedagogic practices and scholarly foci that empathize with, for example, human needs, civic and moral responsibilities, public values, fluid ways of knowing and becoming and critique (Giroux, 2010a).

That is, as I draw upon Cleaver to demonstrate, the body is seen as an instrument to be improved upon rather than as part of our full, living and complex humanity. Moreover, the body exists within social systems which need to change if they are to contribute to this living, complex humanity.

This more fulsome, human approach has been a thread running through what could be described as cultural studies, both before and after the period of the

Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). CLR James (before the CCCS), for example, discussed how cricket in the West Indies became an alternative form of national collective that was both locally based and anti-colonialist (James, 2005; Smith, 2006; Giulianotti, 2015b). Most recently, this thread, along with a critique of the limits of sports sociology, has cohered into a somewhat diverse combination of approaches in the field of physical cultural studies (PCS). Silk and Andrews (2011: 8), in their commonly referenced piece on why physical cultural studies (PCS) exists as a discipline, propose that:

> Empirically, PCS identifies the body–and even more specifically the active body–as the central focus of its intellectual labor. Physically active bodies–and the subjectivities they inhabit, perform, and embody–may appear natural (an authentic expression of some biological essence), yet this masks their sociocultural constitution (Pronger, 1998). In problematizing such assumptions–and thereby countering the scientific knowledges and naturalizing truths that have commandeered the body as an object of inquiry–PCS is a project motivated by the need to better understand the sociocultural organization, representation, and experience of active embodiment.

For me, understanding the social, political and cultural context of the body, its activity and subjectivity, is only part of the problem. Understanding the active reconstruction of the body in mutual action is *also* important. Simultaneous to this, as described most thoroughly by feminist Marxist authors, is the contradiction between the social construction of the body and a sports participants' agency. Similarly, Giulianotti (2015b: chapter 4) describes how 'Cultural Studies analyses draw on Marx to conceive of subordinate groups as active agents in shaping and reshaping their identities and practices'. As Vertinsky and Weedon (2017: chapter 1) illustrate, physical cultural studies has 'inherited from cultural studies a language, a theoretical lineage and a conceptual apparatus concerned with struggle and resistance'. They go on to describe how physical cultural studies has kept the 'same critical, political sensibility' which is then used to 'interrogate active bodies' and to aim towards 'emancipatory potential' (Giardina and Newman, 2011).

The methodological implications of this approach are discussed in significantly more detail in chapter 2 (on alienation) and chapter 3 (on methodology). For now, I provide a brief taster of what this approach means and its consistency with some of the key tenants of physical cultural studies. Silk and Mayoh (2017: chapter 6) discuss the relationship between this academic discipline and the theorisation of praxis. They write that praxis is for them 'rooted in a feminist insistence that knowledge is useful, that understands theory and research as practice, and that is committed to understanding the social world and then changing it (Stanley, 1990; 2013)'. However, they and Atkinson (2011: 141; also Gibson and Atkinson, 2018) caution that one of the limits of physical cultural studies has been a lack of 'engaged intervention and willingness to openly take sides in the process of policy development and reformation'.

My thesis aims to contribute, along with many other athlete-researchers, to at least a small reduction in this lack. This thesis does take sides in particular policy debates, especially within the sport of roller derby. My approach also focusses on the possibilities that stem from physical activity as a form of freedom from alienation (Giulianotti, 2015a), particularly in its gendered forms (Bhattacharya, 2017), and as a series of acts of mutual self-fulfilment. This returns us to Cleaver (2009), who points out that an early slogan of the eight-hour movement was 'eight hours for what we will' (xxx). Movements for workers' self-organisation are often connected simultaneously with movements for self-realisation and fulfilment. As with CLR James, Cleaver sees the potential for social and political change in 'our self-activity and struggles to escape domination' (2009: xxix). The reason is that, within these movements, are seeds of a future society, the seeds of revolutionary activity and of a world where human fulfilment is possible.

Culture, then, in all its forms, is a terrain of struggle, as the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory and cultural studies has recognised (Carrington and McDonald, 2009: chapter 1). In contrast to the Frankfurt School, however, I argue that these seeds of revolutionary activity are also to be found in the cultural activities of sport. Furthermore, engaging the body through physical activity helps to overcome the mind-body divide that is so common in our modern forms of labour, a divide that was for Marx a source of all alienation from our human selves (1844a: 328-29).

Reversing Karl Marx's four categories of alienation (1844a: 328-30), Harry Cleaver (2009: xxxii-xxxiii) puts forward four criteria for sport that would be necessary for it to be potentially liberating:

1. it should be run by the participants themselves;
2. the products of the sport – the events, the outcomes of the sport – should also be under the control of participants;
3. it should encourage social connection and bonds; and
4. it should create the space for human fulfilment and development.

Roller derby, at least partially, meets all these criteria, as this thesis will aim to demonstrate. I have observed and participated in roller derby events such as bouts, bootcamps, conventions, national tournaments and everyday training sessions. I have spoken to organisers and visiting international coaches to ask their opinion about what makes the sport so unique. I have noted my own experiences of training, competing and organising. Most importantly, I have collected in-depth interviews with a range of women and non-binary skaters who self-identify with the very common saying 'roller derby changed my life'.

A key question for this research has been: what are the conditions in which such change and human flourishing can occur? First, I will show that inclusivity matters. One needs to be able to be oneself, whoever that is. For some women, this means putting on a persona, for their real-life selves have become constrained by being 'the good wife' or the 'good mother'. I will show that roller derby creates spaces that open wider possibilities for what it means to be feminised. Secondly, the thesis will reflect on the implications of the evidence that the sport is run by the athletes themselves. They control their training, their competitions and their sport's governance. Thirdly, the thesis will offer evidence that roller derby provides mutually supportive places for learning new ways of moving and experiencing the body. Roller derby is a complicated sport to play. Everyone comes to it needing to learn something. This learning can have a profound and long-lasting impact on participants' relationships to their bodies, to themselves and to the world around them.

Chapter outline

I started my thesis quite deliberately with a reflection on how a physical activity had changed my life. The preface provides an understanding of what occurred earlier in my life which led to my noticing life-changing activity in others. Participating in roller derby later in life, in a way, led me back to this understanding. As skaters were describing their new connection with their body and were describing how their newfound strength and freedom in roller derby was leading to major life changes, I began to realise that similar changes had occurred for me, just through involvement in another sport, decades prior. For those whose bodies have been objectified *for others*, finding new ways to connect to the body *for ourselves* can be radical, regardless of the exact context in which it occurs.

This *current chapter* has also provided a more detailed description of my own introduction to roller derby and my comparison of its practices with my own experiences in various social movements. My experiences in socialist and other progressive forms of activism led me to view roller derby through a similar lens. It led me to ask, 'what if we analyse a grassroots sport as a kind social movement?'. Some of the founders of roller derby also make this comparison.

Chapter 2 provides the foundational understanding of the social conditions in which we currently exist and are driven to strive towards freedom from alienation. I argue that we live two primary lies about our existence: that we are non-corporeal and that we are independent of each other (Fox, 2015). This idea follows on from the writing of Karl Marx in the *1844 Manuscripts* (1844a (1992)), which describe four forms of alienation we experience as a result of capitalist social relations. We experience alienation from the outcomes of our own labour, from the conditions of our labour, from each other and, ultimately, from our own human flourishing. I then argue that, consistent with the arguments of Tithi Bhattacharya (2017, 2019) and other theorists in the area of Social Reproduction Theory,[19] that we are also alienated from caring and reproductive labour. This chapter then establishes the social conditions of alienation that particularly women and feminised people face and from which roller derby skaters have found moments of freedom. I argue that there is a dialectical

[19] For example, see the collection of work on *Social Reproduction Theory* edited by Bhattacharya (2017).

relationship between this alienation and our human flourishing, which can be witnessed in shifts towards mutually fulfilling practices.

In *chapter 3* I explain the philosophical framework through which I have come to understand the life changing experiences of skaters. I reflect on critical sociological methodology and the contribution this aims to make towards theories and practices of emancipation. I rely heavily on the work of critical realists (such as Bhaskar, 1986, 1989; Collier, 1994). This 'rethinking' concerns not only the question of finding self-fulfilment in sport but also its implications for movements seeking emancipatory change. This chapter then describes my choice of roller derby for a qualitative case study and the implications of this for my methods of data collection and analysis.

The following three chapters are the results and discussion chapters. They are broken into three main themes, based primarily on the themes to come out of analysis of the 23 in-depth interviews and additional field notes. *Chapter 4* begins with a discussion of the physicality of the sport and the ways in which it is *real*, *strong*, *athletic* and *revolutionary* (WFTDA, 2019a). Here I discuss the rethinking of feminine aggression through the practices of the sport, the joys of new skills and physical competence and what it means, particularly for women, to connect with the body in new ways, *for* the self and not another.

Chapter 5 discusses the alternative subcultural practices of roller derby. The fact that the sport is run and led by women for women and feminised people, is described by many as key to their participation. Both cisgender and transgender skaters describe the openness of being able to play with gender and radically alternative forms of femininity as key to their enjoyment of the sport. For some, it was counterposed to the restricting constraints of assumed femininity, even in (or, maybe, especially in) other women's sports. Connected to this challenge to dominant forms of femininity is the *queer pride* that runs through the sport and the rejection of the idea that women's and feminised people's bodies exist for the sole gaze of men. The supportive and, mostly, inclusive subculture of the sport is also discussed and is a central theme within the interviews.

In *chapter 6*, I begin to draw together these results to explore what the saying *roller derby changed my life* truly means, in practice, for the skaters I interviewed. Here the results are as profound as the popular saying. Skaters describe no less than finding themselves, their people and, for the first time in their lives, *being free to be themselves*.

For each skater, this freedom may look very different, but their descriptions of 'finding myself' are remarkably similar. I also discuss two very important counter tendencies to this finding: one around the exclusion felt by skaters who are injured; another felt by skaters who are 'not white' or are women of colour. I conclude the chapter by discussing some of the practices which aid mutual flourishing over and against those which are indicative of continuing oppressive practices.

As indicated throughout this introduction, the thesis culminates in a detailed discussion in *chapter 7* of what I believe this case study can demonstrate for wider theories of social movements and emancipatory praxis. I conclude that maintaining radically alternative subcultures which are mutually supportive is critical to any form of social movement or movement for change. I also conclude that, counter to many critical social theoretic approaches, physical practices, including those of sport, should be considered in these alternative subcultures. That is, the body really does matter, and roller derby shows just how much so.

To conclude this introduction, I leave you with the following thoughts. Under certain conditions sport changes lives. Far from being the 'other' to social change and freedom, sport can be central. Social movements, critical art projects and workers' self-activity create spaces for resistance to dominant social structures and alienated labour. So, too, can sporting cultures challenge the ideologies that buttress alienating and oppressive structures. In Bentley Le Baron's (1971: 561) words, such challenges are never solely about changing those social structures directly, they are also about 'the self-activity of becoming other than we are, the activity of surpassing the given (which is ourselves), and of beginning to be new people, creating new kinds of social relations'. As this case study of the radical, women-led sport of roller derby will illustrate, this self-activity certainly does occur in places of physical activity and, far from being irrelevant to social transformation, they can be central to it.

Next I discuss the social conditions of alienation that we daily live, especially as women and feminised people and bodies. It is from this position we can then begin to understand the profoundly live changing alternative conditions that roller derby, at its best, provides.

Chapter Two

The Contradictory Social Conditions of our Alienation

Introduction

In the first chapter, I introduced you to my interest in the sport of roller derby. I set out the broad shape of my argument that it has the potential to assist us in a radical re-interpretation of emancipatory praxis. This chapter now explores the social conditions that lead to the need for emancipatory praxis and resistance in the first place. Beginning with a discussion of the myth of our non-corporeality and separateness, I show how these ideas stem from our social conditions. Specifically, this chapter will first show how these social conditions treat our labour and each other as objects, more precisely as commodities. It explores what this means for our ideas about ourselves and for ideologies which try to explain away oppressive social relations. Secondly, I discuss the particular form of alienation that occurs through the demarcation of reproductive labour and productive labour. This manifests itself in the ideologies of a gender binary and oppressive femininity that stem from this separation. I discuss the effects of these ideologies, particularly on women and feminised people.

Throughout the chapter, I indicate the moments of contradiction, of resistance, and of emancipatory potential. I also discuss the ways that these social conditions may shape, spark or constrain emancipatory praxis, especially in its formation. I lead towards the argument, which is concluded towards the end of the next chapter, that the dismissal by theories of emancipation of sport as potentially radical or emancipatory reflects an ideology that stems from the very social systems that these theories are endeavouring to critique. In some ways this is not an entirely new approach in Marxist Cultural Studies. As far back 1993 Andrews and Loy also proposed a dialectical approach to understanding the body and sport in wider social and cultural context. They, however, proposed that the ‘link between consciousness and corporeality’ be explored through

'the concept of affect' (Andrews and Loy, 1993: 270). I choose instead to focus on the question of alienation and reproduction, as suggested by Cleaver and Carrington. This chapter explains the context of why.

I start now with John Fox's *Marx, the Body and Human Nature* (2015). Fox provides a critique of the lack of acknowledgement, found in many texts, of the corporeality that does run through Marx's philosophy and theory. Fox also locates this lack in the broader anti-corporeality and inhumanity of capitalist social relations: social relations that are also colonialist, hetero-normative and patriarchal. He borrows considerably from Marx, pointing out that 'one of the most striking challenges to the traditional debate about human nature was mounted by Karl Marx through his theory of "species being"' (Fox, 2015: 9).

The myth of separateness and disembodiment: its creation and rejection

We start with John Fox's (2015) contention that we live under a great myth: that our bodies and the lives of others do not matter to the constitution of our *selves*, that we are non-corporeal and atomistic beings. As the skaters in this case study later describe, to find freedom and to find activities that are fulfilling is to be connected to our bodies and what we can do with them. It is also to be connected to each other in mutually self-fulfilling common activity. As this thesis describes, however, these experiences are rare, particularly for women. They are all-the-more appreciated for their rare quality.

The myth of disembodied atomism reinforces the conditions in which we can be exploited individually. It has a 'wide-ranging oppressive effect' on the body that is central to the 'constitution of modern social policy' (Fox, 2015: 14). For example, whether it be the denial of adequate resources for living, the conditions of unstable rental housing, buildings that designed to exclude those with mobility aids or the treatment of hospital patients as mechanistic objects, the ideology of disembodied humanity has profound effects. The contemporary approach to social and health policy is one of frugality and punitive measures to 'manage' the body – to force our bodies into the objects of calculative 'rationality' – rather than to live in unity with our corporeal selves.

This myth we also absorb unconsciously – we internalise it – in order to continue to function within the exploitative conditions of the capitalist economy. We internalise its perverse logic in order to be good, malleable and self-managing workers. It is a lie that also ignores the profoundly important labour – often unpaid, but always underpaid, little-acknowledged and compelled – that goes into the care of others to produce future labouring bodies, repair current labouring bodies and maintain bodies too old to produce and to sustain our communities. These systems of exploitation disregard caring labourers and exclude them from many central social institutions. They require an ideology of bodiless, disconnected selves. To connect to the body, and to each other, is to help to unmask these relations, to help to see them for what they really are: damaging, for the economic benefit of a minority, constraining of the self and our capacities, inhuman and divisive.

The argument of the paragraph above is bold. The following sections will elaborate on the components of the argument. What became evident in my initial thesis focus – on ideology and how to confront it (Farrance, 2009) – was that the effect of the ideology matters as much as its content. Ideology is seen to be ideology not by studying it outside of practice but precisely by seeing and experiencing practices that contradict ideology. In particular, alternative practices confront the artificial limits imposed by ideology. Resistance often comes to be understood as resistance by first noticing that a constraint exists and, secondly, that that constraint can be challenged. Often, these initial, peremptory moments of resistance are based on going beyond ideological constraint in practice. Often, it is not until after the constraint has been surpassed that the constraint or limit is understood to be ideological in nature. Resistance, therefore, partly comes into being through unconscious, not fully-formed, action. Only later is it understood to be resistance.

However, for actions to become resistance implies that there is also some form of reflection on those actions. This, I argue throughout this thesis, is the moment that action can become praxis: conscious action directed at emancipatory change. Drawing from Petrovic's (1991: 435-40) entry in Tom Bottomore's (1991) *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, praxis can be understood as:

> …action, activity; and in Marx's sense to the free, universal, creative and self-creative activity through which humanity creates (makes, produces) and changes (shapes) our historical, human world and ourselves; an

> activity specific to humans, through which we are basically differentiated from all other beings. In this sense humanity can be regarded as a being of praxis, 'praxis' as the central concept of Marxism, and Marxism as the 'philosophy' (or better: 'thinking') of 'praxis'…The definitions range from that which treats it simply as the human activity through which humanity changes the world and itself, to more elaborate ones which introduce the notions of freedom, creativity, universality, history, the future, revolution, etc. [In this latter, it is a concept that] expresses essential human potentialities…a radical change of both human and society. Its aim is to abolish self-alienation by creating a truly human person and a human society...

This expansive definition also shows how praxis is immanent: a potential formed by and within resistances to dominant practices and the ideology that sustains and bolsters them. It is this understanding upon which I base my arguments throughout the thesis. It is from this understanding that I begin to ask the question: how can emergent practices that express an underlying impulse for freedom from alienation and for human self-fulfilment come to form a more substantial emancipatory praxis?

Returning to Marx through Fox (2015: 200), I argue as well that 'the concept of the independent, non-corporeal self, founded as it is in experience, cannot be readily dispelled by logic'. To try to rethink this myth through thinking alone is to remain within the framework of disembodiment itself. It is only through practical action, through praxis, or as CLR James describes it 'living the life within' (Smith, 2011), that we can come to understand ourselves more completely, in our bodies. As Marx (1845 (1992): 423) expressed it in the Eighth of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.' Read alongside the rest of the *Theses*, and Marx's work in general, these comments underscore the ways in which old ideas and ideologies are either reinforced or broken down. To transform ideological thinking, there must be practical action combined with reflection on that action. This leads to the second important point: ideology can consistently be broken down through conscious and critical reflection on practice only *from the perspective of human emancipation* or,

alternatively put, only *from the perspective of non-alienating practices*. For the purposes of this thesis, these are to be understood as related approaches to the same process.

The words of participant-skaters in this thesis (chapters 4-6) provide significant insight here. While reunification of our embodied, corporeal selves comes through experiences *of the body*, actions upon the body that reinforce oppression and repression are likely to deepen our sense of alienation and disembodiment. Conversely, in a culture of freedom, mutual support and radical rejection of ideological constraint, experiences of the body, even when learning new and difficult skills, will contribute to emancipatory praxis. The case study of roller derby concludes with discussion of how radical social change involves:

1. attending to our corporeality;
2. attending to our collectivity;
3. caring for our bodies and ourselves, together, in freedom from alienating conditions; and thereby
4. creating the radical conditions of mutual self-fulfilment and human flourishing.

This thesis demonstrates that there is a constant tendency for people to push back against the ideology of the disembodied and atomised self: the mechanical self, treated as merely a tool for work. I will also present evidence that, under certain social conditions, moments of freedom can be grasped, even if temporarily. People can be reconnected with their bodies and with each other, and practices of mutual self-fulfilment can flourish. Moreover, the thesis will show that these emancipatory practices are not as rare as we might first imagine but are ordinary and everyday. It is on these 'everyday' resistances and potentials for emancipation that the thesis focuses. As CLR James (2005; see also Smith, 2006, 2011 on James) describes them, these resistances are far from the 'other' to political struggle but are the beating heart of it.

Disembodiment in critique: the non-corporeal in Western thought

In their editors' introduction to the collection *Physical Culture, Power and the Body*, Jennifer Hargreaves and Patricia Vertinsky (2007: xiii-xiv) explain that it is important

to '…demonstrate the links between the personal body and the social body and to consider the significance of relations of power', including to 'understand the historical and social construction of different bodies in different contexts'. Hargreaves's and Ian McDonald's (2007: xiii-xiv) remarks as editors of the *Routledge Critical Studies in Sport* in their preface to *Physical Culture, Power and the Body* is also notable. Their method is based on '…a rejection of essentially descriptive narrative, [in favour of] a deconstruction of the taken-for-granted, and a quest for the complexities of embodiment'. Alongside this, the critical method develops an understanding of the depth of the 'contradiction between the emancipatory and repressive tendencies of the body' and the tensions between the cultural and biological (McDonald, 2007: xiii-xiv). McNally (2001) in his detailed critique of theoretical approaches to the body, *Bodies of Meaning*, describes the critical project as one which 'attends to what this total system represses and forgets, thereby holding open the possibility of a different order of society' (7).

The body, then, is a contradiction between its emancipatory and repressed elements: it is constrained socially and internally; yet it is also the source of our freedom to move and act. However, this is not always how the body has been understood even in critical traditions in Western thought. Fox (2015) traces this neglect of the corporeal in the dominant history of Western thought. Fox is right when he draws the conclusion that, while postmodern thought has focussed on the corporeal, especially in contrast with prior Western thought, the effect too often has been to treat the body as 'so plastic as to effectively erase it' (Fox, 2015: 6). As Joseph Fracchia (2005: 57)[20] explains in their review of literature, the 'materiality of the body' has in the end been mostly dissolved and turned into an idea (cited by Fox, 2015: 6). An emphasis on performativity turns the corporeal into a performance, rather than it being deeply lived experience under largely inhuman social conditions. Fox argues that this is exemplified by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), with 'her emphasis upon performativity and treatment of the human body as the passive and completely plastic means for the staging of those performances' (Fox, 2015: 6)[21].

[20] Fracchia's article in Historical Materialism is a thorough summary of some of the key criticisms (that I also have) of Althusser's Marxism.

[21] While not focussed on the body but on ideology, Geoff Boucher's (2008) critique of Butler has some similarities with Fox's.

While Butler's work is not only about gender 'as performance', there is a tendency to over-emphasise the malleability of the body and thereby to distance the body from the biological. The problem here is that the body remains unaccounted for in the ways it 'both limits and enables all our actions in this world' (Fox 2015, 6). More than this, 'In privileging the dominated body and disciplined material world, this perspective … does not reflect the lives of those who experience the corporeal as far more troubling'.

In contrast, Raewyn Connell's work emphasises that, for example, someone's gender is the result of a complex interplay of social systems that define gender, the body we are born with, the modifications we make to this body and our resistances to how we are read as a human being (for example: Connell, 2009, 1985). For Raewyn Connell (2009: 67; original emphasis):

> Bodies are both *objects of* social practice and *agents in* social practice. The same bodies, at the same time, are both. The practices in which bodies are involved form social structures and personal trajectories, which in turn provide the conditions of new practices in which bodies are addressed and involved. There is a loop, a circuit, linking bodily processes and social structures… (These loops) occur in historical time, and change over time. They add up to the historical process in which society is embodied, and bodies are drawn into history. I call this process *social embodiment*.[22]

The key for Connell in this discussion is that the body is not erased but is *part* of this construction. While different bodies are read differently in different social contexts, this reading is still a reading of a body that exists, that we live in, that we modify, that we experience the material world from and that has its own material existence, regardless of how it is socially 'read'.

However, while to varying degrees the tendency to resist has been explored through contemporary Cultural Studies and the 'postmodern turn', it has historically focussed on text at the expense of the body (Kellner, 1995):

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[22] It is worth noting here that while Connell is talking about gender and gendered bodies, race, ableism, sexuality, ageism and a whole mix of ideological constructions and their interactions are *also* how bodies are drawn into social practices and history. They are equally forms of *social embodiment*.

> At its most extreme, the postmodern turn erases economic, political, and social (and corporeal) dimensions to cultural production and reception, carries out a new form of cultural and technological determinism, engages in theoreticist blather, and renounces the possibility of textual interpretation, social criticism, and political struggle. In a more dialectical and political version, postmodern theory is used to rethink cultural criticism and politics in the contemporary era. Indeed, postmodern theory can be useful in calling attention to new configurations and functions of culture, as it charts the trajectories and impacts of new technologies, the emergent global economy and culture, and the novel political terrain and movements.

At its worst, Cultural Studies has dismissed the very material, systemic, economic and political shaping of our bodies, and when it does it fails to understand corporeal experience beyond text and mere performance. However, at its best, the focus of Cultural Studies on the economic and political sources of the cultural has demonstrated contradictions within material existence and, therefore, also the potential of everyday contradictions in our practices (see also Kellner, 2005). Cultural Studies has used a critique of culture to understand better the meaning behind deeply-embodied cultural resistances and, therefore, also the political in the seemingly superficial. Stuart Hall's work with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (for example: Hall, 1978, 1986, and with Jefferson, 1976) still marks a re-politicisation of culture in critical thought by, for example, drawing attention to the corporeal and material behind cultural representation. In a similar way, this thesis aims to demonstrate the economic and political contributors to constraint upon women's and feminised bodies and, simultaneously, the kind of resistances these constraints can lead to. Hall's work was influenced by Marx (1844a), who also approaches our corporeal and social existence from the perspective of contradiction.

Indeed, 'our lives are punctuated by and organised around movements of separation and unity, of anxiety, pain and pleasure' (Fox, 2015: 19-20), which are both individually felt and socially understood. For Fox (2015: 19), the denial of, or flight from, the corporeal may be understood because of the experiences of pain and alienation deeply felt under our current social structures, something I discuss further throughout

this chapter. Such a flight is also 'is self-defeating'. Realisation of the limits – or impossibility – of escape from our corporeal nature can nevertheless lead to shift to a more 'human' way of thinking and being. Fox argues (2015: 19-20) that the focus on bodies in feminist, post-colonialist and postmodern thought since the middle of the 20th century – on how bodies are disciplined and how they might heal – indicates a shift in thinking that is 'both immanent and promising' (these are similar to some of Carrington's arguments, for example: 2009). In addition, I would argue, along with Nancy Fraser (2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b), that such a shift indicates very material social and economic shifts *requiring* this new focus on the body. The deepening crises in social reproduction – crises in the labours of creating, repairing and tending to the body and our physical health – mean that our bodies are calling out for attention to the corporeal. There are recurring discussions about the 'balance over family and work', basic income, migrant work, unionisation of service work and worsening workloads of those who work in health, education and elderly care. In particular, Fraser notes the impossible workloads placed on poor women and women of colour (2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b). Tithi Bhattacharya (2017, 2019; see also Farris, 2019) and Nancy Fraser describe how these events are part of a broader crisis in social reproduction, a crisis that is felt deeply in the body, and especially in particular types of bodies. It is interesting to note that, while Fox (2015) has acknowledged the shift in thinking associated with these material crises, he does not yet connect this shift with the shifts in the material world.

The discussion of the implications of these material crises continues later in this chapter. Next, though, I describe how, even before the recent crises in reproduction, our social world had distanced us from our bodies, from our own labour and from each other. I begin next with a discussion of the commodification of social interaction and human relations.

The world made spectral: the ideologies of commodity relations

Within Marx's *Capital* (1867 (1976)) lies a key to understanding the nature of the subject under capitalism (Wayne, 2003: chapter 7; Blunden, 2006). The key is to understand the inversion by which relations between people appear as relations between things, namely as commodity relations. It is in part through understanding Marx's vision of the subject that we can bridge the conceptual gap between ideology and

resistance and, even, between ideology and praxis. It is through his discussion of the commodification of human relationships that we can identify the existence of ideology within the subject, as opposed to it being only an external force upon the subject. Similarly, we can better understand the opportunities for resistance and the possibilities that participation in everyday practices directed towards emancipation can open up.

For Marx, the 'the essence of humanity is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.' (Theses on Feuerbach 1845: 422; see also Gelder's 2005 description of Marxism). Moreover, society is not a convenient name we give to an ensemble of individuals. It is a complex mix of relationships, with differential forms of power and with groups of subjects having more or less agency. As Marx describes it in the *Grundrisse*:

> Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand. As if someone were to say: Seen from the perspective of society, there are no slaves and no citizens: both are human beings. Rather, they are that outside society. To be a slave, to be a citizen, are social characteristics, relations between human beings A and B. Human being A, as such, is not a slave. They are a slave in and through society. (Marx, 1858-59: 265)

That is, we are social beings, and our subjectivity is shaped by, reflective of, and imbued with the social relations within which we exist. 'It is not the consciousness of people that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx, Preface to the *Critique*, 1970: 21). There is no ahistorical human subject above and beyond social relations. At each point in human history, the human subject is to be understood in the context of the social relations, practices, ideas, interactions and structures of the time. That is, in a broad sense, being determines consciousness, and being is not only deeply social but, as we have already established, it is also deeply embodied.

The most important basis for understanding social being under capitalism, Marx stressed, is understanding the system of commodity production and exchange: commodity relations. This system is founded on the commodity relations in which capital dominates, relations that bear with them a peculiarly capitalist normativity.

These relations imply a normative logic of fair exchange and that everything has a fair monetary value. In markets, everything and everyone appears as if equal, not only under law, but under economy. The struggle for a decent wage appears in this peculiar logic as a 'fair exchange' of the commodity – labour – between capital and individual labourers. Pepperell (2009) explains the effect of commodity exchange, including the exchange of the commodity labour-power, on subjectivity:

> ...the owners of the objects, by contrast, take themselves – and are taken by others – to 'count' in certain kinds of intersubjective interactions only as representatives of the objects they control – only, that is, as owners – as personifications of the objects that enable them to confront other owners, equal to equal, in a standoff whose result will be determined by the social properties of the commodities they own.[23]

It was to shatter this set of self-reinforcing illusions that Marx left his job as editor of the German progressive capitalist newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung* to begin his studies in political economy, found the International Workers' Association (First International) and toil away writing *Capital* for the rest of his life.

The world of commodity relations is so pervasive and appears as so natural that it is hard to imagine the world before it (or, indeed, after it). These uniquely capitalist commodity relations take on the status of being naturally occurring and ahistorical, and this masks the complex world of social relations, relations between people (Geras, 1971; Marx, 1867 (1976): 280; 1894 (1981)). The real human relations that produced the commodity disappear, and the commodity world takes on a 'life of its own', carrying with it a new set of human values (Klein, 2001; Lukacs, 1967 (2019); Wayne, 2003). Commodities come from a world behind which sit oppressive corporate relations that are largely unknown and unseen (Klein, 2001; Mason, 2008). In this system, labour itself is a commodity. Perversely, labour becomes something we want to save, not spend, even when the expenditure is caring for our dearest (Hochschild, 2003). We internalise the objectifying logic of this world of commodity relations. In order to participate in society, we become complicit in at least some of the 'ideological fantasies

[23] This argument is also made in Pepperell's later PhD Thesis, *Disassembling Capital* 2010. See, for example, chapter 11 *What a piece of work is man*.

of equal exchange, equivalence, competition, the rationality of what is' and fancy the 'possibility of authenticity (only) in cultural spectacles' (Wayne, 2003: 207). The process of socialisation and education is about developing people so that they become a useful 'object' in the commodity world, stripped of their humanity, interconnectedness, corporeality and agency. To experience even moments of the opposite to this objectification and alienation from ourselves is to experience moments of radical joy (Segal, 2017: chapter 1). They are rare.

Ideology then is not simply a form of 'propaganda', as is popularly conceived. Neither is ideology simply a set of 'false ideas' in the service of the powerful (Rehman, 2013: chapter 2; see also Eagleton, 2007: chapter 1). As partly demonstrated above, ideology becomes the taken-for-granted understanding of the world, of the everyday, based on the sets of social conditions we find ourselves already in (Eagleton, 2007). We reproduce not only the relations of the commodity world through repeated everyday practice but also the ideology that buttresses them. Ideology, moreover, is no mere passenger. It also shapes and even directs practices. That means that the untruthfulness of ideology – or of any false, incomplete or complicit ideas – is to be found not merely in a distorted consciousness but in the social conditions that contributed to distortion: the material and objective conditions that gave rise to those ideas. They are the *plausible misrepresentations* of the social world (Eagleton, 2007: chapter 1), or as Foreman (1977: 104) describes, based on 'real experience that is only partially understood'. Those ideas in turn take on a *life of their own*: they themselves are objectified, reified and become like material things (ibid 104-105). These ideas gain real, material power so long as the source of these ideas is not understood; as long as they remain materially unchallenged.

To return to a focus of the thesis, the dominant ideology of femininity begins in a social structure that artificially creates a separation between men and women in order to raise the power of men and the importance of production over human life (Federici, 2004: chapter 1). This ideology then becomes a theory of biological difference, while the real, *social source* of the ideology disappears from immediate view. The result is gendered bodies 'entering history', perceived already as unequal and 'naturally' distinct (Connell, 2009). That is, even understandings of biology itself become distorted through the frame of a gender divide, of the unequal social conditions in which we exist. Put another way, a false idea – that there is a clear biological difference between genders, or

a so-called 'sex-divide' – becomes 'true' (for contemporary discussion of sex and gender similarities see: Scientific American, 2017; Ainsworth, 2015; Kralick, 2018; Delfondo, 2014). The *source* of this ideology – in the creation of a divide between genders, in part created by the need for feminised people to conduct free or cheap reproductive labour – disappears from immediate view. Even something as material as the body is read ideologically, and the source of this reading, in particular social relations, is masked. Furthermore, while that ideology may be critiqued in the field of ideas, its ideological power will only decline with material changes in those social relations.

Nicole Pepperell makes a similar point (2009, 2010). For her, ideological representations of the social world are neither true to that world nor unrelated to that world: they are *plausible misrepresentations* and are often dependent on a person's location within particular social relations. For her, interactions between people and objects – commodity relations – produce 'socially *plausible misinterpretation* of the qualitative characteristics and practical impacts' (own emphasis) of interaction, and this is in part because of the 'specific, partial perspectives made available within the interaction itself' (Pepperell, 2009). For Pepperell (2009), as for Marx, the objects of the commodity world appear to have innate features to which 'human practices must conform', rather than 'human practices conferring particular properties on material objects by using those objects in determinate ways in collective life'. The objectified world – and the ideas this world produces – thus appears as natural rather than the result of changeable social practices. This then 'shields those practices from critique'. Marx, in contrast, aims to 'demonstrate how these relations are generated in a contingent, non-objective interaction'. Hence, the ideological veneer of our alienated, objectified world is that of 'plausible misunderstanding' or misrepresentation (Pepperell 2010: 18, also chapter 4; Foreman, 1977 makes this argument with regard to *femininity*) that occur in daily life. This contradictory process then – the 'demand for rational explanation' and the repression, through reification, of 'a level of reality from thought' – results in the restructuring of our minds, creating an unconscious and conscious split (Foreman, 1977: 60-63, 105).

For Wayne (2003: 218), this process, of commodity fetishism and reification, 'burrows deep into the subject, their consciousness, sense of self and the world and their

culture'. He explains that processes of reification and ideological thinking operate in four ways that will be useful to articulate:

1. Immanence – the disappearance of the networks of social relations (in thinking as well as practice) and their transcendence into social crises that appear as unrelated from their original conditions;
2. Splitting and fragmentation – the 'wrenching apart of what is a total social process';
3. Inversion – wherein the appearance of something is the exact opposite of the social relations it represents (this corresponds to what critical realists (e.g. Collier, 1994: 6-7, 11) call counter-phenomenality); and
4. Repression – the process by which a subject forgets the contradictions of social life in order to form him or herself as a 'non-contradictory unity' (Wayne, 2003: 193-219).

To summarise, the particularly damaging effects on the self, shaped as a social being in the commodity world, are:

- the appearance that socially created systems are natural and unchangeable;
- the disappearance of actual power relations from clear view;
- the disappearance of the changing nature of subjective interactions; and
- the commodification of human relationships.

Within this framework, even where we see change, we do not readily understand it as something that we can try to influence or, if we do, we misunderstand where our power lies.

Throughout this thesis, I explore the ways in which this does come 'undone' and how this undoing can be kept open to allow for the possibilities of immanent social change: possibilities that exist within all forms of resistance, even if accidental. Before this, however, I explore further the source of the gender divide, in the split between production and reproduction, and the resulting ideologies of gender division and oppressive femininity/ies.

Social reproduction and the ideology of femininity

Productive labour under capitalism is not the only cause of alienation from our bodies, lives, activities and each other. It is also not the only way that people are alienated from their potential. There is an additional way in which alienation occurs for the one-half of humanity who are compelled to provide unpaid, privatised and individualised caring, or reproductive, labour: women and those who are feminised.[24] I shall now explore this form of labour, which has been divided off from capitalist production, ideologically and materially. I shall also explore the impact of this division on the construction of: feminised labour forms; the gender binary; and constraining ideologies of femininity.

Reproduction and production are intimately tied. As Marx and Engels said in the *German Ideolog*y (1845-6 (1932): 47), the 'first premise of all human existence' is that:

> … human beings must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.

That is, the first act of human beings is to create the means of subsistence and of life. The second act, Marx and Engels go on to say, is the making of the tools to assist with the first act. The third act, just as integral, is that connected to caring and reproductive labour:

> …people, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other people, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman [and people], parents and children, the family. The family, which to begin with

[24] Treated as feminine or like a woman; emasculated. Those who are assigned female at birth are often feminised even after identifying as non-binary or transmasculine. Some cisgendered men are also feminised, as are many non-binary people, especially those who also identify as femme. This term is used to acknowledge that not only women suffer under the ideological creation of a gender binary, of a 'lesser' gender expression, that is, the feminine. This will be discussed in further detail through the rest of this chapter.

> is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one… (1845-6 (1932): 48)

These three aspects are not separate events, or stages, but are intersecting 'moments' that are intimately tied and require each other. In summary, they are the creation of:

1. the means to live;
2. the means of producing the means of living; and
3. the making of the social conditions which allow for the former two moments.

Marx and Engels (1845-6 (1932): 48) go on to describe how the 'production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation'. That is, both productive and reproductive labour are forms socialised work. Both these forms of labour are the responsibility of multiple individuals, whatever the specific conditions – whether born of co-operative or oppressive relationships – and no matter in what ways the labour is conducted. This is important to note because it means that shifting labour – from oppressive and compelled towards something more fulfilling or even emancipatory – necessarily requires co-operative, mutually fulfilling social relationships. Alienation cannot be resolved individually. It also follows that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation or social stage: i.e. there is nothing eternal about social relationships.

Marx and Engels were also very clear that there are 'natural' limits to the human capacity to labour and that those limits are, in general, restricted to the ability to reproduce that labouring body. That is, for it to rest, eat, repair and return to work. They were *also* clear that this 'natural' limit is not unchanging, nor was it set at an individual level. The physical limits of the body, and of our social systems of repair, care and reproduction, *also* vary significantly over time and place though *(Capital I* 1867 (1976):

273-7). The models for the replacement of labour power *also* vary considerably across different societies and social structures.

In some locations where labour is (comparatively) freely available – the free trade zones of the Global South for example – the bodies of labourers in textiles 'sweatshops' may literally be used up over a period of years rather than a lifetime, creating injured bodies that then are no longer able to work. In fact, this is exactly what does happen (Klein, 2001, 2008; also Mason, 2008). These factories then find new labour in other people or locations. Similarly, immigration and slavery have provided new sources of exploitable labour power for employers and companies based in colonial heartlands, which has replaced the need to repair bodies within and around capitalist centres. That is, the refreshment of labour power not only occurs 'within the home' but through multiple means, including through the movement of labour or capital globally. This analysis of colonialist capitalism is as important as feminist critiques of patriarchal social relationships for properly understanding how capitalism reproduces itself and finds new sources of labour.

Social Reproduction Theory: bringing reproduction into focus

While Marx's work does provide a basis for understanding this sphere of labour and activity, his focus on capitalist production led to a concurrent neglect of reproductive labour in the lifetime of his work and that of his later followers. Feminist-Marxists have developed this work since the 1970s and continue to work on Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (2013), 'probes theoretical absences' in *Capital* and Marx's work (Introduction by Ferguson and McNally, 2013: xxiii-iii). Vogel does this by demonstrating that such an absence is not only unnecessary but is inconsistent with the rest of Marx's theory. Specifically, Vogel focuses on the parts of *Capital* in which Marx is silent on exactly that which he needed to explore more thoroughly: on the biological, social and generational reproduction of that special commodity, labour power. Ferguson and McNally (2013: xxiv) point out that this part of *Capital* begs the question: 'how is the special commodity itself produced and reproduced?'. Vogel answers: 'Labor power is not produced capitalistically'. Rather, it is produced and reproduced in a 'kin-based site', including within the 'working class family' (2013: 151, 170), and within sites in existence before

capital's presence. The point has been taken up by Bhattacharya (2019: 113-15; own emphasis):

> Vogel's critical insight is significant in three crucial respects. One, because it expresses the dialectical unity of the historical and logical form of capital. Labour-power, SRT shows, can only become available to capital through distinct but reliable sets of gendered, racialized social relations which create their own institutional forms of sustenance (e.g. the monogamous, hetero- normative family form). Older historical forms may be recast, new forms may be created and mobilized, but it is only through concrete social relations, and sensuous human labour, that labour-power is produced and made available to capital. This is not a functional argument about capital creating the ideal family form or gender regime to correspond neatly to the compulsions of its own reproduction. Rather, while capital does not exert direct influence on the production of labour-power and thus allows for relative autonomy of forms and practices, capitalist re-production imposes conditions upon the social forms possible in which labour-power may be reproduced. Second, being attentive to labour-power not as it appears to capital but as it is produced and reproduced, SRT introduces, or rather restores, to capitalist totality a sphere of social relations *where life-making activities proliferate*. Finally, there is a clear strategic component to SRT. Life-making social practices by workers are not simple congeries of activities to satisfy needs. They have the *potential to carry an anti-capitalist charge*.

For feminist and postcolonial Marxists, the meaning of reproduction can only be understood wholly when understood in the context of the interconnectedness of social systems within capitalism. Importantly, this must include an understanding of the historical forms of patriarchal social relations, alongside understandings of colonialism and the global carve-up of land, resources and labour. Furthermore, reproduction must be understood alongside an understanding of how capitalist systems of production require both conditions and ideologies that devalue bodies that are not able to work (Ferguson, 2016). That is, these systems *require* ableism, ageism, fatphobia and the

simultaneous medicalisation and control over those who are 'not fit to work' and, as soon as they deemed 'unfit', the dismissal of these people as unimportant to society in general. As earlier sections of this chapter have explained, these ideologies and conditions appear to us as 'natural' and apparently rational explanations of 'what is'. However, these ideologies – which intersect in sometimes consistent and sometimes inconsistent ways – are operating to justify a set of social conditions which are historical, change and, very importantly, can be changed to favour those who have been marginalised.

The last decade has seen a resurgence of theorisation of social reproduction. This newer discussion is taking Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) beyond the unified theory of the 1970s and 1980s and towards an engagement with both Intersectionality Theory and what is argued to be an impending crisis in care (Fraser, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b). This means that SRT now provides substantial engagement with critiques of colonialism and, more recently, with the sociology of social movements and social change. Lise Vogel's book *Marxism the Oppression of Women* is considered a seminal text in the 'unitary framework' – the idea that the spheres of reproduction and production are indeed intertwined and cannot be understood separately. Therefore, it is not only possible to understand both women's and racial oppression within Marxist thought, she argues, but that implicit in a Marxist analysis is exactly this. Writing more recently (2015; also referred to in 2000), she has reiterated and extended these ideas. For Vogel (2000, 2015), social reproduction includes all of:

1. Daily activities that maintain direct producers (workers) and enable them to return to work.
2. Similar daily activities that maintain non-labouring subordinate classes: the young, the old, the sick, the disabled, those involved in caring labour activities or those who are out of the workforce for other reasons.
3. Generational replacement processes, including but not only bearing and giving birth to children. Generational replacement may also include expanding the location and source of new workforces (related to the next point).
4. Processes that bring new workers into the workforce from outside the current boundaries of that workforce, for example through migration, expansion of

colonialist powers, slavery, land grabs etc.

Therefore, the two most common ways to repair and replace the current workforce are via the normal activities of social reproduction – understood to be conducted 'in the home' or attached to family networks – and, just as importantly, through shifts in the geographic location of workforces conducted through a mixture of colonialist land and economic expansion, labour migration and the movement of capital to new locations (see also Farris, 2019). Vogel, as with many authors, emphasises the importance of reproduction that occurs outside of heterosexist family norms. For Vogel, too, SRT helps to demonstrate the ideological construction of 'the home' as the sole source of reproduction, as well as the messy contradictions and counter tendencies even within 'the home'. For SRT, therefore, there is no such clear and distinct 'family' category. Not only do families vary across time, place and context, but they do not exist as they are popularly represented or as conceived to be.

The intensification of exploitation and oppression – and, therefore, alienation – of the reproductive labour of feminised bodies who are also colonised and racialised is critical to note in any discussion of reproductive labour. Bhattacharya, Fraser and Vogel all highlight how feminist discussions very often repeat the invisibilisation of colonisation as a contributor to reproduction and reproductive labour. What is in fact a central aspect of reproduction has often been written out of, or ignored, in many feminist studies in the West. This is connected to particularly liberal feminism's failure to connect questions of women's oppression to race and class, as famously critiqued by bell hooks in *Feminist Theory, from Margin to Centre* (1984). At their most intense, systems of slavery and abusive coercion of migrant labour intersect not only with colonialist claims over land and resources but also with patriarchal controls over women's bodies and bodies who are feminised.

As chakaZ (correct spelling) describes in her piece on *The loss of the body: a response to Marx's incomplete analysis of estranged labour* (2011) (content note[25]) how in the plantations in the US and elsewhere, there were breeding houses where enslaved women were raped and then denied access to any form of birth control. Their bodies

[25] Note for the reader: this piece is now discussed in this paragraph and contains details of severely racist and sexist violence which may be distressing.

were literally controlled in multiple ways, and their labour, both productive and reproductive, was not only exploited but also stolen, and violently so. Their children, when old enough not to be entirely dependent on their mothers, were then kidnapped and taken to slave auction houses. This cruel practice proved an 'efficient' way to extend the profits of the masters. The new generations of slaves were forcefully produced on the premises by taking control over women's bodies. The response of the mothers, of course, was to try to help their children escape. If this were not possible, they also killed their children rather than bear the suffering associated with them being stolen and sold back into slavery. So, while the unpaid and compelled domestic labour of women in the houses of working class and middle-class women and feminised people is certainly important, it is not the only source of social reproduction for capital (Vogel, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017b; Farris, 2019). For those concerned with oppression and emancipation, it is often not the most important.

Contemporary discussion of Social Reproduction Theory

As mentioned above, Marx was particularly interested in how social forms are reproduced for capitalism. This includes the forms of reproduction which contributed to the development of new workers for capital (child-bearing and rearing, slavery and migration, education etc.) and the maintenance of this labour (the labour of care and household maintenance, as well as health care systems and more general socialised welfare provisions). However, as I am interested in how reproductive labour can be re-directed towards alternative social forms, forms which are fulfilling for self and others, I need to expand this traditional Marxist conception of social reproduction. As will become apparent, this discussion will develop contextual themes that have a direct bearing on my contention that the sport of roller derby can exhibit a potential for a radical re-interpretation of emancipatory praxis to occur.

I start with contemporary theorist of social reproduction, Tithi Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya (2017) uses the work of Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett to expand the conception of social reproduction. Laslett and Brenner (1989: 382-83)[26] describe how social reproduction comprises all of:

[26] See also Brenner and Brenner (1981).

> …activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally. Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the ways in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the social organization of sexuality. Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work-mental, manual, and emotional-aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation. And the organization of social reproduction refers to the varying institutions within which this work is performed, the varying strategies for accomplishing these tasks, and the varying ideologies that both shape and are shaped by them.

While useful, a problem with this conceptualisation is its focus on the sphere of domestic and caring labour to the exclusion of all other forms of social reproduction. Colonisation, migration and slavery are also historically important sources of labour for capital because capitalism is not able to provide for the full material reproduction of labour power, even when reproduction is underpaid or unpaid. As Bhattacharya (2017: 28) describes it, this is ‘the very nature of the process’ which is ‘always-already reproduced as lacking in what she (the worker) needs’. This is why there is a constant struggle for higher wages, or a constant class struggle, to be able to earn enough to be able to rest and repair oneself in order to work again or even just to live. Simultaneously, capital is in constant need of new sources of labour to replace the now exhausted, injured or ageing worker.

> Here we arrive at the strategic implications of (social reproduction theory), or how an integrative sense of capitalism is central to our actual battles against capital… (It is) from this standpoint… (that we can) address the conceptual and strategic totality of workplace struggle, along with struggle that erupts away from the point of production…While it is easy to state that workers have an existence outside of the circuit of commodity production or point of production, the challenge the essay

> takes up is to clarify "the relationship between this existence and that of their productive lives under the direct domination" of capital, for that relation between spheres has the potential to chart the path of class struggle. (Bhattacharya, 2017: 18)

Bhattacharya goes on to explain how SRT is particularly powerful for shifting the focus of analysis of capitalism from commodities – including labour-power as a commodity – to human labour itself. I would argue that it even has the power to shift focus onto human life itself, or the relationship between our self-fulfilment and our free, creative labour for and with each other. Social reproduction therefore also 'exposes to critical scrutiny the superficiality of what we commonly understand to be "economic" processes', to include processes that at first seem 'external' to the economy but are in fact central to it. Social Reproduction Theory thereby 'restores to the economic process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced, and unruly component: living human beings, capable of following orders as well as of flouting them'. (Bhattacharya, 2017: 19)

Nancy Fraser (2016a, 2016b) connects her discussions around reproduction and labours of care with what she argues is an impending or intensifying crisis in reproduction. She argues that, historically, discussions of capitalist crises have tended to neglect reproduction in favour of a focus on production. This is a problem precisely because both spheres are intimately connected. Furthermore, in any discussion of contemporary politics – especially radical self-care debates and social movement discussions that reach beyond the popular understandings of what constitutes 'the economy' – an understanding of the crisis in reproduction is critical. Paying attention to the field of reproduction – the labour conducted by feminised and racialised people – is critical to an understanding of the profound effect that casualisation, stagnating or falling real wages, higher costs of living, privatisation of health and education and housing and general reduction in social supports are having on whole sections of the working classes, whether working or not working. Again, crises in each sector spill into the other. This contradiction – between being necessary but largely taken-for-granted labour – exists 'at the border' of the capitalist economy, but it is still *within* the economy (Fraser, 2016a, 2016b).

To set the context, Nancy Fraser (2016a, 2016b) describes three epochal shifts in the balance of this contradiction between reproductive labour and productive labour:

1. The 19th century period of development of productive capitalism left workers to reproduce themselves autonomously, with the state looking on. At the same time, the domestic sphere became idealised, with the idea of the white, middle-class homemaker being raised as a normative goal.
2. The 20th century saw the state and corporate provision of social welfare, as well as the goal and development of the *family wage* (also backed by unions) in many national economies. Both these developments occurred alongside the rise of consumerism and intensification of colonialism, which siphoned capital towards the colonialist heartlands and allowed for the rise of wages of, for example, white male workers in the west.
3. Since the late 20th century, we have seen the rise of financialised capitalism, which has also seen increasing numbers of women enter the workforce – including women who were not previously in the paid workforce – along with the expansion and intensification of labour exploitation in the Global South, and massive state disinvestment in (and privatisation of) services of reproduction previously provided. That is, we have seen massive cuts to public funding of health, education, energy and water provision, housing, telecommunications and even media. Now that reproduction becomes increasingly privatised and commodified again, it becomes accessible largely to those who can afford it, and it relies heavily on the cheap (or unpaid), often un-unionised, labour of marginalised workforces: women, people of colour, workers in the Global South etc. Hence, there are now calls for a new movement beyond a 'double movement' of labour and women, towards a 'triple movement' uniting with anti-colonialism.

As this third (neoliberal) shift develops, the contradiction between production and social reproduction is intensified. Neoliberalism then combines the marketisation of the labours of care, which in turn undermines the social senses of protection of well-being. Out of this also emerges a 'progressive neoliberalism', or a form of neoliberalism which appears as, and claims to be, progressive. This new form of liberalism celebrates

the spectacle of diversity and freedom, while simultaneously destroying systems of social reproduction and support. The old supports are replaced with 'leaning in' (see Miriam-Webster 2019 for a summary), or working harder to access privileges, and commodification of what was once provided by the state. The feminist trajectory in this case, Fraser (2016a, 2016b) argues, becomes particularly problematic. Reproduction as a site of struggle, one requiring social supports, becomes increasingly ignored – thereby also ignoring the plight of those most struggling under the burden of reproduction, particularly women of colour. Feminism becomes more interested in gaining equal seats at the tables of power, rather than being interested in emancipation for all women. Meanwhile, the care gap is filled by the poor, women of colour and migrants. This also means that caring labour is displaced in their own families.

Struggles over the 'balance' between home and work life intensify, in part because there increasingly can be no balance, and individuals cannot resolve the material social tensions alone. So, too, do tensions over basic income, health care, migrant worker rights, unionisation of service work in all its forms, education and care for the elderly and ageing. While appearing to be separate, these struggles all hint at a 'massive call for reorganisation of social reproduction', Fraser (2016a, 2016b) concludes. Part of the difficulty with the disparate nature of current struggles, though, is that there is both a lack of recognition of the connected source of these problems and also a generalised dismissal of, or even attack on, state support for social reproduction. The arguments for privatisation of social services are becoming, or have become, dominant. Fraser argues that what is needed is to re-align struggles for emancipation with social protection and socialised reproduction.

These struggles will also require a rethinking of the very meaning of what constitutes reproductive, or 'women's labour'. The next section will discuss the relationship between the invisibility of reproduction/ reproductive labour and oppressive forms of femininity. That is, it will explore how the divide between reproduction and production, both materially and ideologically, has led to a divide between 'men' and 'women' and, concurrently, to the increased alienation women experience from our bodies, our labour and each other.[27]

[27] Here men and women are placed in inverted commas because I am emphasising that these are socially constructed separate categories that do not exist in 'nature' or biologically.

A great division: labour, reproduction and gender

Foreman (1977: 104) describes how femininity operates as ideology embedded in practices and argues that it is reliant on *plausible misrepresentations* that are 'based on experience that is only partially understood'. Her point in this respect is that some social realities, relationships and interactions – for example, the reliance of workers on the labour of care and support from women and feminised workers within the normative family – 'appear as the most natural and unchanging relations of society, whereas actually they are historically specific' (1977: 104-105). That is, as Marx maintained, these social relations become reified: they appear as if fixed and unchanging or as goals towards which to aspire. The real human relationships of oppression and exploitation associated with 'the home' or 'the family' or 'women's labour' then, also disappear from view or are deflected as being 'natural' and, therefore, above challenge. Thus, Foreman says, 'ideology is not derived from wrong ideas or wrong experiences, but from different levels of reality' (Foreman, 1977: 105). This deeply affects relationships between people. One implication of this conclusion is that 'women can be unknowing accomplices in their own oppression' because we do not grasp the full systems of oppression in any one act and set of ideas that coincide with that act. To see this clearly, it will be necessary to locate the position of 'the family' within this 'full system'. In other words:

> While the family is fundamental to women's oppression in capitalist society, the pivot of this oppression is not women's domestic labour for men or children, however oppressive or alienating this might be. Rather, it pivots on the social significance of domestic labour for capital – the fact that the production and reproduction of labour-power is an essential condition undergirding the dynamic of the capitalist system, making it possible for capitalism to reproduce itself. (Foreman, 1977: xxv)

According to Ferguson and McNally (2013: xxviii-xxix), Vogel makes the argument, moving on from Marx, that capital's reliance on the labour of social reproduction being unpaid or underpaid, or even forced and stolen, then leads to 'the social organisation of biological difference' which is then the 'material precondition for

the social construction of gender differences'. Connell (2009: 10) argues similarly that 'Gender is a social structure but of a particular kind'. It is not determined by biology but organises biology (2009: 10-11). It is the 'structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena' (2009: 11) which itself is established through social relations. This social structure distorts our understanding even of biology, so that certain bodies are read in certain ways. That is, some bodies are feminised and devalued (Connell, 1985; Connell, 2009), just as some bodies are racialised and devalued (although the systems of oppression and ideology vary considerably).

Understanding of how the definition and categorisation of certain bodies – namely, those associated more directly with biological reproduction – is a social construction has also been advanced and critically developed by feminist Marxists. I concur with the contemporary understanding that the binary is false: that there is not in fact a biological sex divide and that the genders associated with particular 'sexes' are further exaggerated and constructed (Parks Pieper, 2018: chapter 3; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Scientific American, 2017; Ainsworth, 2015; Kralick, 2018; Delfondo, 2014). Likewise, many contemporary feminist Marxists and queer theorists argue that the category of separate sexes is similar to the category of separate races: it is socially created and not based on the existence of biologically distinct categories. Another way of putting this is that the gender divide is an ideological construction that acts to naturalise and reinforce the often-brutal systems of patriarchal capitalism that force unpaid, devalued and often forced reproductive labour out of feminised bodies. Therefore, similarly to race, both sex and gender only exist as social categories, not biological ones. The political implications of this are many, and they are discussed throughout this thesis. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000: 7), a biologist and feminist interested in the social construction of biological concepts, puts it this way:

> Ever since the field of biology emerged in the United States and Europe at the start of the nineteenth century, it has been bound up in debates over sexual, racial, and national politics. And as our social viewpoints have shifted, so has the science of the body.

The extended international debates around Caster Semenya's participation in women's sport and the controversial changes to 'differences of development' rules by

the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) provide possibly the most obvious international case around insistence on a sex divide in international sport. Hers is far from the only the case, however. This rule change requires some female athletes to moderate their testosterone levels. This goes against the advice of specialist scientists in the biology of human differences across the sex spectrum. Bioethicist at Standford University, Katrina Karkazis, argues that 'It bears noting that athletes never begin on a fair playing field; if they were not exceptional in one regard or another, they would not have made it to a prestigious international athletic stage' (cited in Reardon, 2016). Even renowned genetic scientist Eric Zilain, who was involved in advising the International Olympic Committee (IOC) with regard to the Semenya's involvement in sport, struggles to defend his advice on scientific grounds – in part because it is not scientific, agreeing that trying to divide sexes in sport is 'very imperfect' (cited in Reardon, 2016).

The implications of these and other sex-divide debates are important for sport. It is decreasingly the case that women are 'limited by biology', even in physical activities. Our physical differences have always been marked, shaped and even created by socially-constructed differences. Once women start to gain access to the same resources, time and support for training, our bodies literally transform and show the physical constraints for the distortions that they are. There is significant evidence of this when studying the impact of Title IX in the United States – legislation that required that sport dedicate equal resources to both women and men (Women's Sports Foundation, 2016). As more and more girls have moved into sport and have been provided with similar coaching and support, they have grown into elite athletes who are now close to equalling, and in some cases have surpassed, men in competition (Hargreaves, 1994: chapter 2). This sporting example backs what genetic scientists of sex have understood since the early 20th century, when the X and Y chromosomes were first discovered: that there is an overlapping series of diverse physical characteristics that cannot be divided into two sexes, not even on a two-dimensional linear spread of characteristics (Parks Pieper, 2018: chapter 2; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Scientific American, 2017; Ainsworth, 2015; Kralick, 2018; Delfondo, 2014). As more contemporary discussions about gender-policing in sport and the International Olympic Committee have shown, there is no simple way to define the physicality of a woman: not by hormone levels, chromosomes or physical appearance (ibid).

What began as a progressive form of inclusion of feminised bodies in sport has, in some important instances, meant the expulsion of 'certain women' – women who do not fit the artificially created biological definition of 'woman' – from the sports they love. While spaces for women and feminised bodies should certainly be protected, more voices now argue that these spaces must be defined and maintained by women and feminised bodies and be based on a critical assessment of the falsity of a biological sex divide. Attempts at biologically dividing all bodies into one of two sexes is pseudo-science (ibid). It is political and the response to this should be political as well. It is society that creates these definitions of both sex and gender, not 'nature'. Our bodies are far from 'natural' in 21st century sports. They are social creations, based on natural materials which have been laboured upon under certain social conditions, and they are read from certain ideas also created by particular social conditions. As Parks Pieper (2018: 62) argues in *Sex Testing: Gender Policing in Women's Sports*:

> Notions of sex/gender difference were also consistently shaped by cultural beliefs and almost always used to maintain the status quo. 'Labelling someone a man or a woman is a social decision,' explains feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling. 'We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender—not science—can define our sex.'

There are reasons for such strong ideology around a gender divide. The ability of bodies to return to labour for long hours, daily, is important to the continued existence of the productive system. Reproduction and production cannot be separated, despite the tie of reproductive labour to industry often being invisible. That is why ideology around this separation has to be so strong: it is about perpetuating underpaid, devalued and largely-invisible reproductive labour as if it were 'natural'. Its object is to convince women that this is in fact our life purpose, our goal and how we can fulfil ourselves. Just like the labour of paid work, it is compelled and not voluntary, in multiple ways. Indeed, as society is currently structured, the alternatives are not immediately obvious. As Foreman argues:

> The historical reduction of women to passivity within the social process determined the form of desire as appropriation. It is her economic

> dependency that provokes the woman to present herself as a fascinating object in order to attract a husband and thereby achieve financial security. (1977: 101)

Still today, in Australia, fundamental caring, cooking and domestic roles remain with women and feminised people, and this work responsibility is intensifying. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census of Population and Housing (2017b):

> Women in full-time employment are twice as likely as their male counterparts to do at least 15 hours of unpaid domestic work a week, [showing] that the traditional split had continued among men and women when it came to domestic chores.

Indeed, about 20 per cent of women who worked full-time undertook 15 hours or more of unpaid domestic work per week, the corresponding figure for men was 8 per cent. About 9 per cent of men employed part-time undertook more than 15 weekly hours of unpaid domestic work, but the figure jumped to 34 per cent for women. Earlier ABS data show (2017a) the same kinds of division of domestic labour.

> In 2015, 6% of females and 3% of males aged 15 years and over provided primary care to a person with disability … Three quarters of employed women who cared for someone were caring for their own children (76%), with 9% caring for grandchildren. In 2007, 35% of Australian men and 42% of Australian women felt they were always or often rushed or pressed for time. This was higher for those who provided care, rising to 46% of men and 55% of women. The main reasons women gave for feeling rushed or pressed for time were trying to balance work and family responsibilities (31%) and having too much to do or too many demands placed upon them (19%). For men, the main reasons were trying to balance work and family responsibilities (27%) and pressure of work or study (26%) ... On average, men spent nearly twice as long as women on employment related activities, while women spent nearly twice as long as men on activities associated with unpaid work, including

> time on domestic activities (2 hours 52 minutes per day, compared with 1 hour and 37 minutes per day for men) and childcare (59 and 22 minutes respectively per day).

The International Women's Development Agency (IWDA, 2018) has dubbed this 'The Woman Tax', noting that:

> Being a woman comes at a cost. This cost manifests itself in many ways – from women's unpaid labour to the gender pay gap. But the price of being a woman isn't just about money. It's about an endless list of burdens placed squarely on the shoulders of women.

The IWDA adds that the tax applies more broadly. 'If you're a woman, you're more likely to be threatened, ripped off, shut out, sexualised, ridiculed, demonised or enslaved. We call this The Woman Tax.'

Nancy Fraser (2016a, 2016b) would agree, emphasising that decades of neoliberal cuts to social welfare and privatisation of social services have caused an intensification of the oppressive conditions associated with reproduction. Foreman's (1977: 102-03) substantive point about the dominant forms of femininity stands.

> Femininity, then, is defined by the intimate relations of the family – the woman's relationship with her husband, and also with her children… women experience themselves as a response to other people's needs – most importantly, their emotional needs … she often has difficulty in establishing for herself a distinct and separate identity ... To put it in existentialist terms, women's 'being-for-others' tends to be stronger than their 'being-for-themselves'.

Connected to this is our increasing treatment as, and reduction to, bodies only. As Rae Johnson (2018: 2; see also Shilling, 2012) argues, 'the more marginalised and subordinated a social position we occupy, the more we are identified as bodies, and the more pressure we experience to modify those bodies to mitigate our deviance from the norm'.

Emancipatory potential within the contradictions of our alienation

Fox (2015: 183-84) says that to 'experience alienation is to be radically incomplete. Lacking one's necessary objects or to be unable to fully assimilate or appropriate them makes life 'radically insecure' in just the sense intended by Heidegger (Barrett, 1990: 136): denied the capacity to unify one's self and yet desiring that completion is to experience an intimate anxiety'. He makes an important correction to this statement though, contending that stating this is 'not to universalise alienation as experienced under capitalism. Rather, just as Marx held that labour was a necessity of human nature but varied over time with different modes of production, it is to assert that the open, interdependent character of being made its security and stability essentially uncertain and variable' as well (Fox, 2015: 183-84). Blunden (2006) also describes this well in saying:

> The epistemological issue here is that if society is riven by irreconcilable contradictions, then the subjects active in that society will internalise those contradictions in their own subjectivity. Subjectivity is therefore full of contradictions which can (only) be resolved by the real supersession of conflicts on Earth and not without their material resolution [also a reference to the 4th Thesis of Feuerbach].

These contradictions can be made conscious, so that they can be resolved through praxis. As I will discuss throughout this thesis, this is far from an easy process, although it is necessary if oppressive social structures are to be changed.

A particular dialectic of the subject which Mike Wayne (2003: 184-85) wants to emphasise is that between the 'idealised subject of bourgeois philosophy, politics and economics' – that is, the subject as active, equal citizen with free will – and the opposite, which is the object subjected to power: of the state or, especially, the economy (see also Geras, 1991). That is, the subject of capitalism is at once a powerful, individual, political agent and an alienated, oppressed and objectified subject of production and politics. Our lived experience is of both at once, between what is a constant and instantaneous shift between the idealised appearances of society and the real social relations in which we exist and have to navigate every day.

Fox also notes the many other theorists who have discussed this contradiction of social being, focussing this time on intersecting forms of exploitation and social oppression and the impact these have on the sense of self and, even, on political outlook:

> Seve (1978: 120; cited in Fox) however, allowed for just this effect in stating that the 'internal' reproduction of 'external' relations might be 'contradictory, fragmented, and incomplete'. The spaces opened up by the interference – or contradiction – of these 'operational' or active relations are the spaces in which possibilities for reflection and agency exist. (Fox, 2015: 182)

That is, the creation of social being is a deeply contradictory process. This reflects the deeply contradictory nature of capitalist social relations in general. The process by which ideology is embedded within the subject's daily experiences is also daily undone. In describing one of the contributions which Georg Lukacs (1967 (2019)) makes to a theory of ideology, Eagleton (2007: 97) explains how the 'totality' of social relations becomes apparent at the point that this totality 'bears urgently in on one's own immediate social conditions'. That is, contradictions must be resolved at the point that some kind of crisis occurs, for the social self or for social conditions more generally. For Bhaskar (1986; see also Collier 1994), such contradictions exist at three primary levels:

1. between the cognitive – how we think the world is – and the actual – how the world really is;
2. between actual human needs that could be socially met and capitalist social relations driven by the profit motive; and finally
3. contradictions within capitalism itself, between, for example, competition within the market that conversely leads to monopolisation through elimination of minor competitors.

For Wayne (2003: 218) the process is a (conditionally) hopeful one, which is to say that the attempt to unify the contradictory subject of capitalism is bound to be

undone. His point is that the subject 'has to participate in some social practices somewhere', which requires investing in ideological signs *as if* 'authentic representations'. At the same time, there is a distinct sense of cynicism about the process, an underlying sense that it is indeed an act, whereby the subject is 'forever exclaiming, in the popular vernacular, "as if" when confronted by any set of signs'. David McNally (2011) describes how this cynicism is represented in popular culture as 'monsters', particularly vampires and zombies. For McNally (2011: 147) these are representations of our 'alienable remnants of personhood, as dead things that can be sold off', which in turn is a distorted representation of the monstrous experiences of alienated labour under capitalism.

So, beginning to see ideology for what it is – a masking of underlying social relations and structures of oppression – is at once a practical and a cognitive process (Eagleton, 2007: 94). Consciousness reflects practice and also is embedded within practices. It reflects practices of both conceding to oppressive social relations and resisting them. False appearances can be broken by counter-phenomenal knowledge – unmasking the appearance of something to expose the real social relations it represents. This unmasking, in turn, makes this knowledge potentially liberating because it can be directed at structural change. As Bhaskar (1998b, xviii, original emphasis) puts it:

> Such [false] beliefs may patently be logically contradictory…or in some other way, be false to the subject matter they are *about*. And it is clearly within the remit of factual social science, which includes in its subject matter not just social objects but, as social objects, beliefs about those objects, to show this. If and when it has done so we can pass immediately to a negative evaluation of them and of action based on them, and, *ceteris paribus*, to a positive evaluation of their rejection

Similarly, Social Reproduction Theory discloses exploitative forms of femininity, alienated femininity, but it also makes us think about what the nature of emancipated embodiment might be. As the previous sections demonstrated, the question is palpably connected to sport. Sport emphasises the body, but the alienated body – the alienated feminised body. This means that sport is a highly contradictory site of human

activity: between the potential of its fulfilling and enjoyable set of practices and the ideological, oppressive and alienating social conditions in which it operates.

How then might the sport of roller derby contribute to creating social conditions that intersect with these contradictions and towards not only resistances – against alienation and constraining femininity – but towards an emancipatory praxis? The answer to this question will develop progressively throughout the thesis. Nevertheless, an important clue concerns the conditions for human self-fulfillment. This clue also concerns the contradictory nature of social reproduction and alienation in leisure activities such as sport itself.

There is a disagreement in the book *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport* (2009) between Harry Cleaver, who contributed the forward, and the general arguments made throughout the book and by the book's editors. One key disagreement is over whether or not, for Marx, the domain of leisure was only about the reproduction of labour. The disagreement is worth considering briefly for what it foreshadows about the themes I take up in the results chapters (4-6).

Cleaver (2009) argues that, for Marx, it is not the case that leisure is only about the reproduction of labour. He argues that the fight for greater leisure time is not just about 'self-preservation and propagation' (Marx, 1867: chapter 23; cited in Cleaver, 2009: xxviii) but also about finding time to be able to organise for even more leisure time. Furthermore, capital is constantly trying to encroach upon, expand its interests in and erode the nature of leisure time, aiming for it to be 'transformed into work for capital' (Cleaver, 2009: xxviii). Leisure space then is a constant site of struggle, between time limited only to biological reproduction and time for full self-expression and human fulfilment. It is a struggle, too, between leisure for the profit of others and freed expression. That is, leisure (including sport) is a site of tension between alienated and free labour and practice.

This leads to the question: what if, just like efforts concerning labour in production, reproduction can *also* be redirected? What if reproduction can be directed away from simply reproducing bodies and minds for labour and towards reproducing bodies and social forms for our mutual fulfilment, for each other? What if this contradiction can be shifted in favour of it being reproduction not only *for* self-

fulfilment but also *radical emancipatory change*? In this respect, Marx again points to free humanity as an end in itself:

> … when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of their creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where they do not reproduce themselves in one specificity, but produce their totality? Strives not to remain something they have become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?... This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier. On the other side, it really is loftier in all matters where closed shapes, forms and given limits are sought for. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or, where it appears satisfied with itself, it is vulgar. (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1859: 488)

In the next chapter we look at how such an approach might be applied to the contradictory practices of roller derby.

Chapter Three

Critical Methodology: On Contradiction and Emancipatory Praxis

Introduction

In the preface, I detailed my own experiences of how sport changed my life, through six years of training in gymnastics. This led me to become a sharp and attentive witness to the similar experiences of women playing roller derby. Both experiences brought me to a consideration of the power of sport: for overcoming the ideological constraints of femininity and, more generally, for finding freedom from the experience of alienation from the body and the self. Furthermore, roller derby has the additional context of being part of, and creating, an alternative subculture around and through the sport.

So far, I have suggested what a renewed interest in sport as emancipatory praxis might look like and how this approach compares to other critical sociologies and cultural studies of sport. Secondly, I have discussed the social conditions in which women and workers live, work and love under patriarchal and capitalist social relations and why opportunities to break from these conditions – even if temporarily – are so important, not only for individuals, but for longer-term social change. Thirdly, I have considered critical social theories of alienation, social reproduction and emancipatory praxis and the implications of these theories for contemporary social movements and radical sports practices.

I will reflect on these approaches throughout the thesis. I will conclude with a discussion of how these theories themselves might be reconfigured in order to better encapsulate the meaning of the experiences of roller derby skaters. This ‘rethinking’ concerns not only the question of finding self-fulfilment in sport but also its implications for wider studies of physical culture and for movements seeking emancipatory change. This method chapter now describes and explains the

philosophical framework through which I have come to understand these skaters' experiences.

As discussed in the previous chapters, I am approaching the thesis from a broadly Marxist perspective. I connect theories of alienation – which help to explain the experiences of women and feminised people under our current sets of social relations – with theories of ideology, particularly around femininity and the gender divide. Connecting alienation and ideology helps to explain how women's alienation is further entrenched and 'explained away' as natural and unchangeable. Finally, I connect the theories of ideology and alienation with theories of resistance, emancipation and alternative subcultures to help to explain how neither ideology, nor our multiple forms of alienation, are inevitable or unchanging (following methods similar to that of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). This thesis will demonstrate how liberating physical activities, alongside or within a supportive and alternative subculture, can provide for important moments of freedom and self-fulfilment. More importantly, these moments provide constant hints at what is in fact possible, if our social conditions were to be made 'more human', to use Engels's phrase (cited in Fox, 2015: 19-20).

I will also employ some of the foundational epistemological principles of critical realism. These principles are a guide to how knowledge can be gained. Knowledge is not merely an exercise at the level of experience: an inductive play upon empirical data. Nor is it simply an application of first principles: a deductive play upon a theory or theories. It is also about practice. In part, this thesis is a *call for a return to practice as a method of understanding*. As such, it goes beyond Althusser (1971) on ideology (Callinicos, 1978), beyond social science on objectivity and beyond those critical realists who still concede a little too much to empirical social science. The trick here is to explain how causal relations and systems of power can be understood beyond and underneath their ideological explanations: that is, understood immanently, from within, from the ground up.

The task can be accomplished through research that looks for the contradictions in a social practice, research that uncovers inconsistencies in both word and deed:

- between what is said and what is happening;
- between social explanation of a practice and the experiences of participants; and

- between past and current experience.

As will now be discussed in more detail, I take a critical methodological approach, as I am interested in the potential for human emancipation and the power of social structures – at intersubjective, cultural, internalised and structural levels – that either encourage or impede this movement. I am interested in how, at the levels of the skater and league and subculture, the social is written, rejected and re-written *into and out of practice*. As part of this approach, I understand that new knowledge and understandings can be created from within a cultural practice. As I also discuss below (and as mentioned in chapter 2), I recognise that the deeper, real social relations may appear, in the first instance, differently to what they are when understood in total. I recognise that how a practice appears may not be the full story, particularly when it comes to uneven and conflictual power relations. This research is therefore actively and openly political. It aims to address calls for freedom and equality, and most importantly, for mutual human flourishing.

Foundational claims for knowledge

For critical realism, there are four foundational claims for knowledge (e.g. Bhaskar, 1998a, 1986, 1991). Andrew Collier (1994: 6-7, 11) outlines the first three.

1. There is objectivity – in the sense that things do really exist independently of our knowledge of them. In other words, there is a world that does *actually* exist (contra some forms of postmodernist thought).
2. Knowledge is fallible – claims about something are always open to refutation by further information, deeper analysis and criticism.
3. *Trans-phenomenality* – knowledge of something can go beyond appearances and touch 'underlying structures which endure longer than those appearances' (1994: 6). These underlying structures are the various causal mechanisms behind the relations between things.

So, for example, the double helix structure of DNA was actually discovered well before the electron microscope – simply because that structure fit with the limited

empirical data at hand. This knowledge was obviously fallible, however. The electron microscope might have uncovered another structure. Andrew Collier (1994: 6-7) gives a wonderful everyday example of trans-phenomenality, that is, the ability to be aware of causality beyond appearance – the *Law of the Disappearing Household Object*. The fact that, when a sock disappears, we know it has not literally, spontaneously disappeared. Instead, something has happened to it. Something has caused it to disappear, whether it is the dog or the washing machine or a mischievous housemate. Collier (1994: 7) goes on to describe the fourth fundamental claim, which is particularly important for this thesis:

4. *Counter-phenomenality* – that this 'knowledge of deep structure...may also contradict appearances', which is exactly, according to Marx, why scientific inquiry exists – that is, in order to go beyond appearances. For Marx, this is especially important for going beyond false and enslaving appearances (referring to Geras, 1991).

Underlying structures can determine and cause things without this being immediately visible. In fact, these underlying structures can create appearances that run counter to the actual structure. An example is the appearance of a heliocentric solar system. In the social world, too, this counter-phenomenality is often caused by the very object the appearance emerges from– which is the source of much false knowledge or false consciousness. I will discuss this further below.

Bhaskar (cited in Collier, 1994: 7-11) argues that, in the social world, false beliefs may be in a functional relation with their objects or institutions. That is, the false beliefs assist in maintaining the underlying mechanisms that generate them (Eagleton, 2007 makes a similar argument in chapter 1). Andrew Sayer (2011: 221) summarises the point well:

> As Bourdieu puts it, a critique should be able to 'explain the apparent truth of the theory that it shows to be false' (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 215). Secondly, as Bhaskar and Collier have elaborated, critique in this strong sense also seeks to identify cases where false beliefs have a self-confirming character by helping to maintain circumstances ('real appearances') that support those beliefs and also are likely to be favourable to dominant groups (Bhaskar, 1998; Collier, 1994). This

> deception need not be intended, but it may nevertheless help to support continued domination.

If we take the profit motive as an essential feature of capitalism as an example, then false ideas such as ‘caring labour should not be paid’ or that ‘the economy is necessarily a natural, uncontrollable thing’ can be seen to be functionally reinforcing. Yet, the realisation that there is a marked and unfair difference between wages for different types of work, or that the ownership of corporations leads to unimaginable income disparity and control over half the planet’s resources and labour by a small minority (Oxfam International, 2019), implies a need for social, economic and structural change. That is, people begin to realise that it will be necessary to change or remove the actual object of the false idea (Bhaskar, 1998b: xviii) – in these cases, the devaluation of socially-important caring labour, or the uneven distribution of wealth and private ownership over the world’s resources – and replace these with alternatives that resolve disparities, through, for example, socially and democratically run care and production. The false and enslaving appearances can be broken by *counter-phenomenal knowledge*, which in turn makes this knowledge potentially liberating because it can be directed at structural change (Collier, 1994: 6-7, 11).

Hence, the foundational critical realist methodology is apt for a thesis such as this. As Collier (1994:10; my emphasis) describes its focus, ‘all social structures – for instance, the economy, the state, the family, language – depend upon social relations... The relations into which people enter pre-exist the individuals who enter them... And it is *to these structures of social relations that realism directs our attention*…’.

Chapter 2 foreshadowed the consequences of this attention to the structures of social relations. That is, the search for trans-phenomenal knowledge of underlying structures helps to expose the causes of oppressive ideologies and thereby anchor resistance to them. Moreover, as can be seen from the examples directly above, counter-phenomenal knowledge – which is directed at structural change – is discovered partly by looking for the contradictions that exist within the social world. This takes us to the role of emancipatory social practices and the potential of the contradictory in everyday activities.

Hegel and Marx critiqued empiricist sciences – both natural and social sciences – for studying objects on their own, as if singular and timeless. Against this, they maintained that the essence of something can only be understood in motion and in context. That is, any object of study – whether a 'natural' or social one – can only be understood fully as a temporary form that has a past and future. For Marx especially, any object of study also had to be understood in its social and historical context. This thesis, therefore, incorporates both a methodological critique of some of 20th century Marxist theory – as economistic – and a call for attention to the concrete, full human: in this case, with a focus on those who are feminised. I argue that this is consistent with the original work of Marx and Engels. Mikhailov points out that the source of these mistaken economistic interpretations, about even Marx's ideas, are in the social relations of capitalism:

> In the capitalist system of social division of labour, which sharply contrasts activity with material objects (bodies) to actually productive, creative intellectual production, the method of analysis of *mechanical systems* has become the dominant method of theorising. This method was born along with machine production as a method classifying purely 'objective' knowledge, in other words, natural science. It produced the mechanical picture of the world in which the human being appears to us not as the result of their history, but as its ready-made and eternally given premise. (Marx, in Mikhailov, 1980: 164; original emphasis)

To counter this requires listening to the voices of those we are studying and trying to understand them both in their full, complex humanity, and within the overall and changing structural conditions within which they exist. Borrowing again from Mikhailov (1980: 166), this means re-centring any person within changing practices and within the wider causes of social conditions and their changes. Marx (1844c: 352; original emphasis) described how every activity can only really be understood in this social context.

> But even if I am active in the field of science, etc. – an activity which I am seldom able to perform in direct association with other human beings – I am still *socially* active because I am active as a *human being*. It is not

> only the material of my activity – including even the language in which the thinker is active – which I receive as a social product. My *own* existence *is* social activity. Therefore, what I create from myself I create for society, conscious of myself as a social being.

In this context, all our activity is *social* and all our activity is imbued with the imbalance in power relations within the social. Next, I focus on one element of this imbalance and its consequences for research methodology and epistemology. That is, I will examine the imbalances around gender and feminised practices and what a feminist approach might look like.

Beyond objectification: women as change-makers

> The idea of women simultaneously conforming to and opposing the conditions which deny their freedom suggests a breach between consciousness and activity that does not exist, at least not in the same way, for the men who have had the power to implement consciousness through activity and to create the concepts that reflect that power. (Westkott, 1979: 428-29)

There have been contributions to discussions of epistemology and knowledge-creation by other critical social theorists that I would also like to draw attention to. In particular, we should examine the work of feminist critical theorists. Marcia Weskott (1979), in the introduction to her highly referenced paper on research methods, begins with an acknowledgement of the contributions of both Marxists and feminists to long-standing criticisms of positivist social sciences. Weskott (1979: 425) describes how the Frankfurt School of critical social theory '…criticised this ideology of objectivity and challenged the positivist idea of generalizing science and the notion that truth can be expressed in causal relations independent of time and place. They charged that positivist methods shatter and abstract concrete social relations into ahistorical relationships among things'. This argument is very similar to the points I have made above and resonates with critical realist views.

Weskott goes on to emphasise this point by calling for a feminist approach to research. For Weskott, these critical approaches are consistent. For example, in reference to the work of Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith[28], Weskott (1979: 425) says that seeing 'women as agents of knowledge' themselves then forces a researcher to see through the 'aura of objectivity' to 'the object of knowledge, the "known", an alien object that does not reflect back on the knower'. That is, understanding the agency and knowing of the research participants themselves – in the case of this researcher, the skaters – not only provides for a more respectful approach to research, but it begins to dig deeper into the experiences of wider social relations of the participants. Just as importantly, it also undermines the 'the wider cultural objectification of women, in which our basic humanness is denied' (Weskott, 1979: 425). In other words, while some commentators on roller derby, such as Helen Razer in a 2014 article[29], will only ever understand the sport from the outside – or how it is represented – this thesis aims to take seriously the claim of skaters that 'roller derby changed my life'. This does not mean taking this statement for granted, but it does mean treating participants as knowing about their own experiences in the sport and the subculture. To put it succinctly: 'It is only where women are also brought in as the subjects of knowledge that the separation between subject and object breaks down' (Westkott, 1979: 425: similar arguments are made in the collection of works in: Caudwell et al., 2017; Giardina and Newman, 2011). This is essential to any form of critical research, particularly research focussed on theorising actually-existing emancipatory praxis. Also, such a research approach means that the 'the questions that the investigator asks of the object of knowledge grow out of her own concerns and experiences' (Westkott, 1979: 426), exactly as they have in my case. In addition, it means neither eliminating subjectivity nor reifying it. As discussed in detail in chapter 2, our everyday existence means repeatedly being interpolated into systems of ideology.

The consideration of the work of Marcia Westkott here reinforces in another respect the arguments I presented in chapter 2, namely that theories of emancipation need to consider the lived, everyday experiences of resistance, together with the potentials for social change that they hint at or demonstrate. Otherwise, we are justified

[28] For example, her 1974 work, 'Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology', in the *Journal of Social Inquiry*.
[29] Titled 'Razer's class warfare: on loving boobs ironically', includes a critique of the idea of roller derby being at all radical.

in asking a preliminary question about any research: what is its point? Is it simply to reinforce the treatment of a group as an object of information and not to change anything? As Westkott (1979: 427-28; original emphasis) puts it:

> The methodological approach which recognizes as valid only the factual recording of *what i*s allows no justification for attending to alternatives to present conditions. The effect of this approach is to justify the present. Ironically, in the practice of conventional social science, this methodological conservatism is frequently accompanied by an ideology of social change. Hence, it is *not at all unusual to see social scientists, who openly advocate social change, practicing a social science that on the epistemological level denies the possibility of that change.* Women's devaluation and the consequences of this devaluation are reinforced by a social science which records these conditions while systematically ignoring alternative possibilities.

The important work of research, for me and other critical sociologists, is not simply to find a new area of knowledge, a new way that people are oppressed, but to demonstrate the possibilities for change. Social knowledge needs to be tested against its ability to respect and guide change. Research knowledge – even when it has the intention of promoting change – can end up reinforcing prevailing states of affairs if it does not also recognise the contradictory moves towards change that also exist. Research knowledge does this if, for example, it only describes power and systems of oppression *as they are*.

Weskott (1979: 428) describes her approach as a social science not about women but ‘for women’. The intention of the research is not to document ‘inevitability’ but ‘an imaginative alternative that stands in opposition to the present conditions of the cultural domination (over) women’. Women participants, therefore, need to be seen neither as passive recipients of the social world, nor as all-seeing, all-knowing reflectors of their lives and world around them. There is a tension here, a dialectic. People change, they change the world and the world changes them. That is, the research participants are also recognised as *change-makers*.

> From this perspective, women as objects of knowledge are viewed not as passive recipients nor as active, confirming reflections of society. Instead, the tension which informs the method suggests a concept of women in society which also expresses a negation: women opposing the very conditions to which they conform.' (1979: 428)

Research needs to reflect this consciously and explicitly in dialogue in order to protect against accusations of 'bias' and, importantly, to reassure participants in this respect. Westkott adds that 'This tension requires at the very least a reconsideration of the assumption in social science research that there is a basic continuity between consciousness and activity' (1979: 428). Instead we require an acknowledgement (as discussed in chapter 2) that we are contradictory social beings. Such a 'reconsideration' coincides, as well, with the critical realist notion of simultaneously doing things one needs to do to survive (providing caring labour), which evidently helps to reproduce the existing state of affairs (an exploitative system motivated by pursuit of profit), while possibly still opposing those things (the devaluation of caring labour).

The quote at the beginning of this section highlights the tension between consciousness and activity, the contradiction between what is meant to be and what is. It is the contradiction between living a full life and one that constantly experiences social constraint. As I explained in chapter 2, contradiction is the source of resistance and rebellion and, therefore, of longer-term change. Change very often does not occur due to conscious activity towards change. Importantly though, sometimes it does. Regardless, action also reflects the underlying social tensions and contradictions between the prevailing and the possible (Collier, 1994). This reinforces the centrality of the methodological question that I raised in chapter 2: *looking for contradictions*. This seeming split between 'consciousness' and activity can give us profound hints as to what kind of future research participants might be after. For example, it might help to explain why the skaters I have interviewed might first appear to 'toe the line' when it comes to whether the sport is 'just a sport' or also a 'spectacle'. However, after deeper enquiry, they acknowledge that the theatrical component was also important to their personal change; this is also what made it liberating and fun. This discussion will be explored in more detail in the results chapters ahead (4-6).

All of this requires a ‘dialectical approach to social knowledge’ (Westcott, 1979: 430). That is, so that future possibilities are not closed off or controlled but are made explicit and open, we must attend to ‘the dialectics of self and other, person and society, consciousness and activity, past and future, knowledge and practice’. As I will now discuss, this is also a form of immanent critique. Put another way, it is an approach which ‘takes up needs and interests concealed in a view in order to lay them open and assess their claims’, revealing the truth of the ‘immanent contradictions’, especially as they relate to their ‘social significance’ (Hawel, 2008).

The theory-practice relation and immanent critique

> Critical theory, which is programmatically committed to immanent critique, calls for the elucidation of the ‘blind reproduction of social life’ in the consciousness of the individual, as Max Horkheimer has written, so that individuals can, together and in solidarity, set about building a ‘social form in which human beings can consciously organise their social life for their own needs and goals and continually bring it into harmony with them’. (Hawel, 2008; see also Stillman, 1983)

That is, immanent critique is about intervening into ill or unconsidered practices and, through reflection, coming to understand what they are about in the context of broader social relations. Therefore, for most Marxists, critique needs to come from within a social practice, not from outside. It cannot be an external moral judgement but a critique of what is going, from the standpoint of inside, i.e. that something fails ‘on its own terms’ (Stahl, 2013: 2). The methodological conclusion to draw from this is the need to listen to the voices of those we are claiming to speak for, while also coming to understand these voices in a wider context. Again, it means the search for contradictions, tensions or impasses. ‘In nutshell, an immanent critique of society is a critique which derives the standards it employs from the object criticised, that is, the society in question, rather than approaching that society with independently justified standards’ (Stahl, 2013: 2).

Critique is also not a simple inversion of, for example, ideology for its opposite. Jan Rehman (2013) criticises Louis Althusser (1971) for claiming that the ideology-

critique of Marx and Engels was simply an inversion of ideas. However, as discussed in chapter 2 and at the beginning of this chapter, appearances are complex, partial and often inconsistent portrayals of deeper underlying social structures. Critique then requires a more nuanced and trans-phenomenal approach. Systems of power overlap, distort and are contradictory and, therefore, inversion alone is a very limited tool for knowledge creation.

As Andrew Collier (1994) and Roy Bhaskar (1989) argue, the world cannot always be grasped in immediate experience. In *this* sense – but not in the sense of deliberate propaganda or lies – our ideas are often 'false'. Or at least, our ideas do not reflect a full truth. A critical realist approach also emphasises the theory-practice relation and the idea that neither future practice nor theory should be beholden to current practice. It rejects the 'primacy of practice' position (Collier, 1994: 15), in that, while all theory can and should be judged against its practical implications, theory can also aid the *transformation* of practice. Theory is the 'growing point of practice' as it helps the improvement of practice by 'exposing and correcting cognitive errors implicit in that practice' (Collier, 1994: 15). Social analysis, explanatory analysis and advancing of theory and practice are complicated. Social critique operates within open systems of analysis, that is, systems which cannot be closed off or tested through independent experiment (Collier, 1994: part I). Nevertheless, real social relations, real social structures and real causes can be discovered (Bhaskar, 1986; Collier, 1994).

Critical realism understands that 'things-in-themselves' or *noumena*, to use Kant's terminology, can be knowable, holistically and beyond appearances. However, its claims do not over-reach. It always remembers that this knowledge is potentially fallible and, thus, can only be contingent upon new and more profound discovery. It is possible rationally to determine causal relations – whether trans-phenomenal or counter-phenomenal, beyond immediate events or social forms (Collier, 1994; Bhaskar, 1989). This then raises for critical realism a double focus, on the duality of structure and the duality of praxis (Bhaskar, 1998a). It can be put simply. Society, the ensemble of social relations, is two things. Firstly, it is the ever-present conditions for activity and humanity – it is an always present material reason for our existence. Secondly, society is continually reproduced through human agency, our actions. Praxis is *also* two things: conscious action at a personal level; alongside the *normally unconscious* reproduction of society and its structures.

Therefore, critical research of this kind has dual aims. It aims to be both explanatory and normative (Held, 1980; Bhaskar, 1986; Collier, 1994; Doughney, 2005, 2006). That is, it aims to be 'adequate both as empirical descriptions of the social context and as practical proposals for social change' (Bohman, 2008). The goal of the Frankfurt School is to '…explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation' (Bohman, 2008). This thesis stands within the tradition of critical theory in this sense, focussing on the dialectic between alienating and emancipatory practices.

In summary, then, my research methodology incorporates:

1. a rejection of the theory-practice divide;
2. a rejection of the mind, body and social divides;
3. an understanding of that which is immanent in current practices, which is to say that analysis comes from within the subject matter and looks for contradictions within it that may indicate future possibilities for praxis;
4. some of the critical realist approaches to knowledge, particularly in acknowledgement of trans-phenomenality and counter-phenomenality;
5. the broader critical approach to understanding social relations of power across all fields (economic, social, cultural, personal) and the social conditions that contribute to human emancipation;
6. theories of alienation and the (often spontaneous) breaks from repression and constraint; and
7. a break away from the Marxist traditions which emphasise the economic as the sole source of both our oppression and emancipation, in favour of traditions that understand the interaction of the economic with colonialist, patriarchal, ableist and heteronormative systems of power and their resistances.

That is, this thesis is driven by a wish to hear, describe and critique the experiences of individual roller derby skaters and to understand what these stories and

explanations indicate for theories of emancipatory praxis. Its aim is to understand the contradictory experiences of the body for women and feminised people: from experiences of alienation to experiences of freedom and mutual self-fulfilment. I take the claims that 'roller derby changed my life' seriously, even if these experiences are only temporary and partial. To understand their potential, we must first understand their source and social conditions.

I now discuss how choosing a qualitative case study of roller derby fits within this methodological approach.

Ethnographic case study: design and choice

Case study research design is useful when conducting exploratory and explanatory investigations into complex phenomena which have not previously been studied. Robert Yin (2003: chapter 1) argues for a 'pluralistic' approach to case study research, in that multiple aims can be incorporated. In this sense, my research here has aimed both to explore what is going on for roller derby participants who describe this sport and the physical culture as having changed their lives in some way (whether positively, negatively or a combination). However, I also hold to the critical approach for research. That is, my aim is not simply to describe social phenomena or to summarise the skaters' experiences. My aim is also to understand the deeper social contributors to, and impacts of, the practices of roller derby. This requires maintaining a critical stance when collecting and analysing the data, with a view to understanding the interplay between this data and deeper hierarchies and social structures of power.

Cases are studied in detail and need to be chosen carefully. They tend to be chosen from 'extreme situations and polar types in which the process of interest is "transparently observable"'. Cases can be chosen to repeat, dispel or 'extend the emergent theory' (Pettigrew, 1988; cited by Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). Eisenhardt (1989: 541) describes the important process of refining theoretical concepts by the 'two-part process involving (1) refining the definition of the construct and (2) building evidence which measures the construct in each case'. This requires constant review, comparison and contrast. Analysis of data for this research was conducted in this way, with repeated reviewing of coding against primary concepts, then review of concepts against the data. There was also a process of refinement of concepts, alongside analysis of their connection or contrast to broader social systems. Because the key aim of the thesis is to

understand breaks from old systems which foster potential new social relations, these concepts also need to be viewed for their possible representation of change. Old language is often used to describe new ideas. The repeated references to 'aggression', for example, which is also 'not aggression', shows the limits of language when describing shifts in social phenomena. It became a key part of the data analysis.

Because of the difficulty in this process, I chose to focus on theories of alienation and, within this field, approaches to alienation within the Marxist and feminist Marxist disciplines. This meant 'leaning on' an established discipline of thought while internally critiquing this thought against the practices of a group of skaters. The extent to which it is possible to make claims that extend beyond this case study group is an important methodological question: one that is impossible to avoid. Yin (1994: 10) describes the ways in which case studies are generalisable:

> … case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a 'sample,' and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization).

Eisenhardt (1989: 544) continues: 'An essential feature of theory building is comparison of the emergent concepts, theory, or hypotheses with the extant literature'. This, again, involves looking for and investigating contradictions and exploring why they occur. It is often where the 'creative insight' (1989: 546) is developed from, alongside new understandings of the complex social relations that have contributed to an event or practice. This is also an interactive process, involving both researcher and participant, particularly in semi-structured interviews in which participants provide their own interpretations of events.

The question of how much data to collect is always a difficult one. In case study research, the number of interviews tends to be around 2-10, so that each can be explored. For this thesis, I interviewed 19 participants over 23 interviews (four 2nd interviews were conducted with particular participants). I also collected a range of other sources of data (the research methods are described in more detail below). The number matters less than the idea that a point is reached of 'theoretical saturation', or 'the point

at which incremental learning is minimal because the researchers are observing phenomena seen before' (Eisenhardt, 1989: 545).

As I discuss in the following chapters, the interviews indeed demonstrated repeated themes. The combined themes relating to developing power and agency ran through every interview, and they were represented more strongly amongst skaters who had been involved in the sport longer and were competing at a more elite level. This indicates not only that data selection was aligned with the topic of research but also that there is something about the practices of roller derby itself that contribute to an increased sense of power and agency. This is discussed in the data analysis in chapters 4 to 6.

There are many contributions that case study research can make. For Eisenhardt (1989: 545), the process of developing theory may result in any combination of new concepts, a new conceptual framework or the development of new theory altogether. This thesis reviews longstanding theories of emancipatory praxis and reflects upon current concepts and suggestions for future practice. Moreover, the process I have adopted of constant checking against rich data means that the development of theory is sound and grounded: 'the resultant theory is likely to be empirically valid' because 'the theory-building process is so intimately tied with evidence' and empirical observation (Eisenhardt, 1989: 547).

As a partial-participant observer – or, at least, someone who was playing the sport while conceiving of the research design – this critical stance must equally be applied to myself. Theresa Petray (2012: 554) describes this dialectic well: 'while it is important to share political emotions with research participants, activist researchers must (simultaneously) remain reflexive and critical of those emotions'. I have, in part, understood this to mean a form of *reflection in action* and *reflection on action*, as famously described by Donald Schön (1983). However, another 'layer' of research is then applied within the critical framework. Specifically, analysis has focussed on questions such as:

1. Are there contradictions between a skaters' actions and stated descriptions of their actions?
2. What is the immediate social context in which that practice took place and what is the impact of this practice on power relations?
3. What are the wider conditions in which that skater has acted?

4. Finally, what are the longer-term implications of this practice for emancipatory praxis?

These questions are catalysts for deeper analysis, as will be shown as we move into the discussion chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 2 has established a detailed analysis of the social conditions in which roller derby exists. Analysis of the case study data then aims to refer to these conditions to highlight where shifts away from our alienating conditions occur, where contradictions arise in practice and where constraints on mutual self-fulfilment are reversed or continue. Most importantly, I am interested in how skaters' practices or descriptions of practices hint at new, potential conditions for human flourishing. As Raymond Williams's work highlights, especially in the collection of his writings on *Culture and Materialism* (2005), cultural practices in a sense are often resistant to dominant cultures. Pre-empting a lot of the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Williams asks us to think about *the sources* of 'those practices, experiences, meanings, values which are not part of the effective dominant culture' (2005: 40).

For Williams, it is possible to consider, broadly, two forms which are not part of dominant culture: one which is alternative but does not undermine or possibly even come into contact with dominant culture; and a second which is more oppositional and, at least in part, in *conflict* with dominant culture. Williams also emphasises that both are, of course, 'subject to historical variation, and as having sources which are very significant as a fact about the dominant culture itself' (2005: 40). That is, alternatives can also be reactions to dominant culture or forms which, proverbially, *let off steam*. Williams then suggests that both these forms might also be evidence of either 'residual' or 'emergent' forms of culture. The distinction is for analytical use, and in practice it is not so clear. Williams (2005: 42) adds, in emphasising the shifts over time of non-dominant cultures, that:

> A meaning or a practice may be tolerated as a deviation, and yet still be seen only as another particular way to live. But as the necessary area of effective dominance extends, the same meanings and practices can be

> seen by the dominant culture, not merely as disregarding or despising it, but as challenging it.

A short critical history of roller derby

> Seeing women all over the world fall in love at first sight, the same way we did a decade ago, shows me that what derby stands for is powerful, and it is contagious. (*Bloody Mary*, 2014)

The well-known slogan for contemporary roller derby is: 'Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.' (WFTDA, 2019a). From its early 2000s conception, these have been the primary themes for the community and the sport. *Bloody Mary*[30] is considered by many to be the 'godmother' of contemporary roller derby. She was part of the split in Austin Texas that is considered the foundation of the contemporary version of the sport, which moved onto a flat track in 2002 (Wikipedia[31], 2019a, 2019b). When most talk about roller derby today, they are referring to this version of roller derby. 'Once upon a time, "roller derby" referred completely and totally to 50 skaters in Austin's rock bar scene', *Bloody Mary* explains (2014). Less than a decade later 'it refers to a global community and an international sport'.

The move to a flat track, alongside the establishment of more skater-driven governing bodies, was the beginning of the recent democratisation of the sport. In 2004, the first inter-league governing body was formed, the precursor to the Women's Flat Track Roller Derby Association (WFTDA), involving 20 leagues (WFTDA, 2019a). The sport quickly grew when the governing body opened its doors to new members in 2006, having established the new rule set and governance structures that have mostly continued throughout to today (WFTDA, 2019a). From the beginning, the sport has been founded on the principle of 'by the skaters for the skaters' (Wikipedia, 2019a;

[30] If skaters compete and speak under their roller derby persona, I respect this name throughout the thesis. Within roller derby, it is common for skaters not to know the 'civilian name' of their teammates and colleagues. In this sense, their civilian name is not relevant, only their 'derby name' is. That is, their roller derby name is as real as an author's pen-name or artist's performance name.

[31] As the sport is relatively knew Wikipedia is one of the most reliable sources of up-to-date information about roller derby. Even the website of the official governing body refers to Wikipedia for details of the sports past and present.

WFTDA, 2019a). This is a principle which connects to the social movement origins of many of the sports' founders.

It is hard to track the total numbers of people participating in the sport because new leagues only need a flat surface on which to skate and maybe 15 people to form a group – enough members to be able to train, scrimmage and referee the sport at a basic level. Many leagues, even around the Melbourne area, have fallen to memberships below this during lulls or periods of high injury rates. Most established major leagues seem to stabilise at around 60-100 members[32], although these numbers are often lower for regional and rural locations. Membership of 60-100 allows for: a competitive travel team, new groups of skaters coming through the ranks, organisers of bouts and the league and the all-important referee team. Referees are particularly important to the growth of leagues because the sport has one of the highest referee-competitor ratios of any team sport. During a tournament, there will be five skaters for each team on the track at a time, 15 per team in total, and there will be seven on-skate referees (referees) and 11 non-skate officials (NSOs).

There are now officially 457 member-leagues of WFTDA that are located across six continents (WFTDA, 2019a); that is, across all continents except Antarctica. Official WFTDA membership covers more than 30 countries (Wikipedia, 2019a). However, as mentioned above, these figures do not come close to accounting for the numbers playing the sport. To become an official member of WFTDA can take years because of the membership criteria that first need to be met (WFTDA, 2019a) and because of the level of membership and resources required to establish a league that is self-sustaining. Moving to a flat-track democratised the sport and made it more accessible. It is now played on every flat surface imaginable, including old bitumen netball courts and tennis courts to floorboard basketball courts, concrete showgrounds and skate-hockey sports courts. Still, the sport requires significant resources, such as quality roller skates for all skaters (these are expensive), a large surface (even if flat) on which to train and compete and people to voluntarily staff the league organisation. League organisation includes finding regular training venues, suitable locations for bouts, organising venue bookings around skater and coach availability, maintaining knowledge of the latest WFTDA rule

[32] This is not a precise figure. It is a figure born of many conversations with founding members of the sport in Australia and founding members of leagues in major cities, as well as in discussions with visiting international coaches. It is backed by correspondence with *Vaderella* (2019).

set (see WFTDA 2019b) and holding onto the high number of referees and officials needed for both scrimmages and bouts. That being said, roller derby performed on a banked track required even more resources that this.

The main changes that occurred with the 'flat-track break away' and foundation of contemporary roller derby were as follows. First, the sport was made more accessible and required less from corporate sponsors and exploiters of privatised bouts, such as those that banked-track roller derby often had. Secondly, roller derby became run 'by the skater, for the skater' and established new forms of democratic management (WFTDA, 2019a). This very point was one of the precursors to the split in Texas. At the time, the board was run by an unelected group in a more corporate-style format. While the board was made up of women and consulted with skaters, it made the final decisions over how the sport would be run and how bouts were conducted. Their drive was often for profit-making, as well, particularly as the board had invested money up-front (Auerbach, 2006; Wikipedia, 2019b).

The lack of democracy caused conflict within the bank-tracked league. For example, there was disagreement over the spectacularised penalties within the sport at the time (Aeurbach, 2006). Instead of the 30-second removal from the track (as exists now), penalties involved a 'penalty wheel' which would be spun to decide on the penalty. Penalties included 'spank alley', a punishment whereby skaters would skate past the spectators to be spanked and another whereby skaters would wrestle to the ground (Auerbach, 2006; Wikipedia, 2019b). Many skaters felt that the sport should be taken more seriously, with rules more clearly discussed and defined and penalties more like standard sports penalties (Auerbach, 2006; Wikipedia, 2019b). These debates seem to be the origin of the slogan 'sport over spectacle', which is understandable in the context of a group of women who simply wanted to play a skate sport under the control of the athletes themselves. So, while early Texas roller derby and the formation of *Bad Girl Good Woman Productions* and their *TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls*, was a break away from the previously exploitative and male-driven production of roller derby bouts, the more radical break away was yet to occur (Auerbach, 2006; Wikipedia, 2019b). It did, with the formation of *Texas Rollergirls* and, later, the WFTDA.

The third shift that occurred with the move onto a flat track was the creative intersection with a wider range of different subcultures. Each of these subcultures brings with them their own sets of practices and ways of being. Each has, over time, deeply

influenced both individual leagues and the sport as a whole. This has meant that, for those who participated in the interviews for this thesis, contemporary roller derby is a complex and unique mix of the following:

1. A technically difficult sport to learn. This was mentioned by a significant number of skater participants in this thesis as a contributing factor to their love of the sport. It is also particularly emphasised by the coach-organisers I interviewed.
2. A sport that contributes to general health and fitness. This is especially significant for women who have not played regular sport before.
3. A serious, competitive, team sport, built on camaraderie within the team and leagues (as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters).
4. A contact sport led by women and for feminised people. It is not only a contact sport which celebrates strength and aggression in women and feminised people, but is, largely, controlled by the women themselves. According to the interview participants, this means that the sport is less likely to slip into either exploitative sexual objectification or the trivialisation of women's strength and aggression.
5. The rules of the sport: no stopping for penalties, two-minute-maximum jams, a small track with tight game play, two point-scorers on the track at once, 'taking the space' being an aim, alongside technical completion of difficult body hits on an unstable surface.
6. A sport that is uniquely run by the athletes themselves in broadly democratic ways. The rules are chosen by skaters, and the leagues are led by skaters. The organisations may not always be run using grassroots democracy in the way that other social movement organisations are, but leagues are shaped by these principles.

Like many other places of women's organisation, roller derby is also struggling with where the lines should be drawn around involvement and gender identification or whether they should be drawn at all. On this, policies are inconsistent and changing. However, the gender policy of WFTDA (2019c) has been revised and some leagues now

openly allow members who are gender non-binary. Some leagues only allow those who have lived as a woman. There is a policy developed within the junior leagues attached to Rose City Rollers, in Portland USA, that coaches 'ask before every practice what pronoun the kids want us to use, so if the pronouns change we respect where the kids are at on that day' (*Scratcher in the Eye*, personal correspondence, 2019[33]). This policy has gone into training of trainers as well and is now the case for both of their junior leagues: 7-12 year-old and 12-18 year-old (*Scratcher in the Eye,* 2019). The UK also changed its national policy in 2014 (UK Roller Derby Association, 2014) to allow for the inclusion of non-binary members. That is, roller derby reflects both its feminist and queer activist histories, along with a reaction to the very conservative histories of gender-policing by sports officialdom. Roller derby is possibly one of the most inclusive sports in the world when it comes to transgender participants. However, it is important to recognise that this has not come without significant effort on behalf of transgender activists and allies, and that there have been terrible exclusions. As good as roller derby is, there is still considerable way to go.

One of the central reasons roller derby's gender policy has been developed in a progressive way is that the sport is still almost entirely skater run: by the athlete, for the athlete. It is one of the few sports that is genuinely run by the participants themselves. The complex and intensely democratic processes by which rules are changed, queried, challenged and overturned is a good example. Jennifer Carlson (2010) – in her thorough ethnographic study of the originators of flat-track roller derby, the *Texas Rollergirls* – hints at this when talking about the sport being run by and for women. This is key. Everything from training and recruitment to the organisation of bouts and how the game is played (via giant debates over changes to rulesets) occurs 'by the skater, for the skater'.

Other researchers (e.g. Pavlidis, 2013; Streeter, 2015; Paul and Bank, 2015; Arafat and Helal, 2017; Khan, 2009) have also emphasised the feminist, queer-proud and alternative nature of roller derby. Mine is not a new analysis of its radical base. In fact, these prior research projects contributed significantly to my decision to focus on

[33] Where specific roller derby histories are not documented I have confirmed details with established roller derby organisers. *Scratcher in the Eye* is a longstanding organiser, coach, and travel team member of *Rose City Rollers* of Portland Oregon, USA. *Rose City Rollers* are current world champions and one of the largest leagues in the world.

roller derby as alternative practice, and I am indebted to their contributions. Adele Pavlidis's (2013) substantial piece of research on roller derby as part of her PhD provides a somewhat more sober analysis of the contributions of roller derby than this thesis does however. She also provides an excellent and more detailed history of roller derby and its connections to alternative subcultures such as Riot Grrrl and Punk. Adele Pavlidis and Simone Fullagar (2015: 489-90) also focus on how the concept of overcoming, even in celebrating pain, is used by roller derby skaters to challenge dominant ideas of femininity. They describe how:

> Pain makes visible the women's relations with each other and the sport itself. The recognition and exchange of pain, both corporeal and virtual, is central in roller derby. Pain marks out the sport – as 'real' – and the women who play (sometimes in fishnet stockings and short skirts) as serious contenders. For women however, it is not simply a matter of exerting 'mind over matter'. Rather, for the gendered bodies in roller derby, pain expands femininity beyond ideals of service to others (labouring) and self-limiting corporeal schemas.

Madrigal and Robins (2017), like my discussion in chapter 6, also provide a more critical discussion of the impact of injury in roller derby and the problems with the reification of injuries to the body. Their analysis coincides with elements of the skaters' descriptions of their experiences of injury in the sport in my later chapters. Regardless, roller derby's alternative status is rarely questioned in the literature, except possibly in Zach Dundas' book (2010) on a range of 'renegade' sports. In the conclusion to his chapter on roller derby, he asks: how long can its alternative status be maintained? It is interesting that this question is still being asked today, indicating a longer radical lifespan than perhaps he predicted at the time of writing.

Finally, in setting the context of this ethnographic study, it is important to acknowledge some of the politics of place within and across roller derby: in particular, how contemporary roller derby is still dominated by the US, even where this is consciously managed and sometimes acted against. I also note, in both the introductory and concluding chapters, that place and access to skating resources also matter to our movements for emancipation.

Next, I take a quick look at the early days of roller derby in Australia, as a way of providing additional context to these interviews, which were conducted primarily in and around Melbourne.

Roller derby comes to Australia

I spoke to *Vaderella*[34] (personal correspondence 2014; also 2019[35]) (known as *Vader*), one of the founding members of roller derby in Australia, about the early days here:

> VDRL hosted two Moe camps. The first Moe camp was the end of 2007 and there was about 80 of us, and that was mostly Adelaide, Victoria, Sun State (Brisbane), and about three or four people from Sydney. That's basically who existed, that was pretty much it. That was the beginning.

Moe is an old industrial and mining town in the infamous La Trobe Valley – also known as 'Death Valley' because of the high level of workers' deaths due to asbestos in the power-generating plants and factories in the region. The existence of a large skate rink in the area was an unexpected but joyful surprise. As *Vader* (2014) says, Moe has 'this crazy huge rink with incredible sports court' surface for skate sports. The rink is so large because the town had received funding for a skate championship one year, and the rink remained and became open to the public. It is renowned amongst those who live in the region (*Vaderella*, 2014).

Some debate exists about who started roller derby in Australia first. *Vader* (2019) confirms that:

> what did become *Sun State* (Brisbane) was the first league in Australia that had formed…Victoria (VRDL)…was about three months behind *Sun State*. Then about three months behind Victoria, Adelaide and Sydney pretty much started in the same week. So those (are the first) four leagues.

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34. Again, where skaters are primarily known within the sport under their pseudonyms this is what I have used for this thesis. This also better connects the reader to the roller derby history of these sources.

35 Where specific roller derby histories are not documented I have confirmed details with established roller derby organisers. *Vaderella* is a founding member of Adelaide Roller Derby, roller derby in Australian, and founding organiser for *The Great Southern Slam* and *RollerCon Down Under*.

Each league, then, began at a remarkably similar time and developed roller derby in their respective cities very quickly. The sport was incredibly popular in the early days, from 2008 onwards. Growth was so quick that even founders in the US were surprised.

> I [*Vader*] went to *RollerCon*[36] in 2008 as part of my first real, first 12 months of derby. It really opened my eyes to the worldwide derby, rather than Adelaide just being Adelaide… Americans were freaked out that there were… 80 to 90 Australians going over every year to *RollerCon* and it just blew their minds (at the time).

The first full game between leagues in Australia was in 2007, the *Skate of Origin*, and was between Adelaide Roller Derby (ADRD) and the Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL). It was the beginning of Adelaide's first season of competition. Adelaide had organised the bout at the same time as Fringe and Clipsal 500.[37] 'We managed to get nearly 1400 people through the door, including people like Ross Noble and lots of the Fringe artists', in part by promoting roller derby as an alternative to Clipsal (*Vaderella*, 2019).

By 2008, the Adelaide league was getting regular audiences of 1200 to games. It was also turning away interested skaters, with 140 turning up for Fresh Meat intakes – the new recruits to roller derby – and only being able to take in 40 (*Vaderella*, 2014). By 2009, the VRDL was getting similar numbers and selling out of tickets within days, sometimes hours, of them going on sale (Bennett, 2014). In 2010, the VRDL moved to the Melbourne Showgrounds and managed sell-out crowds of more than 3000 per game for a while. These numbers were bigger than those in much of the US at the time (*Vaderella*, 2014).

There are some unique reasons, from city to city, for why roller derby was so popular. In describing why roller derby was so popular in Adelaide, *Vaderella* (2019) says 'I think it goes very well with the fact that Adelaide is a festival city. Being

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[36] The giant roller derby convention held in annual in Las Vegas in the US. Thousands now attend this from all over the world.

[37] Now known as the Superloop 500, a motor racing event for the Supercars Championship.

someone that's worked in the arts, when something big happens in Adelaide, the whole town knows about it.' Giving some indication of the level of volunteer skills to get a league up and running, *Vaderella* (2014) also describes how the original group of organisers, the board members, had backgrounds in organising and events management already. Hearing about the early days does demonstrate how committed the founders were, especially as they were volunteering their time and labour. Adelaide Roller Derby began with an initial recruitment drive:

> *Barrelhouse Bessy*… had her little laptop up and she took this PowerPoint presentation and talked in her crazy Texan accent about roller derby and coming from Austin… she'd come over with her husband and had spent the (previous) 12 to 18 months researching how the hell she could do (roller derby) here in Australia. (Bessy) was smart in the way that she had previously seen what happened in Austin, knew that flat track existed, and banked track, and had spent a lot of time working out, how do you do this, how do you incorporate?… Her best friend is… *Smarty Pants*, (who had said) 'you build it, I will come'… and she came… a lot of other leagues took a lot longer to get going.

This is a small snapshot of what went into the beginning of roller derby, almost everywhere. Commitment to the sport in the early days 'was universal' (*Vaderella*, 2014). By 2010, Adelaide was hosting the first of *The Great Southern Slam* (TGSS) – the largest tournament to be held outside the US, with 650 competitors attending the first event. The 2012 TGSS housed more than 1000 competitors (Wikipedia, 2019c). *Vaderella* (2014) was one of the founders of TGSS and explains the thinking behind it. Although there were occasional interstate tournaments, overall 'we never got to see each other' because 'Australia is so huge', so there was a significant motivation to get 'everyone under one roof':

> So that was the motivation… 'man, these people are awesome face to face, let's get everyone together and get derby under one roof', and we had the venue… our intention was never about ranking, our intention was always just, we're so far away, it's so expensive, let's try and get as many people to play each other.

While the original motivation was not primarily about competition or rankings, The Great Southern Slam has certainly housed some incredible games and is now one of the primary means of ranking teams within Australia and ranking teams against New Zealand (Aotearoa). *Vaderella* and I were both at the finals for the first TGSS and have reminisced about two games in particular. One was when the giants of Pirate City Rollers skated onto the track. They hailed from Auckland, and their fierce reputation preceded them. It was not undeserved. Made up of proud Maori skaters, and skaters who had played rugby and other contact sports, they only lost to that year's champions, the VRDL, by a matter of points. The grand final was extraordinary, too:

> Then we had that amazing, wonderful grand final where VRDL and Sun State came down to that last game, and I think VRDL took it by two points in the last two seconds… I still cannot get over that game'. (*Vaderella*, 2014)

Vader is right, that was one of the most incredible games I have seen with lead shifting throughout the game.

Reflecting on what it is like to be one of the founding members of this sport which is still so loved, *Vaderella* (2014, confirmed 2019) expresses the view that:

> It was a privilege to be first. I was in the right place at the right time, and those early years are special to me, because we got to build something. So I think my experience… is completely different to people who are now entering the sport, having been established for years and years and years… The game has changed so dramatically… So it was life changing for me because we got to *build something*, I didn't even know what it was…. I've got photos of my first training session (at *RollerCon* in Las Vegas), 250 skaters in a car park… with one trainer! … and seeing people who are really unconfident and timid become powerful. Whatever you want to construe that is, whether that's on the track powerful or finding their voice – I've seen people make radical changes in their lives after being involved in derby. I've seen very young girls come from very remote suburbs go, "I'm going to go and have a world trip for two

> years", and have that confidence. I think things like that are the biggest successes… I think it's the human element that is the most successful, and the thing I'm most proud of.

These words echo those of coach-organisers (as quoted in the preface) and the words of so many skater participants in this research. I next discuss how the interviews with skaters were collected and analysed.

Ethnographic methods: research data and participants

The thesis takes an ethnographic approach to case study research (Harrison et al. 2017[38]; Ravitch and Carl, 2015: chapter 4; Denscombe, 2014: chapter 5). That is, this was a form of qualitative, participant-observation research, with an action-oriented focus; it was ethnography with an auto-ethnographic component. Data was collected using a variety of methods (Ravitch and Carl, 2015: chapter 5; Denscombe, 2014: part II): field notes at roller derby events, personal notes on my own experiences of roller derby and semi-structured interviews with coaches and organisers of the sport. The core data, however, were 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with skaters who identified with the saying 'roller derby changed my life'. This ethnographic research is then used to reflect upon, review and refine a critical social theory of sport and its emancipatory potential. It also attempts to take into account the complexity of a solely 'intimate insider' approach to ethnographic research (Pavlidis and Olive, 2014) by using mixed methods, engaging with critical theory and inviting some participants to review drafts of the thesis as well. Chapters 4-6 discuss the research results, while chapters 6 and 7 reflect on the implications for social theory.

Leon Anderson (2006), in one of the introductory articles in a special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, reviews the history of auto-ethnography and proposes certain characteristics for an *Analytic Auto-Ethnography*. My research

[38] The authors describe well the consistency between a case study approach, a realist approach to qualitative research and ethnography. They argue: 'The fundamental goal of case study research is to conduct an in-depth analysis of an issue, within its context with a view to understand the issue from the perspective of participants'.

methods are mostly consistent with this approach, as I outline here. Anderson describes the characteristics as including (2006: 378):

> … (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis.

As discussed in the preface and introduction to this thesis, my direct involvement in roller derby preceded a wish to investigate its practices in more detail. My interest in the ways in which the sport contributed to life-changing experiences for skaters led me to reflect personally on these experiences (in a diary) and begin to consider its practices in the context of other, critical sports studies. I joined the Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL) in November 2009. I participated in 'Fresh Meat' (introductory) intake program and proceeded through the levels that and the following year. But mid 2010 I was at bouting (competition) level in the sport. By early 2011 I was selected for the travel team (level B). Our 2009 intake was a large intake, with around 70 skaters passing the Fresh Meat intake test. Being a part of such a large intake contributed as well to gaining an understanding of the multiple experiences of joining, participating and competing with a roller derby league.

I was a competitive skater for approximately one year and resigned from skating in late 2011. The resignation was due, in part, to health reasons, meaning I have some experience of the kinds of disillusionment and feelings of disconnection that other participants in my research described (see chapter 6). After this date, I continued to participate in the league and inter-league events, was a Bench Coach for the *Dead Ringer Rosies* (VRLD intra-league team) and later decided to formally focus my attention, as a PhD candidate, on the sport and its practices.

As mentioned in both the preface and introduction, this experience of participation in roller derby deeply shaped my later research design and the kinds of interviews I conducted. My active participation in the sport, in particular in coaching through the *Queer Roller Derby Network*, aiding me in finding willing research participants. It also contributed to the depth of interviews I was able to conduct. While not a 'complete research member' at the time of my primary data collection (skater interviews), my background in roller derby had a significant impact on both my

approach to the research, the research participants' approach towards me as a researcher. In a sense, the usual 'divide' between researcher and researched was reduced – this was also a conscious act on my part. Simultaneously, also consistent with Anderson's (2006) recommendations as above, I took seriously the need to constantly reflect on my own interpretations of events and research participant interviews. I now discuss in more depth how this work was conducted (consistent with Anderson's 2nd, 4th and 5th characteristics above). This included keeping a research diary while collecting field notes and research interviews, as well as checking interpretations of events with the research participants themselves (where necessary).

Skater participants were sought through emails and messages to discussion boards for each of the Melbourne leagues at the time, plus those in Geelong and Ballarat. I consciously sought skaters from a mixture of inner Melbourne, outer Melbourne and regional centres, as I suspected the experiences of roller derby may be quite different. This was somewhat true. I considered interviewing skaters in rural and outer-regional leagues as well, travelling to visit skaters in Mildura and Broken Hill in May 2013. Later I decided to focus on a core group in and around Melbourne so as to concentrate the data collection in one area. Outer regional and rural leagues have considerable difficulty establishing themselves as leagues, in part because of the resources required. Very interesting stories about the power of skaters banding together to form a league would have resulted but, in the end, I felt that this could turn into another whole research project and might take me beyond the focus on life changes through sporting participation. For similar reasons, I also chose to interview skaters who had been training for at least six months with a league.

Altogether, I interviewed 16 skaters, four of them twice. In the case of repeated interviews this was due to the depth of breadth of skater experiences, particularly amongst those who had been members of the sport for more than five years. I also interviewed three coach-organisers of the sport. I approached visiting coach-organisers directly and, if possible, arranged interviews. This was not always possible, as their time tends to be extremely tight and involves coaching across multiple leagues or assisting in organising major events like *Battle on the Bent Track*, *RollerCon Down Under* and *The Great Southern Slam*. These coach-organiser interviews were very useful for providing more insight into roller derby history, particularly in Australia. They also provided some confirmation that there are similar experiences of roller derby across many major cities

and regional centres, even in the US. Of course, more interviews with coaches and organisers would be needed to generalise this finding with more reliability. Where necessary, instead of conducting interviews with coach-organisers I contacted them via email or met with them briefly in person. Where this correspondence was simply factual (not personal) in nature I have noted this correspondence under the formal references.

As the core of this case study's data was to come directly from skaters who identified with the saying 'roller derby changed my life', skater-interviews were, in a sense, more important to this research. There were several points that I wanted to cover in the skater interviews, and each interview was structured around those points. If it were worth exploring some topics in more detail, we did. Some interviews strayed considerably from the main points, but all interviews covered the main points. These main themes are listed below. Ethics approval was granted through Victoria University under memorandum HRETH 12/340 prior to the conduct of all research interviews.

Consistent with the ethics approval, all research interview data has been de-identified in the write-up of findings (chapter 4-6). This has meant not only removing references to names, leagues or personally identifying information, but the quotes have been detached from the individual skater-participants. That is, I have not used a pseudonym for each participant; the quotes are presented generically. The roller derby community is a relatively small one and even turns of phrase could potentially be pieced together to identify particular skaters. This approach – of disconnecting quotes from participants in the write-up – is also consistent with my overall methodology: to find common themes around flourishing and fulfilment, or the counters to these.

I *have* however counted references to particular themes and the number of skater-mentions of these themes in order to provide an overall sense of emphasis amongst participants. The themes for the interviews revolved around discussion of:

1. the skater's personal involvement in the sport;
2. what attracted the skater to the sport;
3. what the skater thought the saying 'roller derby changed my life' meant to them;
4. any life-changes the skater had experienced and how this related *to* the sport and its community (this was the substantial part of most interviews);

5. any follow up questions depending on responses to the above; and
6. whether the skater's views of roller derby had changed.

In total, I conducted 23 semi-structured and in-depth interviews (including repeat interviews and coach-organisers). Most interviews lasted approximately an hour. Two of the skater interviews were shorter, going for around 30 minutes. Two interviews went on for significantly more than one hour. The four follow-up interviews provided discussion of a depth of experience that could come only from more experienced skaters. They had all been involved in the sport for more than five years. Of the 16 skaters interviewed:

- six had been a member of Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL) in Preston;
- five had been a member of Northside Rollers (NSR) in Reservoir;
- seven had been a member of at least one of South Sea Roller Derby (SSRD) in Frankston, Westside Derby Dolls (WSDD) in West Footscray, Geelong Roller Derby League (GRDL) and Ballarat Roller Derby League (BRDL); and
- several skaters had been a member of more than one league, a not uncommon practice at the time.

Altogether, six leagues were approached, and I interviewed at least one person from each of the six leagues. All the leagues were approachable and supportive of the research idea. However, it was somewhat difficult to contact members directly where they were in the leagues outside of the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne (beyond VRDL and NSR). This is partly because most of my own contacts were located in the inner northern suburbs, either as a member of the VRDL myself or due to having close friends in NSR. It was also easier to follow up and arrange interviews with potential participants from these inner northern leagues. I turned down several members from VRDL and NSR in order to ensure a better spread among my skater participants across regional leagues.

Most of the participants identified as same-sex attracted in some way at the time of the interviews. For some, this had been a new part of their sexuality only explored after participating in the sport. This is publicly quite a common story and possibly represents a common experience. Amongst the participants, four also identified as transgender, although not all openly at the time of the interviews. The generosity of the transgender participants is deeply appreciated, and their contributions added significant depth to this thesis's exploration of experiences of roller derby in general and, in particular, of femininity and gender.

Important note: skewed towards whiteness

While an attempt was made to find a diversity of participants, diversity is not represented across all demographic categories. The skater participants represent diversity in terms of sexuality and somewhat in terms of being transgender or gender non-conforming (although not always). Most participants were white, and this reflects a number of problems: that the sport itself is also very white; and that women of colour are possibly less likely to put their hand up to participate in a research project run by a white woman and with the focus of which is how 'roller derby changed my life'. It also the nature of my own roller derby networks, which were, at the time of this research, biased in favour of white participants. This has, undoubtedly, skewed my data. More importantly, this has meant that, from a social justice and equality perspective, I have unconsciously allowed the de-prioritisation of voices of people of colour.

It is also important to recognise, however, that women of colour have played an important part in both the sport's contemporary formation and its ongoing reckoning with racism and whiteness. This recently became an issue in one of the leagues in Melbourne, a league from which I had drawn participants. The issues are discussed in more detail in chapters 6 and 7, the latter reflecting on the consequences for emancipatory theory. One immediately important call came out of discussions within the sport. Two women of colour pointed out that, if the sport is to be radical at all, then it needs to be transformative not only for white women but for women of colour as well. This is a powerful and deeply sobering point to be made, and it provides a necessary addition to this thesis. I regret that it took until this debate became public (2017) for me to approach two of the main women advocating the elimination of racism in the sport in Melbourne. Quite understandably, they were not available for interview. It is our job as

researchers to make our own biases conscious so that they can be reduced and so that further research can begin to redress these biases (Anderson, 2006; also Ratna and Samie, 2017).

Methods: critical analysis of the interviews

As indicated in the preceding sections of this thesis, I am interested in the following. By conducting and reading the interviews, I sought to tease out:

1. the practices that moved towards freedom and self-fulfilment and away from alienation;
2. the historical and cultural location of these practices and the impact of location on practices;
3. the potential these practices might have for deeper social change;
4. the contradictions that exist between (re)incorporation into oppressive systems and action towards emancipatory change;
5. the connections between our current social relations and personal transformation; and
6. the relationship between countering ideology and resistance to the oppressive conditions ideology stems from.

Analysis of the interviews took several rounds of reading and coding using *NVivo software*. In the first read-through of interviews, I looked for major groupings of themes. From this first round of reading, and in light of my interests in particular theoretical concepts, I broke the content of the interviews into three main groupings:

1. Personal highs and lows in the sport;
2. The community and culture surrounding the sport;
3. The physical experiences of the sport.

These high-level groupings led, in part, to the major chapters in this thesis: the body and physical practices; the alternative subculture; and experiences of freedom and flourishing. I then became interested in the contrasting experiences of either fulfilment and flourishing or forms of exclusion and difficulties within the sport. I added two more

major groupings which also intersected with the three above: challenges for the sport and experiences of fulfilment and flourishing.

As was expected, most of the interviews contained detailed stories about experiences of fulfilment, joy and flourishing. All skater participants identified with the saying ‘roller derby changed my life’. Although skaters were invited to volunteer for interviews about negative life changes, almost all participants had had overwhelmingly positive experiences. This meant that, as researcher, I could focus on what were the conditions that allowed for mutual flourishing. I do discuss some of the limits to this in the later chapters. I will now provide an overall summary of the representation of personal experiences of change and flourishing. I provide a breakdown of the analysis for the physical practices of the sport and its subculture in chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

For research participants the following were the most commonly mentioned themes in the interviews.

Table 3.1 Personal highs and lows in roller derby

Type	Theme	Skaters	Mentions
Highs	Fun	10	32
Highs	Focus	12	32
Highs	Self-pride	14	46
Lows	Health / Injury	13	81
Highs	Hard work	16	97
Highs	Skills	15	108

Interestingly, the most common theme around personal fulfilment or ‘high’ was around skill development and participating in something that is hard work. This contrasts significantly with our usual experiences of ‘hard work’ and hints at the potential for our labour to be enjoyed when directed at activities we choose to participate in. The reference to the ‘low’ of having experienced a health issue or injury is significant and is discussed in more detail in both chapters 4 and 6.

For research participants, the following were the most commonly mentioned themes around self-fulfilment and flourishing.

Table 3.2 Common themes around fulfilment and flourishing

Self-fulfilment	Skaters	Mentions
Intimate relationships	8	32
New options	9	36
Freedom	8	43
Gender transition	4	44
Coming out	11	56
Being me	13	62
Body pride	12	75
New attitude	14	86

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6, the language around the sense of freedom and 'finding myself' is not mild. For the skaters for whom roller derby led to changes, these changes were profound: not least of all for those who were gender transitioning. All four of the transgender participants talked considerably about how their participation in roller derby was closely connected to their experience of transition. Somewhat similarly, experiences of coming out as being transgender or same-sex attracted were a noticeable part of the positive experiences of those participating in roller derby. This indicates something else about the conditions of emancipatory praxis.

There is a real sense of self-determination in the voices of the skaters. A combination of factors contributes to this self-determination. This is detailed in the following three chapters: on the body and the physicality of the sport; on the community and alternative subculture; and finally, on the conditions that contribute to fulfilment and flourishing.

Now I conclude this lengthy discussion of methodology, methods and case study research. This thesis has moved from a review of important concepts (in chapter 2) to the collection of data on radical practices and will move on to re-thinking the original concepts in light of this data. I take the view that the real, embodied and particular experiences of life and knowledge-making are the real source of emancipatory epistemology. This cannot be an armchair exercise, as Sayer (2011: 93) notes in a critique of Habermas' version of critical theory:

> Note also how embodied practical skills, which enable [people] to intervene in the flow of events and make things happen, are pushed into

> the background in Habermas's analysis of action. Praxis is presented as talk–in fact, talk on the model of the academic seminar, not as doing anything in the everyday sense... Of course, talk is a kind of action, but not all action is talk. If we think about actions involving cooperation, whether it be cooking a meal together or organizing a political campaign, people need to do more than talk–they need to be competent, socially skilled actors, able to do complex things and take responsibility for their actions, that is, exercise their practical sense, reason and wisdom… As Bourdieu notes in his angry critique of Habermas, the reduction of praxis to discourse is not only a misrepresentation of action, but functions to preserve the elevation of the leisured life of contemplation and discussion above embodied practice (Bourdieu, 2000).

Moreover, recalling Marx's *Letters to Arnold Ruge* (1843a (1844)), the point is not to impose – from above or outside – ideas about what people should be fighting for. It is to understand and demonstrate what they *are already fighting for* and to aid the development of that tendency towards freedom and flourishing. I will come back to these themes in the concluding chapter 7.

Chapter Four

Results: Real, Strong, Athletic

I think it's partly the fact that you're getting regular exercise. The team aspect: so being part of a team, part of something, the team sport, I guess. The greater community as well… Also it's a contact sport so there's something very primal. It's ritualised combat, which we don't do a lot of, apart from in sport or the medieval re-enactments… Children play-fighting as well: that sort of thing.

I think it's really important, because people have that broad spectrum of emotions and the desire to fight, I guess… So, yeah, it's ritualised combat, which I think harks into something really primal, which I think is probably a great anti-depressant for a lot of people.

Introduction

There seems to be a general pattern in the experience that many skaters go through in participating in roller derby. It runs approximately as follows:

1. Skaters witness a bout or have watched *Whip It* (2009) or one of the many documentaries that now exist about roller derby. They might otherwise have heard about roller derby through a friend. They are initially attracted to the combination of women being free to be aggressive and also to be feminine and the way that they dress without shame. They are also attracted to the sport being proudly led by women and the alternative and inclusive nature of roller derby, with all its punk, rockabilly, queer and even burlesque influences. They want to be a part of *that*, whatever *that* means. There is a

sense of freedom expressed by roller derby skaters that is highly attractive and draws feminised people into playing the sport.

2. Once having joined there begins a series of ‘oh fuck I’ve joined a sport’ moments. They realise very quickly that what looks relatively easy from a spectator’s perspective is really very difficult. Skaters talk about how playing a contact sport on roller skates is a ‘great leveller’ and how often they fall over and have to get back up again. Very early on in training, falling and recovering becomes a metaphor for living life.
3. If they continue to go to training and are not put off by this difficulty, by injury, by the time required to learn skills or by the fear, then skaters begin to have a series of moments of self-realisation. Not only can they now do what they thought was impossible, but they now know something more about what is involved in learning new, difficult skills. They therefore know more about breaking future barriers. There seem to be some early breakthrough moments of learning that skaters have to pass through in order to stay. Those early moments are liberating. Skaters say: ‘I can do it’; ‘I can do what I thought I would never do’.
4. Later they experience growing sense of strength, physical power and competency, not only at the basic and individual level but now on a track, collaborating with or competing against other skaters. When it comes, it is about pulling all the complex pieces together:
    a. a well-trained and fit body;
    b. being highly skilled in each action;
    c. learning to skate with teammates so that movements are combined and become like second nature; and
    d. being able to achieve all of this in the context of a competitive team sport within a particular rule set and on wheels.

A competent roller derby skater is one who is very much in control of her wheels, her body and her movements while simultaneously being sharply aware of the environment around her: her teammates, the other team, the obstacles on and around a track and the goal of the game, to score points. The sport is difficult because points are

not scored with objects, e.g. ball, bat, goal frame, ring. The goal-scoring 'object', rather, is an actual skater, and there are two of them on the track: one for each team. Anyone trying to block the opposition point scorer has simultaneously to contend with needing to assist their own. Metaphorically, the point scorer, or jammer, is a human ball. One you need to play offensively for; the other you need to play defensively against. This is the origin of the saying that roller derby is both offensive and defensive at the same time. It is because it has two, point-scoring objects on a track – point-scoring objects who are thinking, moving, attacking human beings.

To be able to overcome all of this is to know that you are able to overcome some difficult challenges. Through training, sometimes for a year or more before competing, you are given a whole set of 'tools for your toolbox' – as many in roller derby describe the new skills. These skills can often be generalised or transferrable to other areas of life. Even more than this, you now know that, with the right information and with practice, you are able to overcome seemingly impossible challenges by learning new skills.

The themes above are discussed in detail in the remaining chapters of the thesis. This and the next two chapters give voice to the skaters' experiences.

A new relationship with the body

The general patterns or themes in the experience that many skaters have spoken of relate to learning a new kind of relationship with the body. The body becomes something you can connect with and do things with that you never thought you could. A skating coach of 30 years, who describes below why she coaches and why she thinks roller derby is important to women, encapsulates this new kind of relationship:

> *Nothing is better than when you see someone you know is struggling – because this is how women think – if we can't do something, it's because there is something wrong with us. If... you can't do a physical thing like a sport and you're struggling with it, you think you can't do it because there's something wrong with you. That's our first go-to. You think I can't do it because I'm too weak, too short, I'm too tall, I'm too fat – that's a common one – I've never been good at sports, whatever. You have your favourite insecurity go-to, and because you can't turnaround*

on your skates, you just insert your favourite insecurity and then you get stuck. Other people try to tell you different, but you just – that's your go-to. That's women. We've been taught basically that.

You have these insecurities: you can't do something, that's it. So, when I teach people and I can see it on their face, I know that they're struggling, I know what the thought is inside their head. So, if I can give them exact technical steps to complete the task and then they do it, and it works, and I see that switch off in their brain that goes from 'buh' to 'I can totally do it'. 'Oh my God. I can do it'. It's that moment, that look on their face where you know that it's that moment that will push them way past and way forward. It's not someone telling them they can do it. Now they know they can do it; from inside they know.

So, it could be something as little as being able to turn around properly on your skates, or jump, or do something they previously could not do. It gives them strength, because now they know 'I can do it' because I have the tools, and someone has taught me the direction on how to do it.

Moreover, as one skater described the process of learning to learn:

Interviewee: ...so because I couldn't… surge. I would just like whack into the side of someone and land on my arse...
Facilitator: Yeah, and have no control.
Interviewee: ...and have no control and not be able to hit people in the right place. So learning how to C-curve or being able to C-curve, realising that the reason why I couldn't get my legs to do that was because I had weak VMO muscles, I needed a stronger butt and stronger muscles on the inside of my legs. Okay, alright, it's not because I'm a terrible human being that my legs are 'broken' and I'm never going to be able to do this... There's nothing intrinsically wrong with me… and I think that that's a really powerful lesson that I'm not entirely sure that a lot of people entirely get. Sometimes I think that people get that, but other times I think there are a lot of skaters who really struggle with the

> *idea that it isn't them. They're not the reason. There isn't anything broken. There isn't anything wrong. There's nothing deficient just because you can't do something. It's just because you have to do it 600,000 times.*

In other words, what immediately appears as the great freedom in roller derby – women becoming physically strong and able both to give and take hits – is not the only source of freedom. While women overcoming years of socialisation and constraint, which enforces the idea that women cannot be strong and physically powerful, is a really important part of roller derby, it is not the only important part. The development of a large collection of skills, learnt through training in a very complex sport, is as equally important. This section discusses both.

It is possible that this is not only the case in roller derby but in any contact sport. The greatest test of your trained ability in the skills of your sport – your ability to perform those skills with precision – is to go up against another who has the same set of skills and who is attempting to apply them to you. Your timing, your precision, your ability to perform under pressure and with a constantly moving and changing environment, which includes standing on wheels, is most sharply tested on the track with other skaters who are also trying to stop and interrupt you. This is possibly why many skaters describe scrimmage – the practice of bouts, a bit like sparring – as their favourite part of the sport.

The constant refrain of 'what the fuck just happened?' is the neat summary of this experience. It said most often when skaters are first learning to scrimmage then, to a lesser extent, when first bouting. It is also said when a team is first playing a team that is in advance of its skill set. Roller derby is an extremely complex sport. 'Overcoming the chaos' on track is one of the main goals. Overcoming chaos, fear and the sense of 'this is not possible' is also an act of liberation and self-actualisation. It is the ability to overcome and still perform well that, as CLR James (1944) argued, shows that the human has an ability to change circumstance.

One jammer at internationally competitive level describes her joy at this process. A number of the top skaters among my interview participants did. The jammer, when asked how she wants to be helped on the track, asks her teammates to:

> *Give me chaos! I want chaos. I skate better in the chaos. That's when I find the gap.*

So, the entirety of roller derby is about developing these skills. Through this, it is about developing power. While strength and power can sometimes make up for lack of skill, skill will always be a more powerful tool in a competitive environment. If you cannot wield your body well, then all that strength and power is wasted.

Not your standard women's sport

Whether by watching the film *Whip It* (2009), or by watching a live game for the first time, most women participants had been spectators before contemplating playing. Roller derby is not the kind of sport that is shown on the weekly news, or if it is, it is only very rarely. Most people have to search for the sport to find it. Most participants only watched a game because a friend, or someone they knew, was playing. It is still a niche sport.

The first and most obvious appearance to note is that roller derby is not your standard women's sport. In fact, it is not a standard sport at all. It primarily involves women (already alternative), on roller skates, 'hitting bitches' (a common refrain). They are skating in uniforms that are very often altered to fit with their personas. The derby persona is an exaggerated form of 'character' or personality, and in this sport is made official through the roller derby skater name. Skaters mostly skate under this name. The name is usually a play on a famous name or term, which is usually aggressive and sometimes a play on sexualisation. Skaters play up their personas on the track, in a way that not only contributes to the competitive side of the game but creates a space for freedom of expression: to be someone you have always wanted to be. This starts to show both on and off the track. There is 'just being something about how skaters hold themselves'. A roller derby skater walks and skates with a visible confidence not usually seen among women or feminised people.

The celebration of 'violence' or women's aggression is a part of the sport. This has continued from its early days, although it has changed form in its different iterations. It is also different depending on the league and the level of competition. It is

still common for comperes to play up the ‘violence’, exaggerating or drawing attention to roller derby names and exaggerating or drawing attention to good hits and falls. This is part of the spectacle of roller derby. Even a small hip check, well timed and well directed, can throw a skater flying, sometimes into the adoring audience on the ‘suicide line’. The make-up skaters wear often highlights or exaggerates the fierceness. Bruises are carried with pride. Visually, there is a stark contrast between, and play with, various forms of femininity and ‘violence’. This is all part of the performance: the sport is aggressive and tough because it is a contact sport, but it is not violent in ways that other contacts sports can be. Skater safety is always high in priority for both rule-setting and refereeing.

> *[A friend] told me about the sport, and it was a mixture of violence, drinking and athleticism [laughs]. Which are three things that I like to do, and it was a lot of women... I had done construction work for a living. I guess people would classify me as a tomboy. So, pretty much... [I] didn’t have a lot of female friends. It was interesting to me to go and be able to socialise with women in that way.*

The combination of radical femininities and aggression is a major drawcard for very many skaters. Interviewees stated several reasons for this. The most obvious reason was that it showed how strong and powerful – and both aggressive and defensive – that women can be, while ‘still being a woman’. This means that the sport attracts many women who have not played sport before, precisely because they can still ‘dress up’, wear make-up and ‘be feminine’ while playing a sport. Skaters are able to alter their uniforms (in most cases) to fit with what they would like to wear and, even better, by doing so they can create their persona. Alternatively, as one skater described it, the sport is very clearly led by and for women and feminised people. Everyone is free to express themselves as they like.

The display of aggression is understood as a display of feminine power, a particular form of aggression. Many of the skaters feel uncomfortable using the word violence (see below). Some feel uncomfortable using the word aggression, while recognising there are not many alternative words for the ability to express power and anger in a way that is not about disempowering another. The sport, like other grassroots-

run sport, is played by rules that all participants sign up to and agree to, and the aim is to score points, not to destroy an opponent. Therefore, the experience of aggression is outward, but productive – about competing against each other for space on the track and to pass around other bodies – rather than destructive – to impair the physical being of another. Many skaters feel simultaneously uncomfortable and empowered by the talk of aggression on the track. Off the track, our experiences as women and feminised people have often been of destructive violence and aggression, towards us and our bodies. Witnessing the display of women being physically powerful and productively aggressive is often a moment of significant realisation: that women can fight back, can take space, make space and push back. We can also do this in ways that are respectful and not destructive of each other.

The combined display of femininity and aggression then is also about power: power to be who we want to be, in any body, dressed in any way we wish. It is the power to hit hard in short shorts or tights *and* with large thighs. It is the power to choose whether to play with, rage against or mock dominant femininity. It is the power to do this all the while playing a demanding contact sport well.

Another reason that the combination of femininity and aggression is an attraction is that the sport is played hard and played well in a sporting context not dominated by men. Women are the primary leaders of roller derby. Women dominate the play of roller derby. The sport is controlled primarily by women.

Moreover, the sport enables a diversity of expressions of femininity. Popular media primarily present women of a particular kind. Often, women who step outside of this mainstream presentation of how women should be are ridiculed and punished. We need look no further than sport for this. An athlete who is openly same-sex attracted (e.g. tennis player Amélie Mauresmo) or a woman with an athletic build who does not present or perform her femininity in a particular way (e.g. either of the Williams sisters (Ifekwunigwe, 2009)) will often be treated badly by media. They will be shamed or shown as an example of how not to be feminine, how not to be a woman. Roller derby – like its influential subcultures of punk, riot girrl, rockabilly, circus, burlesque, grunge, kink, queers, feminism and activism – rejects these constraints on femininity. It openly rejects mainstream femininity outright and then plays with femininity: to make fun of, critique, sometimes play to ironically, sometimes not. It complicates femininity and, in the process, diversifies its expression, all the while celebrating female aggression.

Diversities of femininity

One skater, whose first bout was the (once) annual *Battle on the Bent Track* – an all-queer national tournament – described some of her experience, and from the perspective of being transgender:

> *There were a lot of different women there. It wasn't all of a type. I found that the fact that it was a queer bout for some reason said 'this is a group of women who are not necessarily feeling they're constrained by the expectations of the culture around them'... they were skating without really worrying that much about what they looked like. They were more focussed on what they were doing. It was at that point when I saw the potential for a community that would give me a number of different ways in which I could explore my own femininity, which at that point was still really embryonic.*
>
> *I was still working out who the hell I was, very much so. So there was that opportunity to go in any one of a number of different directions, surrounded by people who probably weren't going to give me grief for it. It seemed like a much less judgemental community than many that I had seen.*

For this transgender skater, in the early stages of openly exploring her womanhood, the sight of women expressing a whole range of femininities, and even sexualities, was ideologically liberating. It completely opened up the possibilities for her, for what kind of woman she could be. This experience is very similar to the descriptions by many of the skater participants interviewed for this research, whether transgender or cisgender. One of the first and main attractions of roller derby is its expression of a diversity of femininities. The research conducted by Nancy Finley (2010) also confirms this (see also Carlson, 2010; Beaver, 2014). The experience of witnessing this display of female aggression is not unique to Melbourne or Australia. Zach Dundas (2010) also remarked on the sport's full-contact nature after watching roller derby in the early days of its rebirth in the US.

The absence of this kind of diversity in media presentations of women or, rather, the absence of true representations of how women actually are, creates the context in which the performance of roller derby becomes so radical. Under the slogan of 'by the skater, for the skater' – a slogan inspired by the politics of riot girrl and its emphasis on women deciding on their own representations – the sport becomes more than a contact sport for women. It is a sport that women are also free to perform as they like, as long as it is within the rules. When it comes to dress, the rules are deliberately flexible. There is no guideline on skirt length (as e.g. in netball). Most jewellery is allowed, and the display of tattoos is not only allowed but encouraged. Team uniform standards are very flexibly interpreted and are enforced commonly via team agreement and very rarely through strict game-wide rules. Again, this is deliberate. Resisting external constraints on what women wear is conscious, whether this means rejecting claims that fishnets and make-up are not suitable for sport or that athletes must embody a particular, male-gaze-focussed, type of feminine or sexy.

This attitude to women, our bodies, our clothes, our social and physical activities, should not be radical. However, it most certainly is. The entire management and performance of a bout is to play to this radical rejection of the constraints of patriarchal femininity. This does not mean that the feminine, and even the sexual, do not come into a bout. Some feminists have commented on this (e.g. Razer, 2014), arguing that roller derby is not in fact radical because it is still playing to the male gaze. What they confuse, however, is that it is not roller derby alone that plays to the male gaze. All women's sport does (see the multiple case studies of this in Hargreaves, 1994), as do all public cultural activities. What roller derby does is *de-centre the male gaze*. Roller derby does not ask women either to reject the male gaze altogether or to conform to it. Instead, roller derby simply asks that women dress and perform how they like. Further – and this is the radical element – roller derby provides a very radical set of examples of how this plays out. The result is that even when skaters wear fishnets and hot pants, they do so with holes in tights and bruises on skin proudly displayed. Make-up is worn heavy, and it is combined with aggressive flourishes. There is an exaggeration of feminine features or a playing against them. The feminine is held up to scrutiny and warped. The overall theme is one of 'it does not matter what kind of woman I am, as I am tough and strong and I can play mean' (e.g. Carlson, 2010; Finley, 2010; Beaver, 2014). One skater describes watching their first game:

> *Absolutely mesmerised. I loved the spectacle as well as the athleticism (if I can pronounce it correctly). I loved that it was not afraid to be girly and it wasn't afraid to be rough and there were no apologies made for either. Some of that I feel has changed over the years as derby has grown in certain directions, and I feel that possibly I've grown in different directions, and that's neither good nor bad, it is what it is. That was definitely something that drew me to roller derby, and it's something that I still feel is very fundamental to the character of the sport.*
>
> *Facilitator: Had you been involved in any other sport?*
> *Interviewee: No. Not since primary school.*
> *Facilitator: So it wasn't so much the sport that attracted you?*
> *Interviewee: No, not the sport at all. Absolutely not the sport. I had no desire to play any kind of sport at all.*

The joys and devastation of physical sport

When I joined roller derby I was a very rare individual: someone who had not only played sport before but had competed at local, state and national level. I had participated in many types of sport – netball, gymnastics, boxing, indoor soccer and also physical activities like circus and dance – and, at the time, was already training regularly by going to the gym, running and taking boxing classes three times a week. I was recruited fairly quickly onto the just-forming Fitness Committee for the VRDL at the time. Roller derby was still a new sport in Australia in 2009 only just developing the kinds of attention to fitness and strength that other competitive sports take for granted.

I was not rare in being well into my thirties. This also reflected the fact that roller derby is not like other sports. For a vast number of women, sport is something that is confined to school and, even then, is not undertaken very enthusiastically. Roller derby not only breaks that mould, it smashes into a completely new model: women signing up in their hundreds to play a very difficult sport, on wheels: a team contact sport not shy of being tough, athletic *and* aggressive. At the time that I joined, the great majority of participants were in their late twenties and early thirties. Most had not played a competitive sport on a regular basis – and definitely not a contact sport. Most were not participating in any form of regular physical activity at all.

As one of the founders of the Fitness Committee, I was asked by coaches to run fitness sessions at our training. One of the tasks was to educate new members about the importance of becoming fit in order to be able to play roller derby. *Kittie von Krusher* (also a certified personal trainer at the time) and I wrote up an introductory pamphlet about looking after the body in roller derby, with tips on good form and how to train at home. Many skaters do not have the money to attend additional training at a gym. They needed to develop a practice of 'off-skates training' training considering the physically demanding nature of the sport. I took to asking *Fresh Meat* groups – the new recruits to roller derby – how often they were training at the time they joined. Every time well over half, and generally about two-thirds, were not training regularly in anything until joining roller derby. Nor had they trained in the last few years. Many, maybe around one-third, had never regularly played a sport, not even a non-contact one on a recreational basis. They were about to get a bit of a shock about what playing such a sport would mean. Mostly this was a joyful and liberating shock.

Sometimes – I would argue too often – this was not a joyful shock but an injurious one. Many would not make it through *Fresh Meat* without injury, at least in those early days of 2007-2010. Often this injury would be serious and require urgent medical care. Early training always first involved learning to skate and to stop and fall well. Yet not all bodies were able to cope even with the challenges of these initial tasks. While the intention of roller derby organisers was always safety first, the knowledge of sport and the body among coaches was not always at a level commensurate with being able to fulfil this aim in practice. One aspect of the problem involves the pressure to skate through injuries. Another involves the experiences of those whose injuries meant that they could not skate.

> *So you marginalise yourself (after injury), it's not the league that does it to you. I started using words like fat and broken to describe myself as I put on 20 kilograms and lost all my fitness, and it does impact on your body image. In the same way that you grew to love your body because it could do all the things, you then find that your body can't do all the things anymore and you mourn that loss [cries]. I think that was part of mourning derby, and mourning is the right word. I've had only a couple of losses in my life that I would rank as highly as losing derby, and they're ridiculous ones like breaking up with my wife.*

> *… you remove yourself because you can't do the things that everybody else does anymore… I found a lot of empathy, particularly from other skaters who had had an injury and recovered. The thing that really hurts is the whole 'never, ever again' aspect. They said, what do you mean? I said, well I can't come back, I'll never skate again. The look of horror [cries] on their faces was striking. Because for a moment you could see them trying to visualise that happening to them and just not even wanting to deal with that.*
>
> *Possibly there needs to be more spoken about with regards to injury.*

As one coach-organiser described it:

> *I have heard people say 'I thought this was a sport for people who don't play sports', …[but] I do not see it that way. It's a sport, and it's one of the highest risk sports for injuries. So people who don't take it seriously, I worry about them. We have the highest rates of (particular) spinal fractures, AC separation, shoulder dislocations. We have a lot of fractured bones. So, I take it very seriously, and I take the training very seriously, and I describe it to people as such.*

I will talk about this side of roller derby – the difficulties around the sport's handling of injury – in chapter 6. It is important to acknowledge where intentions were not, and are not, fulfilled. A truly empowering and fulfilling practice needs to note and respect its limits in order to break through them. Roller derby, like any other social group, social movement or cultural practice, makes mistakes. Honest reflection on the mistakes – intentional or unintentional – are, to borrow a critical realist term, 'the growing point of a practice' (Collier, 1994: 15).

Power in supportive learning

Now we can return to the liberating and empowering practices of roller derby, however.

> *It was terrifying because I went in there thinking it was easy... because I had skated when I was a kid – for about three or four years when I was really young I did quad-figure-skating – I thought it would be like riding a bike. Once you start it's fine, and it would always stay with you… Then [I] put these horrific skates on that where about two sizes too big for me and… then tried to get up and just fell... and fell, and fell, and realised that it wasn't going to be as just instantly easy as I assumed it was.*
>
> *By the end of it, it was okay, but that first training session was terrifying… It was terrifying but it was really exhilarating. Like I said, I had found somewhere that I felt like I fit and that was cool. So, as much as it was terrifying, it was also really sort of exhilarating, and for me it sort of cemented the decision that I made to go and find something that was for me because that's exactly what I found. I found exactly the right thing for me at the right time in my life.*
>
> *I think I had a real misconception of what – as much as I had seen bouts and I thought I knew – what I was getting myself into. I didn't realise how structured and meticulous (the league) are about their levels and their training. I think I was expecting it to just be kind of 'rough, tough, whatever goes, goes' sort of situation. I think a lot of people think that, that you go straight into scrimmage and you just figure it out. It's not like that! There's a lot of fitness and skill focus before you even think about a bout, which I didn't know.*

A constant from the interviews concerned the collective learning process: all learning together, in a supportive environment, with the fact of learning on roller skates being a great leveller:

> *...everybody starts being bad at skating, you know. Because I never did basketball or anything like that… I wasn't about to join a sporting club [in which] everybody was good at [playing] already. Whereas skating, it's kind of, obviously, there are some people that are really good, but most people kind of start on a par with each other.*

Nevertheless, some pick it up quicker than others do and find their physical place quite quickly:

> *Facilitator: The post* Whip It *intake?*
>
> *Interviewee: Yeah, exactly, well it was 2010. But it still was, a lot of people were still discovering* Whip It *and… the learn to skate classes had just finished. So, a lot of people had just done those classes and gone straight into… roller derby. Like it was just, it was just a big kind of year for intakes in derby and my first. I could barely cross over, but I picked it up fast. I think I got, kind of, above that. I was never one of those 'I can't even skate around the track for a whole session'. By the end, I was doing a cross over on my first session.*
>
> *This is funny, because I have played sports my whole life but been really bad at all of them [laughs]. I was in every team sport imaginable, and I had to try really hard just to be mediocre, but roller derby came pretty easily… I think I had the highest score in my test for my boot camp. The last boot camp, I even got higher than most of the guys who went on to ref, which was exciting. So, yeah, it was good.*
>
> *Facilitator: What was it like, rocking up to that first boot camp?*
>
> *Interviewee: You just didn't even know what you were in for, and I was one of those that would tell everyone, I'm going to do roller derby. What's that? Girls in fishnets hitting each other. Like, that was what it was about, and then you sweat and you burn your skin off doing baseball slides, because it's actually not practical to wear fishnets on the rink and [laughs]. I had seen a bout before that, so I had already seen it and known that's what I want to do, and it was worth it: all of the work. That's what I want it to be.*

Some skaters discussed what attracted them to the sport as well. This often wasn't the sport itself, but the culture around the sport.

> *Wow, I think the type of people it attracts is probably what makes it so life changing. For the very reason that you don't know what you are getting into. You think you're getting into it just for a bit of fun and silliness and you don't realise how much hard work it is, and… wouldn't have thought of yourself as someone that could put in that much hard work and achieve those things. Because that wasn't what you were signing up for, when you signed up for it. So, after you do that, you look back and go: Wow! I just did that!*
>
> *It attracts people on the fringes of society that… never felt like they could have a sport, that they would be accepted, and they go 'this is a place where I can be accepted'. So, it's just this wonderful group of people that come to it, so many people with no athletic background whatsoever, and that's funny because that's always a clash… [between] those that have always been athletes and the people who haven't. They just want different things out of it.*
>
> Facilitator: So, yeah, it attracts people that have probably never played sport before. It tricks them into playing the sport?
>
> *Interviewee: It does, and then people who kind of realise what they're getting into before they get into it, who are just athletic and just want that new challenge. Like you get speed skaters and hockey skaters who are like 'oh, this is where I can put my skills to use'. I find the people that I tend to gravitate towards are the people that have joined and that want to give it their all. So, I like that. It's a wide mix of people. Especially now it's so big. It's really hard to generalise how it changes everyone's life, but I think that is moderately universal for a lot of people. Or, at least, it was in 2010, in the year that I joined.*

> *It was really hard! It isn't an easy sport to get into, because I hadn't skated in years and I didn't know anything. It was much, much harder than I thought it would be. But then because I'm one of those people that doesn't like to be bad at stuff, I pushed myself really, really hard to get a lot better [laughs].*

Learning to pull down, to go around, to see through and even to smash barriers are skills, like any other, that require practice. This insight has more profound implications, which I will now foreshadow and discuss in chapters 6 and 7.

Connecting with the body in action

As discussed in chapter 2, the limits of social relations and social structures are also ideologically defended, even exaggerated, and these barriers are internalised deep within the subject (see also: Lawson, 1997: 157-73; Collier, 1994: chapter 5; Bhaskar, 1991: 145-61, 1986: 129-36). Once internalised, they are also personally enforced and self-limiting; they are also assumed. This is where all of the materially experienced barriers coincide with ideological 'explanations' of the 'rational' and 'unchanging' nature of these barriers. The ideological combines powerfully with our own internal psychology about our own ability to push back at, and sometimes break through, these barriers. As was described in chapter 2, these barriers become a part of the self: they become self-limiting, self-blaming and, sometimes, even self-created. The oppressive and unequal social powers become a part of the self.

Importantly though, this oppressive power over the self can be shifted. It can often be broken apart by the very contradictions contained within these social systems and, therefore, within our subjectivity. We are *both* the powerful individual subject and the subjugated powerless self (Wayne, 2003). Sometimes these subjects collide internally. This can generate moments of clarity: revealing where the social source of this power over the self is located. That internalised power is, as it were, externalised, breaking open possibilities inside the self to change.

Sometimes limits can be shown to be entirely ideological: where the untruths of 'common knowledge', or 'counter-phenomenality' (Collier, 1994: 6-7) are exposed. Some of these moments, while realised in thought, are *first* experienced through

material existence. Such moments can be captured in simple realisations that ‘actually I can and did do this activity that I have always been told I couldn’t’. Alternatively, they can take on a deeper form: ‘I’ve always been told I could do this if I just tried, but there are real social barriers that exist that prevent me from doing this and they exist outside of myself’.

Roller derby, like other radical physical activities that are located on the edges of what is possible, or what we are told is possible, provides a genuinely interesting case study of how a physical activity can provide a source and catalyst for these moments of realisation. These moments can provide a highly important fracture in ideological barriers that have been internalised. Some of these moments occur for roller derby skaters when first spectating the sport. For many skaters they occur *during* early training, when experiencing all the changes that occur to their competence in moving around on wheels – gaining control *with* their bodies, in action – and in developing strength, physical power and fitness.

> *It requires a kind of a physicality that I’d never had to engage with before… The only analogy I have for it was cycling… I was a very enthusiastic cyclist up to, and including, when I was doing derby. So, as with cycling, I found that derby was one of the very few things that made me like my body, because I could be muscular and deft and graceful and I would get positive feedback for that.*

One skater described how she decided to concentrate intensely on her training in the sport and began to see real changes:

> *My crossovers became textbook. I was stronger and more agile and fitter than I had ever been in my entire life. Suddenly, I found myself being able to do things like nearly get 30 laps in five minutes. Well, I’ve never been able to do that. What’s going on here? I went to every training session that I could. I went to the freshie white star trainings. I went to every scrimmage that they would let me be at. So I think there was probably about six months where I was doing a dedicated Pilates session*

> *once a week, at-home exercises every morning and probably spending somewhere between 10 to 14 hours at training sessions.*

Another, who started roller derby significantly less fit, acknowledged that:

> *It was tough, it was physically challenging. I weighed like 115 kilos or something when I started roller derby as well. So, I wasn't physically fit. I was probably [in] the worst shape I'd been in in my life.*

Later she was able also to refer to achievement in taking on the physical challenge:

> *I hate endurance…We started a couple of minutes after everybody else because I had lacing issues, and we ended up only being eight laps shy of the target. I'm just lying in the centre of the track, like, dead [laughs]. Then the coach comes over and she goes, that's the most amount of laps I've seen you do since I joined the coaching and you should be really proud of what you've pulled out today.*

Another skater commented on the preference for being strong over being skinny. She has moved even beyond this statement. Now she asks, why would strong ever want to be skinny at all?

> *One of the skaters used to wear a t-shirt that says 'strong is the new skinny'. I really liked that for a while. Now I don't really like it because, I'm like, why would strong want to be skinny? Fuck… Having muscles means you're strong and being strong means you're good at derby.*

The moment arises when skaters realise that, before roller derby, they had never considered that *the person they are now* might have been possible:

> *On the one hand, yes, I can do things I never thought I'd be able to do: not just from a self-confidence point where, realistically, three years ago,*

> *two years ago, I could not have considered doing what I'm doing now. It was not ever a potential option, let's put it like that. So part of it's circumstance. Part of it's… I've been training and exercising more than I ever have in my life this last year.*

Most of the research participants also discussed in detail the level of practical skill required and learnt over time, again, echoing the words of coach-organisers. It also leads to a deep reconnection with the body.

> *What makes a good derby person? Lots and lots of patience. Flexibility. Knowledge. Passion. That there had to be that certain focus: you are doing it because you want to go fast or hit hard. You can't have that drive to do that, all that training, unless you have that love for the game. It doesn't have to be for a greater goal or anything, [but you] have to be able to see the split-second consequences as well as what you are trying to achieve in that game and over the season and over the long term.*

> *Everything takes me a really long time to learn. I don't have the natural grace that a lot of people have on skates. A lot of the skills for me are really hard-fought, but there is an extraordinary amount of value in that journey, the skill acquisition and of learning to be in a team, that I don't think exists in many other places. So, it probably took me close to two years to go from freshie to bouting skater. That's a really long time.*

> *I'd never had to consciously think about why I put my body in a particular position, or how I can move better if I do this, or I need to train this set of muscles to be more flexible or stronger or whatever. Engaging with the entire idea of how my body moves, how it can be trained, what its limitations and strengths are, is an extraordinary challenging process for me to engage in.*

There is an acceptance here that each skater comes into training from different levels; that each skater will have their own struggles and face their own barriers in

learning. This acceptance of others also leads to an acceptance of the self and our own limitations and struggles as well.

> *But by seeing other people come up behind me, helping them like that was, okay, alright, the issue is not that I am good or not, the issue is that I keep turning up and giving it a go. To give myself permission to do that was an incredibly powerful thing for me. So, my objective might not be to be a bouting skater for the rest of my life, but I think, for me…[helping] was such an incredibly powerful transformative realisation that, for other people, they might just go, 'yeah, of course, that's how it works, like whatever'. Sometimes it takes people a long time to figure things out.*

> *It's really exhilarating and it's – again being in an environment where that's supported and encouraged and people will hold you up at the end and then go 'you did really well today'. Vice versa, like I love being there. I love being in there and being able to tell people 'man that was really cool'. Then accepting that and being grateful for that, and [for] the constructive feedback and the constructive criticism that happens as well. Scrimmage, particularly, I think more. Training's great, but [in] scrimmage you get to get in there, and you put all those things that you were working really hard on into practice and get that feedback. The positives and the negatives. I think that's really cool. I love that. I really like that.*

> *I look at my skating performance. I went from 20 minutes on track in the first session to now doing two – doing full two hour sessions. They're some of my big wins.*

> *I was really nervous because, I'd probably not skated since I was like eight on in-lines. So, I went and bought a freshie kit straight away and was skating every single day that skate lab was open, and my boyfriend was like 'oh you spend all this money what if you don't even get in?' Because back then we did tryouts. So, I was just keen to learn as much as I could in as little time as possible. Which was kind of scary… I just wanted to push myself as hard as I could.*

> *Facilitator: How does it change lives?*
> *Interviewee: I guess because it helps people learn new things about themselves. There are people at derby who… are so nice, they don't think they can hit someone when they first start. But now that they've joined, they just want to hit people. I guess it's kind of empowering, and people get a lot of confidence being able to learn new things and be able to do them well. I guess that's something I learnt the hard way. Like, I didn't think I was progressing until I got onto bouting, but watching other people in lower levels –some of them, they nail stuff really early and they are like 'yes, I can do that' and feel so proud of themselves – and I guess it just helps you to push yourself in ways you've never pushed yourself before. I guess a lot of people kind of join derby as a mid-life crisis [laughs] and kind of just stick around because they love it... It just challenges people and pushes them in ways they probably never thought they would push themselves.*

All through the descriptions of learning and skill development skaters made reference to how significantly this experience of a physically demanding skillful sport transformed their understanding of their body and their relationship to the body. Skaters also mentioned how important this is for feminised bodies.

> *…You are socially defined by your body. You are positioned by other people according to what they see. So, when you get to do something irrespective of, or almost in defiance of, that positioning, it becomes a relief. So, I suppose there's a parallel between cis women no longer feeling like they have to be beautiful, they can be strong, they can be fast, they can revel in what their body does rather than what it looks like. For me, it was the ability to be in a space and do a thing regardless of what I looked like, and feel that it didn't matter.*

> *We skated and skated. We skated hard, and then we did the scrimmage, which is another hour of skating really hard. At the end of two hours of skating really hard, I didn't want to stop, I loved having a body that*

> *would do that [cries]. That was – it was – empowering. I'd never been that fit in my life, and it made me love my body. It actually really did.*
>
> *I got really depressed about how I looked when I was pregnant. I was like 'I'm so fat. What am I going to do with my life? I'm so ugly.' And then, after derby, I was like 'you know what, it doesn't matter what I look like because I'm still a machine on the track'.*
>
> *There's a really great cartoonist called Victoria Jamieson... and she has this one [comic] where it's like this woman looking in a mirror, and she's like 'look at all my fat, look at all my fat'. And then she's looking in the mirror, and she's got a roller derby girl, and she's like 'I'm a Hulk Smasher' [laughs].*

The contradictions of aggression

While the show of a bout is one of celebration of feminine violence and aggression, this same celebration does not necessarily extend down into the training experience of skaters in the same way. Many skaters have a difficulty with the word 'aggression', arguing that they do not think that the sport is 'that aggressive' and certainly not 'violent'. Many of the skaters interviewed had a troubled relationship with the word aggression and shied away from using it or, at least, they provided several qualifications attached to its use. Aggression for them is a reference to aggression *against* someone, a reference to abuse and violence. Skaters are quick to clarify that they do not mean aggression in this way.

The discussions in the interviews therefore highlighted both the limits of language and, equally, how gendered a concept like aggression is, with many women being so quick to distance themselves from this descriptor of anything they are doing. On the other hand, however, many participants do celebrate this side of the sport. Some, having played contact sports before, are entirely happy with the concept of aggression in sport. Here, I discuss what I feel the skaters are describing when they talk about finally finding a place to express their aggression.

Many skaters, almost unconsciously, talk with a sense of joy about finally being able to 'be aggressive' or 'express my aggression'. Talk of this is often combined with a

sense of finally being free to ‘express anger’, ‘get it all out’, ‘be boisterous’, ‘take the space’, ‘dominate the space’ and take back the power for the self. What is interesting, though, is how many women skaters follow statements like these with a quick retreat or clarification: ‘I don’t mean *violent’* or ‘actually I don’t like the word aggression. It’s not aggression.’

In one interview, we entered into a discussion about what word they may use instead of aggression, and the skater had to acknowledge that there was not another word that described the experience. The skater said that it was ‘like empowerment’ but that even that word does not express fully the power of roller derby. Empowerment, this skater thought, is an over-used term that does not really express the full extent of the power experienced on the track, including the ability to hit others and hit them well. This is not only acceptable, but it is encouraged as part of a demonstration of athletic skill.

There is an underlying ethics in the sport, which also goes to the heart of this question: ‘the no douchebag policy’. The policy is discussed verbally in training and in training circles. Comperes at bouts sometimes mention it. The rule, broadly speaking, describes the use of force up to and not beyond what is necessary. So, for example, a large, strong and experienced skater should avoid simply smashing into smaller, newer skaters, when a simple push or gentle hip check is necessary. It is smart game play as well, because it conserves energy. This is connected to the old sporting principle of playing the sport not the player. Skaters should avoid doing harm to anyone, in so far as it is not necessary. Someone jumping onto a track and simply pushing people around for the sake of it, or even showing off their power in a way which is destructive to others, is shunned or pulled into line. In fact, there are very heavy penalties for such destructive practices, including expulsion from the game or from bouting for whole seasons.

This is consistent too with a whole range of rules and practices in the sport. The first drills to be learnt and learnt well are falling and stopping drills. That is, first comes learning to fall and recover quickly, without injury to self or others. Learning how to stop is also an early skill, to avoid collisions and on-track hazards which are common. The use of safety gear and its integration into skater skills and gameplay is central. When falling, we use the safety gear: through a knee slide or sliding onto wrist guards and elbow guards rather than onto joints or heads. The slide, on the safety gear, becomes part of the fall and recovery. If mastered well, a fall can actually propel and advantage

skaters because it can gather speed, and, while 'down', they cannot legally be hit (although some restrictions to this tactic have since been introduced). 'Safety first' is a repeated motto and central to the kinds of ethics behind the sport. Similarly, skaters cannot progress to hitting drills until have they have mastered falls, stops, jumps and slaloms. They are all the skills of safety for self and for others on the track: the ability to avoid hits, take hits and avoid injuring other skaters once downed. Of all the training and testing rules, these are often the most strongly enforced. Getting to the stage of being allowed to hit someone else requires 'being safe' on the track: getting up quickly being a key component, at least within the leagues of which interview participants were members.

> *One of the girls came off the rink and I could see that she wasn't angry, but she was very obviously upset, and I said hello and asked her how she was doing. She stopped, and she really thought about that question, rather than just blowing it off with 'oh I'm fine'. She stopped, and she really thought about it, and she looked at me and she said, 'you know those days when you really, really want to hit a bitch?' I went, 'yeah'. She looked at me and said, 'I need to not be here today'. I was very impressed by her insight and her maturity and I commented. I wasn't going to let that just sit there, but I thought that was really wise and really mature. That's something I've always tried to hold myself to. If I'm having that bad a day it's time to look after myself. More often than not, going to practice has been the looking after myself.*

The rules of the sport also are constantly reviewed with safety in mind. Styles of helmets allowed were changed to allow visors after a number of skaters experienced injuries to the face. The 'no back-blocking' (hitting a skater in the back) rule in the sport was integral in its early contemporary (post-2002) days and, while this has been modified, the essentials remain the same: running into someone's back is only allowed if they have stepped into your line of movement. That is, a skater who does this will be prepared for the hit, and it will not come as an injurious surprise.

Injuries still occur. However, the most obvious potential sources of major injury – to the head and back, for example – are minimised wherever possible. The rules

reviews take such things as sudden injury-rate increases very seriously. No tripping has been a consistent rule since 2002. No elbows are allowed. Anything involving actions that could directly injure a skater, rather than simply stopping their movement forward towards point scoring, are generally banned or heavily restricted. This makes the sport somewhat different to the practice of many other full-contact sports, which include martial arts, rugby, gridiron and ice hockey – all sports that roller derby has rightfully been compared to. The biggest source of injury now comes, unfortunately, from the fact of playing a contact sport on wheels, which of course requires significant pressure on the joints and connective tissues, due to the speed, 'unnaturalness' and sudden changes of game play while being hit by others. What is true, though, is that the aim of the game is still not to injure an opposing skater, but literally just to 'block' them. This is where the sport, in many ways, breaks from *some of* the male-dominated, full-contact sports, where injury to another is considered part of the game, even if limited and controlled. Part of roller derby's significant strength is the fact the sport is run by the athletes themselves as well.

The contradictions in the experiences of aggression – either as receiving or expressing it, or using it for the self or against another – and the attempt to balance these contradictions, runs all through the sport. Roller derby is proudly a full-contact women's sport that is 'real, strong, athletic, revolutionary' while simultaneously taking skater-care seriously. It is a difficult balance to maintain. However, the effort to balance playing a serious full-contact sport with athlete-safety is real. Giving women and feminised participants the experience of power to be gained from contact sport is central. The break-away in 2002 indicated a conscious effort to reclaim 'the real' in the sport: to show that women could play hard and tough, too. Some interview participants described how, for them, roller derby was even more serious about women being able to play aggressively, fully and competently than in martial arts. Others with a contact sport background indicated similar experiences: that, even in other full-contact sports, women are still treated as if inferior, as if naturally not as aggressive or as 'violent' as men are, as needing still to perform a form of femininity that meant being restricted from expressing themselves as would men express their masculinity. Misha Merz, in her two volumes on boxing (2009, 2012), describes a similar experience of being instructed, early-on in her now-champion boxing career, to 'hold back when sparring other women'.

The theme of mutual care runs throughout the interviews as well. There is certainly a serious consideration in training that women are not socialised to hit. There is also a very serious consideration of that fact that very many women will have experienced being hit as victims and survivors of forms of domestic or other abuse. Many participants had experienced being the victim personally. Worse, media coverage has very often painted women victims of violence as also somehow partly to blame for attracting this violence (Gilmore, 2019). So, as skaters described, this experience of gendered violence runs in stark contrast to playing a full-contact sport like derby, where athletes are both the aggressors when it comes to pushing past other players, 'taking the space' on the track, and are extremely competent and capable defenders *against* this sporting aggression. Significantly, this can only happen in something approaching a 'safe(r) space'. This is a commonly used term in contemporary feminist discourse, although the reference is to a space in which the absence of physical expression – whether offensive or defensive – is the assumed norm to aim for. In roller derby, a safe space has a different meaning, because all skaters participate because they want to learn to hit and take hits. A safe space in the derby context means that this learning is conducted carefully and with the unique life experiences of women and feminised people in mind.

Overall, the intent and culture of roller derby is one of aiding the strength in women and feminised people to be able to give and take hits, and in a way that is in stark contrast to their experiences – whether physical, emotional or ideological – of being hit in other areas of their lives. When learning to hit, for example, training is taken slowly and is based on already gained skills in falling and recovering. Skaters are usually given the opportunity to pair up with those of similar size and ability as well, at least in training.

When skaters feel uncomfortable with using words like 'aggression' or 'violence' when describing their sport, or when they are angry about how others impose these descriptions on their sport, the social context of violence must be kept in mind. Women's experience of aggression – in themselves and in others – is extremely contradictory, complex and sometimes fraught with personal and traumatic memories. This is also why the interviews bear out the importance of the sport – a full-contact sport – being run by women and for anyone who has experienced the violence of feminisation. It is so central to the sport's radicalism.

Smashing constraints of femininity

> *I was sitting in the pub with a friend (before joining roller derby), just having a cold one before everything gets organised (for a pride march) and there was a bunch of derby girls that walked past. I just looked at them and went, they are derby. My mate goes, how do you know? I'm like they're derby, look at them… I think it's the way people carry themselves… They have a very large presence in the way they carry themselves, the way they move, the way they walk, the way they talk, all that stuff.*
>
> *There's nothing better than smashing into your friends for two hours to make you feel good, especially after a day of dealing with demanding children.*

Women gain the ability to hit and take hits, offensively and defensively, and in ways that are mostly not injurious. This is important to gaining and regaining physical, psychological and, even, social power. It is simultaneously a rejection of the constraints of the ideologies of femininity *and* a break from a physical inability to 'fight back' or 'take hits'. It involves a rewiring of memories and experiences of the body so that retreat becomes less and less the first (or only) option. Possibly most important is the way that roller derby skaters, collectively, are able then to push back at a culture which enforces constraints on feminised folk in everyday ways, both at micro and macro levels. There is a certain culture around roller derby, which is connected to, contributes to and comes *out of*, its aggressive physical culture. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter, but it is introduced as follows.

There is a carefreeness within the culture of roller derby, a rejection of expectations of how women should be. As one interview participant put it, 'a fuck you' attitude; or another describes 'not giving a fuck'. It is exemplified in some ways by derby after-parties on the dance floor. Skaters tend to own dance floors and take them over on behalf of all those who would normally be pushed aside or sleazed on by misogynist men. Skaters tend to *take the space*, wherever they are, and then hold that

space for everyone. Skaters also tend to take on and intervene into misogyny and sexism when out socialising: naming and calling out micro-assaults like grabbing in nightclubs, verbally and physically intervening when men refuse to leave or continue to harass, inviting women and feminised folk into the roller derby circles and into the safe space created by skaters.

In the end, ideological, physical and social systems of constraint on women, and those who are feminised, are too often about restricting women's power. This is demonstrated in a whole range of practices, policies, legislative measures and even state-run and non-government support organisations supposedly for women. As Mischa Merxz (2006) also discussed in her book on boxing, there is a dominant idea that women cannot fight back, are always victims and are in need of 'protection'; protection that is then controlled by another force. Roller derby, in a small but unique way, smashes these controlling ideas by training women to 'smash back'. Even the term to 'smash bitches' (not supported wholesale by roller derby skaters but still common) is a reference to both physically hitting another skater *and* smashing the ideological limits imposed by the very concept of 'bitches' in the first place. Women can be bitches, women can control other bitches and women can hit and take hits. Not only that, women can smash others. Men could never use that term, because it is a play on the idea that women are 'just bitches' and cannot hit at all. In these and many other ways then the physical culture of roller derby turns even ideas of 'the feminine' on their head; or rather, smashes these ideas and proudly displays the resulting bruises as if badges of honour, as Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) also colourfully describe.

How do we (re)claim power without expressing power over others? Can power not only be taken or conceded, but be *mutually* increased? How can a full-contact sport – according to the common definitions of sports sociologists – be played with minimum harm to athletes? This theme of power, its expression and control, runs all through roller derby and the stories of its participants. These words provide a sharp contrast to so much sports sociology.

> *I think the other thing I was going to say, actually, about the way that it changed me, is that it really made me think about female aggression, and that it was that women have been told all their lives not to be angry or aggressive, or to not be competitive. I think being involved in roller*

> *derby really allowed me to be competitive in a good, positive way, instead of a probably negative way that I used to be. I think that could be what it is that attracts people to the sport as well, this avenue to exhibit aggression legitimately. There's not really a lot of other contact sports (that do this).*
>
> *Roller derby transgresses gender norms. There are not many acceptable avenues for women to express aggression or frustration, and we've been told since childhood not to behave in competitive or 'masculine' ways. I'm an aggressive and often angry person, so roller derby gives me a much-needed outlet. There's nothing better than smashing into your friends for two hours to make you feel good, especially after a day of dealing with demanding children.*

Participants also talked about the unique forms of 'therapy' and even joy to be gained from being free to express aggression and physical power on the track.

> *I have a theory about male friendships and the reason they are less complicated than women's. It's because competitiveness and aggression toward a friend or foe can often be expressed through sport. In other words, men have more opportunities to 'get it all out' on the field rather than letting issues simmer and stew. Women, on the other hand, are less likely to play competitive or contact sports with each other and have no valid outlet for aggression, therefore tend to internalise anger.*
>
> *Sport induced adrenaline is cheaper than therapy or anti-depressants!*
>
> *I always hit hard. I was aggressive before I started. I did boxing. I was always wrestling with friends. Derby was just a good outlet to that. And I could do that legally. Outside derby you can't be as aggressive.*
>
> *The best thing someone can do is lay me out. They are so happy that they have taken [me] out. And I am so happy because they have learnt to do that and I see in their face that they are so happy. [This skater had also won best blocker awards].*

> *I think it's the way [roller derby] people carry themselves... I have absorbed some of that, but there are times when I can be extremely quiet. Derby girls don't generally see that side of me, but that's okay, a time and place. I appreciate that I've got to spend so much time around people that are so unapologetically themselves and, to someone who's not used to it, that's actually quite jarring, but not in a bad way.*

Participants also discussed the somewhat unique ways in which dominant ideas of femininity are challenged in roller derby. For the geographic areas where these participants were based, some felt this was even unique amongst contact sports.

> *Women's football and gridiron didn't take off until the last year or two [in Melbourne]. I think the confidence to play that has come because roller derby has blazed the way [there are a number of past and present roller derby skaters who moved onto football and gridiron]. It is a very aggressive sport. The idea that this sport and the support network that it has and that you hit and hit good and it's all left on the track, for some reason it didn't come out of other contact sports in the same way. Women hitting women wasn't promoted [in other sports].*

> *There is a juxtaposition in roller derby between femininity and hard hitting. Derby married it from the very beginning. Yes we are sexy. We are cute. We are being edgy. We are, in the beginning, we are being violent. Then a few years later, it was also we are being very strategic and sporty. Then an extra point was added to the triangle, and it was very pointy [draws a triangle in the air to show these three parts of derby]. It gives women the confidence to say 'I am **all** of these things'. It's tough and feminine and athletic.*

> *I don't take a lot of shit anymore, That's mostly due to, that, I'd tie that back to feminism as well, because a lot of the shit you have to take, you realise is, if you were talking to a guy, you wouldn't be saying this.*

Throughout this chapter I have remarked how roller derby skaters 'smash back' at a culture which enforces constraint on women at micro and macro levels, at embodied and ideological levels. As is demonstrated repeatedly here, these are *socially caused* constraints, not biological. As Raewyn Connell notes throughout her work, we always see the biological through social eyes. 'Social gender relations do not express natural patterns; they *negate* the biological statute.' (Connell, 1985: 269; original emphasis). Moreover, she cites Rubin (1975: 179-80) to emphasise the point that: 'Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural *similarities*.' (own emphasis; 1985: 269). In this and many ways the physical and cultural practices of roller derby make more explicit these contradictions between what our society says women's bodies can do, and what we know, through action, we *can* do. Next I move onto a deeper discussion of the alternative subculture that creates the conditions in which this *smashing constraints of femininit*y can exist. Again, this in part because the sport is led by the feminised athletes themselves.

Chapter Five

Results: Alternative Subculture

Introduction

Chapter 4 has documented some of the experiences of participants to underscore the view that roller derby is not simply a form of accidental and spontaneous politics. It is also conscious. The slogan of the primary governing body, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, 2019a), is still 'Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.' This shows up in how the sport is played and in women's experiences of it. In an initial summary, then, the interviews have elicited the following four important themes or factors that allow for or help to create change in the participants' lives, with the first two discussed in the previous chapter:

1. The physicality of the sport – that is, contact requires fitness and strength, and the women are pushed in ways, physically, they never have been before.
2. The technicality of the sport – that is, the women are learning to do difficult things.
3. The culture is one of support – this factor looms large, so much so that the previous two would not be possible without it. It is possibly the most important criterion.
4. The culture also constitutes a radical break from mainstream culture. The sport is led by women, for the skaters, is queer proud and promotes a 'fuck you' attitude to anyone who says how women and feminised folk should be. It is punk, it is 'bad girl' and it is everything that mainstream culture says women should and should not be. It aims to be diverse and inclusive across.

How then is roller derby radical and alternative? This chapter will pursue an in-depth answer to this question. Chapter 4 has already pointed to a provisional answer, in part because all four of the above components overlap. This sport is: feminist; women-led; queer proud; attracts freaks, radicals, punks and those sitting on the margins of mainstream culture; attracts and celebrates strong, tough women; challenges dominant forms of femininity by blending aggression with femininity; is fun, plays with and challenges mainstream notions of how women should behave and what we can do; and is run collaboratively and by mentoring skaters into leadership roles. The collaborative nature of the sport thus develops positive inter-subjectivity around a common goal. Hence, it is powerful collectively *and* individually. At its best, roller derby offers mutual experience of self-expression, fulfilment and the power of those who have been feminised.

In other words, the sport seems to fulfil Harry Cleaver's (1994: xxxii-xxxiii) four categories of non-alienated sport (see also chapter 2 of this thesis). It is worth reminding ourselves what these were. The first was athletes' individual and collective control over their activity and self-expression. The second took athletes' control a step further, to encompass the 'product' of the activity (whether athletic satisfaction or performances). The third was that the activity increased participant interaction and connection. The fourth extended the reach of the activity itself, such that it was 'organized as a creative realization of human species-being'. When taking into account the particular forms of alienation that women face, roller derby does even more. The subculture of roller derby provides a set of conditions within which the idea of physical liberation is posed (as a process, not an endpoint). This is a bold claim. Roller derby still exists within a broader social structure, and its participants live their lives beyond the subcultural conditions of roller derby. However, in a world which is alienating on multiple fronts – in terms of our labour, our inter-subjectivity, our intimate relationships, our sexuality, our physicality and our creativity – roller derby provides a space which is oppositional. At least, it provides moments of freedom from many of these constraints, even if it can never offer a complete escape. That is, the subculture of roller derby provides a space in which there are some freedoms. Some of the characteristics of these freedoms include:

1. a space in which people feel comfortable learning and making mistakes;

2. a space, by being led by and for the athletes, is, therefore, led by women and for feminised folk;
3. a space which encourages and celebrates a diversity of femininities;
4. a space that is radical in its rejection of how women should behave;
5. a space that is about training up women to be physically strong and aggressive[39]; and
6. a space that encourages skaters with diverse sexualities.

In short, it creates an *alternative* space in which to create community by encouraging productive inter-subjectivity: working together towards common goals which involve each other's self-fulfilment and flourishing.

An alternative culture

According to the 23 in-depth interviews for this thesis conducted with both roller derby skaters and coach-organisers, one of the most deeply spoken about reasons for roller derby's contribution to life-changes was that the culture of roller derby was alternative. It is alternative in some profound ways. Sentences and paragraphs from the interviews were selected according to the themes shown in the following table, which isolates quotes according to the culture of the sport. Skaters are the number of interview participants (see chapter 3) who made reference to that theme, and 'references' is the number of times that theme was mentioned across all of the interviews. The interviews were coded using *NVivo* software. As is evident in the table, sentences and paragraphs could be coded against multiple themes, and themes overlapped considerably. The total numbers therefore add up to much higher than the number of interviews.

The table illustrates the point that roller derby is both an alternative subculture in its own right, and is most definitely an alternative form of sport. When grouping the references to the sport being alternative or radical in some way so as to include the fact that it is women-led (which is also radical), then the alternative subculture references run to 1,283 across the 23 interviews. This compares to the sport being fulfilling or freeing, which brings 1,101 references. All of the sport and fitness references come to

[39] Note the discussion in chapter 4 on the meaning of complex meaning of aggression.

458 in total, followed closely by references to community and support which number 441.

Table 5.1: Themes evident in skater and coach interviews

Level 01	Level 02	Skaters	References
Women led	**Combined**	**18**	**332**
	Feminism	17	140
	Diversity	15	101
	New Relationships	13	91
Supportive	**Combined**	**18**	**307**
	Support	17	124
	RD Community	12	52
Radical	**Combined**	**17**	**298**
	Freeing	15	161
	Alternative	16	96
	Democracy	12	63
LGBTIQ	**Combined**	**15**	**285**
	Diverse Sexualities	15	124
	Diverse Genders	9	92
	Queer Pride	11	69

This table shows that the sport being run by women is mentioned by most of the participants. It is the theme mentioned most relating to the culture of the sport. The culture being one of a community of support, and one that reaches beyond individual leagues, has a similar level of importance. A review of where the themes overlap also shows the considerable importance of these two major themes. The sport is at least partly radical *because* it is run by women. It is a place where women feel comfortable exploring their sexuality and coming out about being same-sex attracted or transgender. This comfort is connected to roller derby offering a culture of support for skaters to be whomever they want to be. The freedom in diversity and self-actualisation can only occur in a culture of support. Freedom from feelings of being physically disempowered is more likely to occur – according to the skaters' interviews – in a sport that is run *by* women.

The radical rethinking of friendships, and of more intimate relationships with other women or with partners and children, occurs within a space that is run by women as well. In short, the sport being run by women, for those who have been feminised,

particularly when focussed on such a demanding contact sport and shared physical activity, is radical in itself.

This radical form of organisation is freeing in some way. It is democratic and supportive of not only those learning to play sport for the first time, but also of those finding a truer personal voice and identity for the first time in their lives. Put simply, roller derby is a space in which women and feminised people are able to challenge and rewrite what it *means* to be a woman or to be feminised. Skaters also feel more comfortable expressing a complex mix of femininity and rejection of femininity. The extension of the rejection of mainstream conceptions of femininity is that transgender women also feel more comfortable in this space because it allows them to explore a range of femininities during a period of transition. The non-binary interview participant expressed something similar. The skaters described a feeling of being welcomed 'just as they are'. As a skater's blog also post put it:

> *Lately I've been living my feminism in a very different way, though still very much corporeal. I've been involved in roller derby… for a little over 12 months. I was first attracted to derby for its alternative/ punk/ feminist/ image. It seemed sexy, but not in a mainstream way. It seemed sporty but not in netball kind of way, and it seemed feminist but not in an academic way. I was right, but it is also* ***so much more*** *than just an image.*

Another states:

> *... you don't need a safe house anymore when you have roller derby, right? Because you have a bunch of friends who are very physically empowered.*

Each theme evident in the interviews can be summarised as follows:

> **Women led**: a community of women and feminised people run and led by women; a community that it is feminist, encourages a diversity of femininities and bodies and encourages the re-thinking of intimate and caring relationships: as parents, as partners and in leaving abusive relationships.

Supportive: a supportive community that provides for empowering forms of coaching and, in addition to support in learning the sport, offers internal and external forms of solidarity, inter-subjectivity and inclusivity.

Radical: a place that frees people to be themselves, has a radical sense of ethics, is fun and performative as well as sporting. It is (mostly) democratically run and has a *do-it-yourself* (DIY) culture. That is, there is an absence of, or significant reduction in, bureaucratic control of the sport by those who do not currently skate.

LGBTIQ: the sport involves skaters who are openly out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.[40] Coming out while being involved in roller derby is a strong theme, and so is one of not only queer acceptance but queer pride.

Self-fulfilment and emancipatory practices

These themes in the interviews all tie back to the sport being alternative to mainstream culture in some way. In turn, the alternative culture helps to promote conditions through which moments of self-fulfilment and emancipatory practice(s) can operate. This is even the case for the very strong themes around physicality, playing a sport and becoming fit and strong. These themes exist mostly *within* the context of the support being a radical departure from other forms of sport: sport from which women and feminized participants had previously felt alienated. Roller derby lends itself to transformative physical practices because it is diverse, inclusive, supportive and run by and for the skaters.

A number of skaters talk about it being the place where all those who do not fit elsewhere come to fit. There is a place for everyone. It forms an active break from the surrounding culture. It is inclusive, it is diverse[41], queer friendly and proud, rebellious and fun. It also has connections with other subcultures. It is a place where skaters feel able to be and to become ‘whomever they want to be’.

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[40] This is not to erase those who are intersex but just to recognise there were no openly intersex participants in this particular research.

[41] With important exceptions that are discussed in chapter 6.

> *If nothing else, it's given me a social network…a lot of people from derby remain an integral and important part of my life. The last house I lived in I shared with two people from my league. I've just got so many people in my life that are in my life because of derby. I've got so many other people who are in my life because I came to know them through derby people. So, it has irrevocably flavoured my social circles. It, to a very great extent, defines who I hang out with. Like I said, it's just given me that knowledge that I can enact femininity in the way that I see fit, and I'm a lot less anxious about that than I might be otherwise.*
>
> *I mean there is something about gang mentality or mob mentality [laughs]. I mean you're a team, you all support each other whether you like each other or not. And you're like, you have that huge support so you feel like you can do anything. It's like you become superhuman when you have that support network…I am someone who has built community my whole life outside of roller derby, like Anarchist, punk, hippy communities…intentional living communities, growing food communities, cooking, whatever, [but] a lot of people don't come from that. They come from very isolated backgrounds and come into an area where you have a community, you have a support network. I think that's the biggest part that changes people's lives. To me that is absolutely the biggest part.*
>
> *In some ways, we're also a training organisation. We're also a community organisation. We're also a fucking self-help group, you know what I mean? So I think that it's really important to recognise and name all those different things that we do, so that we can better meet the challenges that have to inevitably happen as coaches require increasing levels of accreditation.*

The culture of support is vitally important to ensure that a range of skaters have access to the sport:

We task ourselves with providing communities to women – and children, men and families in many cases – and we make a promise to people who join that we will provide a safe and empowering place to explore some of the issues that you can't explore anywhere else. So, that means that roller derby attracts a disproportionate number of people with mental health issues, people who are lower SES… people who haven't played sport or have had injuries or haven't had good positive experiences with sport.

One of my teammates, when I first joined… got married, like, a couple of months after I joined. It was in the summer, so it was like four months after I joined the team, and then she left the team and moved to [town] skating down there and then was attacked by her husband. Like a month after they got married, two months after they got married and she had to jump from a… window (to escape) and he called the cops on her… she was the one that ended up being arrested, and the cops did not believe that he attacked her but said she attacked him. It was just, it was, it was crazy, because it was in a tiny town, in a rural area and all the men are supporting the men! And, of course she immediately moves back to [city] and, with her friends in roller derby, starts playing roller derby. She had an ***immediate*** *network. She had that, and if he were to ever come and visit, he would have had the crap kicked out of him [laughs]. Right? It was* ***not going to happen****. It was completely secure. I mean, you don't need a safe house anymore when you have roller derby, right? Because you have a bunch of friends who are very physically empowered.*

It was really shocking, because it was not somebody you would think would ever be put in that situation: a very strong, very aware, very smart, highly educated woman. Yeah. But she never went back, she never gave him a second chance. It was a one-time thing, and she was like 'fuck this'. Then she talked to his ex-wife, who was like, oh yeah, I just thought it was just me. He had a ***history*** *of it… I don't know what she would have done had she not had roller derby. She wouldn't have had*

> *the legal support, you know, and, I mean, she could have gone to her family, but it's not quite the same, right?*

Ken Gelder's (2005) account of Victor Turner's *communitas* is apt. It is the opposite of social order and structure. It is an 'anti-structure': an 'expression of liminality, of social marginality and difference: a site of unmediated contact between people at the edges of society, unregulated by it and free from its orderly gaze, a realm of full and "total" experience' (Gelder, 2005:10; citing Turner, 1969: 136).

Alternative femininities

Alongside the celebration of aggression, one of the most obvious characteristics of roller derby is that it is a predominantly women's sport. This is unusual on several fronts. First, the sport is led and dominated by women. Secondly, it is a women-led contact sport. Thirdly, it is not a women's adjunct to a sport that is dominated by men or was previously dominated by men (e.g. cricket, soccer, Australian football, boxing etc.). Fourthly, even the understanding of gender or who can be involved is significantly expanded beyond standard sport structures and membership criteria. It was a women's led sport from the beginning (in its contemporary form, at least). This combined celebration of powerful, athletic, women leaders who are openly aggressive and competitive, is unique not only in the world of sport but more generally. This alone would be enough to celebrate its feminist attributes. However, I argue it has deeper implications.

> *One of the things I really wanted to do as I went through [gender] transition is [that] I really, really wanted to go and hit the rink and roller skate. But I felt that, as an alleged adult, that was something that would not be age appropriate. I would end up feeling like the creepy, weird old person on the track. When I saw roller derby I saw that not only was that not the case, but there was an adult space where you could roller skate and it wasn't 'prissy', basically. It could be feminine and it could be aggressive and it could be very competitive and... a* ***lot*** *of competitive, healthily aggressive energy.*

The primary flow-on from the sport being run predominantly by women for women, is that it challenges mainstream notions of femininity. In fact, it does this simply by existing as a women's led space. However, the consequences run deeper than this. Rejecting mainstream notions of femininity creates more than a resistance to constraint and dominance. It opens up a space of *possibility*: possibility for what women can be, for what anyone can be, beyond those constraints. Roller derby creates this space of possibility.

> *Interviewer: So, in what way would you say it's feminist? Or, what did you think at the time?*
> *Interviewee: I think, initially…because of the diversity of women that were, that I saw skating...the confidence that women displayed, the fact that it was all, it was quite clearly, and it was marketed that way to begin with, it was women run, it was run by women, for women. Yeah, I think those were the main things that I initially thought were feminist about it.*

This leads me to my next description of the culture of roller derby: it both consciously and unconsciously pushes back at mainstream ideological constraints on women. This means it rejects popular notions of what it means to be a woman. It rejects constraints imposed on women's and feminised bodies. Moreover, it toys with and mocks mainstream conceptions of femininity. It shuns the cries of 'but you can't do that' and focusses on showing what women can do physically. In these ways, it is indeed radical and revolutionary, as the slogan of the international WFTDA says (see introduction above).

> *Roller derby encompasses women of all different shapes, sizes and ages. Body shape is really no barrier to competing, and a large bum is seen as an asset! Never have I loved my body more than in the last 12 months. Yes, my arse is bigger and my thighs are huge, but it's from the three days a week of skating and strength exercises that have left me stronger and fitter than I ever imagined. I could crush nuts between my thighs!*

> *I think that physical strength and fitness have led to a more positive body image and self-confidence in all aspects of my life. Because there is no emphasis on being thin, roller derby lacks the focus on dieting that many other female sports tend to do. Moreover, roller derby is not a sport solely for young women. Our oldest league member is 50, and our youngest is 19. There is a regional league in Victoria that has a mother and daughter duo! Where else would you find that in the sporting world?*

> *There were so many different women.* ***So different****...Women with sporting backgrounds, from business, punk, just for the image, just to [be there],* ***all the different body types****! [original emphasis]… That was really a huge thing. Any body type can join.*

This was even visible just watching my first bout. The thing that stood out for me, as someone with an athletic background, was the range of body shapes and sizes on the track: small and large, nimble and quick and the slower big hitters. It struck me watching that game how much we are used to only certain types of women's bodies playing sport. I even caught my own prejudices playing out, with the thought: 'how can some of these women be playing this hard?' Our archetypical ideas of how women should be are incredibly constrained by oppressive ideologies of femininity (as discussed in chapter 2). Even the idealised sportswoman favoured by the media (Hargreaves, 1994; Parks Pieper, 2018) is rarely one of physical fact. Women of a whole range of shapes and sizes are able to play sport and play hard. For me, roller derby challenged my incorrect ideas around this, even just watching that first game. For roller derby skaters this translates from spectating into training and competing and then into their closest relationships.

> *...for my daughter.. especially. I love giving her different women to look at, because I know it's very hard [to avoid] in mainstream media. It's all over the place, and she still gets affected by all the shit, but at least she can come to the stadium and go, you know, there's mum's friend... and she's awesome, and she's got these strengths, and [she] looks like a man, that's her choice... You know, it's really good to just go, look at all these people. They are so different, but they all have equal value.*

In this context of the rejection of mainstream femininity, participants then tend to drop a range of internalised constraints on themselves and their bodies, as part of, and alongside, participation in this culture. The saying ‘roller derby is so gay’ and ‘how did you come out to your parents, did you tell them you play roller derby?’ are also well known within the community. They are testimony to roller derby’s challenges to mainstream femininity and to its heteronormativity and patriarchal dictates of what forms intimate relationships should take. That many transgender women have found a welcoming home within roller derby is further testimony (although, unfortunately, this is not always the case). While many other sports involve members of the LGBTIQ community, roller derby is much more likely to be publicly proud of this fact, rather than it being something quietly to accept or tolerate, as with some other sports. The fact that women well into their 50s play this contact sport is another aspect of its rejection of mainstream femininity, though this is becoming more common in other contact sports (e.g. women’s football). The fact that women of all shapes, sizes, ages and femininities are welcomed to roller derby is an unfortunate comment on its radical nature. It is unfortunate because, too often, women’s sports are based on quite oppressive ideas of what women’s bodies are like and what we can accomplish.

Moreover, the diversity in dress and personas is a symbol of the rejection of constrained femininity. Participants are encouraged to train and compete in anything from the classic fishnets and hot pants, skirts, butch and more masculine clothing through to mainstream athletic attire. Often these are combined. Again, this is evidence of the opening of possibility that roller derby provides. While some feminists might argue that this is not a genuine challenge to mainstream femininity, what they miss is that it is diversity that is encouraged. It is a space, at least in its ideal form, which encourages women to express themselves in whatever way they wish and, furthermore, to challenge expectations through mockery. In the traditions of circus and radical burlesque, fishnets and hot pants are also worn with bruises, war paint, a scary persona and a war cry. Rarely can this be read as simply parroting mainstream femininity. Roller derby rejects constraints while also saying that it is still alright to be feminine. Skaters take up a variety of positions on this scale and move around on it.

The roller derby persona is an additional symbol of this radicalism, of the opening of possibility. While there is a new trend towards competing under ‘real names’

(that is, legal names), it is still relatively rare. Traditionally, coming up with a roller derby name has been a key part of the process of becoming a roller derby skater. For most of the first decade of this century, there was a central register of roller derby names, and each had to be unique. Skaters would take time to think through, come up with and play with different personas. It was a conscious process, driven in considerable part by questions of 'who do I want to be?' Thinking through, deciding on and then developing a persona around a roller derby name allows skaters to try out new ways of behaving or performing. In short, it allows skaters to break out of their mould and try new ways of being in the world. All of this occurs in an environment which not only allows but encourages and celebrates it.

> *I have a tattoo, yes. I designed my own tattoo, and I got it on my back because my ex -husband said [that] it paints him as more of an arsehole than what he is. He said, 'you're not taking my money and getting a tattoo', and I was like, 'it's your money? I thought we were working together here, and it's my body and I'll do what I like thank you very much.' So after we broke up, I got the tattoo on my back [laughs]. But, you know, that was the first time he had said it like that – 'my money' – and it was like, 'wow is that what you think or are you only saying that because it's a control thing, like you wanna try and control what I'm doing? So now you're saying it's* ***your*** *money?' Like, that's insane.*

Skaters' remarks such as these bring out an important feature of the culture of roller derby, namely that it involves performance. It is out there. Alternative subjectivity, contra neo-liberalism, is meaningless when expressed by an atomised individual. At some level, we know this. Individual dress sense, musical taste or lifestyle is neither individual nor expressive when it is not social. It is only through social interaction that our bodies, our clothes, our selves, take on recognizable meaning. A symbol is only a symbol of something if it is read by someone else. Hence, the play with alternative subjectivities, the testing out of an alternative self, only really occurs at the point of social interaction.

For roller derby, performance peaks in a roller derby game. It is *this* performance that so many skaters and, certainly, the audience love so much. On the part

of the skater, it is a chance to perform with strength, skill, aggression and physical power. This involves ownership of the body. The skater's body becomes an object for self-enjoyment. The body is not being used for the enjoyment of others at the expense of self, as often occurs in professional, commodified spectator sports. For the roller derby audience, it is a performance of recognition, support and celebration of alternative femininities. In this sense, even though the traditional spectator divide exists in some form, it is also broken down. Skaters mingle with spectators before and after the game and recruit skaters to the sport. Skaters organise and run the bouts. No one is exempt. The audience participates in this celebration of transgressive femininities as well. Parents talk about the pride of having such 'strong, powerful' daughters. It is a coming together of all those tired of the soul-sapping constraints of sexism and, to some extent, hetero-sexism, as well.

An inclusive community of women

There is a further indication of the radical nature of a sport run by and for women. When we compare all the sections of the interviews relating to roller derby being a women's sport and the sport being a radical alternative culture, 16 of the 20 interviews contain at least one reference to this combination. This combined theme makes up an average of more than 8.5% of the interview content for 13 of the 16 interviews.

In short, it appears that the sport being run by and for women is at the core of the reason why it is radical, why it is supportive, why it encourages a diversity of expressions of femininity and why it is considerably more open to women-identifying members of the LGBTIQ community. This is a highly significant result of the interview analysis given the absence of women-only spaces in many mainstream communities and organisations and even some social movements. Furthermore, when considered in the context of criticisms of feminism for being exclusive, homogenous and, therefore, not radical in its contemporary form, this finding is also a really important counter. At the very least, it points to the possibilities of spaces run by and for women to contribute to a radical rejection of mainstream notions of what it means to be a woman.

> *We all know the myth that large groups of women tend to be bitchy and full of jealousy. This long-standing patriarchal archetype only serves to*

silence the many examples of female solidarity and friendship. As I mentioned earlier, roller derby is run for women, by women, and my involvement in the VRDL has shown me that women in large groups are supportive, competent, organised, non-hierarchical and, for the most part, not bitchy. I've seen so many examples of true friendship and camaraderie and, when issues do arise, they are dealt with in a respectful, professional way, and probably with harder hits on the track!

I do think it's about having the empowerment of being surrounded by women and women encouraging you. I think women are really socialised [to think] that you get your validity from men and, so, when you actually find it through women, you…do not have to have a male. Which is why so many women then become lesbians [laughs] or start dating women, because 'Oh, I don't have to have a male validation'…validating my life and the choices I am making. I have these women here to do that and also, on top of that, I can validate myself. Right?

I mean...it's this tiny county in the middle of nowhere in Oregon, and there's five women that are getting together, and the majority of them...have never exercised in their life [laughs], and they're housewives, and their husbands all drive tractors and they go to the bar after work, and that's their life in a rural farming community. These women are getting together twice a week to skate now...They are making time for each other, they are making time for themselves to do something that is very positive for them, and I think that's life changing for them. Right?

In order, then, for women to undo internalisation of social expectations, spaces need to exist which, at least partially, break down dominant norms and ideologies around femininity, around what women can and cannot do. The interviews indicate that roller derby does this. It is part of the reason for the sport's contribution to life changes, to women finding themselves for the first time. The evidence is that roller derby introduces to the women who get involved a diversity of ways of being a woman. This

occurs through a kind of radical inclusivity: where women are encouraged to be, or even just to try out, whatever they feel like being.

We have seen that this radical inclusivity and acceptance of diversity occurs in multiple ways. First, for it to mean anything, the breaking out involved needs to be practiced, and practiced physically, in performance, not just ideologically. The existence of roller derby 'personas', or characters created and played out by many skaters, is a reflection. Secondly, there is a consistent set of policies and practices of inclusion of 'all types of women'. In many leagues, you do not need to have played sport before, let alone to have skated. Thirdly, across roller derby, a diversity of sexualities and even genders is accepted, including of those who are transitioning or sit outside the gender binary. Some leagues especially encourage parents' involvement.

That said, there is an important limitation to acknowledge. Roller derby in Australia remains a very white sport, even within cities that are diverse in terms of ethnicity. This is talked about quite openly as a problem or, at the very least, an observation to note. It is also reflected in the make-up of the participants in the interviews for this thesis and, therefore, in the data analysis. So, while there is diversity among participants in roller derby along the lines of sexuality, gender identification (up to but not including cis men), body shape, age, class and – important to note for a full-contact, competitive sport – athletic background, this diversity largely does not extend to ethnicity.[42]

Diverse sexualities and genders

Two special characteristics of the diversity, inclusivity and community of women are worth mentioning in particular: there is a diversity of sexualities and a diversity of gender expressions not seen in most other social spaces. There are a number of transgender skaters among my interview participants. This is significant in two respects, in that they are both part of roller derby and also keen to participate in this research and share their experiences.

42. It also does not extend into a diversity of disabled bodies. There has been some work towards actively involving those with hearing disabilities, and there has been talk of a wheelchair display game, however beyond some of these initial moves towards inclusion, the sport is largely only open the mostly able-bodied.

I was like I'm going to be this person and this is how I see myself and now I feel like I've moved towards being that person. So therefore the line between (derby persona) and (civilian name) has been really blurred. But I think that's a good thing. There are women I know who choose to skate under their own name. I just wonder if when they came into the sport if they were these wonderfully tough confident women that didn't need the persona in order to be able to kick arse.

All my friends were my husband's. I wanted to meet some women outside of that circle. And do some exercise. Circus wasn't tough enough. Didn't have that edge. Much more 'lovey dovey'. I am a carnivore. I like to be rough. I like that aspect of my personality that I am very rough and tumble.

It's this bell curve. You begin and you have this image of yourself. Then you design a persona and then you achieve the persona. And then you become more of yourself. You realise that your persona is you. [draws a bell curve in the air]. But for me I was already (my roller derby name)… it is about my (type of hit). I always hit hard!

I guess it's nice to not feel like a bit of a freak, which you do. Yes, I'm queer in a slightly different direction to a lot of the others, but it's nice not to feel [that way]. It's more that in completely straight environments there are things I wouldn't talk about. I might still dress slightly differently, things like that, whereas if I want to rock up [to roller derby] dressed the way I prefer to dress and so on, no one will bat an eyelid. It's that sort of thing. It's that they've got a culture of accepting people regardless of what their gender expression is. I don't have to – I used to teach in Catholic schools, do emergency teaching at Catholic schools. Catholic schools have this 'nice' policy where they're allowed to sack you for being gay at work (so this was a new experience).

The significance of the existence of diverse sexualities within roller derby is probably not surprising. Roller derby is known as very 'gay', queer-friendly and even

'queer proud'. The activism and advocacy around LGBTIQ rights both within the sport and beyond is no small reason. The very common, almost trite, stories of people joining roller derby and then leaving their husbands for a woman contribute to this perception as well. The diversity of sexualities and femininities in the sport was also considered important by the interview participants – in fact the two aspects very often overlap. It is about 'all the types of women' being present. Of course, 'all' is an exaggeration. At this stage of the sport, not all women can participate. Many of those with disabilities are an obvious example. However, there is definitely greater diversity of women participants when compared to other sports, and there is a demonstrable sense of pride and openness about that diversity. The diversity is literally *on display*.

> *Interviewer: So, coming out...?*
> *Interviewee: Yeah, it was pretty big. My friend said: 'I always knew you were gay but you had to find out for yourself'. So much of my life was with my husband. I knew I was always attracted to women, but I didn't have the confidence to act on it.*
>
> *Some personal stuff got to the point where I couldn't be with my husband any more. And, having that support network of friends in derby, where you could be whatever you wanted to be, was really important.*

Pride in diversity is key to understanding the radical elements of the culture of roller derby. Roller derby is seen as not only being gay friendly but also one of the most inclusive sports for those who are transgender and, increasingly, for those who are genderqueer or non-binary. Skaters find not only a home, or 'find their people', in the sport, but they learn to be proud of their difference. This is not to be uncritical of the many locations where homophobia and transphobia continue to exist within the sport, but it is to acknowledge that it is significantly more inclusive than other sports. This is also to acknowledge the connection to the sport's alternative subculture. For example, the Queer Roller Derby network – historically known as *Vagine Regime*[43] – is a visible

[43] Queer Roller Derby networks and teams became well known in the roller derby community under the name *Vagine Regime*. The name was initially intended as both a queer and feminist statement. In July 2019 one of the core queer roller derby teams, playing at the annual *RollerCon* event in Las Vegas, announced it would no longer use the name *Vagine Regime*. This is to allow for a name that provides

and very present international network of queer skaters. It is active both within the community and outside it. Members of Queer Roller Derby have participated in policy development in other sports and produced documentaries counteracting homophobia and transphobia in sport.

> *I know of women who haven't come out to family or friends, family in particular, who have chosen to participate in* Vagine Regime*, as in a game or as a support, and they've found that very valuable. It's also a good way to show the community that – I'm thinking of a narrow minded [section of the] community as well – that their ideas of what a lesbian or a queer woman or a gay woman would look like and be like are not necessarily the case. I think that's very important. There are parents that participate in* Vagine Regime*. There are amazing women that participate in* Vagine Regime*. The audience support is incredibly important, because they do turn up. I was told that male audiences come along because of the tits and arse, but I don't think that's the case. That might be what they expect when they turn up, but it's not what keeps them coming back.*

The goals of Queer Roller Derby are also tied to the sport. As stated on one of the many blogs or online groups for Queer Roller Derby (*Vagine Regime*, 2008):

> Through a commitment to inclusive solidarity we hope to create networking opportunities, cultivate acceptance, and foster derby love matches. We endeavor to dominate challenge scrimmages with our traveling Team Vagine, inspire awesome cheerleaders, and throw brilliant parties for all to attend.

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greater representation for queer skaters and bodies within the wider roller derby community. In their statement they explained that: 'By having a name and logo that is specific to the cis female experience and to cis female genitalia, we exclude many people, including those who are non-binary, transgender and who are cis men who are queer.' Their full statement can be found on Queer Roller Derby (US based) social media. In paying respect to this decision, I now refer to the queer roller derby network(s) simply as Queer Roller Derby. Quotes from skater interviews however retain the term used at the time and used by the interview participant. I believe this announcement is another example of the often-changing nature of roller derby and the commitment of participants to inclusion.

That is, the entire basis of Queer Roller Derby is inclusivity, queer pride, dominance on the track and fun. Being queer is not only something to be proud of, it is something to fear on the track.

> *My (derby) wife said it best with her usual grin that goes for my wife, the way she put it was, all sports are gay, just roller derby is proud of it.*
>
> *It provides a community for queer women that is not explicitly about being a queer woman. You're there to skate. You're not there specifically to be queer, but you can be queer and skate, and both of those things will be celebrated. As opposed to most other queer communities, where being queer is actually the primary thing – what you're doing when you're there is you're being queer – for derby that's not the case. You'll be loved for it, you'll be celebrated for it, it's acknowledged, it's spoken about. You see queer people all around you, so you have these exemplars. You're not invisible in that space but, at the same time, that's not why you're there. You don't have to explicitly be being queer to not be invisible in that space. You can be queer without having to try to be queer, and that's a normalisation that you don't get in most other places. In order to be visibly queer elsewhere you have to be specifically* ***being queer****.*
>
> *Well, I guess for me, I've always been pretty open about my sexuality and pretty fluid. I've come across, in my life, a lot of people that aren't so much. In the communities I've found myself a part of, I was very much a minority. Maybe not always frowned upon but definitely looked as different for my orientations and my beliefs and belief system – as far as all that is concerned. Then being there and watching [derby], especially in (my league) [showed that] it's a super gay sport, in the* ***best*** *way.*

The queer pride present in roller derby has allowed many to manage gender transition and/or come out more openly as gay, bisexual, lesbian and/or transgender. This is connected to an understanding of the diversity of feminine and masculine expression, as described in this and chapter 4. In addition, however, this understanding

seems to move into, with support from peers, a new comfort with a complex mix of expressions of sexuality. That is, through participation in roller derby, women come to develop a much fuller sexuality that is, again, not as constrained by mainstream patriarchal, heterosexist and cissexist ideology. In many cases, this, in turn, completely upends concepts of the types of relationships that are possible. It then encourages radical revision and even rejection of those prevailing concepts.

In practice (at least as far as these research participants are concerned), women who participate in roller derby tend to leave men, form relationships with women and non-binary folk, leave abusive relationships, find solidarity in leaving and metaphorically (and sometimes literally) depart the picket-fenced house for fuller, deeper and truer friendships, partners, lovers and shared lives. The inclusivity and diversity of the subculture reaches not only across theatrical representations of the self but deeply into the most intimate of relationships, with the self and with close others.

> *I'm not going to be the last straight chick who turns up and realises that she's maybe not quite as straight as what she thought she was. I'm not going to be the only kid who hates their body and needs to learn how to make it move in a way that's kind of cool. So, I'm just going to keep trying to figure it out.*

> *I lost myself for a long time in every sense, not just in my sexuality but also, I think, when you're in a relationship like what I was in. It wasn't physically abusive or anything like that. But it was, I guess, emotionally abusive, and it just wore me down to being somebody that I'm not. Like I got caught up in that and in groups of people and situations that are not me…I lost who I was, I think in every sense.*

> *I don't know, I think it was the 'choose your own adventure nature of [derby]' and not being judged for pretty much anything. Not being judged for not wanting the husband. I want the kids, but they just drive me nuts [laughs]. Yeah, but nobody judges you if you want to ditch the husband and get with the girl [laughs and looks over at partner].*

> *And when you realise that somebody is holding you back from doing the things you actually want to do… and what you want to accomplish in*

roller derby…and [in contrast] you have a community of people who are like: 'Why are you putting up with that, that's bullshit? What do you want to do?' Then you can make those decisions, and you can benefit yourself.

Then, lo and behold, as I'm starting to realise that my body can do all this cool stuff, I then go and have these weird feelings around this girl. Well, that feels weird, kind of awesome. I think her flirtation makes me feel okay. I wonder what that's about…

Oh gosh...how many people have left their husbands [laughs]? Not just for women, but just like 'oh, I'm in, I'm not in a great relationship right now. It's not what I want'

I think, also, women are trained to be financially dependent, so financially dependent on whomever else it is. And, when you have a huge community of people, you have 500 people that, when you break your leg, are there to help you take care of it. The league is setup and structured to do that for you. It feels a lot safer [laughs] to make riskier decisions.

Queer pride varies from league to league. However, even where there is homophobia or a lack of understanding around what it means to be a transgender person, the community and culture as a whole respond and in careful ways. A number of the interviews mentioned the 'code of silence' which exists in other sports. That is, it is okay to be gay, just as long as you do not mention it or make it obvious. In roller derby, the opposite is the case. Pride is encouraged. This was particularly evident for me at the Australian Roller Derby Convention in 2012 (*RollerCon*). Visiting international coaches announced that they were members of Queer Roller Derby as part of their introductions and resume. Being part of Queer Roller Derby teams is considered an honour, particularly of the highly contested state teams of Victoria, NSW and Queensland. Queer Roller Derby members are well known to be the among the toughest and most competent skaters. One of their mottos is to play better than everyone else. Pride is shown not only in wearing a t-shirt, but it is demonstrated on the track. A very high

proportion of representative travel teams are also proud Queer Roller Derby members. One transgender participant talked about the first roller derby bout she had ever seen, *Battle on the Bent Track*:

> *There were a lot of different women there. It wasn't all of a type. I found that the fact that it was a queer bout, for some reason, said this is a group of women who are not necessarily feeling they're constrained by the expectations of the culture around them. They weren't, because they were skating without really worrying that much about what they looked like. They were more focussed on what they were doing. It was at that point when I saw the potential for a community that would give me a number of different ways in which I could explore my own femininity, which at that point was still really embryonic. I was still working out who the hell I was, very much so. So, there was that opportunity to go in any one of a number of different directions, surrounded by people who probably weren't going to give me grief for it. It seemed like a much less judgemental community than many that I'd seen.*

The *Battle on the Bent Track* (or 'Battle') was first formed in Australia in 2012 in Melbourne to coincide with the Midsumma LGBTIQ festival. It later became an official event of the festival. Formed outside of the league structures and official networks by a group of queer skaters, it shows the strength of the Queer Roller Derby networks. Promoted as both fun and serious, it mimicked some of the older style of roller derby, often with unique, especially-queer personas played up and more exaggeratedly dressed. The players also included many of the top skaters in the country. *Battle* became the largest all-queer roller derby tournament in the world, involving skaters from most states in Australia and, more recently, New Zealand (Aotearoa). It has been listed in the top 10 events for both Midsumma and Mardi Gras and has a large following among the LGBTIQ communities in the cities where these festivals are based. Many queer skaters – including among my interview participants – name this as their first, or among their first, bouts as a spectator.

Quantitative analysis using *NVivo* of the LGBTIQ themes in the interview data shows that, for a couple of interview participants, this theme makes up around one-third

of their interview content. The theme is significant for another eight interview participants, being mentioned at least ten times. In other words, the LGTBIQ theme is significantly important in around half the interviews. The other half of the interview participants did not make significant mention of LGBTIQ issues. The two participants for whom this was very important were both transgender skaters. For them, access to roller derby offered an environment that is accepting and which they could explore different expressions of femininity, not only without judgement but with active encouragement.

> *I essentially, not knowing how I was going to be received as a transwoman, particularly someone who was very early on in the process of transitioning, who was pre-op, I had no idea how I was going to be received by a women's team and there was a certain amount of anxiety there. So I essentially said, 'will you let me skate with you?' There was a fairly positive and immediate response and I was enrolled almost immediately. It was just like, 'come, try out, we've got a fresh meat intake soon, come and do this, you'll need this and this, we'll get in contact with you'. There was a lot of proactive, 'we want to talk to you about this', even though at that stage they didn't have a specific policy with regards to transwomen.*

I have been privileged to have four transgender participants involved in my thesis: three transgender women and one non-binary skater. Three out of the four transgender participants were out about their gender at the time of interviews. All four of these skaters were members of women's leagues. All have provided a significant *additional* set of insights into what this diversity of femininity within roller derby can mean for participants. In addition, these skaters have provided an insight into the inter-subjective, cultural and social consequences of transitioning from one sense of self to another, truer self. Two of the skaters talked about how, to them, transition was not a unique experience but one that, in a sense, most of the women involved in roller derby go through. Indeed, roller derby seems to attract women who are about to or have begun a period of transition in their lives. Again, what the interviews show is that the access

that many transgender women feel they have to the sport of roller derby is deeply connected to the sport's challenge to mainstream conceptions of femininity.

> *I've always been the weird kid. Why should I shy away from that now? That's the other thing about transition. It's not about switching genders, it's about being you. Why should I throw off one ill-fitting mould for another ill-fitting mould? That's bullshit. Roller derby is what showed me that…it was bullshit and that there are other options, and you can be yourself and you can be weird. You can be strange, and you can make really bad jokes and belch like the best of them, and all that jazz, and you can still be feminine. You don't have to apologise for any of it.*

> *It's so ingrained [the gender binary]. Yeah, not only is it different, but when you're walking from one side of that spectrum to the other, there's a journey in the middle. You don't just teleport, and that was exactly how I felt I was expected to behave. I was expected to be the perfect little prissy princess, which is so not my personality. I love dressing up in frills and skirts and all that jazz, and sometimes I like wearing a pair of jeans and really slacking down.*

Challenging gender divides

The participation of transgender skaters, particularly transgender women and non-binary people, in roller derby provides an interesting case study of the growing complexity around having a gender divide in sport. I suggest that in roller derby we can see the early days of the divide's unravelling within sport, all the while the divide continues at elite sport levels. As is argued throughout this thesis, the reduced social power of women is a requirement for the continued functioning of current oppressive and exploitative social structures. Sport, while beginning to pose a challenge to the biological determinist view of women's bodies, does not sit outside these systems. These tensions and contradictions certainly make for interesting theoretical debates, especially when the views of transgender and non-binary are given voice.

We have seen historically that as women's sports receive more resources and attention, not only do they expand and become more competitive, but also women's

bodies change. This is demonstrated, in part, by the inability of the International Olympic Committee to make a sharp demarcation between men and women any longer. It is increasingly difficult to even make the case for a strict biological distinction between the two. Biological science has known for decades what is now visible to many athletes and even in some public debates: there is not a sharp divide between men and women (Parks Pieper 2016, Introduction; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Connell 2009). There are not only 'exceptions' to the divide in people who are intersex, but none of the physical variations between men and women, when taken alone, are sufficient to differentiate along binary lines. Sex division is becoming the same type of false category that race once was, if it has not already become this. Indeed, the two false categories sometimes come together (see Parks Pieper, 2016). Elite women athletes can now beat men in some sports, particularly those which are weighted. Younger and newer athletes of all genders play alongside each other in the same teams. Women's boxing is finally a recognised sport internationally, after decades of competing in the ring against men (as the only way to access competitions in many countries, including Australia). The ideology that women are 'naturally' the 'fairer' or 'weaker' gender is becoming much harder to justify. As Jennifer Hargreaves (1994) argues throughout her landmark textbook, the feminist battle over artificial physical limits is being won on the sports field.

In short, acceptance of the absence of a clear biological divide between genders has made its way not only into feminist and gender studies but also onto the track and into the Olympics: into a space that, only decades prior, would have been thought unimaginable (Parks Pieper, 2016). This confirms what so many feminists – and also women athletes – have argued: that we will not know what the limits of women's bodies are, socially, culturally and physically (if they exist at all), until women have the same (or full) access to resources and support that men do. For example, Title IX[44] in the US

[44] The following is from the US Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) website: 'Title IX states that, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."… Title IX was established in 1972 to provide everyone with equal access to any program or activity that receives Federal financial assistance, including sports. This means that federally funded institutions, such as public schools, are legally required to provide girls and boys with equitable sports opportunities. Before Title IX, one in 27 girls played sports. Today that number is two in five. While we still have far to go before every girl has equal access to sports, especially girls of colour, it is clear that we are making headway. This summer at the 2016 Rio Olympics, the world watched as woman after woman broke barriers, shattered records and won titles across a multitude of sports… [In an] article, appropriately titled 'Amazing things happen when you give female athletes the same funding as men,'

has not only changed women's sport, it has changed women's bodies and undermined the biological determinism used to underpin women's oppression (Hargreaves 1994).

Do we still need women's sport? I would argue that the battles over *social* equality and freedom are far from over. Therefore, we still need women's sport. However, as the interviews indicate, we need the support of women in sport to be based on a non-binary and non-biological conception of gender. At the very least, we need to take on board the criticisms by transgender women about the need for their automatic and active inclusion in women's spaces. So, first we need to hear the voices of those who do not fit within a binary framework, being either intersex or gender non-binary. Secondly, we should be accepting of the science and social science which confronts the divide (e.g. Connell, 1985: 2009; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Parks Pieper, 2016).

Roller derby has at least made some thoroughgoing attempts at doing this, even while maintaining the allegiance to roller derby being a women's sport: by reviewing international, national and league policies around the inclusion of transgender women and by initiating ongoing discussions around the inclusion of those who do not fit neatly into a binary framework. What this has shown is that inclusiveness is not that hard to achieve as either. It simply requires consultation with those affected. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) has done this by developing over the years an increasingly inclusive policy position. The 2019 position is a considerable advancement when compared to other sports:

> The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is committed to inclusive and anti-discrimination practices in relation to all transgender women, intersex women, and gender expansive participants, and aims to ensure that all skaters', volunteers', and employees' rights are respected and protected.
>
> 'Transgender' refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match their assigned birth gender…

WSF's first President, Donna de Varona, praises the effects of Title IX on women's sports. "Since 1972, thanks to increased funding and institutional opportunities, there has been a 545% increase in the percentage of women playing college sports and a 990% increase in the percentage of women playing high school sport." Title IX is a terrific model for the rest of the world to follow as Lopiano notes in The New York Times: "We have the largest base of athletic development. Our women are going to dominate, not only because of their legal rights but because women in other parts of the world are discriminated against." A very unfortunate, but true fact.' (WSF, 2016)

> ‘Intersex’ is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male…
>
> Trans women and intersex women are individuals who self-identify as women.
>
> ‘Gender-expansive’ is an umbrella term used for individuals that broaden commonly held definitions of gender, including its expression, associated identities, and/or other perceived gender norms, in one or more aspects of their life. […] Some individuals do not identify with being either male or female; others identify as a blend of both, while still others identify with a gender, but express their gender in ways that differ from stereotypical presentations…
>
> The WFTDA recognizes that identifying as transgender, intersex, and/or gender expansive is not in any way related to an individual’s eligibility for participating as a volunteer or employee. *An individual who identifies as a trans woman, intersex woman, and/or gender expansive may skate with a WFTDA charter team if women’s flat track roller derby is the version and composition of roller derby with which they most closely identify*.
>
> The WFTDA will actively work to promote a climate that is welcoming and inclusive of transgender, intersex, and gender expansive participants. Any conduct which fosters a hostile environment for any participant on the basis of gender identity will not be tolerated. In addition, the WFTDA will continue to increase its knowledge of trans, intersex, and gender expansive issues through ongoing education for volunteers and staff. The gender identity of any and all WFTDA participants is considered confidential and private.
>
> (WFTDA, 2019c, Statement about Gender, my emphasis)

Interestingly, a number of queer-friendly feminist organisations have also taken this approach. For example, the Women*s Circus in Melbourne (2017) – a longstanding social institution for the purpose of promoting women’s physical training, exercise and

movement following the *social model of circus* – has similarly opened its doors to anyone who has experienced living as a woman (Women*s Circus, 2017)[45]. Roller derby in the UK has taken a similar approach, although with some initial critiques of its original drafting. The UK policy (UK Roller Derby Association, 2014) aimed to include those who identified as non-binary as well. These debates and new policies are reflective of wider changes too, at least within intersecting feminist and queer communities. In a sense that is not unexpected leagues based in Melbourne, known for its left-wing, feminist and queer activism, is also where transgender women skaters might be welcomed into roller derby leagues.

> *I've had no issues...about my gender diversity, whatsoever. To them, I am who I am… I had a chat with [the coach] the other night [and] said, 'everyone's struggling with their own little battle, and they're concerned with their own little battle. They don't care if you used to be a guy or if you wear skates that have different coloured wheels – whatever.' Everyone's there for their own reasons, and I respect that. The one thing that really hit home with me was that it didn't matter who you are. Once you stepped into skates, it didn't matter. It was all about the game.*

At one stage (in 2014) a junior league in Portland USA had a policy of gender neutrality in all language used training in documentation (*Scratcher in the Eye*, 2019). This has developed now so that coaches 'ask before every practice what pronoun the kids want us to use, so if the pronouns change we respect where the kids are at on that day'. This policy has gone into training of trainers as well and is now the case for both of the junior leagues: 7-12 year old and 12-18 year old. As noted elsewhere, this is possibly not surprising. Rose City Rollers is based in Portland, a city that has a history of progressive activism and is generally considered to be feminist and queer friendly. It

[45] The Women*s Circus policy states: 'The following can become members of Women*s Circus: • Assigned female at birth; identifies as a woman • Assigned female at birth; identifies as a man • Assigned female at birth; identifies as other/they/ze/non-binary/gender diverse • Assigned female at birth; does not identify as either woman or man • Assigned male at birth; identifies as woman • Assigned male at birth; identifies as other/they/ze and when "other/they" identity includes woman • Assigned intersex at birth; identifies as a woman/they/ze/non-binary/gender diverse'. The asterix in their name also now indicates a broader definition of 'women' and links to their policy. See their 'Trans and Gender Diverse Inclusion Policy' (2017) for more details.

also has a very progressive commitment to including skaters from beginner level right up to their, now champion, travel team. These changing approaches to gender may also possibly a sign of things to come. Among new generations of people, the gender binary is seen increasingly as being both false and oppressive, and their rejection of its imposition is vocal.

> (When) they've asked the coach to refer to them as they and them and not as she or her or he… that came from the kids. It did not come from the adults, because there's a lot of kids that are like 'I don't know what my gender is, and I don't want to have to be forced to pick it at this time in my life'. (*Scratcher in the Eye*, 2019).

Other interview participants who have coached described a similar shift amongst younger skaters:

> *I have coached juniors, and they're so fricking adorable. They're the kids who are the freaks from the school, too. They are the kids that didn't play sports and were kinda outcast punk kids, and a lot of them are queer, too.*

Tensions and contradictions

While in many ways the community is inclusive and supportive, there are also tensions. This is important to note. This is also discussed in more detail in the following chapter. There I critique the exclusion of those who are injured or not deemed competitive and I also address cases of racism that were raised broadly within the sport in 2017.

Some argued too, in their interview, that there can be a flipside to the 'rebellious element' of the sport and community around it. In some ways the DIY, punk, 'fuck you' and anti-establishment attitude, when not balanced with inclusivity and grassroots democracy, may turn into anti-community sentiments or work *against* mutuality. When drinking heavily after bouts, for example, some had experienced heated arguments and tensions. The question was raised by some skaters, 'how can this be resolved?'. While not the focus of most of the interviews, this is an important question that is raised and it

is one that every community and social movement faces. Again, this will be discussed further in the following two chapters.

The following quote highlights for me this tension, between inclusion and comradery, and dismissal of imbalances of power where they do exist. It is a tension that only seems to be resolved in practice, when activists or advocates raise their voices to push for change in their favour. This kind of politics is not automatic, although as we have seen in the above quotes, does happen where there is space allowed for this – as there is in roller derby.

> *I mean there's always a sense of, oh what is it? There's always a bond that happens. Like if you play roller derby it doesn't seem to matter what class you are. Although it is all white women. [It is very white] It is very white. But there's still a bond that happens, so, oh you play roller derby? Well, we can talk about that all day. [laughs] It doesn't matter what age you are, if you have kids, if you don't have kids, like, there's definitely a sisterhood. It's like a giant fucking sorority [laughs] I don't know, it's like you can go to any city in the world and if you post online that you play roller derby, you're going to get a place to stay, people are going to take care of you and your going to have fun. It's pretty hard to miss that.*

The next chapter now explores what this combination – as described in this and the previous chapter – can lead to. I argue that this combination of inclusion, alternative subculture, support and openly physical and aggressive practices assist skaters, particularly women and those who are feminised, in reconnecting with their bodies and their selves. As the saying *roller derby changed my life* indicates: for many, when roller derby is at its best, the sport provides the conditions for nothing less than mutual freedom and human flourishing.

Chapter Six

Sport as Praxis: From Freedom to Flourishing

I think it's a freedom, I really do. I think it's a freedom to be oneself. You know, and to experience that freedom... physically.

Well, everything is different now, because I can do whatever I feel I want to do, and I can tell my children 'you can do whatever you want to do and nobody gets to tell you who you are, and nobody gets to tell you you're a girl so you have to wear a skirt, or you're this so you have to do that'.

Introduction

When roller derby has changed skaters' lives – as is described throughout this thesis – the descriptions of this change are neither mild nor equivocal. Skaters discuss freedom finally to be themselves, finally finding a community of like-minded people. They reveal significant transformations in their ideas about what it means to be a woman, having completely new conceptions of what they are able to do in their lives and, even, that their lives have been saved – saved either from previous drudgery or constraint or, literally, because they now want to live their lives.

As with any social activity there are countervailing tendencies which are discriminatory, even oppressive, and tend towards replicating oppressive social systems. This is so even when, simultaneously, those systems are resisted. It is especially so in a competitive field which also requires space and resources to exist. As will also be discussed in this chapter, countervailing tendencies can become serious for those who are injured and side-lined from the sport in ways which are ableist. The continuing

dominance of whiteness in the sport can also contribute to implicit, and sometimes even explicit racism. As discussed in chapter 2, all movements for change – and our very own subjectivities – can be contradictory. Taking account of these contradictions is part of the work of creating the possibilities for change. First, though, I discuss the positive changes.

Where the sport has changed lives for the better, the changes are not minor. They are changes which point to the ideas of theorists mentioned in chapter 2, and whose work will be explored further in the next and concluding chapter of the thesis. These ideas include: CLR James's ideas of people finally *living the life within*; Cleaver's idea of human fulfilment through physical activity; and, importantly, Marx and Aristotle's ideas of human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. This chapter begins by exploring the extent of these life changes and how they are connected to the radically[46] reconstituted social and physical conditions that roller derby provides. This sense of freedom and fulfilment is experienced in multiple ways. As the previous results chapters have discussed, participants have:

1. finally reconnected with their bodies, experienced as their own and for themselves;
2. discovered what their bodies are capable of, not only in terms of physical strength but also in terms of new skills and abilities to act in the world;
3. discovered that many of the constraints on their ability to act in the world were previously ideological and internalised, rather than permanent and unchallengeable;
4. discovered a community, mainly of women, who are supportive, powerful as a collective and aid each other's development and self-expression;
5. found the freedom to be who they want to be through an alternative subculture which rejects mainstream femininities that constrain behaviour and privilege concessions to patriarchal systems of power over the interests of women; or

[46] Throughout the concluding chapters I use the word radical to indicate a shift away from oppressive practices and towards a praxis of freedom. I do not consider a replication of oppressive practices to be radical.

6. found the freedom to explore a type of being they had previously barely contemplated.

These participants have found forms of freedom and self-fulfilment. At its best, this self-fulfilment is not individual, but attained *with* each other. Overall, this self-fulfilment does not come at the expense of others. Rather, each person's freedom, development and full expression is aided by forms of mutuality, reciprocity, care and support. At its best, the practices of roller derby demonstrate the idea that each person's freedom is aided by everyone's freedom – no matter what the form this freedom takes. In the next chapter I provide a deeper contemplation of the implications of this mutuality of experience for theories of emancipation and human flourishing. For now, I focus on the words of skaters.

The descriptions of these intersubjective ways of being and collective attending to our bodies and physical practices are also similar to the emphasis that John Fox (2015) places on human corporeality and our human interdependence. For Fox (2015), as for roller derby skaters, the promise of future human fulfilment comes in overturning the lie of the separate, independent human who is disembodied. As it was for Marx and many writers since, our intersubjective engagement produces, and is a response to, a wish for freedom and to 'live the life within' (see the summary of CLR James's work in Andrew Smith 2011: 496-7). When we collectively attend to our physical human frailty, we can move through it towards mutual human flourishing. Many roller derby participants have found their way to flourishing and self-fulfilment through difficult but also joyful activity. These skaters' remarks show how we depend on each other for looking after our bodies, overcoming our limited physical selves and creating the conditions of joy and fulfilment. This is also important to note when discussing who is included in this mutuality and who may not be.

> *...I did the obvious choices, you know: the marriage and the kids and stuff like that. And I don't even think I had the choice to not do that. And because even stuff like now I grow underarm hair and that's my choice [laughs]... now I'm like, when I'm bouting, I feel better to have a bit of a winter coat, it's like I'm tougher and more grrr, [laughs].*

> *…they feel comfortable in that confidence and they're not...changing themselves for… other people... It's a lovely confidence and it's a comfort in that confidence. It's not a confidence that's in your face... So, there's that freedom in that confidence.*

> *I don't think roller derby can change your life, but it can definitely inspire change from within. I like the thing that 'it saved my soul' because meandering around and then 'oh', something felt like home, felt comfortable, felt familiar, felt liberating.*

Contradictions and countervailing tendencies

In its ideal state, roller derby shows the potential to contribute to a praxis of emancipation and human flourishing. This potential is constrained and even fails where there fails to be a radical rejection of dominating ideologies and their practices (or practices and their ideologies). This tension exists in all practices but, perhaps, especially so in sport because of its requirement of competitiveness combined with its self-conception as being 'beyond politics' (Stradling, 2009). Even significant sections of roller derby aim to gain the approval of mainstream media, sports organisations and corporate sponsors. Not all the sport's practices are radical in an emancipatory sense.

A lack of conscious reflection on how to maintain radical practices leads to important tensions in the sport. In this research project, these tensions showed themselves in particular ways and were especially evident at some of the more elite[47] levels of the sport. There were tensions between mutuality and competitiveness and between radical inclusiveness and the maintenance (conscious or otherwise) of wider discriminatory practices, particularly those reflecting racism and ableism. Sometimes mutuality, or *camaraderie*, has been limited or even not existent.

Skaters, including some participants in this research, have been undermined by a destructive competitiveness. This runs through all sports, but it is often moderated in

[47] Elite is a word used within roller derby to describe skaters who have been selected in travel teams which compete both interstate and internationally. While use of this word may seem contrary to the more community-based and egalitarian aspects of roller derby, it is not necessarily seen as a counter-position within the sport. I have chosen to use words also used by skaters, wherever possible.

roller derby (as discussed in previous chapters). This destructive competitiveness is not something essential to roller derby, or to sport-in-general, but is something that enters the sport through: commodified-sporting institutions; pressures upon roller derby to meet the expectations of a high-performing sport; and a lack of self-reflection on the ways that competitiveness can remain mutually beneficial without harming those who are currently not 'competitive'. This dilemma is most visible when talking to skaters who have been injured physically. It is hard to underestimate how different the experience of an injured skater becomes, from one of 'finding freedom' in movement, skill and community to one of immediate exclusion from both physical activity and the culture of a league. So much of a league's culture is based on training and physical activity. When this participation is suddenly removed, it can also be life-changing for a skater. This exclusion from practice and community is (re)alienating.

These countervailing tendencies will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. They are an important counterweight to the positive experiences of skaters. They also, in some ways, confirm some of the conclusions of this thesis, that it is *certain conditions* of mutuality and freedom that lead to self-fulfilment. The creation and maintenance of these certain conditions are far from automatic.

There can also be a tension between the new-found freedoms from the impositions of oppressive forms of femininity and the continuing responsibilities to each other in those freeing practices. Among most of the participants in this research, a sense of mutual responsibility to each other, or mutuality in freedom and fulfilment, is present. Comments about 'finding freedom' for themselves are followed by comments like 'and also for everyone else' or descriptions of a 'culture of freedom'. All through the interviews there is a sense of 'my freedom is bound with the freedom of others'. This is important to note, because such a claim can be called to the test. As discussed below, this challenge is exactly what has been called for by anti-racist activists within the sport. As they argue, if the sport is to be truly freeing, it must be freeing for all its participants.

A culture of freedom from alienation

I now continue with the experiences of freedom evidenced among the interview participants.

> *I think the type of people it attracts is probably what makes it so life-changing...You think you're getting into it just for a bit of fun and silliness, and you don't realise how much hard work it is... because that wasn't what you were signing up for, when you signed up for it. So... you look back and go, 'Wow. I just did that'.*
>
> *It attracts people on the fringes of society that have never seen, never felt like they could have a sport. That they would be accepted and they go, this is a place where I can be accepted. So, it's just this wonderful amount of people that come to it.*

The idea of roller derby changing lives seems to revolve around this idea: of finally becoming oneself. There are many themes around this, including 'finding my people' or 'developing a new relationship with my body' or 'not caring anymore about what other people think'. What this also shows is the flip side: the extent to which women are constrained in everyday life; how much women and feminised people are alienated, not only from their bodies but also from what they do and how they live their lives. In this sense, roller derby, and other sports and cultural activities, have a powerful role to play in aiding human fulfilment.

> *...watching these young ones go from 'oh I can't, it's too much, it's too much' to actually seeing themselves come into themselves and go 'ah, ha!'...and empower themselves and take on the responsibilities...*

The sport then *is* unique. Roller derby has a unique set of cultural characteristics, a set of rules and ways of playing the game that contribute to significant changes, particularly for women, in their experiences of the body and how it is used. According to the interviews, my own experiences and conversations and the countless stories expressed on blogs, these experiences then translate into changes in other areas of life. 'If I can do it on the track, then I can do in my life' is the common refrain.

The alternative culture of roller derby also creates an active break from the surrounding, often constraining, culture. Roller derby aims to be inclusive and aims to be diverse. Roller derby is generally queer friendly and even queer proud. It is

rebellious, fun and often has connections to other subcultures around, for example, music, circus and protest movements. It is a place where skaters feel able to be and become 'whoever they want to be' and, also, importantly, to play with change. For some, the personas they create in roller derby are an important part of that change: the ability to perform, to try out a 'new me' and, through this, to work out who that me really is.

> *Yeah, it definitely changed my life. I like all the stuff, like I said before, learning all those skills, becoming fit, learning about the way people work, I think, has changed my life... the way people work in a group.*

> *But certainly, for me, it was the idea of real, strong, athletic derby, is that it's revolutionary. It is revolutionary. You look at the administration of the sport and look at the development of the sport, which is entirely promoted and run by women, and it has a different flavour to if it had been done by men.*

Sport's radical potential then is fairly simple. In contrast to our alienated and constrained existences, sport, under certain conditions, provides a place of potential, to change the world around us, to live momentarily free from constraint, and doing so alongside like-minded others. For sport to be truly radical, too, this freedom must be expanded to include all participants: beginner and elite, cis and transgender, white and Black, Brown and Indigenous.

> *...ultimately that's what derby meant to me [as a transgender woman], it was not just acceptance, it was being actively welcomed, being actively acknowledged for who I was and having that celebrated [cries]. There was a great deal of validation and love in that experience, and that for me is what roller derby was [cries].*

> *So, in recent times I've been skating in the fresh meat/white star sessions, and I see that in all the baby derby skaters to varying degrees. Some of them already have that unapologetic 'this is me and you will deal with it'. Some of them have that, but they hide it from everyone else.*

They're not ready to let it out yet. Some of them have seen that this is part of what happens in derby and you can see it [is]... like a moth to a flame. You can see it written all over their little star-glazed faces. It's awesome, and sooner or later they break out of that shell and they kick arse with the best of them. It's fantastic to watch.

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself now?
Interviewee: Loud when I want to be, quiet when I don't. I know how to be loud in multiple ways that suit me. I've gotten to the stage where I have stopped apologising for being myself, and I have admittedly had to learn a lot of humility along that way too because, as I said, we do fuck up along the way... You have to learn how to own that shit.

Well, ***everything*** *is different now, because I can do whatever I feel I want to do, and I can tell my children 'you can do whatever you want to do and nobody gets to tell you who you are, and nobody gets to tell you you're a girl so you have to wear a skirt, or you're this so you have to do that'...I'm totally much more aware [that] everyone makes choices and you don't get to choose for other people.*

...now I grow underarm hair and that's my choice [laughs]. You know, but, before, it was just like, 'oh no, you can't have hairy armpits. That's just like urgh'. But now... I feel better to have a bit of a winter coat, it's like I'm tougher and more 'grrr'. [laughs]

In his preface to *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, Harry Cleaver (2009: xxx; as discussed in chapter 2 of the thesis) describes how 'our struggles become more than resistance when we strive to find new ways of being and doing'. They become moments of 'self-valorisation', according to Negri (cited in Cleaver 2009: xxx). I would argue that, further than this, all acts of resistance are firstly a move towards self-valorisation. Cleaver says, 'our struggles have involved, repeatedly, the liberation of activity and things from capitalist uses' (2009: xxx). He points out that an early slogan of the eight-hour movement was for 'eight hours for what we will', that is, for 'eight hours for self-valorising activity of whatever kind they might desire' (2009: xxx).

Movements for workers' self-organisation are often connected simultaneously with movements for self-realisation and fulfilment (2009, xxxi; also see Mason, 2008).

> *I think that it's something to do with fringe culture, and the people that feel like they sit outside of what's normal, being able to find a community where they belong. And derby [brings] that sense of belonging, being willing to embrace people. Even if there's no commonality, the commonality is derby.*

> *Learning how to play roller derby is an extraordinarily complex thing that is not just about skills acquisition. So, in that context, how do we represent ourselves as sporting organisations, community recreational organisations? But I think it's probably pretty clear that we also have a... policy or advocacy role. I think there's... definitely a social justice intent.*

At its best, then, roller derby provides for radical conditions of supportive intersubjectivity and support for learning and personal and cultural change: that is, the social conditions for self-fulfilment and human flourishing.

> *I only ever see people building each other up and encouraging each other and willing each other on to succeed and do the best that they can possibly do, the opposite which is what I have seen my whole life. It's vastly, vastly different in that regard.*

> *We kind of had this golden era that everybody got to try out stuff, and everyone was forgiving of other people's mistakes, and it was really like a great safe space to just exist and really concentrate and focus on that development.*

> *So yeah, it is empowering, because it is supportive and inclusive, because you're using your body for this amazing sport, because you're learning new things about your body all the time, you're pushing yourself all the time, you're achieving things all the time that you may have never dreamt that you could achieve before. So, being that in*

> *control of your body, and being able to use your body in that way, is really empowering. I think that's probably the main – I think that's why I would tend to align with those views – [reason] that roller derby saved my soul, or roller derby changed my life.*

This culture of support provides participants with the freedom to find, to play out, to trial and to become who they really are. It is the experience of 'living the life within': of becoming what you feel you need to be.

> *I think it was the whole nature of the sport and the fact it was all women. You know, I think that changed the dynamic.*

> *...she was the only coach, and you know, she would yell things like: '**dominate the space**' and 'get in there, **dominate** the pace'. And I said to her, 'I've been trained by my parents to not do those things, to be a good girl', you know, so that's what was freeing and to be actually allowed to... go 'yeah, my space, bugger off!', to act defensively to stop people... to have the freedom and the permission... The nature of the sport made it, like, freeing for me personally.*

> *I don't think roller derby can change your life, but it can definitely inspire change from within. I like the thing that (saying) 'it saved my soul' because meandering around and then 'oh', something felt like home, felt comfortable, felt familiar, felt liberating.*

> *Interviewer: What does practising freedom look like in roller derby? Interviewee: Not giving a fuck really [laughs]. You know, it's... if you are a caring person, there's a freedom in not giving a **hoot** about what people think about how far you've got to go… it's just committing to yourself, committing to doing your best and you being your own benchmark and you being your own, you know, critic if you have to or whatever.*

Freedom and power out of chaos

In my interviews with roller derby skaters, the word freedom is mentioned often. However, it is not simply freedom on its own, it is a freedom *to be* and *to do* something. It is not *only* freedom from constraint. Participants say they are 'finally free to be myself', 'free to be in relationships with women', 'free to be boisterous and aggressive', 'confident enough to change careers and do what I really want in life', 'to do things I never thought possible'.

In reading these interviews, there is a sense in which freedom from constraint and to be and do may have something to do with the complexity of the sport, which forces people to learn completely new skills and ways of being. This new way of being is very physical, very 'in your body'. Training requires a significant physical transformation in terms of strength and physical power, and it also involves the development of precise technical skills in the use of that power. In roller derby, skaters do not just wield their bodies at each other. Incredible accuracy is required, too, partly because the whole thing is conducted on eight, very unforgiving, wheels.

One of the skaters who had participated in the sport for many years described this aptly as 'learning to overcome the chaos'.

> *I like that I have to respond to the different chaos in different ways. And it can be because I have done things over and over. I like repetition. I like to focus on minute details. Like the angle of my foot. And how this effects a hit. Really fine tuning is what I really like to work on. It is kinda my strength. I'm not a pretty skater but a technically beautiful skater, because I have worked so much on that. Because the technique is good it allows the chaos to happen. And it allows the explosive power to be there and the quick reaction.*

> *To be an artist you have to have the technique down in order to be good. But you also have to allow the chaos to happen, to let it go. So, in that sense derby is no different.*

> *It requires precision. I like the precision. Because the technique is good it allows the chaos to happen. And it allows the explosive power to be there and the quick reaction.*

As noted in chapter 4, which discussed the words of skaters on reclaiming the body, there is a freedom to be gained from becoming physically competent. Strength and physical power are important to this physical competence, but only if they aid mastery of the skills required. The liberation for many women who participate, then, comes from understanding their bodies as something they can do things with, for themselves, skilfully.

The sense of power comes not necessarily from playing a contact sport per se, but from playing a particular kind of contact sport: one run in a more community-centred way, one which requires physical strength directed precisely in an environment which is literally chaotic. It is a contact sport on roller skates which takes no break for penalties and in which the points are scored by point scorers who are jostled around like balls on the track, yet who can fight back and pick up speed against blockers. Roller derby looks chaotic to watch. It is even more difficult and chaotic to play. It requires high levels of skill to play, let alone play well. In this sense, the description of playing a sport on roller skates as being a kind of equaliser rings true. Even those who have played sport or skated before find a steep learning curve in roller derby. Further, the training environment is one that recognises this difficulty and allows skaters time to learn to hit and be hit and to learn, at least partially, to overcome the chaos of the track.

> *What makes a good derby person? Lots and lots of patience. Flexibility. Knowledge. Passion. That there had to be that certain focus: you are doing it because you want to go fast or hit hard. You can't have that drive to do that, all that training, unless you have that love for the game. It doesn't have to be for a greater goal or anything. Have to be able to see the split-second consequences as well as what you are trying to achieve in that game and over the season and over the long term.*

> *I think that's the beautiful thing about roller derby as well, you know, not often, how often do you choose to go into a situation where you have to perform well. You have to be alert, you have to, you know, your strategy and, you know you have a defensive, offensive game. You have to be a team player. You know, like you have to be really alert to do it.*

These comments are almost always combined with comments about how 'I found my people', 'everyone could be anyone', 'there were all types of women', or 'I was free to be a better mother by being free to be myself', because they had finally witnessed and discussed a whole range of ways to parent. This highlights two elements that are often missing from mainstream discussions[48] about freedom, namely:

1. Freedom is often found through collective activity and rarely through isolated effort. In collective activity, freedom can be gained through encouragement, sharing of resources, gaining of insight and encouraging individual agency.
2. Freedom is not only an end 'in-itself' but is a means to achieve some form of fulfilment or goal. Freedom provides conditions in which the flourishing of human agency and achievement can occur. It is both freedom from constraint and also freedom to be, to do, to gain something.

angel Kyodo williams[49] (2019), building on the words of bell hooks and her experience of *queerness*, describes how freedom is not a finish line but is a constant practice that also needs to be made conscious. She emphasises that, in order for there to be a just practice, everyone must commit to creating the conditions for everyone's pursuit of their own liberation, in conscious, reflective mutuality. This is as much about the pursuit of a practice, of an intention, as it is about particular outcomes. Using the Buddhist conception of 'right relationship', she asks 'are your relationships just?', for if they are not no-one can be free. Later in this chapter, I discuss where roller derby relationships are not just and therefore run counter to practices of freedom.

While skating is a great skill to have, and while a lot is to be gained from the early stages of training, roller derby is not really experienced until skaters get to the level of full scrimmage. That is when the sport can really be understood and enjoyed in

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[48] Fortunately, outside of mainstream discussion, authors such as Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, as well as other proponents of the 'capabilities approach' to human freedom provide a healthy corrective (see e.g. Sen, 2000, Nussbaum, 2000; see also Erich Fromm, 1941(1994)).

[49] The lower-case components of both these names are deliberate and match how each has requested their name be written.

all its complexity. The skills of playing a team sport on wheels that is also a contact sport without a ball all begins at scrimmage. Most of the interview participants were at least at this level of skill. One's first scrimmage is thus a unique marker. While pre-contact scrimmage-like drills were being developed and improved at the time of data collection (2014), most skaters have limited understanding of the sport until it is played with contact and in game-like conditions. The first scrimmage is therefore often one of a 'mind-blowing' and confusing scuffle, as skaters try to pull together the skills they have learnt and to apply them in an environment that is high-speed and crowded. Skaters even accidentally forgetting which side they are on is common in early scrimmage training. This is possibly strange when compared to other sports. To begin with, it reflects the very real, difficult complexity of the sport. It also reflects the lack of experience in playing team sports among very many skaters who join roller derby.

Scrimmage is a kind of initiation, then. Experiencing it is often the first time that skaters describe 'falling in love' with the sport. Even for those already skilled at roller-skating, scrimmage can at first be thoroughly confusing. Remember, the game does not stop for penalties. There is not a ball but two moving, point-scoring human beings. There is a whole list of hits that are and are not allowed, and all of this is on roller skates. It is noisy, crowded and the stadium circle is tight.

> *Interviewer: It's not an uncommon experience for skaters to go through to remember their first scrimmage and find it simultaneously overwhelming and exciting and confusing. The expression is often, 'what the fuck just happened?'*
> *[Mutual laughter] Interviewee: Oh yeah, over and over again, you just say that over and over again throughout the entirety of that first scrimmage I think. 'I don't know what just happened!', 'I don't know what just happened', three times a lap, 'I don't know what just happened'.*

> *So, being that in control of your body, and being able to use your body in that way, is really empowering... I think that's why I would tend to align with those views, that roller derby saved my soul… or roller derby changed my life.*

There are some interesting things to note in the collation and analysis of the themes in the interviews around 'power and agency'. First, nearly every skater has mentioned a growing sense of power or agency. Secondly, it appears to be the skaters who have participated the longest in roller derby who have experienced the greatest sense of self-fulfilment and actualisation. In most of these cases, the sense of fulfilment was so strong that I felt compelled to conduct a second interview. This is not what I had expected. I had expected that most skaters, if they made it to scrimmage level, would have experienced a certain level of self-fulfilment and actualisation. I did not believe this would be different from the experience of the more elite and experienced skaters. I was wrong about this.

> ***Two minutes!*** *[original emphasis]. Within two minutes, you go on instinct, because you have done so much training. Because it makes me do a process [to get to the point that she can act on instinct]. It's a process my body can remember.*
>
> *So yeah, it is empowering... because you're learning new things about your body all the time, you're pushing yourself all the time, you're achieving things all the time that you may have never dreamt that you could achieve before.*

So, the question then becomes: how is it possible to bring all skaters up from beginner to elite level? Or, how can the pathways be created for this movement? Rose City Rollers (Rose City) is one such example of a league which consciously works towards this goal. Rose City is also one of the leading leagues in the world, currently holding the world champion league position – the Hydra trophy – in the years 2015, 2016 and 2018. Rose City have consistently asked themselves these questions: how can we include everyone *and also* remain globally competitive? They have repeatedly committed to being *both*. In part a result of this, it has one of the largest memberships in the world (Wikipedia, 2019a).

Many of the original 30 league-members of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) were similarly committed to being accessible, even to skaters who were not initially able to skate. In Australia, in its early years of existence, 2007-

2009, even the Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL) – ranked No.1 in the WFTDA rankings in 2017 – would train new members to skate from the beginner-level. While leagues like the VRDL now have entrance tests and have decided to commit resources to elite sport at the expense of greater accessibility – a shift not uncommon to most competitive sports – members of Rose City would argue that competitiveness and inclusivity are not counterposed. As one long-standing member of Rose City and international coach stated:

> In our mission statement it says to provide access to all types of women...to all body types and to all women. That is our mission statement, to provide it for everyone. But also, to compete at the highest level. So, our mission is to have both. (*Scratcher in the Eye*, 2019).

Some of the elite skaters amongst my interview participants had been relatively good athletes from the beginning. However, very importantly, *many had not*. Some had played sport before and were looking for a sport like roller derby in which they could fully express their aggression, physicality and competitiveness in a way that other sports had not allowed them to do (discussed in chapter 4). However, many skaters had not. That means that 'natural ability', or the slightly more accurate description of 'previously played sport', are not determinants of later ability or levels of self-actualisation. Previous sporting experience may help move a skater from a beginner in the sport to competitive and elite level – a kind of shortcut – but it is not a determinant of future competitive level.

Further, as my interviews would indicate, the elite skaters experience some of the highest levels of self-actualisation among my research participants – self-actualisation that they identified as truly life-changing. So, to fulfil roller derby's implicit, and sometimes explicit, aim of being accessible, surely there must exist accessible pathways that provide the opportunity for everyone to make it through to this point? In a critical sociological sense, therefore, we need to democratise the conditions of self-fulfilment and self-actualisation: we need to make this fulfilment more readily available. To restrict access is to restrict radical and life-changing potential.

As a roller derby skater participant argued, when asked about why she thought roller derby was potentially life-changing:

> *I think it is, again in that loving your body for what it can do thing. It helps people learn new things about themselves... I guess it's kind of empowering and people get a lot of confidence being able to learn new things and be able to do them well.*

For roller derby to be revolutionary – as the by-line indicates it is – it needs to find ways to make this learning available to as many women and feminised people as possible. This is, after all, in part the basis upon which the sport was (re)formed in 2002. It is a major component of its radical potential. Moreover, as some leagues demonstrate, it is still not counterposed to elite performance. Some might even argue that accessibility, community outreach, league longevity and elite performance assist each other. Or, at the very least, resolving these tensions consciously and collectively is the secret to the success of some leagues and can be the secret to success of roller derby as a whole.

Next, I discuss some of the negative consequences of two unresolved tensions in the sport, first regarding the treatment of those who are injured or less competitive and, secondly, around racism and white dominance in the sport. I call these counterbalances to freedom and fulfilment.

Counterbalances: excluding the injured and 'non-competitive'

A strong counterbalance to the reports of mutual self-fulfilment amongst the interview participants are the stories of exclusion from those who were injured, had health issues or those who repeatedly did not make it through tests or selections for teams when previously they might have. This is particularly important to note because of how the interview participants were selected: those who self-identified with the saying 'roller derby changed my life'. While participants were invited to put their names forward even if they experienced negative life changes, on the whole most understood this saying to mean positive change. Furthermore, those who did talk about the deep demoralisation and sense of exclusion they felt when they had become injured, or were not as agile and fit due to age, were often the same skaters who had experienced significant positive changes in their life prior to injury as a result of the sport. The

demoralisation felt was in part *because* of the stark contrast between these positive and negative experiences.

> *I think, you know, that roller derby combined with ageing... there's not a lot of time [for the sport] anymore... there is still that self-flagellation personally (because of not being able to give so much to the sport).*
>
> *...in the last couple of years there's been some pretty horrific injuries of people that've only just started skating, and I think it sets a tone for people being more nervous about their participation.*
>
> *I face that now, as an older woman. Going back. I have a lot of muscular skeletal stuff that causes me pain on a daily basis, which is not pleasant. Which is another thesis in itself. I don't want to be seen as, 'can't be hit' or, you know, if I fall down, people go 'oh!' you know, I don't want that. I'm doing this [sport] knowing that is the risk... you don't want to be seen to be a wuss.*
>
> *I did get injured. I tore cartilage and had an arthroscopy and then went back again and broke my ankle. Not even skating, just skating to the toilet before going to my final... and yes. Broke it. No one was watching, it wasn't spectacular, but by jove! I thought I had just done a big roll, but then I couldn't stand up.*
>
> *...that freedom and escape is harder to get to because of the level of skill that is happening (as the sport develops), and what's demanded of me at training, so I'm not feeling too free [since the injury].*
>
> *It's been really tough actually. I've got fibromyalgia... I've been really good for the last couple of years. Most days either no pain or limited pain. If I... do anything stupid like excessive exercise or if I don't get enough sleep and so on, I'll be quite bad. What I call a bad day these days would have been a good day three years ago [though]; it would have been a noticeably good day. But it does mean that, for instance, when I'm skating I don't always know if I'm dealing with an injury problem or the [fibromyalgia].*

> *...when I went to pack my gear for the next training session, I squatted down to pack my bag and thought, oh that doesn't feel right. I went and saw a physio and the initial thought was that it was a meniscus compression or a small tear. So, I stayed off it and gave it time to heal and functioned as an NSO [non-skating official] and I did that purely with the idea that eventually I would heal up and I would go back to it. But eventually I... found out that this was not something that was fixable. From that moment I could not be around derby. Two years later and it will still catch up with me sometimes. I think it's because I left derby at the peak of my infatuation with it... I thought, this is the most astonishing thing ever, and then it stopped. So, it was a wrenching departure, it wasn't one where I was ready to let go of it. I would dearly love to be able to be associated with it still. I can't go near it but I'd love to.*

There is a serious depth of feeling around sudden departures caused by injury. A sudden 'wrenching' from one of the most enjoyable experiences of a skater's life, followed by suddenly no longer being able to participate. I would argue that just like roller derby needs to consider different levels of skating skills and find pathways for new skaters, it should also find ways to keep skaters involved after injury and during injury recovery.

It is important to note thought that this negative assessment is not the case for all the leagues. Many do try to keep skaters or ex-skaters involved, for example, through coaching or bench-managing or being involved in committees that do not require skating. Many stay involved through help to administer leagues, promote roller derby to new skaters or manage bouts. There are ways to continue involvement in the community and the sport as well. Some leagues do manage to continue involvement relatively well. As one skater described it:

> *[I have been off skates for] two-and-a-half weeks. So it's still pretty fresh and I'm still involved in going to training and I'm going to bench (coach) for the bout coming up, but it's not quite the same as being physically into it and physically active. I'm confident I can work hard and I can come back because I've seen people break both their legs and*

> *now they're jumping around and maybe not skating anymore but jumping around and being active and strong still. So I'm confident I can work hard and be strong and get back on skates, but my priority is to just get strong first, and if I can be part of the community whilst I'm getting strong, then whether or not I put skates on again is irrelevant because being part of the community is kind of the point at the end of the day.*

Another offered a somewhat idealised description of how a skater managed being injured:

> *She coached, while injured. She NSOed [was a non-skating official], while injured. She bench-coached, while injured. It's like all the names you see on the internet. You see a soccer player, he gets kicked in the shins and you know, you get a Gold Logie performance out of it. A girl gets knocked in the shoulder, dislocates her shoulder, she tapes it up and keeps going. A couple of Panadol later and she's back on track, ready to roll and throwing just as big hits as she was before she got injured. So there's so much acceptance and positivity in there.*

For some, the community within roller derby was key to injury and accident recovery. In one fairly extreme case amongst my participants, a skater had fractured her spine in a traffic collision while also being pregnant. She explains:

> *...I was in a really bad car accident, where I fractured my spine and my car was written off, which was pretty scary and intense, and I thought that I'd never come back to derby. Then when I went to the Alfred and had all my spine x-rays and stuff, they found out I was pregnant, which I didn't know. So, that was a double shock at the same time... So I'd been skating and doing everything I possibly could and I was still getting my period... So it was like really scary, two massive scary things happened at once. I was like, 'that's it, I'm never going back to derby'... [But] everyone was still really supportive and helpful and it wasn't as scary as*

I thought it would be, telling all these people these two massive crazy things had happened to me.

Many also talked about the pressure of not only having to train intensively for such a competitive sport but also to contribute to all the tasks that are required to run a league. Most leagues have compulsory requirements for contributing to committees, training attendance levels and volunteer labour for bouts. For example, at the time of my involvement (2009-2012), the VRDL required of members that they contribute to two or more committees, have a particular training attendance rate of three or four sessions per week (which did vary from season to season), as well as compulsory volunteer tasks at bouts. Often skaters would train at gyms for strength and injury prevention in addition, sometimes two or three times a week. If these requirements were not met, then sometimes a skater's access to competing in bouts was restricted or removed. For those with part-time jobs, no caring responsibilities and no ongoing fitness or health issues, this was realistic. For many, however, this was not, especially over the long-term.

In derby you are required to do committee work. And know the rules and work out how to change those rules. And in other sports this is not the skaters' job. It is the combination of doing the skating and then all the development around it as well. There is very little separation of the roles. The reason why so many are disillusioned is ***because*** *of the DIY [original emphasis]... Being tired is a big thing!*

About three years in, I hit a real low. I'd been captaining a team that had been having little success for a couple of years and people had abandoned it and of course when you're the common denominator, you start to think it's you. Very busy at work, very busy with my studies, really snowed under, really fucked. I nearly quit then.

There is something about being removed from the very activity that fulfilled you though: a period of grieving and struggle with accepting a new approach to activity, to sport and to the body. While leagues can and do provide support for injured members, they often do not.

> *So strong is the fear of injury amongst some, that there is an almost determined denial of the possibility of injury.*

What this shows is the limits to a sense of community in some sports and in some versions of roller derby. There are problems of volunteer-work overload, plus destructive forms of behaviour that arise because it is difficult trying to maintain a league with limited resources. These problems sometimes combine with destructive forms of competitive behaviour that arise in organisations, heightened perhaps by the competitive nature of sport. This can and does lead to exclusion should one not 'measure up', or in some cases, the use of the idea of competitiveness as a cover for discriminatory behaviour.

These stories of exclusion due to injury or inability to commit significant time to a sport are a notable counterbalance to the more positive life-changing results. They also confirm my argument for the importance of physical activity occurring within *both* a supportive *and* a radically alternative culture which rejects mainstream conceptions of competitiveness. If the sport is to be at all emancipatory, it needs to be both inclusive and resistant to dominating and destructive forms of organisational exclusion.

Under some conditions, then, roller derby can inhibit mutual fulfilment and freedom. It can add to or even be the source of profound alienation from a person's body. At an extreme, conditions inhospitable to injury or variations in levels of skill could lead to a sense of hate for the body or self, and alienation from a community. The latter can be the consequence of, for example, insisting on participation in a particular form of training in order to be part of the community. These conceivable limits to its liberating potential are both internal to the sport – e.g. a lack of conscious thought around radical inclusion – and external to the sport – e.g. some of the mainstream norms around aggressive competitiveness in sport and ideological constructions of bodily limits. This warning note is particularly important to sound because it emphasises that roller derby does not necessarily 'change a life' in a positive way. It emphasises the importance of *consciously* maintaining the particular, radical conditions detailed throughout this thesis. No cultural practice is *necessarily* radical and emancipatory, not even an alternative one. It is only in the constant reflection on, and revision of, practices

that these practices can maintain their radical nature. That is, emancipatory praxis is about a *conscious* practice of mutuality, freedom and empowerment.

There is an obligation that comes with saying the sport is 'open to anyone'. As one skater describes it:

> *...we task ourselves with providing communities to women, and children and men and families in many cases, and we make a promise to people who join that we will provide you with a safe and empowering place to explore some of these issues that you can't do anywhere else. So that means that roller derby attracts a disproportionate number of people with mental health issues, people who are lower SES, brackets often the amount of time that we require of people. We have people who haven't played sport or have had injuries or haven't had good positive experiences with sport.*

This interviewee went on to say, too, that:

> *I think the management of injured skaters is particularly difficult, how you manage injured skaters coming back. How you manage a team... For people who are [in] recreational suburban leagues, then there are major issues around how you manage time requirements, team identity and cohesion amongst people who have jobs and kids and (friends)... outside of roller derby.*

This discussion leads us on to a discussion of racism within the sport, and its general whiteness, particularly concerning the leagues which were the focus of my research, in and around Melbourne.

On racism: 'this is not revolutionary for all of us'

> ...in order [for people of colour] to thrive in this community, this space has to be as revolutionary as it is for white women (Mick Swagger, 2018, founder of *Team Indigenous)*

During my involvement in the sport from 2009-2012, it was often remarked that ‘this sport is so white’. This was the case, at least, in the leagues in and around Melbourne – i.e. the leagues that were the focus of my skater interviews – and it does reflect the composition of the sport as it currently exists, more generally. Most members of these Melbourne leagues were white. Most leaders of these leagues were white. Leaders of leagues or teams that were not white would comment themselves on how white the league was, not only in terms of numbers but as a description of the culture. Naty Guererro Diaz (2018), a Chilean woman and previous member of the VRDL Executive, describes well the consequence of this culture and history when it comes to policy and how leagues are managed.

> I think the feeling of policy makers is often that we make policy, to serve the majority of the group. So we have a group of, I don’t know 100 or 150 members, and we make a policy that’s going to serve you know 98-99 percent of those members. The problem is when you have a group that’s been excluded from roller derby for a long time like particularly in Australia, people from other cultures or non-white heritage, then they are not going to be served by a policy that serves the majority... particularly when you have policy that serves the majority like that it often is silent on race, it’s silent on issues that affect the minority of members and that is a failing. Because as soon as you’re silent about race, as soon as you are silent about oppression, that is when oppression is able to flourish.

It is one thing to notice the whiteness, another to do something about it. White skaters simply stating ‘this sport is so white’, without attending to the reasons why or, even, suggesting changes that might need to occur, is in many ways an avoidance tactic. It becomes a simple statement of fact about policies and structures, instead of turning that fact of inequality into a catalyst for making an organisation or culture more equal. It can also provide a cover for this inaction. Worse, joking about the sport being ‘so white’ without taking action to undo this white dominance can reduce the visibility of Black, Brown and Indigenous participants.

The radical act is not to name the dominance – it is to consciously take action against this dominance, action which must include listening to, raising and prioritising the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). There are many ways to take this action, too, as I will now discuss. For starters, a serious look at the imbalanced numbers of memberships could be reviewed.

> I can count the people of colour who have moved through the league. I can name them all and that in itself is a problem. I couldn't name all of the queer or gender diverse people in the league because [there are so] many of them. You know, like they are a large part of the league, not just in terms of leadership but also in terms of numbers – and people of colour are not. And that is that is not reflective of the kind of city that we live in... It's certainly not reflective of the area of the city that the league is situated in and it's absolutely not reflective of the kind of revolutionary community that I would like to be a part of. (Guererro-Diaz, 2018)

As many have commented, and as I have discussed in chapter 5, the sport has quite boldly and even courageously welcomed the idea that the sport is 'very queer' and even actively encouraged LGBTIQ membership.[50] It is joked that roller derby is not only 'queer accepting' but 'queer proud'. Yet the experience of BIPOC skaters in the sport has often not been the same.

One good summary of the discussion of experiences of racism within the sport, or at least within the VRDL in Australia, is a podcast produced by *Mick Swagger* (see 2018) – coach, skater and founder of Team Indigenous[51] – in discussion with Naty Guererro-Diaz. Guererro-Diaz notes that, in the Victorian Roller Derby League (VRDL) there are often questions about 'how can we be more inclusive? How can we... be more

[50] There are importantly also many exceptions to this. It would be an overstatement to say that roller derby has not excluded transgender members, for example. It would also be an overstatement to say that lesbian and gay and bisexual identifying participants have not felt excluded by polices or practices of team-mates. The difference, however, is that these exclusions are more often talked about openly and attended to.

[51] Team Indigenous has a social media presence on Facebook and Instagram, at the time of writing. It was founded by *Mick Swagger* as a global team for Indigenous skaters, and it was first officially recognised as a global team by the WFTDA in time for the world championships in 2017.

welcoming?', and so it is particularly disappointing, even heart-breaking, when race is not considered in the same way. As Guererro-Diaz states, '…to someone who is really committed to diversity and inclusion like I am that's really painful to see people... actively trying to include, you know, everybody except for people who are black and brown or who are not white' (2018). Guererro-Diaz continues, 'that's why I think it's so pivotal at the moment because we're doing so much good work in other spaces and we're not doing... very good work in this space' (2018). In the podcast there is even a reflection on why the numbers might be unbalanced, and further issues come to light. For example:

> I have found roller derby to be a space where I need to navigate my identity carefully because I have felt that at times I haven't been white enough for the group. That I've been too outspoken or too angry or too physical in a space that values physicality... and those are issues of race. Those are issues that arise because the league that I'm a part of is, I would say, at least 98 percent white and has been the entire time of being a part of it and hasn't really been willing or able to look at that and address it head-on. (Guererro-Diaz, 2018)

For a sport that claims inclusiveness, including in Melbourne, this is poor practice. It goes further, though. As a 2018 article by catherine lizette gonzalez[52] points out, 'many racial and economic barriers keep White people in the majority in roller derby; skates, protective gear and membership fees can amount to as high as $500' in the US. Costs can be higher in countries like Australia that also require shipping, often from the US. In summary, there are many reasons the sport is dominated by whiteness, and those reasons cannot be properly acknowledged, let alone addressed, without first listening to current and past BIPOC skaters.

Mick Swagger describes some of the reasons for forming a global team dedicated to Indigenous skaters and to promoting Indigenous struggles and rights internationally. In part, this was because of a need to decolonise roller derby, which is also about 'recognizing that opportunity and access exist in roller derby only for white

[52] Font as printed in reference.

privileged American and European people' (cited by Constable, 2018). It was also about addressing:

> the clear racial imbalance in a sport whose ethos is female empowerment but that draws mainly white middle-class athletes. That is because the sport is most popular in the United States and Europe, where white people are in the majority, and the expensive start-up costs... are a barrier to entry (*Mick Swagger*, cited in Constable, 2018)

Team Indigenous also sees itself as much more than a roller derby team. It is also an advocacy organisation for Indigenous rights internationally, particularly for Indigenous women. For example, it campaigns to raise awareness of the disappearance and murder of Indigenous women globally.

The team's very existence is testimony not only to its founder and members but also to what can be achieved when voices of the oppressed and discriminated-against are raised within the sport and beyond. It shows that issues of exclusion and discrimination are not irresolvable, especially if the will is there on behalf of those who hold privileged positions within the sport. The prompt support that the Women's Flat-track Derby Association (WFTDA) offered to Team Indigenous is one example of how leadership bodies can attend to calls for acknowledgement. In a similar way, the WFTDA eventually supported the rewriting of gender policy, after significant pressure from transgender skaters, activists and allies. While this took time, roller derby is also ahead of many other, more mainstream, sports on gender policy (as discussed in previous chapters).

This work on behalf of Indigenous skaters has now opened opportunities for moments of solidarity and support. Tui Lyon (2018), captain of the Australian team was interviewed by *Mick Swagger*. She spoke about the process of giving a platform to Team Indigenous at the 2017 World Cup in Manchester. She says:

> I had been following Team Indigenous' progression throughout the weekend... (and) as a white person I felt the absolute importance to show publicly a stand of solidarity with Team Indigenous. I think... it's a tricky place to tread as a white person and all I wanted to do was create a bigger platform, and... take any opportunity I had to potentially share the

> message of Team Indigenous with a wider audience. And Team Australia being in the final game we were afforded that opportunity. So I think it is ignorant to not recognise that platform that you are sometimes handed. So for me I felt very strongly about ensuring that we had some sort of Indigenous representation in our moment before our game, rather than having our (national) anthem.

There was a 'pretty unanimous no' amongst Team Australia to playing the national anthem. They were very happy to share the message of Team Indigenous instead of the anthem. Team Australia were especially keen to contribute to Team Indigenous' public awareness campaign about missing and murdered Indigenous women worldwide. As a consequence of this act of solidarity, the message was then communicated through internet media and also the BBC. For both Tui Lyon and *Mick Swagger*, it was the favourite moment of the World Cup weekend. Swagger also described how this was such an important expression of support.

In part, what this shows is when the people affected by decisions and organisations and cultures, even the practices in radically alternative subcultures, are able to organise, be heard and their words are taken seriously, opportunities genuinely open up for change. They shift the very real, practical meanings of solidarity, mutuality and inclusion. These acts move the sport closer to its lofty claim of full inclusion. Like the fact that skaters control this sport is so radically different from most other sports – resulting, for example, in safer rules and greater inclusion of transgender skaters – so, too, being open to the feedback of BIPOC skaters, and providing spaces for such skaters within current structures, opens up the sport as a whole. It changes the sport and draws it to closer its radical ethos.

In my interviews with them, a number of skaters reflected on teamwork and coming to learn to work with others, saying that this is something they gained from the sport.

> *So, then we not only have to teach people how to roller skate, we also have to teach people how to be on a team. You have to teach people how to volunteer. We have to teach people an enormous array of skills, not just how to play roller derby…*

> *So, people that you normally wouldn't get along with or hang out with, or be in the same community as, derby is something that transcends that, and, from that, all of the other riches come.*

> *It was really fun and I felt free and I felt accepted... I used to be a pretty, like a hardcore punk in my early days. You know, anti-government and anti-establishment and anti this and anti that. I was a gentle punk [laughs]. I liked the music. I liked the release the music gave me. And that's what roller derby did as well. It was like I can just be myself and no one is going to give a hoot and that was really liberating.*

Such camaraderie and teamwork need to be generalised, which means taking complaints and critiques seriously, too. Naty Guererro Diaz (2018) finishes up her interview by *Mick Swagger* by making the really important point:

> ...white derby players are often – and we hear it all the time – often saying, 'This is the most revolutionary thing that ever happened to me. I've grown as a person, I've met people who are like minded. I've... enjoyed my time in the community', and that's all true but it's not true for all of us...[in this] sport or this community. It's not been the most revolutionary community that I've ever been in.

Mick Swagger responds: 'in order [for people of colour] to thrive in this community, this space has to be as revolutionary as it is for white women. And you know from what I've seen over the past 10 years and coaching around the world? It's not everywhere. It's not most places and I would really like to see that change.'

I have argued throughout these results chapters that, for so many skaters, roller derby is the sport and the community through which they found freedom, self-fulfilment and even reconnected with a stronger sense of self. Unless this sport can be freeing and fulfilling for all participants, then the sport cannot truthfully hold to its claim of being radical.

Radical communities of care

In our lives, our relationships with each other are constrained, attenuated and even destroyed through individualised systems of employment, competition for that employment and the exploitation of caring labour that is unpaid, unrecognised and unsupported. Radical social change then involves the opposite:

1. attending to our collectivity;
2. caring for our bodies and ourselves, together; and
3. through these acts, creating the radical conditions of mutual self-fulfilment.

In short, these are at the heart of our humanity and, therefore, at the heart of potential social systems which could nourish this humanity and aid our mutual self-fulfilment. Roller derby has provided just one case study of the ways in which we can break out of alienating practices and transform ourselves through mutually self-fulfilling practices. The point, however, is to develop these practices into a deeper and more politically-conscious praxis.

Mike Wayne (2003) talks about the need to emphasise the intersubjective in life in order, as he maintains, to restore the effects of capitalism's draining of subjectivity from the subject. I would argue that this intersubjectivity must simultaneously be in conditions of freedom; that is, freedom for all.[53] Wayne's argument is remarkably similar to that of Dundas (2010). Any progressiveness of sport is in the social interaction it creates or is based upon. According Andrew Smith (2011: 496), and for CLR James, the 'desire for togetherness and the celebration of the human as an ability to act in the world' and those 'flashes of wholeness and completion which cultural forms at their best provide' – including those of sport – are not the 'other' to political struggle. These are what a genuine and popular politics is about. A politics without them is inhuman.

The results also indicate how reproductive labour can be turned towards radical social change. This labour by its nature cares for each other and the needs of our bodies and selves. It can be re-directed from alienating practices towards the reproduction and

[53] '… we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' (Marx and Engels, 1848, conclusion to chapter 2 of *The Communist Manifesto*)

enhancement of our corporeal powers *within* the conditions of our mutual self-fulfilment. Further, I argue that such a shift would not be an additional task for social movements. In many ways, it is already a core constituent of them. As discussed earlier, theories of radical social movements have tended to focus on resistance in the form of withdrawal of productive labour or by trying to connect movements for social change to organised labour, both within and outside workplaces. What the radical practices of roller derby demonstrate, however, is the importance of integrating radical reproductive labour into any communities of personal and social change. From the labour of care and community-building to taking care of bodies and training people in new skills, this kind of labour not only contributes to the achievements of a roller derby league, it foreshadows how radical social movements can remake the very social conditions of our mutual self-fulfilment. How this provides an indication of the conditions of emancipatory praxis will be discussed in more detail in the next, concluding chapter.

Consciousness through praxis

As discussed in chapter 2, while the ideology of our non-corporeality is strong, our bodies do remain ours. Organic labour is not fixed. It exists as part of a human being who is embodied, agential and, therefore, can rebel. Our bodies can be the source of the means to our freedom: the source of our power, our agency and our own self-fulfilment. This is especially so when acting in concert with others. Even with the dominance of the capitalist mode of production and its constituent social relations, 'the human body has not lost its character – its volatility – nor has the individual corporeal body lost its fragility. It is an immanent, ever-present feature of our existence.' (Fox, 2015: 172) We might add, it is an ever-present feature in our power and agency.

Precisely because of its immanent, ever-present character, the socially connected human body carries immense possibilities, has powerful emancipatory potential. It also has the potential for bringing joy and, because of it, the inspiration to establish these practices and direct them at wider social structures, an idea which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Roller derby skaters have indicated how this can occur, in three ways:

1. demonstrating alternatives and attracting others to the alternative ways of being (as highlighted in this chapter);

2. rejecting the ideological imposition of dominant forms of femininity, especially as imposed upon bodies (in the case of this thesis, primarily feminised bodies); and
3. embodying alternative practices, thereby changing the way we relate to our bodies, the bodies of each other and to the selves of each other – that is, creating new forms of embodiment and intersubjectivity.

The evidence of chapters 4-6 shows that roller derby demonstrates that, under certain conditions, including conditions of freedom to be oneself, a new relationship to the body can be developed. However, emancipatory change does not just happen but has to be agential, self-aware, intentional or conscious. This means that the alternative practices of the sport will necessarily come up against the fact that our social systems are riven by contradictions and social conflict, at many levels and at different intensities at different points in time. The same is true at a personal level. Contradiction is our first experience of the world, before even that of the self (Watrofky, 1911: 376; cited by Fox, 2015: 193).

There are different levels of consciousness. One is a radical, critical consciousness that judges activities against their emancipatory potential. It is the consciousness of critical social theory. Participating in roller derby for very many women shifted not only their relationship to their bodies and to each other but also shifted their consciousness of the constraints of femininity on their past activities. Their participation in a freeing and fulfilling physical activity meant that, for the first time, they experienced a profound way of being which was, for a time, an experience of freedom from the constraints of dominant femininity and objectification. For many, this awareness shifted their being permanently. They could no longer be in the world in the same way. This, of course, does not (necessarily) mean that the world had changed, just that they now experienced social constraint upon their bodies as something consciously felt and seen. This is because they had, for a while, moved in the world as free(r). The contradictions of their existence – between constraint and agency – had, for a while, shifted in favour of agency. This experience of agency is critical for understanding any movement for social emancipation. The key, however, is to shift this awareness into a

conscious movement for social change, something that is discussed further in the next chapter.

As discussed in chapter 2, contradictions must be resolved at the point that some kind of crisis occurs, whether for the social self or for social conditions more generally. For Bhaskar (inter alia 1986, 1991; see also Collier 1994), such contradictions exist at three primary levels:

1. between the cognitive (how we think the world is) and the actual (how the world really is);
2. between actual human needs that could be socially met and capitalist social relations driven by the profit motive; and finally
3. contradictions within capitalism itself, between, for example, competition within the market that conversely leads to monopolisation through elimination of minor competitors.

Ideology's undoing, then, often occurs through quite ordinary practices. We see this, in part, in roller derby. Beginning to see ideology for what it is – a masking of underlying social relations and structures of oppression – is at once a practical and a cognitive process (Eagleton, 2007: 94). Consciousness reflects practice and also is embedded within practices. It reflects practices of both conceding to oppressive social relations *and* resisting them. As Marx thought, false and enslaving appearances can be broken by counter-phenomenal knowledge – unmasking the appearance of something to expose the real social relations it represents (Collier, 1994: 6-7, 11). This unmasking, in turn, makes this knowledge potentially liberating because it can be directed at structural change. Collier and Bhaskar go on to argue that, when social forms change, the explanation will not normally lie in the (conscious) desires of agents to change them, 'though as a very important theoretical and political limit, it may do so' (Bhaskar, cited by Collier, 1994: 147; see also 1994: 6-7, 11). Which is why the idea of conscious, intentional and productive collective mobilisation is so important. It does begin to change that very consciousness, again through shared social activity. It is indeed how we build a new society within the 'womb of the old' (to appropriate Marx's words[54]).

[54] Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859).

It is through collective practice then, that we break from the drone-like individualism of capitalism and see that we primarily consist of a social particularity (see e.g. Bhaskar 1986, 1991). Radical sport – if founded on informed practice and guided by an over-arching purpose – is a central tool for developing this collectivity. It can bridge a divide between human agency and an intentional reproduction or transformation of social relations – through discussion, sharing of information and tactics, organising social struggle and critical reflection.

Alternative forms of cultural practice can, simply by the act of working together to create something with and for each other, create new social relations. They can shift social interactions from being objectivist, oppressive and alienating to ones which are mutually fulfilling. In this way also, if these practices develop into a series of conscious political acts – acts intended to empower each other, to engage with the body, to create in reciprocity and to reject oppressive constraint – they can become more than a limited expression of our desire to live a fuller life: they can become the heart and muscle of social change. In this sense, roller derby is more than a sport or a pastime: it is a fledgling form of social change.

The point of the thesis has been to try to make all this conscious. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this for critical social theory and for a more consciously emancipatory praxis.

Chapter Seven

Conditions of Emancipation: From Radical Resistance to Conscious Praxis

Introduction

This research has focussed on feminised people – women and non-binary people in this case – the body, culture and practices of freedom and flourishing. The empirical case study was conducted on the sport of women's flat track roller derby in cities and regional centres in and around Melbourne, Australia.[55] This thesis has made several discoveries. The results can be summarised as follows:

1. The body matters, not only to our existence, but to our freedom and flourishing: to emancipatory praxis.
2. The social conditions of action also matter: human emancipation can only be created *out of* conditions of mutual freedom and flourishing.
3. Consciousness of the intimate connection between these two can contribute to social movements that:
    a. provide places of healing, mutual care and flourishing for all involved;
    b. provide hints at possible futures for our freedom and flourishing; and
    c. are under the control of those affected (for roller derby, being *by the skater for the skater*).

[55] I have noted, in chapters 1 and 3 some of the politics of place within and across roller derby: in particular, how contemporary roller derby is still dominated by the US, even where this is also challenged. As discussed in chapter 6, as well, I acknowledge that, in my case study location of Melbourne and nearby regional centres, the sport is very white.

So, first, this research has provided a confirmation that the body matters. It matters in many ways. These ways provide a counter to, as Fox (2015) describes it, the ideology of the independent, non-corporeal self. We are corporeal beings whose corporeality is not only ignored but actively repressed and even assaulted under the current social conditions of colonialist, patriarchal capitalism.

The skaters talk about overcoming their feeling of physical alienation in several ways. The most immediate is the shock at finding that they are, in fact, participating in a sport, and it is a sport which is physically demanding. This realisation, while being startling, is not, on the whole, one of distress. It is the opposite, in fact. While being surprised that this is an intense and demanding sport, there is joy in this discovery. With it, there are repeated experiences of the joy of training hard and learning what the body can do, as well as its limits.

> *… even with the muscular ache that comes afterwards, it was that good muscular ache that comes with having exercised and just feeling, yeah my body did that thing and it was happy about it.*

Most of the women who play roller derby, at least those in this study, have not played sport on a regular basis before and have not even participated in regular physical activity. This is consistent with countless studies on women dropping out of sport during and after high school (e.g. Craike et al., 2009). So, for them, this experience of physicality, and of a completely new sense of what their bodies are capable of, is revelatory. Even where obstacles are encountered and a skill or trick is hard learnt, the process of learning, overall, is joyous.

> *You have these insecurities; you can't do something, that's it. So, when I teach people and I can see it on their face, I know that they're struggling, I know what the thought is inside their head. So, if I can give them exact technical steps to complete the task and then they do it, and it works, and I see that switch off in their brain that goes from bug, I can totally do it. Oh my God. I can do it. It's that moment, that look on their face where you know that it's that moment that will push them way past*

and way forward. It's not someone telling them they can do it. Now they know they can do it; from inside they know.

These experiences are intimately tied into, and push back against, the wider life experience of constraint – and even physical assault – that women and feminised people are subjected to. As discussed in chapter 2, the ideology of femininity is its own form of constraint. It is internalised and reproduced in our everyday actions, both consciously and unconsciously. It is also a reaction to very real social and physical forms of constraint on women's bodies. These constraints occur through legal systems of control, through political systems of inequality, through economic systems of unequal recognition for work and which enforce the unpaid labour of care. Alongside this is an aggressively maintained ideology of a gender binary that creates the dominant (and false) idea that men and women are fundamentally different and that this difference is not socially created but is 'natural' or 'biological'.

The second major finding of the research is that the skater experiences of life-change are strongly connected to the alternative subculture of roller derby: that the form of our inter-subjectivity matters for our own freedom and flourishing. This subculture openly rejects the constraints of dominant femininity, while not rejecting the idea of femininity altogether. It is a re-writing of femininity and a re-writing of what it means to be a woman or to be feminised. For many, this is exactly what attracted them to the sport in the first place, namely 'its alternative, punk, feminist image'. The intensity of the experience of change indicates just how deeply constrained women felt before they joined. Several things follow from this active and conscious rejection of dominant femininity.

The first and most obvious rejection is that of the idea that women cannot be aggressive. Every participant research mentioned this in some way: from completely overwhelming experiences of the freedom to be gained from finally being able to express aggression, to finally finding a community of women in which this was considered acceptable.

I'm an aggressive and often angry person so roller derby gives me a much needed outlet. There's nothing better than the smashing into your

> *friends for 2 hours to make you feel good, especially after a day of dealing with demanding children.*
>
> *… it was a mixture of violence, drinking and athleticism [laughs], which are three things that I like to do, and it was [with] a lot of women.*

On the other hand, as discussed in chapter 4, there was also a sense of ambivalence towards, or even rejection of, the word aggression and a recognition that it was interesting that we usually associate the word with men, and in conditions of violence against women. The discussion had then become one of not whether aggression or anger is expressed but of how and under what conditions. Contact sport does provide for sets of rules around this and, in roller derby, at least, of ways that minimise actual damage to others. A contact sport on roller skates likely provides a unique form of anger-expression, for it requires immense skill and precision to direct power from an unstable surface of wheels towards an unstable surface on wheels. It therefore requires a very precise and controlled form of physical aggression – in ways that other contact sports may not. Learning to express this power and aggression with precision is also important, as discussed in chapter 6.

The rejection of dominant forms of femininity also provides – in many roller derby leagues, at least – a place for transgender skaters to explore more fully their gender expression and being. This research included four transgender skaters, three of whom identified as women and, as self-described, were in the process of transitioning at the time of skating. One participant identified as being non-binary. All four skaters described their experiences of feeling completely included in the sport. While they played in only two out of the six leagues of which skater-participants were members, this is a not an insignificant result when compared with other sports. The overwhelming experience of these skaters was of finding a place where they could express who they really were or, even, to explore who that was. They found a place in which: others were experiencing change in areas of their lives; the focus was on skill and contribution to the sport and not on themselves or how they appeared; they were not only ‘allowed’ to present as how they liked but were actively encouraged to do so. One skater who was quoted in chapter 5 found ‘a community that would give me a number of different ways in which I could explore my own femininity, which at that point was still really

embryonic.' The environment was significant 'because I was still working out who the hell I was… [and it gave] opportunity to go in any one of a number of different directions, surrounded by people who probably weren't going to give me grief for it.' Another explained:

> *…when you're walking from one side of that (gender) spectrum to the other, there's a journey in the middle, you don't just teleport and that was exactly how I felt I was expected to behave* [beyond roller derby]. *I was expected to be the perfect little prissy princess which is so not my personality. I love dressing up in frills and skirts… and sometimes I like wearing a pair of jeans and really slacking down.*

Finally, the alternative subculture was also obvious when it came to the full expression and exploration of women's sexuality. There are jokes about roller derby being 'so gay' and that one way to come out to those around you is just to join the sport. Roller derby as a whole is *active* in the acceptance of the diversity of sexuality. It is not only accepted, but freedom of sexuality is actively encouraged and even celebrated. The queer roller derby network is a global network of queer identifying skaters. It is an online network, but it also forms teams for display matches. In Australia, a whole tournament is dedicated to queers only: *Battle on the Bent Track*.[56]

There is a saying in queer roller derby to the effect that we're not just queer and proud but we're also the best skaters. Queerness gets *resignified* as a strength, a superpower. This provides a significant contrast to many other sports, where 'don't ask, don't tell' is the best that that they can muster (note the *Come Out to Play* report by Craike et al., 2009). 'Don't ask, don't tell', of course, is not friendly at all. It conveys an insistence that couples never show affection, that there is a danger in being yourself and that 'being out' is not allowed. It is a demand for constant suppression of the self. Many skaters have talked about how much freer they felt within the communities of roller derby to express their full sexuality and forms of intimacy. It therefore becomes a space where many skaters who were previously 'in the closet' or less open about their

[56] It is the largest all-queer roller derby tournament in the world. It happens annually. It has recently expanded to include New Zealand/Aotearoa.

sexuality feel more comfortable in removing their repressed forms of expression. More than that, however, many women come to discover their fuller sexuality – including same-sex attraction – while being involved in the sport. This demonstrates again how important the surrounding culture is to our ability even to conceive of, or be open to, our full selves. This is less about the common narrative of people being 'born that way' and more about people having the freedom to explore what a wider set of options might look like. In this way, attraction is not repressed before it even has a chance to be felt and explored.

> *Then it just grew and grew and I think I got more comfortable with who I was and more open with who I was. The people around – and this whole world opened up so yeah, there was them – like those two girls in particular but then slowly getting to know everybody else in the league...Then it just kept on going and now I'm in an awesome relationship that I probably wouldn't have been open to if I hadn't have gotten back in – like comfortable in that kind of environment, in that kind of world. It's sort of been a ripple effect to every other part of my life.*

> *… there is the gender element as well. So, queer kinda covers* ***everything****. That's been huge! Realising, you know, I no longer think that gender is a binary, [there are] all the different classifications… I think it aligns with my feminism at least and [comes from] some articles posting, meeting people, meeting (transgender women).*

Towards human flourishing: from alienation to freedom

This leads to the third major grouping of discoveries in the research. This combination – of being allowed to express ourselves physically in a wider variety of ways and being part of a liberating subculture which openly rejects norms of femininity – is a powerful source of self-change. It literally allows someone to breath and to move towards a new self, a self that possibly was always there as potential but was refused expression. It is therefore also radical. It is a radical rejection of social constraint. It is a radical rejection of forms of human alienation that structure our lives under patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist social relations. Specifically, it is a rejection that:

1. we are non-corporeal beings;
2. our bodies and our selves are simply objects to wield instrumentally for certain uses or to be controlled by others;
3. we are isolated beings with no need for connection;
4. the gender divide is natural and biologically based;
5. of constraints created by the dominant current social and cultural conditions in favour of ones which aid freedom and fulfilment; and
6. a hierarchy of power is required in order to make decisions (being 'run by and for skaters' has analogical social reach).

Reclaiming power over our bodies and lives comes through working *with* each other (Nussbaum, 2007: 85, 132) and *away* from the systems of exploitation that objectify ourselves and each other. This sounds simple but is not. While roller derby has demonstrated a potential for emancipatory praxis – or practices which aid mutual flourishing – the practices have not always been liberating or fulfilling, at least not for all skaters. Therefore, I also argue that it is necessary to become conscious of the practices which do not aid mutual self-fulfilment but contribute to objectifying and oppressive systems of disempowerment. Consciousness is needed, as well the connection that certain practices form between mind, body and each other. When we act consistently with mutual self-fulfilment in mind, we transform not only our own but each other's lives.

A guiding question for this thesis has been: how might the sporting practices of roller derby provide a guide for wider social movements for emancipation? What might we learn from it about the practices, forms of being and cultural conditions that could contribute not only to the immediate and temporary well-being of this sport's participants, but to wider forms of social change? What might these practices indicate about the possible forms of praxis within social movements that would aid our struggle for social conditions which contribute to our mutual flourishing and to our *species being*?

The results would indicate that we cannot understand human agency, or even human existence, outside of a movement towards mutuality in human flourishing that

attends to the body. These twin ideas now connect us to the more longstanding theoretical discussions around 'what makes emancipatory praxis'? I will now discuss in more detail the implications of the empirical findings of this study for broader theories of emancipatory praxis. However, in order to discuss them, it will be useful to revisit the discussion in chapter 2 around the alienating social conditions of our existence, namely the conditions that create the need for freedom in the first place.

Alienation can be understood as separation from control over our own bodies and our labour. Alienation can also be understood as an entire social system which prioritises production for its own sake or, more accurately, production for the private profit of very few people. That is, it can be understood at both individual level and from the perspective of wider social conditions. Instead of the goal of production being to reproduce the conditions of mutually fulfilling life, the *goal* of production for profit is fundamentally different. Worse, it causes an inversion whereby the reproduction of the social conditions of human life, and even the reproduction of animal and plant life, have the goal *of* production. It is reproduction for production's sake, instead of production being for reproduction (as discussed in chapter 2).

The consequences need not be detailed here, for they are obvious to most[57]: the planet's life is drained; basic human needs for food and shelter, let alone a flourishing life for all, are not met for most of the world's people; and production-fuelled climate change threatens future life. This is the consequence of reproduction being subsumed by the interests of production for profit, of our alienation from human-centred social reproduction. Let us return for a minute to the outline, described in chapter 2, of the three components of human society that Marx and Engels sketched in the *German Ideology* (1845-6 (1932)):

> … human beings must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a

[57] As I review these words, bushfires are burning across many parts of Australia; the worst air pollution seen in Australia currently hangs over the city of Sydney. This week will also see scorching temperatures across the country and another round of record-breaking weather.

> fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.

So, first of all, human society produces the means of subsistence. The second act, Marx and Engels (1845-46) continue, is producing the means to produce, that is, producing tools. The third act is reproducing the social conditions necessary for all of this, that is, the social systems of production and reproduction.

As human society changes and 'develops'[58] so, too, does the relationship between these three components. Under capitalist social systems, production no longer exists in order to meet human needs, but exists in order to make profit. Therefore, our human society's production becomes increasingly separated from meeting human need, let alone human flourishing. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The labour involved in both production and reproduction therefore also shifts away from sustaining human and other life. Through this process, we are alienated from all of:

1. the exercise of our own labour in production;
2. the products of our labour;
3. each other in the act of producing; and
4. each other in the everyday conditions of life and from the conditions of our mutual human flourishing. (Marx, 1844a; also Wood, 2004: part 1)

This list focusses on only one component of human society, though. As discussed in chapter 2, we also become alienated from:

1. our labour in reproduction;
2. the results of our labour in reproduction;
3. each other in acts of reproducing; and
4. again, each other in the everyday conditions of life and from the conditions of our mutual human flourishing.

[58] The scare quotes here serve as a reminder of how troublesome and political the idea of social development is. It is a note, too, that with each 'advancement' there is often a simultaneous regression and that there are questions over who, or which social groups, have the power to define advancement and regression in the first place. For further anti-colonialist critiques of the concepts of development and civilisation, see e.g. Frantz Fanon (1961 (1983)), *The Wretched of the Earth*.

If we are to understand alienation at all, then we must also take into account these additional forms of our everyday labour. I would argue, as well, that we are all alienated from human flourishing because all forms of reproductive labour are subsumed under the priorities of productive labour (see e.g. Nussbaum, 2007: 167, 277-78, 347). That is, we (as workers) eat, have shelter, have access to buildings and streets, migrate, reproduce children and heal from sickness and injury only insofar as these are required to provide productive labour. At its most extreme, this list of human needs may barely be met at all. Sweatshop labour conditions in the textile industry in Bangladesh, for example, are not sufficient even to allow for recovery and healing between shifts, let alone across the lifetime of work (e.g. Klein, 2001, 2008). Within most national boundaries, too, there are not the state-supported means for survival and healing (Fraser, 2016a, 2016b). Instead, this labour of survival and healing is expected of increasingly struggling communities and family networks, networks sometimes stretching across national boundaries themselves (see e.g. Farris, 2019; Nussbaum, 2007: 277-78).

Put simply, reproduction is for the needs of production for private profit and all other forms of reproduction are subsumed under this primary need. What is needed instead is for *both* production and reproduction to be redirected *towards* the basic needs of human beings in general and, specifically, towards the requirements of human flourishing in its many forms. Supports would be provided for practices of genuine mutuality under the control of those labouring. This would be a social system where needs and flourishing were not separated but *both* nurtured according to the vast potentialities of our species being (or, in Marx's idiom in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, the German word *Gattungswesen*).[59]

The thesis has focussed on uniquely women-led acts of human flourishing. In part, this is because these acts are repressed and suppressed more so than they are for men. This act of research is thereby also resisting patriarchal dominance by drawing

[59] 'Following Feuerbach [and Hegel], Marx describes the human being as a *Gattungswesen*, a term which can be translated either as "species being" or "species essence"…[and] which can be naturally applied both to the individual human being and to the common nature or essence which resides in every individual... Or again, very significantly for Feuerbach and Marx, it can be applied to the entire human race…The main intention of both philosophers in using the term, in fact, seems to be to imply that there is some sort of intimate connection between each person… and all other human individuals, and that the source of this connection is the fact that the qualities which constitute the essence of each individual are somehow bound up with those which are essential to the whole species. (Wood, 2004: 17)

attention to labour and actions which are feminised. It has also drawn attention to the multiple forms of alienation that occur under capitalism, beyond 'production'. The focus on feminised labour – in both its oppressive and liberating forms – also locates the thesis within contemporary debates around radical self-care. I now move onto a discussion of these radical practices.

In order to reverse Marx's four forms of alienation as outlined in the 1844 manuscripts, we also need to reverse the prioritisation of production over reproduction. We need to take a *reproductionist* approach to society, in part by returning to the latest contributions by those working in Social Reproduction Theory. For example, Bhattacharya (2017), Fraser (2017), Vogel (2013) and others (see chapter 2 of the thesis). The title of Bhattacharya (2019) is telling: 'From the production of value to the valuing of reproduction'.

As this chapter will now show, this is not a clever conceptual manoeuvre but has very practical implications for social movements. Moreover, the idea is not simply abstract, but it comes out of analysing and critiquing – and truly understanding – the motivations behind those involved in transformative and resistant practices. This deep understanding has, in part, been born of my own experience of these practices, then further reflected upon through a critical realist approach to ethnography of a roller derby case study. Ideas for the research design stem from an approach similar to that which Marx expressed in 1843 (1843a (1844)), namely to understand, in a deeper way, what it is that people are in fact already fighting for. Or, as Raymond Williams (2005: 43) describes it, to understand forms of alternative subculture as an expression of 'the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention… [and the] extraordinary range of variations, both practised and imagined, of which human beings are and have shown themselves to be capable' and which sit outside of the dominant cultural forms.

Towards radical social reproduction

Tithi Bhattacharya (2017: 19) describes how Social Reproduction Theory 'restores the economic process its messy, sensuous, gendered, raced, and unruly component: living human beings, capable of following orders as well as of flouting them', as well as creating alternative social conditions from within the old. As Meg Luxton puts it, 'production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated

process' (cited by Bhattacharya, 2017: 3). That is, the economy cannot be understood without understanding reproduction. Neither can resistances to the economy. In an interview for *Dissent Magazine*, Nancy Fraser (2017) says that:

> Struggles over social reproduction are virtually ubiquitous. They just don't carry that label. But if it came to pass that these struggles did understand themselves in this way, there would be a powerful basis for linking them together in a broad movement for social transformation. And if they also understood that the structural basis of today's crisis of care is capitalism's inherent drive to subordinate reproduction to production, then things could get really interesting.

After all, the struggles around social reproduction are everywhere, including struggles around: access to clean water, a basic income, pay for caring labour, migrant labour rights, reduction in child-care costs, a shorter working week, quality nursing homes and nursing conditions, access to quality food and housing. What then would social reproduction look like if it were directed at community, tending to life and our mutual self-fulfilment on a society-wide scale? This thesis highlights *some* of what we might see.

I will now describe what a *reproductionist* focus might look like. I describe how this approach integrates well with contemporary debates around the need for radical self-care, healing and emotional labour within social movements. That is, how such an approach can help us to rethink, to reconceptualise the old discussions around how 'the personal is political' and how to build the new world from within the old? A society and its social relations geared towards our corporeality, freedom in action and mutuality is a society whose praxis is already one heading towards radical social reproduction directed at emancipation.

Fox's words below – a summary of one the aims of his book – provide a good link, and they help us to open the discussion of what social reproduction directed at emancipation might entail, from and beyond everyday experiences of mutual self-fulfilment.

> With regard to the breadth and influence of the many ways in which we are called upon to discipline our bodies and the extent to which related

> bodily anxieties have featured since the middle of the twentieth century, I argue that corporeal prompts towards a different sense of our selves are both immanent and promising. These arguments draw not only on the Marxist tradition but on feminist, postmodern and post-humanist insights and on the experience of those suffering serious chronic illness, as on the moment of joy and exhilaration we can experience in our bodies. I suggest that Marx's notion of 'species being' – as a collective mode of mediating between our organic and inorganic bodies – can equally apply to other experiences of the body, such as those shaped around gender. Whilst maintaining Marx's emphasis on a dominant mode of production, I also draw on his recognition of the coexistence of other, less pervasive modes to explore the… application of Marx's model to… other long-established, oppressive relations… (Fox, 2015: 20)

Whereas Fox argues that Marx's view of making change is based on the suffering body, taken to the point where the self can no longer cope and must change, I have a considerably more hopeful view of Marx. That is, he also sees the change that comes of collective forms of resistance – through the making of joy. Moreover, this is the main way towards emancipatory praxis, because severe pain and suffering often, instead, leads to depression, demoralisation and dissolution. It is a point that Leonard Cohen (2009) makes. When asked about how pain may lead to creative practice, he disagrees, arguing that creative practice is instead a sign of freedom from pain and alienation. He disagrees with the common view 'that it's exclusively suffering that produces good work, or insightful work'. Rather, he believes 'that good work is produced in spite of suffering. And as a response, as a victory, over suffering.' (Cohen 2009: 2:20-3:00) Of course, it is a complex dialectic: the tension between amelioration and joy, which may or may not lead to freedom. However, ultimately, pain and suffering alone can also, and often does, lead to an inability to shift things in one's life. Knowing this is important. The end point of Marx's life's work was to move society away from being one which exists for production's sake. This requires looking beyond economic production and towards freedom (see e.g. Nussbaum, 2000, 2002, 2007; Sen, 2000; Geras, 1983; Lukes, 2008).

The social is both our source of alienation and our freedom and mutual self-fulfilment. Our oppression is to be found in social systems that are hierarchical and abusive. However, our emancipation is to be found in activity *with* each other and in *changed* social relations. The question is not whether or not freedom can only be found through cultures of care and support for each other, it is a question of *how* these cultures can come about from within, and reaching beyond, the social relations constituted by the opposite: alienation and oppression. As Angela Davis (2016: 49) said 'I don't know whether I would have survived had not movements survived, had not communities of resistance, community of struggle (existed)… It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism' and change. Davis's words are not unique. Many talk about the need to find hope in resistance, and this hope in resistance comes from sharing change with and alongside others. It entails sharing hope, joy and optimism. Fox (2015: 224) describes Sennett's (2008) view that such joy can be gained from repetition of tasks:

> The experience of joy and beauty of dwelling and working with resistance is a common exhilaration for both musician and dancer (and as Howe [see below] indicates, for many involved in activities, including sports)… In both (dancing and playing music) the acquisition of skill involves repeatedly reaching for a particular resonance – the effort to bridge that boundary (between lack of skill and skill).

Fox goes on to describe, again using Sennett (2008), the potential to connect with the corporeal, and each other, through such 'experiences of corporeal pleasure':

> It is the pleasure of immersion and losing the sense of separation of mind from body and body from floor (or partner) that Sennett (2008, 173, 174) described as 'the continuity between (one's own) flesh, and the balance of the material world. It is that sense of expansion and presence across the extent of the dance floor that flows form this corporeal immersion and ceasing to treat that floor as 'other' (Fox, 2015, 224).

Howe (2003: 93) describes this as 'reaching the self out beyond its apparent boundaries' (cited in Fox, 2015: 224). Martha Graham put it this way in 'Dancer's

World': 'Your goal is freedom, but freedom may only be achieved through discipline… imposed by you on yourself.' She explains, 'In the studio you learn to conform, to submit yourself, to the demand of your craft so that you may finally *be* free.' (Morris, 1996: 35; in Fox, 2015: 225; original emphasis).

These words are reminiscent of so many of the skaters' words reproduced in this thesis: 'It's a freedom. It really is.' This is especially so if the skaters are at the higher, elite level. A sense of additional freedom is gained from a body well trained. In the repeated process of training, a skilled athlete no longer has to think about what she is doing. It becomes tacit, automatic. There is a 'freedom from overcoming the chaos', as discussed in chapter 6. From this can come a sense of ability to overcome anything, not only on the track but extending into life in general. If this level of mind-body unity, and unity with our material surroundings, can be gained from training, then we have also learnt how to do this in many areas of life. The goal:

> … is not victory over one's body at all… It is unity: the regaining, for those brief moments for which it lasts, of perfect immediacy between body and mind. The point… is to limit and even to close the distance between self and body… (and to enjoy) that absolute freeing sense of ontological unity that can occur when mind and body are wholly in sync with each other, when intention is translated into effect seemingly without effort or intervening formulation of means or method… moments of ontological synchronisation. (Howe, 2003: 99; see also Fox, 2015: 225)

What is also important, though, is to understand the critical conditions in which these moments of synchronicity may occur. As skater after skater describes, it is the conditions of learning, skating and, even, competition that are key to them gaining a sense of unity with self as a corporeal being. Both our corporeality and our inter-subjectivities matter to our human self-fulfilment. As we have seen in chapter 6, too, under certain conditions, the opposite of unity, connection and intersubjectivity occurs where oppressive social structures make their way into the practices of a community. These must be consciously attended to, for unity in our corporeality and mutual self-fulfilment can only occur when they are. Marx's theory is one that 'suggests a different

"human language" to that of the traditional debate about human nature: one founded in relationships rather than separation, thus embracing the corporeal as central to our sense of self.' (Fox, 2015: 19-20; see also Nussbaum, 2007: 85, 132, 277-78). I agree with Fox that Marx's writings offer clues to a more human world, free from alienation.

There is a popular contemporary call for us to reconnect with our bodies, ourselves and to reject the anti-corporeal ideologies of our modern world. However, this call, on its own, is unrealistic and idealistic, in the classic philosophical sense. The dominant ideas that promote our supposed non-corporeality and individual separation are also, perversely, a form of comfort. In social conditions which exploit and oppress ourselves and our bodies, we can also wish to disconnect from our bodies, to split ourselves. To treat our bodies as if they were not our own, not part of our selves, is also to momentarily and partially to separate from these oppressive social conditions of labour and exploitation. Under these social conditions to connect with our bodies is to feel the pain and suffering. Just as those who experience trauma will psychologically dissociate from what is happening to them (described by, for example, Levine, 2010), it is, in a sense, sensible that workers in factory sweatshops, whose bodies are being harmed, also disconnect psychologically from the conditions of their labour, from what they are being asked to do with their bodies. The same might be said about reproductive labour.

There exists a parallel here with the way in which Marx and Engels described how institutions such as the family and the church function in contradictory ways. While religion is the 'opium of the people' and the family a pillar of existing social forms of care, the community of religious organisation and the home also offer the 'heart of a heartless world' (Marx, 1844b: 234). Current conditions of life for many are too difficult to bear in full honesty and truth. Ideology can therefore not only be a distortion of understanding but *also* a comforting distortion. These ideas can never fully be exposed for the false conception of the world that they are until the material conditions of oppression and exploitation, of alienation from our bodies, our activity, our relationships and our mutual self-fulfilment, are resolved. Meanwhile ideology will provide some partial comfort and distorted sense of escape for many. So, the undoing of ideology can only come through alternative *practices*.

In order to reverse the four forms of alienation outlined in Marx's 1844 manuscripts, we also need to reverse the prioritisation of production over reproduction.

As I said above, this is not a clever conceptual manoeuvre but has very practical implications for social movements, coming as it does from truly understanding the motivations behind those involved in transformative and resistant practices. It is to understand what people are already fighting for, even if they do not necessarily understand the potential of their everyday struggles. Or, as CLR James presented in many of his major works (Smith, 2011), it is about understanding that within every cultural form, every expression of humanity, exists a drive to 'live the life within', to live freely and in mutually fulfilling ways (see also Marx, 1843a (1844); Williams, 2005).

In chapter 2 and above, I contributed a critique of the economist or 'productionist' focus of many Marxists and critical theorists, particularly those of the 20th Century. This is not to understate the importance of the economy but to demonstrate that we must also look beyond the economy in order to grasp what it is that we are fighting for when we are aiming for the social conditions of mutual self-fulfilment. Having reviewed the words of skaters and found a central theme of mutual self-fulfilment, I will now describe what a *reproductionist* focus might look like. This approach also integrates well with contemporary debates around radical self-care, healing and emotional labour within social movements. Such an approach can help us to rethink and reconceptualise the old discussions on how 'the personal is political' and also 'how do we build the new world from within the old?' As activists of the past have well understood, these are not simply nice rhetorical statements. They connect with deep underlying political problems:

1. How do we include those excluded from the economy into social movements for change?
2. Is the role of the marginalised just epiphenomenal to labour and economic struggle?
3. Why is the labour of care unrecognised not only in dominant ideologies, but even within social movements?
4. What happens when working class and social movements begin to socialise reproductive care?

When the focus on production is flipped to reproduction, some of these political 'problems' begin to dissolve. I propose that maybe these are not in fact 'problems', or even curiosities, at all. Rather, they are about the very nature of our social movements precisely because they are about the very 'nature' of our humanity as social and embodied. Our wish for fulfilment can only really be understood by coming to terms with these two ideas. The flipping to a focus on reproductive labour, and on social reproduction which is radically, mutually self-fulfilling, helps make sense of not only what our emancipatory praxis could look like but also what social movements have always already gravitated towards. In the words of one roller derby skater:

> *But certainly for me, it was the idea of real, strong, athletic derby, is that it's revolutionary. It is revolutionary. You look at the administration of the sport and look at the development of the sport, which is entirely promoted and run by women, and it has a different flavour to if it had been done by men.*

The praxis of human flourishing

> The concept of the independently, non-corporeal self, founded as it is in experience, cannot be readily dispelled by logic. To attempt to do so is to remain, most often, within the self-supporting and blinding confines of that logic. It was only through praxis that so central and profound a belief could be challenged. (Fox, 2015: 200)

We turn now to a discussion of what the deeper meaning of everyday resistances may be for wider social movements and for activity directed towards human fulfilment and flourishing or, as Marx imagined it, activity to change the world in order to fulfil the potential of our *species being* (Marx, 1844b; Wood, 2017: 17). First, let us look on at what Marx described as human emancipation. In Marx's writing (1843b: 233-34) on *The Jewish Question* he described how someone will have become a (true) *species being*, only when they have become human in all of:

> … their empirical life, their individual work and their individual relationships, [and] only when humanity has recognized and organized

> their *forces propres* [own forces] as social forces so that social force is no longer separated from them in the form of political force, only then will human emancipation be completed. (Marx 1844b: 233-34)

In other words, emancipation will be completed only once society is organised to aid mutual human flourishing. Furthermore, all of Marx's work is based on the simple idea that the very activity that so many feel stifled by under capitalist social relations – our labour – is the same activity that is the source of our human flourishing. Our collective, creative labour *can bring about* our human flourishing if only society were organised to this end. It is exactly this collective, creative labour that I have been witness to amongst roller derby skaters. It is an activity – a labour – that is performed in concert with others, designed to aid others and produces more than an individual result. Activities such as these are examples of labour wherein a binary between productive and reproductive no longer makes sense. Producing together, for each other, interdependently – this is at the heart not only of sport but of all forms of emancipatory creative practice. I am not the only one to make this argument either (e.g. Cleaver, 2009: xxx; Fox, 2015: 224-25; Carrington, 2009: 19; Williams, 2005: 40).

Marx critiques Feuerbach's materialist outlook in his famous *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). Marx argues that Feuerbach's outlook remains idealist – or, 'in the clouds' – because it is still not connected to our knowledge *in human activity*; that is, as also sensuous, practical activity. Similar to Fox's statement above, Marx writes:

> The question whether objective [*gegenständliche*] truth can be attained by human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. It is in practice that man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or unreality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. (Second thesis)

That is, as also discussed in chapter 2, developing consciousness of what we are fighting for is also a *practical* question: raised and resolved in everyday practices. The results of this research into experiences of roller derby are consistent with this outlook. In the best practices of roller derby, skaters force open spaces 'to be' a truer self, to

allow each other to develop new skills and grow, to make temporary spaces for *living the life within* – and this resistance to constraint occurs even within and against wider oppressive social relations.

Marx's work in general, including in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, focuses on the concept of labour – both as exploited waged labour and as source of our human emancipation when allowed to be the expression of our internal and connected creativity. This thesis has discovered something else, though – or at least, it emphasises what others have noted (e.g. Nussbaum, 2007). The emancipatory forms of human labour are best understood when seen in acts of mutual self-fulfilment and in the full expression of our physicality. This physicality is also a form of caring labour, where our bodies are tended to, pushed, trained and supported by each other. As discussed in chapter 2 (and throughout), these forms of labour are so often hidden or even denied a real social existence or representation. Labours of care are denied their true social importance. Alongside the denial that working bodies are more than mere machines or instruments, objects embodying labour power to be bought and sold in labour markets – the denial of working bodies as human beings – there occurs a denial of our human bodies as *living*. The ideological 'logic' of capital both denies that 'livingness' of our bodies and denies the life-giving nature of caring labour. These forms of objectification are connected. Consequently, the general experience of labour, whether productive or reproductive, is one of alienation, or of 'having the object of one's expression torn away' (Fox, 2015: 201).

The general experience of caring labour – of the labour of repair and life-giving – is so often one of its opposite: compulsion, domestic dictatorship *and even*, denial of its existence. At its extreme, being a single, woman carer is not seen as a social contribution but as a social drain. What kind of strange and alienating 'society' could conceive of caring labour in this way? Fox points out that '… the neglect of the corporeal has a wide-ranging oppressive effect… [but it is] central to the constitution of modern social policy' (Fox, 2015: 14). For example, the denial of adequate benefits and the treatment of patients as objects. The whole approach to social and health policy is one of frugality and punitive measures to manage the body.

> This has promoted a focus, not only on the will, with neglect of the corporeal, but on the will as independent of all other influences and, in turn, an emphasis on independence and self-reliance a the essential

> character of our humanity… (and) it denies recognition to those who bare the 'stain' of the corporeal and who cannot exhibit that self-reliance founded on will power, untrammelled by its influence – children, women, the aged, the ill, those with a disability, those experiencing poverty and other. It is an approach that oppresses them for revealing their – our – humanity. (Fox, 2015: Ch 1)

It is clear that one case study cannot represent everything that is required for emancipation from social constraint. However, this case study can show the ways in which, every day, we find ways to express our humanity and to step outside of the systems of constraint and oppression. These activities demonstrate the constant struggle to live a full life that is expressed in almost every area of our lives. Even more importantly, such activities illustrate aspects of the wider social change that is necessary. As Andrew Smith (2011, 2006) explains, CLR James's work made the powerful point that these everyday resistances are not the other to social struggle but are at the heart of it. They are at its revolutionary core. To understand how change is made, we need to understand and listen to that heart, in all its bloody, messy, beating, biological reality; in the ways it symbolises life; in the way it connects us to each other; in the way it suggests systems of social connection that could be organised for each other in mutual life-giving.

I mentioned in the last chapter, Cleaver's (2009: xxx-xxxi) description of how 'our struggles become more than resistance when we strive to find new ways of being and doing' and that, in Negri's words, they become moments of self-valorisation (cited in Cleaver 2009). My claim, which I will repeat, is that *all* acts of resistance are first moves towards self-valorisation. This is consistent with CLR James's argument that the source of all political struggle is the wish to live free from constraint and to live the life within. After all, our social and political struggles are very often about the everyday attempts to liberate our 'activity and things from capitalist uses' (Cleaver, 2009: xxx). An early slogan of the eight-hour movement was for 'eight hours for what we will', that is, for 'eight hours for self-valorizing activity of whatever kind they might desire' (Cleaver 2009, xxx). Movements for workers' self-organisation are often connected simultaneously with movements for self-realisation and fulfilment. Paul Mason (2008) argues similarly in his history of how the working class organised across the globe and

strove for a ‘socialist way of life’. Cleaver (2009) also describes how CLR James has been critical to the development of his understanding of ‘the ability of people not merely to resist, but to take the initiative in struggle against the capitalist constraints on our lives’ (Cleaver, 2009: xxviii). He explains his intense interest in the work of CLR James and argues that the strength of all of James’s work, including his famous book on cricket, was on ‘our self-activity and struggles to escape domination’ (Cleaver, 2009: xxvii). As he points out, in Marx’s work, ‘our living labour appears as the only source of whatever dynamism the system has. The possibility of our self-activity rupturing capitalist efforts to harness’ it is the path to radical self-activity (Cleaver, 2009: xxix). Our resistances to a constraining system become visible and knowable at the point that they are disclosing new ways of being and doing. This is key to understanding what resistance is about and how everyday resistance can and does shift into a more conscious, more political form of struggle.

This can be seen in everything from the forms of resistance in sport and physical activity that I discuss in this thesis to the union run-social activities, communes and occupations of the early twentieth century across the globe: the building from below of the ‘socialist way of life’, as Paul Mason (2008) describes it. Similarly, Raymond Williams (2005) talks about the existence of alternative cultures in capitalism that can move from resistance to opposition whenever dominant social relations are not able to incorporate new ways of being. He points out that, while the dominant culture appears as the only culture, it is not. There are always resistances to the dominant culture: sometimes remnants of the old and sometimes indicators of future social forms.

Under certain conditions, then, sport changes lives. Far from being the ‘other’ to social change and freedom, sport, too, can be central. Just as social movements, critical art projects and workers’ self-activity can create a space for resistance to dominant social structures, alienation and their attendant ideologies, so can sporting cultures. This is important. As Bentley Le Baron (1971: 561; own emphasis) notes, the struggle for emancipation is never solely about directly changing those social structures, it is also about ‘the self-activity of *becoming other than we are*, the activity of surpassing the given (which is ourselves), and of beginning to be new people, creating new kinds of social relations’. As this case study of the radical, women-led sport of roller derby demonstrates, this absolutely does occur within the places of physical activity *as well*.

Roller derby as looking beyond

This case study has recorded that at its best roller derby demonstrates alternative ways of being, and thereby provides glimpses of what they may look like on a wider scale. It does so by:

1. tending to the body in physical activity;
2. offering an outlet for the emotional toll of living under capitalism;
3. rejecting dominant forms of constraint, in this case oppressive forms of femininity;
4. providing an alternative space for learning, support and care for each other; and
5. creating a place for mutual self-fulfilment through and with the body, a place for experiencing the self as whole, as a physical being working in concert with others.

In all these senses, roller derby foreshadows the overcoming of alienation(s) and therefore shows the potential conditions for aiding human emancipation. While many within critical social theory have talked similarly about the radical possibilities of the creative arts, they have tended to downplay the possibilities of sport. This thesis demonstrates that no cultural activity – including sport – should be removed from consideration of its radical possibilities.

Further, I argue that physical activity – the direct involvement of the body in alternative practices – could be critical to any emancipatory potential within social movements. This is for one key reason: our body is so often intensely neglected, punished, drained, excluded and exploited under capitalism. This is especially so for racialised bodies, whose labour is often stolen or super-exploited; for feminised people, whose bodies are expected to be given up for sexual and caring labour, often against our will; and for disabled people, who are too often infantilised, super-controlled and denied access to even the most elementary social activities. The labour of social, emotional, and corporeal reproduction is key, and not only to the functioning of capitalism. When the dynamic of reproductive labour is inverted and put under the control of those who perform it, the labour of social reproduction becomes radical.

Similarly, when the physical activities of the bodies who are oppressed and discriminated-against are put under their own control, these practices have the potential to become radical. As queer disability activist and radical poet, Jax Jacki Brown (2017), puts it, ‘my body holds the secrets to the revolution’. Those who live in particular bodies know best how cultural practices impacting upon these particular bodies must change. Control by those who are most affected by social practices is essential to any emancipatory change. In this case study, this has meant the sport being ‘by the skater for the skater’. Such a principle is more broadly relevant though. This case study has shown that under these conditions, ‘even’ reproductive labour becomes the key component of the radical transformation of social and cultural practices.

In other words, what contributed to ‘roller derby changing lives’ is re-directing both reproductive and productive forms of labour towards a culture of support: towards a culture that fosters human flourishing, in conscious and democratic mutuality. This necessarily includes a rejection of constraints on bodies and behaviours associated with dominant ideologies of femininity which seek to pacify and repress women. Simultaneously, it means attending to the full corporeality of participants through training, skills-development and tending to care for the body. Participating in a sport in a supportive and alternative community leads to the re-experiencing of the body as ‘mine’ or ‘for me and not everybody else’ or ‘that can move and act and is not simply for a male gaze’. This is a body that is also recognised as more than ‘just a body’ but as a human being with agency who is encouraged and supported.

This thesis has explored, through a case study of a radical praxis, the dialectic of human alienation and self-fulfilment, and the conditions through which this dialectic might lean in favour of the emancipatory instead of the oppressive. Recall the words of Leonard Cohen I quoted earlier. They are worth repeating:

> That’s a popular notion, that it’s exclusively suffering that produces good work, or insightful work. I don’t think that’s the case. I think in a certain sense it’s a trigger, or a lever. But I think that good work is produced *in spite* of suffering. And as a response, as a victory, over suffering. (2009, at 2:20-3:00 minutes; original emphasis)

It is also reminiscent of the work of CLR James and his decades of commentary on sport and, in particular, cricket. According to CLR James' historian Andrew Smith (2011: 487), for James:

> The triumph of it (taking risk in sport), when it occurs, is that it demonstrates to the watching world for a moment something of the possibility inherent in human creativity, something of the human ability to transfigure and transform circumstance.

Boxer and journalist Mischa Merz (2012, Preface) explains that she practices the sport of boxing 'like an artist, because I must, not to attain any particular goal, but because it is who I am'. In these ways, sport displays, in a sense, that dynamism of living labour that Karl Marx argued drives human development and directs it towards emancipation. This would certainly explain the popular enjoyment of sport and physical movement. Dave Zirin (2008: xii; own emphasis) surmises that:

> … sports are more than just a sounding board for war, graft, and mind-numbing moralism. It can also be a place of inspiration that doesn't transcend the political but *becomes* the political, a place where we see our own dreams and aspirations played out in dynamic Technicolor. Politics are remote and alien to the vast majority of people. But the playing field is where we can project our every thought, hope, and fear.

The words of roller derby skaters call on us to listen: to our bodies, to ourselves, to each other, to the life within us, together and reciprocally. They call on us to make change now, to express our humanity, to step, ever-so-briefly but also boldly outside of systems of alienation and control. They call on us to break free and express ourselves in our full corporeality. They show that, to take that step, is not only desirable but possible – sometimes, under some conditions, with the support of some others.

That 'something about roller derby skaters' that some talk about is more than a rejection of dominant femininity and the constraints it imposes upon person and body. 'That something' is also a reflection of a more universal rejection of oppressive imposition: rejection of constraining ideology that works to maintain our alienating

social systems. One skater describes it as 'that fuck you' attitude. That attitude is simultaneously a rejection of constraint *and a reassertion* of the self-within. This self-within is not some individualised mechanical-like body, it is embodied and living and connected to others: not in Borg-like[60] monotony, either, but in creative mutual self-expression, with and alongside others in freedom.

These 'at their best' practices are not guaranteed. Even in a radical sport like roller derby, with its athlete-run ethos and rejection of oppressive femininities, mutually-fulfilling practice is always an ambition, a bar to keep raising. However, these practices are an important indicator of emancipatory possibility. They show the possibilities of freedom from alienation. They run counter to the ideology that our bodies are machine-like and just require the right fuel and servicing. The roller derby practices of physicality, skill-development, care of the body and care for each other have created desires for wider change in the bodies and selves involved. It has changed lives, not only as individuals but as *subcultural particulars*.[61] These personal changes are not unimportant to social change. They *are* social change as it occurs daily, everywhere, spontaneously and sometimes consciously politically. As Marx says, the trick is to make this everyday activity conscious, to make our resistances directed at an alternative future, not only a present. He describes this beautifully in an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge:

> We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not. (Marx, Letter to Ruge, 1843a (1844))

If we apply this idea to the analysis of sport, then we will see that there is power in making visible the radical potential of what draws so many into sport. This thesis has attempted to contribute such a deeper understanding. Skaters are not the only voices making this call. Instead of looking for the voices of giant Masters above us, they

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[60] The Borg are a Star Trek representative, in alien form, of what rigid and dictatorial collective practices may sometimes look like. Some argue they are a caricature of the old 'Communist' regimes.

[61] To use a Marxist and Hegelian term for individuals who are shaped by social circumstance.

remind us to listen now, to those next to us, beside us: voices already calling, whether in screams or a ‘give me chaos’ battle-cry.

Audra Simpson – Kahnawake Mohawk scholar and Professor at Columbia University – argued the point in a keynote at the Crossroads Conference in 2016 that: ‘Seeking the gaze of the self in another can be an endless source of suffering.’ The hope of mutuality does not exist in the gaze of the Master, yet ‘history is littered with this failed attempt to look away’. Instead, we need to start with acts of *refusal*: to look away, to build our own worlds from within the old, but away from and against them, as Raymond Williams also described of alternative, oppositional subcultures.

Roller derby shows one example, in place and in time and under certain conditions, of that attempt to look away. When it does this it does remain, as its slogan promises: real, strong, athletic and revolutionary. Being conscious of what makes it so, from the ground up, allows for the extension of this ethic across and beyond roller derby to wider movements for social emancipation.

> The reform of consciousness consists entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it. Like Feuerbach’s critique of religion, our whole aim can only be to translate religious and political problems [or in this thesis, problems of resistance and flourishing] into their self-conscious human form. (Marx, Letter to Ruge, 1843a (1844))

When trained in roller derby, we are trained to lift our heads, to look not down at where we are but ahead, to where we want to be and beyond. This is not unique to roller derby or to skating. This is how cyclists are trained, how I was trained on beam in gymnastics, how I was trained to shotput in school, how people are trained to play in tennis. Do not look at your feet, the beam, the ball – look ahead.

A radical practice such as roller derby then, in the philosophical sense, is a kind of looking forward, beyond now to maybe when. It is a complex and contradictory mix of commentary on femininity and its constraints in the past, now and as a harbinger of possible futures. These futures are where the binary of masculine and feminine, of man and woman, return to their more material reality: a reality which is neither binary nor

the same but is a diverse and complex mix of bodies formed, socialised and, always that little bit, resistant to constraint.

It is a beyond, too, of the current body, both feminine and human: a body which can flip and turn and tumble[62] in ways now only fleetingly anticipated but yet known, a body surpassing expectations of what is *both* womanly possible and humanly possible. It is a body, maybe, for which the former category may no longer even make sense, a body beyond gender binary and maybe even gender herself.[63] This beyond is immanent, emergent and also from within the contemporary social conditions. It is not an 'other' to now – it is *beyond* in multiple senses of this word.

A question appears in-the-now: how radically different is this future beyond? When skaters have had, and still have, to fight for inclusion and involvement – beyond white-dominant, trans-exclusionary and ableist feminisms – how radical can we say this alternative culture is? The answer, if there is an answer, is also to be found in the movement from now to future, in how well rumblings and internal resistances are heard, attended to and included within revised practices. This is, in part, a question of internal democracy. It is, in part, a question of how well governing bodies are able to resist the stabilisation of practices of domination and be open to the disruptions of those still fighting for empowerment and freedom.

It is a question, too, of how mutual the practices of mutuality in fact are. Queer roller derby activists and advocates were able to organise, connect and push governing bodies to listen. It is through this activity, and the allowing of internal organisation over difference, that trans-exclusionary rules were changed and reduced. However, some leagues still exclude transwomen. There are many leagues that exclude non-binary folk or require of them to hide and deny their non-binary identity. There are still leagues who deny the existence of racist practices and protect white privileges in league management. There are still leagues who do not actively keep injured skaters involved, let alone consider ways that the sport could be more inclusive of disability.

The sport has come a long way. There is still a way to go.

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[62] This is a deliberate use of terms which could equally describe gymnastics or roller derby.
[63] This is a deliberate gendering of gender in recognition of the fact that a binary exists for a purpose and that purpose is gendered: the oppression of women. Simultaneously, the end of a gender binary can only occur with the liberation of women.

Another question appears, then: how possible is this ‘beyond’? Again, this a question only answered in movement. It is neither yes nor no. It is in the everyday acts of resistance, of listening to the inner self, of communion, of free physicality, of tending to our bodies, of being both for ourselves and each other towards mutual flourishing.

Sport shows nothing more and nothing less than the ability of human beings to move in the world and to change it and ourselves. In so doing, it hints at a future beyond. It creates the potential for a world where those fleeting moments of freedom and flourishing that occur in resistance to our current social conditions might instead form the *foundation* of our social conditions. It is by appreciating these moments of beyond, and contributing to their openings, that our social movements may come to understand what an embodied and mutually fulfilling emancipatory praxis might be, in movement together.

Afterward

November 2020

This year of 2020 is now one of the strangest years in which to have completed a PhD thesis on sport, especially on a contact sport.

I have grappled all year with how the ideas discussed and the experiences detailed may still be relevant to this new world of climate change driven bushfires and global pandemics. As the year comes to a close, I am still grappling with this, after months of legally imposed lockdown in Melbourne, Australia, while living solo.

During this lockdown, I experienced barely any physical touch for six months, struggled to maintain physical activity, struggled to maintain calm and connection to my body in the face of significant health risks and generally experienced the opposite of the embodiment and collectivity described in this thesis. Still, somehow, the human drive for connection and feeling remained. Our communities reconnected in new ways. I returned to an online, home practice of yoga. We all worked in multiple ways from home, parents and carers took care of young ones in education and we all found new ways of conforming, of resisting and finding our own ways towards self-fulfilment. The exaggerated division between reproductive and productive labour became so obviously ideological.

I know not yet the implications of any of these experiences. I doubt many do. I only know that it was a strange year that challenged many of my conceptions of the world and how the social conditions of our living might be changed to work with our humanity.

I end now with the moving words of another roller derby skater, posted very recently on social media. With their consent, I offer this as final contribution to the idea that those in social movements, in whatever way this is conceived, really do provide insights into our humanity, both what is, and what could be.

The Hydra[64]

Keary Ortiz (*Agent Meow*), Brand Manager for Rose City Rollers, Wheels of Justice 2012-2017, and DJ for WFTDA.

> *Forged in 2008 from working class steel under the snowy gaze of Wy'east in the City of Roses, on behalf of the entire world of roller derby. Welded by a skater, named for a skater, this trophy quickly came to signify that the sport of roller derby was built by, and sole property of, its participants.*
>
> *In Austin, Texas, its Championship Sunday, and many of us should be asleep in hotel beds, dreaming of the fast-approaching fight to claim, and to hold high, this cherished award. It would have been a fitting homecoming, bringing the great ship of roller derby home to the city of its birth in time to celebrate 15 years since those early trailblazers organized their leagues into the WFTDA.*
>
> *But it was not to be. This year, the world had a different plan for us, and this day might have gone unnoticed in the struggle to maintain our bearings and our courage in such raging seas. But as the athletes of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association fight with Championship strength for the health of their families, and for overdue justice on the streets of their communities, the Hydra waits patiently in its place of birth for victorious hands to grasp it in celebration once again.*
>
> *Our derby family is scattered around the world, and it's been lonely. But, though separated, we can take solace in each other's shared struggles and little triumphs. In the era of uncertainty, we are still certainly together in our hearts, in our actions, within the welds of this trophy. For we, like the Hydra, are put together out of such common stuff, but are*

[64] The trophy of the WFTDA world championships, a steel trophy in the shape of roller skates. Details can also be found: https://wftda.com/the-hydra/

imbued with desires, challenges, and victories that render such significance from simple elements.

And like The Hydra, built on behalf of all of us from working class steel under the snowy gaze of Wy'east in 2008, we remind the world of this simple truth: the significance of an award is measured not by those few who hold it, but by those who craft it, and those who come together in love to offer it as tribute.

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