Becoming-Roller Derby: Women, Sport, and the Affects of Power

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Abstract

This project is centrally concerned with (re)writing and (re)conceptualising a feminist cultural imaginary for sport and physical culture. Focusing on roller derby as a ‘new’ sport played predominantly by women, I examine the various affects in circulation, both on and off the track, and what these affects do. Thinking through affects, I highlight the processes of transformation that women undergo through roller derby and the challenges of sustaining this kind of cultural space into the future. In doing so, I have written of women in their multiplicity, drawing on post-structural conceptualisations of subjectivity and recent socio-cultural theorising of affects. I acknowledge the challenges of women coming together to pursue a shared goal, yet the project is a hopeful one, in which I offer alternatives to reductionist thinking or biological determinism.

Conceptualisations of sport and leisure as ‘empowering’ or necessarily ‘resistant’ for women are questioned throughout this thesis. This questioning grounds my analysis in women’s bodies as they experience roller derby: as they skate, move, fall, bruise and break; and as they form friendships, allies and ‘enemies’, and feel love, joy and pleasure. Privileging women’s bodies throughout this thesis enables a focus on the affective realm of experience, rather than just the interpretive. A focus on affects tells a different story of sport and physical culture, one that is more generous in taking into account bodies sexed as female and their particular challenges in embodying power.

The DIY ethos of many alternative and extreme sports has been central to the growth and governance of roller derby, and is often expressed via the ‘by the skater, for the skater’ slogan. This project interrogates this ethos, along with the ‘win at all costs’ philosophy traditionally aligned with sport, in a way that acknowledges women’s affects,
in all their multiplicity – creative, destructive and everything in between – at the centre of the analysis. In roller derby, there are struggles among the women involved as they compete, on and off the track, for resources, authority and ‘power’. The affects in circulation through the sport – of pride and shame, love and anger, hope and disappointment – shape the social in very particular ways. Thinking through these affects provides illumination into the ways in which sport, transformations and organisations have been, and can be, thought in roller derby.

In this thesis, writing and roller derby are brought together and both activities have possibilities for transforming knowledge, risk, success and failure. This project is part ethnographical, part autobiographical, as well as drawing on the more ‘traditional’ methods of interviews and textual analysis. It is an assemblage where fragments of stories are brought together to write roller derby in a way that is open to future possibilities, while still acknowledging the very temporality and spatiality of the research process.

Having interviewed 36 women involved in roller derby for this project, and having spent hours immersed in the roller derby community in South-East Queensland, Australia, this thesis presents both a micro and macro perspective. Through examining the intricate, nuanced ways in which affects circulate between women at very local and more global levels, I demonstrate the importance of sensitivity, openness and the ‘feminine’ in research into physical cultures. Women’s affective experiences of roller derby are shaping the growth of the sport in very particular ways. Their feelings of exclusion, shame, success, pride, disappointment and love are shown as having important implications for the governance of the sport – for small local leagues and at regional, national and international levels – and for their own personal experiences of transformation.
Statement of originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

The research for this thesis was authorised by the Griffith University Ethics Committee under the protocol number HSL/30/10/HREC

Signed:

Date: 26th July, 2013
Me: my first bout, October 2010
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List of publications arising from research


Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter includes excerpts from the following peer-reviewed book section, of which I was the sole author:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each published paper.
The whistle blows. The blockers start skating, slowly at this stage as they hustle and try getting in front of the opposing team’s players. The second whistle blows. This time the jammers\(^1\) start skating. Fast. And faster. BANG. A blocker tries to knock a jammer over. But she is too good and doesn’t even go to the ground. She just skates along on one foot as she gets her balance back. I am in awe. ‘How does she skate like that?’

Waiting for my turn. Waiting for the bench manager to call me on, I wished I were a better skater. I want to play, but I don’t want to let my team down. I want them to think that I am great, that I am a worthwhile team member – needed even. And that’s causing the butterflies in my stomach. Not the risk of being injured. That hardly crosses my mind. If it happens, it happens. It wouldn’t be too bad to break a bone. So far I have found that it’s amazing what my body can do. It has suffered, experienced extreme pleasure, euphoric highs, deep lows, been close to death even. It is scarred, marked. It is my own body. A woman’s body. Mine. And it has so far served me well.

But right now I can’t seem to shake the stress. It seems that I cant ever do enough. The PhD thesis needs to be done. I have teaching to attend to. Family issues, personal issues, emotional, mental. Research! Interviews! Writing! All this and skating and derby training. Will I ever be able to reach my goals?

Finally it’s my turn. I can’t stop smiling: I am so excited and nervous. My face is beaming. Some of my team-mates smile back, others don’t. I wish there were more people here to watch me, to witness my ‘becoming’ a derby grrrl! I notice my ankle ache and breathe through the pain. Quickly joining the pack, the hustle begins. I slowly skate in front of my opponent, getting down low with my arse up high, hoping to block her once the game starts. The whistle blows.

There is no more time for doubts.\(^2\)

\(^{1}\) Jammers are the points scorers in a game of roller derby. They wear a cover on their helmet with a star to signify their status as the jammer. They are often the fastest skaters in a team.

\(^{2}\) Throughout the thesis, my auto/ethnographic writing is signified by the use of a different font (Arial).
Speaking (as) woman is not speaking of woman. It is not a matter of producing a discourse of which woman would be the object, or the subject. That said, by speaking (as) woman, one may attempt to provide a place for the ‘other’ as feminine. (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 135)

**Introduction**

This thesis is a response to the contradictions, pleasures and tensions raised in the above narrative, and the challenge of speaking (as) woman, even among women, in physical cultural spaces. My challenge has been to provide a place for the ‘other’ as feminine, specifically in the sociology of sport and leisure, and to write of women on their own terms, highlighting the implications for management. To do this, I write roller derby – a ‘new’, ‘women only’ sport space. But it is not only about writing; it is also about doing, being, *becoming*. Becoming healthy? Becoming active? Becoming part of something *bigger*? Becoming different to what one once was? Roller derby is a complex physical cultural site where issues of power among women are central. Discourses of empowerment and power run through and around roller derby in a way that is difficult to escape. This ‘power’ is *felt* through a range of affects: love, anger, aggression, fear, shame, pride, joy. And it is these affects of power that drive this thesis.

I aim to illustrate how affects shape the social for women in very particular ways, and what this tells us about sport, transformations and organisations. Words such as passion, desire, pride and love are often used in relation to sport. But questions remain about how these affects work on the level of individual and collective bodies. What do affects do? What do they enable or impede? In this thesis, I demonstrate the creative and destructive ways in which affects work in roller derby, often in surprising and non-linear ways. It is not a simple equation of effort equals
reward because, as we know, life is far from ‘fair’. Nor is it a matter of overcoming bodies by disciplined minds, for the ‘mind’ is part of the body anyway (and the ‘mind’ is itself a dubious concept). And neither do affects work purely on a collective level. That model of emotion, as ‘caught’ from others, has long been surpassed. Instead, in this thesis I am interested in what affects do for individuals and collectives in roller derby. In particular I am interested in the ways love, pride, joy and belonging – all understood as ‘good’ affects most of the time – can lead to unexpected and sometimes disappointing outcomes, while shame, anger, aggression and even hatred can be productive of transformative, valuable changes for individual subjectivity and collective bodies, specifically in sport and physical cultures.

The situated, temporal, relational nature of affect is highlighted throughout this thesis. In this way, a range of encounters – between women, between women and men, between individual and collectives bodies – can be taken into account. Power and its affects, for those bodies sexed as female in roller derby, is productive of a range of meanings, decisions and actions. As Sara Ahmed writes, ‘Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 10). This ‘miscommunication’ is central to the ways in which ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are often thought. One women’s experience of roller derby is different from another’s, and these differences, in all their complexity, are made visible in this thesis.

For women, it has been a challenge to participate in competitive sport – whether recreationally, socially, professionally, ‘seriously’ or otherwise – in ways that do not constantly involve them being compared with men. Thinking through affect, I counter this tendency. My focus is on roller derby as a physical cultural site, a sport and leisure space that needs simultaneously to be managed, celebrated, analysed and
This thesis examines the ‘new’ sport of roller derby and investigates the ways in which the women involved ‘feel’ about/because of their participation. The central question concerns understanding the social relations of affect that shape the embodied experience of roller derby in their multiplicities. To do this, I draw upon a post-structural feminist trajectory (Braidotti, 2011; Irigaray, 1993a) that emphasises the movement and multiplicity of subjectivity and follows these ideas more specifically into recent debates in socio-cultural theories of affect (Ahmed, 2004a; Blackman, 2012; Wetherell, 2012). Theorising roller derby as a physical cultural site through which certain affects are produced (pleasure, pain, excitement, anger, belonging, pride, shame) enables me to examine the significance of alternative sport cultures in women’s lives and what this might mean for the ongoing governance and management of ‘new’ and emerging sports more broadly.

Physical cultural studies: (female) bodies, power and society

We live in increasingly complex and uncertain times. In advanced capitalist countries, increasing ‘complexity’ and ‘uncertainty’ in the job market, education, the environment and international relations are evident (e.g. see Ang, 2011; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991), while at the same time changes are occurring within the sphere of leisure, sport and physical activity. For women in particular, these changes and complexities have given rise to hopeful possibilities as well as increased pressures (e.g. see Harris, 2004; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 2003; Wearing, 1998). To the ‘traditional’ sports, such as football, tennis, netball, basketball and cricket, have been added various ‘newer’ sports, such as surfing, snowboarding, kite surfing, ultimate Frisbee and, more recently, the contemporary, revived version of roller derby. These sports have both similarities and differences
with the more established ‘traditional’ sports mentioned above. They have been celebrated as sites where women (and men) can renegotiate identity, resist gender norms and transform gender relations (e.g. see MacKay & Dallaire, 2012; Thorpe, 2005; Wheaton, 2004; Woodward, 2009; Young & Dallalre, 2008). Sport and physical activity have been examined and conceptualised from a range of perspectives – for example, as ‘new’ sport, ‘lifestyle’ sport, ‘alternative’ sport, ‘subcultural’ sport and indeed ‘extreme’ sport, where risk and danger are central to the experience. These different ways of writing about the changing meaning and practice of ‘sport’ and physical cultures have been well documented in the literature (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Beal, 1999; Breivik, 2010; Donnelly, 2006; Giardina & Donnelly, 2008; Heywood, 2008; Kellett & Russell, 2009; Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003; Wheaton, 2004).

In choosing not to define roller derby as any one particular ‘type’ of ‘sport’, I acknowledge the women involved in my study and the various, sometimes ambiguous ways in which they describe this activity they love (and sometimes hate) as multiplicities.

In this way I position my research broadly within the emerging field of physical cultural studies, with an explicit focus on interdisciplinariry and post-structural feminisms. As Andrews and Silk comment in their introduction to a special edition of the Sociology of Sport Journal, physical cultural studies is ‘an over-arching sensibility or framework’ (2011, p. 3), rather than a particular theory or method for the study of physical cultures (Markula, 2011, p. 938). Physical cultural studies is a framework that enables the taken-for-granted notions of sport and physical activity to be questioned, undone and redone. This ‘undoing’ and ‘redoing’ – or, more precisely, ‘rewriting’ of sport and physical cultures – creates, as Andrews states, ‘potentially empowering forms of knowledge and understanding’ that can ‘illuminate, and
intervene into, sites of physical cultural injustice and inequity’ (2008, p. 54). The inequitable position of women who play sport is most certainly in need of illumination and intervention, and this, broadly, is the task of this thesis.

Thus this thesis also makes a contribution to feminist reconceptualisations of sport, for as I found through my research, many women have a desire for sport. Some want to compete and win, while others desire opportunities for participation and belonging (among other things). Therefore, in situating my work within the field of physical cultural studies, I also emphasise its position as a feminist text aimed at transforming the social relations of affect in roller derby and the broader social, technological and organisational context within which it is embedded. Women’s bodies in roller derby have many affects. They compete, they win, and they lose. They manage, organise and negotiate tensions, complexities and ambiguities. Women’s bodies blush, rage, love, bruise and break. These affects and many more, as women experience them, are what is at stake in this thesis. And so, although this thesis does concern itself with ‘sport’ in a broad and inclusive way, it is also concerned with what happens ‘off the track’. The relationships, friendships, tensions and organisational dynamics are part of sport, but not the same as it.

Therefore, as a field of study that pays attention to that which ‘constitutes its object of analysis’ as much as it focuses on ‘illuminating the [physical] cultural operations and experiences of power and power relations’ (Silk & Andrews, 2011, p. 8), physical cultural studies aligns strongly with this current project. It could also be considered a ‘line of flight’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9), as I draw upon the writings of Luce Irigaray, Rosi Bradotti, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault and others to write a specifically feminist physical cultural studies. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Luce Irigaray, who wrote, that ‘by speaking (as)
woman, one may attempt to provide a place for the “other” as feminine’ (Irigaray, 1993b p. 135). As an examination of the affects of power in roller derby, this thesis represents an attempt to provide a place for the ‘feminine’ in physical cultural studies and, perhaps more problematically, sport management. As I take into consideration the micro and macro arenas of power in roller derby, the affects – of pride and shame, love and hate, joy and anger, and so on – are productive of the (mostly female) bodies that make up the roller derby community.

These bodies, individual and collective, struggle with claims related to authenticity, truth and control. In many ways, these political struggles for authority and control are destructive. Yet they are also, in Braidotti’s words, ‘points of rupture which are ripe for transformation’ (in McRobbie, 2009, p. 162). The physically active female bodies in roller derby are engaged in multiple relations with themselves and others around them. These relations are made visible through this thesis as a way of illuminating the affective ‘points of rupture’ that might support a future of roller derby where women’s bodies remain central in their multiplicity. Yet, in order to know something of the future, it is also important to know something of the past. It is not the task of this thesis to delineate an in-depth genealogy of roller derby; however, some background to the sport is needed to situate the study in its broad international context.

**The rise of roller derby: the story so far**

Roller derby was a popular sport in the 1960s and 1970s, and was similar to wrestling, with paid professional skaters, faux violence, television coverage and a tough image. The first incarnation of the game occurred in the late 1920s, and since then it has been reinvented several times, with its latest re-emergence quickly gaining momentum
across the globe (Mabe, 2008). In 2001 a group of women in the United States got together to create a ‘new’ version, and by 2007 Storms (2010) identified 7,927 women skaters registered in the International Roller Girls’ Master Roster. In 2013, a total of 40,542 active skaters were recorded internationally (Two Evils, 2013). This growing popularity of roller derby raises interesting questions about the socio-cultural forces that shape women’s desire to engage in a sport that defines itself as alternative and empowering. The use of digital communication technologies means that there is space for creative articulations of roller derby – poetry, short stories, fine art, graphic art – as well as the embodied corporeal aspects so important in sport (Woodward, 2009, p. 119). The inclusion of this creative aspect of derby culture engages the desires of different women and opens up the possibility of play. The rapid rise of roller derby presents an opportunity to think through affects and may provide insights into how to counter the persistent gender inequities in women’s sport and leisure participation (ABS, 2006a; Hargreaves, 1990; Wearing, 1998).

As an embodied cultural practice, roller derby is marked by speed and movement. The sport is played hard and fast, and demands strength and fitness from the players. With links to rock’n’wrestling, pin-up girls, comic book heroines and dominatrixes, roller derby provides a multiplicity of meanings that can be taken up by diverse women and used to enact multiple femininities. In some ways, roller derby can be viewed as a creative, gendered leisure practice. It is an enabling space where binaries that separate masculine and feminine (and mind and body) can be broken down. Yet it is also a sport: competitive, skilful, requiring commitment and dedication. Roller derby’s growing popularity – as evidenced by the number of leagues being established and the number of names being registered with the
international names register\(^3\) – highlights the need for further understanding of the
dynamics of this complex ‘new’ sport, and provides an opportunity to ‘speak [write]
(as) woman’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 135). Yet in writing as woman, it is not as an
essential female subject, as Moi (1988) suggests Irigaray’s work alludes to, but as a
body sexed as female in contemporary culture, with all the attendant affects,
possibilities and limits (Braidotti, 2011; Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994; Kirby, 1991;
Markula, 2006; Probyn, 1996; Woodward, 2009).

Primarily a women’s sport\(^4\), roller derby presents an opportunity for women to
position themselves as intelligible subjects, capable of complex and at times
dangerous improvisation. Roller derby privileges the affective, sensual aspects of
sport, allowing women to create a ‘personal space’ for themselves that is also socially
situated (see Wearing, 1998). In the popular literature about roller derby, the sport is
explicitly linked to particular affects and emotions. Joulwan (2007), who was part of
the initial roller derby revival in the United States, goes so far as to outline her ‘derby
playlist’, stating that, ‘it’s a mix of songs that I associate with being powerful,
aggressive and sexy – the emotions I try to channel when I hit the track’ (Joulwan,
2007, p. 153). Despite this comment by Joulwan, the affective relationships played
out in virtual and embodied spaces have yet to be explored within roller derby.

The story goes that the revived version of roller derby was begun by a group
of women in Texas, some of whom were said to have been members of the Riot Grrrl
scene. Their revived version was played on a flat track at local roller skating rinks,

\(^3\) See the International Roller Girls’ Master Roster, <www.twoevils.org/rollergirls> for a list of
all players and leagues around the world.

\(^4\) Men play mostly supportive roles as referees and coaches, although a small number of male
teams are starting to promote themselves. Chapter 6 of this thesis also discusses men
involved in roller derby. See also the thesis by Donnelly (2012).
and although some of the previous rules were carried over, much was changed (Storms, 2010). In this initial revival, the ‘tough’ skaters of the past were parodied, with players wearing skimp clothing, highly sexualised costumes (such as maids, nurses and school girls), and an emphasis on the contact aspect of the game. When a player fouled, or broke a rule, the consequence was playful and ‘cheeky’, with a large wheel spun and penalties dealt out – such as being spanked by the crowd, or other similar ‘punishments’ (Ray, 2008).

This revived version became quite popular, and other leagues started to develop around the United States. With more and more people getting involved, and leagues starting to draw large crowds, questions started being asked by the women involved about how the money being earned would be spent and what they would get out of it (Joulwan, 2007; Mabe, 2008; Ray, 2008). These issues led to a split between the women who started up this ‘first’ new roller derby league and some of the skaters from that league. This new group, eventually to be known as the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), had a new focus: this time roller derby would be a ‘real’ sport, one in which only players could be owners or committee members.

Yet roller derby itself is not so simply defined. In the United States, there are several ‘versions’ of roller derby, each vying for authority to claim the status of the ‘real’ roller derby. These ‘versions’ are multiple, and differ in terms of their relation to ideas around sport, governance, management, the ‘mainstream’, music and subculture. There are a number of leagues that revel in roller derby’s past relationships to rock’n’wrestling, and choose to promote the sport as risqué, dangerous and sexy, while also explicitly allowing space for parody and ‘play’. One league that fits this conceptualisation of roller derby is Texas Roller Derby (<www.txrd.com>). It was the subject of the documentary Hell on Wheels (Ray,
2008), which claims to document the rise of contemporary roller derby, and is a banked-track league whose management has chosen to emphasise the ‘toughness’, sexiness and ‘meanness’ of the game and the women who play it. Unlike many of the flat-track derby leagues, Texas Roller Derby has been open to corporate sponsorship and large-scale publicity – for example it was part of a cable television reality series (Kearney, 2011) and is run as a business, with ‘owners’ who make profits from the activities of the league.

On the other end of the scale are leagues such as the Charlotte Speed Demons (<http://charlottespeeddemons.com>), which in describing its league states:

Our corporate and competitive structure has been modeled after professional sports teams. This structure ensures sustainable growth while advancing the sport … While others incorporate some level of showmanship … RCRD has chosen a different direction. To help reinforce the fact that roller derby is a sport, its players compete using their legal names and wear a traditional sports uniform. (Charlotte Speed Demons, 2012)

This league, like the Texas Roller Derby, is a profit-run business, yet this is where their similarities end. There are several leagues in the United States that align themselves with either of these two ‘versions’, or ways of understanding and promoting roller derby. However, by far the most common ‘version’ is that supported, promoted and claimed by those leagues who are members of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). WFTDA’s mission states:

Founded in 2005, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) promotes and fosters the sport of women’s flat track roller derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship, and goodwill among member leagues.
The governing philosophy of the WFTDA is ‘by the skaters, for the skaters’. Female skaters are the primary owners, managers and/or operators of each member league, and of the association. Operational tasks include setting standards for rules, seasons and safety, and determining guidelines for the national and international athletic competitions of member leagues:

All WFTDA member leagues have a voice in the decision-making process, and agree to comply with the governing body’s policies. (WFTDA, 2012b)

Yet there has been something of a ‘rebellion’ against the WFTDA, including the formal activities of a breakaway league, aptly named, ‘The Renegade Rollergirls’. This league describes itself as follows:

The Renegade Rollergirls were formed ... by a group of derby girls dissatisfied with the direction the sport was going. They wanted to incorporate moves from the sport’s heyday into game play but were bound by rules enforced by penalties. They ... desired a faster-paced game that highlighted a skater’s skill. Going against the beliefs of the league they had been skating for and the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), they quit and created their own ‘renegade’ league not bound by any of the conventional regulations put on the sport. (Renegade Rollergirls of San Diego, 2012)

Unlike Texas Roller Derby and the Charlotte Speed Demons (described above), WFTDA and the Renegade Rollergirls are committed to remaining skater-owned and operated. In Australia there are similar ‘versions’ of roller derby being established, although at present most are not-for-profit sport organisations – professional, for-profit type leagues such as Texas Roller Derby are yet to emerge.

The revival of roller derby in Australia was not far behind its emergence in the United States, with the first leagues establishing themselves in 2007 (Sun State Roller
Girls, 2012; Victorian Roller Derby League, 2012). This relatively quick takeup in Australia was most likely enabled by the use of the internet in promoting the sport and the global reach of related music scenes such as Riot Grrrl\(^5\) and rockabilly (Harris, 2003). As women in Australia began to set up leagues, tensions quickly arose as to the structure, direction and governance of these leagues – much like in the United States. The national sporting organisation (NSO) supporting skate sports in Australia, Skate Australia, was approached in these initial days for insurance. The relationship between Skate Australia and many Australian leagues has been slow and at times conflicted, despite the support and resources the NSO has and continues to offer. The ‘skater-owned, skater-operated’ ethos promoted by WFTDA and the Renegade Rollergirls has been a sticking point for many Australian leagues as they struggle to adapt this to an Australian context – where not-for-profit groups, such as sporting clubs, can gain support from government-funded sports organisations without becoming corporate, for-profit clubs. Unlike the US sports system, dominated by college pathways, and with complex requirements for clubs to become not-for-profit organisations, the Australian sports system has placed a large emphasis on grassroots clubs, supported by larger, government-supported not-for-profit organisations such as Skate Australia (and state-based organisations such as Skate Victoria).

**Interdisciplinary roller derby research**

The diversity of organisational forms and management challenges that this ‘new’ sport presents are all implicated in the opportunities for transformation and belonging for the individual women involved. The sport has affects on both individual and

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\(^5\) The use of ‘grrrl’ is a ‘feminist reclamation of the word girl with a less polite and more assertive political stance’ (Rosenberg & Garofalo, 1998, p. 809).
collective bodies. To ‘get at’ these affects – the embodied meanings roller derby has on women’s lives, and what these affects do – an interdisciplinary approach to both theory and methods has been adopted in this thesis. As a contribution towards physical cultural studies, my intention is ‘to displace, decentre, and disrupt’ (Silk & Andrews, 2011, p. 29). Yet mine is a particularly feminist project. As I bring to the thesis women’s stories – my own included – together with an analysis of affects, I aim to interrogate the ways in which women and sport have been understood. My hope is to provide an account of roller derby that can take into consideration the multiple ways the sport is being played, developed, governed and experienced.

As Anne Game wrote in her widely cited book *Undoing the Social*, where she presents a ‘different sociology’: ‘the project is not a negative one of argument against the discipline so much as a demonstration of what the ideas of reading, writing and text might contribute to social and cultural analysis’ (1991, p. 3). Through auto/ethnographic writing, interview transcripts and text in circulation among the roller derby community, I demonstrate ways of thinking and doing research in physical cultural studies that provides a place for woman:

In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretensions to the production of truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.
(Irigaray, 1993b, p. 78)

One way I have practised this ‘jamming’ is in highlighting the creative *and* destructive ways in which women experience roller derby. Another has been my focus on writing as an embodied method – for writing, too, can be understood as a physical culture – served to demonstrate the relationships between pleasure and pain, love and fear, joy and anger that are so central to sport, and in this instance roller derby.
Roller derby is an exciting, popular (feminist?) physical cultural site, and as such prompts a range of questions and curiosities. As such, the decisions made along the way – in research, reading and writing – were guided by my over-arching research questions:

- How do women’s affective experiences contribute to ways of knowing roller derby?
- How can roller derby be organised and governed, while supporting women’s multiple affective experiences?
- How is it possible to embody research and give form to ideas and affects through writing without hiding behind an ‘anything goes’ mentality (Silk & Andrews, 2011)?

These broad questions guide the chapters that follow and provide a way of reading/writing affects in physical cultural studies. There are many other questions that could have been asked and many different approaches that could have been taken. Some of these I have addressed in other published work, listed at the beginning of the thesis. But still others remain are outside the scope of the project.

The majority of my research was conducted in Australia. The women I interviewed were from leagues around Australia and the league I skated with for eighteen months was situated in a large regional city in Australia. I do use some texts from websites and social media sites that have been written by women and men in the United States and elsewhere, but the research was situated primarily in Australia. As a contribution to feminist physical cultural studies, my work is situated in a particular time (2010–13) and place (the east coast of Australia and virtual space). But roller derby waits for no one. With each word I write, there is change and movement
happening in the world of roller derby. With each day I spend writing this thesis, the rules change, and relationships between individual and collective bodies involved in roller derby evolve. I cannot account for all these changes, nor do I want to. Instead, I have provided an account of roller derby and women’s affective experiences in a way that is spatially and temporarily limited, while open to future possibilities.

The chapters

This thesis consists of seven chapters. This introductory chapter introduces roller derby and physical cultural studies as a broad field of academic study. The significance of roller derby as a popular (feminist) physical cultural site has been demonstrated, as have some of the questions the sport provokes, particularly as it relates to affects. In bringing in affects, and more specifically what affects do in roller derby, I draw on feminists such as Braidotti and Irigaray, who articulate an embodied, non-essentialist feminine subject.

Chapter 2 provides more explanation of the feminism articulated in this thesis, as well as an introduction to some of the other intellectual themes taken up in the preceding chapters. Ways of theorising power, influenced by post-structural thinkers such as Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, are outlined as ways around the restrictive binaries of masculine and feminine, mind and body, individual and community. Chapter 2 also explores the ‘turn to affect’ and how this ‘fits’ with research into sport and physical culture. In this way, I argue that the relations of power in sport and physical cultures are affective, and are key to the production and maintenance of any type of roller derby subjectivity.

Chapter 3 discusses my methodological approach and how I conducted the research. It highlights a specifically feminist post-structural approach to research and
writing – bringing these two practices, so central to academic work, together.

Fragments of stories, meanings and text are brought together to form assemblages (Denshire & Lee, 2013; Law, 2004; Marcus & Saka, 2006) and there is a focus on the affective relations of power between individual and collective bodies in roller derby. Stories – my own and those of the women involved in this study – are highlighted as ‘conceptual personae’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) as a way of embodying the research ‘findings’ and presenting the complexity of women’s lived experience in sport and physical cultures.

In Chapter 4, I extend the theorising from the previous chapters and explore the stories of three women: Debbie, Kate and Beth. Through their stories, I demonstrate some of the ways in which women involved in roller derby construct their participation as healing and transformational, and show the importance of the sport in their lives. These women’s stories articulate the affective processes of ‘becoming-derby’ that they have undergone. Personal transformation, felt as ‘love’, is experienced through the complex relations between women and their orientations towards each other, and the affects in circulation through roller derby – off and on the track.

Chapter 5 then goes on to examine the more ‘destructive’ affects felt in roller derby, the limits of transformation, love and becoming; of rejection, aggression and frustration felt by myself and other women, revealing a ‘dark side’ of belonging in the sport. Through my own auto/ethnographic writing, and the narratives of Debbie and Lola, I explore the ways in which affects are productive of success and failure, belonging and exclusion. The challenge of conceptualising femininity – particularly in a cultural site such as sport, which historically has been a masculine domain – is presented via women’s affective responses to power in roller derby.
The final analysis chapter, Chapter 6, brings affects and power into an analysis of the governance of roller derby. The collective derby bodies, charged with a range of operational and strategic tasks, become an authority in women’s lives. These collective bodies in derby adhere to a broadly (mis)understood do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. This DIY ethos, drawing on anarchist, Marxist principles where power can somehow be escaped (Shantz, 2005), ignores the complex affects of power. Taken up by leagues in various ways, such an ethos is shown in this chapter to be sometimes destructive. The limits of the ‘by the skater, for the skater’ DIY ethos are outlined in this chapter, alongside a description of some of the tensions and challenges being grappled with by leagues in Australia at the present time. The governmentality in roller derby is revealed, opening up a way of managing and working through some of the tensions and paradoxes of the sport as it grows exponentially.

Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of the ways in which power and affects circulate in a sport such as roller derby. I suggest some ways around and through key impasses in roller derby that could be applied more broadly in other ‘new’ and emerging sport and physical cultures. Women’s bodies in roller derby are supported to do things they’ve never done, to feel affects they’ve never felt. They surge with pride and strength as they achieve milestones and win games. And they feel love and loved by the women around them – sometimes for the first time. They feel ‘empowered’. But what to do with that power once it is gained? How to share that power? What are the destructive affects of this power? These questions, and others, are explored in the following pages. Like roller derby, this thesis is bold, and women’s bodies – in particular my own body – are central. Yet I temper this boldness with the rigour of theory and research.
Through writing this thesis, I have felt many moments of intense pleasure and pain; success and failure. My self is written in this thesis – not always explicitly, but I am as much a part of this research as the women who volunteered to participate. I am a woman, a mother, a student, a derby player, a white professional, a teacher, a wife (and on the list goes). Highlighting subjectivity and power is not an easy task, but it is one I hope can contribute towards new ways of thinking and doing research in and about physical cultures and sport management into the future. As a physically active woman, I have struggled to always embrace myself as active, strong and a ‘success’. I know I am not alone in this. Through this thesis, the writing and the practice of roller derby, I have paid attention to the affects in circulation through the sport and what these affects do. And, as I write about transformation, I am transformed. Bringing female bodies and their affects into physical cultural studies and sport management reveals opportunities for a more just, equitable, inclusive society. And, perhaps more importantly, it contributes towards the development of a feminine cultural imaginary beyond the home.
Chapter 2

Sport, gender and power

Introduction

I have decided to start in the middle – the middle being ‘by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). In the middle is where I am now – not quite an academic, not quite a derby grrrl – I am ‘becoming’. I am a woman writing in the twenty-first century. Feminists of the past have made sure I have this opportunity – not only to write, but to write about women in a way that brings their experiences, my own included, out of the margins. Feminists of the past have fought to ensure I have a voice, a vote, an ‘opportunity’? Yet it has never been solely my voice, my vote, my opportunity. It has always been on masculine terms that they, and I, have negotiated these ‘rights’. Many before me have attempted to rewrite these ‘terms’, the masculine imaginary that guides the shape of the social and the spaces where action takes place (for example Cixous & Kuhn, 1981; Gatens, 1996; Irigaray, 1993a). Now it is my turn. To do what? To attempt to rewrite the feminine, without reducing the feminine as simply the Other to the masculine. When I started this thesis, I thought I had found the utopian space to enable this writing, a space of alleged ‘empowerment’ – roller derby.

Of course, things were not as they seemed and the complex workings of power and its related affects began to highlight the problematic of configuring roller derby as primarily an open, ‘feminine’ and for some women feminist sport-leisure space. This chapter maps out the theoretical ‘space’ on which I am working – the terrain I cover and the edges I move close to and nudge against. Tensions between sport and leisure,
sport management and community sport, power and empowerment – tensions that are complex and sometimes contentious – are introduced in relation to my research on roller derby. These ideas are carried through the subsequent chapters of this thesis and are explored further as I move through the work. In particular, I grapple with the multiple ways of thinking about roller derby as ‘sport’ or ‘leisure’ along a loosely delimited continuum – this continuum being social space, the everyday, as it is occupied primarily by women.

In writing the feminine, I am writing of an embodied subject, of woman ‘fully immersed in processes of becoming, in productive relations of power, knowledge, and desire … an affective, productive, and dynamic structure’ (Braidotti, 2011). When I write of woman, or the feminine, I am not writing of an essentialist subject, delimited by biology or even culture. The distinction between sex and gender has often been understood as the primacy of biology over culture. Yet this way of thinking has relied on essentialist notions of femininity that position women as less (strong, intelligent, rational, controlled, valuable, and so on) than men. As Butler notes:

If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this ‘sex’ except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that ‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access. (1993, p. 5)

And so bodies sexed as female do not possess some essential quality that is common to all women. Instead, in this thesis I write feminine, female, woman as multiplicity. She (and I) cannot be understood only through the masculine discourses that have so far dominated – where dichotomous perspectives, of masculine/feminine, unitary/fragmentary, one/multiple, reason/emotion, man/woman, mind/body, structure our thinking, nor where psychoanalytical thinking – which has understood the
‘feminine’ in terms of deficiency ‘as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 69) – dominate.

Instead, I write the feminine as ‘a sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed and which would not be incoherence nonetheless’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 31). Femininity is:

A virtual reality, in the sense that it is the effect of the political and conceptual project aimed at transcending the traditional subject position of Woman as other. This transcendence, however, occurs through the flesh, in enfleshed locations and not in flight away from the body. (Braidotti, 2011, p. 111)

I write woman as capable of pleasure without a man, specifically through sport, and revalue the feminine as a way towards a more inclusive, creative and just society. Through woman’s relations with other women, with men and with herself in sport and physical activity, affective qualities – of hard and soft, love and hate, gentleness and aggression, weakness and strength, shame and pride – are embodied. These all shape the experience of ‘being a woman’ in sport and physically active cultures. It is this multiplicity, and the capacity for holding in tension these qualities, that I mean when I write of the feminine (except when I am making a point about the ways in which the feminine has been misunderstood and undermined).

And so I write roller derby as a women’s ‘sport’. However, as with the project as a whole, I am concerned with the ‘middle’: the overlapping space between sport and leisure. They are both spaces and practices where gender norms can be challenged, where friendships can be formed and sustained, where women can find personal space, where they can perform and where transformation is possible. Yet in sport the body, as it moves, sweats, bruises, expands/shrinks, wins and loses, is central, as are issues of governance and the management of teams and competition.
Therefore, I refer specifically to sport while acknowledging the overlaps with leisure and the whole range of physical cultures available. In doing so, I use the word ‘sport’ cautiously. Many women do consider roller derby a ‘sport’ (see Chapter 6); however, the ways in which they understand this vary. For some, roller derby is a creative leisure practice, a space where the opportunity to ‘play’ with gender norms and subjectivity is valued over competition. Choosing their unique ‘derby name’, identifying themselves as ‘tough’, ‘sexy’, ‘sexual’, ‘mean’ and/or ‘cute’, and ‘dressing up’ in ways many of them usually do not – wearing fishnets, garter belts, wigs and face makeup on top of skates, helmets and short shorts is as important – or even more so – than the physical activity of the sport. For other women, skating – fast, strong, tricky and skilful – is central to how they understood roller derby. For many women involved, ‘winning’ is important while roller derby is also a space and practice that enables transformation. In naming roller derby as a sport, I therefore also strongly acknowledge its connection to leisure and popular culture: it is often both sport practice and leisure culture at once, it is rule governed, requiring discipline and adherence to strict norms, while also being a space of personal ‘freedom’ (Wearing, 1998) and play (Fullagar, 2008). I engage with issues related to roller derby as a structured, organised, competitive sport, as well as a creative leisure activity where ‘play’ is central to the experience.

In some ways, women’s experience in roller derby is akin to Stebbins’ (1982) concept of ‘serious leisure’. He notes that, previously, seriousness was commonly associated with work, and leisure with play, as ‘the happy carefree refuge from our earnest pursuit of money and social standing’ (Stebbins, 1982, p. 251), but that this is changing. Stebbins’ research describes how people who once gained personal fulfilment and identity enhancement through their work now found this through particular types of
‘serious’ leisure ‘careers’ (Stebbins, 1982). This tracks with sociologists’ description of the change from a society based on production to one based on consumption (Beck et al., 1994). Stebbins describes serious leisure as:

> The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centred on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience. (2007, p. 5)

Many of the women interviewed for this thesis talked about the ‘seriousness’ of roller derby. For some, this was the way they took themselves seriously as ‘sports people’. For others, it was serious in their commitment to the style and ‘look’ of the culture. And for still others, it was serious in the organisation and volunteer management of the sport. While I draw on some of Stebbins’ ideas relating to careers in people’s leisure endeavours and identities (1982, p. 256), I do not use this as a guiding framework for my analysis. The ways in which seriousness, sport and work have been associated with masculinity, and ‘play’, creativity and leisure with feminine pursuits, speak to the need to further examine a cultural site such as roller derby where women ‘play seriously’ – or, in Stebbins’ terms, engage in ‘serious leisure’. In this way, I grapple with the masculine ideal of sport as ‘serious’, while also acknowledging it as a space open to change and transformation.

In Betsy Wearing’s influential work, *Leisure and Feminist Theory* (1998), she conceptualises leisure as social and gendered space. In this thesis, I too use the notion of space to connect a range of ideas about individual and collective subjectivity in roller derby and in the cultural sites in which they manifest. In thinking of roller derby as a space, as well as a practice, activity, culture and sport, the possibilities for women to act and be in ways perhaps different from the norms of the everyday are open to
change. Wearing expands the concept of leisure to space – or, more specifically, the Foucauldian-inspired concept of ‘heterotopias’, as a site of difference. She suggests:

That both physical and metaphorical leisure spaces can act as heterotopias for struggle against and resistance to domination of the self and inferiorized subjectivities. They also provide a space for reconstituting the self and rewriting the script of identity. (Wearing, 1998, p. 146)

This view of leisure as space resonated with the ways in which many of the women in this study spoke of roller derby (see Chapter 5), yet alone it is not a broad enough way of thinking. For space is not only a literal or imaginary place where objects and identity can be experienced differently. And one space is not distinct from another in a neat and limited way (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Rather, space is where politics of community, identity and sexual difference can be reterritorialised.

In her recent book, *For Space*, feminist geographer Doreen Massey writes that, ‘space does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations’; rather, ‘identities/entities, the relations “between” them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive’ (2011, p. 10). Women involved in roller derby often self-identified as ‘derby grrrls’, and the collective bodies that manage them are co-constitutive in that they exist only in relation to each other. This relation happens ‘somewhere’ – in space, both actual and virtual. Yet Massey also acknowledges that space is not an uncontentious concept: ‘we have inherited an imagination’ so deeply ingrained that it is often not actively thought’ (2011, p. 17). Historically, space was ‘coded feminine and aligned with stasis, passivity and depoliticization’ (Wearing, 1998, p. ix). Yet this meaning of space is not predetermined: space can, and has been, 

6 Massey argues that the imagination we have inherited is a masculine one.
open to different, more fluid interpretations. Space is a ‘dimension of multiple trajectories, a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2011, p. 24). Sitting at my desk, I become aware of the multiple trajectories possible through my research in derby. As I participated in the physical culture of roller derby, I was overwhelmed by the simultaneity of stories-so-far and of the imagined future – for roller derby, for myself, for the other women around me, and for our future relations.

Everyday space is the site of struggle, resistance, negotiation and potential liberation, freedom and transformation. It is inherently political, for it is in (and through) space that relations of power are resisted, negotiated, fought and overcome. Conceiving space as open to the possibility of divergent meanings and transformation, while also political and imbued with power, enables me to write women’s experiences of roller derby as open-ended: their stories are not fixed or stable, nor are they finished when the research is over. Massey writes that, ‘in this open interactional space there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction (or not, for not all potential connections have to be established), relations which may or may not be accomplished’ (2011, p. 11). Stories about roller derby produce multiple narratives and pathways, and meaning is fluid: ‘a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). It is moving forward, developing quickly. Rather than search for the ‘truth’ of roller derby, and the ‘derby grrrl’, instead I focus on those events, ideas and people I learnt about and came across through my research and the spaces they create, participate in and transform.

At the heart of this thesis is the over-arching question of power and its affects. Every action sets in motion reactions and affects. I seek to explore how women’s affective experiences (my own included) – of love, empowerment, belonging, anger,
aggression and rejection – contribute to ways of knowing roller derby as a developing sport organisation, run predominantly by and for women. I am interested in how such a perspective might contribute to the sustainable growth of the sport. I argue that understanding the social relations of affect that shape the embodied experience of roller derby is vital to critically informing broader debates around participation, policy and sport management. Through privileging difference rather than unity, and by acknowledging power–knowledge relations amongst women, this PhD aims to bring the question of sexual difference to the sport-management field in the hope of contributing toward a more inclusive and just space for women and men alike.

**Inspired by roller derby**

As contemporary roller derby has gained popularity, and as it becomes more visible in the sport and leisure landscape (Chapter 1), women around the world struggle as they vie for authenticity and authorship of roller derby. There are now several different versions of roller derby, with the largest of these being the Old Skool Roller Derby League and the WFTDA, with their key difference being their rule set – the way they play the game. In Australia, roller derby started in around 2007 in Melbourne and Brisbane, and it has quickly spread around the country with over 60 leagues now active in city, regional and rural areas. For some of the women who play, roller derby is precisely about ‘playing’, and it has particularly been a space for queer identities to be played with and privileged. However, for other women, the focus has been on athleticism and authenticity – they claim to play the ‘real’ roller derby and argue for the right of women to have a ‘sport of their own’, echoing Virginia Woolf’s emphasis on the importance of a ‘room of one’s own’ (1977). In all instances, the focus has been on playing – whether it be playing with, or the playing of. Roller derby is one
sport where ‘play’ in many forms is central. It is a space where women can practise ‘emotion play’ (Fullagar, 2008), performing different relations to self and others. It is also a space where women can push their bodies to their physical extremes through the desire to win or perform.

The emerging literature on roller derby draws on the body of feminist work that argues that sport is a site for reinforcing and undermining gender inequality. Sport can provide women with experiences that ‘empower’, ‘heal’ and ‘transform’ them as individuals and, more broadly, challenge cultural norms about women’s embodied capacities. Much of the emerging feminist analysis of roller derby communities struggles to overcome an apparent impasse about whether or not the sport is empowering for women. Derby tends to be viewed as a cultural site that reinscribes a sexualised hyper-femininity while unproblematically adopting masculine aggressiveness. For Jennifer Carlson (2010, 2011), roller derby presents an opportunity for participants to undermine norms regarding feminine fragility and traditional female gender norms. Drawing upon work by Dick Hebdige on subcultures and style and R.W. Connell on accentuated femininity (1985), she asserts that ‘skaters remake femininity by consciously integrating threatening aggression into feminine dress’ (Carlson, 2010, p. 434). However, despite this assertion, Carlson noticed the ‘stigmatization of certain feminine stereotypes’ (2010, p. 436) within the league with which she was involved. What Carlson identified was the rejection of ‘girls being girls’ and the embrace of strident athleticism. She states that ‘this focus on athleticism and skill seems to belie the professed democratic, grassroots ethos of roller derby and suggests the limits of derby’s potential critique of athleticism’ (Carlson, 2010, p. 437). Carlson concludes with this insight:
While exhilarating for the individuals that practice it, it nevertheless appears inadequate on its own to address the broader issues of inequality that perpetuate the emphasized femininity that derby skaters critique. (2010, p. 438)

In another study, Nancy Finley (2010), using Mimi Schippers’ (2002, 2007) concept of ‘gender maneuvering’, focuses on roller derby in the American South. She highlights how, ‘in their gender maneuvering skaters transport content from other experiences, life histories, and structural domains that is usually stigmatized, and the participants employ it to femininize their activities’ (Finley, 2010, p. 374). Where they may have been considered pariahs in other settings, in roller derby these non-conforming attributes become honoured. And it is not just this localized movement on which Finely focuses: she also looks at the larger regional-level gender relations that ‘provide cultural materials that are adopted, altered, or challenged in local arenas of face-to-face interaction’ (Finley, 2010, p. 364). Yet Finley (2010) also finds that the privileging of these pariah identities leaves out the possibility of multiple ways of being or becoming a ‘derby girl’. What is missing from current analyses is a focus on the affective dimension of experience, and the ways in which women constantly negotiate many gender contradictions as they put their bodies on the line and their identities in play. A focus on affects in a highly charged sport such as roller derby helps to move thinking beyond the assumption of ‘rational’ subjectivity. In this sense, I argue that roller derby, as a sport space and practice, cannot be reduced to a polemic reading of power as productive of ‘good or bad’, ‘hyper or normal’ feminine subjects. Nor can the sport as a collective be read as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather needs to be viewed as a space open to possibility, creativity and even at times destructiveness.
Kath Woodward states that ‘[s]ensations, sensibilities and sensuality are all implicated in sporting embodied practices’ (2009, p. 5). Sport is fun, a challenge and provides those who watch and participate with pleasure. Sport provides exhilaration that ‘dematerializes the body’ and ‘overwhelms traditional modes of perception’ (Woodward, 2009, p. 133). It makes visible the ‘tensions, interrelationships and connections between corporeality and the social world embodied selves inhabit’ (Woodward, 2009, p. 5). Sport is also often viewed as the site of ‘community’ and ‘social cohesion’ (Putnam, 1995). Around the world, sport is celebrated and athletes are revered for their skill and strength.

Yet this public ‘good’ has also been gendered as ‘masculine’ – competitive, public, hierarchical and ‘tough’ – with women’s participation being historically marginal to men’s. Institutionalised sports confirm patriarchal, techno-capitalist, modernist styles of living (Woodward, 2009, p. 67), often privileging competition, winning and aggression over cooperation, sharing and creativity. Jennifer Hargreaves writes:

In sport, ‘masculine’ identity incorporates images of activity, strength, aggression and muscularity and it implies, at the same time, an opposite female subjectivity associated with passivity, relative weakness, gentleness and grace. (1986, p. 112, quoted in Theberge, 1987, p. 388)

Historically, this has meant that in the main women have been marginalised from sport by having to struggle for fair and equal access, promotion, participation and pay. In sport, ‘men usually are active subjects while women fill passive roles, often as wives, sweethearts and admirers’ (Theberge, 1987, p. 388). There have been some long-standing exceptions – such as equestrian, gymnastics and netball – that have
been deemed ‘appropriate’ for women. Gymnastics (and ice-skating), with a focus on aesthetics and grace, have traditionally been seen as ‘feminine’ and appropriate for women (Trangbæk, 1997). Netball, too, has been found to promote ideals of ‘compliant femininity’; it is seen as a ‘girls’ game, adhering to social expectations about ‘appropriate female behavior’ (Taylor, 2001, p. 57).

Over time, with the rise of feminism and a greater emphasis on equality between men and women in law, women have begun to participate in, volunteer for and manage sport in greater numbers and in an increasing range of sports. Yet the increase in women’s participation has not automatically equated to an equitable environment (see Clasen, 2001). Nancy Theberge states:

The feminization of the fitness movement [through the focus on sexual attractiveness and appeal as opposed to physical capacities such as strength and endurance] represents, not the liberation of women in sport, but their continued oppression through the sexualisation of physical activity. (1987, p. 389)

Even where women have entered into traditionally ‘male’ sports, such as tennis or bodybuilding, women have continued to be sexualised via hyper-feminine clothing, makeup and jewellery (Heywood, 1998). For professional women in sport, there is often a focus on their private lives in the media and official commentary, undermining their skills and capability as athletes. More recently still, we have seen the rise of women’s participation in ‘alternative’ and ‘lifestyle’ sport (Wheaton, 2004) – for example, surfing, snowboarding, skateboarding and roller derby. These ‘alternative’ sports have been seen as spaces within which to defy mainstream values and norms, including those that marginalise women (e.g. see Heywood, 2008; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004; Thorpe, 2005). Heywood and Dworking write of women’s participation in sport as a type of ‘stealth feminism’, which ‘draws attention
to key feminist issues and goals without provoking the kneejerk social stigmas attached to the words *feminist* (2003, p. 51). However, much of the research cited here has focused on sports that still privilege male participation. Questions remain as to how a ‘new’ (predominantly female) sport culture might enter into the debate.

In general, women have had to overcome many constraints in order to gain access to the same sport and leisure opportunities as men. In sport and music, women have often been viewed as passive spectators or supporters. When they have participated more actively – particularly in sport – they have been labeled ‘lesbian’ or ‘butch’ through heterosexist discourses (Caudwell, 2006a; Lock, 2006), and their performance has been compared unfavorably to that of men. In Australia, more males participate in sport and physical activities than females (males 65 per cent, females 63 per cent) (ABS, 2011), and this difference is even more pronounced when examining participation rates in organised club sport (males 7.9 per cent, females 4.8 per cent) (Australian Government & Australian Sports Commission, 2011, p. 3). This trend is common around the world. Constraints to women’s and girls’ participation in sport and physical activities are numerous, and include specific issues around body image (Frederick & Shaw, 1995), sexism (Griffin, 1992), income (McKay, 1991), capacity (Young, 2005) and most importantly, cultural and ideological norms pertaining to the abilities of and possibilities for women (e.g. see Bryson, 1987; Chase, 2006; Clasen, 2001; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Gill, 2007). If the historical associations of sport have been with ‘masculine’ traits such as strength, competitiveness and aggression, then roller derby has been one sport where these ideals have been skewed. While valuing strength, competitiveness and aggression in this contact sport, women in roller derby revel in the opportunities to show off their bodies, often wearing fishnet stockings and other hyper-feminine adornments,
signifying themselves and valuing each other as ‘sexy’. They also maintain governance of the sport via rules around women-only leadership and management in an attempt to counter the dominance of men in sport and to maintain their authority. Yet these attempts by women in roller derby to create and maintain a ‘sport for women’ through particular management practices have their limits.

**Sport management and its limits**

As a field of academic study sport management is relatively young, and as such it has experienced – and still does – ‘growing pains (and sometimes … self-doubt)’ (Chalip, 2006, p. 1). A number of prominent researchers in the field have argued for the inclusion of multiple research paradigms in sport management as key to a process of growth (Aitchison, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Markula, 2003; Skinner & Edwards, 2005; Woodward, 2009). The Earle F. Zeigler Lecture Award, the most prestigious award given by the North American Society for Sport Management, has facilitated much of this debate. Yet, despite these ongoing calls for critical, interpretivist, feminist, post-modern and post-structural approaches to sport management research and teaching, the dominant paradigm used, promoted and privileged in the discipline continues to be positivist and thus masculinist (Humberstone, 2009). As a young discipline, there are opportunities for researchers to stake their claim to the shape and future of sport management – much like in roller derby – with all vying for their perspective/method/paradigm to be the most relevant to the practice of sport management. Laurence Chalip writes:

At issue has been the degree to which the emphasis on theory building in academic research is useful to practicing sport managers, and whether our field is a relevant one if its research and theories are not immediately applicable by sport managers. (2006, p. 1)
Yet to me this seems to be a second-order issue. The question of immediate application needs to be explored from a solid conceptual foundation.

The emerging academic identity, and perhaps lower status, accorded to the study of sport and popular culture within the academy (Banks, 1983; Thaube, 1996) seems to foster an insecurity that drives a need for sport management research to be directly ‘useful’, ‘applicable’ and ‘certain’. Striving for these outcomes means that an interpretive approach that tries to understand experience and social context is sometimes ignored. Cara Aitchison, commenting on the consequences of our thinking in the field, writes:

Particular social and cultural policies and practices, including those relating to sport and leisure management, are the outcome of equally particular perspectives and philosophies. In other words, our epistemology, or preconceived model of the world, shapes the ways in which the management of sport and leisure is produced and understood within that worldview. (2005, p. 427)

The common preconceived model of the world, and of sport, is often one where women are subordinate to men and where men dominate positions of authority and leadership. Assumptions based on this preconceived perspective of sport and society about women’s bodies as weaker than men’s, and of women as less able to fulfill leadership roles, perpetuate ways of thinking and doing sport management that continue to negate the complexities of gender. The possibilities of sport as a site of transformation and ‘success’ for women are limited, as are the opportunities to address problems of sexism, bullying and injustice. Feminist sport management research, which takes up feminist methodologies and theories, is needed to better deal with gender complexities and questions raised in a sport such as roller derby.
This is not to negate the progress already made in the field. The way in which the management of sport and leisure is so far produced and understood has indeed given us much social benefit. Over time, the numbers of women participating in sport have increased – although recently there has been a concerning decline in Australia (65.7 per cent in 2006, down to 63 per cent in 2011) (ABS, 2009, 2011). As well, a greater variety of sports are available, and the benefits of sport – from playing a role in local community development (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008) to contributing towards peace and the goals of the United Nations (Beutler, 2008) – seem to be limitless. The social ‘goods’ of sport are often promoted as central to ongoing public and private support and funding, and are an important leverage for sport managers to use.

The concept of social capital as a form of social good has been central to the ways in which researchers have understood and attempted to ‘measure’ the benefits of sport in society, and to how sport managers, at both community and elite levels, have attempted to gain funding and justify public spending on stadiums and the like. Robert Putnam’s key work, *Bowling Alone* (1995), brought the concept to a general audience and was hugely successful in arguing for a more cohesive population and for the role of civic duties, such as volunteering, in fostering trust and cooperation within communities. Pierre Bourdieu (1993) also used the term ‘social capital’, but his concern was how social and cultural capital are linked to economic capital and the ways in which these are related to the reproduction of inequalities. The basic premise is that the greater ‘social capital’ one possesses, the greater economic capital to which one has access: social and economic capital are interconnected and class based. Despite Bourdieu’s scholarly influence, it was Putnam’s somewhat different use of social capital that really popularised the concept. Putnam’s social capital consists of ‘features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated
actions’ (1993, quoted in Field, 2003, p. 4). Issues around solidarity and relationships between members of society are a key theme within sociology, and have been since the discipline’s inception. This concern continues to be central to the related fields of sport sociology, leisure studies and sport management.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has uncritically drawn upon the concept of social capital, particularly as it is articulated by Putnam, and uses it quite frequently in its reports. In one of its most recent reports on sport and physical recreation, it includes a specific section titled, ‘Sport and Social Capital’, where it states:

The associational nature of sport and sporting clubs is sometimes seen as a forum for the creation of social capital by providing opportunities and settings for social interaction, sharing, common interests and enhancing a sense of community. (ABS, 2011)

Yet often the social good highlighted by sport management research is purely quantitative and contributes little to understanding the cultures, contexts and experiences of sport. Fred Coalter points out the way in which a focus on social capital (used in Putnam’s sense) negates structural inequalities, placing the onus on individuals to become responsible, accountable, ‘active citizens’ (2007, p. 538). He highlights a conundrum: sport is viewed as a vehicle for social inclusion and connectedness; however, those most likely to participate in sport already come from higher socio-economic groups and are generally well connected with their families and communities (Coalter, 2007). James Skinner, Dwight Zakus and Jacqui Cowell (2008) also provide a critique of the way social capital is often discussed in sport management. Rather than embrace the view that sport necessarily builds positive social capital, they instead argue for a more nuanced, focused and responsive approach to using sport for community development (Skinner, Zakus & Cowell,
2008). The uncritical acceptance of sport as ‘good’, without attending to cultural and contextual issues, could potentially cause more ‘bad’ than ‘good’.

For example, less than 7 per cent of televised sport is of women’s sport (Lumby, Caple & Greenwood, 2009), which makes women virtually invisible. The media have been shown to present women in dissimilar and unequal ways to men, undermining their strength, skill and capacity as athletes (e.g. see Daddario, 1994; Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane, 1988; Wright & Clarke, 1999). Women are associated with appearance rather than performance (Jarvie & Thornton, 2012, p. 229). Hence, in uncritically accepting sport as a social good, these inequalities and the ongoing marginalisation of women in sport are perpetuated. As noted earlier, as a public good sport has also been gendered as masculine: competitive, public, hierarchical and ‘tough’, with women’s participation being historically marginal to men’s. The visibility of men’s sport – both good and bad – is in contrast to the invisibility of women’s sport (and the visibility of their sexualised bodies). Without questioning the inherent ‘good’, sport-management practices and research will continue to serve to justify and maintain the status quo, assuming a unified, masculine subject and negating or reinforcing sexual difference.

Wendy Frisby asks us to consider whether we ‘are relying on mainstream approaches where sport organisations are depicted as rational goal seeking entities, rather than fostering multiple and alternative viewpoints?’ (2005, p. 5). I think it would be fair to say that, in the main, sport management does rely heavily on mainstream approaches and that, despite the ongoing calls for multiple perspectives, approaches and methods to be taken up, the academic discipline (or field of study) has stuck conservatively to conventional ideas from parent disciplines – for example, traditional management studies, marketing and positivist approaches to psychology,
sociology and education. Yet other closely related disciplines – particularly those such as sport sociology, feminist leisure studies and even critical management studies – have contributed towards creating different ways of conceiving and doing sport management. However, in the specialised area of sport management and in journals dedicated to the discipline, there have been few examples of the use of innovative, experimental, critical, feminist or post-structural perspectives. Frisby writes that ‘perhaps we are not drawing on critical social science\(^7\) because we do not see its relevance for practice’ (2005, p. 5). Comments like this relate to the ongoing debate about sport management as a specific discipline or field of study, and issues pertaining to the centrality of theory versus practice. Janet Parks attempted to tackle this issue in 1992 where she wrote:

> On one side, it was rumoured, we had researchers who wanted to ‘develop theory in a vacuum’; on the other side we had practitioners who wanted to ‘tell sport managers how to sell more tickets’. (1992, p. 221)

In justifying a position within the academy, many in sport management rely on the direct relevance and benefit of their work in terms of economic gains and quantitative measures. In this way, they demonstrate the distinctive aspects of the management of sport, and the need for the discipline – rather than simply relying on research from the ‘so-called home disciplines’ (Chalip, 2006, p. 2), such as management, economics, marketing or sociology. Studies that have direct applicability, which serve to ‘sell more tickets’, do have their place and are important. However, they do not need to be the only way sport management makes visible its value within the academy and to the practice of sport management. Nor do they have to exclude or impede the emergence of alternative epistemological approaches.

\(^7\) And, I would argue, other paradigms.
Sport management is a complex space where multiple focus points – for example, community/elite, profitable/voluntary, spectators/players – need to be negotiated and explored. The management of sport is first and foremost about the management of players/participants who are mobile, diverse, corporeal bodies. These bodies do not always behave in rational and controlled ways. In sport itself, bodies sweat, bleed and move. These bodies can do surprising, amazing things, together and individually. They can also be broken, bruised and battered. Bodies feel. Affects or emotion are central to the experience of sport; however, they have been mostly invisible in the management of sport discourse. Except in a few instances where attempts have been made to ‘measure’ feelings such as ‘love’ and ‘pride’ (e.g. Broadbent & Ferkins, 2011), and where a unified – and thus masculine – subject is assumed (Hanin, 2000), bodies, in their lived multiplicity, have yet to be fully acknowledged as a worthy focus of investigation. Questions about the ‘object’ of knowledge in sport management, so often assumed as known and stable – ‘sport is rational’, ‘sport is competitive’, ‘sport is important’, ‘sport is special’— need to be problematised if ways of thinking, doing and understanding sport management are to change and develop. Questions about the relations between sport and leisure, power and sport, gender and affect, and so on give rise to these different ways of doing, thinking and understanding. These questions require the strengths of a reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) and an interdisciplinary perspective so that differences (and the multiplicity that is woman) can be highlighted, not made to fit into neat, discrete categories.
Roller derby is a sport; it is competitive, rule governed, athletic. However, the literature from the sociology of sport and sport management alone cannot untangle the complexities of this space. This is why I have embraced theory and writing from multiple ‘fields’ – cultural studies, leisure studies, feminism and geography, as well as sociology and sport management – to address questions of authenticity, power and space in roller derby. As argued by Ang, ‘the development of sophisticated and sustainable responses to the world’s complex problems needs the recognition of complexity, not for complexity’s own sake, but because simplistic solutions will no longer be sustainable’ (2011, p. 780). Deleuze and Guattari’s work (1977, 1987) offers alternative ways of thinking that may be able to respond to the complex issues facing us today and into the future. They draw from biology, geology, geography, history, literature and art to rethink the social. They point to the dominance in Western modernity of the discourses of science, psychiatry and psychology (Rose, 1990), and of the reductionist thought processes that accompany them. They note the way categories and systems are used to organise complex scenarios, therefore producing an illusion of finding straightforward ways through and/or clear answers to complex problems, hence reducing the number of differences that are perceived in the field under examination. In this way, some/many things/people are more likely to ‘fall through the gaps’ between these neat categories. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that we need means to increase our capacity to perceive differences if we are to develop strategies and/or solutions that take account of what is actually there.

Questions about roller derby – about what motivates the women involved, and ‘why’ they participate – are questions researchers in the field of sport management might ask (for example Funk & James, 2001; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004;
Mahony et al., 2002). But such questions lead us down the same old path, the same model, where the subject is unified, contained and rational, where neat categories and systems reduce differences and where language, power and affects are ignored. Instead of this approach, I embrace the multiple:

Difficult as that may be … The multiple must be made, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety, with a number of dimensions one already has available—always $n - 1$ (the only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted). (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6, emphasis in original)

Deleuze and Guattari’s work, where they give us ways of thinking and doing that increase our capacity to perceive difference through the figuration of the rhizome (1987), is important for the development of feminist theory now and into the future. It is creative and, importantly, productive in enabling multiplicities. There have been some feminists, most notably Alice Jardine (1984), who view Deleuze and Guattari’s work on ‘becoming women’ as based on ‘unanalysed stereotypes’ (Jardine, 1984). Yet even she saw promise in their work in supporting the invention of ‘new kinds of subjectivities’ (Jardine, 1984, p. 59).

Feminists – such as Markula (2006), St Pierre (2001) and Braidotti (2011) – have found Deleuze and Guattari’s writing useful for re-examining feminine identity and ‘opening up the subject’ (St Pierre, 2001, p. 143). As Braidotti writes:

complexity is the key to understanding the multiple affective layers, complex temporal variables, and internally contradictory time and memory lines that frame our embodied existence … feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. (2011, p. 25)

Although not ‘feminist’, Deleuze and Guattari’s writing provides ‘imaginary ways of looking at bodily identity … divorced from the feminine-masculine dichotomy’
(Markula, 2006, p. 32). This is not a simple endeavour, and the tendency to re-enter into the feminine-masculine dichotomy is easy enough to fall into. If sport and fitness can be, as Markula notes, ‘a practice of resistance where an individual woman’s agency has the potential to liberate her from the bindings of oppressive patriarchal definitions of the feminine body’, who then ‘is that woman? Where does she come from? What does a liberated woman do differently from men?’ (Markula, 2006, p. 34). These questions challenge the assumption of a female ‘essence’ to which constructivist approaches attempt to get, and ask us to interrogate our conclusions about resistance and empowerment through sport as simply ‘good’. As Heywood and Drake note, ‘we know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something you participate in’ (1997, p. 3). Instead, through the use of post-structural ideas, woman as multiplicity can be illuminated, in a move that opens up the possibilities for transformation and for a positive future for women and feminism (Markula, 2006, p. 36).

In writing (as) woman in roller derby and sport, there are contraries and paradoxes that, if ‘resolved’ would rely on the ‘truth-seeking dialectic of the philosophers’, whereas I am contributing towards the ‘meaning making dialectic of the poets’ (Phelan & Garrison, 1994, p. 256). As a form of feminist poetics, ‘it is directed more toward disclosing meaning and enhancing understanding rather than toward determining the truth and arriving at discursive explanation’ (Phelan & Garrison, 1994, p. 262). Rather than view research as a positivist ‘science’, I understand it to be a practice, an ‘art’. Rather than attempt to reduce knowledge and break down complexity to its ‘roots’, I seek to draw out complexities and create anew:
Art has the capacity to give birth to new life-forms directly; if we think of our lives as works of art, we regain the ability to think creatively and challenge the limitations of the ‘natural’ identities formed through the games of truth. (Markula, 2003, p. 102)

In turning away from the rationality of traditional science, I counter the tendency, in research and life, to ask ‘why’ at the expense of the frequently more productive ‘how’. Asking how opens space up to possibilities of living counter to fascism (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. xii–xiv) and processes of normalisation (Foucault, 1991c).

The search for ‘origins’, ‘roots’ to social ‘problems’, and the urge to reduce these problems to a single source by attempting to find some underlying simplicity in an ever complex world (Ang, 2011), has become normalised in the dominant episteme. In eliminating complexity, positivist discourses attempt to gain control, but in doing so they became ‘enamored of power’ (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. xiv). Deleuze and Guattari, along with others such as Foucault and feminists who have also taken a different path, acknowledge that simplicity, security and control are not the answer: ‘the man who looks for security, even in the mind, is like a man who would chop off his limbs in order to have artificial ones which will give him no pain or trouble’ (Miller, in Seem, 1977, p. xvi). Insecurity and uncertainty are constants in life. Rather than fight against this uncertainty, I have decided to go with it. To question the inherent value of roller derby – even of sport. To go with my own and my research participants’ insecurities and fears. And to question how power and affects shape individual and collective subjectivity in roller derby. I relate to Heywood when she writes,

I have a point of view that seeks out shadows, spots over the sun, monsters, the ugliness that lies in wait just under the smooth surface
of an aesthetic, any picture, any image, any goal that presents itself as purely ideal and good. (1998, p. 8)

In order to ask these types of questions and pursue this point of view, I cannot rely on old models – models of management as directed from the top down, or the bottom up; models of a stable organisation, a unified [masculine] identity; models of a subject having an interior emotional life and an exterior physical one. These models have continued to marginalise women and to assume a masculine, rational, unitary subject. Instead, I turn to post-structural approaches, to rhizomic thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), centring sexual difference (Braidotti, 2011; Irigaray, 1993a), taking the ‘social world as surface’ (Probyn, 1996) and a new model of emotions (Ahmed, 2004c). In making this move, I am not trying to solve a problem in roller derby. Rather, I am ‘writing’ roller derby at the nexus where theory and the body meet. By doing this, I demonstrate the productive, and destructive, workings of power in this so-called ‘empowering’ space, highlighting alternative readings of my own and my research participants’ responses and reactions.

This is not an exercise in abstract theory, nor is it a strictly an empirically driven piece of work. Rather than asking the questions of humanism of how to make a better world, a better, happier, more advanced citizen, I ask questions inspired by some of the post-structuralist thinkers who have come before me. This is not to reject humanism, but rather to acknowledge its limits. Like Ahmed (1996), I view the coupling of feminist practice with humanism, and feminist theory with postmodernism as misleading, and prefer to view theory and practice as interrelated and informed by a range of philosophical perspectives. I ask, ‘How does power move in roller derby and what affects does this make possible?’ In this way, I uncover the
ways in which roller derby – the practice, the sport, the community and the women who play – is becoming normalised.

My work begins with a recognition that theory is a practice, and that the site of my research involved all the complexities and open-endedness of the lives of embodied subjects. This thesis is an attempt to read theory/the body and write roller derby, write sport and feminist sport management anew. I do not claim to represent the ‘truth’ of roller derby, nor do I set out to address any particular ‘problem’ and offer simple solutions. Most importantly, I refuse to reduce roller derby – my embodied experiences, discourses and text, and the responses of my research participants – to any neat categorisation or single, unified meanings. The over-arching question guiding this thesis – of how women’s affective experiences contribute to ways of knowing roller derby – multiplies differences in the field and enables a more open dialogue between cultural studies, sport sociology and sport management.

To avoid pathologising roller derby and the women who play – or, indeed, myself – as overly aggressive, as ‘butch’, as ‘abnormal’, I turn to those writers who also reject absolute claims about ‘human nature’, ‘truth’ or ‘science’, and who question the dominance of positivist methods and the pervasive discourses of the sciences (social or ‘natural’) psychiatry and psychology (Butler, 1993; Deleuze & Guattari, 1977; Foucault, 2005; Grosz, 1994; Rose, 1990). Although these writers had different subjects of analysis, their writing was influenced and informed by one another. For example, Deleuze wrote a book called Foucault (2005) and Foucault wrote the preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1977). Foucault’s intellectual project, through which he methodically analysed the history of ideas and the rise of claims to truth, asks the question of ‘how’ rather than ‘why’. He writes, ‘my objective … has been to create a history of the
different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (Foucault, 1982 in Rabinow, 1991, p. 7). He does not ask why it is that we, as humans, act this way or that, but rather how it is that such ways of being are possible – what the conditions are that make certain subjectivities possible. Foucault’s most general aim was:

To discover the point at which these practices [of analysing the subject] became coherent reflective techniques with definite goals, the point at which a particular discourse emerged from these techniques and came to be seen as true, the point at which they are linked with the obligation of searching the truth and telling the truth. (Foucault, 1980, in Rabinow, 1991, p. 7)

In sport, marketing and management discourses have become coherent techniques with definite goals: to increase participation and profits. Rabinow writes that, for Foucault, ‘knowledge of all sorts is thoroughly enmeshed in the clash of petty dominations, as well as in the larger battles which constitute our world’ (Rabinow, 1991, p. 6). In terms of sport and sport management, there is a clash and a battle for claims to the ‘truth’ – for what and who is best positioned to dictate the direction, the ‘rules’, the ‘truth’. Sport ‘matters’ to our social lives; the enmeshment of sporting and management knowledge in the battles for domination matters beyond the confines of the sport field and the fields of sport.

While Foucault paid little specific attention to gender, his work proved very valuable to feminists (for notable examples, see Bordo, 1997; Diamond & Quinby, 1988; McNay, 1992). He investigates how difference (the Other) is discursively produced in relation to sameness – how we come to know ourselves and other selves. He also explores pleasure and desire (1990). Equally relevant for feminism is his insistence that we must turn away ‘from all projects that claim to be global or radical’,
as they lead to the ‘return of the most dangerous traditions’ (in Game, 1991, p. 35). Beyond the problem of subsuming women into the one term, ‘mankind’, this also speaks to the danger of collapsing ‘women’ into one coherent category, ignoring differences between them and the multiplicities of selves it is possible for each woman to be. The initial goals of feminism, in gaining access to the vote, to paid work outside the home and access to sport and leisure previously viewed as masculine – that is, most sport – needed women to unite. Their goals were to gain access for women to those areas of life that previously had been the sole domain of men. For this purpose, there was less need to address and account for the differences among women because at this stage their marginalisation was so severe as to negate the benefits of this approach, and anyway required urgent political action based in solidarity. Yet access to the vote, work and leisure has not meant women have equal standing in society. Although more women are entering the workforce than ever before, they are still paid less and are still disproportionately represented in those jobs labelled as ‘feminine’, such as teachers, nurses, child-care workers, social workers, counsellors and other ‘helping’ professions. As described above, even in sport, women’s participation – though increasing – is viewed as somehow less than; as lacking skill, strength, even value. Despite the material gains made possible by feminists, many women still feel that their main role in society is to nurture and give: as mothers, wives, girlfriends and even employees.

In this sense, a new way of thinking about women and feminism was and still is needed, and it has been towards thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze that a number of feminists have turned in order to uncover new questions, strategies and directions. Braidotti, influenced by the work of Deleuze and in line with several
contemporaries (such as Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1996) and the feminists who were her teachers (Irigaray, 1993a), writes:

Feminists need to become fluent in a variety of styles, disciplinary angles and in many different dialects, jargons, languages. Relinquishing the image of sisterhood in the sense of a global similarity of all women qua second sex, in favour of the recognition of the complexity of the semiotic and material conditions in which women operate. (Braidotti, 2011, p. 66)

To recognise this complexity means to understand power differently from those feminists who came before. Where power was that which adversely affected the capacity of others to act – such as the power of the law in denying women the vote or access to paid work outside the home – Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualised power as the capacity to act. An analysis of power ‘must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the overall unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes’ (Foucault, 1978 in Pringle, 2005, p. 260). That is, however our agency may be constrained and/or denied, we can uncover our capacity to have agency provided we can understand and resist the terms of its denial.

Thus the feminism I articulate in this thesis questions the dominance of particular discourses, structures and institutions that marginalise women, instead seeing these as the forms power has taken, which can therefore be changed/replaced/supplemented. Braidotti writes that, ‘power formations are both monuments and documents, in that they are expressed in social institutions and in systems of representation, narratives, and modes of identification’ (2011, p. 84). Yet it is more than that: ‘Power is the process that flows incessantly in between the inner and the outer’ (Braidotti, 2011, p. 17). In thinking of power in this way, we are forced to
orientate ourselves differently to the truth and knowledge claims of science and equally those of more ubiquitous applied disciplines such as marketing and management. The objects, practices, laws and institutions we take for granted are not self-evident or ‘given’ or even ‘inevitable’, but are formations of the flows of power. The ways of thinking we take for granted – here particularly with regard to the way women relate to each other and to sport, and what women’s bodies can do – are not the products of ‘truth’ or ‘fact’, but are formations of the flows of power. They all need to be interrupted. However, we must be cautious about what our interruptions might do.

Feminist work has proved significant in recognising the cultural construction of gender. This has been an important component of the feminist struggle to reject essentialist constructions of woman that sustain oppressive behaviours. However, over the last three decades, feminist thinkers have tended to stress that the distinction between sex and gender is not an accurate description of the complex ways in which biology and culture interact in subject formation (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994, p. x). Nonetheless, the concept of gender remains very useful, enabling us to speak and write with a degree of subtly precisely about the interplay involved in sexed bodies. Structurally and culturally, women as a group are still marginalised to the extreme in many areas, particularly in the ‘elite’ and ‘executive’ spheres – for example, the low numbers of women on executive boards and the substantially lower prize money awarded to women in most elite sport. These and many other inequities are directly related to the social and cultural positioning of people whose sex is female, and speak to the importance of keeping gender as a useful construct for activism and advocacy purposes. I agree with Wearing when she argues that ‘we do a disservice to our discipline if we rigidly appropriate any one theoretical perspective in our analysis of

Historically, feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone viewed the specificities of the female body – menstruation, pregnancy, maternity, lactation and so on – both as a limitation and as a means of accessing knowledge unavailable to men. In doing so, they risked reinforcing the existing binary in culture and language, relegating women to the sphere of the body, with men being associated with mind, reason and rationality. As a feminist project, I refuse the inherent ‘coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness’ (Grosz, 1994, p. 4), the coupling of reason with the masculine and emotion with the feminine (Ahmed, 2004c) and the institutionalised mind/body dualism that pervades so much of the research on sport. Butler asks, ‘how, then, does gender need to be reformulated to encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production?’ (1990, p. 7). In response to this question, I explicitly draw on work that privileges sexual difference by writers such as Irigaray (1993a) and Gatens (1991) with a focus on the sensual, affective aspects of experience in order to write roller derby.

The challenge of bringing women’s embodied, affective experiences into the dominant value system has been noted:

In politics, some overtures have been made to the world of women, but these overtures remain partial and local: some concessions have been made by those in power, but no new values have been established. (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 6)
Different ways of valuing the feminine, in all its complexity and the intersections of sex, gender and sexuality, need to be established if we are ever to move past the mind/body dualism and masculine/feminine binaries. The feminists of sexual difference view the body as crucial to understanding women’s existence; however, as Grosz writes, ‘the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object’ (1994, p. 18). Rather, it is the lived body with which they are concerned, ‘as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures … constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation’ (Grosz, 1994, p. 18). It is the irreducible differences between the sexes – these differences being at once biological and cultural – that are important. Acknowledging sexual difference is the beginning of a strategy to give women their own history and their own future – a feminine imaginary, an alternative feminine subjectivity that is not based on lack or negativity. In writing sexual difference, women are no longer simply ‘not man’, or ‘less than man’, which is reflected in the ways ‘sport’ is considered masculine; ‘gender is largely only noted when women are playing’ (Woodward, 2009, p. 116). Rather, acknowledging sexual difference allows women, as diverse subjects, a space from which to speak on their own terms, in their own voice, despite how difficult this may be.

Irigaray writes that, ‘man has been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality, or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always masculine and paternal, in the West’ (1993a, p. 7). The feminine has been absent, and continues to be absent from many discourses. This is particularly clear in sport, and even more so sport management – except in a few exceptional cases (Aitchison, 2005; Fullagar & Toohey, 2009; Humberstone, 2009; Shaw et al., 2006; Shaw & Slack, 2002; Woodward, 2009). As Irigaray observes: ‘women are left the so-called minor arts: cooking, knitting, embroidery, sewing; and in exceptional
cases, poetry, painting, and music. Whatever their importance, these arts do not currently make the rules, at least not overtly’ (1993a, p. 7). But the question remains of how the feminine might be imagined as the subject of discourse. For Irigaray, it is love that will be the mediator: ‘it is love that both leads the way and is the path. A mediator par excellence’ (1993a, p. 21). Here, love of the other is irreducible to sameness, and is instead a relation that respects difference but also connects. Yet Irigaray’s writing has been called ‘deeply pessimistic’: ‘her pessimism is about the limited opportunities for changing what she calls masculinist discourse’ (Robinson, 2000, p. 287). While Irigaray’s goal of transformation and a feminine discourse is nigh impossible, her strategies of privileging love, affects, fluidity and becoming work to challenge and rewrite the status quo. Working through issues of sexual difference is ‘an approach that would allow us to check the many forms that destruction takes in our world, to counteract a nihilism that merely affirms the reversal or the repetitive proliferation of status quo values’ (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 5).

Braidotti, from a post-structural perspective, also argues for the importance of sexual difference, drawing in particular on Deleuze and Guattari to imagine alternative feminine subjectivities. She emphasises the embodied and embedded nature of the subject and a focus on difference:

*Difference* is not a neutral category, but a term that indexes exclusion from the entitlements to subjectivity: to be ‘different from’ means being worth ‘less than’ … By extension, Otherness is defined in negative terms as the specular counterpart of the Subject … this results in making an entire section of living beings into marginal and disposable bodies: those are the sexualised, racialised, and naturalized others. (Braidotti, 2011, p. 75, original emphasis)

If we situate women as ‘different’ from men, without untangling the specifics of sexual difference as Irigaray (1993a, 1993b) has done, we automatically relegate 53
women to the position of ‘Other’ and less than. For Braidotti, ‘feminism is a practice as well as creative drive that aims at asserting sexual difference as a positive force’ (2011, p. 38). Central to this is an understanding of affect that is relational. In questioning any ‘essential’ femininity and stressing an embodied experience of sexual difference, I bring to the fore emotion and affect, and explore how they work in relation to subjectivity and power. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1977, 1987, 1994) writing on subjectivity, embodiment, affect and philosophy, as well as their models of writing, effectively challenges Cartesian dualism. For a range of feminists, their work carves out new ground from which to write (sexual) difference.

Reconceptualisations of power and gender have brought issues of the body and affect to the fore, so posing questions about how power works on the body and how these affects contribute to subjectivity and collective belonging. In sport and leisure studies, these ideas and tools for analysis have only just begun to be used, and have yet to be brought into the dominant field of sport management. For Braidotti, a post-structural approach ‘situates sensuality, affectivity, empathy, and desire as core values in the discussion about the politics of contemporary nonunitary subjects’ (2011, pp. 83–4). I have followed this lead, situating affects as central to this work in researching women’s (my own included) experiences of roller derby, as well as the experience of roller derby as a collective, organisational body. Roller derby, in its multiplicity, is a practice, a space, a culture, a community and a sport organisation. Power, and hence affects, are central to an analysis of all these elements.

**Alternative sport and the ‘affective turn’**

In the area of sport and leisure, there have been several notable theoretical approaches to emotion that have considerably influenced the direction of research in the area. For
example, Elias and Dunning (2006) argue that the emergence of a ‘civilised’ society has prevented people from experiencing and expressing excitement, which they consider vital for ‘healthy’ human functioning. Sport and other leisure activities were positioned as enabling the ‘repressed euphoria’ in society (Elias & Kilminster, 2006). Elias and Dunning’s work, both together and individually (1986), focuses explicitly on sport as a masculine, violent domain. They go so far as to position sport and war as intimately connected, where ‘a “play fight” or “mock battle” between two individuals or groups is a central ingredient’ (Dunning, 1986, p. 227; Elias & Dunning, 1986).

In a similar vein, Lyng (2008, 1990) theorised extreme sports as pushing the boundaries of the social order via ‘edgework’ – the practice of ‘working’ the ‘edges’ in high-risk sports. The ‘edges’ are the line between life and death, safety and serious injury, consciousness and unconsciousness: the ‘boundary between order and disorder’ (Lyng, 2008, p. 85). Interestingly, edgework skills are regarded as non-cognitive and embodied: edgework is a form of embodied reflexivity, as opposed to the cognitive reflexivity proposed by theorists such as Beck (1994) and Giddens (1991). This embodied effect allows ‘edge workers’ to transcend the structured order of things and transform themselves, if only for a brief moment. Lyng’s edgework proposes that one can get outside of culture (Lyng, 2008, p. 99) via edgework and the experience of ‘thrill’. The work of both Lyng (1990) and Elias and Dunning (2006) serves to incorporate an understanding of emotion and affect into sport, but with little regard to women’s experiences of sport, and even less acknowledgement of decentred subjectivities or mediated culture.

Sociological work on emotion and affect is a relatively new area of research, drawing mainly from the positivist, constructivist and interactionist perspectives (Thoits, 1989). Most famous is the work of Hochschild (2003), who theorises emotion as
culturally constructed, proposing ideas such as ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ acting. Hochschild focuses on the self-‘management’ of emotion – how we ensure that we feel the ‘right’ emotions at the ‘right’ time within the rule governed context of social life. While contributing a great deal to the sociology of emotion, this body of work has assumed a unified subject as its basis, and has largely ignored feminist work on affect.

Over the past few years, there has been a ‘turn to affect’ (Blackman & Venn, 2010) across the humanities and social sciences, which rejects the unitary subject by privileging multiplicity and becoming over unity and ‘being’ (Braidotti, 2011; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1996). Sara Ahmed (2004c) uses the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’ interchangeably, arguing that they cannot be reduced to psychological states or biological processes. Affect is relational and produced through cultural contexts that shape, and are shaped by, the performance of identity and power differences. She argues that, ‘Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 4). In this sense, roller derby – as an embodied and virtual sport culture – is produced through repeated actions that move and shape women’s identities in different ways. Extending Ahmed’s line of thinking, I also argue that emotions are central to the gendered performance of derby identities by and among women. Roller derby as an individual pursuit and collective experience enables the “surfacing” of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 117).

To a limited extent, the theorisation of affect has begun to permeate feminist analyses of sport, and there is a growing interest from sociological, cultural geographic and critical psychological perspectives (Heywood, 2011; Markula, 2008; Massey, 2011; Ryba, 2007; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010; Thrift, 2004; Woodward,
I draw upon a body of work on affect (e.g. Ahmed, 2004c; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Probyn, 1996) to ‘read’ roller derby. By focusing on how the derby body is put into motion, and the affects it generates in relation to other bodies, I offer another way of thinking through the movement of gendered subjectivity as it is imagined, felt and reinvented through sport spaces. Rather than define the roller derby body by its organs and functions, or by its shape and build, ‘instead we will seek to count its affects’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 257) by asking, ‘What can a roller derby body do?’

The women involved in roller derby are not imitating ‘being a roller derby grrrl’, nor is there such a thing as a ‘natural’ derby grrrl, an essential set of qualities that define what woman is. Rather, women who play are always becoming-derby grrrls as they produce affects (as distinct from static representations of meaning). Derby grrrls have wide-ranging effects, and affects, on each other – both on the track and off. Derby bodies can influence debates in feminism; they can influence the ways in which leagues are managed; bodies injure or care for other players; excite and become excited; they can participate in music and art, perform fashion and style, and so on.

Yet there has been little analysis of the way feelings move through that space and produce the embodied meaning of roller derby. Writing about the movement of affect, Kristyn Gorton states that what is important is ‘the way in which feeling is negotiated in the public sphere and experienced through the body’ (2007, p. 334).

Within the public sphere, roller derby communities can be viewed as a tight-knit subcultural group: spectacular, subversive and resistant to dominant modes of behaviour (Hall & Jefferson, 1983). Yet this way of conceptualising roller derby does not account for the range of differences between the women involved. Bennett (1999) argues for a rethinking of the term ‘subculture’, preferring instead the concept of ‘neotribe’ to acknowledge how young people’s affinities and relations of affect
connect them with each other. Yet both of these ways of conceptualising community do not necessarily enable a reimagining of sport and of women. And nor do they support the type of questions – of authority and authenticity – raised by roller derby that are so central to this thesis.

**Belonging and community?**

In moving beyond the notion of roller derby as simply a subcultural group, or the idea of identity as any type of unified, stable category, I aim to write the inclusion/exclusion dichotomy differently. In sport, the positive value of inclusion versus the negative value of exclusion is taken for granted; however, the dynamics at play are not simple. As Graham and Slee write, ‘to include is not necessarily to be inclusive’ (2003, p. 278). Probyn (1996) has tackled the inclusion/exclusion binary and questioned assumptions about the inherent value of the ‘inside’. She does this through arguing ‘the surface as a more adequate chronotope than models of depth and interiority’; she searches ‘not for causality but for transversal connections’ (Probyn, 1996, p. 35). Roller derby consists of a ‘community’ of players, fans, spectators, officials, coaches and interested observers that has slowly spread, from the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom to China, Japan, Europe and beyond. This ‘community’ is ‘real’, virtual and imagined in multiple ways, troubling the notion of community as any kind of stable ground of identity. Ahmed and Fortier, in writing about reimagining communities, remark:

> Community enters into the debate about how to live with others and seems to be crucial as a name for what we already do (or do not do); what we must do (or not do); or what we must retain (or give up).

(2003, pp. 251–2)
The roller derby community is in tension with itself, as it is both a site for belonging and unity and a site of difference and multiplicity. The London Rollergirls mission states:

You do not need to be tattooed or punk, you do not need to be a sports fanatic but both girls fit in fine and both have a home within the London Rollergirls league. We [comprise] a diverse collection of women of various interests and lifestyles. (London Rollergirls, n.d.)

Maintaining this tension is a challenge of ‘living with difference’, ‘disentangling “community” from “identity”’ (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 256), and perhaps ‘identity’ from any sense of a fixed or stable core.

In this thesis, I write roller derby as community. Yet, at the same time, I question the notions of stability, coherence, unity, likeness, inclusiveness and commonality that the term often implies. Rather than refuse community completely, I refuse any resolution of community, and instead think about ‘community as an effect of power’ (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 256). In this way, I seek to uncover the way a plea to ‘community’ and inclusiveness can bring with it ‘ascription, conscription and erasure’ (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 256) – while some are embraced and granted inclusion and identity, others are rejected, pushed out or forced in. Earlier in this chapter, I wrote of roller derby as leisure space: a ‘dimension of multiple trajectories, a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2011, p. 24). I argue that communities are spaces, following Ahmed and Fortier, who write that we might think of ‘communities as effects of how we meet on the ground, as ground that is material, but also virtual, real and imaginary’ (2003, p. 257). So I write roller derby as community, but without a stable core ‘identity’ or ‘centre’ with which members might identify. This is despite the ongoing effects of power within this community that do exclude, marginalise and circulate via a range of affects, from love to belonging, anger, aggression and hate.
In roller derby, there is a clear imperative to be inclusive, to embrace difference and to identify as a community of difference. Yet the question has yet to be asked: ‘Whose interests may be served by practices that seek to include?’ (Forsberg, 2003, p. 278) Graham argues that the term inclusion ‘implies a bringing in’; it presupposes a whole or centre into which something (or someone) can be incorporated (2006, p. 20, in Forsberg, 2003, p. 278). However, the centre cannot hold. There are slippages, resistances and disruptions that cannot be stopped. Yes, the ‘centre’ becomes the ‘norm’; however, it is the creation of this norm that creates the ruptures, the rebellions, the discomforts from members of this same community – myself included. The desire to belong to this community of roller derby, as a site of love and comfort among women, requires ‘quiet but demanding physical and emotional labour, without which “communities” would cease to exist’ (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257). This ‘physical and emotional labour’ is part of the disciplinary regime about which Foucault (1991c) writes, that normalises bodies. I agree with Graham and Slee, who argue that the maintenance of notions of normalcy and community ‘result in an exercise of disciplinary power where alterity is subjected to perpetual rehabilitation through an intensification of normalising practices’ (2008, p. 289). As roller derby becomes more and more popular, to maintain (protect? defend?) their ‘community’, women in roller derby must define who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ more precisely – there is an intensification of normalising practices.

In roller derby, women join to find ‘freedom’, ‘escape’, an alternative to the ‘mainstream’ and to the restrictions of everyday life. Described by some as a ‘provocative mix of rigorous athleticism and campy eroticism’ (Kearney, 2011, p. 283), roller derby is a space for women to play with alternative expressions of their bodies – and this space has been configured as ‘inclusive’ – in opposition to society, which allegedly excludes these different types of expressions of corporeal
physicality. Nevertheless, due to the way power works, self-discipline is enshrined. Rules concerning behaviour become institutionalised. And it is not only behaviour that is governed, but thoughts and feelings too. You can get away with some ‘non-derby’ behaviour only if you compensate with more ‘derby’ behaviour. And so this space, which ‘includes’, creates its own norms that serve to exclude. In many ways, this is due to an under-developed awareness of differences between women:

Talk of ‘including’ can only be made by those occupying a position of privilege at centre. Second, that talk seldom revolves around recognising and dismantling that vantage and the relations of power and domination sustaining it. (Graham & Slee, 2008, p. 289)

As Braidotti articulates, there is ‘a bond of commonality among women … but they are not, in any way, the same’ (2011, pp. 155–6). For women in positions of authority in roller derby to speak of ‘inclusion’ is to continue to perpetuate the normalising forces of power relations and to imbue community with an unproblematic equivalence to identity – the very thing I avoid.

And so the dream of an ‘inclusive’ community, where differences are embraced and known, is a fallacy. The ‘inclusive’ community denotes a stable identity held by those on the ‘inside’. But we are all at the edge, the outside, the surface of community – always ‘becoming’. Deleuze and Guattari write of a dream:

There is a teeming crowd in it, a swarm of bees, a rumble of soccer players, or a group of Tuareg. I am on the edge of the crowd, at the periphery; but I belong to it, I am attached to it by one of my extremities, a hand or foot. I know that the periphery is the only place I can be, that I would die if I let myself be drawn into the centre of the fray, but just as certainly if I let go of the crowd … (1987, p. 29)

The ‘inside’ is an illusion, created through normalising discourses that seek to hierarchise, discipline, survey. The ‘outside’, too, is problematic. There is no centre of
community, no central point, no specific commonality; nor is there an ‘outside’ or definite Other through or against which to differentiate ourselves. In this thesis, community is a plane, a surface, where the outside and inside meet:

The distinction to be made is not at all between exterior and interior, which are always relative, changing, and reversible, but between different types of multiplicities that coexist, interpenetrate, and change places. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 36)

Probyn writes that, ‘at the edge of ourselves we mutate; we become other’ (1996, p. 34), and this is an affective process.

In this sense, in terms of edges and surfaces and spaces, the roller derby community becomes a site for transformation, not simply for inclusion. It is my argument that what is vital and valuable in roller derby is the potential for ongoing transformation. Irigaray’s work focuses on ‘the potential for transformation contained by the feminine as the sociosymbolic location of privileged otherness. This feminine is a complex and multilayered location and not an immutable and given essence’ (Braidotti, 2011, p. 91). In this thesis, the issue of sexual difference runs throughout the varying chapters in one form or another. For it is in sport – particularly in team sport, where difference is often at its most marginalised – that uniformity, rules, regulation, unity and cohesion are vital to competitiveness and access to participation. Referees and umpires watch closely to ensure that rules are not broken. The more similar the competing teams are in terms of skill and strength, the better the game. Belonging, inclusiveness and cohesion are all part of the discourse of sport, yet this language continues to marginalise the feminine and negate difference. So in this thesis I position difference as productive, while also acknowledging the importance of community, as an effect of power, for the women involved. As a site of transformation, roller derby has the potential to support women to create multiple
imaginaries of their own futures. Yet this potential is finite. As soon as women in roller derby try to ‘hold on to’ this potential – to manage it, define it, declare it, make it normal – an inside/outside dualism emerges that needs to be overcome. Heyes writes that, ‘normalization may ultimately function to sustain insider/outsider dualisms convinced of their own inherent meaning’ (2007, p. 7). As a sport, as well as a creative leisure practice and a space of potential transformation, roller derby cannot escape normalisation. Sport is rule-bound and organised around competitive relations. Teams engage in contest, then are measured against one another; points are scored and counted. Yet the potential for transformation is still present. The tension, between excitement, movement, capacity and rules, fixity and discipline, creates a ‘space’ for this transformation – not necessarily in the ‘centre’, but on the margins, which is the focus of this thesis.

**Ways and means: beyond empowerment**

In the popular media, representations of roller derby as liberatory and revolutionary abound (e.g. see Figueroa-Ray, 2011; Joulwan, 2007; Mabe, 2008; Ray, 2008; Storms, 2010; White, 2010). On blogs and public forums, women recount their positive experiences of roller derby and the ways in which it has ‘changed their lives’. Roller derby, as a site of alternative gender relations and empowerment for women, is celebrated. Yet, as outlined in this chapter, I am not simply interested in why roller derby is so wonderful. Nor am I focused on roller derby as a counter-hegemonic strategy (Bryson, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Donaldson, 63

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1993; Jarvie & Maguire, 2000; Pringle, 2005) aimed towards the possibility of emancipation. Instead, I am interested in how it is that these ideas about transformation have permeated roller derby and some of the ‘dangers’ inherent in thinking narrowly in these terms. I am not only interested in how roller derby has positively transformed some women’s lives, but also how it has been a destructive force in their lives as well: what is the cost of the love, belonging and power found in roller derby?

The emphasis on roller derby as revolutionary, resistant and empowering suggests that the sport is becoming what Foucault warns us against as a global project: in this case, aimed at women’s empowerment and occluding the differences between women, while misunderstanding the effect of difference between men and women. And yet I ask myself: ‘What could be so wrong about the desire to empower women?’ It has been with this question in mind that I have grappled with the contradictions and complexities of roller derby. In this sport/leisure space of alleged empowerment and revolution, I asked the question that Game asked: ‘What are the limits imposed on us and what are the possibilities of going beyond them?’ (1991, p. 36). In constructing certain identities as ‘natural’ – such as ‘student’, ‘researcher’, ‘woman’, ‘roller derby player’ – limits are imposed as to what can be said and done. In moving away from assumptions about gender and subjectivity that are deemed ‘natural’, these limits are opened up and new questions can be asked. My project has been to question the equation of sport with (public and masculine) success, and women with (private) nurturing. And I also question the automatic coupling of roller derby – and indeed other ‘alternative’ sport – with an over-arching notion of resistance and empowerment. I do this not to negate the positive benefits of roller derby in the lives of women, but to continue my search for different ways of knowing,
feeling and doing that can highlight the capacities, strength and wisdom of the female sexed body if enabled in its multiplicity.

I agree with Fahy, who argues that post-structuralism can be emancipatory but in a more nuanced, complex way, achieved by sharpening ‘the critical edge of research’ (1997, p. 31). A feminist post-structural approach unveils power relations where they are ‘most effective and invisible’ (Braidotti, 2011, p. 76). As a ‘new’ sport and leisure space, predominantly for women, roller derby seems to be a field of endless possibilities for reinvention, transformation and freedom. Yet each day, as knowledge increases – about rules, history, leagues, competition, management, media, merchandise, uniforms and costumes, safety, insurance, governance, promotion, events – the multiplicities and opportunities for ‘becoming’ are progressively limited. In an attempt to filter, hierarchise and order the knowledge produced, women in roller derby have begun to claim it as a unified space. My aim is to counter this tendency and continue to pay attention to the ‘local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against claims of a unitary’ (Foucault, 1980, in Jørgensen, 2002, p. 31) sport, while at the same time acknowledging the benefits of sport and leisure for women, both for individual and collective bodies.

Derby is often understood as a physical cultural site of ‘resistance’ as a DIY sport. Yet, by ‘doing it yourself’, many women are left burnt out, excluded and sometimes just confused. In becoming ‘empowered’ through roller derby, there comes a sense of ownership and control, and feelings of pride. But pride is not necessarily positive, nor shame negative (Probyn, 2005). And resistance and empowerment are affects – they are not stable or fixed, but temporal, spatial and, more importantly, relational. This points to the need for a methodological approach that can take this into account. As articulated by Acker, Barry and Esseveld:
The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality? (1983, in Lather, 1995, p. 572)

In the next chapter I provide my response to this question. I note that ‘the distinction between theory and research methods in course structures reflects the distinction between representation and the real’ (Game, 1991, p. 27), and that this distinction is illusionary. And so this chapter and the next, although presented separately, overlap in many ways. Issues of epistemology, paradigm and ‘approach’ are raised in both chapters, with each informing the other.
Chapter 3

Writing roller derby/research

This chapter includes excerpts from the following peer-reviewed journal article for which I was sole author:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each published paper.
To do feminist ethnography you have to be prepared to live in conditions of emotional, political, economic and theoretical insecurity. (Skeggs, 1995, p. 203)

The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end. (Foucault, 1988 in Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 23)

Derby love? Derby mum? Derby brat? Derby stance? Derby research? What kind of research would that be? I’m doing it. It would be ‘different’ for sure. Rough even. Tough. It would go around in circles quite a bit, contradict itself a lot, entertain, titillate, and provoke discussion. A paradox of sorts. It would be mobile; until it broke a bone or tore a ligament of course. But research can’t be broken. Or can it? Perhaps the tears and breaks are those interruptions, of which my own writing is a part. (15 May, 2012)

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline how I came to know roller derby and the theoretical lens through which I read this ‘knowledge’. I outline the use of auto/ethnographic writing, informed by feminist post-structural approaches, in physical cultural studies. This chapter provides alternative ways of thinking, writing and doing research in leisure and sport studies through the use of narrative, the privileging of affect and the centrality of the body. The key concepts that enable me to work through the processes of doing, thinking and writing research are subjectivity, mobility, power and affect. My experiences of fear and disappointment, as well as joy, strength and determination, as they were related to my role as a researcher, highlight the problematic of power and affect in ethnographic work. These experiences, alongside my writing and the voices of my research participants, contribute towards furthering feminist research that is ethical, diverse, flexible and open.
As Van Maanen (1995) comments, ‘restlessness is the norm’ when it comes to post-structuralism and ethnography. And my experiences of participating in roller derby as a skater and researcher have certainly led to a kind of ‘restlessness’. From my very first day, when I entered the large basketball stadium where the league trained, feelings of insecurity and doubt began to rise. My lack of skating skills and my need to gain access for my PhD research lead to feelings of vulnerability, and even a sense of desperation. I have always been sensitive to the situations in which I found myself, yet many qualitative textbooks and articles (e.g. Green et al., 2007) told me that this was a good trait to have as a researcher. These feelings – the ‘restlessness’ – highlighted the complexity of engaging in sport cultures and research. In meetings with my academic supervisor, I discussed these feelings and was encouraged to keep writing and exploring these affects and to keep up with my derby practice for as long as I felt able to. Which I did. I know that I have not ‘failed’ as a researcher, but it does feel that I have ‘failed’ at becoming the desired Other: I was not able to sustain the subject position of derby grrrl for very long. This chapter, and parts of Chapter 5, highlight the productivity of ‘failure’ and the possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and becoming that ‘failure’ enables. I highlight the impossibility of becoming Other and the consequences of making visible this impossibility in a physical culture such as roller derby, where belonging is so vital and a discourse of inclusion is taken for granted. I interrogate what happens when a researcher – me – is othered by her research participants, ‘failing’ to gain ‘insider’ status despite the impossibility of this position in the first place.

My hope is that my writing gives other researchers permission to interpret failure differently, to be upfront about the challenges of doing research in sport and leisure, and of doing research that goes beyond static descriptions and generalising models. Rebecca
Olive and Holly Thorpe (2011) have written about their perceptions of ‘feminist failure’ and their own ‘discomfort’ as they struggled with doing feminist research in male-dominated sport cultures (surfing and snowboarding). In a way, my experiences parallel theirs; however, in my case it was the struggles of doing feminist research in a female-dominated sport culture that posed the challenge. This complexity has been dealt with through a focus on writing and privileging affects – discomfort, restlessness, excitement, interest, love and so on – as a way of doing research, despite the impossibility of representing the ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ of others’ lives.

**Writing**

Deciding to research roller derby brought to the fore a whole range of methodological questions and curiosities. To me, roller derby was an opportunity to try new things, experiment, innovate even. Guided in part by my principal supervisor and in part by my own love of writing, I became interested in the way writing and research are complicated. I read Probyn (1996) and Anne Game (1991), who showed me their way. Game says that ‘method becomes part of the writing, rather than the occasion for putting off writing until a result has been found’ (1991, p. 28). And so, first and foremost, this thesis is an open text. It can be ‘read’ in conjunction with and across other texts: statistical reports, popular fiction, film, news reports, interview material and so on. It does not aim to represent ‘the truth’; rather, it presents multiple perspectives, counter-narratives, contradicting stories, alternative possibilities, none of which cancels any of the others out.

That which moves me, them and us drives this research. The mediation of my experience of roller derby, in the form of writing, aims to draw the imagination of my readers into exploring another world: that of roller derby – a sacred world to the
women who inhabit it. Through writing, I aim to document the processes of becoming, not only for the women who participate but also for the sport of roller derby and the organisation of individual leagues. This writing may then be used to engage creatively with researchers in sport, sport management, leisure studies and studies in popular (physical) culture more broadly. Perhaps even women involved in roller derby and on volunteer management committees might engage with my writing in a way that helps them to think though particular tensions and impasses. My focus is on methods as a creative practice. As Law argues, methods do not ‘discover and depict realities’; rather, they ‘participate in the enactment of those realities’ (Law, 2004, pp. 45, italics in original). Or, as expressed by Irigaray:

> Meaning does not function like the circularity of something already given and received. It is still in the process of making itself. And the superior overview of a metalanguage is and will always be partial where this is concerned. (1993a, p. 178)

Through a focus on narratives, gender and movement, I am creating a reality based not on what roller derby lacks, but on the kinds of movement and modes of subjectivity it makes possible.

For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 4–5). Following this trail, I create a particular map of the landscape of roller derby in Australia. The experiences of the women involved, the ways in which they understand themselves, their connections to other women and other ways of thinking are all mapped out in this thesis. It is a multiplicity, an assemblage (Denshire & Lee, 2013; Marcus & Saka, 2006) from which I constantly subtract, detaching elements from the perceived ‘whole’ for particular attention (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 6) in order to avoid reductionism or the tendency towards totalising theories. Each chapter I
have written can be read on its own, each sub-section can be read on its own, and the chapters can be read out of order without too much distress or confusion on the reader’s part. Although I have used signposts and other operational devices throughout the thesis, these can easily be ignored. It remains an open text: a map has ‘multiple entryways’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12).

I am writing an open text, a map, yet this has its own consequences and cannot avoid relations of power. As Taussig notes, ‘the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed’ (Taussig, 1993, p. 13). My writing is an artifact, a material portrayal of those aspects of roller derby to which I paid close attention. My writing has embedded me deep within power relations previously unknown to me. I am tangled in the webs of power and struggle to get ‘out’, because there is no ‘outside’ of power. All that is left for me is to write. But I have no control over how my writing will be read, and that has at times made me scared. Fear rises to the surface. I write and write and write. Hoping that through writing I can find hope and perhaps an alternative strategy for negotiating the power relations within roller derby. The challenge is always the same: how to give form to ideas, to meanings, through academic writing.

**Where to from here, derby grrrl?**

Mean, bad, scary *girls*.

Tough, strong, powerful *women*.

Tainted, different, alternative.

Athletic, fit, competitive.

These are the roller derby grrrls.

They aren’t too young,

But they’re not so old either.
Not Drew Barrymore.

‘It’s empowering,’ they say.

Do they?

Can I feel it?

Love and aggression, a relation of choice.

The thrill, the speed, the pleasure.

Who are they now that they skate so fast?

Scary, mean, aggressive girls.

Tough and strong and lean.

Pushed *themselves* out of the league of men,

Into their own.

Where to from here …

This short poem evokes the multiplicities of meaning, and the multiple questions and challenges, raised by roller derby and the women who play in this contemporary era. Taking an interdisciplinary socio-cultural approach to roller derby means that I do not privilege the sociological representation of the social over the fictional or creative non-fictional production of knowledge. Creative writing gives me a way of saying what cannot always be said through sociological codes of writing that attempts to represent ‘facts’ (Game, 1991, p. 18). Fiction – broadly speaking – has been used in qualitative research – either on its own or alongside other data – to highlight the multiple ‘truths’ and perspectives possible (Vickers, 2010). Game asks, ‘How open or closed are they [the social and theoretical texts] and what are the possibilities of rewriting?’ (1991, p. 19). In moving away from the imperative to represent the truth, texts become more open to rewriting.
Writing can bring readers closer and enables an affective reading. The above poem (which I wrote) evokes some of the contradictions and the drama that arose through my participation in roller derby. I have not included other poems in the chapters to come, but all the way through I have used writing to evoke and create meaning, rather than to ‘represent’ ‘truth’. I work with fragments – fragments of narratives told by my research participants, fragments of my own narrative, fragments of poetry, websites and theory. It is these fragments that create multiplicity. These fragments are mediated via the theory and literature I read and, most importantly, via the practice of writing. Like feminists before me, writing – which is to be distinguished from conventional ‘facts’ – is ‘sensuous’ (Game, 1991, p. 88). Yet ‘sensuousness’ also has a ‘dark side’, as do the multiple roller derby stories that came through my research. The sensuous affects of writing roller derby are at times uncomfortable, and even painful: fragments of stories without clear plots, narratives or coherent characters.

Writing is embodied. It is a ‘doing’: bodies sit (and squirm), fingers type, wrists ache, shoulders become tense. And this thesis is embodied. Through its pages are fragments of my ‘doing’: skating, participating, training, observing, volunteering, reading, writing. In a sense, what I did was ethnographic research. Ethnography comes from the modernist tradition, where the binary between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ was clear and unchallenged. Even in recent articles on auto/ethnography (e.g. Anderson & Austin, 2011) the emphasis is frequently on a researcher’s ‘insider’ status, and fails to trouble the insider/outsider binary. That conventional binary has been revealed to be in many ways exploitative and biased towards the white, male, Western subject. Yet ethnographic methods of observation, participation and ongoing relations with the people and practices of interest continue to be useful and valued.
from a range of perspectives. So my challenge became how to ‘do’ ethnography without ‘othering’ my participants.

Post-structural feminist approaches, drawing broadly from Foucault’s genealogy, provide one way of answering this question. Tamboukou and Ball (2003) outline the points of collision between Foucault’s post-structural methodology of genealogy and the traditionally modernist methodology of ethnography. Both methodologies, although resting on different epistemological assumptions, adopt a context-bound perspective, in this instance, roller derby, for the exploration of meaning making. Both transgress closed theoretical and methodological systems and point to the limits of dominant power/knowledge regimes. Both enable the researcher ‘to focus upon and explore “events”, spaces which divide those in struggle’ (Ball, 1994, in Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 5) and to recover excluded subjects and silenced voices. And finally, both ethnographic and post-structuralist approaches to research ‘restore the political dimension of research’ (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, pp. 3–4) – albeit a micro, feminist politics. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), it is through attention to micro politics that we reveal potential for change as well as the operation of ‘micro-fascisms’.

**Ethics and affect in feminist (auto/ethnographic) sport research**

Despite their similarities, genealogy and ethnography also have some marked differences, namely the ‘different conception of power as sovereignty in ethnography, and power as deployment in genealogy’ (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 8, emphasis in original). This key difference has been crucial to my thinking, writing and doing research, and is central to understanding the various uncomfortable affects felt through my relation with roller derby. In my auto/ethnographic writing, I wrestle with
these different conceptions of power and struggle with my own feelings of paranoia and fear.

‘What does she want?’, ‘Who is she anyway?’, ‘I don’t think we should do it’, ‘Why not?’, ‘Stuff her’. These are the whispers I think I hear as I wait for a response from some of the women I have approached. I need to interview them for my PhD. But the voices won’t stop. They scare me, those whispers. I forget they cannot hurt me. Those whispers cut through the outside and deep into the core of me. ‘I should give up now’, ‘none of it matters anyway’, ‘they’ll find out’. What it is they’ll find out about me I am not sure, all I know is that they will; and when they do there will be hell to pay.

But despite these ghoulish whispers and dark thoughts, I go on. This makes me think that perhaps I am a derby grrrl after all. I am certainly tough – to put up with those thoughts! Aren’t I?

A specific example: an associate of a close colleague is excited and keen to be part of my research – yay! – and is ready to go. I email her back with some times that could work and wait for her reply. An hour passes, then another, then another. A whole day passes and I know something is wrong. Someone must have said something. I can hear them already in my head, ‘you need permission to do that’, ‘who is she anyway’, ‘you better ask the committee first’.

Next morning – today in fact – an email came through, stating, ‘apparently I need to get permission from our committee to talk to you’. It wasn’t paranoia after all, the voices were telling me something useful. But why are they so concerned? The easy answer is that they don’t want me to misrepresent them. But is that all? (15 December 2010)

In approaching the league to allow me to conduct ethnography, or when asking individual women for one-on-one interviews, I was careful to make sure that I did everything I could to create a situation in which they felt safe and comfortable.

Despite my commitment to a non-exploitative research methodology, anxieties continued to circulate for me, and I had to carefully negotiate the complex affective surface of my research field in order to respond appropriately to both my own feelings and those of my participants. In constantly questioning my actions and desires, as
highlighted in my auto/ethnographic writing above as paranoid thoughts, I was experiencing the ‘restlessness’ of which Van Maanen (1995) wrote. For me, this restlessness manifested as feelings of unease and doubt. I felt as though I was doing something wrong, although I followed ethical protocols. Maintaining a critical stance towards what I observed and felt through my participation in roller derby meant that at times I was uncomfortable with the decisions and actions of my league and its members. However, I could not speak out (too directly) for fear of losing access. So at times trust was elusive.

Harrington stresses that ‘to conduct a study, researchers must first gain the cooperation and trust of participants by establishing interpersonal relationships with them’ (2003, p. 593), but it is hard to establish interpersonal relationships when everyone is moving all the time – sometimes at speeds with which I cannot keep up. I pushed my body in a way I never have before. There were many times when I wanted to give up, yet my desire for knowledge and access was greater than the bodily restrictions I placed upon myself. Many of the key roller derby participants were faster, stronger and more skillful than me, and it took all of my strength to keep up. At the same time, it is important for me to acknowledge the privileges I have that many of the other women don’t – particularly in relation to education. Yet these ‘privileges’ have never equated to some kind of sovereign power. Whereas it is often assumed that the researcher is the one in a ‘powerful’ position (e.g. Boser, 2006; Holloway & Wheeler, 1995; Wray-Bliss, 2003), I found that an over-emphasis on my own power ended up being disempowering for me and for them. For some of the women I came across, I was the ‘other’ against whom they resisted, and I struggled not to judge them for this. I did not want to perpetuate the very tendency I was seeking to move beyond. As Game noted as she interviewed female secretaries, ‘I felt discomfort which was
symptomatic of a general unease about the power relations of research and the constitution of the other to the subject of research’ (1991, p. 127).

The struggles I had in negotiating power relations in roller derby manifested in what might be described as a type of ‘researcher paranoia’. This paranoia seems to stem from not really knowing how I am being seen and how I am positioned within the complex power relations of research as ‘the double agent’ (Roy, 2012). I knew that the women had seen me and recognised me because they remembered my name and sometimes acknowledged my presence; however, their perceptions of me remained unknown. Most problematic was my initial perception of ‘them’ as having a collective identity when in reality the women were more likely to be smaller groups of friends or just individual people, each with her own perceptions and understandings. I also felt as if I may be a burden to the league. When I joined, it had only recently had its president (elected volunteer official) resign and had to take on more freshmeat (women new to the sport) to grow its teams (several substitutes are needed in a match). But there was more to it than that. Because of my focus on the affective dimension of power relations, I could not ignore the feelings that circulated.

Beverly Skeggs’ writing resonated with my own thoughts and feelings about feminist ethnography:

I began the research with some knowledge of feminist research ethics: I wanted to reciprocate, not exploit, not abuse power, to care, to empower and to be honest. Putting these principles into practice was often difficult. During three years of full-time contact many close friendships were formed but I found it very difficult to sustain the level of commitment that any friendship required. Juggling old friends, new friends and writing is a constant problem. Reciprocity and friends increase the demands on the researcher in a way in which a text is unlikely to do. (1995, p. 197)
Early in my PhD, I presented a paper on feminist ethics in research where I stated, boldly and unequivocally, my commitment to non-exploitative research practices and representation. I did want to reciprocate, not exploit, not abuse power; to care, empower and be honest. Actually, these are things I aim to bring to my day-to-day life anyway. Yet joining a roller derby league and becoming involved in the roller derby community on the east coast of Australia was a full-time ‘job’ – making time for a life outside of roller derby became harder and harder. During the day, I was a casual sessional university teacher and PhD student researching roller derby, and in the afternoon and on weekends I was ‘Deli Slicer’, roller derby player, league secretary and high-functioning member of the roller derby community. Old friendships suffered. There was no time for anything else. This way of researching was not sustainable – for me anyway, it was a harsh, hard way of doing research. Although it may have been non-exploitative for the women involved, the demands placed on me, as the researcher, did not really fit well with notions of feminist research.

Many feminist researchers strive ‘to establish egalitarian relationships and encourage participants’ involvement in interpretation of their lives’ (Rice, 2009, p. 245), yet there is also the potential for manipulation, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. What is written is from the researcher’s perspective, and participants may have different interpretations. Rice (2009) examines the influence of physicality in her research and the implications of nondisclosure/disclosure in the research process. Like Rice, I aimed to move ‘beyond simple acknowledgement of social identities to interrogate complex effects of differences on data produced, without centering or suppressing their subjectivities in the process’ (Rice, 2009, p. 250, italics in original). And so I reflect on my own emotions, experiences,
embodiments and allegiances as they affect the research process, while creating opportunities for the research participants to tell their stories. I aim to be accountable for the ways in which my personal experiences mark my interpretation of the participants’ stories.

I was enmeshed in the ‘tangles of implication’ (Britzman, 1995, in Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 11) in roller derby. I was not an innocent bystander, nor was I revered in my position as researcher. My opinions, actions and beliefs affected the league and the other women involved, just as they affected me. I could not stand ‘outside’. I was constantly struggling with the complexities of post-structural ideas, ethnographic approaches and feminist perspectives. Tamboukou and Ball write that, ‘The management of this involvement/distance tension is a most “dangerous” and risky task for both the ethnographer and the genealogist’ (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 12). Yet the struggles, and the feelings associated with them, were not the culmination of my research. I had to manage these struggles in order to move beyond them, to write positivity as a woman in sport. This thesis is not only about my struggles as a researcher, but also about the larger question of power and its affects in physical cultures and the implications of this for sport management. My approach to research is suited to this question, yet I had to manage the tensions of post-structural feminist research to do justice to the task of how, as a woman, to research women.

To do so, I turned to the work of feminists of colour who wrote of the dilemma of the ‘outsider within’ (Collins, 1986). As Merriam states, ‘What an insider “sees” and “understands” will be different from, but as valid as what an outsider understands’ (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 415). My marginality is my strength in this project, as it provides me with what Hendrix (2011) calls ‘wide-angle vision’. My experience – that is, what I see, touch, feel, intuit, hear and smell – reveals knowledge
that otherwise is obscured by more orthodox approaches (Collins, 1986). In doing so, the experience of roller derby as a transformative practice for women and its related affects can be viewed critically – and, I argue, more productively.

In this way, my marginality can be seen as an ‘excitement to creativity’ (Collins, 1986, p. 14). As an ‘outsider within’, I have been able to question the foundations of ‘belonging’ that are so central to sport, sociology and in particular roller derby, and to incorporate a critique of ‘insiderness’ not only into my methodological approach, but also into my suggestions for theory and practice in sport and leisure studies. Toby Miller writes a strong critique of the way academics, most particularly those working in the field of sport studies, privilege their status as participants and fans, noting that, ‘their closeness to sport … their love for what they profess becomes a badge of membership’ (Miller, 2008, p. 540). He observes that most academics working in the area of sport have been or are athletes, sometimes at the elite level, and he finds this to be a ‘bad’ platform for argument. His piece highlights the extreme views that run through the field of sport studies. He writes:

> Tension, confidence, stress, and deity are allotted responsibility for success and failure. Planning, organisation, ideas and probability are not privileged in the same way. (Miller, 2008, p. 541)

Yet of course these binaries are not always so clear-cut, and affects are not always ‘positive’. The affects I experienced in roller derby were at some points ‘negative’, ‘painful’ even, as I struggled to negotiate the affective power relations at play between women and leagues.  

Another view of affect, passion and fandom in regard to sport academics, is written by Grainger (2011) – a self-confessed ‘fan’ and sport lover. He writes that:
A ‘critical sporting intellectual’ so often seems to be about the suppression of our sporting passions and preoccupations, or, at least, the tempering of our cultural hubris and affective excess. (Grainger, 2011, p. 559)

And so we find that Miller’s arguments regarding the ‘dubious nature’ (2008, p. 542) of claims to authenticity and experience amongst sport scholars are not quite so obvious. Clearly, some scholars working in the area of sport – such as Grainger – are thinking about themselves reflexively as participants and fans of the subject they are studying and questioning their values and desires in both research and sport. As for this project, and myself, reflexivity is key. Like Miller (2008), I agree that love, passion and experience are not necessarily ‘positive’ in sport and leisure research. Yet I find Grainger’s arguments even more compelling. And so, as I plan and organise my ideas, I also privilege affects and how I feel through the research process. Reflecting on her participation in bodybuilding and her writing on the subject, Heywood notes,

I believe that the fact that I have lived this book, struggling with and critically reflecting on the issues presented in it, allows me to put that struggle on display: the thinking through, the uncertainty, the awkwardness where the logic stutters, the places where the narratives starts pursuing its own course through the weird complications of daily life. (1996, p. 6-7)

And I too put these on display: the uncertainty, awkwardness and complexity of roller derby in the lives of women involved.

**Multiple methodologies and post-structural influences**

My research brings together different ways of knowing, but this ‘mixing’ of methods is understood as very different from ‘mixed methods’, where quantitative and qualitative methods are used together. Bringing together ideas around power, writing
and fragments of narratives allows for a more fluid approach to research that has room for the stories women tell about themselves, the stories other people tell about them and the sensual affects of movement. My approach focuses on the ‘spaces in between’, and attempts to evoke the multiple subjectivities of women in roller derby. In between training and bouts (derby events), in between their day to day jobs and their leisure time, their everyday ‘self’ and their derby persona: these are the spaces in between that interest me. In between these spaces is where assemblages are formed, disrupting ‘the way things are done’. It is also where different women come together to cooperate and compete. In the detail of these in-between relational spaces, different knowledges about women in roller derby can be mapped out and brought to light.

Multiple methods have been used to capture this detail. McLeod and Thomson state that multiple methods:

> Capture something of the fleeting character of the ephemeral and the interplay of the subjective and objective dimensions of time. They are methods that through different forms of duration – in fieldwork and/or analysis – recognize movement, exchange and dynamic process.

(McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 5)

Qualitative research has been said to be ‘inherently multimethod in focus’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5) in an attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of study.

Traditionally called ‘triangulation’, the use of multiple methodological perspectives, materials, and practices adds ‘rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). I have taken what my participants have said, my affective responses to roller derby, and the wider sphere of roller derby culture, particularly as it is played out in virtual spaces, into account in this research. I take into account these various ‘spaces’ – the personal, the league, the internet and the
broader socio-cultural environment in Australia – as a way of including in my analysis women’s relation to broader social formations and organisation. As Kearney, writing on the representation of roller derby on cable television, states, the ‘individualist rhetoric has specific consequences for women’s sport teams since it leads to a denial of their collective power’ (2011, p. 294). I not only use multiple methodological perspectives and methods – for example, participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis – but also include multiple sites of roller derby: local, national, global and virtual. In this way, I continue my focus on multiplicities, fragments and assemblages throughout the thesis as a strategy for escaping the tendency towards unified or totalising theories and practices.

However, I also experienced slippages and struggles through the research process. Probyn talks about desire being that which moves us forward, yet at times I lacked the desire required to push myself forward. I lacked the desire to overcome my fears and the gender limits placed on me by the ‘historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of [my] situation’ (Young, 1990, p. 29), as did many other women involved in roller derby. Fear territorialised my desire and held me immobile at times. My ambivalence – to bout or not to bout, to spend time with my roller derby friends or peers at university, and so on – is most likely shared with other players. Not everyone wants to throw themselves into the sport straight away, despite the centrality of risk and uncertainty inherent in the game. I move between subject positions, as researcher, freshmeat, professional, student, partner and friend, always occupying multiple positions at once. Roller derby grrrls are women on the move, literally, and through their narratives I have been able to engage with the different ways they succeed (or fail) in becoming different to what they were: in becoming tough,
competent, fast women; women who belong despite, and perhaps even because of, their differences.

**Roller derby/research practice**

In February 2010, I joined a roller derby league and began my auto/ethnography, through which I participated in and observed roller derby within my own league and those in close geographical proximity. My auto/ethnographic writings map this initial entree into roller derby and follow my journey from freshmeat eventually to bouting (in late October 2010), and to my resignation from the committee and exit from regular roller derby practice and participation (April 2011). During this time, I was appointed as league secretary, and this provided me with an invaluable opportunity to observe the relations between myself and others in the league, as well as the relations the women in the league had with each other. As Fleming and Fullagar point out, researchers using their own experience ‘can problematise the power relations that shape their own leisure related identities, performances and managerial authority’ (2007, p. 239). In this way, I constantly questioned my own involvement in roller derby and the subject positions through which I moved during my time with the league. As I questioned my involvement, different ‘lines of flight’ and points of departure for alternative ways of thinking about roller derby and its organisation were able to emerge. I conducted observation of all league activity, including committee meetings, subcommittee meetings, training, social events and day-to-day activities with members. I also participated in training on skates up to three times per week (training would usually last for two hours each session). I wrote of and about my experiences throughout the year on days of training, meetings and so on, describing
my experiences, reflections, initial connections with theory and any other ideas relevant to my research and my thinking about my research.

Some sport management scholars have acknowledged the need for more innovative methodological perspectives (e.g. Frisby, 2005; Skinner & Edwards, 2005). Skinner and Edwards argue for sport management researchers ‘to embrace ethnographic research designs underpinned by critical and postmodern thought in order to advance our understanding of sport management practice and organisations’ (2005, p. 405). This call from established sport management researchers is exciting, as it speaks to the need for new and innovative approaches to sport management research, theory and practice. Coming as I do from a background in literary studies and cultural sociology, where this argument for innovative methodological approaches is far from new, it has long been clear that it can help address impasses related to ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions and ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ knowledge. In sport management, and to a certain degree leisure studies, auto/ethnographic approaches have only slowly been taken up as a valid methodological approach. Even less used are approaches that combine auto/ethnography with post-structural ideas. Yet in physical cultural studies, an emerging field of study towards which I am contributing (auto/)ethnography is more common (e.g. Giardina & Newman, 2011a; Markula & Silk, 2011; Silk & Andrews, 2011).

As noted earlier, in this research I use auto/ethnography as my primary methodological approach, as practised in conjunction with feminist post-structural ideas around power relations and sexual difference. It is an evocative auto/ethnography, where emotion and affect are privileged. That is, this research is not caught up with the problem of how to represent the ‘truth’, but instead ‘invokes an
epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to feel the feelings of the other’ (Denzin, 1997, in Anderson & Austin, 2011, p. 132). Unlike many other evocative auto/ethnographies, however, my ‘epistemology of emotion’ does not assume a unified subject, or rely on an assumption of emotion as interiority. I do not aim only to evoke feelings ‘in’ the reader; rather, the point is to use emotion to guide my research, to effect different ‘readings’ and mobilise different ways of knowing. As an assemblage, my auto/ethnographic writing ‘seeks to problematize the relations’ (Denshire & Lee, 2013, p. 12) between others and myself – as researcher, volunteer committee member, derby skater and so on.

I do not aim to prove my authenticity via the privileging of experience and affects. Rather, like Chapkis, my ‘autoethnographic passages … served to reveal my own investments in the debates’ (2010, p. 288). In her work on beauty, she ‘deliberately sought out stories of pleasure and power, as well as pain’ (2010, p. 486). In many ways, this is what I did. I wanted to know the pleasure and power women were able to feel through roller derby, as well as their pain and frustration – often simultaneously in the same story – in order to draw out the multiple trajectories of subjectivity. I sought to find women’s creative responses to these contradictions that perhaps I struggled to find myself. So I include not only my own responses to events and the affects surfaced through my experiences of roller derby, but also my participants’ responses in interviews as well as ‘official’ statements by leagues found online. By including not only my experiences, but also the experiences of others, as expressed via interviews, I highlight the relational, mediated aspect of experience. On the privileging of ‘experience’ in feminist ethnographic work, Skeggs writes:

Ethnographers and feminists often give overwhelming authorial weight to the concept of experience. Because you spend so much time as an
ethnographer with people, or because you have had a particular experience doing the research you may believe that this gives you access to a particular form of knowledge to which others may not know about; that it is authentic and privileged. Yet, experience is always being interpreted by those who are experiencing it, so the researcher always enters the second stage of the interpretative process. (1995, p. 199)

As Skeggs suggests, I come to those experiences through the relations of power at work within a given space – in this case, a roller derby league and the wider roller derby community more broadly as I interacted with it.

As well as the observations, interviews were conducted with women involved in roller derby in Australia, all at various stages of their roller derby ‘careers’. These interviews were used to explore their experiences of roller derby, their experiences of the organisation of the sport and their feelings about how they have changed through their participation. Most of the women who participated in the research had sought approval from their league committee before attending their first interview. In total, I conducted interviews with 36 different women (see Appendix 1 for details). Each woman had a different story to tell about her experience of roller derby. I asked a set of open-ended questions, such as: What attracted you to roller derby? What was your skating/sport experience like prior to roller derby? How has roller derby impacted on other aspects of your life? Physical? Emotional? Family? Friends? How does it feel to be involved in roller derby? How would you describe the organisational culture of your league? And where do you see roller derby heading in the future? However, these questions were used as a framing device only, and for the most part interviewees told their own stories of roller derby without too much guidance from me as the interviewer.
Of these women, I deliberately sought out some who were, or had been, active in the volunteer management of the sport at local, regional, state or national levels. Similar questions were put to these women, although there was more of a focus on the management of the sport, and scope was given in the interviews for them to explore and reflect on their experiences as committee members and/or active league members. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me as soon as possible after the interviews to ensure that notes could be added for context and analysis could start as soon as possible. Follow-up interviews were conducted with ten of the women. These ten were chosen because of their focus on the affective aspect of roller derby, for their insight into the organisational aspects of the sport and their willingness to be interviewed a second time.

In my interview work, I found that what I experienced as a roller derby player – the arguments, the tensions, the communication problems, the rushed decisions, the non-democratic processes – were sometimes, but not always, reinforced and expressed by my research participants. In the context of the interviews, my position automatically and formally changed, from roller derby player to researcher, as marked by the informed consent procedure and my own explanation of the research. At times, I was disappointed that the women didn’t disclose as much as they usually did when we were in a different ‘space’, but now, thinking through issues of methodology and ethics, reading through some key readings on feminist research, I can see the benefit of this approach. When the women knew they were being interviewed, they made sure they only said as much as they were comfortable with, and the informed consent procedure made sure of this. I stressed that they could say as much or as little as they liked. Many of the women had questions for me, and were curious to find out what I thought about particular issues – particularly those women in my own league. I
answered them and used these moments as opportunities to engage in a dialogue about the issues raised. In these interviews, I sometimes said as much as they did and engaged with the participant as researcher and derby skater, and sometimes friend. In other interviews, with women I did not know, my role as ‘interviewer’ was more traditionally positioned.

Duncombe and Jessop (2002) describe the way ‘rapport’ and interviewing methods were previously described in methods textbooks as being ‘instrumental, hierarchical and non-reciprocal’, with the aim of producing valid, professional, scientific research. This type of qualitative research was seen as ‘masculine’, and a feminist methodology was offered up as an alternative. Feminist research is supposed to be empathetic, egalitarian and reciprocal; however, on further examination many researchers – both feminist and not – have come to see some of the inherent tensions and problems with viewing research in this way. Duncombe and Jessop write:

Uncomfortably, we came to realise that even feminist interviewing could sometimes be viewed as a kind of job where, at the heart of our outwardly friendly interviews, lay the instrumental purpose of persuading interviewees to provide us with data for our research, and also (hopefully) for our future research careers. (2002, p. 105)

As a job, I can see that some women’s choice not to disclose personal information and information about conflicts and disagreements within their league and the wider derby community was a positive one.

Although I did what ‘good’ interviewers do in working hard to gain rapport, I also stressed that participation was voluntary and that I would be using their responses in my thesis, in public presentations and in academic publications. In doing feminist research, I was ‘empathetic, egalitarian and reciprocal’ (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002), but I was also thinking and acting as a researcher, seeking responses that would
provide material that would enable me to discuss and explore issues of power and subjectivity in effective and interesting ways. In my interviews, and afterwards listening to the recordings as I completed the transcriptions, I practised what Olubas and Greenwell called ‘an ethics of listening’:

Listening might be understood as an activity which maintains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ whilst simultaneously opening between these a space for the movement of sound waves washing across and up onto the shores of the receiver’s ear. This ear, awaiting reception, is one desiring to become sensitive to the sensation of the waves as they break and run up upon its membrane. These waves, touching and soaking into the nerve endings in the process pass the reverberations through into the intricacies of the interstitial connections and onto the larger organising system of the recipient’s body. This body is a desiring one, yearning to be touched by hearing from an other and in that desire, yearning also to reciprocate the touch by taking on a form of responsibility to ‘remember’. (1999, para. 10)

As discussed above, my aim in this research is to produce an open text, and to write about, with and through research, roller derby and the question of affects in ways that enable my writing to make itself available for multiple uses and applications – for theory, sport management, pleasure and even pain. To do so requires me to practice what Les Back (2007) has called ‘the art of listening’. Interviews ensure that the voices of women at many stages of derby life are present in the multiplicity of this writing. As Game notes:

The interview itself as mediation is constitutive of the research text; relations between subjects are constituted in and through language. A transcript, for example, does not simply reflect the interview; any ‘final’ research text is not a representation or translation of experience. In short, it is not a question of stripping away the mediations to get to
the real; which, in turn, means giving up on any notion of a final point of research. (1991, p. 30)

The materials from my interviews are not the ‘final word’. Nor are my field notes, or even my bodily sensations or emotions as mediated via writing in this thesis. And nor are the ‘official’ statements made by leagues online. There is no final word, and this is why I have relied on a plurality of approaches, spaces and voices – including my own – to tell this story of roller derby in Australia that is also my story, a research story and all kinds of other stories that open out within and through my work. There is no singular roller derby to get to, nor a ‘real’ self to access in the interviews or even in my own thoughts and feelings about the sport. Rather, there are approaches, ways of thinking, strategies for negotiating and possibilities for becoming made available through my writing-as-multiplicity.

**Narrative analysis: fragments of stories**

Tamboukou, drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, suggests that ‘human beings live fragmented lives whose meaning always evade them’ (Tamboukou, 2010b, p. 117). When I asked participants to tell their ‘derby story’, it was not only what they said but the way they told their stories (how, for whom and so on) and what was not said that was of interest. Through such an approach, I am concentrating on the multiple subjectivities of my participants and the ways they come together to form assemblages – ‘a synthesis of properties not reducible to its parts’ (de Landa, 2006, in Tamboukou, 2010b, p. 127), the ‘always-emergent conditions of the present’ (Marcus & Saka, 2006, p. 101). In considering the multiple sites and affects to be explored in this project – creativity and sport, women and aggression, for example – power relations and desire are always going to be in play, ‘creating conditions of possibility
for women to resist, imagine themselves becoming other and for new possibilities in their lives to be actualized’ (Tamboukou, 2010b, p. 127).

Working with fragments of narratives gives us the ability to see the different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning that can emerge from people’s stories, and allows me to bring different stories into ‘dialogue’ with each other (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). As a methodological approach, narrative inquiry gives me a means to investigate how stories of roller derby are told, and to consider the dynamics that unfold between the story and the storyteller, the interview transcript and the participant, between different stories, and between the stories and their contexts—that is, roller derby and women’s lives. Unlike the style of narrative analysis undertaken by interpretive researchers (e.g. Gerard & Chick, 2004), I have not analysed my research material according to themes, but instead focused on each woman individually, and ‘read’ each narrative against theory and other narratives. What is important is not only what is said, but by whom and in what context. In this project, narratives are taken to be productive: ‘they do things, they constitute realities, shaping the social rather than being determined by it’ (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou 2008, p. 7). My research participants were in many ways aware of the productive power of their narratives. On signing their ethical consent forms, it was made clear to them not only that their responses may be used in publications, presentations and reports, but that those publications would be available to any roller derby league that wished to access them. By telling a certain kind of story about roller derby, these women knew with varying degrees of specificity that they were staking out a claim for their version of the sport, and a certain kind of subjectivity for themselves.
In the chapters that follow I have taken a narrative methodological approach in analysing the interview material, my auto/ethnographic writing, affective reactions and ‘official’ texts found online. The amount of material I collected through this research was considerable, and at times seemed overwhelming. In any case, there was clearly no way to include all the individual stories. Having completed 46 interviews with women involved in roller derby, as well as countless conversations in the course of my participation in the sport, and writing thousands of words in my research journal, the material I have chosen to focus in on in this thesis is significant. To do this work thoroughly, to explore power and its affects, and to make visible the multiplicities of feminine subjectivity between and within women, I have included the narratives of roller derby told by ten women. Including the narratives of these ten women means that I have excluded others. Ten women’s stories were chosen, but in making my choice I interrogated each interview transcript, asking: Does this align? Does it conflict? Or does it join with my own narrative of roller derby? I wanted and needed to include a range of perspectives, which I achieved through these choices. I also wanted and needed to include those who articulated common issues and ideas reflexively. And I wanted to include women at a range of stages in their derby ‘career’ (Stebbins, 1982) and from a range of geographical locations. Including only ten research participants does not mean that the rest were ‘wasted’.

Having 36 participants exposed me to a large range of ideas and ways of articulating roller derby and its affects. And so the decisions made – about who to include and who to leave out – were informed by the vast amount of material to which I had access. I have also used some of the other women’s transcripts in journal articles, where I have explored other ideas and concepts separate from, but still related to, this thesis. If this were a different piece of work, exploring ideas from a different
methodological approach, then perhaps using all 36 women would have been appropriate. However, for this thesis, exploring affects in roller derby and in research, it has been imperative to use the stories of a few women, allowing for more continuity between chapters and enabling a deeper analysis of complex ideas in line with the methodological approach described above. The women’s stories I have chosen to include have compelling personal narratives that run parallel to their roller derby narratives. Each of these women highlight the territories of thought; the limits of thinking in certain ways are delineated by the apparent boundaries of their bodies and personal histories. Their stories constitute interesting, ‘pleasurable’ texts, and I have, as Tamboukou puts it, ‘let myself [be] seduced by their stories’ (2010a, p. 179). As noted by Andrews and colleagues, ‘narrative data can easily seem overwhelming: susceptible to endless interpretation, by turns inconsequential and deeply meaningful’ (2008, p. 1). In acknowledging this tendency, it has been important for me to question the how and the why of analysis.

In taking up a narrative methodology to analyse my research material, I have been influenced by Foucault’s genealogy and by Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual personae and aesthetic figures (1994). Deleuze and Guattari write, ‘The role of conceptual personae is to show thought’s territories, its absolute deterritorialisations and reterritorializations’ (1994, p. 69, italics in original). Concepts that become part of the familiar discourse of a culture are made, invented, fabricated. They are also ‘signed’, attached to a proper name and so take on an authorial function as in ‘Aristotle’s substance, Descartes’s cogito, Leibniz’s monad, Kant’s condition, Schelling’s power, Bergon’s duration’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 7). In order to write ‘new’ concepts and ways of thinking, we need, according to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘conceptual personae’ (1994, p. 2) that will make discursive interventions
more effective. Such a persona for my work can be found in the friend. In my time in roller derby, I made many ‘friends’.

The friend who appears in philosophy no longer stands for an extrinsic persona, an example or empirical circumstance, but rather for a presence that is intrinsic to thought, a condition of possibility of thought itself, a living category, a transcendental lived reality. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 3)

The women whose voices appear in the following chapters demonstrate a condition of possibility of thought and introduce a relationship with the Other.

Including and naming the Other/s and my relationships with them allows an expression of a possible world and enables us to ‘consider the components of this field for itself in a new way’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 18). While I have made use of a great deal of narrative material, I have only named ten women from my research. Each woman has been given a pseudonym and I have gone to all kinds of lengths to ensure that they cannot be identified in other ways. Yet in giving them a name and allowing for some continuity throughout the thesis, I aim to illuminate the multiplicities of their narratives and my relations with them. Naming them positions them as conceptual personae whose ideas matter and who enable new possibilities to be thought. The women’s names are: Debbie (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), Kate (Chapter 4), Beth (Chapters 4 and 6), Lola (Chapter 5), Clara (Chapter 6), Suzanne (Chapter 6), Tia (Chapter 6), Vicky (Chapter 6), Jenny (Chapter 6), and Lou (Chapter 6).

Tamboukou writes about how we can use ‘the trope of the name to follow different trails, transformations and discursive constructions’ (2010c, p. 20). In a sense, these women become the characters in my narrative as well as the subjects of their own.

This extended text from Deleuze and Guattari describes how ‘characters’ become a
convention in a style of philosophical writing that enabled the philosopher to create new concepts and could carry ideas that demonstrate limits and possibilities:

The character of the dialogue sets out concepts: in the simplest case, one of the characters, who is sympathetic, is the author’s representative; whereas the others, who are more-or-less antipathetic, refer to other philosophies whose concepts they expound in such a way as to prepare them for the criticisms or modifications to which the author wishes to subject them. On the other hand, conceptual personae carry out the movements that describe the author’s plane of immanence, and they play a part in the very creation of the author’s concepts. Thus, even though they are ‘antipathetic’, they are so while belonging fully to the plane that the philosopher in question lays out and to the concepts that he creates. They then indicate the dangers specific to this plane, the bad perceptions, bad feelings, and even negative movements that emerge from it, and they will themselves inspire original concepts whose repulsive character remains a constitutive property of that philosophy. (1994, p. 63)

In analysing my research material and choosing which stories to tell and which women to include, I have made a point of presenting narratives that variously align, conflict and cohere with my own.

I am interested in how the narratives included ‘evolve as stories in becoming, taking unpredicted bifurcations, being interrupted or broken, remaining irresolute or open-ended’ (Tamboukou, 2010c, p. 21). And these stories evoke yet larger narratives, like those told in Chapter 6, of the future and possible directions for roller derby, or of the sport’s ‘origins’, or of the possibilities for these women’s lives. But they are always still open, unpredictable, becoming. In some ways the material presented in the following chapters is organised according to discursive themes, ideas around love, becoming, belonging, inclusion, exclusion, anger, aggression and
feminine subjectivity. But more than that, they are organised by concepts, and
therefore conceptual personae: the ten women whose narratives tell a story of roller
derby. In this way they are embodied. These are stories told by women I met and
came to know in the course of my research. Hence their corporeal bodies, what they
felt and the affects impressed upon myself and others are as important as the
discursive text and language used to evoke that emotion. Tamboukou writes that, ‘the
subject does matter in narrative research and not merely as a textual effect, but as
embodied and grounded’ (2010c, p. 21). And it is the feminine subject in particular
that matters in this research. Narrative research allows for these women’s
subjectivities to be written as multiplicities.

**Affective research**

Taking my lead from Ahmed, I am committed to making visible ‘not just the textuality of
emotions, but also the emotionality of texts’ (2004b, p. 27). As mentioned earlier, these
‘texts’ are the interview transcripts, my auto/ethnographic writing, and text found online on
‘official’ derby websites and unofficial blogs. I highlight the emotionality of the texts ‘read’
– where women express their feelings or where I experience certain affects through my
relations with others. Ahmed writes that, ‘all actions are reaction, in the sense that what we
do is shaped by the contact we have with others’ (2004c, p. 4), so my reaction – what I feel,
what I write – is shaped by the contact I have with others: other bodies and texts. Given my
feminist conceptual and methodological frameworks, the body is central to this thesis.
‘[Bodies] act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable’ (Grosz, 1994,
p. xi). I ‘feel my way’ (Ahmed, 2004c) through the research process, privileging sensations,
feelings and affects. Like Irigaray (1993b), I privilege that which is usually reserved for
those ‘minor’ disciplines: art, craft, poetry. I privilege the feminine in all its multiplicity in research and I ask different questions. As Massumi writes:

The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? (in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xv)

In taking this approach, what has been produced for me and through my research has not always felt ‘good’. Sometimes it has felt downright ‘bad’ and it has often been very uncomfortable, but it has also been transformative.

In taking the body and its affects seriously in writing and research, I aim to do what many before me have done and to find new questions, and therefore new answers, new concepts for working through the tensions of a broadly defined feminist physical cultural studies. Debates about agency versus structure, work and leisure and so on are not at stake here. Instead, this thesis explores the affects that circulate in relations of power between women and what this means for individual and collective subjectivity, and for the governance of subjects in roller derby. The notion of experience has become polarised as either positive or negative in some feminist debates between post-modernism/modernism (Oksala, 2004). In this text, I aim to demonstrate the value of experience and of the discursive, in unravelling the complexities of the social world of roller derby. When one takes a post-structural approach to theory, method and writing, it is often assumed that representation and discourse will be treated as more important than lived experience and affect. This is not the case with my work, nor is it always the case with others in the broad fields of physical cultures studies and the sociology of sport (e.g. Giardina & Newman, 2011a, 2011b; Heywood, 1996; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Markula & Silk, 2011; Martin, 2011; Silk & Andrews, 2011; Thorpe, Barbour & Bruce, 2011; Woodward, 2009).
To the question ‘What is auto/ethnography’, Ellis responds: ‘research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political’ (2004, p. xix). And so in this thesis I connect the textual with the embodied, the cultural with the social and political, discourse with experience. I have found that the relationships between experience, bodies, discourses and power are best written through emotion and affect – my own and those expressed by my participants. Yet thinking and writing through emotion and affect are not always comfortable; they are sometimes outright painful, and always risky. I take some comfort from Ellis, who writes that ‘almost always, the insights you gain about yourself and the world around you make the pain bearable, even welcome at times’ (Ellis, 2004). And so auto/ethnography and roller derby go well together. Both are risky, at times painful, at times immensely satisfying, and both allow participants to know more about themselves, those around them and the broader society in which they live. These links may perhaps not be obvious to those unfamiliar with both fields, but I maintain that the ‘dangers’ (Foucault, 1991b, p. 46) of researching roller derby and of roller derby itself are interrelated with the emotions and affects in circulation through this process. The love, passion, desire, anger, aggression, belonging, hate and shame in circulation in roller derby reveal the movements of power among women and the possibilities for transformation for individual subjectivity and collective bodies in sport and leisure.

This thesis uses a plurality of methods to question the relation of power and affect in roller derby. It is a collection of fragments – part ethnography, part auto/ethnography, part autobiographical story (Ellis, 2004, p. 31). It emphasises discourse and experience in an attempt to unravel the multiple subjectivities and collectivities possible in leisure and sport studies. It questions the inherent value of
sport as a social ‘good’ (ABS, 2006b; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009; Jarvie, 2003), and
questions the feminist value of sport and leisure as inherently resistant space (Beal,
1995; Green, 1998; Parry, 2005). I turn away from these questions in a move that has
proved to be satisfying and productive in terms of thinking differently about power
and affect in sport and leisure. Roller derby is ‘hard’ and ‘tough’, and not always
‘right’, yet the connotations of these words tell us about relationships of sexual
difference between and among women (Braidotti, 2011) and illuminate the extent of
work still to be done in forging a more positive feminine imaginary that does not
reduce women to the masculine other as mother, wife or child.
Chapter 4
Belonging and becoming: –
‘roller derby saved my soul’

Introduction

In 2006, an independent band, Uncle Leon and the Alibis, released the track ‘Roller Derby Saved My Soul’. This catchy title has become a common trope within media, popular literature and online content about roller derby, as well as on official league material. The lyrics of this song resonated loudly with the roller derby community:

Roller Derby Saved My Soul

Well some girls are built for kissin’
Some girls are built for love
And some kinds of girls
Like diamonds and pearls
And all that fancy stuff
But some girls are built for speed
And some girls, they like to fight
There ain’t nothing so sweet
As a girl on skates
Whoopin’ other girls asses all night

9 To hear the song and watch the official music video, go to <www.youtube.com/watch?v=8R95ZC5NbWQ&feature=watch_response_rev> (accessed 25/01/12).
She’s the hottest little deal on eight wheels
Burning like a babe outta hell
Jammin’ and a blockin’ and a little skull knockin’
It's enough to make a grown man yell
GO GO ROLLER GIRL
LOOK AT THAT GIRL ROLL
ROLLER DERBY SAVED MY SOUL
She got muscles in all the right places
She got tattoos, attitude, and sass
And I’ll be damned to hell
If that skinny little girl couldn’t
Roll up and whoop my ass
Well some men they like ‘em quiet
Some men like ‘em shy
But give me a girl
With some bruises on her butt
And that killer look in her eye
She’s the hottest little deal on eight wheels
Burning like a babe outta hell
Jammin’ and a blockin’ and a little skull knockin’
It’s enough to make a grown man yell
GO GO ROLLER GIRL
LOOK AT THAT GIRL ROLL
ROLLER DERBY SAVED MY SOUL
Now friends,
I was lost and I was lonely
Like a wheel with no air to roll
I was hungry for a game
That could ease my pain
And put the fear o’ woman in my soul
I ain’t talkin’ about no cheerleader
I’m not talkin’ about no volleyball team
I’m talkin’ about the ones with the moves and the guts
I’m talkin’ about roller derby
She’s the hottest little deal on eight wheels
Burning like a babe outta hell
Jammin’ and a blockin’ and a little skull knockin’
It’s enough to make a grown man yell
GO GO ROLLER GIRL
LOOK AT THAT GIRL ROLL
ROLLER DERBY SAVED MY SOUL (felixthebrat, n.d.).

Women involved in roller derby speak strongly of the ways roller derby has ‘saved their soul’. The potential of roller derby to affect the ‘souls’ of the women who participate adds an almost mystical air to the sport. For some women, roller derby has taken on a ‘religious’ fervour. For others, it has become their ‘medicine’, a protective factor from mental health problems and the general stresses of life. For some of my research participants, roller derby has offered them something they could not find.
elsewhere – in particular, it has offered them a sense of belonging with related positive affects.

In this chapter, I explore the processes of ‘becoming’ derby and the ways the women came to understand the affects they felt in roller derby. This ‘becoming’ is similar to the Foucauldian concept of subjectification (1980), yet here the focus is on the centrality of affect to this process. I map out the way affects – such as love, desire, pleasure and even aggression, pain and violence – are central in the processes of ‘becoming’ derby that the women experience. In ‘becoming’ derby, the three women who are the focus of this chapter – Debbie, Kate and Beth – desire to exert themselves in an attempt to overcome gender norms of feminine fragility and weakness, while also maintaining a connection with their own versions of alternative femininity. The subject position of ‘derby grrrl’ and its related affects are temporal. It is an unstable, complex, mobile position that both I and these women took up for a time. And for a time it was a productive, fruitful position. It felt different.

Roller derby is a practice that allowed these women to embody an ‘ethic of care’ (Foucault, 1986), to care for their selves, experiencing healing and transformation. In the Foucauldian sense, it was a ‘technology of self’, a practice that worked to:

> Permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988 in Markula, 2003, p. 88)

The women’s stories told in this chapter demonstrate the complex workings of power in pushing gender boundaries and enabling creative expressions of alternative subjectivity, with affect as central to these processes. Yet roller derby, as a productive, transformative
practice that allows diverse women to experience ‘success’, is somewhat contradictory. Some women experience the sport as violent, aggressive and rough; and the costumes worn and style promoted is often of a highly sexualised, adorned ‘femme’ femininity. In being united in their resistance against a passive heterosexual femininity, they negotiate the finer complexities of sexual difference (Butler, 1990; Gatens, 1991; Irigaray, 1993a). These negotiations, between what I have called hardness – aggression, toughness, attitude, violence, force, physical skill and fitness – and softness – love, care, belonging, healing, friendship and joy – are undertaken by women in roller derby in their attempts to use sport and physical activity as pathways to alternative ways of living as embodied gendered subjects.

This chapter addresses the question of how a ‘tough’, ‘rough’ space such as roller derby works as a space of transformation, belonging and love; it also explores how force is used to produce these affects. As Massumi positions it in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s usage, ‘Force is not to be confused with power. Force arrives from outside to break constraint and open new vistas. Power builds walls’ (in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xiii). The difference between power (see Foucault, 1998, pp. 92–102) and force has sometimes been confused. Force is that feeling most of my participants described where they felt strong, capable and tough – where they felt good about being able to knock another women down at training or in a game. I too felt this positive relation to embodied force:

Best training last night. I did 25 laps in five minutes easily, with ten seconds to spare even. Then we did some scrimmaging and it felt amazing. I felt so strong and capable. I knocked a few people over with my blocks and it felt great. No guilt, no regret. It was actually really satisfying to knock them over and see them sprawled on the floor. And then I tried jamming and it was wicked. I got past the pack with ease and felt just so good. It’s really hard to express in words, but to avoid injury (two women hurt themselves quite badly
during the scrimmage) and to feel in control on skates was a fantastic feeling. I just felt so strong; don’t know how else to describe it. (11 October, 2010)

Power, on the other hand can be forceful, but more often than not it is more subtle. As you will read in the three narratives below, Debbie, Kate and Beth have orientated themselves differently towards the force and strength required in roller derby. This alternative orientation has enabled them to feel successful, loved and part of a supportive group of women.

In selecting three participants’ stories to tell, I thought about my own experience of roller derby. On 15 March 2010, only weeks into my PhD candidature, I wrote the following in my research journal:

Went to a roller derby bout on Saturday night. I thought it was an amazing experience! I sat right on the edge of the track (they called it suicide line or something like that) and I could see everything. I was absolutely enthralled at the way these women competed in front of over 1600 people and gave it their very best for no financial reward, nor any mainstream acknowledgement of their efforts. This was truly a subcultural sporting event. Not only in the sense of windsurfers and skaters as articulated in other research about subcultural sports, but in the way that the spectators were a truly homogenous group of ‘alternatively’ styled men and women (mostly women and predominantly over the age of 24) gathered to revel in other women’s pain and success. I suppose what really stood out to me was the excitement in the room. The music played loudly as one by one the women presented themselves to the crowd. The commentator introduced them using their ‘derby’ name and women did knee slides (an effective way to stop quickly when skating by going down on one knee) to the cheer of the spectators. And then the game/bout began. Slowly, as I watched, I could get more of an idea of the rules – it wasn’t until halfway through the second half that I noticed the ‘sin bin’ where players were sent as a penalty for breaking the rules.

Because of my lack of knowledge of the rules, it did take me a little while to get the hang of what was going on, but that didn’t stop me (nor, from the sound of the cheers and looks of excitement on the spectators’ faces, did it stop anyone else from enjoying themselves) from having a great time. I was
inspired. I wanted to go out and buy every bit of merchandise I could – thinking that it would be ‘cool’ to be a part of such a ‘different’ community; one that revolved around sport instead of a particular style of music. I am not sure why this is so attractive to me – or to the other spectators – but there is definitely something in it … At the end of the bout the women did a victory lap and it was at that point that I decided that I wanted to be a roller derby girl. I wanted to experience the feeling they had when they had escaped injury and won the match. I wanted to know what it was like to have all these ‘cool’ people cheering for you. I heard the gay couple next to me say, ‘Oh my god, I love her. I am going to get my photo with her!’

So, of course, I went to roller derby training the very next day (I had been thinking of going for a while, but I didn’t think it would be that soon). I was very apprehensive, and once I got my hired (old, brown, very daggy) skates on I honestly thought that I should just give up then and there. I felt wobbly and unsure, nothing at all like the fantasy I had of myself being confident and strong. But I persisted for the two-hour training session. And I fell. Twice on my bum (and I am told that is the worst way to fall as you can really hurt your back bone and don’t have padding there) and several times on my knees (which I was actually praised for). I did my best, slowly remembering some of the skills I had back in the early 90s when I used to spend my Friday nights in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne rollerblading to the sounds of Too Unlimited, Aerosmith and other suitably daggy tracks of my teens. I was never a great skater. I had a fun time and I didn’t break any bones. So here I was, over fifteen years later, skating on roller skates and wobbling around a track. I went through the drills set out by the ‘freshmeat’ coach. She was actually quite encouraging and by the end of the session, sweating in my jeans and t-shirt (I obviously had no idea what to wear), she told me that I had done really well and that in eight weeks I would be in the intermediate level! A bit quick I thought but then again it is a new sport and they probably want to get people involved as quickly as possible to keep their interest. So many questions have been running though my mind and I want to know as much as I can about roller derby.

I wanted to be like them – to become them, to belong among them. To become strong, fearless, loved even. I wanted to be part of something ‘different’ and exciting such that my first bout presented to me. I saw roller derby as an opportunity to break open
new vistas, to reinvent femininity and ‘sport’. These were perhaps ambitious and naive desires, but I am sure I was not alone in thinking about these possibilities.

Throughout my life, at different times, I’d felt marginalised, depressed, undervalued. I’d struggled with the challenges of being a woman in a man’s world. I’d felt restricted by my gender many times: rejected by men and women. Coming in contact with roller derby, I felt excited and exhilarated by the possibilities I saw inherent in the sport. It gave me the energy I needed to push my body further than I ever had before. At 30 years of age, I was learning a new skill and was willing to push through the discomfort that comes with that. After two or three months of training, I wrote:

I am really starting to love skating and the feeling of freedom I get on skates. I am getting more competent on them and can therefore move with a little more speed, a bit more purposeful in my movements, and am more skilful in my actions. It’s an amazing feeling to be on those skates, moving in ways that I could never do just on my feet. Being able to move in this different way is one of the attractions – I think. (29 May 2010)

In the first few months of my participation in roller derby, I loved it – I truly did. I wore my ‘derby gear’ to my PhD confirmation seminar to embody my previous months of research. I felt really proud to be a ‘derby girl’, even though I was still not sure exactly what that was and whether I qualified. I went to training two to three times a week and spent hours doing administrative work for my league each week. I socialised with women from roller derby and very quickly they became the central people in my life. Despite this commitment of time and energy, I was never really sure whether I was considered ‘derby’ to some of the women who had been involved for longer than myself – although ‘longer’ was usually only a few months, considering that it was still such a new sport in that area at the time.
This questioning of the stability of the roller derby identity led me to reject any model of the ‘roller derby girl’ as either ‘this’ or ‘that’. Rather, it was a process of ‘becoming’:

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification … To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination … [becomings] … are perfectly real … Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are … Becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself … [and] finally, becoming is not an evolution. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 237–8)

As stated in Chapter 2, rather than define the roller derby body by its organs and functions, or by its shape and build, ‘instead we will seek to count its affects’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 257) by asking, ‘What can a roller derby body do?’

Women in roller derby can definitely hurt each other – the rules and form of the game allow for and encourage it. But they can also love each other. Central to the processes of becoming that the women involved (and the sport itself) are undergoing is belonging. Experiencing belonging and love – whether that felt easy, or hard, or whether this was in opposition to, or a continuation of, their experiences in day-to-day life – was an important affect, which worked as a kind of glue between the women involved.

For many of the women involved in this research, roller derby provided an antidote to the gendered institutions that had trapped them in the past: family, work, medicine and their gendered relationship to their bodies. Roller derby has become a space associated with transformation, change, belonging and reinvention. With its very particular ‘style’, roller derby has enabled women to think of themselves differently. As articulated by Deleuze, style encompasses ‘three poles, the concept or
new ways of thinking, the percept or new ways of seeing and hearing, the affect or new ways of experiencing’ (Deleuze, 1990, in Probyn, 1996, p. 52). The pole of affect is my focus: the affective aspects of roller derby that enable women to experience themselves differently. Focusing in on this ‘pole of affect’, with regard to the particular style of roller derby, enables me to write the way some women come to experience themselves in/through the sport. In focusing on how it feels to be involved in roller derby, I demonstrate Ahmed’s view that ‘emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside from an outside in the first place’ (2004c, p. 10). The narratives of Debbie, Kate and Beth in this chapter serve to illuminate the ‘inside’ of roller derby: that privileged space where women experience transformation, love, belonging, pleasure and empowerment. It is a relatively hard space to occupy because of the contact nature of the sport, the high levels of fitness required to play and the diverse women that form part of each league. Yet this ‘hardness’ is not the absence of emotion; rather, as articulated by Ahmed, it is ‘a different emotional orientation towards others’ (2004c, p. 4, italics in original).

I draw upon the interviews and my experiences of three research participants: Debbie, Kate, and Beth. These women are in many ways very different; however, all of their lives have been influenced by roller derby in one way or another. Each of the three women chosen for this chapter expresses a different orientation towards roller derby and articulates her experiences thoughtfully and in some depth – which was necessary for the type of analysis I am undertaking. Interviewing 36 women involved in roller derby, as well as my personal experiences being involved in the sport, gave me a very broad perspective. Yet in order to explore how women’s affective experiences contribute to ways of knowing roller derby as a space for becoming and belonging I could not tell all the women’s stories. And so I chose Debbie, Kate and
Beth for this chapter. I may have chosen other women – for example, Gail, my oldest participant at 45 years of age. Gail had been socially isolated before she started roller derby. She worked nights in a factory, was raising two school-aged children on her own and lived in a low socio-economic area. She was one of the best skaters in her league, and at 45 had found friendship, belonging and love in roller derby. Or I could have included June, a 30-year-old naturopath who I interviewed twice. She had recently come through a painful relationship breakup, and found roller derby to be a healing space, despite breaking her leg and needing surgery. Or Dee’s story, or Lisa’s, or Catherine’s, Gail’s, Jenny’s, Lou’s, Vicky’s, Sherry’s, Lola’s, Bunty’s, Jo’s, Rachel’s, Anne’s, Tia’s, Bianca’s, Clair’s, Yvette’s, Leanne’s, Francis’, Kerrie’s, Kara’s, Bec’s, Kelli’s, Robin’s, Jane’s, Bligh’s, Elaine’s, Sarah’s, Barb’s, Gretel’s, Jackie’s, Clara’s or Suzanne’s. But only a few narratives could be used if I was going to undertake an in-depth narrative analysis.

I asked myself: What kinds of stories get told the most? Are there any exceptions? Any women who express something different to the others? Are there any stories that I feel challenge my own experiences? Or align with them? Which stories were most seductive (Tamboukou, 2010a, p. 179)? The three participants chosen for this chapter – and indeed all participants in my research – are white women. ‘Whiteness’ has in fact been shown as common to other female leisure cultures, such as Riot Grrrl (Piano, 2003; Schilt, 2004). Yet to read their narratives as the ‘same’ would be to perpetuate the over-simplification of the category of ‘women’ in general. As women, they and I have some things in common: most importantly our marginalisation and lack of imaginary of alternative futures for ourselves. However, there are intersections and negotiations of aspects of subjectivity, such as class, sexuality, whiteness, affects and ability that trouble categories (Brah & Phoenix,
Debbie, Kate and Beth identify with and can be identified by a range of aspects of identity, and as such make visible the complexity of writing women’s affective experiences.

Becoming strong, sane, independent and proud, Debbie, Kate and Beth describe how they have been affected by roller derby as a productive, transformative, positive force in their lives. This is in contrast to the next chapter (Chapter 5), which examines those ‘negative’ affects that surface in [the] sport. ‘Roller derby’ means different things to different women in the context of their lives and identities, which are produced through the intersection of age, sexuality, socio-economic status, geographical location and ethnicity (Pavlidis & Fullagar, forthcoming, 2013). By reading across texts – interview transcripts, theories, policies, online blogs and discussions, and popular texts about roller derby – and my own experience, I aim to show the way roller derby acts on the gendered subjectivities of some of the women involved. Each of the narratives presented here is unique, yet they all share one key similarity: roller derby has been articulated to in some way or another ‘save their soul’.

Focusing in on the stories of roller derby told by Debbie, Kate and Beth, this chapter highlights some of the ways in which affects circulate in roller derby and the way roller derby has affected the bodies, minds and ‘souls’ of the women involved. First is Debbie’s story. She is in her late thirties, living in a rural setting with her two children. Debbie has a chequered history – a ‘hard’ life – with drugs, domestic violence, housing insecurity, unemployment and general financial struggle all being part of her day-to-day life. She loves physical activity and pushing her body ‘hard’ in her favourite sports, skating and surfing. Debbie was one of the best skaters – if not
the best – in her league: she was fast, strong, lithe and highly skilled on roller skates. She could jump over two people lying side by side, she could skate 25 laps in five minutes with ease (the minimum requirement for a roller derby skater) and she could do a lot of things many other skaters could not. Yet Debbie’s participation in roller derby was also at times destructive, despite the positive affects and changes it brought to her life (see Chapter 5). Debbie was keen to participate in this research and volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview. She was passionate about roller derby: it was a sport that brought her skills and strengths as a skater to the fore and placed her in a position of some authority as one of the strongest skaters not only in her own league but in her region of Australia. As a woman who had overcome several adversities and who supported two children with only government benefits to assist, Debbie’s life was not one of traditional ‘success’. Debbie did not have formal education beyond high school, was unemployed, rented a small, cheap flat for her and her children. Her successful experience of roller derby stood in opposition to her day-to-day life, and it is this stark difference that highlighted to me the powerful affects of roller derby.

‘Fire in the belly’: the healing power of roller derby

In my time involved in roller derby, Debbie became a close friend and support. I admired her ability and skills on the track, and could see the struggles with which she contended daily in supporting herself and her two small children. Her passion for roller derby was obvious. She would drive a total of three hours to attend training, and would often end up coaching simply because the league needed her help. We would talk about our frustrations, desires and hopes for ourselves and roller derby, and would spend hours trying to figure out the ‘best way’ to run the league. She had been
a member of the league since its inception in 2006, and had continued to do the three-
hour round trip twice a week since then. Debbie was a ‘star’ in our league. When we
held bouts, fans would rush up to her afterwards to get a photo with her, and young
children would ask for her autograph. On the days when we weren’t training, Debbie
would skate around her local area, in the skate bowl, to work, when and wherever she
could to keep her skills up. Her commitment to roller derby often kept me going when
I didn’t think I could push myself any harder. Her encouragement helped me
challenge myself and my abilities. I was one of the few skaters in my league who was
able and willing to jump over another player, and it was Debbie who told me that I
could do it – I believed in her and wanted to impress her.

For several of my participants, roller derby had ‘healing’ affects. Debbie’s
interviews and my experiences of her spoke most strongly to this idea of ‘healing’ via
roller derby, and it is through Debbie’s story that I explore the ‘healing’ power of the
sport. Spending time with Debbie and interviewing her for this project, it became
clear that she had engaged with psychological and ‘spiritual’ discourses about the self
in order to help her reconcile some of her challenging life experiences. As argued by
Furedi, ‘the quest for personal self-understanding through the act of self-reflection is
one of the legacies of modernity’ (2004, p. 143). Put differently, Rose writes:

Psychotherapeutic language and advice extends beyond the
consultation, the interview, the appointment; it has become a part of
the staple fare of the mass media of communication, in the magazine
advice column and in documentaries and discussions on
television...The therapeutic imperative appears as much a matter of
healing ourselves as it is of being cured. (1990, p. 218)

Though not without criticism, particularly in regards to feminist thinking, both Furedi
and Rose’s work does well to highlight the inward orientation to self that has become
popular in recent years, where, as Furedi states, ‘the question of identity is increasingly associated with feeling’ (Füredi, 2004, p. 143). The idea, of sport as explicitly therapeutic and healing is not often explored in the literature (for one notable exception see Axelsen, 2009), although it is sometimes mentioned (e.g. Heywood, 1996, p. 7). Debbie’s reflection on roller derby moves beyond embodied discourses of fitness and fun, and instead delved into questions of hope, faith and healing. At the start of our first interview, Debbie commented on some of the affects of roller derby:

*It lets out everything, it’s like meditation, isn’t it? you know, it’s sort of, I guess it helps heal, its heals, it moves you through things, it’s good for your body, physically, your health, your mental wellbeing, it’s being just one with everything, I suppose it helps you exert yourself.*

Roller derby is not just a physical, bodily activity, but also a spiritual and emotional one. I asked Debbie what she meant when she said ‘healing’, to which she responded:

*Healing is making realizations and growth, moving forward … A healing experience would be learning and growing, walking away on more of a positive note than what was and knowing that you’ve also got to make some changes … it’s not always going forward, like a sore healing up, sometimes things have to get worse before they get better.*

This type of psychic – as opposed to the physical – healing performed by roller derby is a good example of the contradictions inherent in the sport. Through physical exertion and aggression – and sometimes pain and injury – women like Debbie have orientated themselves differently to this contact sport.

Rather than an orientation of toughness and strength – although they are also important affects with varied implications for subjectivity and sport management – some women have orientated themselves towards roller derby in a way that privileges
love, ‘healing’ and positivity. In some ways, reconfiguring roller derby as ‘healing’ marks the sport as ‘feminine’ in a particular way, as opposed to traditional notions of competitive sport as related to strong bodies and winning. Debbie says, ‘I’m hard and I can do what I got to do’. Yet, as mentioned above, this ‘hardness’ is not the absence of emotion but, as articulated by Ahmed, ‘a different emotional orientation towards others’ (2004c, p. 4, italics in original). Unable to lash out at those people and institutions that judge and hurt her, Debbie instead takes out her frustration in roller derby. She is supported to be ‘hard’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘tough’, and for her this is healing. She says, ‘it allowed me to feel more happiness really. It helped me to move through other things that were going on’. In moving away from the Freudian model of the unconscious, where Debbie’s desires for roller derby could be traced back to a single origin, I read her responses as the ‘surfacing’ (Ahmed, 2004c; Probyn, 1996), the ‘mapping’, the mimesis (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of her relations with roller derby.

‘Love’ is ‘hard’. Roller derby reflects this complex relation. It is not an imitation, ‘but a capture of code’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10). ‘Roller derby’ is ‘hard’, as is Debbie, as are many other women involved who also describe themselves in this way. But this hardness does not preclude love. It actually fosters it in some way: it gave Debbie confidence, helped her deal with self-doubt and helped her heal from past adversity. But Debbie knows that this hard/soft space is not for everyone: ‘I think you’ve got to be a certain type, definitely, you’ve got to have a little fire in the belly, you know there are just certain types that aren’t made up that way.’ That ‘fire in the belly’ – the drive to push herself harder and faster – is part of the ‘healing’ and self-love that happen for Debbie in roller derby. That ‘fire’ is the momentum that keeps Debbie moving, becoming, healing. It is a different kind of love, not maternal
or charitable, but hard, strong and tough. This love is something like Ahmed argues for: ‘a different kind of line or connection between the others we care for, and the world to which we want to give shape’ (2004c, p. 141), and also similar to the love we give ourselves. This type of ‘love’ can underpin a respectful relation between self and others, and perhaps a feminine imaginary of relationships between women.

Debbie’s desire for roller derby was powerful to be around; it was inspirational. In understanding Debbie’s desire as productive, her interpretation of the affects experienced in roller derby as ‘healing’ come to make sense. As Foucault writes, desire is ‘movement which animates the soul and propagates itself spontaneously from soul to soul … bringing forth pleasures, uneasiness, manners of seeing, sensations that I have already had or that I intuit that I must feel some day’ (1982, in Probyn, 1996, p. 61). Desire is the ‘fire’, the healing power, the adrenaline of which Debbie speaks:

Running on adrenaline, no fear, no fear, no fear at all. Running on adrenaline but the feeling it gives me is actually more of a presence, cause there is no time, whereas normally when you are doing your every day chores you’ve actually got more time to think, whereas when you’ve got a sport, like roller derby, its back to back, so you’ve got to make split decisions.

The ‘presence’ to which Debbie repeatedly refers is the ‘now’, the ‘spirit’ or ‘love’ that is constantly referred to in New Age texts and teachings (e.g. see Tolle, 2004). Yet where this ‘presence’ is usually sought via calming, ‘gentle’ practices, such as yoga or meditation, for Debbie this affect is found in the aggressive, ‘hard’, ‘tough’ practice of roller derby. Roller derby creates for Debbie ‘jouissance’, a term used by some of the French feminists in connection with women’s sexuality. It is connected to notions of fluidity, flow, expanding and excessive escape, and is explicitly ‘feminine’
(Wearing, 1998, p. 108). Rather than the civilised, rational ‘love’ proposed by philosophers such as John Stuart Mill (Gatens, 1991, p. 27), Debbie’s is an embodied love – an affect rather than a cognitive process.

The ‘presence’ felt by Debbie is a momentary release from her gendered body and expectations. As a single mother of two children, who struggles with drug abuse and epilepsy, Debbie is in a precarious position. She is not the entrepreneurial ‘top girl’ of whom McRobbie writes (McRobbie, 2007, 2009), nor is she actively resisting consumerism via ‘alternative’ practices. Debbie is what Harris might describe as the ‘at-risk’ girl (2004), though she is heading into her forties. The production of Debbie as a ‘failed’ neoliberal subject ‘is achieved by an uncritical analysis of [her] circumstantial disadvantage as well as an attribution of personal incompetence or willfulness’ (Harris, 2004, p. 26). By pushing her corporeal body and feeling the ‘presence’, Debbie is actively undergoing a process of subjectification. Her bruises, her strong body, her relationships with the game and with the other women involved are evidence of her transformed self – and perhaps her previous self. Where the binaries between reason and the body, man over woman and ‘a God-given soul and a mortal, lustful, sinful carnality’ (Grosz, 1994, p. 5) were once concrete, in roller derby – and for Debbie in particular – these binaries are troubled and made strange. Through a discourse of alternative (Eastern?) spirituality, Debbie reconfigures her desire, passion and aggression as healing, loving and explicitly physical and emotional and cognitive. Somehow, her ‘mortal, lustful, sinful carnality’ has been ‘saved’; her soul has been saved via the aggressive, competitive, potentially ‘dangerous’ practices of roller derby.

Debbie’s strong, hard body is also an account of the self-love she is showing herself. In being a part of roller derby – a sport at which she excels, and where she is one
of the best – Debbie has gained confidence and some distance from some of the adversity of her past. Of the way roller derby works as a healing force in her life, she says:

_Healing in the sense that it kept my mind active, it gave my mind something healthy to think about. It gave me a goal. It gave my physical body a reason to have to get up and go and prove itself. I think just having the kids 24/7 and not working, so it gave me the confidence, it made sense._

Yet this ‘healing’ has not been easy for Debbie. Roller derby is the ultimate ‘tough love’ – it is the feminisation of aggression. Debbie understands her desire to be part of roller derby as coming ‘from the heart’. She says:

_I haven’t been an overly confident person, but people know that I’ve followed my heart. So if something gets in my mind I am not going to worry if someone is going to see me skating on my own in the middle of nowhere, or going for a surf where there are like a hundred men, or whatever, they can all think what they want to think, so I think there has always been that, whereas that might come across as confidence, whereas anyone else is going ‘oh my god’, where they put you down for whatever you know. So there is that, where I think that’s more following the heart, didn’t mean that I wasn’t out there feeling all shy and ‘no one look at me’, you know …_

As mentioned previously, Irigaray writes that, ‘it is love that both leads the way and is the path. A mediator _par excellence_’ (1993a, p. 21). For Debbie, ‘love’ – for herself, her children, and other women – leads the way, taking her out on to the roller derby track, a space where aggression and strength are required to stay in the game. Debbie’s narrative of roller derby, as healing past hurts and facilitating adrenaline and ‘presence’, is very much about desire, movement and ‘becoming’, rather than the stories of ‘being’ or any type of fixed identity. As Deleuze and Guattari write, ‘becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something …
Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own’ (1987, p. 239). Debbie’s is a feminist ‘becoming’, becoming-love, following her desires, her ‘heart’, her ‘soul’. Of her participation in roller derby, she says, ‘I am following my heart so it’s leading me in the right direction.’ It is leading her towards a group of women with whom she feels belonging and love.

To understand the affective forms of reorientation undergone in roller derby, Deleuze and Guattari’s writing can enable different ways of thinking and writing affects such as love, aggression and becoming. Instead of modeling our thinking in terms of the tree and root, we can look towards a rhizome:

The rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21)

Thinking of roller derby through the rhizome allows for different connections to be made, such as the connections made by Debbie that bring roller derby, ‘hardness’ and healing together. We may not have brought these orientations together previously, but it is precisely these differing points of connection that enable alternative ways of becoming and thinking. The rhizome challenges binary thinking that privileges man over women, hard over soft. Instead, it makes connections where there previously were none. Debbie’s extended response below highlights the sometimes familiar, sometimes surprising connections brought together in alternative sport and physical cultures such as roller derby:
Emotionally it’s helped immensely. Having the two kids on my own, not having any outlet or any time to surf, being able to take them somewhere where I can release, and just have a bit of time for myself where it’s quick thinking and presence, presence, presence, that has helped me immensely. I have dealt with everything at home much better ... it has got me through the hardest times, and the confidence, after not working for six years, and always working beforehand and doing heaps of stuff to all of a sudden almost losing your identity, knowing that yeah, exception with that I am a mother and that’s my identity too, but my own thing, and it helped that way. I never would have wore fishnets or short shorts, or stood in front of a crowd, I would have never have, yeah, it’s helped me grow big time and its helped me get back into work, the confidence to get back into work and to think that you are capable and you are part of this society.

The idea of leisure being a space for women to challenge the gender constraints of ‘motherhood’ and heterosexual feminine norms is commonplace (e.g. see Aitchison, 2003; Wearing, 1998). However, for Debbie, in roller derby it is not just the opportunity to gain ‘freedom’ from gender constraints that is important, but the almost spiritual dimension – the ‘presence’ – and the way she understands this for herself as ‘healing’ that allows for a different way of thinking about roller derby, and women’s sport more generally.

In roller derby, this ‘healing’ that Debbie speaks of is achieved via the risky practices of the sport where women attempt to out-skate and out-maneouvre their opponents, at times pushing them over at quite dangerous speeds. The concept of ‘edgework’, developed by Lyng (2008), has been a central theory in helping to explain people’s desire to voluntarily engage in risky sport and leisure practices and the importance of the ‘thrill’ in these experiences. Yet the concept of edgework has been criticised for its ‘masculinist perspective’ and lack of attention to women’s risky practices (Young & Dallalre, 2008). Spowart, Hughson and Shaw (2008) also explore
the way ‘risk’ is tied up with women snowboarders’ ‘resistance’ to gender norms, in particular those related to motherhood. Risk-taking in sport is usually constructed as a way of performing dominant masculinities (Collison, 1996, in Young & Dallalre, 2008, p. 238), as is a person’s tempered, stoic response to pain and injury (Hoffmann & Tarzian, 2001). Thus, if women take risks, they trouble gender norms.

Other scholars, such as Newmahr (2011), have attempted to completely rework the concept of edgework from a feminist perspective using her experiences and observations in a sadomasochism (SM) community in the United States. Instead of focusing on bodily risk, which has been at the centre of edgework experiences in most other literature, Newmahr considered emotional and psychological risk as part of the edgework experience in SM; it is not physical order and chaos that participants negotiate, but rather emotional order and chaos (Newmahr, 2011). The concept of edgework is attractive as it speaks to our desire to ‘break free’, to do things we know are not necessarily ‘good’ for us and to test our strength and resolve in learning difficult physical – and emotional, according to Newmahr – skills. Yet the concept does not take into account the mobility of affects and the relational aspects of emotions. Edgework, the practice of ‘working’ the ‘edges’ – between life and death, safety and injury, consciousness and unconsciousness, order and disorder (Lyng, 2008, p. 85) – still relies on the psychological model of emotions based on a presumption of interiority (Ahmed, 2004b, pp. 8–9). The edgework experience of being on the edge, the ‘thrill’, is something participants ‘have’, yet roller derby is more rhizomic. For Debbie, roller derby is healing, yet it does not simply ‘heal’: the affects felt are in motion. Debbie tellingly states, ‘The aggression, as long as there is not bad intent in it, I think it is just a release, a motion that’s released basically.’ This highlights the movement of affects and the changing emotions that are felt by
different women in roller derby along the surface of the social: the connections between women and each other, within the game, and between themselves as multiplicities.

The movement of affects experienced and expressed by Debbie, myself and several other participants seems key to the experience of roller derby as transformative – as a sport that affects the ‘soul’. In particular, ‘risk’ – controlling it, feeling it, purposefully negotiating it – is key. The risk experienced by Debbie and other women in roller derby is in relation to the risk they experience in their day-to-day lives. Irigaray writes that, ‘it matters for “man” to find a vital speed, a growth speed that is compatible with all his senses and meanings’ (1993a, p. 73). Debbie’s ‘vital speed’ is hard and fast. It is at this speed that she has been able to transcend, to heal, to overcome – if only momentarily – the limits of her gendered subjectivity and to experience a feminine imaginary of sport.

Irigaray views philosophy and society as products of a male subject (1993a). With this come limits to what women can imagine for themselves, as the only mode of imagining is via the philosophy and society given to them by man. For Irigaray, the feminine is the excluded other, and her task was to stimulate, via writing, a feminine imaginary – a future where transformation can occur and an ethical relation between the sexes is possible. She writes:

Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice – a threshold that is always half-open. The threshold of the lips, which are strangers to dichotomy and oppositions. Gathered one against the other but without any possible suture, at least of any real kind. They do not absorb the world into or through themselves, provided they are not misused and reduced to a means of consumption or consummation. They offer a shape of welcome but do not assimilate, reduce, or
swallow up. A sort of doorway to voluptuousness? They are not useful, except as that which designates a place, the very place of uselessness, at least as it is habitually understood. Strictly speaking, they serve neither conception nor jouissance. Is this the mystery of feminine identity? Of its self-contemplation, of this very strange word of silence. (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 18)

The lips are an alternative, feminine imaginary that Irigaray offers as a way of structuring our discourse. In stimulating a feminine imaginary, Irigaray attempts to reinvent the image of the subject, from fixed, singular, closed, phallic, to relational, fluid and open. This reconfiguring of subjectivity is a type of becoming. Braidotti writes that, ‘there is a significant point of convergence between Irigaray and Deleuze in their effort at reinventing the very image of the subject as an entity fully immersed in the processes of becoming, in productive relations of power, knowledge, and desire’ (2011, p. 17). Roller derby has given Debbie an alternative feminine imaginary, an alternative way of imagining herself. With skates on her feet, she is taller, stronger and faster. As a skater, she is capable of healing and loving and nurturing, but she is also hard, fast and in motion. She is becoming-derby.

Debbie’s narrative of roller derby, where she acknowledges herself as ‘hard’ and understands the benefits as ‘healing’, speaks to women’s struggle to love themselves and to find a cultural imaginary that articulates and represents women as subjects ‘in and for’ themselves. For Debbie, roller derby helped her to regain confidence lost. She says:

I suppose doubting myself too after having the [epileptic] seizures and the memory and not knowing whether I had it in me ... it just got rid of a lot of self-doubt, the fact that, ‘hang on, yeah, I am all right at something’, and it gave me a reason for being, other than being a mother.
Thrift writes of affects as ‘roiling maelstroms’ (2004, p. 57), and roller derby – like most sports – is a highly emotional landscape where different affects circulate, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. Roller derby is a complex site where affects – in particular the ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’, the toughness of the game and the healing qualities felt by Debbie – are somehow able to exist together. This multiplicity of affects means that conventional metaphors of emotion, as coming from the inside out, or the outside in, are inadequate for writing roller derby. These multiple, sometimes jarring affects open up a space where women like Debbie can imagine themselves as strong, independent feminine subjects.

‘It’s taken roller derby to make me feel comfortable’: the power of belonging

In the popular media, newspapers, film and books about roller derby, the story is about change, strength and transformation. Many of my research participants spoke of the way roller derby had changed their lives in certain ways. In particular, Kate, a 28-year-old woman who joined the league a few months after I did, quite clearly expressed a discourse of transformation and change. She even specifically referred to Uncle Leon and the Alibis song: ‘Like that song, you know, “roller derby saved my soul”, and it sort of did.’ Kate grew up in a rural area and moved to a larger regional town when she was due to start high school. Moving to a ‘big city’ and starting a new school was tough for Kate, and she was bullied by her peers who teased and called her ‘lesbian’. Kate spoke freely of the painful experiences of bullying and of her mother’s ignorance of the affects this had on Kate at the time. She developed what she called a ‘nervous disorder’ at this time, which she thought was the reason for her desire to participate in high-contact sport.
Kate is an attractive, fit young woman who had made a point of taking up traditionally ‘non-feminine’ leisure and work practices. She is a fully qualified carpenter who worked for herself as a subcontractor and drove a brand new ute. She also trained and fought in competitions as a Muay Thai boxer. Like roller derby, women’s boxing at first glance ‘appears to be a radical intervention which blurs traditional male and female images and identities and class alliances’ (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 35). Yet, despite her work and leisure practices being conventionally ‘masculine’, Kate does not see herself as a feminist. In fact, Kate calls herself a ‘bogan’ (Felski, 1997). Kate could barely stand on her roller skates when she first joined the league, but she worked hard to pass the minimum skill set (Appendix 2). As well as roller derby training two or three nights a week, Kate continued with her kickboxing training three nights a week and so was very fit and strong. Hers was a very ‘working-class’ femininity. As Skeggs points out, ‘being, becoming, practicing and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, races, ages and nationalities’ (1997, p. 98). Kate would wear feminine colours – pink, white, light blue – and had long flowing hair, and her physical body signified working-class femininity: ‘inherently healthy, hardy and robust’ (Skeggs, 1997, p. 99). Yet her lifestyle, work and leisure practices did not sit quite so comfortably with this projected image.

Kate was very much aware of the way some people perceived her as ‘butch’ and ‘lesbian’, and explicitly riled against stereotypes of women. She said:

*I get that general, ‘so you’re a lesbian’. I’m like ‘whether I am and whether I’m not doesn’t matter, I’m still the same person’ – but I’m not [lesbian], I do these things because I enjoy them and no man is going to stop me, and I get sexism through my work and everything, that’s why I have to work for myself because men won’t hire me, it’s in*
everything. you can’t avoid it, but I don’t go out there and say ‘look at me, I’m women, hear me roar’. I just do everything I want to do, I don’t draw attention to myself, it just comes.

Like Debbie’s narrative, Kate’s challenges the dichotomies of masculine/feminine and of heteronormative femininity, yet for her roller derby does not do the work of ‘healing’, but rather enables ‘belonging’. Where she felt excluded from ‘men’s’ work and leisure, despite her skills and desire to participate, she also felt apart from most women she met. She stated, ‘I am not the best person to get along with females, like really chicky chicks.’ For Kate, the women in roller derby are ‘tough’ – just like her – giving her a place where she felt accepted and loved and was able to be with others with whom she could identify. As Ahmed writes:

love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal. (2004c, p. 125)

As was the case for many of my participants and in stories found online or in print media, Kate feels ‘love’ for her derby ‘family’. She says:

So it took a while to get to know everybody, but once I’ve got to know everyone I wouldn’t turn back, I just love everybody and I look at them as if they are my little roller derby family, and a little part of me, it’s sort of helped me to accept me as who I am ...

It is the strong intersubjective relationships – the ‘love’ – that makes roller derby subjectivity possible. But the ‘love’ Kate expresses is not a ‘spiritual’ one, as touted by Debbie; rather, it is a more pragmatic affect. What Kate identifies with is the will to overcome the inferiorised feminine body – a common project in roller derby for many of the women involved.
In joining a roller derby league, Kate was not instantly accepted by the other women. She was fitter than almost everyone in the league, yet she could hardly skate. This meant that she had to ‘work hard’ at belonging. But Kate persevered and found herself feeling comfortable and a part of her chosen league. Kate made active choices to ‘belong’ to this particular community of women – choosing to spend time with these new-found friends rather than her other friends. She said:

*All my friends are like, ‘Oh, come to our house’, because we always do an Australia Day party, and I’m like ‘oh no, I’m hanging out with roller derby girls’, and they’re all like ‘What about us?’, and it’s weird, its different.*

Kate had found a group of women for whom being a ‘tough’, ‘strong’, physically active and feminine ‘girl’ was the norm. This alignment with other women in her league allowed her to feel comfortable with her very particular form of resistance against feminine norms. Through her leisure and work practices, Kate constantly challenges gender norms. She said:

*It’s in everything I do though, I’m not a feminist, I’m not like ‘yes, woman power’, but everybody thinks I am ... I’ve always been a tomboy I guess.*

Kate embraces a ‘tomboy’ identity, which had previously separated her from others. In boxing and carpentry, she experienced sexism and false accusations of homosexuality, mainly from men. In roller derby, she has been able to incorporate her ‘tomboy’ identity with her love of sport and her desire to be recognised as ‘feminine’ within a diverse community of women – as opposed to the more individualised practices of boxing and even carpentry. In attempting to explain her love of roller derby, she said:
I just found that roller derby has helped me to just become myself and just be comfortable with who I am, and it’s taken me 28 years to get here, so it’s sort of sad in a way that I’ve been in construction for ten years as well as kickboxing, but it’s taken roller derby to make me feel comfortable. I think it’s because I am with like-minded women, and strong women, cause most of my female friends are like ‘I wish I could do that, I wish I could do that’, but they’ve got no balls.

Kate identifies strongly with the other women in her league. Ahmed argues that identification is a form of love: ‘identification involves the desire to get closer to others by becoming like them … becoming like them obviously requires not being them in the first place’ (2004c, p. 126).

In developed countries around the world, cohesion, social inclusion and fostering ‘community’ are all key issues on the sport and welfare policy agendas. Discourses about belonging are woven tightly through debates on these issues, and there is a plethora of research published every year on the concept (e.g. ABS, 2006b; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009; Jarvie, 2003; Lee, 2010; Walseth, 2006). The focus on belonging in sport often requires a way of thinking that privileges ‘sameness’ or ‘unity’ within the social world, at the expense of the rich differences between and among people. Kate’s narrative of a lifetime of sport speaks more to the exclusion and separateness she felt rather than any kind of belonging:

I was right into running and athletics in primary school and then my mum moved me schools and then I just, cause in high school I moved from the country and that was the biggest move ever, it was really hard for me to adapt. I ran away from home. I’ve got a nervous disorder now from it, and it’s like, it stopped me from doing my sport because I wasn’t comfortable, I mean, they stereotyped me ‘lesbian’ in high school so I didn’t have any friends – kids wouldn’t talk to me. I had no friends for the whole Year 8, so that was really hard, and then I made
friends with one of the other girls that they stereotyped as well – I mean we are not gay at all, I mean it didn’t matter if we were, but the way they just picked on us, it was horrible. I hate bullying.

So it is not ‘sport’ in general that has given Kate that feeling of comfort, of belonging, but specifically roller derby. Kate’s previous struggles to feel ‘comfortable’ were in masculine-dominated spaces: the boxing gym and the workshop. She found that her ‘tough’, ‘strong’ female subjectivity was rejected in these spaces, yet in roller derby it was accepted. In roller derby, Kate found a community to which to belong. However, this ‘community’ is not a ‘moral community’ of care and responsibilities (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003), but rather a community that is open to others, a ‘coming community’ (Agamben, 1993). It is a space where women are free to express their desires for hardness and toughness as women, a space where they can belong and become, where they can be open about their problems in getting along with women, among other women who relate.

This is the ultimate paradox at play within roller derby, particularly for Kate with her background of bullying and exclusion from other women and her choice to enter into masculine-dominated environments and practices. Kate feels hostility from and perhaps towards other women, and so chooses to spend most of her time with men. Yet she cannot and does not want to become-masculine, while she also does not want to become-feminine in conventional terms. Irigaray writes of the way women talk to one another, often expressing sentiments such as:

— like you
— me too;
— me more (or me less).

Such nagging calculations paralyze the fluidity of affect. We harden, borrow, situate ourselves on the edges of the other in order to ‘exist’. 
As proofs of love, these comparatives eliminate the possibility of a place among women. (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 103)

In a movement away from these calculations, Kate attempted to orientate herself towards men and masculine-domained leisure and work, such as boxing and carpentry. In doing so, she troubles gender identification. However, this did not work. In not identifying with other women and attempting to step beyond conventional, ‘caring’ femininity, she found herself in a precarious position. Rejecting passive heterosexual femininity did not mean that she embraced queer femininity. Kate made a point of letting me know that she was heterosexual, despite some people’s assumptions that she was not.

As a strong, fit, physically active woman who worked in a male-dominated field many people assumed she was a lesbian. Sport traditionally has been conceptualised as a masculine domain, where strength, aggression and control are privileged and women’s participation is marginalised (Clasen, 2001; Hargreaves, 1982; Theberge, 1987). With this strong association between masculinity and sport, many sportswomen are viewed as ‘masculine’, and are often assumed to be lesbians (Caudwell, 2006a, 2006b; Johnson & Kivel, 2007; Lock, 2006). Some sportswomen attempt to counter this assumption by expressing an overt style of heterosexual femininity (Clasen, 2001). In some ways, Kate also did this; she grew her hair long and wore tight-fitting tops and shorts in ‘feminine’ colours such as pink and pastels. In moving away from the calculations and in not identifying with other women, she found herself distrusting other women and being discriminated against by men. However, in roller derby she found that in moving towards what she calls ‘like-minded’ women she found the affects she was seeking – love, belonging and comfort. Yet these affects surfaced in a very particular relation – roller derby – and the women
who play are ‘tough’, ‘hard’ and ‘fast’. They are ‘hardened’ towards each other and
the game, yet this orientation is what allows for the circulation of love – at least for
Kate. Kate states that ‘it’s also the most female friends I’ve ever had and I don’t
know, I really enjoy it’.

The language used by Kate, and most of my participants in their interviews,
was affective, using words that moved themselves and others towards roller derby –
see Chapter 5 for those movements away from roller derby. They spoke of ‘derby
love’, ‘belonging’, ‘hardness’ and ‘strength’ as central to their experiences of the
sport. In Gorton’s (2007) review of feminist theorising of affect and emotion, she uses
Denise Riley’s work on the affects of language: ‘the structures of everyday language
are as – if not more – responsible for the production of our affective selves as our
unconscious psyches’ (Pearce, 2006, in Gorton, 2007, p. 339). Kate’s responses in
some ways confirm this, particularly when she speaks of relating to the song ‘Roller
Derby Saved My Soul’ and to a book she read. She says:

    I read a book about it too, about roller derby, and they said the same
    thing about that song, they said, ‘When women come into roller derby
    it’s not just a sport, it’s not something you go home and you forget
    about it, if you are really into roller derby you go home and your life
    becomes second to roller derby.’

Yet it is not just language that produces these affects, but also the intersubjective
corporeal experience, the collective and individual bodily experience of roller derby.
Kate pushes her body way beyond the ‘limits of her situation’ (Young, 2005, p. 29),
and in no way skates ‘like a girl’. She has trained herself to move out of the bodily
limits and has found pleasure and joy there – jouissance even – as a shared experience
among women. She, along with those with whom she finds connection in roller derby,
refuses to be territorialised as a passive gendered subject.
In roller derby, for Kate and others, affects circulate not only through language but through physical effort. Kate’s feelings of being comfortable and loved are not just achieved via language, but via the physical experience of roller derby: pain, exertion and pleasure. Braidotti writes that, ‘the body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others’ (2011, p. 25). In roller derby, Kate has undergone and continually undergoes subjectification – she becomes someone different, someone more comfortable with herself and a woman more comfortable around other women. This is produced via language and the corporeal body.

Subjectification in roller derby is complex. As women in roller derby actively ‘work on’ themselves, becoming derby grrrls, they undergo a painful process of becoming. Kate’s struggles to ‘belong’ within her league were ‘worked through’ via language and physical exertion and pain in learning how to use her body differently according to the norms of roller derby. In describing the way pain works, Kate recalled an experience from boxing:

*Getting hit? I think it’s, well one guy, he punched me in the head last year. I should’ve blocked it but I didn’t, and afterwards I’m just like, ‘That was a good punch’, and he goes, ‘Makes you feel alive doesn’t it?’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah’. I think it’s a different breed of person that can … I mean, there must be a little bit of insanity in there to want to get in the ring and actually get hit, but I refer to it like playing a game of netball, except you’ve only got one person that’s coming at you, whereas in netball you’ve got a whole team coming at you, and they’re vicious women.*

Pain brings her to life. And yet pain is not just masculine, it is also feminised in terms of the ‘vicious women’ in netball.

Kate’s ongoing struggles with what she sees as ‘other’ women – typified as ‘netball girls’ – speaks of her subjectification, becoming-derby, becoming different to
what she has been told about feminine subjectivity. Hemmings (2005) critically examines the way affect has recently been deployed. For her, what is valuable in theorising affect is not its autonomy from the subject, as suggested by Massumi, but the possibility of viewing the body and its affects as intimately connected to the self and to others with shared judgements (Hemmings, 2005, pp. 564–5). The affects – the love, hardness, toughness, pain and pleasure – my research participants experienced are directly related to their subjectification – their understanding of themselves as ‘derby’. Probyn’s work on belonging helps to explain the ‘painful’, affective aspects of subjectivity. She writes that, ‘belonging hinges on not belonging … being at the threshold may provide another perspective from which to view the complexities of identity, difference, subjectivity and desire’ (Probyn, 1996, p. 14). In roller derby, for Kate and others, ‘belonging’ to this group of women – experiencing feelings of love and comfort – hinges on ‘not belonging’, or being orientated away from ‘women’ and not identifying with certain ‘girly’ traits (see also Finley, 2010). It is in not belonging that Kate has found an embodied, corporeal belonging in the specific collective that is roller derby.

‘Proud to be a woman and to be in my body’: sexual abuse, strength and roller derby

Beth, a 38-year-old graduate student who had been involved in roller derby for over two years, told a moving story of roller derby and the transformative affects of the sport in her life. Beth trained as a gymnast until the age of 16, training up to 30 hours a week on top of school. In our interviews, she spoke of her frustration at the way gymnasts are made to think that once they turn 18 they are already getting too old for the sport – that their bodies are no longer good enough to compete. As a fellow
graduate student, we had a lot to talk about, and she was open with me about her
struggles and adversities. At 38 years of age, Beth had only recently broken up with
her long-term boyfriend, with whom she was planning on having children. They both
started roller derby, he as a referee in training, her as a skater. Not long into their
training, he cheated on her with another skater from the league. This devastated Beth
and led to months of extreme emotion, distracting her from her studies. Yet she did
not leave that roller derby league. Her league made sure that the ex-boyfriend was not
at her training sessions and prioritised her participation over his. As a highly educated
woman, interested in politics and cultural issues, Beth’s understanding of what roller
derby did for her was insightful in terms of the way certain women come to
understand practices – like roller derby – where aggression, toughness and strength
are central.

In practising gymnastics, gendered norms about youthfulness, femininity,
 strength and ability were constantly reinforced for Beth. She said:

_We always had the concept that we would retire, and that’s the word
  we used, retire at 16 to 18 and none of us knew of any gymnasts at an
  international level that went beyond 18 – 18 was old, in fact it would
  be commented on, and so we were in this mentality of, ‘you reach
  puberty and everything goes to shit,’ pretty much, and it’s quite a
  fucked up way of looking at your body, but that’s how we saw it._

Sport historically has been a masculine domain, where women struggle for fair and
equal access, promotion, participation and pay. Yet sports such as gymnastics (and
ice-skating), with a focus on aesthetics and grace, have traditionally been seen as
‘feminine’ and appropriate for women (Trangbæk, 1997). In their Foucauldian
analysis of women’s artistic gymnastics, Barker-Ruchti and Tinning observed the way
that the young women ‘came to embody submissiveness and dependence, as well as
the notion of body-as-machine’ (2010, p. 245). Beth’s long-term participation in
gymnastics gave her warped ideas about her body and her capabilities, and led her to
feel ‘weak’ and ‘less than’ men in her teenage years. This way of thinking was also
exacerbated by a tragedy that occurred around the same time:

In addition to that there was some personal shit that happened, I was
sexually assaulted when I was in my teenage years and that had a huge
effect on me as well, it just acerbated the feelings that I already had
about my body and being a women and missing my pre-pubescent days
when things were less complicated and felt stronger and I felt equal to
my male counterparts, whereas a whole bunch of stuff happened in my
teenage years around quitting and after quitting gymnastics that just
made me feel unequal. I really felt physically and mentally – well
maybe not so much mentally, but physically, which then had an impact
on my mental outlook – just really felt the weaker sex and that had a
lot of long-term effects so I think that’s why it partly took me so long to
get back into something.

Being sexually abused as a teenager, coupled with the strong discourses of
appropriate femininity passed onto her via her gymnastics practice impacted on Beth
for years afterwards. She felt weak and incapable.

These feelings of weakness were challenged over time as Beth saw an increase
in the number of ‘tough’ women being portrayed in the popular media (Inness, 2004).
These mediated images of women pushing themselves beyond the norms of passive
femininity were in contrast to Beth’s experiences of abuse, domination and
submission. She said:

And it’s possibly why seeing something like Million Dollar Baby was
so revolutionary for me, cause I was like, ‘Fuck it, she can do it, I can
give it a go’, and then starting to watch YouTube videos and
documentaries and movies on women in contact sports and starting to
read about it and getting really interested in it, and reading Misha Merts, who is a journalist who has written a book called Bruising, and it’s on her experience of getting into boxing, and I could really relate to it, a lot of the discussion in the book about the whole concept of women and contact sport and what violence means and how women being aggressive was perceived as violence and inappropriate. There is lots of stuff there ...

Interestingly, the largest international governing roller derby league, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, includes ‘revolutionary’ as one of its core values (WFTDA, n.d.). And it has been revolutionary for many women involved. Beth states that ‘the biggest one is probably just feeling, almost for the first time in my life, like really sincerely happy and proud to be a women and to be in my body’. As for Kate, it is the ability to ‘just be’, to feel comfortable. Like Kate, Beth also found her way to roller derby via boxing, and enjoyed the corporeal aspect of that sport. Yet, also like Kate, Beth found the boxing gym to be a masculine space where she did not feel completely comfortable. In roller derby, it was about more than just the physical corporeality of the sport, but also the friendships and the women with whom she associated. She said:

“It’s not just about me, it’s about training with other women that I am really proud to train with, or that I look up to or I am amazed by. It’s the whole kind of community and camaraderie that we have amongst each other, the fact that we look out for each other. I mean I never had anything like this in gymnastics, and I got to the point in boxing where I was really struggling personally. I was being confronted again with that feeling of being the weaker sex, because I was training sometimes with men and I would feel their strength and power and found it really frightening and there were times after training when I would cry cause I would just be like, it was sending me back to the place I was when I was a teenager and to being assaulted and feeling out of control, even
though it was a really safe training space and it wasn’t anything that the men that I was training with were doing – in fact, most of the men in boxing that I trained with, and most of the men at training, were amazing and really supportive and loved seeing women get strong. I just found being involved in that sport a bit too much, whereas roller derby has just been completely different, cause it’s a sport run by women for women, even the men involved are really there for the women – at least in our league.

Boxing helped Beth to feel strong, yet this was a sport orientated towards men. It was a masculine domain. In roller derby, Beth found a space where strength and toughness were valued, but where women were at the centre. It was a space where the friendships and community were held together by the strength and toughness of the women [and some men] involved.

Beth’s narrative of roller derby speaks of the hard/soft dichotomy again and again. As for Debbie, roller derby was healing for Beth, and helped her move through difficult emotions. She said:

*It’s made absolutely the world of difference for me. I’ve been getting therapy at the same time, just kind of still working through some of that old stuff, but I kind of almost think that roller derby has done almost as much for me as the therapy has – the two have worked really well together and I think having both: working through the mental stuff but also physically, almost being able to apply it, has been, yeah, the combination has been unbelievable.*

Beth’s body has become a site of contestation – and not just economic, political, sexual and intellectual (Grosz, 1994), but also a site of affectual struggles, between hard and soft, love and fear, pride and shame. The collision of Beth’s self as ‘weak’ with roller derby’s ‘hardness’ create the affect of hard/soft that has been repeated by all of my participants. In attempting to understand the circulation of emotions that
happens within roller derby, the way friendship, belonging, healing and love collide with hardness, strength and even violence, they speak of transformation, of ‘souls being saved’, a ‘spiritual’, affective relation to roller derby.

For Beth, pain and violence are important aspects of roller derby. She understands her participation in roller derby as ‘violent’:

*I think there is definitely difference between violence in that sense and violence that occurs in sport. I am just not sure whether I am that reticent to use the word violence at all, ’cos aggression doesn’t cut it, it’s not really aggression.*

The literature on women’s aggression and violence has predominantly concluded that these ‘traits’ are male or masculine (e.g. see Archer, 2004; Ember, 1981; Rohner, 1976), and the question has remained of whether feminist researchers should study women’s violence (Day, Gough & McFadden, 2003, p. 142). It is important to note that, although it is clear that women can be violent and aggressive, this does not discount the violence and aggression done by men towards women. Nevertheless, acknowledging Beth’s and others’ perspective of themselves as violent and aggressive, and as desiring these affects through sport as consenting adults with agreed-upon rules, is a key point to explore. Women’s aggression and violence in the public sphere have largely been overlooked by researchers (Day et al., 2003). Although there have been several studies on women who play the physically aggressive sport of Rugby (e.g. see Chase, 2006; Gill, 2007; Pope & Williams, 2011), these studies have not taken into account the productive power of the affects produced through violence and aggression.

Beth articulates roller derby, and hence herself, as in some ways violent. In doing so, she is enabled to play with the notion of ‘woman’, and therefore her own
female subjectivity. Traditionally, women have been ‘denied’ aggression and violence; they are expected to be in control of their emotions (Thing, 2001). Even in Elias’s (1978) work, where he notes the prominence of aggression and violence in the Middle Ages and before, it is men who are central; women are invisible in this older world, relegated to the roles of carers and mothers, as they often are today. Through ‘violence’ in roller derby, Beth and other women can feel something often denied them. In sports where aggression and violence are part of play – such as ice-hockey, rugby and roller derby – most of the literature has focused on the ways heterosexual femininity is accentuated (e.g. Krane, 2001). Aggressive affects are usually under-acknowledged and under-theorised in the sport literature (for a notable exception, see Pringle, 2009). But, for Beth, violence does something. It is productive.

For Beth and Kate, and many other women with whom I spoke about roller derby, pain was central to their experience of the sport. In training and on the track, women in roller derby often cause each other painful affects. Yet this pain is not destructive in the traditional sense; rather, it is productive of an alternative subjectivity. Pain in roller derby, and women’s responses to it, demonstrate the affective aspects of subjectification – ‘the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject’ (Foucault, 1991a, p. 11) – as a more particular way of thinking about ‘becoming’. Subjectification is ‘painful’, yet this pain and voluntary exposure to violence have a liberatory potential. Through roller derby, there is the possibility of pleasure with ‘strange parts of the body’ (Foucault, 1994, in Senthorun, 2010, p. 126). It is through pain that Beth, Debbie, Kate, myself and other women involved become subjects – via wrestling with the power relations within which we are embedded. Braidotti writes:
Change is a painful process, but that is no reason not to engage in it, as the conservatives recommend. The point in stressing the difficulties and pain involved in the quest for transformative politics is rather to underline the dignity of the project and to raise the awareness of the complexities it involves. (2011, p. 79)

The process of becoming in roller derby is complex. As women in roller derby actively ‘work on’ themselves, becoming derby grrrls, they undergo a painful process of subjectification.

Beth grapples with the violent, painful and aggressive aspects of roller derby, and tries to figure out a way to understand the multiple pleasures gained through her participation. She says:

*It’s interesting, cause there is a difference between the pain that you experience as a victim and the pain that you experience as voluntarily being involved in a sport where there is rules and guidelines. You know, I’ve been punched in the face in boxing doing sparring, and kind of loved it – it hurts, and took a step back and went, ‘I’m alive, I’m fine, I can punch back.’*

And so the rules and guidelines provide a space where aggression and violence become legitimate for women – in roller derby, it becomes the norm even. For Beth, in her experiences of pain in sport, she has felt ‘alive’ and strong, ‘proud to be a woman and to be in my body’. In making the connection between herself as a woman and her desire to participate in an aggressive sport, Beth is challenging long-standing stigmas that exist in society. This stands in stark contrast to the ‘over-protective’ view of women in sport that is usually presented. In her analysis of female rugby players, Gill writes that, ‘women who behave in a violent or physically aggressive manner are among the most stigmatized groups in society’ (2007, p. 416). Yet Beth and Debbie and Kate, and my other participants, did not see themselves as necessarily
stigmatised. They are mothers, sisters, graduate students, tradeswomen and daughters. Many of them have experienced adversity, from mental health issues to sexual abuse in Beth’s case to bullying in Kate’s case, and in all their lives, roller derby has been a practice and a means of transformation. Roller derby has ‘saved their souls’ via hardness, aggression and even sometimes violence on the track, and the opportunities for relations with others with a similar orientation towards ‘hardness’.

Beth’s view of roller derby as both violent and as a positive life-changing force again reinforces Ahmed’s view of affects as ‘the accumulation of affective value over time’ (2004a, p. 120). It is a process of intensification. It is the forcefulness, the hardness, the toughness that brings to the surface the love, belonging and comfort experienced. Ahmed writes that ‘pain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place’ (2004c, p. 27). The narratives presented in this chapter tell a somewhat different story. Debbie, Kate and Beth all evoke the power of force – pain, aggression, violence – in enabling them to feel a sense of ‘themselves’, to become-derby, to become one among others and to belong, and to challenge passive femininity and gender roles. As Massumi states, the mobility of affect ‘is nothing less than the perception of one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability (often described as “freedom”)’ (Massumi, 2002, p. 36, italics in original).

An alternative relation to ‘hardness’

As Gill writes, ‘women … who embody violence, redefine what it means to be feminine’ (Gill, 2007, p. 417). Earlier, I quoted Massumi who wrote, ‘Force is not to be confused with power. Force arrives from outside to break constraint and open new
Roller derby is a highly mobile, risky space for women. It is a space where speed, strength and movement are privileged, and where the affective relations between women shape both the game and women’s experiences of themselves within it. Debbie, Kate and Beth are skilled, fast skaters, and through roller derby they have undergone a process of subjectification – they are actively undergoing a process of self-formation. As Foucault notes, the process of becoming subjects is done via ‘operations on [people’s] own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct’ (1991a, p. 11). It is the way they understand themselves, their actions, thoughts and conduct. These women perform and regulate their roller derby identities through affective relations with other women in their league and the derby community more generally.
Through these women’s intersubjective experiences of belonging and becoming, we can understand the importance of affect – and in particular love – in this processes. Ahmed writes:

Love becomes a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal, which takes shape as an effect of such bonding. Love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal. (2004c, p. 124)

The next chapter delves into the narratives of those who have ‘failed that ideal’, but this chapter has highlighted the centrality of love to the process of becoming-derby. Love is a way of bonding with others, and is that which moves one forward: towards a new way of being in the world that challenges norms of passive femininity. Love, so commonly read as ‘feminine’, is troubled in roller derby. It is rough, tough, hard even. And, as observed by Ahmed (2004c), love can be used for troubling ends: to perpetuate racism, violence and hate. It is the pleasure and pain, of pushing their bodies to the extreme, of pain and aggression, the love and hate, of each other, of ‘other’ women that shape women’s experiences of becoming-derby.

Conclusion

‘Roller derby saved my soul,’ they say. ‘It’s changed my life’, ‘it’s healing me’, ‘I finally belong somewhere’, ‘I’m proud’, ‘I love my roller derby family’. In taking up roller derby, these women have gained a different orientation towards both themselves and other women. Where they may have understood their selves as ‘soft’ or ‘weak’, or as out of place or uncomfortable, they now have the experience of being ‘strong’, ‘tough’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘loved’. And the same goes for their orientation towards other women. It is not only freedom from constraints that these women desire

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and derive from roller derby, but the *feeling* of freedom: the ‘aliveness’, ‘presence’ or ‘realness’ of which they speak. They are ‘becoming derby grrrls’, confident and strong. Affects become an alternative mode of self-understanding for these women. By affirming the multiple, at times contradictory, affects deployed and in circulation in roller derby, these women are able to defy those dominant discourses that marginalise and repress their ‘selves’.

This chapter has addressed the question of how a ‘tough’, ‘rough’ space such as roller derby is also a space of transformation, belonging and love. Through physical exertion, aggression and a positive relation to ‘risk’, Debbie, Kate and Beth have orientated themselves differently to this contact sport and have experienced themselves as somehow ‘changed’; they have experienced positive transformation. Aggressive physical contact, such as that required in the game of roller derby, has given rise to certain affects that have somehow enabled these women to change: to feel loved and successful, and to experience ‘healing’ and belonging. They are ‘becoming-derby’, engaging in an alternative relation to passive heterosexual femininity. Through roller derby, they have felt ‘new’ affects; they have felt the ‘hardness’ and ‘toughness’ of the sport together with love and belonging among the other women in their team. Earlier, I wrote that ‘love’ is ‘hard’, and that roller derby reflects this complex relation. It is not an imitation, ‘but a capture of code’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10).

There is no essential roller derby subject, yet in the lives of the women involved, roller derby incites a passion and desire for movement. Deleuze and Parnet argue that ‘bodies are not defined by their genus or species, by their organs and functions, but by what they can do, by the affects of which they are capable of’ (in Fraser, 1997, p. 30). If this is the case, then – despite the discursive differences
between the narratives of roller derby told by the women involved – what supports the sport in maintaining a possible future, however tenuously at times, is their shared affects – the pleasures, desires, pains and passions for the game itself. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 477) state that ‘in a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy’. At present, space in roller derby is smooth. It is a space where affects, emotion and sensuality are privileged over structure and routine, enabling a positive self-understanding for the women involved; however, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 500) observe, ‘smooth space will [not] suffice to save us’. As an empowering space for women, roller derby eventually will become striated – evidence of this is found in the way roller derby leagues are beginning to structure themselves and the increased focus on the athleticism and seriousness of the sport.

The next chapter explores roller derby as a ‘striated’ space of becoming – or, if you prefer, ‘the dark side’ of roller derby. It continues on with Debbie’s narrative and introduces another participant – Lola – to highlight the multiplicity of subjectivities expressed and experienced via roller derby. Debbie, Lola and I were driven by passion and love, and felt ourselves change through roller derby; however, this transformation was not sustainable. Our will to overcome our feminised bodies via force and an alternative orientation towards ‘masculine’ affects and emotion was not without a personal cost. In considering the affects deployed in roller derby as mobile and in circulation, there cannot be a movement towards without a corresponding movement away. These movements away from roller derby highlight the ‘negative’ affects – of shame, anger, frustration and depression – that women feel in roller derby. Yet, by taking these affects seriously and writing a ‘darker’ story of roller derby, I show how these ‘negative’ affects are productive, enabling these
women to challenge authority (in roller derby and perhaps beyond), as well as providing the basis for fairer and more transparent sport-management practices, and for supporting diversity and a broad form of inclusion in physical cultures more generally.
Chapter 5

The dark side of belonging

This chapter includes excerpts from the following peer-reviewed journal articles for which I was either sole author or first author:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each published paper.
Introduction

Despite the transformative power of roller derby, my research also demonstrates the more destructive, ‘dangerous’ and ‘fixing’ affects of the roller derby subject position. As the sport continues to grow, struggles for authority and authenticity are rife among individuals and leagues. Claims to the ‘real’ roller derby are made by those in positions of leadership and those with access to online spaces where they can express their views. With these claims, certain women and leagues are rejected as ‘inauthentic’ and as tarnishing the reputation of roller derby. In focusing in on this ‘disidentification’ of roller derby subjectivity and the feelings of exclusion experienced by some of the women involved, I highlight the ‘ugly’ side of affects in roller derby, ‘when emotions work against us or are used against us’ (Gorton, 2007, p. 345), when ‘love’ is turned against us, when ‘you don’t love roller derby enough’, or ‘we love roller derby so you can’t’ – highlighting the fluidity of affective relations. This fluidity and movement of affects produce different subjectivities. Women in roller derby experience themselves as successful, as failures, as ‘part of’ or as separate from. These at times oppositional subject positions raise important questions regarding the dynamic that exists in relation to love. I and other women in roller derby have struggled against our own passion and desire to belong, resulting in the creation of a type of ‘failed’ derby subjectivity. In the previous chapter, I explored Debbie, Kate and Beth’s experiences of love, healing and belonging within the ‘hard’, ‘rough’ space of roller derby. Yet what happens when the relations between these women and roller derby become ‘sticky’, when stasis rather than movement is privileged?
This chapter will continue to explore changing themes in Debbie’s narrative of roller derby, and will also introduce Lola, to examine the ‘dark side’ of belonging in roller derby. Debbie and Lola tell significantly different stories about roller derby and their experiences of a ‘dark side’, although they were both deeply invested in the sport. These two women also went to great lengths to describe their reactions and frustrations. Many other women also spoke about their feelings of frustration, rejection and anger in the sport. Jenny, Vicky, Beth and Bianca feature in the next chapter (Chapter 6) as I analyse the affects of power in the collective organisational bodies of roller derby, while others – such as Jackie who was left feeling disappointed and disillusioned as she realised that her league would probably never let her bout (her league was very competitive and had extremely strict requirements for those that were able to bout) – simply could not be included due to the scope of the thesis and overall word limits.

The ‘dark side’ to which I refer involves the tensions arising from the disciplinary regimes that ‘organise’ the sport and the impact of the highly affective relations among the [mostly] women involved. These two ‘dangers’ in roller derby are interrelated in that the drive to organise and professionalise the sport is at times connected to, and at other times in opposition to, the love, passion and desire of those involved. As Foucault wrote, ‘the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger’ (1986, in Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 9), and this is what Debbie, Lola and I struggle to determine. Are our feelings of frustration, resentment, rejection, exclusion and shame a reaction to intense love, belonging and pleasure? How are they regulated? And, most importantly, what do these emotions do?
Power and affect

In the preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s book, *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault writes:

> The major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism … the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. (Foucault, in Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. xiii)

Power is not some unified, central, sovereign ‘thing’ that is held by some[one] over others. Rather, as Foucault writes, it is ‘the myriad of bodies which are constituted as peripheral *subjects* as a result of the effects of power’ (1980, p. 98). In illuminating the ‘dark side’ of roller derby, it becomes clear that power is not centralised, excluding some and including others, or loving some and rejecting others. It is not a question of ‘why’ certain people want power over others in roller derby. Instead, it is a question of ‘how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 97), our souls and our emotions. It is the nuanced exchanges between people, the affects surfaced through these relations and people’s orientations towards these affects that tells us more about power. Affects are not determined in advance (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 59), so how are they determined? Affects are ‘an important yet under-researched process and mechanism of subject formation’ (Blackman, 2012, p. xviii). Through roller derby, women *feel*. They feel hard and soft and love and anger and aggression and rejection and shame. These affects are the result of power, and they tell us about the possibilities that are available for transformation.

In the previous chapter, I wrote Debbie, Kate and Beth’s experiences of roller derby as transformational, positive and creative. Yet, as becoming-roller derby
subjects, the process is never complete. There are blockages, lines of flight and movements in other directions – sometimes towards, sometimes away from certain aspects of the sport. Deleuze writes:

There is no need to ask which is the toughest regime, for it’s within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another. For example, in the crisis of the hospital as environment of enclosure, neighborhood clinics, hospices, and day care could at first express new freedom, but they could participate as well in mechanisms of control that are equal to the harshest of confinements. There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons. (1990, para. 2)

In the general ‘problem’ of sport, with lowering participation rates, lack of space and struggles to attract young participants, alternative, lifestyle and subcultural sports are seen as ways of expressing new freedoms. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, these ‘alternatives’ are often the ‘harshest of confinements’. ‘Difference’, in all its forms, is both its effect and cause; it is both emancipatory and restrictive. As Felski writes, ‘the appeal to difference does not transcend but embroils the individual more deeply within the problematic but inevitable condition of normative judgement’ (1997, p. 16). There is no simple escape from power, fascism or destruction, so the task is to expose it.

In presenting multiple narratives of roller derby, highlighting the complex intersections of ability, affects, bodies and culture, I demonstrate the problematic of feminine subjectivity. Grosz writes:

Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities. (1994, p. 19)
In roller derby, as in most of the social world, there is a tendency towards unification and centralisation – a collapse of multiplicity into a whole. By writing multiple, often contradictory narratives of roller derby, I aim to counteract this tendency. However, in writing these multiple narratives I highlight the destructive, ‘negative’ affects that circulate, as well as those affects that enable transformation, healing and love.

Difference does not automatically equate to freedom, due to ongoing struggles to acknowledge and live with this difference. In a similar way, sameness does not equal belonging or acceptance. Especially among women, who are constantly being relegated to the position of the Other, without a specifically feminine imaginary from which to draw, acknowledging, accepting and embracing differences and similarities between each other, and even within themselves, is a challenge.

In the same way as Irigaray writes about the way competition ‘paralyses love among sister women’ (1993a, p. 102), fascist tendencies seep into roller derby communities. The women involved in roller derby talk of finding a place of belonging, a place where difference is embraced, of love and healing. Yet they vie for power between themselves – for the power of authorship, the power to state what and who roller derby is, the power to include/exclude. They vie to occupy the coveted subject position of Roller Derby Grrrl. These relations of power between women in roller derby are affective – they are felt on the body and often expressed as emotion. Fear, hate, love, anger and shame circulate among the women. Yet these emotions – some of which are often assumed to be destructive – are all expressions of desire:

Desire here is not a metaphor; it is a method of doing things, of getting places. Desire here is a mode of connection and communication between things, inevitably giving way to the literalness of things.

(Probyn, 1996, p. 41)
Desire plays a major role in how these women move and connect with each other and the world around them. Given the extent to which contemporary theory – especially feminist theory – has problematised the long-established construction of desire as lack, and posited an alternative understanding of desire as production (e.g. Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1996), roller derby is a site where women’s desire is neither based on lack, nor orientated towards the masculine subject.

My participants spoke of different experiences of desire entangled with affects such as love, hate, fear, shame and anger. As explained in Chapter 2, I draw from contemporary feminist models of emotion and affect where feelings do not originate from the inside and come out, nor are they ‘caught’ from the outside and brought in. Instead, I view emotion and affect as productive of objects and ‘surfaces’ (Probyn, 1996); ‘emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 4). Emotions and affects are relational and always intersubjective – there is always ‘something or somebody’ to whom the feelings are related, ‘although that something or somebody does not necessarily pre-exist the emotion’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 49). In the previous chapter, Debbie, Kate and Beth had experiences of pleasure and ‘good’ emotions from roller derby, although sometimes they came to these affects in rhizomic, irrational ways. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate the productive, important and interesting ways of thinking when ‘negative’, or not-so-pleasurable emotions are brought out of the margins of academic writing. In writing about one specific ‘negative’ emotion – shame – Probyn states, ‘by denying or denigrating it or trying to eradicate it (as in the countless self-help books against various strains of shame), we impoverish ourselves and our attempts to understand human life’ (2005, p. 3). I concur. Rather than deny or attempt to eradicate aggression, hate, shame, anger, hurt and competitiveness among
the women in roller derby, I have chosen to focus on these aspects. I do this not to undermine the sport in any way. In a sport that prides itself on embracing difference and accepting the unaccepted, I seek to explore those affects relegated to the margins and rejected from roller derby. This is not just a theoretical activity, although that is part of it. It is also practical (and personal) in terms of attempting to think differently about women and sport, specifically in the case of roller derby. I explore the relations of power among women and the role of affect in these relations. I ask, ‘Who is it possible to be in roller derby?’; ‘Who might it be possible to be in the future?’; and, ‘How do the dynamics of power work to enable becoming subjects in roller derby?’

Contemporary feminists (such as Ang, 1995; Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1996) have begun to theorise difference as productive and women’s difference as more than an inferiorised otherness to the masculine. The productivity of difference has not negated the desire for belonging; rather, it has changed what belonging means, what it feels like and what it does. Probyn states that we are in a ‘milieu in which different modes of belonging fold and twist the social fabric of life, so that we find ourselves in unexpected ways using desires for belonging as threads that lead us into unforeseen places and connections’ (Probyn, 1996, p. 20). In this research, I was led into an unforeseen place, connected with people I have never known before, connected with women different to me in many ways, but with a common desire—to become competent on skates, to become a ‘tough’ roller derby player, to feel the adrenalin from playing to win, to move; perhaps to find out more about ourselves and what we are capable of. Probyn (1996) invites us to think in terms of surfaces and outsides rather than the insides and the margins. Through a focus on surfaces, what becomes visible are the assemblages that are created: when organised sport and a DIY ethic come together; when skating and rockabilly come together; when women and sport
come together. These (and many other) points of intersection show us some of the
modes of subjectivity available. Yet, for Debbie, myself and others involved in roller
derby, certain subjectivities have been rejected or shunned, making them ‘harder’ to
enact; they have become ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 4).

Both Carlson’s (2010) and Finely’s (2010) research on roller derby found that,
despite the inclusion of certain subjectivities, there was also the explicit exclusion of
others. Many roller derby leagues proudly put forward a vision of roller derby as an
all-inclusive space. Closely modelled on those of traditional sports, with a strong
emphasis on empowerment and fairness, is the website of the Australian league, the
Sunstate Roller Girls. In the section titled ‘About Sunstate Roller Girls’ can be found
the following text:

The Sun State Roller Girls (SSRG) are a not-for-profit organisation
dedicated to developing and promoting the sport of women’s Flat
Track Roller Derby in Brisbane by facilitating the development of
athletic ability, sportswomanship and goodwill among league members
… We promote the empowerment of women in a safe and organised
environment that fosters the health, well-being and personal growth of
skaters. We honour diversity and encourage self-expression and are
committed to building a network of friendship and support among
skaters. We seek continuous improvement in our sport and are
committed to democratic principles, constructive dialogue and
teamwork.

The London Rollergirls’ website is also highly professional. It includes information
about upcoming events, a very clear section on ‘What is Roller Derby?’ and several
other pages. In the section titled, ‘Who are the London Rollergirls?’ it states:

We are the London Rollergirls: an all-female, skater-owned-and-run
roller derby league based in London, England. Formed in April 2006,
we were the first roller derby league established in the UK and are
proud to have spearheaded the introduction of this awesome sport to the United Kingdom and Europe. The women that make up the league are not easily defined as there is no prototype for a Rollergirl. You do not need to be tattooed or punk, you do not need to be a sports fanatic but both girls fit in fine and both have a home within the London Rollergirls league. We are comprised of a diverse collection of women of various interests and lifestyles.

Thorpe and Rinehart observe that ‘the manipulation of affect for political and commercial ends has reached new heights of impact in the present moment’ (2010, p. 1278), particularly through the use of new technologies. Roller derby is also making use of affect, whether explicitly or implicitly. Reading the London Rollergirls’ mission statement on their website, we can see the affective pull evoked through language. Pride and comfort come through strongly. It states that, ‘both [tattooed and highly athletic] girls fit in fine and both have a home within the London Rollergirls league’. By evoking the affective-laden concept of ‘home’, this organisational body creates an impression of cohesion and collectivity (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2012). Ahmed’s work on collective feelings informs us that bodies take shape through the responses to impressions of others and objects, and the ‘transformation of such sensations into emotions and judgements’ (2004b, p. 30). The London Rollergirls’ presentation of themselves online is in response to others and objects, which then affect other bodies in roller derby.

While the text found on both the British and Australian league websites speaks of a ‘happy diversity’ (Ahmed, 2010), an easy embrace of multiplicity, the static nature of the websites implies that affects are controlled and highly regulated. These types of ‘official’ sites promote a coherent, stable view of roller derby, and do not acknowledge some of the tensions and affective relationships at stake. Women’s empowerment and diversity are key aspects promoted by these leagues. To speak out
in frustration, anger or shame is something of a taboo in roller derby. To acknowledge the struggles in holding together such a diverse group of women is viewed as weak – a strong, united front is upheld always. When these emotions and affects are publicly displayed online, they tend to be displaced. Deleuze and Guattari talk of rhizomes, ‘Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes … Even some animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 6–7). In the same way, a pack of roller derby players represent a rhizome, a complex figuration of women’s bodies: sometimes they touch and hit one another, at other times they stay away, are sent off, cry; there are ‘wild or untamed differences’ (Deleuze, 1994 in Patton, 2000, p. 32). But there are challenges in enabling these ‘untamed differences’ in a competitive team sport. Some roller derby leagues and the women involved have attempted to ‘tame’ the sport, including strict rules for membership and participation, and having clear boundaries around the identity of ‘roller derby’.

The weblog *Live! Derby! Girls!* is one site where alternative views are sometimes expressed. The blogs title banner reads, ‘Live derby. Girls, girls, girls’, along with flashing lights reminiscent of strip clubs and Mötley Crüe songs. The blog has 20 contributors, all ‘derby girls’, all literate and articulate, and some very creative. Several of the contributors identify as academics, or students of sociology, creative writing and gender studies. The site is full of derby-related confessions, stories of overcoming adversity, tales of sexual encounters and lots of entries about corporeal bodies. The most popular blog (with the largest number of comments) is titled,
‘Overcoming the darkside of roller derby’, and the blogger, TrACDC,10 opens with the following:

I’m about to do something taboo. Not like having sex with your twin taboo, but taboo nonetheless. I am about to admit, right here on the interwebs, that roller derby isn’t all camaraderie and fishnets. (Live Derby Girls, 2011)

In a very diplomatic way, this blogger admits that the women in roller derby have not always been supportive. She states:

Who do you think it was that gossiped about the demise of my marriage and said extremely unflattering and unforgiving things about me? A derby … Who made me feel like shit about my lack of derby engagement when my life was falling apart and I was sitting at home with a broken hand? A derby. Who made out with my girlfriend after the after party? You better believe it was a derby. Did these experiences affect how I relate to my team and perform on the track? I want to say they didn’t, but they did. (Live Derby Girls, 2011)

In response to this blog article, over 50 comments were posted in the days and weeks following. The comments ranged from acknowledgements of a ‘dark side’ – but with the addition, ‘there’s usually a dark side to pretty much everything’ – to expressions of grief and loss:

I loved derby … I always thought I’d leave with an injury or because I had another path to choose or because I simply stayed long enough. I didn’t think I’d leave because I had fallen and shattered into a million pieces. I hope that I can get over it and let it go. Because I don’t love derby anymore. And I miss that.

10 Women in roller derby take on a ‘derby name’ or moniker for themselves. A list of registered names around the world can be found on the international list, <www.twoevils.org/rollergirls>.
What is clear from this post and the related comments is the role of desire in both the virtual and embodied communities of roller derby. Love, and the desire to love the experience of the sport – including the relations developed with the other women involved – is a strong affect evoked by roller derby. Ahmed writes of the way pleasure works as a form of entitlement. For her, the way space is claimed is through enjoyment that is witnessed by others (Ahmed, 2004c). Those who show the most enjoyment, the most pleasure – those who love roller derby the most – are the most entitled. To speak out against roller derby, or to express negative affects (of ‘not love’), is to be witness as ‘Other’, as ‘not roller derby’. As articulated by Probyn, ‘desire is a profoundly upsetting force. It may totally rearrange what we think we want: desire skews plans, setting forth unthought-of possibilities’ (1996, p. 43). In the previous chapter, I discussed the ‘love’, ‘healing’ and feelings of belonging experienced by women involved in a ‘hard’, ‘tough’, ‘rough’ sport such as roller derby, and in the next chapter (Chapter 6), I explore the politics of affect in three different leagues in Australia. In this chapter, however, I focus on what happens when ‘love’ turns ‘bad’ and when ‘hardness’ and ‘roughness’ become too much to bear.

**Exclusion, subjectivity and affect: a research dilemma**

Many of the women who participated in my research, as well as websites and blogs dedicated to roller derby, expressed a view that reflected my own struggles with the sport. It initially excited and attracted me, then it repelled me. I could hardly read through my interview transcripts or go and watch a bout. For a time I felt ashamed, angry, resentful, a failure. Where I was once enthusiastic about the possibilities roller derby held for rewriting femininity, I became disillusioned and confused. I asked myself, ‘Is there something wrong with me?’ – I felt judged, ‘othered’, hurt by some
of the women involved in roller derby. Vacillating between my insides and the outsides of roller derby, I struggled to stay on the surface, where myself and roller derby and the other women involved touch – sometimes gently, but often forcefully. Ahmed argues that:

> Emotions produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects … objects of emotion take shape as effects of circulation. (2004, p. 10)

My responses to roller derby—excited, fearful, curious—produced particular boundaries and delineations between my body, the other women’s bodies and the collective body of roller derby. Probyn observes that, ‘Desire, outside belonging and writing are about the modes of effecting movement aimed at creating momentum for change in social relations’ (1996, p. 14), and so I desired to know more, to stand outside roller derby communities and to write about belonging.

But I didn’t feel as though I ‘belonged’. My ‘love’ for roller derby wasn’t enough, or it wasn’t the right kind, or I wasn’t tough enough or mean enough. Or perhaps I was too ‘girly’, too ‘feminine’. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be part of the league, to feel in the centre of things, to help the league grow and flourish. I wanted to observe what was happening, but I wanted to be part of the action. I often felt like a fraud, despite the commitment and energy I put into my league. I was experiencing paranoia. Sedgwick (in Gorton, 2007, p. 340) writes that ‘paranoia proposes both Anything you can do (to me) I can do worse, and Anything you can do (to me) I can do first – to myself’. Paranoia is a good example of what Ahmed (2004, p. 67) calls the ‘affective politics of fear’. She writes that ‘fear creates the very effect of “that which I am not” through running away from an object, which nevertheless threatens as it passes by or is displaced’ (p. 67). Yet I did not run away: I stuck with
it. My desire to become ‘derby’ was still strong for that year – although it did start to wane towards the end of my time. The excitement and possibilities presented by roller derby sustained my commitment and passion. Yet, as noted by Braidotti (2011, p. 158), ‘the central issue at stake here is how to avoid the repetition of exclusions in the process of legitimating an alternative feminist subject’. Roller derby is attempting to legitimate an alternative feminist subject, but it is struggling to avoid the unifying and fascist tendencies so commonly found within groups and individuals (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977).

I – and numerous women with whom I spoke formally and informally during the course of my research – wanted to belong. As a researcher, I wanted roller derby to be a space where new femininities could be enacted, a space where the feminine was not subordinate to the masculine. I also wanted the sport to grow and to be accepted as a legitimate choice for women. I repeated the feminist tendency to romanticise leisure and sport spaces as empowering. I wanted government to help fund venues and training, and I wanted women to have the opportunity to make it to the ‘top of their’ game and to experience the thrill and exhilaration of pushing themselves to their physical limits. But some of these desires contradicted one another. Like the tensions between the multiple roller derby leagues in the United States described in Chapter 1, this tension eventually became part of me. The multiplicities of resistance had an intense affective response. In a way, this was the surfacing of affect. Probyn (1996, p. 138) argues for the flattening out of ‘inside/outside’, ‘that we regard the outside as the welding of the interior and exterior’ (1996, p. 138), where affect and emotions are not separate from the structure and organisation of roller derby, but are ‘welded’ together. Below is an excerpt from my research journal, written on 30 August. At this point, I had been involved in my
league for over six months, and had recently been nominated for, and accepted, the role of league ‘secretary’.

Training last night. Kind of glad I have waited until this morning to write this as I was so angry last night. Angry and scared. As agreed at the last committee meeting, I handed out a short questionnaire to all members with a few questions (basically asking them to point out what they saw were our strengths, weaknesses, and what our priorities should be for the next 12 months). It was short and I had gotten great feedback from most of the members. It seemed as though they appreciated being asked their opinion and being able to have a say in the direction of the league. So that was all fine until I gave a copy of the questionnaire to the ex-secretary (21-year-old, great skater), who responded, with remarks such as, ‘I don’t like this’, ‘It’s too formal’, ‘I just want to hurt people’. I reacted to her comments badly (I held my emotions back, but I was furious) as I read what she said as meaning that I was being a ‘party pooper’ by trying to organise things for the league and by taking the secretary role seriously. I definitely don’t want to take the fun out of roller derby, and I don’t think I am, but there are some things that need to be taken seriously.

My multiple desires: to be accepted, to belong, to organise, to ‘take charge’, to ‘take things seriously’, were contradictory and left me in a place that felt unsafe and fearful.

I continued to write that day:

My fear in this situation comes from fearing the repercussions of standing up to some of these women. That they may target me in scrimmages and bouts and aim to hurt me (separate to when they are trying to block me in the game). There have been a few times in my life where I have been subject to violence and they have stayed in my memory as times to avoid. The feeling of being the brunt of other people’s anger and dissatisfaction, their distrust and mistrust, is probably one of the worst things I have experienced.

Yet, in my fear, I was producing a unified ‘other’ – I too was perpetuating the unifying tendencies and struggling to acknowledge difference.
The challenges of acknowledging difference and accounting for multiple points of resistance produced an affective reaction. The frustration, anger, hurt, shame and pain are what produced, for me and some of the other women involved, a view of roller derby as ‘other’, as a unified entity in a power struggle with my own subjectivity. Foucault writes:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power ... there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (1980, pp. 95–6)

But in feeling judged and hurt, I could see only ‘one’: the ‘other’ women. I could not acknowledge what was the ‘plurality of resistances’ – though I did try. Through the fear, hurt, guilt and shame I felt, all the women melded into one. It felt as thought ‘they’ were against me, when more likely they each had their own points of ‘resistance’. I felt separate from the other women in my league, although I knew I was not alone in feeling this way. This affective response was my own strategy of resistance to the ‘dark side’ of roller derby, and the tendency towards professionalisation and exclusion and the privileging of certain femininities over others. In my last month of roller derby, I wrote the following entry in my research journal.

I was dreading going. Every part of me didn’t want to go. My stomach was churning, my head was spinning with all the reasons why I didn’t want to go. ‘It’s not fair’, ‘I don’t feel as if I belong’, ‘I don’t want to belong there’, and so
on. I pushed through and drove myself to the venue thinking that the feeling and thoughts would pass once I was there. Unfortunately this was not the case. I felt miserable and I looked it too. I couldn’t hide my ambivalence. One of the women who I felt was a friend thought I looked exhausted. When I told her I wasn’t she looked at me strangely. I suppose she was wondering what the hell was wrong with me if I wasn’t tired. (13 February 2011)

It was a struggle to continue my involvement in roller derby – I felt as though everyone was against me. Other women, like Lola and Debbie, also felt uneasy and even angry at their treatment by some of the other women involved.

In the production of the subject position ‘roller derby girl’, that same ‘girl’ is restrained as well as liberated. Butler notes that ‘feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of ‘women’, the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought’ (1990, p. 2). As a predominantly ‘women’s only’ sport, roller derby is a site where emancipation may be sought, yet it is also a site of struggle, restriction and the marginalisation of certain femininities. In her discussion of shame, Probyn writes that ‘the dynamics of “being good”, the fear of disappointing others, and the interplay between shame and the desire for connection, then, are not just a matter of theory’ (2005, p. 21). And so this is not just a matter of theory, but an exploration of subjectivity – not just textually, but also of my own subjectivity as a feminist researcher. I was implicated in a range of complex relationships through my research where the dynamics of ‘being good’ were strong. I had a desire for connection, to belong to this ‘resistant’ leisure practice. Yet I was undertaking a feminist critique of roller derby, and so was interrogating the very notions of resistance and power that I desired.

My roller derby subjectivity – that ‘socially mediated process of entitlement and negotiations with power relations’ (Braidotti, 2011, p. 18) – in some ways
‘failed’. My desire for and movement towards roller derby as a collective experience were halted and the reverberations shifted my sense of belonging, as they did for many other women involved. Perhaps this was all women’s experience of roller derby? Probyn (1996, p. 8) writes of the ‘impossibility of ever really and truly belonging, along with the fear that the stability of belonging and sanctity of belongings are forever past’. I was constantly aware of my role as a researcher, and of the issues involved in the subjectivity enabled via roller derby – in becoming hard, tough derby girls, many women rejected different versions of femininity in order to authenticate their subjectivity. In roller derby, ‘femininity’ was something to be rid of; one had to ‘toughen up’ and ‘shut up and skate’ – except for the adornments of hyper-femininity, such as fishnets and garter belts, which were meant to operate as a parody. Yet, as Markula argues:

> It is thus important to reconceptualise femininity from a symptom, effect, or product of patriarchal culture into an intensity exerting its own force. Femininity therefore should be understood as positive and enabling, not something to get rid of. (2006, p. 36)

In roller derby, most forms of femininity—whether restrictive or not—were not seen as positive and enabling. Femininity was to be countered, opposed, rejected. To ‘belong’ and be accepted— and this also applied to both myself and other women who struggled with their ‘derby’ selves – would have required ignoring the differences among and within women, which we all struggled to do.

**The circuitry movement of affects: backwards transformations**

Debbie’s story is particularly interesting, as she was probably the best roller derby player in her league. In contrast to Carlson’s findings, where she argues that an increased focus on athleticism and skill ‘belie the professed democratic, grassroots
ethos of roller derby and suggests the limits of derby’s potential critique of athleticism’ (2010, p. 437), Debbie’s story speaks to a more complex interaction between sport, gender, affect and inclusion. Debbie’s advanced roller derby skills and the way roller derby had initially changed her life did not stop roller derby from eventually becoming a destructive force in her life. The ‘love’ and ‘healing’ she spoke of experiencing began to close in on her, narrowing the possibilities that had previously been available. Over time, the ‘force’ that initially broke open new vistas shattered new hopes. Force – the hard, aggressive, rough aspects of the game – in roller derby was key to ‘freedom’, ‘healing’ and the saving of ‘souls’. However, it quickly became normalised, restricting freedom and surfacing different, more ‘dangerous’ affects for those involved, including myself. It had become a ‘technology of power’ (Foucault, 1991c) – a technique of control, discipline and repression – as opposed as to a ‘technology of self’ (Chapter 4) where individuals can exert their will over their minds and/or bodies to achieve some kind of positive state.

In finding roller derby and joining a league, Debbie had found a space that allowed her freedom to act, to push herself, to exert her will, to wear clothes she would never have worn before and to act in different ways. Yet, in time, her capacity to act was limited. Being and acting ‘tough’, ‘rough’ and ‘aggressive’ became normalised and hence no longer worked to ‘heal’, ‘transform’ or ‘liberate’. Debbie described the changing affects experienced as circular. She said:

*It’s hitting a point where it was so many steps forward, three steps back and it was almost like I was shifting back into my old mode of how it was when I first started, the self-doubt was creeping back in.*

Despite Debbie’s huge commitment to and desire for roller derby – driving over three hours to get to training, being one of the league’s coaches, skating almost daily to
keep up her skills, and pushing her body to the limits in every bout played – she still found it challenging to feel part of the league. She was frustrated with the lack of commitment shown by most of the other women in the league and found that, although she wanted to push herself further, her league was holding her back. Training sessions were disorganised, there was a lack of direction and leadership, no code of conduct or way of protecting members from discrimination, bullying and inappropriate behaviour, and the fact that they were continually losing to other leagues.

In delineating ‘technologies of self’, Lloyd (1996) makes an important point, arguing that it was only under certain conditions that practices could turn into feminist alternative politics: they had to involve an active critical attitude and an act of self-stylisation. For many women in roller derby, their initial involvement in the sport was a critical response to the lack of sport available to women and an attraction to the freedom for self-stylisation possible via costumes and names. As described in the previous chapter, roller derby was a site of affective transformation, a technology of self that truly transformed their lives and those of the thousands of women involved. However, the critical attitude some of the women had held in regard to social perceptions of women and women’s sport was put aside. They were not critical of roller derby, this practice and community that had brought so much positive change to their lives. Many of them became ambivalent about the transformative potential of roller derby and the multiple affects it impressed upon their bodies. Some women expressed that it was just a ‘sport’, that it was nothing special or unique, and that it was anything but ‘feminist’. Others privileged the resistant, subcultural aspects of roller derby and its links to music and art. They said they did not really care whether
the sport was sustainable, or whether it would be a viable option for other women in the future, or how it could be sustained.

Yet a number of women – Debbie and myself included – stayed critical of roller derby and the direction in which it was headed. We became frustrated at the lack of insight and critical thinking demonstrated by those in voluntary management positions. This is not to ‘blame’ those in management positions, but to highlight the difficult task they have in attempting to manage a growing sport. These challenges – of facilitating competition nationally, ensuring women’s safety and maintaining a critical emphasis on empowerment, women’s bodies, love and belonging – are explored further in the next chapter.

In challenging norms of femininity that signify women as soft, weak, nurturing and fragile, Debbie did experience feelings of ‘freedom’, of the ‘presence’ of which she speaks. Yet her league has not yet been able to enable this alternative figuration of woman to thrive. Instead, many leagues have started to implement a masculinist approach to sport management, with strict membership requirements, ‘closed’ training sessions and highly competitive attitudes towards other leagues. Debbie does want to ‘win’, but her experiences of roller derby as ‘healing’ were as important as winning and being physically competent; however, her league seemed to struggle to continue to facilitate this kind of relation to roller derby. This struggle to facilitate multiplicity in roller derby is the same struggle that women experience in acknowledging and accepting multiplicity amongst themselves (Braidotti, 2011; Butler, 1990).

Identity is not constant, but moving, changing, ‘becoming’. The women’s narratives told through this thesis highlight the multiple ‘identities’ experienced via affects in roller derby. In the previous chapter, Debbie referred to herself as ‘hard’,
but this hardness facilitated a type of ‘healing’ or spiritual dimension to her roller derby experience. She wanted to win and got frustrated when her league did not train her hard enough, though she also became frustrated by her relationships with the other women in the league. She said:

_The anger, definitely. Yeah, the anger definitely crept back in and that’s where it got to a point where it’s like, no, I’ve got to move from here or shift because I was starting to get angry and it’s not a trait that I want to portray to people. I’d actually lost the happy Debbie that I was before I even went into derby, as a free spirit sort of thing. It had become more of a controlling thing._

_I basically live my life around people and what they’re talking about, the interactions and feelings, more than anything. So that was always the challenge in making sure that I got on with everybody or if there was confrontation, how was I going to deal with this, where was my fault in it … I found I lost my happy little medium self where I’d like people to think or to see that that’s how I was, you know. Who I am._

Feminist sport sociologist Markula has argued that Deleuzian thinking encourages us ‘to leave behind the examination of the static, visible representations of the body to engage with visceral, ephemeral movement to create a line of flight to new territories of feminist research’ (2006, p. 43). Debbie’s anger had created a new ‘line of flight’ – where roller derby once gave her so much, it was now ‘taking’ and ‘controlling’. The discourses that run across roller derby as empowering and soul-saving do not speak to the movement of affects that circulate in between and among the women involved.

Debbie’s relation to roller derby and the other women in her league had changed, although nothing had altered dramatically in terms of the league members, rules, training or competition. Whereas previously it was the ‘hardness’ and aggression of the sport that aligned the women together in roller derby ‘through the
very intensity of their attachments’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 119), these affects and their intensity were now doing different things. They were supporting a move away from roller derby and were not binding the women together. Ahmed (2004a, 2004c) argues that emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, though they work to bind subjects together. I would also argue that it is the non-residence of emotion that binds and tears apart, heals and harms. The non-residence of emotion highlights the relational experience of emotion – they arise in relation to the other. Debbie spoke of her recent anger towards roller derby – and herself:

I was walking away angry and upset with myself every time for the fact that I’d spoken up or been too outspoken. So I’d walk away going, oh my God, you shouldn’t have verbalised that, you shouldn’t have spoken out, and angry at myself. But I suppose that’s the doubt in yourself. Then the fact that I most probably didn’t feel that buggered after training and that whilst I was at training, I was walking away more, the opposite to being healed, to be honest, in a certain sense.

She spoke about her self-doubt again, whereas in the beginning roller derby gave her confidence. This changed relation to the hardness and aggression in roller derby tells us about the circulation of affects and what these affects can do: they can heal and harm, they can bind and pull apart. Debbie decided to leave the league at that time. She called me on the phone. Her voice sounded excited, angry and determined. She recalled the conversation she had with our league’s president and it seemed she was seeking reassurance and support with her decision, which I gave her. I agreed with her. I too felt frustrated and annoyed, so I felt content and satisfied that Debbie, the league’s best skater, had similar feelings. But a week later she was back at training. She was still frustrated and angry, but she was back. In roller derby, affects are not static; they are temporal and mobile, hence enabling a becoming subject – and becoming is not always comfortable.
Debbie’s league – which was also my league – struggled to get a coach and to find extra times for training. Without a dedicated coach, our skills and fitness did not improve steadily, though our website and promotions were as good as the better leagues in Australia. This lack of ‘match’ between ‘image’ and physical corporeality frustrated several members, myself and Debbie included. Debbie expressed her frustration about the league and the direction in which it was moving, stating:

*They seem to be moving really, really fast and I think it’s good to be able to move fast but with the same token, you’ve got to be present here now and deal with that situation before you sort of go into the next.*

The desire to grow and be seen is at times at odds with the realities of managing a league with over 50 members – particularly as it positions itself as a ‘counter’-cultural (counter-hegemonic?) site. Braidotti points out that the goal of nomadic subjectivity is the creation of an ‘alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories’ (2011, p. 7). Yet roller derby, and in particular Debbie’s league and similar organisations, have positioned themselves as oppositional, countering those qualities, institutions and affects they are against: normalised heterosexuality, ‘passive’ femininity, weak vulnerability and slowness. This oppositional position does not escape the dualism of good/bad, conformity/non-conformity, us/them, denying the ongoing relations of power between women through the discourse of empowerment.

For women involved in roller derby, their desire to break open new visas and overcome their gendered bodies comes at a cost. For Debbie, it cost her ‘jouissance’ – the feeling of ‘presence’ that she mentioned so often in the previous chapter. Her will to win, to ‘get on with it’ and ‘just skate’ produced particular affects, and hence particular subjectivities. Debbie’s previous orientation towards roller derby could not
be sustained. Her league did not have the skills or the knowledge, to understand where to start in managing the multiplicities present between and even within women (Braidotti, 2011, p. 157). Debbie was not able to resolve the binaries that had restricted her own life, let alone in play in roller derby. That feminine jouissance she experienced was eventually at odds with her desire to win and compete. She was frustrated and angry with a number of women in her league, who she felt were pushing her out. For Debbie, it was a constant battle between light and dark. The metaphors of darkness and light in roller derby are not necessarily discrete. Derby skaters are not sparkly, new neo-liberal girls (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). They often occupy the dark side of neo-liberalism, tough, ‘dirty’, unkempt – yet they still want to win. They are entrepreneurial but anti-commercial, anarchic but competitive.

In positioning themselves in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ and different to ‘netball girls’ and compliant femininity (Taylor, 2001), women in roller derby often understand their participation as ‘dangerous’, ‘dark’ and ‘different’. In doing so, many of them also experience the sport as liberating, healing and generally positive. And so there are contradictions and unresolved tensions. Roller derby is a sport, and as Probyn reminds us, in sport ‘bodies do compete, they do fail or win, they are covered in shame, and they beam in pride’ (2000b, p. 25). Roller derby gives rise to feelings of success and pride. As they notice themselves improving, when they feel the pride of winning and the experience of working together with their team, women feel strong, vital and successful. Often these affects – of pride, success, strength – are in contradiction to the women’s previous experiences of life, so roller derby takes on an almost ‘holy’ position in their lives. Yet positioning roller derby as ‘good’ gives rise to a ‘darker’ side. Roller derby is rough, aggressive and highly competitive. There are constant tensions and movements of affect between the women involved. Polemic
understandings of [the] sport, as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘light’ or ‘dark’, shut down the opportunities for reimagining femininity that initially were possible.

In the previous chapter, Debbie articulated her experiences in roller derby in terms of healing and love, yet four months later she spoke of anger, frustration and darkness. She felt as though others in her league were spreading lies about her, and that a certain ‘style’ was being privileged to which she did not adhere. Initially, Debbie found that the ‘style’ of roller derby helped her. She says:

> See I never ever would have worn fishnets, I never would have worn short shorts, as much as one day I’d love to go, I don’t give a fuck, I won’t wear them, fucking short shorts and be all right about it all. So having that derby name and being that different person helped me to shift into the person that I most probably was also hoping to be – not hoping to be but allowing me to express myself in a way that I wouldn’t have felt confident enough to do ...

Yet this ‘stylisation’ was not enough to sustain Debbie’s feelings of ‘empowerment’, ‘love’ and ‘healing’ through roller derby.

> I think the spectacle is what sort of throws it out a lot for me because all the people are there more to be seen than to improve their skills or to say that they’re part of something or belong to something ... so there is that ownership, I suppose, that everyone takes on that subculture that they can relate to. I felt in some way you sort of had to drown out that little bit of whatever and think that maybe you had to do this or do that for it all to be accepted ...

Because of the time and commitment she put into roller derby, what happened at training and on the track were not limited to those spaces but were spilling out into other areas of her life. She stated, ‘Little do they know that – so you might go out there, you do all that. They don’t really know what goes on in your everyday life.’ For the first time in her life, Debbie had the opportunity to truly excel at something, to
make it to ‘the top’ of her sport. She was definitely good enough and was committed to continual improvement, but there were many obstacles in her path that prevented her from achieving her potential. With two young children to take care of on her own, having to cope with epilepsy, and a lack of resources to be able to afford to live in a city with a more competitive league, her potential and dreams were stifled. For Debbie, the fishnets, the short shorts, the names and ‘style’ of roller derby were always marginal to the opportunity to use her skating skills and push her body in a way that gave her some esteem and recognition from others.

Roller derby, in its current configuration, goes to great lengths to differentiate itself from other sports. This will be explored further in the next chapter, but the point is relevant here as it speaks to the frustration some women have with the structure and organisation of the sport. Braidotti writes:

The paradoxes, power dissymmetries, and fragmentations of the present historical contest rather require that we shift the political debates from the issue of differences between cultures to differences within each culture. (2011, p. 8 italics in original)

It is these differences within roller derby that leagues are struggling to acknowledge and manage. For Debbie, the differences between herself and her team members are in direct opposition to one another – they are light versus dark. Women’s difference becomes negative. She said, ‘It’s the old dark energy to the light energy. I think in the end, the light prevails … it mightn’t be in the instance that we’re there …’ Yet to think in these binary terms did not help Debbie to resolve her angst. Her desire to play was at odds with her anger and frustration. Whereas initially these two affects – hard and soft, light and dark – could be felt together, they were now relegated to opposite ends of the affective spectrum for Debbie. Her will to overcome her feminised body was somehow at odds with the desire of the other women in her league for the same
thing. Debbie and I spent many hours trying to ‘figure’ out how to be ‘happy’ in our league. We came up with many ideas as to how the league could better structure and organise itself, but our suggestions were ignored. This was not surprising, as the question about to how to live with difference raises the central problematic of how to negotiate the ever-changing power relations within and between cultures. Yet so often this is a case of living with differences between cultures rather than trying to think about living with differences within cultures.

The trouble with women: control, authority and authenticity

Lola was interviewed once for this project. At the time of her interview, she had not been actively involved in roller derby for over a year, but prior to this she had been one of the spearheads of roller derby in Australia. Lola is in her early forties, and disclosed her heavy involvement in the BDSM (bondage and discipline and sadism and masochism) community since the age of 13. Of BDSM, she said, ‘It’s a lifestyle for me and there’s a fair few involved in roller derby. It seems to attract those type of people.’ She was also a committed online ‘gamer’. Having been at the forefront of roller derby since its arrival in Australia, Lola had some strong opinions about the sport and where it was going ‘wrong’. Lola had removed herself from all contact with roller derby and had not spoken to even her closest friends in the roller derby community because of the ‘negativity’ she felt from some of the more ‘powerful’ people involved. Lola was resentful about how she was perceived and treated in roller derby and reflected upon what had happened. Like Debbie’s story above, Lola was an excellent skater, a committed team member and gave roller derby her all, yet this did not equal sustained or even enjoyable participation. On the contrary, her story – of someone heavily invested in roller derby – illustrates the ‘dangers’ of emotional
attachment and the ‘trouble’ women have in working together when the affects are so intense.

In the previous chapter, I wrote of Kate’s struggle to find a place to belong when she had been bullied and felt separate from other women. Kate did not get along with women in general, but in roller derby she felt as though she could find some common ground – that is, a shared desire to overcome their inferiorised feminised bodies. Yet roller derby did not provide this same ‘safe haven’ of belonging for Lola. Though it may at first have been a space where she saw the possibilities of women working and playing together, this did not last. I asked her, ‘What do you think the major problem was, then?’

*Lola: Women.*

*Adele: Yeah, the fact that they’re women?*

*Lola: They’re women ...Who do women pick on the most? How many women do you see picking on guys? Women are competitive beyond belief but they take it too far, you know what I mean? It’s – they ... instead of going ‘Wow, you did awesome.’ Like I’ll admire someone for a while, but it’s that tall poppy syndrome thing. For example, [skater from her old league] is a brilliant skater, phenomenal and they’ll admire her for a bit and then all of a sudden, they’ll all of a sudden turn on them. It’s just a clique, one person influences the next group and you become out of favour – I’ve watched someone be out of favour, in favour, out of favour with – you know, it’s women.*

This response from Lola speaks to what Butler (1990) refers to as ‘gender trouble’. Butler writes that, ‘there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women … because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts’ (1990, pp. 1–2). She goes on to argue that it is the insistence of some kind of stable and seamless
category of ‘women’ that excludes, regulates and coerces in the name of freedom (Butler, 1990, p. 4). Lola blamed women’s ‘emotionality’ for the ‘trouble’ that occurred between them. She said: ‘Men are logical, women are emotional.’

Lola was set on her views of women being the cause of her troubles in roller derby. Ahmed writes of the way emotions are associated with women, ‘who are represented as “closer” to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement’ (2004c, p. 3). Lola’s views reinforce the dichotomous binaries that place emotion as secondary to reason, women as secondary to men. When I asked whether there was anything positive about women’s emotionality, Lola responded by saying:

They can be compassionate if they choose to be. But if they don’t, or their clique doesn’t respect that compassion, no they’ll turn and back stab. If you could read some of the emails and stuff that I’ve got since this whole thing started and what people say about other people, you’d be mind-blown. But in the next month that person will be awesome.

Women – there is no reason behind it.

Lola’s strong reaction towards women in roller derby was a direct result of her aggressive and dogged determination to get roller derby started in her region. She was outspoken, and saw roller derby as an opportunity for her to finally find other women with whom to relate and have fun. Her strong views and opinions about the sport led some people to dislike her and her view of roller derby. She explained it as follows:

I think they thought I wanted to control roller derby. I’m a big-picture person, I’m not good with smaller details, so I could never run anything. I never wanted to run anything. But on the flipside of that I would say I’m a control freak, I like the uniforms a certain way, I like the name a certain way. I like thearty side of it and I love to skate and
I like to be in control on the track because I like being pivot, I’m a lazy Jammer. But yeah, I think other people had the idea to make it more a business and I wasn’t interested in that, I was happy for whoever wanted to do it to do it that way but I think they didn’t think I would be. Nobody spoke to me about it, they just do it all behind your back and then say blah, blah, blah, blah.

Questions around roller derby being run as a ‘business’ or not will be explored further in the next chapter, but what is important here is Lola’s perception of the other women in roller derby. She said, ‘they thought I wanted to control roller derby’, and ‘nobody spoke to me about it, they just do it all behind your back’.

Lola thought roller derby would be an opportunity for her to do something with other women. She said:

It’s a shame, I had this great expectation for me personally to learn to get along with women better and stuff and maybe be a bit tolerant. But all it taught me was that I was right all along.

As Kate discussed in the previous chapter, women struggle to belong as equals among men, yet it is also difficult to find a place among women. Irigaray writes that, ‘the love of self among women, in the feminine, is very hard to establish’ (1993a, p. 101). The fluidity of affect created through roller derby expressed in the previous chapter is not sustained, but ‘paralysed’ through what Irigaray describes as the ‘quantitative estimates of love that ceaselessly interrupt love’s attraction and development’ (1993a, p. 103) between women: ‘Love among women has been a matter of rivalry with: the real mother; an all powerful prototype of maternity; the desire of man: of father, son, brother’ (Irigaray, 1993a, p. 103). This rivalry about which Irigaray writes, and the

11 The pivot is often (but not always) the team captain, and guides and directs their team’s pack on the track.
lack of cultural imaginary in which relations between women are represented, help to explain Lola’s struggles to maintain positive, loving relations with women in roller derby. This is the ‘ugly’ side of love, ‘when emotions work against us or are used against us’ (Gorton, 2007, p. 345). Lola ‘loved’ roller derby. She put her body and ‘soul’ into the sport and worked hard to establish two leagues in her region; she also supported other women to start other leagues. But this was not enough. Ahmed argues that space is claimed through enjoyment that is witnessed by others (2004c); those who show the most enjoyment, the most pleasure, are the most entitled. Lola most definitely showed the most enjoyment. She was interviewed for newspapers and other media several times, and was involved in several leagues – all this as well as being one of the strongest roller derby players in the region at the time. But her ‘entitlement’ to roller derby was still challenged.

Irigaray argues that women have ‘no language sexed as female’ (1993a, p. 107), which speaks to the constant comparison between roller derby and traditional masculine sports such as rugby. With this lack of language comes a lack of communication, one of the key issues raised by my participants and by online blogs and websites, between committees, ‘leaders’, skaters and volunteers. The common catchphrase, ‘shut up and skate’, was sometimes used to avoid clear and upfront communication between league members and supported the bullying that occurred between them, even when they have the best intentions. Lola said:

*I think it’s impossible for women, I think if you’re an ethical person and you have the best of intentions, several things can happen: one, you can either get passively bullied until you just give up. You can also get aggressively bullied which I’ve seen on the track.*

Ringrose notes that there has been increasing attention paid to what is positioned in the popular media and academic research ‘as a significant “rise” in girls’ aggression,
bullying and violence’ (2006, p. 405). This ‘universal mean girl’ is caught up ‘in “girl-power” discourses – neoliberal, individualising claims that respond to liberal feminist rhetoric’ (Ringrose, 2006, p. 415). Lola has understood the affects she experienced in roller derby as further evidence of the gendered discourses of the ‘mean girl’ that are perpetuated through popular and academic sources, as a kind of assertiveness gone too far. She says:

They all want to control it; they all want to have it their way. They all think their idea is the best, it’s crazy … It’s the feminine part that’s the bad part with that. I’m a woman and I’m all for women doing stuff and everything, but we’re not good together … I’m telling you it’s women, maybe they’re control freaks more than they think they are.

Lola collapses ‘women’ together into one discrete group, herself included, as in possession of some kind of innate (‘nasty’) feminine essence. Lola’s responses reflect the common adherence to biological and popular notions of femininity and gender that are perpetuated throughout the popular media.

Lola’s exchange with me was passionate and emotive. Her disappointment about unmet expectations for roller derby was obvious, and her hatred for some of the women involved came through clearly in her responses. Where Irigaray writes of the struggles women have to love themselves and other women, Ahmed (2004c) attempts to write the ‘organisation of hate’. Yet Ahmed writes of the organisation of hate with regard to race, not gender. For Ahmed, ‘hate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement’ (2004c, p. 44, original italics). She continues:

Hate is an intense emotion; it involves a feeling of ‘againstness’ that is always, in the phenomenological sense, intentional. Hate is always
hatred of something or somebody, although that something or somebody does not necessarily pre-exist the emotion. (2004c, p. 49)

Hate is intense and intimate. It highlights the ‘relation between destructive attachments and conservation’ (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 51). In order for the object to be hated, it must be conserved. Ahmed’s writing on hate highlights the ‘surfacing’ of subjects through affective encounters, ‘giving’ the subject an identity apart from others, as in hate groups and nationalism. Yet how does this ‘surfacing’ of subjects work between women when they are either ‘one’ or nothing at all?

The intensity of affects became too much for Lola. Despite the fun and joy she experienced through roller derby, the ‘dark side’ became too much to stick with. She said:

*Was it worth it? Roller derby was worth it, it’s made a lot of women happy, it’s made – it’s done so much for individual women, it’s given women purpose and stuff. It’s just a shame it has that dark side.*

For Lola, the ‘dark side’ is the competition and fight for control among women in roller derby: the ugly side of affects, where love is hard, not fluid. This ‘hardness’ was at first a revelation. It provided a counter-discourse to femininity, yet it was always in relation to masculinity. In acting as an advocate and ‘voice’ of roller derby in her region, Lola was attempting to reinscribe femininity, yet she fell into the trap of unifying the ‘feminine’ into one. She saw roller derby as an opportunity to embrace those ‘pariah’ femininities – such as lesbian, ‘cock teaser’, ‘slut’, ‘bad-arse’ or ‘bitch’ – said to ‘constitute a refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination and therefore are threatening to male dominance’ (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). These pariah femininities, and the rejection of what Finley describes as ‘girly girl’ femininity (Finley, 2010, p. 379), to some extent disrupt and transgress the gender and sexuality dichotomy. Yet, as these pariah femininities become normalised,
they too come within the realm of disciplinary power. This is the ongoing paradox at work within roller derby – ‘difference’ becomes the ‘norm’. It becomes desirable and normal to embrace pariah femininities – it stops being a radical ‘choice’. However, not all the women involved in roller derby even wanted to embrace pariah femininities. For some, like Debbie, they wanted to push their bodies to the sporting extreme and use roller derby as an escape and meditation, to find a space of their own.

In her conception of roller derby, as transgressing norms of gender and sexuality, Lola was still rejecting women as multiplicity. Women’s expression of emotion and their differences were a hassle for Lola, and took away from her enjoyment of derby. She said:

*I’d still be there; I just decided to focus on me for once instead of everybody else’s problems. Always fixing everyone and listening to everybody’s gripes and whinges, oh my God, it doesn’t stop.*

In rejecting the ‘soft’ affects in roller derby, Lola has limited her capacity to be involved, not just in the temporary disruption of the status quo but in the performance of a new version of femininity. There is a narrowing and ‘fixing’ of femininity that occurs that disables the fluidity of affect: it is neither hard nor soft. In this view of affects, desire is not productive but destructive. Lola says that, ‘it takes a lot of your life that you’ll never get back’. Ahmed (2004c) wrote of the circulatory movement of affects and the surfacing of hate. Thinking of this movement of affect through roller derby and between women highlights the differences between women more than ever. Lola sees herself as ‘against’ other women. Irigaray writes that:

*The Other often stands in our tradition for a product of a hatred for the other … equally annihilated by sameness is the nonthetic love of self, which still finds no representation.* (1993a, p. 112)
Among women, hatred for the other is hatred for the self. Yet this is not for a unified self, but rather a multiple, fractured, split self. The same split self that made possible a different orientation towards ‘hardness’ from the previous chapter is now doing the work of destruction rather than creation.

By saving ‘souls’, roller derby has given women belief where they often previously had none. They are no longer nomads with no habits or territories, although they still could be. Nor are they atheists with no beliefs (Seem, 1977, p. xxi). Roller derby has become territorialised, colonised and organised (although often in a disorganised way). The women involved in roller derby, Lola included, want the sport to grow and succeed and spread, and they want the opportunity to play different teams. Yet this desire is in opposition to their other desires: for ‘freedom’, fluidity, meditation. For Lola, it is not just roller derby that has become restrictive, but Australia has a whole. She said:

*I can’t get out of here fast enough. I think Australia has taken away our choice ... They’ve got choice in America, they may be fucking crazy but they have choice and you can do what you want over there, you know what I mean? It’s not as constricted as here.*

For Lola, roller derby may have started out as an opportunity for solidarity among women, but this quickly changed. What is more important to her now is having ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’, which she thinks that many leagues are not enabling. Her anger and frustration at the narrow meanings allowed by some women in roller derby is clear. She said:

*Some people in roller derby, they come looking for fitness, or they come looking for friends, or a social group, or – everybody comes into it with their own agenda and I guess the people that are already in [it]*
Power/knowledge serves to normalise behaviour – it ‘compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes’ (Foucault, 1991c, p. 183). This was exactly what Lola did not want of roller derby. She liked that it was outside of the ‘norm’, that it was ‘different’, ‘dark’ even.

In wanting something ‘different’, Lola tells a story of contradiction and tension. She wants to do something ‘big’ with women; she wants to see women get together to play and spread roller derby, a sport she loves. But she sees women’s emotionality getting in the way of her goal. Yet she also sees the need for multiple ‘versions’ of roller derby to be supported and embraced. She does not identify as a feminist – she states that she doesn’t even like women. However, in her own life she has rejected the sex/gender binary via leisure practices in the BDSM scene. She is an excellent skater and strong roller derby player, but these skills are not enough to keep her in the game. She feels restricted, constrained, trapped. Yes, roller derby has saved some women’s souls. However, according to Lola, in doing so it becomes

*like a fucking religion that picks some weak-willed people and brainwashes them into believing this certain way ... Roller derby’s not giving anybody choices but it was supposed to.*

Lola’s alignment and orientation towards roller derby was hard and tough and ‘different’. Over time, anger and frustration intensified between her, roller derby and the other women involved. She felt hurt, betrayed, angry and frustrated. Where she first identified with difference, she now undergoes a process of dis-identification with sameness. Ahmed writes of identification being a form of alignment, while also involving ‘dis-identification or an active “giving up” of other possible identifications’ (2004c, p. 52). In other words, if Lola were to think of herself as ‘derby’ then she
would have to ‘give up’ other identifications – which she was unwilling to do.

Although Lola and I are very different women, my story also speaks to my unwillingness to give up certain identifications for roller derby.

The dark side of belonging

Roller derby leagues promote themselves as inclusive, all-embracing sites for the expression and experience of an alternative femininity. Yet they have not been so for all women. For Debbie, her athletic skills and determination were at odds with her desire to belong and feel a part of her league. She wanted to be able to express her own ‘style’ – reflecting the beach culture to which she was so close, instead of the fishnets, stockings and short shorts so often attached to roller derby. At the same time, Lola wanted to maintain those pariah identities that were embraced by roller derby. She didn’t want roller derby to be more organised or structured, and she wanted to keep it as ‘alternative’ as possible, embracing aspects of the BDSM scene of which she was also a part. I wanted to push my body in new ways and to enjoy the pleasures of being ‘hard’, ‘tough’ and ‘strong’. But I couldn’t handle the disorganisation, the lack of focus and the extra work they made for themselves. I knew that in theory difference was ‘good’, but among the women in roller derby this brought on a sense of fear and panic. To be different was to be rejected. Yet at the same time, it was often a desire for ‘difference’ that attracted women to the sport in the first place.

The affective relations between the women involved – of love, belonging, anger, aggression and so on – are vital in producing the normalising discourses of difference in roller derby. Emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 1). The ‘surface’ of roller derby and the women who play have been signified as ‘different’. This ‘difference’ does not only transcend,
but ‘embroils the individual more deeply within the problematic but inevitable condition of normative judgement’ (Felski, 1997, p. 16). The feelings of joy, healing and love that circulate through women’s participation in roller derby eventually become ‘normalised’. The affects experienced and expressed are differentiated, categorised and disciplined according to the norms developed. With its discourse of inclusion, roller derby ‘implies a bringing in’, it presupposes a whole or centre into which something (or someone) can be incorporated’ (Graham, 2006, p. 20).

Although researchers have begun to theorise a different mode of belonging, privileging the fluidity of relations over strong bonds and shared values (e.g. see Bauman, 2000; Bennett, 1999), the focus on belonging as a coherent concept is still strong. Particularly within psychology, social work and health disciplines, belonging features as a key component to well-being and ‘healthy communities’ (e.g. see Benjamin, 2008; Ory, Liles & Lawler, 2009; Pittman, 2010). Even within sociology, the concept is consistently being revived. May defines belonging ‘as a sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings’ (2011, p. 368). And although she does admit to the possibilities opened up by not belonging, she argues that the concept of belonging is appropriate for studying the ‘relationship between social change and the self’ (May, 2011, p. 370). Despite the persistence of belonging as an ultimate state of being-in-society, roller derby is a site that highlights the virtual impossibility of belonging as a singular relation because of the multiplicities between and within women. The overwhelming desire to belong to a shared identity limits the possibilities for diverse femininities. As Braidotti articulates, there is ‘a bond of commonality among women … but they are not, in any way, the same’ (2011, pp. 155–6).

Deleuze argued for the prioritisation of the conjunction ‘and’ over the verb ‘to be’: ‘“And” comes to stand for that which is in-between any two things brought into
relation with each other’ (Patton, 2000, p. 10); it is a line of flight, a place where changes can take place. Roller derby embraced this ‘and’ in its revival in the early 2000s. It was game and play and sport and hard and fun and tough and kinky and butch and tricky and dangerous and simple and silly and more. The sport of roller derby, and the women who participated, resisted oppression through exploring multiplicities. However, as Deleuze and Guattari note, ‘groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize’ (1987, p. 10). Roller derby leagues have quickly implemented rules and norms that exclude certain subject positions and certain women.

The price of belonging is paid through the homogenisation of roller derby. As roller derby grows, the need for more defined governance structures becomes clear. Yet how can they govern without suppressing the feminine subjectivities possible within roller derby? One World Roller Derby Inc. is attempting to be a more inclusive alternative to the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association. Rather than ‘Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary’, One World Roller Derby Inc. states that it is:

A resource for leagues to form and / or grow, unite in competition, exposure and networking. OneWorld is not a governing body and has no say in managing or dictating how leagues are run; we only ask that you pay it forward and help grow the sport with integrity and athleticism. (One World Roller Derby, 2013)

This alternative organisational body has seen the impact of high attendance and participation requirements, and is attempting to provide an alternative, in partnership with the official American roller sport organisation. But even this is in some ways restrictive. One World Roller Derby Inc. has removed the links to music scenes such as punk and rockabilly, and instead presents roller derby as a ‘regular’ sport. These
strong relations to music and art have been a key driver for the growth of roller derby. Women and spectators are obviously attracted to this ‘new’, colourful sport, with new leagues being started on a regular basis and audiences growing (WFTDA, n.d.), and may be one of the reasons women are willing to put their bodies on the line for the pleasure of the game. With the introduction of national and international governing bodies has come a gradual marginalisation of multiplicity within roller derby.

I have likened a roller derby pack to a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). For a brief moment in time, roller derby was pregnant with possibility. There were possibilities for transforming the way we know sport, women, aggression, playing. Yet very quickly the desire to belong came at the cost of this possibility. Governmental discourses of inclusion and cohesion have seeped into roller derby leagues. The women involved have struggled to create a feminine imaginary that is multiple and other to the masculine imaginaries that are taken up. Roller derby leagues do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of the society in which we live, where neo-liberal politics drive the economic, cultural and political sphere and where feminine subjectivity is marginalised to the extreme. There is no escape from the fascism within us, ‘to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us’ (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. xiii), except to continue to multiply. Yet how can a competitive team sport such as roller derby continue to embrace multiplicities while a governing body organises national and international competitions?

It is the differences between and within each woman and they way they understand these differences that come through in this chapter. In the next chapter, I focus in on the differences between leagues, between collective rather than individual bodies. Examining three different leagues in Australia and reading across theory, interview material and my own embodied experience of roller derby, I highlight the
multiplicity of desires and models of management being employed by those in leadership positions. Markula writes that, ‘if the aim is to examine how change happens in women’s sport, it might be as important to study the management of power as it is to analyse individual athletes’ reactions to it’ (Markula, 2003, p. 100). By looking at the way power and affects are deployed in these three different leagues, I continue to show how affect circulates and examine the possibilities for ‘becoming’ that are enabled (and impeded) in roller derby.
Chapter 6

Multiple ‘roller derbys’ – affects and governance

This chapter includes excerpts from the following peer-reviewed journal article for which I was the sole author:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each published paper.
Introduction

Roller derby attempts to bring together a competitive sporting culture, privileging strong, fit bodies and winning with a more playful leisure culture, where art, costumes and music are as much a part of the sport as the rules. This blurring of boundaries between play and sport is one of the strengths of roller derby as an emerging sport for women. However, there have been recent changes in many leagues that privilege an understanding of ‘sport’ as highly competitive and ‘serious’. The current conditions of roller derby, which are resistant to external organisation or structuring by governing bodies, allow women to parody hetero-normative gender relations, as evidenced by the often overtly sexualised costumes commonly worn – such as fishnet stockings and garter belts – and the outrageous names used, such as ‘Abra Macabre’ and ‘Cunterstrike’ (see <www.twoevils.org> for the complete list). However, some women are beginning to use their real names instead of their derby monikers, and some leagues have decided against wearing highly feminised costumes as uniforms. Some leagues are also increasing the fitness requirements for women who want to join, with a much greater focus on fitness and ability than in previous years.

Institutionalised sports confirm patriarchal, techno-capitalist, modernist styles of living (Woodward, 2009, p. 67). Roller derby has never really adhered to these ideals, particularly with its links to rock’n’wrestling. In John Fiske’s classic cultural studies analysis of rock’n’wrestling, he states:

ROck’n 'wrestling refuses ‘fairness’. It is unfair. Nobody is given a ‘sporting chance’ and anyone who attempts to ‘play fair’ is taken advantage of and suffers as a result. (1989, p. 86, italics in original)

The contemporary version of roller derby in some ways reflects the roller derby of the past, particularly as the women involved position themselves as ‘tough’ and their
sport as ‘different’. Yet, to differentiate the previous versions of roller derby from the current version, emphasis is often placed on the ‘realness’ of the sport. There are many women involved in roller derby who reject and rile against roller derby’s links to rock’n’wrestling, seeing it as somehow tainting or *dirtying* their sport. For them, roller derby is an opportunity to push their bodies and to experience the thrill of competition – nothing more. For others, the links to the past versions of the sport are stronger. Relations between the past and the future are complex and ongoing as women are ‘situated’ (Woodward, 2009) in the present.

Like many volunteer-run sporting organisations, roller derby leagues are complex bodies, charged with varied tasks, from organising large-scale events to ensuring coaches turn up to training on time, managing the clubs’ finances, grievances and dealing with corporate sponsors. These tasks require skills in a range of areas, and can be time-consuming and stressful activities. As a relatively ‘new’ sport, roller derby has numerous complex issues that need to be worked through over the coming years. It is my hope that I can create a space for dialogue about different ways of thinking about how leagues are managed now and in the future. But, perhaps more importantly, my hope is that roller derby may inform a gendered understanding of research in sport and sport management in ways that privilege women as embodied subjects.

Human resource management and psychological approaches have been utilised to examine some of the complexities within volunteer-run sports organisations, particularly related to issues of supporting, training and retaining volunteers; however, gender is often ignored (e.g. Cuskelly, McIntyre & Boag, 1998; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Hanlon & Cuskelly, 2002). More critical approaches to sport management have been taken up to analyse issues related to the governance of sport.
organisations with specifically ‘development’ or ‘peace-building’ goals (e.g. Coakley & Donnelly, 1998; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Kidd, 2008; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013) and to the ‘incorporation’ of sports labelled ‘alternative or ‘action’ (e.g. Kellett & Russell, 2009; Lombard, 2010; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011), yet gender is also often secondary in these studies too.

As a relatively young field of study, the depth and breadth of research in sport management goes some way at interrogating people’s lived experiences of this field. However, they do fall short in interrogating the specificities of women’s lived experiences of sport and sport management. In this chapter, I extend this literature, highlighting the complexity of organising and governing a ‘new’ sport for women and the relations between power and affects that are shaping the direction and growth of roller derby into the future. In doing so, I address the call for interdisiplinarity and more critical approaches to sport management research (e.g. Amis & Silk, 2005; Doherty, 2013; Frisby, 2005). Trevor Slack (1996) argues that sport management scholars need to focus their research in different sites – not just, as he states, the ‘locker room’. His call is for sport management researchers to go into diverse sites, such as footwear stores, boardrooms and large media corporations. These are in many ways male-dominated sites. Through a focus on roller derby and the women involved, I am moving the focus from one site to multiple sites; to issues of administration and organisation; to female bodies and relationships. In doing so, I am contributing to the feminist literature in sport management (e.g. Aitchison, 2005; Shaw et al., 2006; Shaw & Slack, 2002; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003), as well as extending the management focus of the growing body of interdisciplinary work in the area of (feminist) physical cultural studies.
In the previous chapters, I have explored the notion of ‘becoming’ in roller derby and the way affects figure into the power relations between the women involved, influencing what and who they can imagine themselves becoming. In this chapter, I go further, incorporating an analysis of collective as well as individual becoming. In focusing on the collective bodies of roller derby and the politics of affect at play between them, I can explore some of the innovations demonstrated and the challenges confronted. Bringing affects to the centre of sport management has implications for both theory and women’s own continual processes of becoming in active leisure spaces. In organised sport, governance is not only about facilitating organisations that win and lose, but also about enabling transformation, play and disciplined freedom. Questions remain about how to facilitate ‘elite’ national competition and give women the opportunity to experience the thrill of winning and being ‘at the top of their game’, while also ensuring women’s safety and maintaining a critical emphasis on ‘participation’, empowerment and belonging, which has so far been central to their attraction to roller derby. Issues related to volunteer management (of training, supporting, retaining), to the relationships between grassroots and professional sport organisations and to brand marketing (attracting fans and increasing revenue) are important for the future of roller derby; however, there also needs to be an acknowledgement of the affective realm of governance. Love and belonging, pride and success, shame and anger – all these affects and more are already part of sport management. In this chapter, I illuminate them and show what these affects do: how they shape and influence decisions, how they create tension and paradox, and how they problematise gender relations.
Wide and far: micro and macro perspectives of governance and management

To play flat-track roller derby, you need a venue that has a smooth concrete or wooden surface at least the size of a basketball court, where you can tape down a ‘track’ (using duct tape) and where they allow skating. Not surprisingly, places that fit this description are few and far between, and most of them are owned by government and are quite costly to hire. Recently in the United States, there has been an increase in the number of leagues that use a banked track, which requires extra large venues, construction and engineering expertise, and a lot more funds. Australian leagues as yet have not committed to the effort and money needed for these ends. Even so, large audiences are required to fund the hire of venues where bouts can be staged, with up to 10,000 people or more needed for larger, more expensive venues. A game of roller derby also requires at least four referees and two non-skating officials (to keep score, keep track of penalties, time penalties, and so), all of whom are volunteers. Managing these ‘spectacular’ events, with their various relations (between venues and leagues, players and officials, skaters and event volunteers, spectators and league members) is labour intensive, particularly without outside support. Currently in Australia, most roller derby leagues rely on their ticket and merchandise sales to sustain their entire operation. Often there is complicated resistance to seeking government support to become a ‘sport club’ in the traditional sense, or to developing collaborations with ‘non-derby’ organisations such as Skate Australia. This resistance and reliance on ticket sales for income means that a lot of time and volunteer energy is directed towards the operation of an ‘event’-focused league, including promotion, marketing, management, training and so on. The organisation and management of roller derby – putting on bouts, organising training, recruiting new players, coaches and referees,
managing conflict, managing priorities and maintaining steady growth – becomes a heavy load for the women involved. But many women take on these voluntary roles without hesitation and thrive. Other women struggle with the new subject positions offered to them through their leadership roles. In my research, over half of the participants (22 out of 40) had taken on a formal role within their league. Those who did not hold a ‘formal’ role supported their league in other ways, such as volunteering on bout days to help with the event.

In Australia, the majority female-run roller derby leagues are set up like most other sport organisations as incorporated associations, under the *Incorporations Act* of each Australian state and territory. Under Australian law, these groups of women must become ‘incorporated’ in order to be considered a legal entity and to be able to create bank accounts, hire venues, obtain insurance and generally operate as a member organisation within mainstream society. As an incorporated organisation, each roller derby league must have a governance structure with a committee of elected officials and an official leader (called the president). For the majority of sport in Australia, these smaller ‘grassroots’ clubs are connected to larger state or national sporting organisations that provide training, some funding and more general support. There is an interplay between the national sporting organisations, state associations and local-level clubs, particularly related to the allocation and control of government resources (Shilbury, Ferkins & Smythe, 2013). This model of sport governance is used throughout Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, and has not changed for some time, despite some of the ‘wicked problems’ associated with it (Sam, 2009). Governments directly fund the national sporting organisations (NSO), which then go on to manage and allocate these funds for various purposes (Shilbury, Ferkins & Smythe, 2013).
This model of governance privileges ‘elite’, ‘successful’ (medal-winning), established, highly organised and structured, male-dominated sports, and in many ways perpetuates a narrow understanding of ‘sport’. For roller derby, as a sport that privileges athleticism and winning alongside belonging and community, and where questions of female identity are central, this governance model has not been embraced uncritically. Instead, women involved have focused on a ‘DIY’, feminist ethos, with a strong emphasis on ‘for derby, by derby’ and an ‘anti-government’ philosophy. These values and attitudes have not meant that roller derby has somehow ‘escaped’ the influence of power. Instead, a range of subtle, nuanced techniques and procedures – some formal, but most not – direct the behavior of individual women in roller derby, and in turn direct the future and direction of the sport more broadly. Governing, managing and organising are happening in roller derby, despite women’s often adverse relationship with formal government (supported) organisations.

In Australia, there have been talks between Skate Australia (the NSO for skate sports), WFTDA and local leagues. Skate Australia and WFTDA have gone so far as to enter into a formal partnership agreement. The media release put out by WFTDA states:

The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) and Skate Australia announced today that the organisations have signed an agreement that will further the development of Australian roller derby and support WFTDA’s efforts to grow its international membership … The organisations have agreed to work together to train and accredit roller derby officials and coaches in Australia to facilitate the development of the sport, skaters and teams … ‘Women’s flat track roller derby started really growing worldwide about five years ago,’ said Juliana Gonzales, Executive Director of the WFTDA. ‘Australia was one of the first places we saw the sport take off outside the United
States, and we immediately began looking for ways to extend WFTDA leadership and resources worldwide. We’re very lucky to have Skate Australia as a partner. ‘This agreement is the result of honest and open communication and highlights a shared commitment to the support of roller derby development in Australia,’ added Matt Helmers, Skate Australia’s CEO. The WFTDA will use its expertise in training and certifying referees to help develop an accreditation panel for Australian roller derby referees and officials. Both organisations will have representation on the panel, but the primary focus, like the U.S. model, will be on peer evaluation and democratic principles for training, evaluation, and accreditation … Skate Australia will recognize WFTDA certification for roller derby referees and officials, and those accredited through the Australian Sports Commission may also become WFTDA certified at the appropriate level. In addition, the WFTDA will develop training and continuing education materials for Australian roller derby skaters and coaches and provide clinics and mentoring programs to create a network of ‘WFTDA-endorsed’ skater trainers in Australia … Skate Australia will provide insurance for roller derby athletes and leagues in Australia and will develop new competitive opportunities for Australian roller derby teams at the local, state, national and international levels. (WFTDA, 2011c)

Skate Australia also supported the formation of a committee that was set up to communicate the needs and desires of the Australian roller derby community directly. However, in 2012 Skate Australia received the resignation from that committee via an open letter. Skate Australia’s response was as follows:

It is with great disappointment and some surprise that Skate Australia has received the resignation from the former Roller Derby Australia (RDA) committee via open letter on June 29. The RDA was formed by Skate Australia to provide a starting point and catalyst for discussions within the Derby community about what was the best path forward for the governance of Derby in Australia. It was created to not only provide you with a national point for coordination, but more
importantly, to help us to better understand the needs of our Derby members and to look at what the Roller Derby membership model should be for Skate Australia. The former RDA executive were elected by the members for the members, to have a democratic voice to represent the collective membership interests and have control in shaping the future for Roller Derby within an established framework with existing Government recognition. The current structures and roles of the RDA committee were always intended to be interim arrangements, until you, the Derby community, had identified your preferred structure and election process. Skate Australia had provisioned initial development funds for RDA executive to invest in programs and opportunities which it identified as relevant and important. Unfortunately after minimal consultation with Skate Australia, the RDA executive has not seen this as a benefit and seeks an alternative outside of Skate Australia. Skate Australia is charged by the Australian Sports Commission with the peak body recognition for all roller skate sports in Australia and have a responsibility to represent them. Each skate sport is at a different stage in their development cycle and has different competition programs. The unique needs of each discipline, and their members, are precisely why each discipline is given the flexibility to develop the governance and consultative processes that will work best for them. As identified by the RDA committee, the exponential growth has presented fresh challenges to our previous planning and the resources available to service the Derby community. However, in the past 12 months, we have initiated a number of actions to help us better understand your needs and to ensure we can successfully play our role in the governance of the sport.

The open letter goes on to outline the initiatives actioned and their plan to undertake further research in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission on ways forward regarding governance and competition of roller derby in Australia. It then concludes:

Finally, Skate Australia is unapologetic about the fact that it serves and advocates on behalf of its current affiliated leagues. It is what a well-
run organisation is meant to do for its financial members. However, this should not be interpreted as any attempt to fracture and divide the Roller Derby community. Skate Australia is, in fact, well aware that our current member proposition is not sufficiently compelling for all the active leagues in the Derby community. The Skate Australia Board and Staff will work tirelessly to listen to you in order to rectify this. (Skate Australia, 2012)

These documents, relating mostly to the governance of roller derby in Australia, outline some of the tensions and issues being worked through by those involved. They also speak to the questions of authority and ownership in roller derby. The first text, WFTDA’s media release, privileges the organisation’s role in shaping and guiding roller derby, with Skate Australia playing a supporting role. The second text, from Skate Australia, clearly expresses its disappointment in the ‘failure’ of the roller derby community to work together with them in shaping and growing the sport and asserts their authority as the ‘the peak body for … all roller skate sports in Australia … [with] a responsibility to represent them.

In the United States, too, there are tensions between WFTDA and the national USA Roller Sports organisation (USARS). WFTDA released an open letter outlining its rationale for rejecting to work with USARS, the country’s national roller skate sports organisation. It writes that roller derby organisations across the United States ‘do not acknowledge USARS as holding governance over the sport’ (WFTDA, 2011d, italics added). In the letter, WFTDA states its ‘skater owned and operated’ value as key to its decision, and expresses its willingness to work exclusively with derby organisations in growing the sport. In doing so, it positions roller derby – and its members as roller derby players – as ‘unique’, while working towards ‘implementing universal rules and standards for the sport’ (WFTDA, 2011d).
These issues of subjectivity, authority and ownership of and in roller derby, of the ways to incorporate ‘elite’ and participatory goals, and the future of the sport, are not unique to roller derby. However, roller derby does present an opportunity to examine these issues from a feminist perspective, where the ‘personal’ (the micro) is ‘political’ (the macro), and where the relations between these domains are not necessarily straightforward or discrete. Roller derby is a cultural site that is explicitly caught up in collective identifications and opportunities for individual transformation. So far, constructs such as agency, stewardship, institutional, resource dependence, stakeholder and managerial hegemony theory have been used to investigate the governance of sport (Shilbury, Ferkins & Smythe, 2013, p. 1), yet none of these has been able to account for gender or for the more subtle and nuanced ways that governance happens. Foucault’s concept of governmentality, together with post-structuralist and feminist approaches to individual subjectivity and collective bodies, enable an analysis that takes into consideration the multiple and often unexpected ways in which authority is gained and maintained in roller derby, and the ways in which affect is central to these processes.

Women who come together (often voted in democratically by the members, but this too is a contentious issue) to form the volunteer committee are a powerful collectivity in the everyday lives of the women within each league. They become ‘regulatory bodies’ (Woodward, 2009). Their actions and decisions affect women differently, and feelings such as disappointment, anger and resentment cannot always be avoided. For example, in selecting who will be playing for which team, or whether a woman is accepted into the next level of training, or even which day training is to be held, can give rise to a range of affects in relation to the desires, needs, relationships, communication styles and ambitions of those involved. The organisation and
governance of roller derby directly relates to the embodied experience of the sport, and vice versa. Women’s experiences of themselves, as strong, tough, capable, ‘sexy’ and so on, made available through roller derby, are enabled and supported (or not) through the governance practices of the sport at micro (the relations between individual women) and macro (the relations between leagues, government and other organisations) levels. This means that no discussion of the experience of roller derby is complete without some initial analysis of these relations.

In maintaining a focus on multiplicity and difference, this final analysis chapter takes a closer look at three Australian leagues. By drawing out the different ways in which leagues are being managed, and how women involved have experienced their leagues, I highlight some of the challenges facing roller derby. In the previous chapters, I demonstrated the fluidity of affects and the multiple modes of individual subjectivity these affects made possible. Now I turn to the way these affects enable, shape or impede collective identifications and intersubjective relationships. The challenges of facilitating competition nationally, ensuring women’s safety and maintaining a reflexive emphasis on empowerment, love and belonging will be explored. In its current figuration, roller derby goes to great lengths to differentiate itself from other sports. Yet in doing so, the sport struggles to fulfil the desires of many of its members. Positioning itself as ‘alternative’, ‘empowering’, ‘tough’ and ‘feminine’, while at the still time being a team sport requiring structured competitions, rules and guidelines, means that there are unresolved tensions and ambiguities that affect women’s experience of both the sport and themselves. There are differences between and even within each of the three leagues examined in this chapter, yet each league must somehow organise itself.
The tensions and ambiguities central to this thesis, and to roller derby – of success and failure, inclusion and exclusion, love and rejection – cannot be resolved easily. Trethewey, writing about feminist organisations and management, states:

Ambiguity cannot be clarified by simply collecting more facts to determine which interpretation is right or true. Rather, ambiguity suggests that more than one interpretation or meaning can be at work simultaneously. (1999b, p. 144)

Feminist values of sharing, equity, democracy and fairness create particular challenges for women-centred organisations such as roller derby, particularly as they start to grow and expand (Ashcraft, 2001, p. 1302; Riger, 1994, p. 275). In particular, as noted by Acker, ‘the absence of sexuality, emotionality, and procreation in organisational logic and organisational theory is an additional element that both obscures and helps to reproduce the underlying gender relations’ (1990, p. 151). If sport organisations are viewed as ‘rational’ bodies (Gatens, 1997), then the irrationalities present – the ambiguities, paradoxes, anger, love and so on – are ignored, considered irrelevant or marginal. My argument is that these ‘irrationalities’ are not marginal, but rather central to any analysis of the governance of individual and collective bodies, particularly in physical cultural sites such as roller derby.

In examining the tensions, challenges and successes of roller derby leagues, I acknowledge the affective realm of governance. Often under-acknowledged in the sport management literature, affects and emotion play a role in the way roller derby leagues are managed and experienced by the women involved. In not taking affects and emotion into account when examining sport-management policies and practices, there is the risk of limiting participation and closing off pathways into sport. By not continuing to push the boundaries of knowledge in sport management, we risk categorising sports as the rational, exclusive, masculinist ‘clubs’ they once were, and
negating the years of work done by feminists in making space for women in sport. As stated by Aitchison:

Particular social and cultural policies and practices, including those relating to sport and leisure management, are the outcome of equally particular perspectives and philosophies. In other words, our epistemology, or preconceived model of the world, shapes the ways in which the management of sport and leisure is produced and understood within that worldview. (2005, p. 427)

As areas such as management, communication and organisation studies take into account contemporary philosophical questions around (sexual) difference and power, and interrogate the all-encompassing value of positivist research, sport management has very much lagged behind. In an increasingly complex and fragmented world, where sport organisations often have to manage competing goals, different approaches to management and organisations need to be drawn upon. Understandings of ‘sport’ in sport management are often normative, privileging a unified, masculine, ‘high-performance’, heterosexual athlete and a male-dominated, highly competitive, structured practice. With these assumptions, it is not surprising that ‘management’ in sport is produced and understood in very authorial, hierarchical, rational ways. Yet how can these ways of thinking about ‘management’ work with women’s experiences of sport as a site of affective transformation, as described in the previous chapters of this thesis?

There have been a few exceptions in sport management where alternative approaches have been taken up, such as the special edition of Sport Management Review edited by Simone Fullagar and Kristine Toohey on critical and feminist research in sport management (2009), John Amis and Michael Silk’s special edition of the Journal of Sport Management (2005), Frisby’s work in the area (alone and with
others – 2005, 2010, 2001), Sally Shaw’s research (2002; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003) and some work on ‘alternative’ sport and issues of incorporation and resistance (e.g. Kellett & Russell, 2009; Lombard, 2010). Kath Woodward, too, has contributed through her work on embodiment and bodies (regulating and regulatory) in sport (2009), and has begun to incorporate cultural theories of affect into her analysis of sport as sites of transformation. These, and some others, have begun to contribute a growing body of literature concerned with those areas considered ‘marginal’ in sport management, including issues of gender and sexuality, unstructured sport, people from non-English speaking backgrounds (Hancock, Cooper & Bahn, 2009), people with a disability (e.g. Darcy, 2003) and the critique of sport as ‘public good’ (Coakley, 2002).

As more and more of our world is subjected to the forces of advanced liberalism and the drive for greater efficiency and calculability, roller derby has been one site where this rationality has been resisted. However, as I demonstrate through my analysis below, resistance in roller derby is complex, tied up with women’s affective desire for challenge, physical exertion, friendship, power, authority, pain and success. Through a focus on three particular leagues, I highlight the tensions, challenges and triumphs of managing this ‘new’, rapidly developing international sport. These three leagues were chosen as they enabled me to explore the most popular and visible ways I observed, online and through my participation, roller derby being thought about and promoted. As well as wanting to include leagues with very different philosophical and practical approaches to roller derby, I also wanted to include leagues from a range of geographical areas with women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.
One of these leagues, which I call ‘Local Derby League’, was my league for the time I participated in derby. My own experiences, along with interview transcripts from Debbie, were introduced in Chapters 4 and 5. Tia, who was president at the time, and Bianca, a newer member, will also be used to explore issues of governance, leadership and management, as produced through the affective relations at play in that league. Another league, located in a major Australian capital city, which I call ‘Competitive Derby League’, and policy statements and interview transcripts from three of its members – Beth from Chapter 4, and Clara and Suzanne, all committee or subcommittee members, will also be used to examine affects and sport management. And third, I use interviews with participants from ‘Mixed Derby League’, a ‘co-ed’ derby league: Jenny, Lou and Vicky, who were all involved extensively in the management and functioning of their league. These three leagues and their members will be used to demonstrate the multiple versions of roller derby and the tensions both between and within them around governance and management.

As a sport that often promotes itself as ‘alternative’, ‘empowering’ and ‘DIY’, questions of governance and management are implicitly worked out in ad hoc, often misinformed ways. Yet, despite the informal, ‘casual’ governance approach, many leagues around the world have strict attendance and commitment requirements for all members, although the ways in which they enforce these ‘rules’ differ. The requirements for an ‘active citizen’ are set out explicitly in the handbooks of most leagues, as well as their constitutions or codes of conduct. Below is an example of these requirements taken from the constitution of a regional Australian roller derby league that was available online:

Roller derby requires time, energy and commitment. It requires skaters dedicated to the process of constant learning and to bettering oneself.
whilst respecting measures that promote the safety of self and others at Roller Derby. It is with safety in mind that skaters should attend 80% of training per month to be eligible to bout (based on the 2 Training Sessions per week). The “Fun Skate” or any other non-training event does not count towards the 80%, this is made up of Training Sessions only.

Skaters that attend 50% sessions or more are active members that are eligible to vote at general meetings, and may be encouraged to undertake important supportive roles within the association at bout time such as score/time keeping.

Skaters whom are members and attend less than 50% of training sessions without approved reason may be ineligible to vote, but would still be able to help out with fundraising events and at bout time may help out the league with the events if they are able. (Ballarat Roller Derby, 2009, p. 9)

These strict guidelines – common to all the leagues I came across in some form – delineate the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion, and are used as a means of governing the derby population. They are also in line with WFTDA’s mission, which states:

WFTDA promotes and fosters the sport of women’s flat track roller derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship, and goodwill among member leagues. (WFTDA, n.d.)

This focus on high-level athletic ability and sportswomanship is one way women are excluded in roller derby (Carlson, 2010). Ability – including perceived ability – is one basis on which people are disadvantaged with regard to their participation in sport (Jamieson & Orr, 2009, p. 137). Yet consistently, in media representations and in the ways my participants talked about roller derby, more affective qualities – such as belonging, love and freedom – are central to women’s positive experience of the
sport. The examples of Lola (Chapter 5) and Debbie (Chapters 4 and 5) – both highly skilled skaters, and strong and fit women – demonstrated the ways in which athleticism becomes sometimes irrelevant, despite it being a highly valued quality in roller derby more generally. And so it is not a simple or casual relationship between athletic ability and belonging, or even skating ability and belonging. Rather, it is the complex relations between individual and collective bodies and affects that are productive in attracting women to the sport and sustaining their participation, and it is these that are so important to understand.

**Governing (female) sport bodies**

Sport-management scholars have acknowledged the difficulty of incorporating feminist and post-structural approaches into the area of sport management research (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). In most cases, it is unacknowledged that ‘organisations are gendered in ways that circumscribe and/or marginalise “feminine” discourse and bodies in favour of the “masculine”’ (Trethewey, 1999a, p. 426), while often conceptualised as gender-neutral and asexual (Acker, 1990, p. 142). Talking about bodies, of sex and gender and affects, is a challenging task, and avoiding essentialism is difficult at times. Post-structural feminist approaches to sport management research have yet to be taken up – particularly given the pragmatic focus on applied ‘management’ that is privileged within the field of study and assumptions about ‘sport’ as a very particular, rationalised, masculine practice. Yet it is a relational approach – one that acknowledges the ways affects are mediated – which can give us ways of thinking and understanding sport and sport management as a (physical) cultural site where bodies and their capacity for transformation (in the case of roller derby female bodies) are central.
Soucie and Doherty (1996) echo the observations of other sport-management researchers as to the methodological deficits within the sport-management field, particularly its reliance on survey questionnaires. The centrality of bodies, as they move, sweat, bruise, experience disappointment, frustration, love, joy and so on, is often viewed as marginal to the field. The ‘irrationalities’ of bodies are made rational through quantified measures. This is highlighted by the dominance of marketing research within sport management (e.g. Gladden & Funk, 2002). Yet, as I demonstrated in the previous chapters, women’s bodies in roller derby are implicated in a range of complex relations that are productive of various affects. These affects are key to the processes of transformation that women undergo through their participation in and attraction to roller derby, despite whether they experience commonly accepted versions of ‘success’ through the sport. Women come together to form the organisational bodies in roller derby, and so this form of analysis – of thinking through affect and focusing on the multiplicity of power relations in which women are enmeshed – can tell us more about the way governance is happening in roller derby than quantitative measures and interpretive approaches that seek the ‘truth’.

In describing the role of research within sport management, Soucie and Doherty state that, ‘research seeks to understand the world of sport organisations and systematically investigate the many variables that may have an impact on the efficient management of sport’, with a particular focus on ‘findings that are useful and meaningful to practitioners’ (1996, p. 488). Although feminist post-structural approaches may be viewed as overly theoretical, I argue that it is precisely this kind of knowledge – about power relations, discourses, affects and bodies – that can inform sport practitioners about ways of managing that are more meaningful for all involved, as has been shown in communication and management studies more
broadly (e.g. Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2001; Clegg et al., 2006; Ibarra, 1993; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2006; Rutherford, 2001; Trethewey, 1999a). If we, as researchers, focus our attention only on what is considered practical and relevant in the moment, then we lose out on the rich theoretical and practical benefits of a more broadly defined research agenda. Particularly within those sports labelled as ‘alternative’ or ‘lifestyle’, research into their management needs to take into account the way they work to both challenge and confirm dominant discourses, the centrality of relationships between active, feeling, gendered bodies, and what this means for those who are involved. This also relates to a rethinking of ‘sport’ more broadly, and the ways people involved experience themselves in relation to the other people involved and the physical culture around them.

Most of the research within sport management that focuses on gender hones in on the lack of women participating in both sport activities and sport management and governance positions. There is a growing body of work on sports with mostly female participants, such as netball (e.g. Mooney, Casey & Smyth, 2012; Russell, 2007; Taylor, 2001) and softball (e.g. Travers, 2006) that problematise the gender binary in sport, yet these sports have already been formally institutionalised and incorporated into government and education programs, which are predominately led and governed by men. In roller derby, these issues are turned on their head, with women making up almost entire leagues and with the volunteer committee roles being taken up mainly by women. Roller derby is also a different cultural site from netball and softball, with netball viewed as a site of ‘compliant femininity’ (Taylor, 2001) and softball as a sport with a noticeable proportion of ‘out’ lesbian women involved and a number of ‘lesbian leagues’, particularly in the United States (Lenskyi, 2003). The question, then, is how to analyse these ‘women-run’ roller derby leagues without comparing
them to male dominated sports or other female-dominated sports, and without relying
on theory that presumes a masculine unified subject. The majority of leagues in
Australia – and around the world – adhere to the mission and values of the WFTDA,
although there are questions and challenges to its claims of authority. Its ‘by the
skater, for the skater’ mantra is similar to the DIY ethos taken on and promoted by
Riot Grrrl in the early 1990s: ‘Riot Grrrl encouraged women and girls to take control
of the means of cultural production’ (Schilt, 2004, p. 115). In roller derby, a DIY
ethos is embraced by most leagues, and is highlighted as a defining feature, promoting
the sport as ‘alternative’ and ‘resistant’ and ‘different’ to mainstream sports.

In an attempt to analyse the management and organisation of roller derby
leagues according to the DIY ethos, Beaver (2012) applies a Marxist lens to women’s
participation, as players and managers, organisers and leaders. He argues that the DIY
ethic in roller derby is ‘motivated in part by the desire to avoid the alienating aspects
of sport’ (Beaver, 2012, p. 5), as pointed out by Marxist sports scholars previously.
Beaver contends ‘that the “by the skater, for the skater” ethic is not about
individualism. Instead the revival is driven by the collective effort of rollergirls,
which builds social bonds between skaters both locally and nationally’ (2012, p. 2).
He uncritically accepts DIY practices as positive, resistant, ‘a tactic for establishing a
nonalienating model of sport’ (Beaver, 2012, p. 7). Beaver’s analysis takes power as
something that is held by some and exerted over others. In this theoretical tradition,
there is a clear division between dominators and the dominated and, generally, causal
priority was given to the sphere of economics (Lears, 1985). In this way, ‘the task for
the working class … was not only to seek control of the state in order to achieve
socialism, but also to strive through political struggle in order to win hegemony in the
sphere of civil society’ (Jarvie & Maguire, 2000, p. 114).
Resistance, then, could be considered a counter-hegemonic strategy aimed at the possibility of emancipation. In roller derby, this might be seen as the overt expression of tough, hard, ‘active’ femininity and an adverse relationship to ‘non-derby’ sport and organisations. This may then be thought of as a way towards women’s emancipation from the repressive gender norms that position woman as weak, passive and inferior to men. Interpreting his participants’ responses to questions about leagues being ‘owned’ and ‘operated’ by skaters, Beaver writes that, ‘they do not want to be “owned”, controlled, or exploited, which they fear would happen if their leagues had an owner and operated with a hierarchical, nondemocratic organisational structure’ (2012, p. 14). This is reflected in WFTDA’s open letter to USARS, discussed earlier in this chapter, where it writes that roller derby organisations across the United States ‘do not acknowledge USARS as holding governance over the sport’ (WFTDA, 2011d, italics added). However, this view of roller derby as a cohesive, united class of women, struggling against the ‘non-derby’ Other, is somewhat misleading, and in some instances quite far removed from the experiences I and many other of my participants had of roller derby. As Irigaray notes, ‘women do not constitute, strictly speaking, a class’ (1993b, p. 32). Women who play roller derby do not always identify as part of a cohesive group – roller derby is a physical practice, caught up with in issues of subjectivity and gender – and it cannot be assumed that all women who are involved in the practice identify as such.

While roller derby has provided many women with the opportunity to learn and apply new professional or vocational skills in organisation and management, as well as coaching, marketing and event management, this does not negate the tensions, conflicts and challenges between women and individual leagues as they vie for control. Perhaps even more than in mainstream sports, where there may be formal
structures and procedures in place to manage conflict, in roller derby power relations and their affects are often left unchecked. At times, aggression spills off the track and into the management arena. Beaver does mention barriers to ‘doing it yourself’; however, his analysis here is very brief and under-developed. He cites time and cost as the only barriers to participation (Beaver, 2012, p. 20), ignoring the relational aspect of power, emotion and affect. Foucault states that we must turn away ‘from all projects that claim to be global or radical’, as they lead to the ‘return of the most dangerous traditions’ (in Game, 1991, p. 35). The DIY project in roller derby claims to be radical and global, addressing issues of male hegemony and female oppression through the creation of ‘derby-owned, derby-operated’ organisations with majority female representation.

Yet to think simply that roller derby is the solution to the ongoing marginalisation of women in sport is ‘dangerous’. To analyse the organisation of roller derby, Foucault’s notion of power is useful for understanding how governance, and hence normalisation, in roller derby happens, regardless of the formal involvement of government or the influence of men or ‘non-derby’ bodies. Power is not held by anyone, or anything; however, it can be trapped, ‘normalised’ through discipline or practices. Power is always shifting. Those on the margins move into the middle, those in the middle move to the outer edges. The ambiguities and complexities of roller derby as an empowering, physical, competitive sport cannot be resolved. A feminist post-structural approach to management ‘discards the notion that the only way to manage competing goals is to subordinate one to the other’ (Ashcraft, 2001, p. 1317). As Foucault writes, ‘power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). In the individual roller derby leagues, or even the loosely formed state and national
competitions, women are attempting to govern and manage in ways that ensure the sport remains ‘skater owned and skater run’, ‘by women for women’. Beaver’s analysis, where the metanarrative of success and empowerment in roller derby is celebrated, fails to acknowledge the challenges and complexities of feminist organisations and their tendency to reproduce bureaucracy (Ashcraft, 2001, p. 1303).

Thinking through the tensions and complexities in roller derby using Foucault’s concept of governmentality provides a way forward that does not seek simple resolutions at the expense of multiplicity. Roller derby is not purely a site for the celebration of individualism, nor is it only a collective body with the purpose of the resistance of gender norms. As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, it is the relational aspects of roller derby – the ways people and objects come together and the affects that are productive of subjectivity, in multiple configurations – that the sport enables. These relations between women in roller derby are productive of what the sport is becoming. As Rose, O’Malley and Valverde write:

An analysis of governmentalities then, is one that seeks to identify these different styles of thought, their conditions of formation, the principles and knowledges that they borrow from and generate, the practices that they consist of, how they are carried out, their contestations and alliances with other arts of governing. (2006, p. 84)

As a sport that Beaver – along with many non-academic commentators as well as those who play – presents as ‘anti-establishment’, and as a space where ‘freedom’ can be experienced, there is an ignorance of the myriad ways in which government is exercised. ‘Governing’ happens in multiple sites, by institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics (Rose et al., 2006).

In roller derby, there are a variety of ways in which women are governed. There are formal ‘rules’, such as the example above that outlines the requirements for
attendance. There is the minimum skills test (Appendix 2). There are codes of conduct, value and mission statements, produced by individuals or a number of women in a league. There are policies – on transgender involvement, grievances, attendance, safety and team selection. And there are friendships, alliances, preferences, beliefs and desires. All of these are productive of affects – they do something to the female bodies involved. Interestingly, for a sport that has positioned itself as ‘alternative’ and productive of ‘freedom’, roller derby is highly governed. Through fulfilling themselves, women produce the ends of government, without the formal intervention of government (Macleod & Durrheim, 2002; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006). Rules of engagement of conduct in roller derby are produced and enforced by women in the sport as a way of ensuring their ‘freedom’, of fulfilling their desires to participate, and their desire for authority and a space of their own. They are, in Rose’s (1990) phrase, obliged to be free in specific ways. Which, in turn, has meant that some women have felt far from ‘free’.

Naively, and indeed hopefully, many people involved in roller derby – myself included – saw the ‘for the skater, by the skater’ ethos of roller derby as key to an alternative, egalitarian, non-patriarchal organisational form. Yet this way of thinking negates the competition and struggle between women (Irigaray, 1993a) and the lack of cultural space afforded to an alternative organisational form (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft, 2001; Trethewey, 1999a). In Foucault’s use of ‘power’, he does not mean it ‘as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state’, nor does he mean ‘power’ as in ‘a mode of subjugation’ or ‘a general system of domination exerted by one group over another’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 92). Rather, Foucault argues for power as ‘the multiplicity of force relations in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation’ and as ‘the
process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them’ (Foucault, 1980, pp. 92–3). Beaver’s (2012) reading of the DIY ethos underpinning the management and organisation of the sport assumes ‘resistance’ as inherently positive. However, if – as Foucault argues – power is an ongoing process, a capacity to act and situated in space, then resistance is not a reactionary process. In this chapter, I demonstrate the way resistance becomes normalised and power relations quickly change, particularly among women. Tellingly, this analysis highlights approaches to sport management that might work with power as multiplicity, rather than simply assuming some kind of rational order and unity.

Although still highly competitive, sports labelled ‘alternative’, ‘lifestyle’ or ‘subcultural’ – such as skateboarding, snowboarding and surfing – have mostly rejected traditional models of sport management as used by ‘mainstream’ sports such as football, netball, tennis and so on. These ‘alternative’ sports have often been read as resistant to mainstream norms and part of a counter-culture and as a space to counter dominant, repressive norms and values (Beal, 1995). Yet, as noted in more recent research, ‘sport subculture simultaneously resists and reproduces existing power arrangements’ (Wheaton, 2007, p. 284). In drawing on a Foucauldian conception of power, recent research has acknowledged the way governance and resistance work together to shape alternative sport management. In the example of skateboarding in Australia, Lombard (2010) demonstrates the way governing is happening, shaped in part by some individual participants’ resistance.

Lombard (2010) examined the way skateboarding was eventually incorporated into the official business of Skate Australia. Through an analysis of material about the history of skateboarding in Australia and the eventual incorporation of skateboarding
as an arm of Skate Australia, Lombard (2010) demonstrates the complex workings of power in this ‘alternative’ sport. Much like women in roller derby, skateboarders wanted opportunities to compete on a state and national scale, and they could not do this without organising themselves and seeking some support from private and public sources. Some individual skaters resisted incorporation, and viewed association with corporate sponsors and government supported sporting organisations as ‘selling out’. However, as Lombard found, this did not stop the incorporation process, but rather shaped it in a very particular way. He writes:

Resistance does not operate out of a complex field of contestation, and … resistance does not operate outside of rule but is involved in actively shaping and altering the governmental incorporation of skateboarding. (Lombard 2010, p. 476)

This research shows how some individual skaters’ resistance, once read as central to the skateboarding community in general, is not the ‘norm’ any more: ‘not only does resistance shape incorporation but evidence shows contemporary skaters are not necessarily attracted to resistance’ (Lombard 2010, p. 476). Similar tensions are being shown in research on the Olympic Games’ incorporation of windsurfing, snowboarding and bicycle motocross (BMX) (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011).

Skateboarding is now incorporated into the activities of Skate Australia, as noted by Kellett and Russell:

The link to Skate Australia as the NSO is not so much seen as a link to securing funding – rather as a vehicle by which to regulate the sport in order to ensure that private companies do not exploit the sport without developing a sustainable future for it. (2009, p. 77)

Similar to what I have found in roller derby, funding and support of the action sport industry appears to be unstructured and dominated by entrepreneurs who are business
owners in the industry, and who are often participants themselves (Kellett & Russell, 2009, p. 67). In roller derby, this is expressed by the phrase ‘for derby by derby’ and via the DIY ethic that is encouraged. Yet, as highlighted above and as described by Lombard in the case of skateboarding, resistance to ‘outside’ support and influence is not always a liberating experience, and nor is it always the wish of all participants. Indeed, not seeking or taking guidance, support, funds and other resources (such as sport management structures and the services of sport and recreation departments) can be just as detrimental to the sport as allowing corporations and government influence. As Lombard found:

Investigation into the early processes of incorporation through sponsorship of skateboarding culture reveals that, while companies were obviously utilising skateboarding for economic gain, corporate interest helped maintain the subculture during an uncertain time in its development. (2010, p. 479)

There are several larger corporations that are attempting to sponsor roller derby in Australia, yet there is resistance from some women and from some leagues to allowing this arrangement. This resistance is not complete, as many individual women as well as entire leagues would be happy to receive the financial support, while other women and leagues vehemently oppose any ‘outside’ support for fear of being commodified and becoming ‘normalised’.

As I demonstrate below, it is important to untangle and analyse these differing, conflicting perspectives for the benefit of the sustainability of the sport into the future as well as to provide an understanding of the ways in which ‘resistance’ and power relations work to ‘destroy’ and ‘create’ (Lombard, 2010) simultaneously. At present, discussions and negotiations between Skate Australia, WFTDA in the United States and leagues around Australia as to the best way to govern the sport to enable
wider participation and various levels of competition have been slow. Suspicions exist among leagues towards each other, Skate Australia and WFTDA, as highlighted earlier in this chapter. Questions around ownership, power, control and authority influence management decisions within leagues, while strong affects – the love, passion, belonging, anger and aggression discussed in the previous chapters – shape processes of ‘becoming derby’, both for individuals and for the collective bodies of roller derby.

Women join feeling hopeful, excited and anticipatory. They stay full of love, acceptance and mastery. They leave in anger, resentment and disappointment. Some of these women collaborate to form new leagues, with different rules and norms, while others leave the sport ‘for good’. The broader issues of governance, between government organisations, leagues and the women who form them, in Australia and beyond, is related to the ways women engage in the sport and its management. The analysis below examines some of these relations at a micro level, and the minutiae of governance and management that are productive of a range of affects. These affects then shape and impede the ways in which the sport and the women involved develop and ‘succeed’, and influence the future of roller derby as a viable physical cultural site for women to experience personal (and social) transformation.

**Competitive Derby League: roller derby is a ‘real’ ‘sport’**

Many women in roller derby want to be taken seriously as sportswomen, and it is important for them to emphasise roller derby as a ‘sport’. The league I have named ‘Competitive Derby League’, and the women interviewed from this league, most clearly demonstrated this desire to be taken ‘seriously’. Three women from that league volunteered to be interviewed for my project, and all three of them came (to
their one-on-one interview) dressed in their league t-shirts, which created the feeling of a unified group. My interview with one of the participants, Suzanne, was particularly challenging, and there were times when her responses to my questions were quite aggressive. In response to my questions about the way her league wanted to be represented, she said:

> As a league we have pretty clear policy about what our ethos is. Its always sport before the spectacular ... I think we always want to see the sport come first and every now and then you see something dodgy, like it being referred to as ‘burlesque on roller skates’ and it’s like ‘you really don’t get it, do you?’

Considering the music, art and style that have been key to the revitalisation of roller derby, I asked Suzanne what she thought of the more creative side of roller derby – the names, logos and links to music subcultures – to which she quite angrily replied, ‘I think we are there to play sport. What do you mean the creative side?’

This disavowal of the creative aspects of roller derby was unusual, seeing that what made roller derby different from other women’s sports, such as netball, was its focus on ‘play’ and ‘making up’ a roller derby self via a new name, costumes, makeup and art. In naming the league ‘Competitive Derby League’, I took my lead from Suzanne, who stated that, ‘everyone knows that we are a competitive league’. Another league member interviewed, Clara, reinforced this view of the league when she said:

> I think the biggest message from our league is that we are sports people, we are serious sportspeople, we are athletes. It’s not all about the wacky names and the personas and all of that. We train hard, we play to win.
The league had aspirations to join the WFTDA, and was working hard at making that happen. As a league, it trained to win and was successful against most other leagues around Australia. Yet, by having this narrow focus, it rejected the idea of having any local, state or national competition, and was very wary of any ‘outsiders’ – such as Skate Australia – offering support, corporations wanting to sponsor it, or even other leagues that wanted to start up in their state. The ‘by the skater, for the skater’ mantra was repeated by Suzanne several times as a blanket response to my questions about the league. In asking about the challenges faced by her league, Suzanne responded that, ‘the other challenge is keeping it true to its grassroots origin as more people come in and more people want a slice of the action’. I asked her to articulate the ‘origins’ of which she spoke, and she responded, ‘by the skaters, for the skaters. We’ve got people who want to come in and manage the sport and put in all this structure and it’s like no, this isn’t what it’s about.’ In maintaining that there were ‘outsiders’ attempting to ‘come in’ and ‘take over’, Suzanne was attempting to defend her position of authority, authenticity – as a ‘real’ derby girl – and power.

In terms of sport development, Competitive Derby League’s rejection of and aggression towards ‘outsiders’ could prove detrimental to the sustainability of the sport. In outright rejecting support and collaboration with Skate Australia, the league was rejecting a whole line of pathways into (and out of?) the sport. Already, many of the league’s best players had come from a background in roller hockey, figure and speed skating and skateboarding – all sports supported by Skate Australia. Yet as Suzanne articulated, they were not interested in working together with other skate sports in Australia, nor were they interested in promoting skate sports in general. Beth, who was introduced in Chapter 4, was also a member of this league. Despite her insight and reflexive thinking around her personal involvement and her willingness to
accept the tensions of ‘becoming’ within roller derby, she had uncritically adopted the
‘by the skater for the skater’ mantra. When asked whether the league had thought
about sport development and the kinds of things that Skate Australia might be able to
help with, she replied:

*We could look at getting someone trained up [in sport development] ... we need to look at doing some courses or something, I might do some research on it, I might be able to find a few people interested in doing it themselves, paying their own way, it’s a really good point, that is exactly what we need, and we need them to be skaters as well.*

Interestingly, this focus on what the women called ‘grassroots’ and the ‘true origins of
derby’ did not stop this league from aspiring to be the biggest and most competitive in
the country. The league had been lobbying strongly for state government support and
was given a large amount of funds that were thought to be for the development of the
sport for the entire state. Yet the other five or six smaller leagues were not given
access to any of these funds, and were often excluded from training events.

Clara spoke about the league’s aspirations, saying, ‘We are a sport and we are
trying to be perceived as just as legitimate as the AFL or the cricket or the rugby or
whatever, we are a legitimate sport.’ This desire to be seen alongside Australian
Football League (AFL), cricket or Rugby is interesting considering that these sports
have long been sites where women have been marginalised to the extreme and viewed
as sexual objects (e.g. see Radford & Hudson, 2005; Waterhouse-Watson, 2007). In
claiming roller derby’s status as a ‘sport’ – competitive, hard, requiring commitment,
highly structured – Suzanne and Clara reject the paradoxes and ambiguities central to
roller derby, where opportunities for creativity, self-expression and friendship are
central, amongst competitiveness, success and winning. I argue that this uncritical
embrace of a particular understanding of ‘sport’ represents a desire for an exclusive
sport for women that is comparable to the professional men’s sport most visible in the mainstream media. This ideal is not ‘bad’, and the women’s intentions are constructive as they attempt to be taken seriously alongside men in the arena of sport.

Yet, as Hargreaves points out in her seminal work on gender in sport:

Liberal feminism fails to examine the extent and nature of male power in sport in the specific context of capitalism and fails to incorporate the ideological and symbolic dimensions of gender oppression. It takes for granted the distinctly masculine modes of thought and practice in sport as if they are inevitable, without considering that they are socially and historically constructed...far from challenging male sport, liberalism endorses it. (1990, p. 290)

Hargreaves also looks at separatism within sport – which in many ways reflects the way roller derby has emerged and evolved. Some forms of separatism, as seen in roller derby, where women create wider definitions of femininity and provide women with experiences to ‘administer and control their own activities’ (Hargreaves, 1990, p. 292), can be positive for women. However, there remains an underlying issue with even this form of separatism because of the assumptions made about masculinity and femininity as ‘natural’, ignoring gender relations and the ways masculine and feminine identities change over time, as well as the gendered discourse of organisations (Trethewey, 1999a). Although ‘women-only’ sports or ‘women-only’ sport spaces can offer a lot to women, they also tend to exaggerate ‘the overall extent of sexism in sport by ignoring non-sexist attitudes and non-sexist sport’ (Hargreaves, 1990, p. 294). In this way, Clara and Suzanne’s insistence on their league being a certain way – that is, a women-only ‘serious’ ‘sport’, with no ‘outside’ input – has some extreme impacts for those involved, and for the opportunities for becoming and belonging that are so ripe in roller derby.
Clara and Suzanne, and many others in roller derby who expressed a similar view, imagine the sport as a space where the broader gendered power relations can somehow be escaped. In their view, by having a majority female membership and only allowing roller derby skaters and officials a say in the governance and organisation of the league, they are protecting themselves from being ‘taken over’, ‘governed’. But, of course, governing is already, always happening. And, not surprisingly, these ‘rules’ – about who can and cannot contribute towards the organisation and governance of roller derby, are often ‘broken’ or ‘bent’, as skaters’ partners, parents, friends or siblings, male and female, get involved or influence decisions. The positions of ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ in roller derby, seemingly so central to the ways Competitive Derby League maintained its authority and competitive position, are far from discrete. What is more telling is the relationship between them – between those considered ‘insiders’ and those considered ‘outsiders’ – and the surprising alliances that are sometimes formed. However, despite the multiplicity of relations within which women in Competitive Derby League were enmeshed – between themselves and their friends, their families, other skaters, other women who play sport, men who skate, men who coach, referee, officiate roller derby and so on – they maintained that there was a clear delineation between derby and ‘non-derby’ bodies, and that ‘non-derby’ bodies were a threat to their ‘freedom’.

If we take power as situated in space, and resistance as ongoing and subject to the regulating, disciplining affects of power, then the strong position taken by Competitive Derby League cannot be sustained. The fixed stance taken by members such as Suzanne and Clara, although perhaps ‘empowering’ initially, creates strong boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and closes off opportunities for transformation and the positive experiences felt by the women involved. Ahmed
argues that emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies (2004a, p. 117). In the case of Competitive Derby League, emotions such as pride, protectiveness, anger and even love bring out tensions in relations between individual women and the collective body. The league fears being ‘invaded’, and needs to be prepared to defend itself against those it perceives want to attempt to change or influence it. To be perceived as ‘soft’ is to risk influence or damage by others (Ahmed, 2004c). To be soft is to be too emotional, too feminine. In this way:

Emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as ‘being’ through ‘feeling’. Such attributes are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others. (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 2)

And so the league has become ‘hard’ and prides itself on increasingly rigid rationalisation and organisation. Suzanne, Clara and Beth all commented on the high level of organisation and structure being implemented in their league. Many writers have commented on the danger of increased neo-liberal rationalities (Foucault, 1991c; Weber, 2003), and this ‘danger’ is playing out in roller derby in quite specific ways. In leagues such as Competitive Derby League, neo-liberal rationalities dominate the organisational discourse. Rejecting government involvement and invoking ‘individual choice’ (Larner, 2000) has resulted in increased governance – women govern themselves and each other, and compete with each other, more harshly than they may have if formal government bodies had been involved. By making this visible, there may be approaches and strategies that minimise the destruction possible in an ‘emerging’ DIY sport.

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Tamboukou and Ball write that, ‘resistance, then, is about continually interrogating the conditions of our lives, problematizing the stories we are told and those we tell’ (2003, p. 9). In their desire to ‘protect’
themselves, Suzanne, Clara and members of Competitive Derby League have stopped interrogating the conditions of their lives and their league. They have become hard, fixed, rational, stable. Yet, in taking a Foucauldian approach to power, no matter how hard and stable they become, they cannot escape the normalising affects of power and therefore the resistance to this normalisation. Competitive Derby League is committed to the sport of roller derby and to creating a large, successful league, competitive on an international scale. The women involved in the management of the league – Clara, Suzanne and Beth included – have all been positively affected by roller derby. It has given them increased confidence and feelings of empowerment and belonging, so they try to make it better and bigger. However, the paradox of power is that in trying to capture it, the affects change. What was once transformational, empowering, evoking love and belonging for those involved, eventually becomes ‘normal’, disciplined, regulated and even corrupt.

In my follow-up interview with Beth, it was clear that her feelings related to her league were not as stable as they had been previously. Beth was angry, disappointed and ashamed of the behaviour of her league and its members, and was struggling to understand how something so important to her – that had facilitated such an important transformation in her life – could now be such a destructive force in her own and other people’s lives. As I experienced paranoia (Chapter 5), so too did the Competitive Derby League and its senior members. They felt threatened by other leagues and ‘outsiders’, and so began to close up, harden up and fixate on winning and success, and the imperative to win. Beth described it:

_The established leadership ... one of them was saying, ‘I don’t know why all the other leagues in Victoria don’t like us’ and there’s this kind of paranoia. I just said, ‘Where are you getting this from? Like I don’t actually think that’s the case.’ Then they’re like, ‘Oh but there’s all_
this talk about how they don’t like us and they think we’re really arrogant and we’re not helpful’. I responded with, ‘Well hang on a minute, we used to voluntarily go and assist training these other leagues. We wouldn’t wait to be asked. We’re not doing that and it’s understandable that we haven’t done that in the last year because we’ve had a lot of our own stuff. But we’re now settled, we’ve got our own venue, couldn’t we start doing that stuff again?’ Then the response is, well those leagues need to develop on their own.

Whereas initially there was a culture of cooperation and sharing among the leagues, suspicion and paranoia led to less and less being shared as the league became more focused on ‘being the best’. This is despite the overwhelming privileged position occupied by Competitive Derby League with its resources and geographical location in a major capital city. I asked Suzanne whether the league shared written information and policies with other leagues in its local area to help them develop. She replied:

*Suzanne:* No … intellectual property. It’s ours … there are things that give us a competitive advantage.

*Adele:* But wouldn’t you like to play more teams, for them to be more competitive in Australia?

*Suzanne:* Yes, but I think they have access to the same opportunities that we have … we are not going to hand over an entire dossier on how we run our league. When you look at an AFL team …

*Adele:* But they are professional, for profit, organisations …

*Suzanne:* Yeah, but they’re still playing a team sport …

Suzanne expressed a view that spoke to the professionalisation of roller derby and a desire to be involved (as an administrator or player) in sport at a professional level. Yet she does not seem to understand the importance of working together – with other derby leagues and with other women leaders in sport more broadly – to achieve these ends. This lack of cooperation with other leagues, the essential ingredient for sport
competition, had been a feature of Competitive Derby League for some time; however, league members such as Beth were unaware of the extent of the protectionism. Her surprise and disappointment were obvious:

Beth: It’s not until recently when I started talking to some of the other skaters in some of the other leagues that I’ve gone, oh my God, did we do that? I had no idea … we don’t have a very good relationship with either of the [other local] leagues. We currently have a position of not providing any training or assistance to them, which I think is a bit noxious and it has never been discussed openly, like that as a position. Like we haven’t voted on it.

Roller derby had allowed Beth to understand herself as a woman as strong and capable. The other women involved supported her to challenge herself. Yet these same women were not as supportive to others who had the opportunity to experience the same thing. The opportunities for transformation, love and belonging were limited. Decisions made by those in management positions were ensuring that authority stayed with them.

These decisions angered Beth, and even Clara was somewhat concerned about the future of roller derby and the decisions her league had made, from increasing training and attendance requirements to stopping themed bouts. Clara said, ‘I kind of worry that we might get too big, too fast and fall apart. Or that it becomes an elitist sort of thing.’ As many women involved feel the thrill of participation, they want to keep improving and winning despite the consequences. Beth stated:

If there was a professional element to the sport I’ve no doubt that there would be professional skaters. But when you talk to them – try and talk to them about roller derby being more than that, actually being a unique sport. Or the uniqueness of the sport is its inclusiveness, they really struggle with that.
With their desire to compete and be ‘the best’, many of the women in management positions have taken on a ‘corporate’ approach in their decision-making. Questions of ‘who is a market competitor and why should we care’ were often posted on league forums, and many of those in management positions had what Beth described as ‘neo-liberal’ perspectives of success and fairness. She stated:

*The model of democracy that they have is - it’s really interesting, it’s much more corporate. It’s very neoliberal. It’s very ‘you can work your way up through the class system if you try hard enough’ stuff. It’s not ‘maybe we’re obligated to make our organisation structurally inclusive’, it just made me fucking furious.*

The issues of emerging professionalisation, lack of support for other leagues, suspicion and paranoia of ‘outsiders’ are all tied up with the desire to win, succeed and maintain the ‘power’ that they have gained through roller derby. As Ahmed writes,

*Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become.* (2004c, p. 45).

As the sport grows around the world the meanings attached to roller derby become more affective. The relations between roller derby and female pride, pleasure and pain intensify. The intensification of these affects materialises the ‘surface’ of the derby’s collective bodies (Ahmed, 2004c, p. 46), in all their multiplicity of forms.

The pleasure experienced by Suzanne, Beth, Clara and other members of Competitive Derby League was transformational. Roller derby was a multiplicity of affects and experiences; there was no centre or unified whole with which to adhere and so the women involved could use it as a space of becoming. By privileging
multiplicities, creativity, music and uncertainty within sport, roller derby allowed women to play with their multiple subjectivities. But that did not last. As an empowering space for women, roller derby eventually will become striated (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 477) – evidence of this is clear from the responses of Suzanne, Clara and Beth from Competitive Derby League and the way several roller derby leagues as collective bodies are beginning to structure themselves with an increased focus on athleticism and seriousness in the sport. In this process of professionalisation, the focus moves away from roller derby as ‘dangerous’, ‘risky’ and ‘sexy’ towards a ‘serious’, competitive sport (see also Dunning’s (1993) concept of ‘sportisation’). Through this process, a range of affects are circulated between bodies (individual and collective) that are productive of particular subjectivities for the women involved. Powerful, successful and in control, these (emerging) professional sport bodies are orientated differently towards those initially transformational affects. As these sport bodies become more organised, structured and serious, modelled on the ‘rational’ masculine body politic of which Gatens (1997) writes, certain affects are limited. The multiplicity of surfaces where pleasure and transformation could be felt are now restricted. Success, through winning on the track and competing for funding and resources off the track, is privileged and ‘failure’ becomes the quality of ‘others’. In a desire to win, to compete and to ‘be the best’ – all desirable and pleasurable goals – collective bodies, such as Competitive Roller Derby, negate the productive and transformational affects that were often central to women’s participation in the sport in the first place, of pleasure, risk, failure, shame, disappointment and anger.
Local Derby League: music, sexualisation and the frustrations of freedom

As a relatively ‘new’ sport, the current reincarnation of roller derby is still ‘messy’ – or ‘rhizomic’, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might say. There are no formal or regular regional, statewide or national competitions, and games are played ad hoc and worked out between members on a casual basis. There are a few exceptions, with a weekend-long tournament, The Southern Slam, being held twice in four years where most Australian teams compete in a round-robin style. Some leagues also get together on an informal basis and put together an annual schedule of regular games, but this has been very recent and only involves a few leagues. There have been attempts by some members to work together and set up a statewide or regular regional competition; however, other leagues are not interested in this. Those leagues resistant to developing the sport in Australia are those who view the ultimate authority in roller derby as the WFTDA. The WFTDA is highly organised and has done a lot of work in developing rules and guidelines for the sport – these rules and guidelines are questioned by many in forums and by referees and players; however it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore these issues in more detail. The WFTDA has very strict guidelines for membership and, much like Competitive Derby League, promotes the sport as ‘serious’. The WFTDA governs highly organised competitions at an elite level of play.

The authoritative position created by the WFTDA has created tensions for those leagues who, for many reasons, cannot join. They may be too small, not have the resources available, not have the skills to organise themselves to the WFTDA standards, not have coaches or referee support required, have men playing (WFTDA is a women-only league), not have enough members, or perhaps not have the desire to
join and adhere to the strict requirements. ‘Local Derby League’ is one of those leagues that, for several reasons, has not made any attempts to join the WFTDA. Although several members saw WFTDA membership as something they would like in the future, at present they do not have the resources, skills or organisational capacity to meet the requirements, nor to even begin the process. As well as this, the current leadership of Local Derby League has very much privileged the music subcultures, creativity and ‘sexy’ aspects of the sport – sometimes at the cost of athleticism and competitiveness. Although not the poorest performing league, they would not be able to win against leagues like Competitive Derby League. In interviewing fifteen women from the league and spending hundreds of hours in training, and on committee work and event organising, over the course of a year, I was able to gain significant insight into the power relations at work and the challenges and tensions at play within the organisation.

Informed by the interviews and the time spent in league activities, Tia, league president at the time, Debbie, one of the founding members of the league and their strongest derby player, and Bianca, a new member with no prior skating experience, have been chosen to tell the story of the league. Tia’s perspective of roller derby, as the president of an established, medium-sized league, is an important one to note. Her view is in many ways in opposition to Suzanne’s from Competitive Derby League and many other women with whom I spoke, although all are passionate and committed to the game. For her, roller derby is going to keep growing – in her words, ‘bigger, better, harder, faster’, mimicking the lyrics to a song by Daft Punk.¹² Tia has a particular understanding of what ‘DIY’ means in roller derby, informed by her contact

with skateboarding (physical) culture (Beal, 2013). For Tia, roller derby is as much about the game as about the music and style. She tellingly stated:

*It’s made for me! Exactly, I’m a music nut. Love rockabilly, love metal and anywhere in-between there. Have always loved dancing and would always dress up for the local dances and we would make our own rock’n’roll outfits, and the next day we would be going to a Metallica concert, just have that real diversity. So yeah, it definitely suits me. I am into cars and wheels and you know, colour, and music and loud and fast and hard.*

Roller derby was a vital part of Tia’s life in the time I knew her. She had found a group of women to support her and relate to:

*I guess that it is a feminist thing, that you do know that you’ve got backup – not backup, that you’ve got a lot of like-minded people in that environment. You know, I guess most people have been down a hard track, or they’ve been in a hard place and this is their outlet for it. So, yes we’re all screaming for help or you know, self-help and this is a way to be able to devour yourself into it, to break up that monotony of normality, you know.*

Tia understands roller derby as much more than a ‘sport’, and revels in the opportunities for parody and taking on pariah femininities (Finley, 2010). It has been a space where Tia has been able to express her particular style – ‘tough’, ‘rough’ and ‘feminine’ – while meeting her need for physical activity and good health. This way of thinking about roller derby, as providing a balance – opportunities for health and fitness and risk of injury and opportunities to counter norms of passive femininity – came through in many interviews, and was part of the way women understood roller derby as ‘saving their souls’ (Chapter 4). Like Debbie, Tia’s life has been filled with adversity and struggle. As a single mother raising two children on her own for many years (although she had just recently married for the first time), Tia has overcome and
continues to contend with unemployment and under-employment, housing insecurity and child-care duties. Tia’s life story closely ties in with her narrative of roller derby as ‘empowering’ and life changing.

This ‘version’ of roller derby – as ‘empowering’ and life changing – is very much the ‘unofficial’ ‘original’. For many leagues and individuals, roller derby is as much about ‘freedom’ as it is about opportunities for playing sport and ‘winning’. Yet ‘freedom’ is a difficult concept, fraught with contradictions and with power ever present. In leagues such as Local Derby League, freedom is very much equated with resistance against government, countering the status quo, countering passive femininity and countering the perception of ‘the mainstream’ (see Huber, 2007 for a critical discussion in the context of music), whether that be sport, music or lifestyles in general. In configuring ‘freedom’ in opposition to these institutions and cultural artefacts, there is a ‘fixing’ effect. Women were obliged to be free in specific ways (Rose, 1990). For example, if one of the women in Local Derby League thought that it wasn’t worth the effort to put on a band and market stalls at the league’s bouts, her view would be rejected. In opposing this suggestion, the women would agree that the bands and markets stalls were an important part of roller derby and what made it ‘different’ and ‘special’. That is, the ‘spectacular’, ‘subcultural’ elements were more important than the opportunities for competition and an alternative relation to physical corporeality offered by roller derby.

For Tia, roller derby is very much about a certain ‘look’. For her, the costumes, bands, stalls and atmosphere are as important as, or even more important than, the skills and strategy of the game. Talking about roller derby and the images she creates as a graphic designer and artist, Tia said:
Sometimes I create stuff that might be a little bit pretty, and then after coming back and looking at it, it’s like nah, it needs to toughen up a little, you know, to be a bit more derby. And I think people familiarise themselves with that. They can see that there’s a bit of that extra dark side to it, there’s a little bit of darkness to it, I guess.

Tia’s narrative of roller derby as subculture and site of resistance and support speaks of a broader society typified by conflict and structures determining behaviour and opportunities. She said:

Roller derby is not so traditional, not the man goes to work and woman stays home and cooks anymore, our worlds not like that. How many stories have you read about the woman that is home with the kids and sees this derby and wants to go and becomes that strength of person again because they’ve got a place they feel they can be strong; it’s not about falling down, it’s about getting back up again. I think it is about that empowering place where they don’t care if you fall down they care if you get up. It’s about being stronger.

For Tia and others, roller derby is a space of their own – different from the norms of society where women are meek, fragile and subordinate to men. In this space, what is important is not just the support of other women, but the ‘style’: tough, rough and derby. For Tia, roller derby is a collective body through which she can rewrite what it means to be a women; she can incorporate toughness, roughness and sexiness into what it means to be a women. Tia’s narrative of roller derby can be read as a type of neo-tribe, ‘an aesthetic form of sociality’ (Sweetman, 2004, p. 86), but as we read above in the way Competitive Derby League is developing, the aesthetic aspect of roller derby is not important to all the women who are involved.

As the president of the league, Tia has considerable authority, and her decisions and actions affected other women in the league. As secretary, I attended countless committee meetings were I had the opportunity to be involved in the
organisation and voluntary management of our league, and to experience the tensions being played out and feel the affects circulated through these relations. One night after a particularly gruelling committee meeting I wrote:

It feels like we don't really have strong leadership at the moment. Its hard for me to say that cause I really respect all the hard work the president has put into the league and she has done a lot of great things with the event and making us look professional, but she really is not leading. She is too scared to make tough decisions and doesn't like to get people off side. (11 December 2011)

Tellingly, Tia held the role of president, merchandise coordinator, event coordinator and website coordinator. She and her husband were graphic artists, and together they were the only ones allowed to develop images for the league, including flyers, t-shirts, stickers and web content. There were many other league members who wanted to get involved in these roles, and their desire to create was strong, yet they were not given the opportunity to contribute towards the images promoted as ‘derby’. Others on the committee were also frustrated as, like me, their views were ignored or forgotten about when it was time to action decisions. Tia struggled to trust the other members of the league, and instead had her husband telling her what to do with it. She stated, ‘I mean he’s big on me understanding how a committee works but yeah and the problem with that is I trust [him] too much.’ One night in particular, he took her aside and we could hear him yelling at her in another room. When she came out she had a very different view on the topic of discussion. Tia and her husband wanted desperately to maintain the style, ‘look’ and creative elements of roller derby, even at the expense of losing members or losing bouts against other, more organised teams.

The ‘style’ of roller derby is undoubtedly important. It is this style that allows certain affects to circulate in particular ways, specifically in women’s alternative orientation toward ‘hardness’ and ‘love’. Yet, as highlighted by Lloyd (1996), it was
only under certain conditions that practices could turn into feminist alternative politics: they had to involve an active critical attitude and an act of self-stylisation. I think it should be noted that it is self-stylisation that Lloyd refers to, not forced stylisation – which is important here.

In focusing in on the stylisation of roller derby, Tia, as president of her league, was sacrificing opportunities for further growth and challenges. She could not view the images and ‘style’ she was promoting with an active critical attitude, and instead uncritically embraced all images that incorporated parody, sex, violence and femininity as acceptable in roller derby. For example, our league was hosting an end-of-year bout and the theme was Christmas. Tia’s husband, in thinking aloud about the flyer for the event, which he would unquestioningly create, described his idea to us. A slim, attractive ‘derby girl’, dressed in fishnets and other skimpy attire along with her roller skates, would be sitting on the lap of ‘Santa’, who was supposed to resemble the league’s overweight, male commentator. This ‘Santa’ would be ‘spanking’ the woman sitting on his lap. Myself and the other committee members at that meeting argued against the image and he eventually created a different image, yet it was one that still objectified and sexualised roller derby and the women who played it. His involvement, and the involvement of men in general in roller derby, raises questions about roller derby as a sport organisation ‘for women by women’ and the supporting role of men.

Like female sexuality, sport ‘has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters … Her lot is that of “lack”’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 23). Lack, for Irigaray, draws up and refutes many of the assumptions of Lacanian psychoanalysis. As Maggie Berg (1991) notes, Irigaray’s writing is at times an ironic critique of Lacan. Women’s sport has been conceptualised as ‘less’ than: less athletic, less
enjoyable to watch, less tough, less valuable. Donnelly (2012), in her thesis on ‘women onlyness’, views men’s participation in roller derby as regulated by women. In some instances, I too observed this, but in other cases – such as with Tia and her husband (and in other leagues) – it seemed that men were making the majority of decisions. It was Tia’s husband who made some of the larger decisions for our league, as Tia struggled to ‘speak (as) woman’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 135) in her role as president of the league.

In the contemporary social landscape, female sexuality is complex and contradictory. It is ‘experienced as pleasurable and liberating, yet reproducing an image that appears objectifying’ (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010). Using the example of the popularisation of pole-dancing, Evans, Riley and Shankar demonstrate how the activity shifted from one ‘typically associated with the sex industry to all-female exercise classes. Here, full embodiment in sexualised culture is contextualised as an expression of empowerment’ (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010, p. 119). This way of configuring sexuality – as linked to pornography and the sex industry in general, with ‘empowerment’ expressed through the body – aligns with what Tia and her husband, imagined roller derby to be. This way of presenting and promoting female sport, sexuality and embodiment was for Tia, and some others such as Lola (Chapter 5), central to the feelings of ‘freedom’ enabled through roller derby. Finding spaces to resist, challenge and subvert hetero-normative, passive femininity has become more difficult in contemporary society, as much of what was once considered ‘resistant’ becomes in itself a discipline – for example, fitness and strength training, full-time work, delaying pregnancy and marriage, travel, higher education. Writing about girls, Harris states:
The spaces and discourses they [young women] can use to complicate contemporary representations of girlhood and articulate resistance and a diversity of alternative stories are diminishing as a consequence of surveillance, colonization and commodification. (2003, p. 43)

Hence perhaps some women’s emphasis on roller derby as ‘violent’, ‘sexual’ and ‘risky’ as potentially liberating.

Yet even these marginalised practices and spaces becomes surveyed, colonised and commodified. In roller derby, issues of safety are often in contradiction to the desire for risk and violence implicit in the sport. In wanting bigger and bigger audiences and more and more profit from putting on large events, roller derby leagues must adhere to socially accepted norms of risk, and they must manage that risk appropriately. So they must organise and structure themselves so that the sport is safe and fair, lest they come under governmental regulation regarding liability, insurance and discrimination. Some leagues, such as Competitive Derby League, have happily adhered to government regulation in the hope of gaining acknowledgement and official status as a bona fide sport. Local Derby League – although adhering to the minimum requirements for safety and fairness – has, as much as possible, attempted to encourage and facilitate the perception of roller derby as ‘dangerous’, ‘risky’ and ‘sexy’. The league’s website states, ‘enter at own risk’ and on its code of conduct is the dictum, ‘no whinging’, along with the standard list of behavioural norms expected in sport. At first glance, Local Derby League’s privileging of risk and danger and continual challenge towards passive female sexuality might be thought to provide an affective space of resistance or freedom for those involved. And it did so for some involved in the league. However, in interviewing fifteen members of that league, I heard about the way that the unstructured, unorganised, sexualised culture was often frustrating and even unwanted.
Local Derby League did provide an alternative to leagues like Competitive Derby League, yet this was a very oppositional, fixed stance. There was no choice but to be ‘free’ from passive heterosexual feminine norms and an organised sport culture. There was no alternative way of being for women in this league – they – and I – had no choice but to embrace danger, risk and hyper-sexuality. As desiring roller derby subjects, we were being governed in this disciplined way. Drawing on the writing of Wittgenstein, Heyes states that, ‘someone is imprisoned by a particular way of understanding the relation between her self and her body if no alternative is imaginable for her’ (2007, p. 19). Bianca, a new league member who had never previously skated, came to Local Derby League to get away from the pressures of work. She described her self as:

A little bit left field. I love that side ... I’m really into that world ... I love that sort of side of things ... into the darker side of arts and crafts, a little bit quirky so that’s what kind of attracted me to derby and that sort of lifestyle. I guess I have a split personality, I’ve got a lot of darker stuff in my wardrobe but a lot of pretty girly stuff too. I probably got into that side more.

Most of the public discourse about roller derby talks about it as ‘empowering’ and ‘inclusive’ – a space where any woman, regardless of skill or background, can become a strong derby girl. But Bianca’s experiences were quite different. Of her first session, she said:

I couldn’t stand up. I struggled a bit when I stood up. Everyone else were very good skaters ... that was a bit daunting. And it just felt that I was being pushed faster than I should have been ... In the first few weeks I found it slightly unorganised. I thought the league was structured. I’m really used timelines and paperwork too, cross every ‘t’, dot every ‘i’ ... I kind of had the impression that you’d go along, meet and greet, come back for some demos ... a bit more of an open
day thing for derby which is what I pictured. But it wasn’t … it took me about six weeks to get my insurance papers so it was very frustrating … it was too laid-back and unprofessional for me personally. The coach really targeted the training to her friends in the group and I found the rest of us were ignored …

Despite her passion to be part of roller derby, her willingness to volunteer her skills and her identification with the ‘darker side’ she saw in the sport, she had a very difficult time being accepted by the other women.

Bianca saw roller derby as an opportunity for her to meet new friends, learn new skills and be part of something ‘different’ – a little ‘quirky’ – that was far removed from the world of work within which she was so embedded. But she also wanted some structure and guidance in her participation. She worked full time and had a partner, so she wanted to use her time efficiently, and she would quickly become frustrated when things were disorganised or when she would turn up for training on a Sunday afternoon only to be told that the coaches couldn’t make it or that they couldn’t be bothered thinking of anything new to teach them. She described the way she felt about roller derby to me:

I’ve got a real passion for it, I kind of get really emotional … I kind of get hooked and run with it and put all my emotions in, it’s all or nothing. Again I get kind of get frustrated because there is no movement upwards, no structure, there was no path … I love training but I either come home on a really high high or wanting to burst into tears … It’s sort of one extreme to the other. I get upset when I look at the league and see that it should be such an amazing thing but there is so much marketing and sponsorship and stuff that should be done but it’s not … and it really upsets me. People have given their time for this and it’s not really being utilised … like everyone, I work full time, so time is quite precious to me.
Bianca’s frustration is similar to Debbie’s, although they are both at very different stages of their derby ‘career’ (Stebbins, 2007). Debbie (Chapters 4 and 5) found roller derby to be transformational in her life, yet she became more and more frustrated with the way her league was managed. Debbie was a highly skilled skater and wanted the league to focus on athleticism and skill, as much as she initially enjoyed the opportunities to dress up and ‘perform’ in front of large crowds. She saw Tia putting the bands and flyers and merchandise ahead of issues around coaching, training and strategy. If and when she would speak her mind about these issues, she would leave feeling judged, excluded and isolated. She said they ‘just made me feel like – “how dare you speak up?”’.

Debbie’s feelings of being silenced, and Bianca’s frustrations and disappointment experienced in roller derby, demonstrate the very fixed power relations created through the oppositional, ‘counter’-culture developed and sustained by Tia (and her husband) in her position as president. ‘Risk’, ‘danger’ and ‘sex’ are institutionalised in Local Derby League in a way that is not conducive to freedom, inclusion or sustainable sport practices for women. Irigaray writes that, ‘repetition without progression is wearisome, exhausting, and damaging’ (Irigaray, 2007, p. 107). And so the lack of change, adapting, adjusting and rethinking done in Local Derby League is damaging. It is not only dissuading new members from joining – such as Bianca, who left after a few months when she broke her tailbone and did not receive support or encouragement to return – but it is also leaving questions in the minds of some of the sport’s best players – such as Debbie – about whether to continue. Several times I suggested to Tia that some members might benefit from the workshops held by the state government on sports governance, yet each time this suggestion was rejected. Her belief in roller derby as a counter-cultural space was so
strong as to cause her to ignore the voices and experiences of a large proportion of her league. This strong belief was at times destructive; as Irigaray writes, ‘Belief destroys identity and responsibility and goes against what experience teaches’ (Irigaray, 2007, pp. 20–1).

Experience and affect teach us limits, boundaries, friends and foes. Debbie’s experiences of love, belonging, healing and transformation, Tia’s feelings of passion for what roller derby represents to her, and Bianca’s desire for a ‘quirky’ type of leisure could be incorporated into approaches and strategies for a more inclusive, sustainable management of Local Derby League. But this is not as easily done as said, and there are challenges in staying open to the multiplicities possible within roller derby. The future of roller derby is still so uncertain, yet many women like Tia and Suzanne (Competitive Derby League) have already decided in advance what should happen. Both views – of roller derby as ‘serious’ competitive sport and of roller derby as an ‘alternative’ sport and site for danger, risk and active female sexuality – have their limits. These limits are not only on the types of subjectivities possible; they also restrict the future of roller derby and the opportunities for it to be an inclusive sport for diverse women.

**Mixed Derby League: even a balanced view can be trouble**

Above, I quoted Hargreaves who wrote that although ‘women-only’ sports or ‘women-only’ sport spaces can offer a lot to women, they also tend to exaggerate ‘the overall extent of sexism in sport by ignoring non-sexist attitudes and non-sexist sport’ (Hargreaves, 1990, p. 294). In taking this view, perhaps opening up ‘mixed’ competition – or at least a ‘mixed’ derby league – might prove to be a strategy that enables a more inclusive, sustainable organisation. With this in mind, I have chosen
what I have called ‘Mixed Derby League’ as my third example to work through the competing, contradictory and complex power relations in roller derby. During the course of my participation in roller derby, I had the opportunity to spend quite a bit of time with members from this league, and found them very open to my research and in their thinking about the sport in general. This being the case, they were also – like Local Derby League – very different from Competitive Derby League and had quite strong opinions about the very ‘elite’, competitive pathway some leagues were taking.

Vicky, a member of Mixed Derby League, had a story of roller derby that is in some ways in tension with Competitive Derby League’s ‘sport’ version and Local Derby League’s ‘subcultural’ version. As someone who had never before played organised sport, she enjoys the way people see her as part of something ‘tough’. I asked her, ‘Do people think you’re tough when you say you play roller derby?’ to which she replied, ‘A little bit, and people just go – you? Which is cool, I do like that. I don’t mind it being promoted to the public as that.’ For Vicky, roller derby allows her to challenge people’s preconception of her as weak and fragile, which she embraces. As a slim, educated, professional women, roller derby is a space where she can experience herself as tough and sexy. Vicky usually wears fishnet stockings, a garter belt and other highly feminised adornments when playing. She articulates her understanding of the ‘sexy’ costumes worn:

*If I got to the point where the costumes were so scanty that everybody was busy trying to pull down their skirts and it interrupted the game, I would have a problem, but it doesn’t. The thing that interests me about the sexualisation is that it seems to be so internalised and it’s more about how the player sees herself. It’s for the player. It’s not for the crowd ... it becomes very apparent that you’re doing it for you and your team, not for anyone else to look at what you’re wearing or how you’re behaving.*
Although Vicky enjoys the opportunity to play with her gender identity, presenting herself as tough and sexy, her investment in the style of roller derby is limited to the game itself. After training and bouts, she does not associate with the styles of music and dress tied up with the roller derby scene. She explains:

A lot of the girls live the whole rockabilly stuff and they just really bring the game to life. I don’t feel the need to become entrenched in that subculture ... the other thing is I’m a high-ranking professional, so there does need to be a strong distinction between my professional life and my athletic life.

Vicky has committed herself to roller derby, and trains three nights a week. Her husband is also involved in her league and it has become a central activity in her life.

Despite her obvious desire to play, Vicky shies away from the competitive, structured version promoted by the more ‘elite’ league. She states, ‘It’s a recreational activity. I don’t want that kind of pressure, so I try not to care too much.’ Vicky also sees the future of roller derby as in many ways limited. I asked, ‘Where do you see roller derby heading in the future? What do you see as obstacles to its growth?’ She replied, ‘I see it imploding; to be honest … I think the idea of it becoming a professional sport now is ludicrous. It’s just way too small for that.’ Although Vicky cannot see a way around this issue, other than adhering to traditional notions of ‘sport’ – structured like other team sports and with less of a focus on the spectacular aspects, she would like to see it survive in some form. Vicky’s narrative of roller derby is a fluid one. For Vicky, there is a privileging of a certain kind of reflexivity – she sees roller derby as a space for reinvention, yet also acknowledges some of the problems and contradictions involved. From my interview with Vicky and my observations of her within the roller derby community, I have come to view her narrative as moving beyond resistance to an us/them relation. Her feelings of
‘toughness’ and ‘sexiness’ are regulated by and relegated to roller derby. She reflexively manages desire and power, simultaneously.

Yet Vicky also felt frustrated by certain aspects of her league. She spoke about the many women in her league who had never before played organised sport – herself included. She discussed how it was these women who were the most ‘controlling’ and the most dominant in pushing forward their agenda for the league. She said:

_The organisation is well-intentioned but clueless. A lot of people have great ideas and it doesn’t actually happen because they don’t know how to get anything off the ground. The executive committee, I think, is a little bit totalitarian. Same with the training and selection committee with the executive – so a lot of ideas get quashed, a lot of people get overlooked. On the level below that, the subcommittees, nothing actually gets done. Any correspondence of your own has to go through three people. I think there’s a lot of that._

Like most leagues, Mixed Derby League had gone through periods of transition and times where the viability of the league was tenuous. Started up in direct reaction to another nearby league, and with conflicts between women involved in both, there was – as described by the current president of Mixed Derby League, Jenny – ‘a lot of acrimony between the leagues’. The current management committee, of which Jenny and Lou were part, were trying to shape and guide their league into what they viewed was the best outcome. Jenny stated:

_My vision for roller derby is very much of an inclusive, groundswell, get as many people skating as possible, and I absolutely understand and appreciate the elite level kind of ambitions of some other leagues and other people and I think there is room for both and both are equally important, but you know, that elite level can’t be sustained without a kind of groundswell and a build up of the sport into a more_
accessible sport and that’s basically my agenda and that’s what I’m pushing.

However, as expressed by Vicky above, a focus on a more accessible sport does not necessarily equate to an inclusive space for all members.

Jenny acknowledged the current state her league was going through when commenting on the possibilities for further developing the sport:

We haven’t even sorted our own league out properly, our processes are only just getting into place, we are only just sorting out our training schedule, all of that sort of stuff, and then we’ve got all our legal policies, like, when people return after injury and all that, so, and how we select people for teams, you know, things are starting to get, you know, touchy and we are going to have to deal with all of this stuff now.

With this acknowledgement of the challenges of developing a new sport, Jenny also has a strong desire to continue pushing forward her agenda of setting up local competition between leagues. She wants to see leagues moving beyond mainly playing against each other – which is currently the norm – to playing against other leagues regularly, in this way improving their skills and learning from others. Yet leagues like Competitive Derby League, with their focus on elite-level competitiveness and a strong alignment with WFTDA values and mission, create complications for this processes. As the larger, more established leagues in the country, leagues like Competitive Derby League are looked up to by smaller leagues. Therefore, when plans for localised competitions were rejected, many of the smaller leagues were confused about what they should be doing and the direction in which they should be heading. These questions of governance – of which bodies are the authority on roller derby and what the norms and regulations for the sport should be –
are constantly changing. As an educated professional, Jenny was not going to let these views get in her way:

   Jenny: I do believe in ‘lead, follow or get out of the way’ … I’d kind of made up my mind, ‘right, I’m at the “get out of the way” phase, now, they are not going to lead it, they don’t want to follow, they got to get out of the way now’.

   Adele: Why don’t they want to lead it and share?

   Jenny: Because they have a different focus. Their focus is on that elite level which hasn’t been achieved in Australia yet, so they only want to play really at an elite level, and to do that they need to go to the United States, and they don’t want to wait, basically, they don’t want to wait for it to develop here in Australia, I mean it will develop eventually, but they don’t want to wait … if it doesn’t fit into their bigger agenda, which is to play at that elite level, then they don’t want to do it.

Jenny, and others in her league, do enjoy the thrill of competition and winning, but it is not their main priority. As a ‘co-ed’ league, as they call it, Mixed Derby League had to deal with some emotional reactions to this fairly controversial decision from both its members and the wider derby community.

   The inclusion of men in roller derby, although not the focus of this thesis, is important to mention because it highlights some of the challenges of developing a national, or even regional, competition and the diversity of organisational cultures at play in roller derby. Jenny said, ‘One of the interesting and highly emotive topics is male roller derby, which is an issue for our league because we have a co-ed league.’ Initially started as a mixed-gender league, concerns about safety, women feeling intimidated and the lack of other mixed teams to play against meant that to continue would mean losing players and being left out of the broader derby community. Jenny went on:
We had instituted segregated training as well so they didn’t even train with us. I must admit I did really push that ... Again, not because I had a problem with training with the boys, and in fact I didn’t even mind doing contact with them, but it had previously been a problem for us so it was easier just to split it. However, having these sorts of issues that came up and realising that we were developing a bit of a them and us kind of culture, I’ve now switched my thinking to realise, okay if we’re a co-ed league, we’ve got to be a co-ed league. Which doesn’t mean again, I’m still not for co-ed contact but training together in non-contact drills, in that sort of way and having the guys part of the organisational process of the league I think is really important. We had a training meeting the other night and interestingly enough one of the members of that committee was clearly quite emotional about the idea and not in a positive way ... I just didn’t realise or anticipate the emotion involved in it.

The resistance against having men involved in roller derby, at any level other than coaching, refereeing and officiating, speaks to some women’s desire for women-only spaces and organisations.

WFTDA’s focus on roller derby as a women-only sport has created challenges and limits for the sustainability and development of the sport, both in Australia and internationally. Women like Jenny, Lou and many others in all types of leagues are against gender segregation, and see that issues of competitiveness and aggression can come from either men or women. Similar to the experiences Donnelly (2012) had of roller derby in the United States, Lou expresses a view that speaks to her acceptance of men in roller derby on women’s terms:

Lou: Because you can get it on both sides. You can get guys who are just full of testosterone and gung-ho ... Either gender who are so hung up on proving their own self-worth, that they feel they have to do that by being better in some way, shape or form. Guys can be more prone
to that in this sport I think, because it is fostered in a lot of ways. In mainstream sport from what I’ve seen anyway … But the guys that we have – they’re just awesome human beings. That’s what I really like about where I am.

Some leagues, like Competitive Derby League, have embraced the gender exclusivity institutionalised by WFTDA. But others question the validity of their claim to authority and authorship of roller derby, particularly with regard to their focus on the sport as segregated. Lou continued:

So with WFTDA in particular I don’t know how I feel about that. I like their rules. It’s interesting. Makes for a good game, but see I’m not interested in gender exclusion … So if WFTDA was a case that you had to have an all-female executive, I would be against joining them because I find that sexist. I would not support it.

Governance of roller derby at individual league, state, national and international levels is loose and tenuous at best. Issues around direction, authority, competition, gender, uniforms, names, music, aggression and even rules of play are in contention. Mixed Derby League and its leadership have decided that gender inclusiveness and general accessibility of the sport to all levels are important to them – although even within the league there are many who have disagreed and moved on to a different league or stopped participation altogether.

Whereas Local Derby League put a strong focus on highly polished events, with bands, market stalls and coordinated event management, Mixed Derby League saw these types of events as unsustainable and not necessary. Jenny, like many others described in this thesis, found roller derby, training, committee duties, communication and events too much to bear:

I actually think that my family life is suffering because of roller derby right now. I’m putting so much energy into roller derby … Sometimes I
think roller derby takes more than it gives ... what it used to give me, it now takes. I now don’t have the mind space to deal with my stress or to adequately attend to the needs of my family or all those sorts of things.

In thinking through a way to continue her participation while lowering her stress levels and the impact it was having on her emotional life, Jenny saw the way the sport was played and spaces where it could be played as key. Her extended response highlights her thinking with regard to this, and some of the challenges of organising and developing a new sport such as roller derby, without sacrificing the elements of ‘play’ and opportunities for challenging norms of passive heterosexual femininity:

*It’s difficult to find a venue that can actually accommodate roller derby, and because of that they usually cost a fair bit of money and therefore it ends up having to be a big production ... it’s not sustainable, you know, to have big events, it’s not sustainable ... it’s very stressful to put those things one ... if you are looking at a season [playing regularly in an organised competition] and you’ve got to put on this huge event once every month, not for profit, people aren’t getting paid ... I think in the next couple of years is potentially going to be a make or break period for this sport, whether or not it is sustainable. I don’t think the big stadium shows as they currently are, are sustainable, you know, for leagues to have six solid months of that kind of intensity, when really only two teams ever get to play, you know, people are going to burn out and they are not going to want to play and they are not going to want to turn up every time to work for all the time its going to take, so I think inevitably the sports going to become more low key, but I think it’s going to become more widespread, I personally think that’s a positive change, and there will be the big tournaments and all those things.*

Like Vicky, Jenny is cautious about her hopes for the future of roller derby, and thinks that a piecemeal approach is best, focused on inclusion and accessibility.
This view of the future and sustainability of roller derby as dependent on careful planning and strategies is very different from Tia’s view of the sport getting ‘bigger, better, harder, faster’, with no clear idea of how that might happen. It is also different from the view of leagues such as Competitive Derby League, which sees its league as playing internationally in the very near future and as a league focused on elite competition only. At present, there are a lack of strategies for the long-term sustainability of the sport. Despite the broad differences in women’s visions for the future of roller derby, all of them want to see the sport continue in some form or another and all of them want to some kind of legitimacy (Bock, 2000; Ridgeway, 2002) from the general public and the Australian government. Even if, like Local Derby League, they see themselves as counter-cultural, aggressive and sexy, there is still a desire to be seen and for opportunities for high-quality events to continue to attract large crowds of fans. Interestingly, many of the women with whom I spoke, from all different types and sizes of leagues around Australia, wanted large-scale support from businesses and government, while also expressing their resistance to any ‘external’ involvement – they all wanted to retain ‘control’. Lou stated:

*I would love to see big games and tournaments across Australia ... I’d love to see it get televised, even if it’s only on local sort of news links. As long as the commercial aspect – as long as the integrity of what’s been developed so far — if that’s maintained ... having the name of a sponsor on your uniform for example. We don’t all really want to go there.*

This resistance to ‘external’ support, funding, guidance or advice means that, although the sport claims to challenge binary dichotomies through the blurring of gender norms, the collective bodies in roller derby struggle to work *with* difference and power in its multiplicity. Assumptions about ‘outside’ organisations, about the
role of men and about the relationships between women (in roller derby and in other sports) are often not critically explored. In this way, the collective bodies in roller derby are often reactionary, rather than responsive, in their desires for control and autonomy in sport. Governing is happening, but often in ways that limit instead of expand possibilities for success and participation.

Managing roller derby

The management committee, like other levels of government, may be imagined as a micro body politic: it has officers and leaders, rules and regulations, modes of discipline and order. The body politic can be imagined as reflecting the ‘human body’, but this imagining is often gender neutral, without the ‘dangers of the necessary but difficult dealings with both women and nature’ (Gatens, 1996, p. 22). Yet this gender-neutral body is not neutral at all, but quite explicitly male (Acker, 1990; Gatens, 1996). This ‘artificial man’ is the product of reason, made by man, for man, with the purposes of creating unity and order, and negating difference. Like the functionalist perspective of society espoused by theorists such as Parsons and Merton, this view of the body politic imagines the social world as an organism, with each part playing a vital role in its function. The organism in question is taken to be a predictable body that is based on the male body, which is seen as much more stable than the female body. The metaphorical body in this model is ‘ruled’, like the male body in Western philosophy and theology, by its ‘head’, which is in turn ‘served’ by the rest of the body. Some women have been able to work within this model of organisation and others struggle with such a form of governance, having had no say over its form or function.
As DIY organisations, where all operations – such as event management, training, promotions and governance – are done ‘by skaters for skaters’, usually on an individual league level, there is a struggle to articulate this model of governance in practice. There is also a struggle to continue to justify this approach when to collaborate – with other leagues and indeed with other sport bodies and individuals for guidance and support – might enable a more inclusive and sustainable physical culture. This effect can be seen in roller derby. In the above analysis, I have begun to uncover the strategies women have employed to make this form of governance work for them. Through women’s passionate stories of governance and organisation in roller derby, I have demonstrated the multiple, often contradictory and antagonistic, ways in which they have attempted to work with multiplicity. They have, with varying degrees of ‘success’, been able to bring a focus on the sensual, affective and interactive into the masculine context of sports management and its emphasis on efficiency, results and winning.

The focus on movement and action, made explicit in roller derby but implicit in the organisation of the sport, could be one of its greatest strengths. Eisenberg (1990) talks of philosophical accounts of the ‘death of man’:

> With the demise of ‘man’ as omnipotent subject and personalist repository of meanings, one consequence is that humans will have to learn more about surrender, in order to better live with the flow. (Eisenberg, 1990, p. 156)

For roller derby, at least, this demise of ‘man’ is perhaps the birth of ‘woman’ as alternative subject, as alternative organisational body that can guide and support roller derby and the multiple ways of being it makes possible. Music and the arts traditionally were placed in dichotomous opposition to sport and action, with the arts being related to women (Irigaray, 1993b) and sport to men. In roller derby, such a
distinction no longer exists, and between these two spaces is where ‘jamming’ can occur. The tensions – between autonomy and interdependence, cooperation and competition, the arts and sport and so on – are ‘at the heart of all social organisation[s]’ (Eisenberg, 1990, p. 143).

Discussing the links between sport and music, Eisenberg (1990) highlights the concept of ‘jamming’. He shows how disclosure and intimate personal relationships have become more important in recent years than the results of people’s actions. This focus on the private realm is akin to ideas around the ‘biographical turn’ (Thomson, 2007), where disclosure and stories about the self are privileged and become a central focus for the creation of the self. For organisations, this has meant privileging shared values and personalities over action and diversity. Eisenberg (1990) argues for a different type of relationship:

> Jamming is a third ideal type of relationship; between the cold nondisclosive relationship and the intimate disclosive one lies the close, nondisclosive relationship rooted in collective action. Jamming stresses coordination of action over the alignment of cognitions, mutual respect over agreement, trust over empathy, diversity over homogeneity, loose over tight coupling, and strategic communication over unrestricted candor. (Eisenberg, 1990, p. 160)

This focus on non-disclosive, action-orientated relationships is articulated by Eisenberg (1990) through his experiences as a basketballer and musician, which for me also recalls Caudwell’s (2010) feminist analysis of the jazz–sport analogue. As it happens, in roller derby the game consists of numerous ‘jams’, where each team has its ‘jammer’, with a goal of trying to pass as many of the opposing team’s ‘blockers’ as possible. This discursive coincidence and link to jamming could be a telling indication of the women’s desire to move in this new way: without a focus on
intimate relationships and shared values and motivations, but instead with a privileging of movement and uncertainty.

My experience within roller derby has really highlighted some of the issues when this isn’t the case – when intimate relationships are privileged over the flow of movement and the effects/affects of power at this micro level of sport organisation. And this is perhaps the unacknowledged irony in roller derby. In being in a space of belonging and empowerment for women, as described in Chapter 4, women privilege closeness and intimacy. However, roller derby is also a space of aggression and competition, which requires some distance and discipline in relations. Irony has been described by feminists as ‘the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play’ (Haraway, 1994, p. 82). As highlighted above, roller derby leagues are struggling to use irony, to maintain the ambiguity and paradox that allow for organisational multiplicity and the possibilities of personal transformation.

To draw on Law’s framework, the organisation itself is an:

Achievement, a process, a consequence, a set of resistances overcome, a precarious effect. Its components – the hierarchies, organisational arrangements, power relations, and flows of information – are the uncertain consequences of the ordering of heterogeneous materials. (Law, 1992, p. 8)

There is no complete, autonomous or final outcome within the social world, so my writing on the management of roller derby will never be the ‘final word’. This being the case, I do not aim to set out solid structures or ‘rules’ at the conclusion of my research. Rather, my aim is to enable movement, to go with the rhythm of roller derby rather than against it. ‘The analysis of rhythms provides a privileged insight into the question of everyday life’ (Elden, in Lefebvre, 2004, p. viii). By focusing in on the
rhythms in roller derby, important insights can be gleaned about the way the sport is
organised according to these rhythms, and some of the problems and possibilities this
grants the management of sport – both locally and on a global scale. This includes the
speed of information circulation, the rules of the game itself and the ways in which
music, costumes and art interact with the rhythms of the sport as an ensemble of
physical movements.

Segrave (in Rapley & McHoul, 2002) argues that ‘the language of sport …
offers us a fascinating window into the very soul of our existence’. The language used
by my participants above – about winning and losing and venues and conflict and
tensions and leadership and uniforms and training – illuminates the very heart of
power and affects. They are ‘the “deterritorialized” flows of desire’ (Seem, in
Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. xvii), which flow in all directions. Roller derby offers
some escape from the ridged codes of sport offered by ‘traditional’ sports such as
football, netball and hockey. The opportunity to shape and develop the sport has
allowed many women to experience feelings of strength and power, and a strong
sense of love. They have the opportunity to create new codes, new lines of flight away
from spaces where they felt restricted, unwelcome or simply uninterested. As
highlighted above, deterritorialised spaces quite quickly become territorialised –
issues of ownership and authority become more important than opportunities for
escape. A norm, a style and structure of roller derby, attempts to assert itself. The
norm has usually been analysed, theorised and conceptualised as affecting individuals
(e.g. Foucault, 1991c; Heyes, 2007; Markula & Pringle, 2006); however, I would
argue that the ‘norm’ is also a measure against which institutions and organisations
are structured. Roller derby leagues can be hierarchised, organised, talked about and
surveyed according to a ‘norm’. The question, of course, is how this norm came to be
– how has roller derby come to be normalised, and what are the affects of these processes?

The ability to lead, coach, choose teams and judge skills is democratised in roller derby. ‘Anyone’ can be league president, coach, referee, grievance coordinator and so on. Yet not ‘everyone’ really can be – even the qualification of ‘anyone’ is not unlimited. There are certain fluid criteria that must be fulfilled, but the absence of formal requirements for these positions gives the illusion of democracy and possibility. Much like contemporary Western society as a whole, the onus is on the individual to ‘be somebody’, to ‘get ahead’ and ‘to be a winner’. Roller derby cannot escape the wider power relations in society that marginalise women and collapse difference into unity – that fascist tendency within us that enamours us to power. To live counter to fascism and restrictive ‘norms’, Foucault asks us to ‘prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems’ (in Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. xiii). The tensions between and within leagues can be read as positive and enabling of counter-fascist strategies. Yet these tensions are causing some women to burn out, others to leave out of anger or frustration, and still others to try harder to control, regulate and normalise the sport. The feelings of empowerment and strength to which women gain access in roller derby – the very affects that attract women to the sport in the first instance – are the same affects that normalise, marginalise, discipline and hierarchise collective and individual bodies.

Roller derby’s emphasis on empowering women – particularly through its ‘majority women’ governance policy (formal and informal) in the majority of leagues – has struggled to sustain a governance system that accounts for emotion, affect, sexuality and the specificities of women’s experience as gendered subjects. Although
many women are reasonably satisfied with the way roller derby is being governed and the direction it is taking, and as the numbers of leagues and women involved continue to grow (Storms, 2010; WFTDA, 2012a), there is an almost explicit disengagement with some of the paradoxes and tensions I have presented. Without working through these tensions, there is the risk of roller derby, as a potentially liberating sport space for women, ‘failing’.

Like many other feminist organisations (Ashcraft, 2001), women in roller derby struggle to work together with the complexities of power and its related affects, particularly within the organisational forms required to be considered legitimate and to be taken ‘seriously’. There is a tendency for leagues and their leadership to fall into one of the ‘twin dangers of paralysis (nothing can be done because no final truth can be found) and totalization (there is one way to do things, the way reflecting the truth that has been found)’ (Ferguson, 1993, p. 35). More frequently, roller derby is asserting itself as a ‘serious sport’, and riles against any who may question this ‘truth’ (Gaskin, 2013; WFTDA, 2011a). This defensive position impedes further interrogation of ‘sport’, and fails to explore alternative ways of sustaining and enabling the affects that initially attracted women to the sport.

In the final chapter, I outline some of the strategies roller derby might employ to manage the ambiguities and tensions within the sport. In particular, taking into consideration the affects enabled and impeded by the sport, my aim is to rewrite sport (and its management) in a way that is open to the complexities and fragmentary tendencies of organisations in contemporary society. Sexual difference – a question that has been central to feminist theory for decades – will be brought into the realm of sport management in the hope of writing sport ‘for women’ that is as effective and competitive as it is affective and sensual. This is no escaping the broader gender
relations in society, but there are ways of working with them. Acknowledging the
affective realm of governance, as I have done in this chapter, is key to working with
power as multiplicity in sport and creating a cultural space where women can shape
their own physically active futures.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

This chapter includes excerpts from the following peer-reviewed journal article for which I was sole author:


Appropriate acknowledgements of those who contributed to the research but did not qualify as authors are included in each published paper.
But if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play other than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of one universe? (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 30)

This question, posed by Irigaray, is relevant to this thesis and the ways in which roller derby has been ‘represented’ – and, perhaps more importantly, ‘felt’ – by those involved. In a desire for some kind of female imaginary, and in their desire for ‘legitimacy’ – to be considered a ‘real’ sport (Gaskin, 2013; WFTDA, 2011a) – women in roller derby – myself included – struggle to account for the range of complex affects in circulation through the sport. In this struggle, they – and I – have often attempted to ‘make sense of’, and in some instances ‘get rid of’, these affects. We seek some kind of coherent meaning in an attempt to understand the affects of our bodies in motion. In a search for ‘the truth’ as singular, we perpetuate that tendency, of collapsing meaning, of erasing multiplicity, hence again marginalising women. In focusing on multiplicities and movement, on the differences between and within women and derby leagues, my aim has been to counter this tendency towards closure.

Throughout this thesis, I have brought together insights from cultural studies, sociology, leisure studies and sport management, interview material and my own observations and feelings experienced through my participation in roller derby. And so I have written roller derby in its multiplicity. Of course, there are many ways of writing roller derby. But this is my attempt to write (as) woman in physical cultural studies. There are slippages, when I write of women instead of as woman. But this too is part of the multiplicity of the subject position of woman. As Probyn wrote, ‘Writing … is after all a game of mixing passion and poison, virtue and vice’ (2000a, p. 145). I have posed many difficult questions, and in turn I have offered up ways of thinking of these questions that might move us closer to a feminine cultural imaginary of sport
and society. These different ways of thinking about sport and sport management – specifically about roller derby and the women who play – have conceptual and practice implications that contribute towards critical feminist research in this area.

So often, research in sport management is focused on increasing participation, identifying constraints and ‘motivations’ so that managers can use this information to try to attract and retain participants (and fans/consumers). This focus on increasing participation is an important one, but starting at this point is often to the detriment of other, perhaps less obvious, questions. The emergence of roller derby and the ‘derby grrrl’ in the contemporary sport landscape enables research that can account for physically active women and the sports they play in their multiplicity. Rather than ‘win at all costs’, roller derby presents both this view and a view of sport as cooperative, transformative and focused on relationships rather than winning. Rather than being the ‘biggest and the best’, the revised version of roller derby was started as a small DIY sport that explicitly highlighted *difference* and women’s marginal position in sport. It was, and in many ways still is, as Throsby (2013) describes it, an ‘autotelic’ practice. It was a space where the pleasures of involvement, training, getting dressed up, choosing a name, becoming strong and fit were an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end (winning). As roller derby grows and becomes bigger and more competitive, more questions arise. Does a sport need to be highly competitive in order to be a sport? Does a sport need to compete with other sports for its position as a ‘sport’? How has the subject position ‘derby grrrl’ been made possible? And for whom?

These questions cannot be answered through survey data and quantitative measures, and instead require the strengths of a qualitative approach, drawing on the humanities for theory and different ways of thinking. The humanities have already
engaged with the ‘hard’ edges (Blackman, 2012, p. 103) of biological and psychological sciences (e.g. Blackman, 2012; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Law, 2004); however, they are yet to engage with those ‘hard’ edges of sport management. And that has been part of the task of this thesis. Engaging with issues around participation in sport, governance and control in roller derby has enabled an analysis that questions key relations in sport – particularly those relations that can be felt: relations between sport and toughness, sport and freedom and sport and pride as they are felt and enacted by those involved. The ‘object’ of knowledge in sport management, so often assumed as known and stable – ‘sport is rational’, ‘sport is competitive’, ‘sport is important’, ‘sport is good’— need to be problematised if ways of thinking, doing and understanding sport management are to change and improve. Cultural theory gives us the ‘tools’ to do this.

In bringing affect to the fore of research, as it has been discussed and conceptualised in cultural theory (e.g. Ahmed, 2004c; Blackman, 2012; Probyn, 2005; Thrift, 2004; Wetherell, 2012), there is an opportunity to interrogate the normative gendered narratives of sport. Blackman wrote that ‘affect is materialized in ways which reveal both the potential for change and hope, as well as the more insidious ways in which populations might be governed beyond normalization’ (2012, p. 22). The love, belonging, anger, rejection and other affects felt by women in roller derby reveal a feminist conceptualisation of sport and provide the keys to a more inclusive, equitable physical culture for women. Affects reveal the possibilities for transformation, as highlighted in Chapter 4 of this thesis. And they also reveal the insidiousness of power relations.

Through this thesis, I have demonstrated the ways in which affects are not felt in isolation, but rather are relational. Love and hate, success and failure, excitement
and fear, pride and shame are often related in surprising ways, and produced through the mediated and embodied engagement with sport as a sociocultural practice. They are experienced by women in roller derby collectively and individually as they are *becoming-derby*. Hardness is not exclusive to masculinity, nor is love exclusive to femininity. Rather, particular affects are felt according to the orientation women have towards something. For example, Debbie, Kate and Beth orientated themselves towards ‘hardness’ in a way that led to belonging, healing and love. In women’s struggle for a feminine cultural imaginary, it is difficult to account for ‘women’s sport’ as it surfaces via the circulation of varying affects. Roller derby and the women involved are passionate in their desire to create a sport of their own. In this process, many have taken for granted the ways that sport is gendered – competitive, masculine, hierarchical. Through this thesis, women’s felt experiences – of success/failure, belonging/exclusion – have been shown in relation to the ways they conceive of roller derby as a ‘serious sport’, a creative leisure space or, more specifically, an explicitly affective sport where female bodies are central.

**Practice and conceptual implications – a women’s sport?**

In conceiving roller derby as a an affective sport, I have been able to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of sport and to bring affects such as love, anger, pride and shame into consideration. Questioning the varying relations between women and roller derby has enabled me to write the sport in a way that is open to a wide range of future possibilities. In February this year (2013), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that wrestling – a sport that had been part of the ancient and modern Olympics – was flagged as one that could be dropped from the ‘core’ sports, to be possibly replaced by a ‘roller sport’ (Cormier, 2013). The IOC
did not stipulate which ‘roller sport’ it meant; however, roller derby is considered one of them. Could roller derby make it to the Olympics? Many of the women with whom I spoke thought that would be the sign of ‘success’ for ‘their’ sport. A Facebook group, ‘Lets Get Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby at the Next Summer Olympics’\(^{13}\) has enthusiastic supporters. Could the Olympics be one of the possible futures for roller derby? What would be the price of this ‘success’? Previously, Sewart (1987) documented the changes to football, basketball and baseball as they became more ‘successful’ as a commodity. And more recently, Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) explored the inclusion of windsurfing, snowboarding and BMX into the Olympic Games and examined how this ‘success’ had impacted the sport and its participants. Yet in both of these examples, neither gender nor affect is considered.

In this thesis, I have written roller derby as competitive sport, as creative leisure practice and as site for the experience of femininity in its multiplicity. As a sport ‘by and for’ women, many derby leagues espouse feminist values such as non-hierarchy, fairness, and sharing – although they will not often frame them as explicitly ‘feminist’. Love and belonging seem to be as important in roller derby as fitness and skill. As Ahmed writes:


> Love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal. (2004c, p. 125)

Women in roller derby are ‘at-risk’ (Harris, 2004), but they are also active and strong. As I wrote in Chapter 5, derby skaters are not sparkly, new neo-liberal girls (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). They often occupy the dark side of neo-liberalism – tough,  

\(^{13}\) <www.facebook.com/pages/Lets-get-Womens-Flat-Track-Roller-Derby-at-the-next-summer-Olympics/131576573564828>.
‘dirty’, unkempt – yet they still want to win. They are entrepreneurial, but anti-commercial, anarchic but competitive. Yet this subject position is not an easy one to occupy, and as subject positions change it is not known in advance what the future holds. Debbie, Kate and Beth (Chapter 4) felt as though roller derby had positively transformed their lives through the love they experienced in the sport. But this ‘love’ was also destructive. For Lola (Chapter 5), this ‘love’ was too ‘girly’ and ‘bitchy’. And for Debbie, the ‘love’ no longer worked to facilitate transformation and healing. Despite the intense desire of these women – and many others – for roller derby to push their bodies, to learn new skills, to be part of the derby ‘community’, this was not enough to ensure ‘success’.

There was a ‘dark side’ to roller derby. So how can roller derby be supported as an affective sport space where multiple affects – of hard and soft and tough, and love and anger and belonging, and success and failure – can be negotiated to enable diverse identifications? How is it possible to organise and govern roller derby while still supporting women to experience the multiple affects in circulation through the sport? These are tricky questions, and I do not claim to have answered them. Rather, throughout this thesis I have offered different ways of thinking about them in a way that opens up, rather than closes down, future possibilities. Roller derby is a sport that has attracted women from diverse social and economic backgrounds, many of whom did not previously participate in active physical cultures. This ‘success’ of roller derby, of getting women passionately involved through the embrace of multiplicity and gendered affects, has much to teach us about how to attract women to sport, and hopefully how to sustain their participation. Below, I articulate a new derby ethos, which supports a move beyond the ‘win at all costs’ philosophy that has proved to be so damaging for men and women in sport, and the DIY ethos in ‘alternative’ and
‘lifestyle’ sports such as roller derby, skateboarding and snowboarding that has failed to engage with governmentality and the more subtle and nuanced ways in which power works. This new derby ethos supports women’s participation in a range of physical cultural experiences, as fans and elite players, and everything in between, without giving up the pleasures, thrills and joy that are also central to the experience.

**Listen (and feel): a new derby ethos**

Derby is always changing, becoming. Focusing on becoming – on the processes of change, for individual and collective bodies that are happening in roller derby – rather than on the ‘end game’ is key to unlocking a new derby ethos that can sustain this affective sport into the future.

> In becoming … the important thing is the position of the mass, and above all the position of the subject itself in relation to the pack … how the subject joins or does not join the pack, how far away it stays, how it does or does not hold to the multiplicity. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 29)

Tellingly, in roller derby there is a ‘pack’. All players, except for jammers, must stay inside the ‘pack’ to be considered ‘in play’. The WFTDA defines the pack in rule 4.1.1: ‘The pack is defined by the largest group of in bounds Blockers skating or standing in proximity and containing members from both teams’ (WFTDA, 2013, p. 12). The pack, along with the rules relating to the pack, is often critiqued by derby fans. One fan, Steven Rodriguez, wrote a 12,000-word web article on his blog about the ‘problems’ with the rules governing the pack (2011). WFTDA has attempted to regulate the pack, yet these rules, and WFTDA’s authoritative position, have been limiting for many women. The DIY ethos in roller derby – the ‘by the skater for the skater’ mantra I came across on the internet, in interviews, in local, regional and even
international discourse about the sport – seems to be secondary to regulating and
governing ‘the pack’, and the game more broadly. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the
DIY ethos in sports like roller derby does not mean that governing is not happening.
Nor does it mean that government, or men and a masculine culture, are not
influencing the decisions made.

Although in roller derby there is the potential for a shift in the way sport and
sport management is thought and done, there is a tendency to try to emulate men’s
sport. To counter this tendency seems at times like a monumental task. Yet my
recommendation is to stop trying. Instead, embrace and make room for multiplicity in
the spirit of a new derby ethos. This is not a simple move, and there is no set of
guidelines or rules that can be followed that will ensure roller derby is enabled as a
space of becoming. However, taking a particular orientation towards roller derby is a
first step. Deleuze and Guattari write:

One of the essential characteristics of the dream of multiplicity is that
each element ceaselessly varies and alters its distance in relation to the
others … these variable distances are not extensive quantities divisible
by each other; rather, each is indivisible, or ‘relatively indivisible’, in
other words, they are not divisible below or above a certain threshold,
they cannot increase or diminish without their elements changing in
nature. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 30–1, italics in original)

In roller derby, and indeed other sport, change needs to be accounted for. The
inevitability of change – for roller derby and other sports often promote themselves as
sites of transformation and change – needs to be taken into account. Unfit women
become strong, strong women break bones, confidence is won and lost, and
friendships and belonging create unaccounted for affects between women involved.
As an ‘inclusive’, ‘democratic’ space, participation for many – ‘strangers’ (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 16) as well as friends – is central. The challenges of women working as leaders, in all sorts of organisational and cultural spaces, have been well documented (e.g. Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003), as have the challenges of women working together (e.g. Irigaray, 1993a; Riger, 1994). Through this thesis, I have demonstrated some of these challenges, yet there are also possibilities of negotiating them. Individual and collective bodies could ask themselves: Who is not participating? Who has left our league? How might different women be encouraged to join? How does it feel to be involved? And how can we revalue these affects in sport? Responses to questions such as these, if answered in the spirit of the new derby ethos for which I argue, could support the individual and collective bodies in roller derby to better support one another. Through supporting each other – in all their differences – power, rather than being ‘captured’ and ‘fixed’, could be enabled in its multiplicity, and therefore governance could be more equitable and inclusive of women’s varying experiences of roller derby as a site of transformation.

There are times when it is important to ‘shut up and skate’ – an expression used throughout the derby and skate community generally that is an incitement to action, and perhaps an expression of a new derby ethos. In ‘shutting up’, there is the possibility of listening: listening not just to what is being said, but by whom and in what context. It is necessary to listen not just to the words, but to the feeling too. This new derby ethos is an embodied one: it is not about control or authority, as privileged by the DIY ethos; nor is it a binary one, such as expressed by the ‘win at all costs’ ethos. A new derby ethos is an acknowledgement that at times there may be a need to seek government support, or to seek the mentorship of women in other sports. At
times, men may have something valuable to offer. It is an acknowledgement that ‘sport’ is not somehow separate from the rest of society, and an acceptance that the broader gender power relations cannot be escaped through roller derby. But in this acceptance and acknowledgement, there is also an embrace of affects such as strength, belonging, love, anger and aggression that circulate among female bodies in derby. A new derby ethos is for women in their multiplicity, and does not attempt to fix the subject position of woman into any predetermined form. Central to a new derby ethos is the value of empathy and respect, feminist affects to be nurtured through the sport as it grows and changes.

A new derby ethos signifies a move beyond the ‘image’ of roller derby and its representation in niche and mainstream media. Sight is important, but I ask women to go further than that: to hear as well as to see. Massumi writes of the dangers of what he calls ‘mirror-vision’, where a single axis of sight defines identity as static and ‘known’ (2002, p. 48). He states:

The single axis of vision stretches you between two surfaces recapitulating the same. On that axis, you resemble yourself perfectly. Stilted, static, a perfect picture. Change is excluded. Change is movement. It is rendered invisible. (Massumi, 2002, p. 48)

Instead of ‘mirror-vision’ and privileging sight, listen. Listen to each other and to yourself, to the ‘other’ that is in you. This sensitivity is key to a new derby ethos, and it is important that women begin to practise sensitivity in their relations with each other.

Writing about the affective power of hearing voices, Blackman writes, ‘What seems to be important is the person accepting the voices, that the “other” is in me, and allowing themselves to be connected and directed to what might be unrepresentable and unknowable’ (2010, p. 165). I argue that there is a need to listen, to take notice of
the feelings produced through the relations between women in roller derby. In Chapter 3, I quoted Olubas and Greenwell and their writing on the idea of ‘an ethics of listening’:

Listening might be understood as an activity which maintains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ whilst simultaneously opening between these a space for the movement of sound waves washing across and up onto the shores of the receiver’s ear. This ear, awaiting reception, is one desiring to become sensitive to the sensation of the waves as they break and run up upon its membrane. These waves, touching and soaking into the nerve endings in the process pass the reverberations through into the intricacies of the interstitial connections and onto the larger organising system of the recipient’s body. This body is a desiring one, yearning to be touched by hearing from an other and in that desire, yearning also to reciprocate the touch by taking on a form of responsibility to ‘remember’. (1999, para. 10, italics added)

Taking an approach that values an ethics of listening can move theory and sport cultures/management beyond what is only representable. In valuing an ethics of listening and empathy, the singular ‘truth’ represented in roller derby – represented as either ‘win at all costs’ or ‘by the skater for the skater’ – can be reflexively approached by researchers (and women involved in derby) to take into account the productivity of affects and the pleasures of participation.

In using affect in this thesis, I have highlighted the deeply personal, but also very public, way in which affects ‘work’ in roller derby. Reading the work of Spinoza, Williams writes:

Affects are forms of encounter; they circulate – sometimes ambivalently but always productively – between and within bodies (of
all kinds), telling us something important about the power of affect to unravel subjectivity and modify the political body. (2010, p. 246)

For Gatens (1997), the modern body politic is a male body – but not just this; instead, as Thomas Hobbes writes, it is ‘an artificial man’. This ‘artificial man’ – the political body that governs so many of our relations – is ‘free from the necessary but difficult dealings with both women and nature’ (Gatens, 1997, p. 82) – and, importantly, affects. Affects in roller derby ‘unravel subjectivity and modify the political body’ (Williams, 2010), and are productive of a feminist organisation supportive of women’s transformation through physical culture. Yet often these affects are pushed to the background as women seek to govern and organise themselves, and in doing so there is a limit to the possibilities of ongoing transformation. In Blackman’s theorisation of affect, she raises an important question – one that resonates with this thesis. She asks, ‘How [do] we live singularity in the face of multiplicity?’ (Blackman, 2012, p. 2) In this thesis, the question might be reframed, instead asking about how to enable competition (with rules, teams and so on) while still acknowledging roller derby as an affective multiplicity – with different versions, ways of playing, attitudes and visions for the sport. This is challenging, considering the centrality of ‘rules’ in sport.

Just recently, WFTDA changed its rules of the game after complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction from many people in the derby community (e.g. Rodriguez, 2011). Part of the new derby ethos is an openness to change, to sometimes unthinkable possibilities. Rules are not ‘fixed’, nor are attitudes, feelings and experiences. Alliances, friends and foes change too. In Chapter 2, I quoted Massey, who wrote, ‘in this open interactional space there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction (or not, for not all potential
connections have to be established), relations which may or may not be accomplished’ (2011, p. 11). Movement and change are embodied, and hence unfixed to any particular sign or meaning (Ahmed, 2004c). Yet there is still the tendency to privilege particular meanings in sport. Meanings around winning (and losing), about authority, independence, lifestyles and gender, are often already assumed as known in sport. A new derby ethos suspends these meanings, and challenges any notion of the fixity of sport. Like Parkour (Atkinson, 2009; Bavinton, 2007; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Saville, 2008), or Throsby’s feminist conceptualisation of marathon swimming (2013), or my own and Fullagar’s writing on women and mass cycling tour events (2012), a new derby ethos takes the focus off ‘winning’ – although playing to win is important to some – or overcoming the body, and puts the focus on to the ‘act of imagination’ (Saville, 2008, p. 897) that works to transform bodies – both individual and collective.

A new derby ethos is supported by guiding principles that serve to support women, in their multiplicity, to engage in derby (and indeed other physical cultural practices) in ways that do not normalise or marginalise their subjectivities. A new derby ethos:

• values women’s bodies in their multiplicity and difference
• accounts for the role of men’s bodies in a feminist space
• acknowledges that one cannot escape the broader power relations in society
• privileges sensitivity and empathy towards self and others
• focuses on the pleasure of participation;
• is open to doing things differently
• acknowledges the affective realm of governance
• values an ethics of listening, and
• questions any claims to ‘truth’ or authority.
A new derby ethos could support women in derby to come to terms with the sometimes intense, sometimes ambivalent affects produced through the sport. This new ethos could also support women to live with the organisational tensions productive of roller derby in its multiplicity.

**Sport management**

Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) examine some of the tensions between sport for development organisations and high-performance sport organisations. As sport is promoted more and more frequently as a tool for development, and social and individual change (Beutler, 2008; Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005; Skinner et al., 2008), it is interesting to note the tensions between the values and goals of sport for development and high-performance sport organisations – tensions between winning and participation, seriousness and fun, and commercial and social outcomes. At the time of writing this thesis, the delineation between these goals in roller derby is often unclear, with many leagues espousing to do both. This is a fine aim, yet as Hayhurst and Frisby show (2010), there are many challenges in achieving this – often with the high-performance goals and values dominating the sport for development goals and values. In this thesis, my aim has been to move beyond such binaries to perhaps find a way in which sport organisations, as collective bodies, might work (and play) together. The new derby ethos, as articulated above, is one way that this might be possible.

The contemporary version of roller derby can be read as a site for development: for developing skills, capabilities, capacities, confidence, friendships and alternative femininities. In writing this thesis **now**, there is the opportunity to write the ways in which some leagues are attempting to incorporate development.
values and aims with high-performance sport. Yet to do so requires a rethinking of how a feminist sport management might work. Derby organisations need to be managed. Coaches, event volunteers, referees, competition with other leagues, and many other relationships and operational tasks, need to be negotiated and actioned. Derby organisations are already being managed (by volunteer management committees and by governing bodies such as WFTDA). Yet in many ways roller derby, as it has so far been written by some (Beaver, 2012; Carlson, 2010; Cohen, 2008; Finley, 2010; Peluso, 2011), is ‘anti-management’ – or, put more mildly, weary and distrustful of management. The ‘DIY’ ethos, or ‘DIY value’ as the WFTDA describes it (2011d) – the ‘by the skater for the skater’ mantra – is in an uneasy tension with ‘management’ as it is commonly thought. This makes writing sport management in roller derby challenging. In this thesis, I have provided a different account of management as well as a new derby ethos that can take into account the affective realm of governance for the female bodies in roller derby. As Clegg and colleagues write, it is ‘an account that is less totalizing and determined and more open to the potential plurality of events’ (2006, p. 12).

Like Clegg and colleagues, I argue that ‘lines of conflict do not follow the organisational chart vertically but emerge rhizomatically throughout the organisation’ (2006, p. 16). Relationships – loving, antagonistic or otherwise – are not necessarily ‘rational’ or straightforward. As I have shown in preceding chapters, love and success are not the prize of those who do the most, work the hardest, skate the fastest or win the most. Although there are moves towards further regulating and normalising women’s bodies in roller derby, with assumptions about the value of winning and friendship, women’s bodies have often told a different story. In roller derby, bodies move, sweat, bleed, cry and break. They blush, they cringe and they burst with joy
and laughter. Bringing these affects into research helps to make a start at understanding how to enable the multiple futures of roller derby, without restricting the subjectivities available for women to enact through their participation. Fit, hard bodies like Debbie’s do not equate with ‘success’ or joy in roller derby. Nor do pride and control, for those such as Tia and Lola – so central to the governance of their leagues – equate with happiness and love. Instead, there are different ‘lines of conflict’, as Clegg et al. (2006) write. In roller derby, women connect with themselves and each other in a range of ways. On the track, they bump up against each other, brush past or sometimes knock down. In committee meetings, they hold back, shout out, express frustration and even sadness. At practice, they laugh and tease and give encouragement. At home, they are exacerbated, excited, exhausted.

These affects are all part of ‘sport’, yet they are mostly unacknowledged as aspects to take into consideration when thinking about sport management. The aggression, competitiveness, pride and love experienced through participation are also part of sport management. It is not a ‘rational’ process, yet that does not mean that it is ‘wrong’ either. However, accounting for these affects in the management of roller derby – in local, regional, national and international spaces – is important. Conflict management, safety procedures and decision-making processes need to take into account the full range of women’s bodies participating – and those who would like to and as yet have not felt able to do so. Those in volunteer management roles, and those involved in paid roles with national sporting organisations and the like, need to have an awareness of issues related to gender and sport, and a commitment to enabling the multiplicities of women’s bodies to be a part of derby.
Feminist physical cultural studies, research and roller derby

The challenges of acknowledging the ‘plurality of resistances’, of writing myself in roller derby, of acknowledging my struggles and emotions in research, put me in a precarious position. Heyes writes:

To confess one’s own participation in these dynamics – to acknowledge oneself as at once critic and subject – is to invite others’ patronizing disappointment or disdain. It is also to invite the very crystallization of experience that fixes identities and defines the individual in relation to the norm. (2007, p. 13)

In relation to the ‘norm’ in roller derby, I felt marginalised. In relation to the ‘norm’ in research, I also sometimes felt marginalised. Yet, in being upfront about my struggles in roller derby – my feelings of rejection and experience of judgement by some of the other women involved – I illuminate the complex workings of power confronted when researching women’s sport and leisure practices such as roller derby. My struggles at some points in the research process have forced me to rethink ideas around resistance and empowerment, and the use of auto/ethnographic writing in physical cultural studies.

Fleming and Fullagar (2007, p. 251) argue that the ‘analytic utility’ of auto/ethnographic writing ‘relates to how gender norms are shown as significant in mediating how others within society, and more specifically how women themselves, make “thinkable” their involvement in non-traditional sport’. In this thesis, I have highlighted how women – myself included – came to know ourselves as changed, as strong, proud and tough, as well as hurt, fearful and a ‘failure’ in roller derby. As a sport played, managed and watched predominantly by women (WFTDA, 2011b), it is the differences between and among women that are central, demonstrating the challenges for overcoming oppressive gender norms when at times it is ourselves, as
women, who perpetuate and reinforce these. Heyes (2007, p. 9) writes that ‘thinking ourselves differently is important, but even more so is practicing ourselves into something new’. I tried to practise myself into something new; however, it may be through writing myself into something new that transformation and alternative feminine subjectivities can be experienced. To have space, such as in this thesis, to write failure and fear in feminist research, is an opportunity to map ‘realms that are yet to come’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

It is often believed that feminism’s ambition is to transform gendered power relations, yet it is frequently forgotten that these power relations include the relations between women, not only between men and women. Differences between women have been acknowledged as an important area for feminist leisure research (Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Scraton, 1994), yet so far these differences have often focused on ethnicity and class (Green, Hebron & Woodward, 1987; Watson & Scraton, 2001), rather than the multiple types of femininity available to many women. As a woman researching women, I have written what is often ‘unthinkable’ – or at least ‘unspeakable’. I have written an academic ‘fiction’ of failure: my own failure to become ‘empowered’ and my failure to identify roller derby as ‘resistant’. In wanting it to become a space where women can ‘kick arse’, it seemed that some women in roller derby negated the multiplicity of ways in which power could be exercised. Hence I argue that assumptions of physical culture as empowering and resistant need to be interrogated further if we are to continue questioning feminine subjectivity and the multiple ways possible of ‘being a woman’.

Irigaray writes that ‘it may be that, in wanting to throw off the physical and spiritual clothing of oppression, we destroy ourselves, too. Instead of being reborn, we annihilate ourselves’ (2007, p. 102). Perhaps, out of the ashes of this annihilation,
we can recreate ourselves as women anew. Perhaps. I see feminist physical cultural studies as a space of action and positive transformation. Because of its emphasis on theory and everyday life, feminist physical cultural studies has the ability to influence and even reconceptualise leisure and sport management. My auto/ethnographic writing may move others to write their own experiences of ‘failure’ in physically active cultures, which may then inspire others to think about their own experiences and the ways in which those experiences may have been mediated via policy or practice. Alternative forms of participation, multiple pathways for entry and more transparent conflict-resolution processes, easier models of governance for volunteers – these could all change women’s experiences of physical cultures.

All these ‘micro’ strategies and alternative tactics, together with a considered, open approach – such that I described through the new derby ethos – influence the way power and affects circulate in the spaces where physical culture is practised. This provides women with possibilities for thinking themselves, feeling themselves and practising themselves differently. For feminist scholars researching physical cultures, there is also the possibility of recreating ourselves anew, practising a more rigorous form of reflexivity about how power can be examined in multiple ways. Situating power as ‘everywhere’ and mobile, the differences between women, as well as between men and women, can be explored. Instead of focusing on a singular notion of resistance, we can deal with the complexity of power relations embedded within our everyday practices as researchers, and as participants.

I admit that along the way I have felt immense pressure to justify my approach to this thesis, to account for the shame, aggression and disappointment and still tell a ‘victory narrative’ (Lenzo, 1995; Vaughan, 2004) of roller derby. And time and time again, I have turned back to those feminists whose writing has inspired me. In
stimulating a feminine imaginary, Irigaray attempts to reinvent the image of the subject, from fixed, singular, closed and phallic, to relational, fluid and open. This reconfiguring of subjectivity is a type of becoming, and requires ‘an act of imagination, an envisioning of other states of being’ (McRobbie, 2009, p. 161). Throughout this thesis, my goal has been to stimulate a feminist cultural imaginary for physical culture and sport management. Yet this is also my goal for research in these fields. In envisioning other states of being, I have imagined myself not as authority or expert on the subject of roller derby, but as a writer – a creator of multiplicities and of a feminine sport management discourse. But, of course, there is always doubt. Of the possibility that perhaps her writing would not interest her readers, Probyn wrote that, ‘maybe I will and maybe I won’t. As they say in Australia, sometimes you have to take a punt … The punt, or the risk of writing is always that you will fail to interest or engage readers’ (2005, p. 131). Roller derby and writing are both full of risk and excitement. I could fall flat on my face, maybe injure myself so badly that I do not want to go back. But I took a risk in roller derby, so is it a risk I am willing to take with writing.

My aim is to enable movement, to go with the rhythm of roller derby rather than against it. In taking into account the multiple desires and subjectivities possible within roller derby, such as I have done in this thesis, an important contribution can be made to the literature on sport management. Specifically, in highlighting the affective multiplicities – of success and failure, inclusion and belonging – I am contributing towards an ‘opening up’ of sport management, asking it to take into account women’s experiences and affects, and to be curious about the knowledge that comes as a response to these questions. Forming collectives, such as all-women roller derby leagues, all-women surf clubs and so on, is one way women are attempting to
carve out sport and leisure spaces for themselves without being continually compared (negatively) with males. Yet these ‘all-women’ spaces have their own problems, particularly if approached uncritically. Spaces such as roller derby are political as well as cultural, despite some women’s frustration with this – one league I came across decided to call itself ‘Derby Without Politics’! There is a need ‘for management’ (Clegg et al., 2006), yet so far a management that takes women’s bodies and sexual difference in sport into account is still being written. Scholars, such as Aitchison (2005, 2003), Shaw (2006, 2002, 2003) and Frisby (2005) have made a start, as have a number of women from the broader management and communications fields (e.g. Ashcraft, 2001; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Hurley, 1999; Ibarra, 1993; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2006; Rutherford, 2001). But there is still much work to do. What women’s bodies can do, including the affects they feel, has often been under-estimated. Roller derby does challenge these ideas, particularly as they relate to assumptions about the relation between femininity, passivity and weakness. But what roller derby and the women involved are struggling to do is account for women as multiplicity.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Irigaray, who asked, ‘if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play other than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of one universe?’ (1993b, p. 30). Roller derby is a site where the female imaginary has deployed itself. Although it has been enormously successful in attracting thousands of women around the world, there is a danger of the sport’s elite goals pushing out the scores of women who want to play purely for the pleasures and fun of the game. The tendency towards closure and unification of meaning, towards normalisation and the insidiousness of power, is being shown in roller derby despite women’s best intentions. Reconciling
individual differences with collective aims is a challenge. Governmental solutions, whether formal or informal, have so far not been able to reconcile these differences, because in many ways they are irreconcilable. Rather than attempt to reconcile them, my argument throughout this thesis has been to embrace them – to work with power in its multiplicity, rather than against it. A new derby ethos, where sensitivity, listening and affects are central, needs to be practised if roller derby is to continue to provide opportunities for transformation for a wide(ning) range of women.
## Appendix 1: Table of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>League</th>
<th>Approx. years with derby</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Shift worker, lived in low socio-economic area, single with children</td>
<td>Mixed Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Professional, married, currently stay-at-home mother of two, suffered depression, previously on medication, lost her mother</td>
<td>Mixed Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lou</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Had not skated prior to roller derby, her male partner is a referee, no children, spent some works in administration role, involved in other physical cultures (dance, historical societies)</td>
<td>Mixed Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Married, professional, never played organised sport prior, husband is referee</td>
<td>Mixed Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Naturopath, just recently been through a hard breakup with a man, no children, single, lives alone</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Played roller hockey as well, single, loves contact aspect of game, experiences depression</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Driving instructor, self-described S&amp;M participant, ‘gamer’, partnered with a man</td>
<td>Ex Mixed Derby League</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Boxer, carpenter, single, describes herself as heterosexual, bullied when younger</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunty</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Excellent skater, fitness instructor, partnered with long-term boyfriend</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>League</td>
<td>Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Partnered with long-term girlfriend, cyclist, skater, cleaner, treasurer of league</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Married to BMX rider, rockabilly scene, shy, talked about being bullied in the past</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Suffered from bi-polar, on medication, several derby injuries, into rockabilly scene, single, no children</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>President of her league, graphic artist, self-employed, recently married, two children</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Has boyfriend, works in HR, likes rockabilly scene but is not involved, no children, had never skated prior</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clair</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Worked in disability sector, strong skater, new to league, divorced, remarried, two children</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Single, one child, used to be a dance skater, struggles with her weight, into alternative heavy music</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>In long-term relationship with a woman, works in supermarket, used to be a speed skater, heavily tattooed</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Very strong skater, single, two children, depression and drug-abuse issues, surfs, unemployed</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dee</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Event management professional, in relationship with long-term boyfriend, some depression, lost her best friend to suicide, lost skating prior to derby</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Also rode horses, strong skater, joined derby to help her with grief after the loss of her mother, felt</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>League</td>
<td>Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerrie</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Student, American, in long-term relationship with her boyfriend, felt bullied in derby and treated unfairly, not a strong skater</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Long-term member, strong skater, popular with younger members, worked in a supermarket, liked alternative heavy music, in recent relationship with her boyfriend</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bec</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>New member, single, one child, recently went through divorce, retail fashion sales assistant</td>
<td>Local Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelli</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Media and events person for her league and professionally, one child, married, into rockabilly scene</td>
<td>City Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Mother of two children (both play sport), married, not heavily involved in volunteering for her league, works full time</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Worked in domestic violence sector, freshmeat coordinator for her league, several derby injuries</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bligh</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>President of her league, also into historical re-enactment groups, partnered with long-term boyfriend</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>HR professional, acts as grievance officer and secretary for her league, enjoys the fitness aspects of the game as well as other parts, married, no children</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Did not want to describe her sexuality, single, undergraduate student, enjoys contact aspect of game, lots of tension with her family</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Journalist, long-term partner of Barb, performer and dancer</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Surfer, long-term partner of Lisa,</td>
<td>Regional Derby League</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>League</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretel</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Takes the sport very seriously, was captain of her team</td>
<td>Competitive Derby League</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Single, struggled with her weight, social worker, struggled with depression, became disillusioned with the sport</td>
<td>Competitive Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Deputy media adviser for her league, data entry officer, single, heavily involved in her league</td>
<td>Competitive Derby League</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Media adviser for her league, media professional, long-term boyfriend</td>
<td>Competitive derby league</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Graduate student, professional, recently single, on fitness committee at time</td>
<td>Competitive Derby League</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: WFTDA minimum skills requirements

WOMEN’S FLAT TRACK DERBY ASSOCIATION Minimum Skills Requirements

Version 4.10 Updated January 31, 2013

This document was created by the WFTDA Training Committee.

Questions about the MSR should be directed to the WFTDA Training Committee at training@wftda.com © 2013 Women’s Flat Track Derby Association
MINIMUM SKILLS REQUIREMENTS FOR SKATERS

Each WFTDA Member League that enters into a WFTDA-sanctioned game must designate a league member who is responsible for verifying that every skater in the game meets all of the skill requirements listed below. Passing the WFTDA Skater Rules Test is also part of the minimum skills requirement. Member leagues are responsible for determining frequency of re-assessment based on league skaters’ experience and skill level.

These minimum skills are:

- Required for charter team skaters playing WFTDA sanctioned games.

- Strongly recommended for skaters playing in interleague scrimmage or games.

- Strongly recommended for skaters playing in intraleague (home) scrimmages or games.

- Recommended for new skaters to graduate to contact drills and intraleague (home league) scrimmages.

1 BASIC SKATING SKILLS

1.1 Skating posture

- 1.1.1 Bends at knees and hips with shoulders back.

- 1.1.2 Demonstrates stability, with center of gravity down and forward.

- 1.1.3 Demonstrates ability to skate low with bent, flexible knees.

1.2 Stride
1.2.1 Uses steady, confident, fluid strides.

1.2.2 Uses both feet to push forward on straightaways.

1.2.3 Shifts weight completely from foot to foot without stumbling.

1.3 Crossovers

1.3.1 Performs smooth crossovers while skating straightaways and track turns.

1.3.2 Uses both feet to push during crossovers.

1.3.3 Performs reverse crossovers, crossing over the right foot to the outside of the track.

1.4 Speed and endurance

1.4.1 Skates at least 27 laps around regulation track within five minutes.

1.4.2 Accelerates from a standstill to complete one lap within 13 seconds.

1.5 Stops

Skater must come to a complete stop from a brisk pace within 4 seconds, using proper form and without losing balance.

1.5.1 T-stop 1.5.1.1 Balancing weight on one leg, other foot is turned at a 90 degree angle so the heel or arch of the turned foot is aligned with the heel of the other foot. 1.5.1.2 Maintaining balance on one leg, applies smooth pressure with the turned foot using the two outside wheels, the two front
wheels or all four wheels (does not use only the two inside wheels).

1.5.2 Plow stop

1.5.2.1 Turns one or both feet so toes are pointing in and heels are pointing out.

1.5.2.2 Upon completion of stop, feet are in a position that would allow resumed skating (feet are not spread so wide apart skater must adjust stance before resuming skating).

1.6 Other skating skills

1.6.1 Performs one-foot glides with each foot for the length of the track turn and straightaway with good balance.

1.6.1.1 In low stance with one foot completely off the floor, able to balance weight over the other foot for at least 5 seconds.

1.6.1.2 Maintains speed sufficient to complete glide and does not flail limbs.

1.6.2 Propels self while keeping all eight wheels on the floor.

1.6.3 Moves easily and fluidly from one side of the track to the other. 1.6.3.1 Performs smooth, quick lateral cuts, crossing the track at least four times on each straightaway and at least three times on each track turn.

1.6.4 Backwards skating within track boundaries. 1.6.4.1 Maintains mode pace skating backward around the entire track.

2 RECOVERY TACTICS

Skater must perform the following falls safely, correctly and naturally. Skaters must
be able to slide into knee contact with the floor, rather than crashing onto pads. Slides should be performed from a brisk pace without using hands or flailing arms. Recovery to a normal skating pace should be smooth and immediate, unless noted otherwise.

2.1 Knee taps

. 2.1.1 Left

. 2.1.2 Right

. 2.1.3 Performs each knee tap without coming to a complete stop.

. 2.1.4 Taps a single knee without breaking normal skating stride.

. 2.1.5 Recovers from knee tap without using hands to get up.

. 2.1.6 Performs two consecutive single knee taps in stride, with low recovery.

2.2 Double knee slides

. 2.2.1 Knees do not make contact with ground at exact same time.

. 2.2.2 Returns to active skating within three seconds.

. 2.2.3 Recovers without using hands to get up.

. 2.2.4 Momentum used to initiate the slide is continued into the recovery to normal skating motion.

3 BALANCE AND AGILITY

Skater must demonstrate the ability to perform the following tasks without losing
balance, stumbling or falling.

3.1 Standing and stepping from a standstill, maintaining control of wheels (not rolling)

. 3.1.1 Forward and backward.

. 3.1.2 Side to side in both directions.

. 3.1.3 Grapevine (first foot side steps, second foot steps across and in front of first foot, first foot side steps, second foot steps behind and crosses first foot) to both the right and left.

. 3.1.4 Shuffle (first foot side steps, second foot steps to meet first foot without crossing first foot, first foot immediately side steps in a hopping motion) to both the right and left.

. 3.1.5 Quick steps (both feet rapidly alternate in small steps, only one foot is on the ground at a time) in place and to the right and left.

. 3.1.6 Ability to balance on each foot from a stationary position at least 30 seconds.

3.2 Hopping

. 3.2.1 Hops over an object at least 6 inches (15 centimeters) in height without touching the object or losing balance, while skating at a moderate pace.

. 3.2.2 Jumps with both feet simultaneously, but does not have to land
with both feet simultaneously.

3.2.3 Hops laterally at least 18 inches (45.5 centimeters) from a brisk forward speed.

3.3 Focus

3.3.1 Comfortably looks left, right, and behind quickly and unexpectedly while maintaining regular skating stride at a moderate pace.

3.4 Weaving

3.4.1 Maneuvers through 10 cones, each no more than 5 feet (1.5 meters) apart (not to exceed 50 feet or 15 meters), placed through the straightaways and track turns, in less than 6 seconds.

3.4.2 Weaves comfortably and briskly through a moderately moving pack of skaters without focusing on their own feet.

3.5 Transitions

3.5.1 Turns 180 degrees without breaking stride, maintaining a moderate pace. 3.5.1.1 Turns clockwise and counterclockwise from front to back.

3.5.2 Turns 360 degrees without breaking stride, from a moderate pace. Using two 180 degree turns in a row, without breaking stride, is acceptable.
4 PACK SKILLS AND INTERACTIONS

Skaters must demonstrate the ability to perform the following skills legally, safely, and without losing balance, stumbling, or falling, while skating at a moderate pace.

4.1 Whips

4.1.1 Giving and receiving arm whips.

4.1.1.1 Giving an inside whip, the initiating skater holds their right arm against their body, providing a hand as a “handle” for the receiver to grab and pull. The initiator does not attempt to pull from the shoulder. The initiator may use the left hand to push the receiving skater.

4.1.1.2 Giving outside whip, the initiating skater positions body with one foot extended in front of the other, and extends right arm to receiver. The receiving skater grasps the initiator’s hand with their own right hand. The initiator of the whip, using core abdominal muscles, not the shoulder muscles, pulls the receiver, transferring momentum to the skater being whipped.

4.1.2 Taking and providing hip, belt and clothing whips.

4.1.2.1 Consistently demonstrates the ability, judgment and timing to take a whip off another skater’s body or clothing without pulling the other skater off balance.

4.1.2.2 Consistently demonstrates the stability to provide hip and clothing
whips without getting pulled off balance. 4.2 Pushes

- 4.2.1 Giving pushes
  
  - 4.2.1.1 Pushes receiving skater near receiver’s center of gravity (hips or buttocks) with ample force to provide noticeable change in receiving skater’s direction of momentum.
  
  - 4.2.1.2 Pushes are centered and even (does not turn receiving skater’s hips).
  
  - 4.2.1.3 Pushes are parallel to the floor (does not push up, causing the receiver to be pushed off their feet, or down, causing the receiver to be pushed to the floor).
  
  - 4.2.1.4 Maintains form and balance before, during and after pushing receiving skater.

- 4.2.2 Receiving pushes

4.3 Pacing

4.2.2.1 Uses momentum provided from a forward push to accelerate and begins skating within two seconds of push.

4.2.2.2 Maintains form and balance while receiving push forward, to left and/or right.

4.3.1 Adjusts to the variable speeds (decrease/increase) of a pace line while maintaining an arms-length distance from other skaters without falling,
tripping, overtaking or running into another skater.

4.4 Weaving around moving obstacles

4.4.1 Demonstrates weaving through a single-file line of skaters, each an arm’s length apart, at a moderate pace.

4.5 Unexpected obstacles

4.5.1 Testing all skaters in a pack of 4-10 moving at a moderate pace. All skaters demonstrate the ability to perform safe knee taps and slides at unexpected times in the pack. Pack skaters must avoid the downed skater(s) without going out of bounds, falling over them or causing unnecessary hazard.

4.5.2 Demonstrates the ability to recover balance after bumping skates or locking wheels with another skater.
5 BLOCKING

Skater must demonstrate the ability to perform the following skills without fouling other skaters while skating at a moderate pace.

5.1 Taking hits

5.1.1 Responds safely to repeated heavy blocks without flailing or grabbing other skaters. If the hit knocks the skater off balance, they fall safely, without sprawling, and demonstrate an ability to recover within 2 to 4 seconds.

5.1.2 Demonstrates the above in a pack situation, without causing an unnecessary hazard for pack skaters.

5.2 Positional blocking and leaning (aka frontal blocking or stall blocking)

5.2.1 Performs contact with good posture and without loss of balance.

5.2.2 Demonstrates ability to lean and push on an opponent with legal blocking zones to legal target zones while moving at moderate pack speed.

5.2.3 Demonstrate ability to plow stop in a pack without tripping other skaters in the pack.

5.2.4 Demonstrate ability to use a plow stop to slow another skater.
5.3 Checks

5.2.4.1 Must be no more than 2 feet (0.5 meters) in front of other skater.

5.2.4.2 Other skater must have demonstrated decrease in pace due to blocking skater’s positioning and/or contact.

5.3.1 Demonstrates the ability to perform repetitive hip and body checks delivered with legal blocking zones to legal target zones with moderate to heavy force while skating at a brisk pace.

Pace

Without breaking stride, a skater starts by striding in one direction and, using the same rhythm as established skating stride, executes a transition and/or recovery tactic and continues skating at prior established stride without a noticeable change in pace or rhythm.
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