‘Troubled’ derby subjectivities: Wellbeing and feminist new materialist movements in sport

Abstract
Roller derby is a unique and innovative phenomenon in the sporting landscape. Body image, gender policies, aggression/contact elements, music, art, and subversive and inclusive politics are all embraced to various degrees. Its growth was swift and significant – thousands of women around the world strapped on their skates and pushed themselves to meet the minimum skills requirements for joining a derby league. This unique sport was put in the (un)enviable position of somehow having done what governments and medical professionals had tried to achieve for years – to get people active who were inactive in the past, to get people to raise physical activity levels, and therefore (so the story goes) to improve their overall wellbeing and mental health. This article engages with interview transcripts with 12 derby skaters who chose to leave the sport, to understand the complex social, cultural and personal forces at play in the relationship between sport and wellbeing. Drawing on feminist conceptualisations of care and movement, I explore the notion of ‘troubled derby subjectivities’ to understand the ways in which the ‘sport’ (including its style, music and affinities) provided a generative space for non-normative gendered subjectivities, embodied movement and ‘wellbeing’.

Keywords: wellbeing, care, affect, feminism, new materialism, roller derby, sport
Introduction

‘Sometimes deliberately exposing the body to possible harm is part of the very meaning of political resistance’ (Butler, 2015, p. 126)

In this article, I speak back to normative notions of wellbeing and (mental) health through feminist new materialist concepts and theories. In particular, I trouble binary notions such as mentally ill/well, good/bad, care/aggression and feminine/masculine in the specific context of contact sport. This article takes a gendered perspective of sport and wellbeing, arguing that sports such as roller derby (and, I would argue, any sport that has historically privileged male participation, or that embraces a level of exposure to harm) provide an explicit space for embracing and embodying the ambivalence of ‘troubled’ subjectivity. In other words, they provide a space to ‘be bad’, or to ‘not care’ or be ‘care-less’, and in so doing allow for the embodiment and expression of self–other relations that are otherwise difficult to enact. In this way, self–other relations are transformed and movement – and thus healing – becomes possible.

In the following section, I outline the role of sport in health and wellbeing governmental policies, and provide some background on where roller derby fits into this landscape. I then explore some of the literature on sport and trauma-informed recovery, and provide an articulation of the feminist new materialist framework I bring to this literature. This is followed by a description of the empirical context of this study and my methodological approach, after which I use data to demonstrate the range of movements (into, through, out of and away from) enacted by women in derby and how these movements develop a range of capabilities that enable
wellbeing. I conclude with a discussion and further articulation of the notion of ‘troubled sporting subjectivities’ and look at how this may be taken forward in future research while acknowledging the limitations of this study.

**Sport, wellbeing and culture: entanglements and intra-actions**

The term ‘sport’ has particular connotations. National pride, uniformity, competition, winning, fairness and being a good citizen are all tied up with sport. While policy debates lie largely outside the scope of this article, this context is worth noting. In Australia (which is where I live), for example, a recent plan published by government emphasises this and more, working towards five target outcomes: (1) to improve the physical health of Australians; (2) to improve the mental health of Australians; (3) to grow personal development; (4) to strengthen our communities; and (5) to grow Australia’s economy (Sport Australia, 2018). All five outcomes are entangled with people’s wellbeing and mental health at both the psychic and material levels.

Sport has been positioned as an ideal site through which to improve the health and wellbeing of the population, and hence significant funding is provided by government to increase participation. As Fullagar (2020, p. 172) writes, ‘exercise has become the new medicine for the soul in a very long genealogy of mindbody practices’. Yet, despite investment in sport and exercise for addressing mental health, this funding is not always distributed fairly or transparently (De Bosscher et al., 2019) and although there has been some redress in more recent times, a disproportionate amount of funding has been directed towards elite and professional sport rather than grassroots and social sport. The extreme example is, of course, sports stadiums – which cost billions of taxpayer dollars and are used primarily for professional men’s sport.
New materialist thinking troubles common tropes about sport and physical activity as inherently beneficial for mental health and empowering for women (Fullagar, 2020) while holding in tension the potential of sport to transform bodies in potentially generative and productive ways beyond limited conceptions of ‘successful’ or ‘winners’. Sport provides opportunities to push oneself outside one’s comfort zone, to experience a range of intense affects, to learn new skills and capabilities (potentially as a volunteer and leader as well as a participant) and to engage with a whole range of material and discursive practices that reshape subjectivity. In this way, sport and leisure can, as Duff (2016, p. 59) notes, ‘prise open the spatial and embodied rhythms of recovery, the real experience that propels a body along a line of becoming well’.

I have been researching roller derby for a decade now, prior to which I worked for six years in various roles in the not-for-profit sector as a drug and alcohol/youth worker counsellor. My interests have always been in personal, social and cultural transformation, and the relationship between these spheres as they relate to people’s opportunities to disentangle themselves from problematic relationships (with human or non-human entities – people, family, church, drugs, alcohol and so on). I have also been concerned with linear notions of recovery, wellbeing and progress, as I have struggled and seen others struggle to fit their complex lives into this narrow model. Hence, as I have listened to over 60 derby skaters via in-depth anonymous interviews, as well as spending time as a derby skater and later as a recreational skater, and reading countless blogs and other documents, I have tried to attune myself to the orientations, discourses, practices and objects that have been important. As a writer-
scholar, I do not stand outside and comment on these practices, but am instead entangled in complex intra-actions between myself, my environment and my work.

This approach is an attempt to think with and through feminist new materialist ideas in ‘the everyday’. I am concerned with the everyday struggles, policies, organisation and gendered power relations in relation to women in sport, leisure and recovery contexts as they attempt to move themselves closer to where they want to be. In taking this approach, I am hesitant to write about wellbeing or mental health as a point of arrival or as a fixed state, and instead engage with ideas around movement and connection and infrastructures of care across time and space (Fullagar et al., 2019). In previous work, I have written about the ways in which roller derby was said to ‘save our souls’, providing a saviour to those who ‘discover’ the sport. This notion of roller derby being a site of deep transformation for those who participate continued to emerge as I talked to women in different national contexts, including Egypt and China (Pavlidis, 2018; Pavlidis & O’Brien, 2017; Rodriguez Castro et al., 2021).

Yet at the same time I heard – both firsthand in interviews and also more publicly in open letters and public statements by notable derby skaters (e.g. Atlanta Roller Derby, 2020) about issues of racism and bullying and power struggles that left women, non-binary and trans skaters defeated, excluded and isolated from the derby community. So roller derby is certainly not the solution to mental health issues – or any other issues, for that matter – and nor is sport more generally. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that so many have experienced the sport as transformative. And of course sport itself can be ‘good for you’. In Australia, our government has in place a range of physical activity guidelines aimed at reducing the burden of ill-health, including
mental health. Adults aged 18 to 64 years are recommended to be active on most, and preferably all, days for a total of 150 to 300 minutes (2.5 to 5 hours) of moderate intensity activity or 75 to 150 minutes (1.25 to 2.5 hours) of vigorous activity each week (or a combination) with at least two days of muscle strengthening.

For many Australians, myself included, this is a fairly comprehensive and overwhelming direction. Particularly for women, meeting these requirements would require a detailed plan, enabling them to fit this activity in between work, leisure and caring responsibilities. Because of these time pressures, and also the fact that simply doing physical activity for the sake of avoiding illness is not particularly inspiring for many people, we are encouraged to find ways to engage in physical activity that also meet other social or cultural needs. This may be the need for creative expression, belonging and/or friendship; opportunities to exert leadership and share expertise; or a chance to carve out time for the ‘self’, engage in ‘body work’ and ‘feel good’. Group or team sports can meet many of these needs.

Sport cultures play an important role in providing people of all ages and genders with a community and sense of belonging, an identity and a space outside of the home and work where they can feel competent (e.g. Spaaij, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2014). Yet at times these relations between leisure, belonging and wellbeing in sport cultures have been conceptualised as gender blind, and have failed to account for critiques of neoliberalism and positivity (e.g. see Cairnes & Johnston, 2015 for the ways in which dieting and wellbeing have been framed as ‘empowering’). In this article, I take a gendered perspective to argue that gender relations, material practices and culture are important keystones in wellbeing, and that sports such as roller derby might be key
disruptors, providing a space for transformation and a shift from embodied distress to strength and confidence.

Governments invest millions of dollars per year into sport as a key site for mental health and physical health, and we are instructed to meet daily and weekly targets for physical activity. Yet sport is not all good. Most clearly, sport is a site of sexism, as it has been and continues to be a site of gender segregation, the acceptance of a ‘boys will be boys’ mentality, rape culture, violence (on and off the field, towards both men and women, and non-binary people), not to mention bullying and other forms of exclusion. Thorpe’s (2021) post-qualitative piece expresses the complexity of sport’s joys and pain. She writes:

Almost two decades now
Towards thinking, knowing
Doing sport,
Differently
But what has been achieved
By academic journals and books
To what effect
When sport continues to do
So much harm
Wrestling bed-sheets
Gut, gutted, gutting feminism
Our intellectual labour is not enough
Where is the blood, the skin in the game? (Thorpe, 2021, p. 412)
Like other forms of government-endorsed or provided mental health services, sport can be both the cause of and a cure for trauma. Focusing on transitions out of sport and leisure, not only for elite athletes or professionals, but for amateur and social participants (See Kraus, 2020 for example of belly dance), provides an important lens through which to explore these issues.

**Sport as cure and cause: a feminist new materialist approach to recovery and wellbeing**

This article brings a trauma-informed approach to feminist writing about sport cultures and gender equity. In doing so, it acknowledges the high likelihood of a women having been a victim of sexual abuse or harassment (e.g. Perkonigg et al., 2000), as well as women’s higher rates of anxiety and depression, and suicidality (e.g. Parker & Brotchie, 2010). It also acknowledges the systematic biases and stereotypes about women that have dominated psychology and rejects notions of objectivity rooted in normative notions of wellbeing (Wigginton and LaFrance, 2019). The approach taken is anti-essentialist, meaning that it does not adhere to the idea that there is something inherently and biological unique about women (that affects their mental health). For example, even so called ‘positive’ stereotypes about women, such as the ‘strong black woman’, can negatively impact on the emotional wellbeing of African-heritage women (Graham and Clarke, 2021).

In taking a feminist new materialist approach to wellbeing and recovery I problematise normative ideals of femininity (passive, heterosexual, fragile, nurturing, etc), and health and wellbeing (rational, positive, happy, fit and strong), in order to respond to the various movements women engage in as they seek to find a sense of
safety/comfort/excitement/belonging/risk/pleasure. In doing so I reconfigure recovery as a ‘matter of “aliveness”’ (Fullagar et al, 2019). Sport, a physically strenuous practice, is an important site to investigate these movements.

A range of different types of sport have been used to ‘treat’ and ‘prevent’ mental health issues. However, rather than position women’s experiences of distress as ‘mental illness’ in need of treatment through biochemical treatment (including exercise), the approach I take here understands women’s experiences of distress as embodied distress. This approach incorporates previous feminist research that has documented women’s emotional lives, the politics of mental health diagnosis and numerous forms of discrimination, inequity and violence (Fullagar et al., 2019).

Much research is directed towards increasing women’s participation in sport and exercise, and it assumes a direct relationship between participation and a whole range of physical, social and cultural benefits. In particular, research appeals to neuroscientific, psychological and even biochemical potentials of sport and other physical practices, removed from their social or cultural contexts. The ‘dangers’ of sport often go unacknowledged (other than risks of injury) and little attention is paid to the reasons why people leave a sport (or don’t take up sport to begin with).

Hence, there are dangers and benefits of sport participation and physical activity that act on the body and work to alleviate or exacerbate embodied distress in various ways – for example, Black’s (2020) recent examination of yoga as both a cause of and cure for sexual violation. She analyses the transnational discourse of yoga to explore the ways in which yoga reproduces gendered hierarchies (men as leaders, women as
teachers) and how it is entangled with neoliberal logics and expanding capitalism. She advances the perspective that ‘sexual violation in yoga is often indebted to broader projects of gendered submission that reveal intimacies between authoritarian and neoliberal structures’ (Black, 2020, p. 2). As well as outlining instances of sexual violation in yoga – particularly in relation to notions of the ‘guru’ (Black, 2020, p. 8) and other issues – she also highlights the development of trauma-informed/trauma-sensitive yoga. Trauma-sensitive yoga has been embraced as a promising treatment for PTSD, yet Black (2020, p. 10) notes that if trauma informed practice focuses on the ‘I’ as ‘in control’, it may also contribute to ‘normalising submissiveness to larger and often invisible regimes of gendered and capitalist inequality’. In outlining these arguments and discourses related to the ‘spiritual’, ‘scientific’ and ‘activist’ claims of yoga, she calls for the illusion of freedom and choice and a world where gendered and neoliberal inequalities shape the conditions of possibilities to be broken and replaced with a broader perception of what yoga was, is and can be – particularly for those who have experienced (sexual) trauma.

Boxing is another sport that has been used to support (predominately) women recovering from trauma. Despite long-held acknowledgement of the dangers of boxing, particularly with regard to head trauma and long-term risks, it has also been used as a ‘cure’ or tool for recovery from trauma. Van Ingen’s (2011, 2016, 2019) work is particularly central here with over 15 years’ experience researching and delivering trauma-informed boxing programs to women to support their recovery from trauma. Her trauma-informed work acknowledges the limits of neuroscience and medically orientated perspectives, and instead incorporates activism and interventions beyond a biomedical model. In particular, van Ingen focuses on the role of the body in
the boxing programs and how it provided participants with opportunities to feel *safe* and *strong*, as well as how this facilitated recovery.

I use the examples of yoga and boxing to demonstrate the complex social, cultural and gendered – material and immaterial – aspects of recovery that are often overlooked in traditional recovery-orientated sport services. Whether this be the male ‘gurus’ in yoga or the dominance of positivist individualistic conceptions of human subjects as ‘mentally ill’, work remains to be done in revealing and working with gendered dimensions of wellbeing and mental health.

**Roller derby and wellbeing**

I argue that roller derby is an ideal site to work through the complexities of women’s relationship to sport and wellbeing because of its unique emphasis on gender fluidity (Pavlidis, 2012), inclusive and democratic governance (Beaver, 2012), and resistance to traditional sport governance structures (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2016). Since 2010, a growing body of work has focused on roller derby as a novel and potentially important space of gender equity. I and others have explored the role of derby in supporting diverse intersectional identities (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013), embracing pariah identities (Finley, 2010), negotiating emphasised femininity (Carlson, 2010), engaging with alternative organisational forms (Breeze, 2015) and expressing feminism in different ways (Pavlidis, 2018; Pavlidis and O’Brien, 2017), as well as the benefits of derby beyond winning (Farrance, 2012).

This article takes this a step further and examines roller derby as a particular and specific spatial and temporal context of wellbeing. I believe this is a significant step in
understanding the relationship between the intense physicality of a sport such as roller derby, the visual appeal and style of some sport cultures and issues related to governance and the formation of groups, and how this assemblage contributes to a person’s wellbeing both within and beyond sport. This is a feminist new materialist approach to wellbeing and sport that shuns measurement, and instead attends to the movement of affect/desire into, through and out of derby (and roller skates).

Wellbeing is of course, a highly contested terrain, interdisciplinary at its core, despite often being studied from discrete disciplinary perspectives. In a recent introduction to a special issue on leisure and wellbeing, Mansfield et al. (2020, p. 5) note that much of the evidence base for policy and decision-making ‘has been informed by the methods and theories of behavioural science and qualitative research’. They clearly note that ‘the conclusions we reach about the impact of leisure, about who is doing well and badly through engagement, in which circumstances and to what extent, depend on our understandings of the social dynamics of leisure, as well as how we define, measure and evaluate wellbeing in leisure contexts’ (Mansfield et al., 2020, p. 5; see also Smith & Reid, 2018). They call for ‘more diverse and creative methods … to [inform] an understanding of the interconnections between personal experience and complex and contested interrelationships and dynamics that shape the contribution of leisure to wellbeing’ (Mansfield et al., 2020, p. 3). It is to this concept that the current article contributes.

In taking a situated, contextual approach to wellbeing, I agree with Smith and Reid (2018) that there is a need for wellbeing research to account for the ‘being’ – that is, to interrogate the ontological foundations on which it bases its knowing. In doing so, I
engage with contemporary feminist theories to account for a notion of wellbeing that is not fixed in place, but rather emerges (in, out and through) specific engagements of spatial, material and more-than-human relations. In other words, rather than trying to ‘arrive’ at a deep understanding of wellbeing, instead I aim to reveal where and when ‘wellness’ arises (Andrews et al., 2014).

Methodology

This project is part of a larger Australian study about the rise of contact sports for women, focusing on the increasing visibility and professionalisation of team sports, such as AFL football, Rugby League and Rugby Union, and of course roller derby. This study has extended my ongoing multimodal ethnography, drawing on the theoretical and conceptual frames provided by feminist new materialism, anti-racist feminism, and troubling interpretive approaches. Feedback from one of the external assessors of the fellowship application suggested it would be useful to interview not only current sport participants, but also those who had dropped out/quit/decided to leave. Attrition in sport is a challenging issue for governments and sport organisations, and the dynamics of attraction and ongoing participation – what draws people in and what supports their participation over time – are complex and often difficult to understand.

Hence, the focus of this article is women and non-binary people who, for whatever reason, have left derby. The response to the call for volunteers was immediate, with over 15 women and one non-binary person (it was an open call for ex-derby skaters) offering to be involved in the project. Those who came forward to be part of this study wanted their story heard. As P1 wrote in a note after our interview, ‘I appreciate
being able to get this stuff out’. In total, I completed 12 in-depth virtual interviews with people from all over Australia, and one from the United States over a three-month period in mid-2020. I also invited participants to send through photographs of themselves during and after their time in derby, and several did so.

I noticed that, although the participants came forward as people who had left roller derby, what emerged just as strongly was what the sport had done for them/made them feel/helped them achieve or overcome or experience – despite or (as I will further discuss) perhaps because of some of the challenges of the sport. Hence, ambivalence was a central affect that emerged in each research encounter, and the interviews provided these ‘derby dropouts’ with the opportunity to express their ambivalence without judgement. As a former derby skater myself, I could empathise with my participants and understand their passion and ‘love’ for the sport, as well as their frustrations or points of tension.

Through an orientation towards ‘not knowing’ (Lather, 2015), I practise remaining open to the uncertainties of the research process and writing, acknowledging the agency of words, technology and even theory. Below, I skate along the edge of post-qualitative inquiry, curious to bring together modes of thinking-writing, such as diary writing and prose, with sociological writing. Through this emphasis on movement and/of words my aim is to materialise the relations between gender and sport in ways that trouble normative notions of femininity and wellbeing. The quotes used are not ‘attached’ to any person, and instead represent movements of all types (big movements like relationship break ups or moving out of home, and small movements like putting on skates, or being allowed to wear a coloured bra).
This approach to post-qualitative inquiry is concerned with how *matter and movement* are entangled through methodological practices, troubling the division of theory and method, instead understanding research practices as enactments of theory-method. As Fullagar (2020a) writes,

> Movement produces multiple lines of inquiry that entangle, disturbing the linearity of a singular trajectory towards Truth. To immerse oneself in movement practices as a researcher often means relinquishing the desire to be certain of where one is going to attune to different rhythms, disruptions, senses and patterns of motion-rest. (119)

This study was about disruption to movement practices – leaving derby – yet this disruption was not the end of movement.

‘Data’: Research encounters of another kind

In this section, I provide insights into the ‘movements’ that emerged through, within and beyond the research encounters. With the study’s focus on people who had *left* roller derby, there was an emphasis on movement into *and out of* the sport that would otherwise not have been there. I engaged with the specific intent of hearing stories of derby participants who chose to leave the sport. Presenting the data in terms of movement troubles an interpretive approach and embraces the movement and non-linearity of subjectivity aligned with Barad’s (2007) agential realism. Each movement was in some way a line of flight, providing the women in the study with a sense of alignment, or resonance, or a break – a dis/connection with people, places, practices, styles, objects that supported their sense of aliveness.
Moving into derby

Putting on skates for the first time. Standing up, feeling wobbly. Practice, practice, practice. Getting stronger, more stable, faster. Buying gear: bags, pads, patches, helmets, stickers, merch. There is an expansion of possibility. I am becoming-derby as my skates, my pads, my team, the rules and regulations of derby, and the various spaces of training and skating become entangled with my everyday life.

It’s different from other sports. I remember getting in trouble with an umpire in lacrosse because I had red hair, bright red hair, and my team was blue and the other team was red and I looked too close. And it was just like, um, that’s my hair! So lacrosse, in comparison to roller derby, roller derby was just so much more free and we were allowed to be silly and we were allowed to muck around. I got to be an athlete as well as my personality, whereas in lacrosse I could just be the athlete.

I moved here to do my undergraduate degree. First time out of home, away from my parents and roller derby was top of my list of things to do. I think it sort of symbolised a really big independence that I’d be able to choose to play this sport, and it wouldn’t matter how my life was being governed by my parents, they couldn’t say no. I was living in college and I remember I bought roller skates on the internet halfway through that year, and would roller skate in the park. And fell over and got a big gash on my arm – classic starting point.
It gave me some sort of currency I suppose in old circles of mine – punk circles. I was never a musician, but now I played roller derby and that was cool. So it was very much the subcultural aspect of it that attracted me, and the grassroots sort of image that it had. I mean, we all know, scratch the surface and there was a lot more going on underneath, and you know, power plays out in a lot of different ways. But yeah, and I loved skating. I found I was good at hitting people [chuckles] and you know, that was getting noticed as someone who might develop into something worthwhile.

There was a sense of freedom moving into roller derby – freedom of movement (on skates), freedom of expression (clothing, style). This freedom was in the sense of which Grosz (2010, p. 140) writes: ‘not only or primarily as the elimination of constraint or coercion but more positively as the condition of, or capacity for, action in life’. In this conception, freedom is not associated with choice, but with autonomy. Grosz (2010, p. 152) goes on to write that ‘autonomy is linked to the ability to make (or refuse to make) activities (including language and systems of representation and value) one’s own, that is, to integrate the activities one undertakes into one’s history, one’s becoming’. The women who came forward to talk to me about their experiences of moving into (and out of) derby experienced a sense of transformation that comes from freedom – freedom not being a choice, but rather ‘an expression of who one is and what one enjoys doing, of one’s being’ (Grosz, 2010, p. 153).

**Moving through**

I can’t really remember going to too many after parties, but it was known that I liked to drink, and when I did go, there were a few skaters and myself and
various other officials and stuff, who would sort of be the last people standing. That sort of gave you your own niche within derby as well I suppose. It wasn’t judged as badly as it might have been in other circles, I suppose. I was definitely winning at the after party.

It was the closest with other women I could get, being surrounded with other feminist women, being with other women who think the same way and who want the same thing. It fulfilled a part of my soul that couldn’t be filled anywhere else. It was something I really needed. I am bi and was married to a guy and had a lot of desire for women at that time.

I felt like the contact and aggression was something missing from other types of physicality available to adult women So, the opportunity to play a contact sport was a kind of physicality that I think people have a right to. As a woman, because we are expressly denied the right to contact sport, it’s liberating. Because it was like standing up to a boy, and we found out it was an illusion and the addiction came from just wanting to participate in something that I’d been denied earlier.

I started off not being able to skate at all, and I’m a fairly big girl, I was 110 kilos when I first started. But I just used to train as the blocker. And one day a coach from another team came to do a coaching session with us, and she said to me, ‘You should be a jammer. You’re an excellent blocker, and you’re fast.’ I went, ‘Sure, alright. You know, I’m not fast enough? I’m not agile.’ All these things that I’ve been told you need to be a good jammer. And she
said, ‘No, that’s exactly why you need to be a jammer, because you’re a blocker.’ So I worked really hard at it, and I think I became a really good jammer. It was good but it was hard for them to realise – hey, these girls who are bigger, they’re helpful as well. That everybody has strengths and weaknesses.

I realised roller derby was the best way for me to relieve my stress. Sounds really weird, doesn’t it? But the physical contact of the sport I really enjoyed. Didn’t much like it when I got hurt. I got to hang out with a group of awesome people. Do some awesome things. Travel to places I wouldn’t have thought. The world opened up to me. Like I could meet people from America, who tomorrow I could call and say, ‘Hey I played with you,’ and I could go sleep on their couch tomorrow.

Moving through roller derby was an embrace of multiplicity. It was sporty and wild and tough and feminist and stress-relieving and fun. It was everything all at once. There was a sense of aliveness that had multiple points of intra-action – the physicality, the friendships, the mobility, the strength, the style. As Barad (2007, p. 171) writes, ‘the world’s effervescence, its exuberant creativeness, can never be contained or suspended. Agency never ends; it can never “run out” … but neither is anything and everything possible at any given moment.’ Holding this in tension, that something can be everything but not all at once: is a challenge for thinking about social and personal transformation. Hence there were ‘breaks’, movements, moments where the women in this study found the conditions untenable.
Moving out

And all the rock’n’roll vibe fell out the window. Everybody started dropping their roller derby names. Our uniforms looked like we played netball. I kind of think it lost – it became normal, and very samey-samey. And I think that’s when I started to think, yeah, I don’t know if this is for me anymore.

When I started, we used to have fun before bouts, like intra-league sort of bouts. A few of us were good with words, so we’d write silly limericks, smack talk sort of thing just about the other team and how we’re going to kick their arse and that sort of thing. Which we thought was fun, and then a new wave of skater came in who took derby very seriously, and the whole aesthetic, very seriously, which I think had given up on. And then someone said to me, ‘You’ve got to stop writing those limericks because someone on the other team was getting really triggered by it.’ It was upsetting them, and I was like, ‘What the fuck?’ Like where did the fun go in this? I think the tension between it being a safe place and then it wasn’t my safe place because I couldn’t be myself and have a stupid limerick, you know. It was now someone else’s safe place, because they felt threatened by my, you know, words.

I don’t know why being the president of a league suddenly makes you emotionally responsible for everybody. And I think maybe when I was younger I didn’t have the emotional intelligence to not feel responsible for everybody’s dramas. Whereas now – I work as a manager in my job. There’d be so many more things where I would’ve had a clarity about how to manage people and their expectations of what they wanted from each other. Whereas
then, as a young person, I was just like, ‘Oh my god, if you feel this strongly about everything then we should do everything to make sure that you get everything that you need.’

How is it possible to develop sport and physical activities that are inclusive and equitable? The challenge for roller derby, in its embrace of multiplicity and the entanglement of aggression and intense physical contact, as well as the mashing of music, styles and sport, was how to maintain these things. Is it possible for something to be good for everyone all the time? Rather than conceive of roller derby as some kind of coherent, unified whole that can be comprehended once and for all, it may be more useful to understand derby (and sport more broadly) as material-discursive intra-actions. This Baradian (2007) notion attempts to account for the co-constitution of phenomena – that things are not sought out and discovered, waiting for representation, but instead emerge through the acts of seeking and discovering. In other words, it is the drive to understand derby, to articulate it, to play it, to change it (its rules, codes of conduct, governance) that produces it as a phenomenon. In understanding, articulating, playing and changing, derby is made, and this involves certain exclusions – who and what is in or out is reworked.

Moving on

Yeah. I’ve kind of moved on now. It was like a really awesome part of my life. I even have tattoos about it. It was a hugely important part of my life. But it’s not a part of my life anymore. It was a hugely distinct chapter. Like I think, I used to do motorcycle riding. When I was 21 I got rid of a car and got a motorbike, and then I did roller derby, and I still had my motorbike. And I
only recently sold my motorbike because I realised I’m just holding on to memories. Because my life isn’t like that anymore. My motorbike doesn’t mean I get to stay up to two o’clock in the morning drinking coffee with a really good group of mates anymore, because they’ve all also had babies. Like, so sometimes you just have to let shit go.

As far as my body goes, I no longer smoke at all or drink to excess. Those things no longer define anything about my identity except as an anecdote among friends. I do, however, still laugh – so perhaps some parts of our identity are fixed and static. Talking to you about this stuff has actually been good, having a few laughs.

For all the people who spoke to me about their experiences, roller derby was a powerful force in their lives – if only for a short while. It set fires in bellies, blasted their lives apart or challenged them physically in a way they didn’t know they desired. For most of them, there was a sense of regret or longing. Did I leave too early? Did I stay too long? They questioned why they couldn’t manage the politics better.

In the arts and humanities, there is much talk about developing critical thinking and ‘soft skills’ of influencing, relationship-building, collaboration. Yet this is often a disembodied notion. This is similar to the social sciences and disciplines such as psychology, which struggle to account for affects and emotions (the body) as well as the social in meaningful ways. Feminist leisure studies provides a space to work through and with sport, emotion and affect, and the body in generative ways, which is the focus of the following discussion.
**Discussion of ‘troubled derby subjectivities’**

The question driving this article has been how to account for the social and the cultural with regard to mental health and wellbeing? How to account for the social in roller derby when, for so many, the politics became untenable in the longer term? This article has worked to reveal the complex relations and contradictory tensions at play between notions of belonging, freedom, wellbeing, sport and gendered subjectivities.

Roller derby is explicitly gendered, and emphasises gender rather than attempting to embody a neutral ‘athletic’ subjectivity. In doing so, derby highlights the desires of women to compete and push themselves, as well as desires for self-expression. Hence, I argue that roller derby can be conceived of in the Deleuzian sense, as a milieu, an opening, an invitation to transformations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It is an invitation to take up/embrace/express/lay bare a troubled subjectivity, and in the process make a claim/take ownership of a form of gendered embodiment uncoupled from nurturing/caring subjectivities.

This is not unproblematic, as the affective power relations at play became untenable for many of those involved, and they chose to leave the sport. This is an important dimension to this study, as it moves away from linear notions of wellbeing (that is, troubling the idea that we can simply find a sport that makes us feel better and continue on our happy way) and instead embraces a non-linear conceptualisation of wellbeing. The women’s experiences of roller derby, in all their difference, were
important in future subjectivities, in showing them what they could be and what they wanted or didn’t want to be.

Roller derby is not about ‘fixing’ a person but about embracing those aspects potentially seen as ‘broken’ (but not really). As van Ingen (2019 p. 127) notes about the boxing program in which she has been involved, ‘there is no “magic bullet” or recipe for healing’; rather, recovery and healing is something at which participants work hard at.

There is constant movement, some productive, some destructive, but all part of the ongoing becomings of the participants’ lives: movement from sport to a game; from spectacle to sport; from good to bad; from in to out (getting stress out); from straight to queer; from uniformity to diversity. Through these and more troubling movements, ‘they generate pleasure, imagination, connection, strength and freedom as a gendered bodying that is not oriented primarily around feminised expectations of pleasing others’ (Fullagar et al., 2019, p. 51).

Do derby skaters have a ‘rebellious streak’? Or perhaps a rational and clear questioning of arbitrary rules? Such as bra colour? Or sexuality? Or women not being competitive? I have titled this article “Troubled” Derby Subjectivity”. By ‘troubled’ I mean complicated, complex, non-normative, changing, fluid, surviving, traumatised, challenging. In providing space for the generation, enactment or creation of a troubled derby subjectivity, the sport may enable a mode of being and relating that cannot be found in many other places.
Because roller derby allows even total beginners to take up this subject position, there is an opportunity for fairly quick transformation – for some, they only skated for a few months or a year, but the experience helped them to move closer to a sense of who they were and where they wanted to belong. For others, it ‘woke up’ their physicality and exercise became easier for them afterwards. Roller derby was neither all-empowering nor all-disempowering, and thinking through multiplicity allows us to reveal the complex non-linearity of wellbeing in women’s lives.

Final remarks

One of the final questions worth asking is, ‘What types of worlds might be we live in where women’s participation in aggressive contact sport is encouraged, supported and accepted, and where notions of feminine fragility and vulnerability cease to exist as barriers to women’s experiences of aggression and competitiveness in sport?’

Aggression, violence and competition together describe some of the worst aspects of social life. Yet their power, or force, is sometimes required to break through or free us from certain entanglements or situations. One does not simply ‘leave’ a domestic violent relationship; instead, a person must muster every ounce of their courage and tenacity and summon all their resources to make that ‘break’. For women in particular, being ‘nice’ has been hugely important, yet being nice is not simply being kind or compassionate, but being self-sacrificing, allowing people to treat one (us? them?) as secondary citizens, loading us with labour (physical, cultural, social and emotional labour) and wondering why we aren’t smiling more.
In the most general sense, the relation between care, competitiveness and aggression is antithetical. Yet this article has to a degree demonstrated that the gendered aspects of competitiveness and aggression in relation to care for the self – and, by extension, others – have useful and productive affects on which the skaters drew for their own subjectivities.

One of the aims of this work has been to think holistically about care and be curious about the associations we make about care and how this affects how we care and who and what we care for. Butler’s (1997) political strategy of ‘unharming the harm’ resonates with research across disciplines that finds aggression helps people to recover from trauma (Weierstall et al., 2012). These multidisciplinary ideas provide a starting point for exploring the relations between care, competitiveness and aggression in sport, thus opening up the possibility for future transformations to gender relations and healing trauma.

My research uses sport as a sociocultural context through which to explore and break open new vistas of thinking and knowing about transformation, belonging and equality. Judith Butler (2015, p. 126) describes political assemblies that involve bodies acting in concert to demand the end to ‘unwilled conditions of bodily exposure’ when ‘sometimes deliberately exposing the body to possible harm is part of the very meaning of political resistance’. Many women in derby embrace the harm that is often inevitable in a sport such as this and, although many – including myself – decided to leave roller derby, exposing the body to possible harm seemed part of an important process of transformative personal gender politics, and a sense of belonging and place in the world outside of sport.
As Fullagar (2020b, p. 186) notes, ‘material feminisms contribute to rethinking subjectivity beyond liberal assumptions of a voluntaristic, (ir)rational self by positioning agency as distributed and profoundly complicated in relational ontologies, multiple forces and complex affects’. The women who came forward to participate in this study were not irrational for choosing a sport that put them at risk, nor were they choosing derby as a way to transform their lives. Instead, agency was distributed and complicated by various notions of sport and skating, and style and feminism, and politics and leadership, and injury.

To conclude, I want to reiterate a few points. The first is the notion of ‘troubled derby subjectivities’ as a kind of antidote to ‘positivity’ culture that disallows angst and strong affects, particularly for women. The second is how taking up these troubled derby subjectivities has wellbeing impacts on the women who play, beyond the sporting field and beyond the time for which they play. Although they might not be meeting physical activity guidelines (though many still are through other sport and leisure activities) these women have a clear sense of what they want, of the power relations in spaces such as derby and how they respond to these kinds of politics. Each of them also has a strong sense of their body’s capacity for strength and harm.
References


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