LACING SKATES AND UNLACING CORSETS: GENDER PLAY AND MULTIPLE FEMININITIES IN ROLLER DERBY AND NEO-BURLESQUE

by

JULES A. HELWEG-LARSEN

A THESIS

Presented to the Folklore Program
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

December 2016

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Jules A. Helweg-Larsen

Title: Lacing Skates and Unlacing Corsets: Gender Play and Multiple Femininities in Roller Derby And Neo-Burlesque

This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Folklore Program by:

Lisa Gilman	Chairperson
Phil Scher	Member

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded December 2016

THESIS ABSTRACT

Jules A. Helweg-Larsen

Master of Folklore

Folklore Program

December 2016

Title: Lacing Skates and Unlacing Corsets: Gender Play and Multiple Femininities in Roller Derby and Neo-Burlesque

Contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque, as an athletic sport and a framed staged performance respectively, each provide a space that encourages gender play through interactions between participants and audience and the role of physical body. In this thesis, I discuss how each activity allows for a multiplicity of feminine identities and commentary by performers on the social and cultural expectations of women. Drawing on performance theory, ritual theory, and gender studies, along with fieldwork, I explore how this commentary comes from participants simultaneously critiquing and embracing those expectations in their performances through costuming, use of the body, and the presence of an audience who interpret the events.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Jules A. Helweg-Larsen

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA
Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL, Canada

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Folklore, 2016 University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts in Folklore, 2014, Memorial University of Newfoundland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my most sincere appreciation to Professor Lisa Gilman for her never-ending patience, support, and guidance, and Professor Phil Scher for his feedback and assistance.

Additionally, I would like to thank my constellation, Amber Berrings, Talia Nudell, and Nikki Silvestrini, for helping me become a better person and a better academic, for helping me keep my sanity throughout this process, and for being some of the most inspiring strong, dynamic women I know. Also, a big thank you to Vanessa and Elfie Cutz, Bjorn Smars, Heather Reid, Melissa Fitzpatrick, Kelli-Rae Hynes, Hannah Kehrer, and Clare Smith. I would not be here without you.

Special thanks to the communities and individuals who contributed immensely to this research, 709 Roller Derby, Emerald City Roller Derby, The Island Belles. Our interviews were some of the best conversations I have ever had.

Most importantly, thank you to Eliza and Robin Helweg-Larsen. I feel like the luckiest daughter in all of the worlds to have you as my parents. Lots of love to the rest of my family as well, especially Geoff for excellent cheerleading and Simon for the academic insight.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

CHAPTER I

DOORS OPEN AND WELCOME TO THE SHOW

Contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque are distinct activities that both experienced a revival in the early 2000s, and share an association with counterculture. Though they are very different activities, participants of both resist Western, patriarchal gender norms through the performance of gender, the use of the physical body, and the event spaces themselves. They each have their own objectives, but can also share participants with the same people being dancers and skaters. Contemporary roller derby is a skating sport, known for its visible aggression, where two teams compete to score points on a flat, oval track. In contrast, neo-burlesque is a framed, staged performance where individuals remove articles of clothing as part of a choreographed routine along to music. Both roller derby and neo-burlesque share features of a female-dominated arena, questions of agency, gendered performance, play with dress, fictitious names, and a challenge to dominant beauty standards. Drawing from my own ethnographic fieldwork and a scholarly framework that draws from performance and feminist theories, this thesis yields insight into how roller derby and burlesque participants challenge cotemporary, Western gender norms by exhibiting multiple femininities and resisting a single definition of womanhood.

As events that are produced by women and, to an extent, for women, derby bouts and burlesque shows are spaces where participants challenge typical expectations of femininity. In contemporary American society, these expectations include being passive, being physically attractive to men and conforming to beauty standards, and participating in nurturing roles that foster empathy. Within this system, women are often juxtaposed

with men, and are considered physically weaker and dependent, while also available and attentive to men's "needs." This interaction of femininity with male dominance contributes to patriarchal gender norms or expectations of women's behavior that relate to and reinforce the idea of women as subservient to men. While this construct is the most pervasive idea of femininity in the United States, there are in fact multiple femininities that exist simultaneously. Derby and burlesque are some of the many places multiple femininities are performed, commented on, and resisted. To do so, the events redefine "masculine" traits and exaggerate displays of femininity.

My major line of inquiry is exploring how participants in both use the contrasting arenas of athletic sport and strip performance to perform multiple femininities. Burlesque is a framed performance consisting of displays of explicit gender and sexuality. Derby can be considered a performance because of its costuming, presence of exaggerated personalities, the mascots, the skits used to introduce the teams, and the audience. In both activities, gender is on display and is an active part of how people engage with bouts and shows. The liminal spaces created, along with the presence of an audience and the role of the physical body, allow participants and audience members to play with and redefine ideas about gender and sexuality. Both derby and burlesque challenge the conception of one type of femininity and the devalued gender norms typically associated with women.

This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork pertaining to both roller derby and burlesque over the course of two years (2014-2016), primarily focused on interviews and field notes. I conducted fieldwork with the 709 Roller Derby and Island Belles Burlesque troupe in St. John's, Newfound, Canada, and Emerald City Roller Derby (ECRD) in Eugene, Oregon, United States, as well as attended multiple events hosted by other

groups in the United States. 709 Roller Derby was the main source of inspiration for looking at the crossover between the two activities as multiple members of the league are also part of The Island Belles Burlesque troupe. Although not explicitly participating in burlesque, speaking with members of Emerald City Roller Derby provided additional insight into my research.

My fieldwork took place among predominantly white populations, with Western views of sexuality and gender roles. The women were predominantly middle class, and came from a variety of occupations. The majority of the participants in roller derby and in neo-burlesque in the scenes I researched were presumed Euro-American. There are, however, many skaters and dancers of color, as well as burlesque troupes dedicated to people of color and their experiences.

I interviewed five members of the 709 Roller Derby, four of which are also members of the Island Belles Burlesque, during the summer of 2016 in Newfoundland. I also interviewed a friend who has actively attended events for both activities for years. I also discussed my work with the local derby community in Eugene, Oregon and conducted five interviews with players for additional perspectives. In these sessions, I tried to let my interviewees direct the conversations. I asked questions pertaining to the performance of gender, the body, and event spaces. We also discussed the role of derby and burlesque in their everyday lives and the greater social impact these activities could have for women in the United States and Canada. My goal was to gain insight into how roller derby and burlesque are viewed by their participants as a source for empowerment and a venue for resistance to expectations of gender.

In relation to my fieldwork, it is important to note that I am not a skater in either

ECRD or 709 Roller Derby, or a burlesque dancer. However, I do consider myself to be part of the communities where my research took place, and my participants and friends who do one or both activities have reaffirmed my role. I have attended bouts for both derby leagues and performances by the Island Belles, as well as events hosted by additional groups in Oregon and North Carolina, for the past five years. I also participated in the ECRD recreation league for one term to learn the basics of skating and observe the inner workings of the organization. I have a similar identity to my informants as I am a white, middle-class, British and Canadian citizen who grew up in the United States. I also identify with the gender I was assigned at birth, meaning I will be accurately perceived as a woman based on my body, which may add to my rapport with my participants as well. As a woman in the United States, I have similar experiences to my interviewees, which could create a dynamic where they felt more comfortable to talk to me than they would with a man. Along with this racial and gender privilege, I am a master's student with an education and training that gives me additional advantage. I recognize these factors led to being able to do research within the derby and burlesque communities, and they most likely made it easier to connect to my interviewees.

For a general overview, contemporary roller derby is a flat-track skating sport where two teams compete by racing around an oval track with the jammer, or point scorer, trying to pass the members of the opposing team. A game, called a bout, consists of two thirty minute periods with two minute rounds called jams. It is primarily a women's sport, but there are also men's and junior leagues. As a sport with international tournaments and rankings, there are two primary governing organizations, WFTDA and MRDA. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) insures female skaters

and provides guidelines for their leagues and sport regulations, while Men's Roller Derby Association (MRDA) provides the same for male skaters. Due to the high numbers of trans and gender queer individuals who participate in derby, there is currently a lot of debate within derby communities about the gender segregation, but for the most part these individuals can belong to whichever association they choose.

Academic engagement with roller derby, as a newly revived sport, is growing, mainly situated within the social sciences. Whether viewed as a force of resistance or as a means of empowerment, articles about derby address the interactions with the cultural and social gender expectations in the United States through combining the athletic aspects of derby and feminist and gender theory. While men's derby leagues exist, the scholarship I have found only deals with the women, and specifically those who are at the competitive skill level. Most of the articles use ethnographic research for support, incorporating narratives from participating derby skaters. To some degree, the scholarship also emphasizes the community that exists among derby participants and the tensions within that community. Articles by Garber (2012), Kearney (2011), and Pavlidis (2013) examine derby through representation on television and in blogs, while those by Beaver (2014) and Eklund (2014) discuss the body. Donnelly (2014) discusses the effect of alcohol in derby events and socialization. All of the articles embrace derby as a women's sport that challenges athletic norms and provides individual experiences for all those involved. Other reoccurring themes in the scholarship include the characteristics of derby events, including costuming, personas of the players, do-it-yourself practices, and the relationship to the audience.

Burlesque, or "the art of tease," is a performance genre centered around variety

shows and stripping. There are many types of burlesque styles, the most commonly known being classical and neo-burlesque. Originally considered "low-brow comedy," burlesque was a form of entertainment for the lower classes that commented on the social and economic divisions of the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the 1950s, the genre shifted to classical burlesque, which placed emphasis on glamour and highly feminized aesthetics with less parody (Allen 1991, Zemeckis 2013). Contemporary burlesque, called neo-burlesque, is a revival of the classical style with a twist. Compared to its inspiration, neo-burlesque features a stronger emphasis on female empowerment and sexuality as well as body positivity. Neo-burlesque events usually take place in bars with predominantly female participants who perform a choreographed striptease along to (often contemporary pop) music. Parody, drag, and the grotesque play a prominent role in the dance routines, as does social commentary on women's experiences in the United States.

There has been a substantial amount written on classical burlesque and the history of the performance genre, mostly in the form of descriptive books that offer a snapshot into a bygone era. *Horrible Prettiness* by Robert Clyde Allen (1991) provides the history of the burlesque through the revival in the 1950s while also delving into its role as an American cultural phenomenon. Neo-burlesque, the contemporary form of the late 1990s and early 2000s is now finding its place in gender studies as well as theater studies (Dodds 2013, Siebler 2014, Nally 2009).

Regarding the crossover between the two activities, David Owen's article "Neo-Burlesque and the Resurgence of Roller Derby: Empowerment, Play, and Community" (2014) provides an excellent foundation for establishing the two are related. Using

ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, Owen discusses how community and interaction with the audience are essential to both events. Natalie Peluso's doctoral dissertation in philosophy "High Heels and Fast Wheels: Alternative Femininities in Neo-Burlesque and Flat-Track Roller Derby" (2010) also looks at the two events together, focusing on how individuals negotiate their identity, especially gender identity, through their participation in the two activities.

Using performance theory (Bauman, Owen), ritual theory (Avery, Turner), and gender studies (Coles, Peluso), I argue that the liminal event spaces in derby and neo-burlesque allow for participants and audience members to experience a multiplicity of gender identities (specifically femininities). This occurs through performance, audience interactions, and the role of the physical body. My first chapter begins by introducing the events, describing them as liminal spaces, and how gender is performed within them. Chapter two addresses audience interactions at a derby bout and a burlesque show, then interrogates interpretation and intention in relation to the audience. The final chapter looks at the physical body and costuming practices in roller derby then burlesque, analyzing what the bodies communicate and how. Lastly, the conclusion engages with a critique of the events and the aftereffects of attending or participating in them.

CHAPTER II

WHEELS AND HEELS: EVENT SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY ROLLER DERBY AND NEO-BURLESQUE

In order to understand how participants in contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque perform multiple femininities, I first examine the events as performances and the event spaces as liminal, then explore how the performance of gender occurs in these spaces. Both roller derby and burlesque are public events that occur in multipurpose spaces with high levels of audience interaction. According to Richard Bauman, performance consists of "an aesthetically marked and heighted mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (Bauman 1992, 41). In roller derby and burlesque, this communication occurs in relation to gender, values of the communities, and celebrating women. Using Bauman's approach (Bauman 1992, 2001, 2012), both derby and burlesque feature the situational markers and required characteristics of performance, despite derby's emphasis on athleticism. By creating liminal spaces, these communicative events allow for gender play and the subversion of gender expectations as the dancers, skaters, and supporters challenge the gender binary and redefine what it means to be feminine or masculine.

In my interview with burlesque performer Wanker Girl (derby name Bettie Pain), she described participants in the derby and burlesque communities as the most "beautifully foul-mouthed women I've ever encountered in my entire life and that just seems equally feminine, which is so weird, because it's not the traditional term. If it is produced by a female it is therefore feminine." Using this perspective, being feminine goes beyond the traditional, Western, heteronormative expectations and includes being rough, aggressive, sexy, in control, funny, and so on. This twist on femininity also applies

to being large and curvy, having attitude and being loud, and playing a full-contact sport.

In this chapter, I analyze contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque events as liminal spaces that allow for the expression of multiple femininities through performance. To do so, I first present Avery's framework for the analysis of rave events and masculinities and Tony Coles' concept of the multiplicity of dominant masculinities to show how these events create an atmosphere for multiple expressions of gender identity and feminine identities. The following sections describe roller derby and burlesque events, the event spaces, and the performance of gender within them. The chapter ends with analyzing the performance of gender as it pertains to *multiple* femininities within these activities, rather than Peluso's application of alternative femininities.

In his article "'I Feel That I'm Freer to Show My Feminine Side': Folklore and Alternative Masculinities in a Rave Scene", Avery discusses how rave participants in New Mexico redefine and expand on masculinity through entering a liminal space. Using ritual theory, Avery argues that when attending a rave, by entering the event and separating themselves from the ordinary world, men are able to express themselves using typically feminine traits and becoming "softer". Within the event frame, values of peace, love, unity, and respect distinguish the dancers from those outside of the rave who engage with racism, misogyny, homophobia, and so forth. As Avery states "Rave is, in part, then, a site for an idealistic political consciousness; reminiscent of the happening scene, it is a politics of peace and pleasure" (Avery 2005, 158). By stepping into a liminal space, interacting with others in the community, dancing, and adornment the male participants can explore alternative masculinities in a supported environment.

Burlesque shows and derby bouts operate in a similar vein as the rave events

Avery describes as they also engage with an “idealistic political consciousness.” They each also create a liminal space that can lead to cultural transformation in regards to gender. In “Liminality and Communitas,” (2004) Victor Turner describes liminality as ambiguous, neither here nor there, and without status or distinction. As part of a Van Gennep's rites of passage, liminality is part of the transitional time between stages. Within the rites of passage and ritual, it consists of communitas, ludic recombination, and the sacra. Focusing on communitas, there is unstructured society and equality among people of contrasting status, creating a space for reversals. By ritually separating from everyday life, liminality represents a rejection of separation, bringing people to the same level into a “generic bond,” and negotiating authority. In this state, normalities are turned upside down and transgressions occur. Among these transgressions, gender can be challenged, expanded, and redefined. Applied to roller derby and burlesque, the event spaces are liminal because of the reversal of gender norms, the promotion of equality and inclusiveness, and the playful nature.

In these events, however, the end result in regards to gender is quite different from Avery's analysis as the events have such a strong focus on women and their achievements. First, the event spaces create an atmosphere that assigns more value to feminine traits such as being open and emotional or taking care of others. There is also a strong emphasis on women helping women, creating what Mikki Malevolent (burlesque name Pearl E. Buttons) describes as a “community of helping each other” where collaboration and working together towards a core objective are highly valued. Describing the Island Belles, she said:

> “As a group of women, we do have fundraisers supporting other causes. They've done a breast cancer show, so all of the money

> raised was for breast cancer. […] I think it's a really good positive where people can see that, and can be really important. We just recently did a show for Planned Parenthood at the beginning of this year, which is helping the community, and I want people to be able to see that. It's not just women taking off their clothes and dancing on stage. We do try to give back to our community, and we try to put on shows for the community, so it would be nice for people to see that too and not just 'oh, it's just a burlesque show.'"

Second, they allow women to adopt traits that are typically viewed as masculine and redefine them. My interviewees consistently described how participating in these activities was "badass," commenting on the strength it takes to do each of them. In derby, this strength is physical as it is a necessary part of game play. Many derby players have extensive training regimes to build muscle and agility, which is usually viewed as masculine. In burlesque, strength comes in the form of being brave enough to be on stage and literally strip down to a state of vulnerability. While "brave" and "strong" are often adjectives associated with masculinity, the core participants will claim these traits and define them as feminine rather than accepting the idea that they are acting like men.

The events also cause the men in the audiences to act in ways that are counter to hegemonic-masculinity. While not the core participants in most cases, the (presumed) men who come to the shows also go through a cultural transformation. They act as witnesses to women being the ones who hold power and commanding respect and attention on their own terms. Men are invited to celebrate women and their bodies, sexuality, and agency. These spaces challenge the societal standard where men are typically expected to be the dominant power, and that women should cater to them. While Avery discusses how raves allow men to be softer or subdued, derby and burlesque allow women to be assertive and, in a sense, released. In derby, this could inaccurately be seen as skaters showing their "masculine side." For those in the community, it is not that the

players are acting like men, they are pushing the boundary (through a liminal space) on what is considered feminine.

By redefining what it means to be feminine, the events also open up the opportunity to express multiple femininities. In "Negotiating the Field of Masculinity: The Production and Reproduction of Multiple Dominant Masculinities," Coles uses Connell's hegemonic masculinity and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and fields to look at a multiplicity of masculinities. Referencing Connell, Coles explains hegemonic masculinity as referring to how men occupy positions of power, which then produce, legitimate, and reproduce their social dominance. This concept relies on the subordination of women. Coles then expands on this idea with the idea of multiple dominant masculinities, stating "Bourdieu's concept of fields allows for a variety of dominant masculinities to exist. As there are a multitude of fields in which masculinities operate, so too are there necessarily different versions of dominant (and subordinate) masculinities" (Coles 2005, 42). That is, there is not one singular hegemonic masculinity, but *many forms* of dominant masculinities depending on the field, or domain of social life, one is engaging with. Both hegemonic masculinity and dominant masculinities occur at a structural level and in men's everyday lives.

Using Avery and Coles together to look at these event spaces, derby and burlesque allow for a wider range of gender performance than participants may experience in their everyday lives while also inviting a variety of femininities to exist. Some femininities are consistent with hegemonic femininity (which reinforces men's subordination of women), others challenge it, and some do both. By attending,

participating, or discussing these events, it becomes possible to deny the gender binary (of male versus female) and the associated behaviors and norms.

Talk Derby to Me: Introduction to Contemporary Roller Derby

In the midst of a second revival, women's roller derby is now a worldwide phenomenon with teams on six continents and an international governing body. Overseen by the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), the sport is known for its visible aggression and association with counter-culture. Initially popular in the 1940s, and then in the 1990s, roller derby has again resurfaced over the last ten years with a strong following of fans and fellow players. Each league and each team are unique in many ways, with their own guidelines and ideas of representation, but there are also some unifying factors aside from the rules and general gameplay. Common associations with derby include fishnet stockings, tattoos, brightly dyed hair, and pseudonyms chosen by the players. League names often come from their city location and use elements from the local to reinforce that relationship. In terms of folklore studies, roller derby is interesting as there are multiple levels of gender and sexuality negotiation, power dynamics, performance, and many aspects of identity. Played predominately by women in their 20s-40s, the player's individual choice of pseudonym and constructed identity are also often inspired by contemporary pop culture references such as "Mad Thighs Moody" (*Harry Potter*), "Rainbow Fight" (cartoon character), "Faith Kill" (musician), "Mary Pain Swatson" (*Spiderman*), and so on.

If attending a roller derby bout for the first time, there is one thing any audience member is bound to notice: Women's roller derby is not like other sports. To the unfamiliar audience member, the action on track may appear chaotic rather than strategic,

dangerous, and fast-paced. The players have varying levels of combined individualism and uniformity, and persona-style names. It is increasingly a family sport, not one belonging to a hidden underground community, with children running around the sidelines. It is also predominately a women's sport, and celebrated as one, compared to the masculine association of most sports. Retaining components of its first round of popularity, derby has an exaggerated theatrical nature incorporated in varying degrees by the different players. This theatricality can be seen in the mascots, costuming, and skits by the players during the introductions, and the overall atmosphere of the arenas as especially rowdy and even playfully bizarre. Most importantly, unlike common popular sports, there is an expectation that there may be many people in attendance who are new to derby at each bout, and accommodations are put in place in order to make them feel more at ease. If the event has programs, they include the rules and general information about the sport, otherwise the announcers often do their best to explain what is happening.

My own interest in roller derby stems from my experience in 2011 as a volunteer at a recruitment night for 709 Derby in St. John's, Newfoundland, as well as continued attendance as an audience member there and in Eugene, Oregon. While it was new to me at the time, I have since developed a love for the sport and I briefly participated in the Emerald City Roller Derby Recreation league in 2015 where I learned the basics of skating and worked with active skaters. Every bout I go to, I leave feeling energized and empowered. I walk out knowing that being a girl is more than okay and that you can be a woman and kick ass. Women can be strong, aggressive, and emotional without being seen as taboo. Even though I am not a skater and do not play derby, I leave feeling like I am

part of something great. Bouts are high energy and fun. And for me, they do something important. From what I've learned in my fieldwork, derby events bring together people that grew up feeling like outsiders, like they didn't fit in or fit the mainstream expectations of them, and gives them a space to be themselves and be appreciated for being themselves.

Every derby league is different depending on the location in regards to space, support and sponsors, and nearby resources. The two leagues I have worked with, 709 Roller Derby and Emerald City Roller Derby, are drastically different despite sharing the same rule book for the sport. Newfoundland is expensive to travel to and from, and has limited options for spaces where to host events, so 709 Roller Derby has to make do with what it has access to. Compared to a 709 bout, Emerald City games allow the audience to be closer to the action and have a higher production effort for each event. Because the space is more intimate and the team participates in national rankings, there is a high level of commotion as soon as one enters the building. They are, for lack of a better term, more professional about the sport side of roller derby. The difference in resources and space then leads to a drastically different event experience at each. While a fan would be familiar at both, participation and the interactions with gender, the body, and the space will be different.

709 Roller Derby:

Since its beginning in 2009, 709 Roller Derby in St. John's, Newfoundland (Canada) has developed a strong following. Hosting events during the summer, the bouts take place at the Glacier in Mt. Pearl, a multipurpose arena space about fifteen minutes away from downtown St. John's. Doors open half an hour before the bout starts, with loud music blaring that can be heard from the parking lot. Before doors open, there is a

line going down the sidewalk, sometimes with a news crew covering the event. Strangers often comment to each other in line, often discussing if this is their first time at a bout or if they are a veteran participant. These conversations also contribute to a sense of community as people connect to each other without prior familiarity.

Once through the door, there is a ticketing table with friendly volunteers and event programs. Moving into the main event space, one is met with people mingling around and finding seats, music, and skaters warming up on the makeshift oval track below. Seating is split between two areas: tiered stadium seating with chairs in a variety of colors, and the 19+ section where beer is available for purchase and people can sit in the suicide seating. Suicide seating, also known as the crash zone, is a section of floor seating right up to the track. In theory, if a skater falls during game play, they can fly into the area, making it a somewhat dangerous place to be.

The bout starts with each team coming from the locker rooms under the stadium seating, lapping around the track as the announcers name off all of the players. Some skaters throw a hand up and wave when their name is called, identifying themselves for those in the audience. The audience usually claps along the whole time, occasionally adding in extra yells if they know the skater personally or if they especially enjoy the player's name. The players then line up on the sideline across from the stands, a locally known theater performer sings the “Ode to Newfoundland,” the skaters have their gear checked for safety, and then the bout begins.

For those new to the sport, announcers will invite them to ask those in the audience who are more familiar with the gameplay for explanations as well as provide additional information when reporting on the game. The programs also have game basics

and examples of the calls referees might make, as well as the photos and names of the participating skaters.

When the skaters come out, most players wear uniform team athletic tops, but they also have a wide range of personalization such as stickers on their helmets or fun leggings. As soon as they move onto the track, the audience members often shift their conversations to talking about skaters' costuming choices and any player names they find to be particularly clever. Some personal favorites from 709 Derby include "eff ewe", "HERicane", and "Ice Cream Slamwich". If my friends and I have anyone with us who are experiencing derby for the first time, we start thinking about what the new attendee's derby name would be. At our table, we laugh and buy each other drinks, and yell loudly to cheer the Neversweets on. Kelly Drover, a fellow folklorist, has signs that support her girlfriend on the Sweets as well as the team overall that we take turns waving. Throughout the evening, we go back and forth between talking, cheering, and adding our empty beer cups to the beeramid (a pyramid or wall of the empties for skaters to crash into). As the bout gets into full motion, the noise and energy of the space amps up, building as the score goes up. People cheer or call out instructions to the skaters, the announcers help describe what is happening on the track for the onlookers, and music comes and goes during set up periods. The loud music is an effective way to cover the dead air during timeouts and lining up, which often result in audience members and skaters dancing in place.

Once it gets going, the space becomes chaotic. There is constant noise and movement, the players become a hodgepodge mix of bodies and colors. Those sitting at the tables in the beer garden (drinking area) share commentary between tables even if

they wouldn't interact in any other environment. Those at our table, as Sweets supporters, often have tension with a table of regular Vixen fans, but still joke around and comment on contributions to the beeramid. We explain rules or successful plays with newcomers, look at the various visible tattoos, and guess where the names and number choices came from. Once the bout is over, we walk up to the track and reach out our hands to high-five and congratulate each player on a good game as the teams take turns coming around. The space then becomes quiet as people disperse, either waiting for their friends or heading home, before reconvening at the after party.

Usually held at the Station, a dive bar near downtown St. John's, the after party is a chance for the supporters and skaters to hang out together and dance, usually to nostalgic pop music from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Players and skaters often pull each other towards the dance floor, moving between the various circles of dancers, and requesting songs. Having taken over the bar, the derby community is one unit, at least until last call and everyone trickles home.

Emerald City Roller Derby: The Professional Amateurs

> ECRD Mission Statement: Emerald City Roller Derby is apart of the Women's Flat Track Roller Derby Association (WFTDA). We are a league of amateur skaters, competing at a regional and international level. We encourage athleticism and personal growth in a supportive and positive environment. As a non-profit based in Lane County, Oregon, we strive to strengthen our community with our inclusive activities and events that are locally supported and member-driven. (From the Emerald City Roller Derby website, November 10, 2016)

Founded in 2006, the Emerald City Roller Derby in Eugene, Oregon has a range of events, including regular bouts, a championship, and it hosts an international derby tournament as well as a variety of fundraisers and awareness campaigns. The league is comprised of the All Stars team, which competes for national rankings, three inner-league

teams with a home season, the Junior Gems (for those under 18 years old, co-ed), and multiple levels of recreational league. They also have a close partnership with the Lane Country Concussion (LCC), the local men's team. The events I am focusing on are those framed as competitive, official, and with fans present, and exclude junior bouts. Bouts are held indoors at the Lane County Fairgrounds in Eugene. Doors open at 5:00PM with the first game starting at 6:00, and the second ending between 9:30 and 10PM followed by two after-parties. Because the events are family oriented, there is an all ages after party at Sizzle Pie, a pizza restaurant downtown, as well as the one for people over twenty-one at a rotating local bar.

During my fieldwork, The ECRD derby bouts sold out almost every time, drawing in 300 audience members on top of the volunteers, officials and organizers, and skaters who can also be included as onlookers. Demographically, the audience is similar to the skaters as the majority (but not all) appears white, between the ages of 20 and 50, with a mix of men, women, and gender queer individuals. There are numerous families in the stands with young children and babies present. It is also fairly common to have player's family members there, including parents and spouses, often with signs that reference their relationship to the player.

As derby uses multipurpose spaces for their events, every league produces a different spatial relationship between the action and the audience. At the ECRD bouts, the oval track takes up a large portion of the building, with “crash zone” seating around one of the curves of the oval. There is then a large gap that serves as a walkway leading to washrooms and the food and drink as well as navigation space for skaters. This gap splits the track and crash zone seating from the bleachers, divided into three sections, where

most of the audience sits. The three sections of the bleachers are for each participating team, marked with banners and fan signs. There is also a merchandise table near the entrance, featuring shirts and hoodies, stickers, and other themed items that represent each of the three local teams as well as the Emerald City league as a whole.

Performing Gender in Roller Derby

Performing gender in women's roller derby comes through the ways in which the participants engage with the perceptions of sport and aggression as masculine. Done on an individual basis, skaters each have their own emphasis on or rejection of mainstream gender norms, seen through the theatricality and athleticism of the activity. Some players actively wear traditional markers of femininity such as pearls, tutus, or fishnet stockings, taking a stand that femininity should not be undervalued. There is also the emphasis on "girl power," or how women should be celebrated for being women, and therefore things that are viewed as feminine should be valued. On the other hand, those who reject typically feminine identifiers (such as pink, makeup, tutus) still feel at home in roller derby by not having to conform to the standards imposed on women in other venues. These skaters can have short hair without facing commentary, they can avoid the pressure to wear revealing clothing that accentuates curves, and they deliberately dress in a way that communicates a rejection of what it means to be feminine. For example, the ECRD player "the StrangeHer" wears the standard uniform, meaning a sleeveless high collar jersey and athletic pants (such as leggings or yoga pants), and paints a mustache on her face. In my interview with Strange expressed her discomfort with her gender growing up as she did not fit into the expectations of being a girl, saying:

> "I'm not a typical female I guess. ... I was definitely much more of a tomboy. I've always kind of been on the butchier, dykier side.

> Initially with roller derby, I was a little apprehensive to get involved because … I thought that was for women that wore fishnets and, you know, and had on these little booty shorts or whatever. [Since then] it's become more of an athletic sport … so I liked it because I've always been an athlete. But then I didn't feel like the typical female so it just kind of came about that I was a 'strange girl'. It just became 'the strange her.'"

Derby is therefore a space for her to perform her rejection of expected gender norms as a woman in the United States. For others, this rejection could also be viewed as a challenge to redefine what constitutes being feminine.

Setting the Stage: Introduction to Neo-burlesque

For many people in America, the term "burlesque" will bring either the New York-based performer Dita Von Tease or the movie *Burlesque* starring Christina Aguilera (2010) to mind. Women are in bright lights, wearing glamourous garments, and embracing their sexuality on stage. Sometimes the clothes come off, and sometimes the women sing, but all around burlesque promises a good time. Neo-burlesque still has the same premise, but with a twist. Often found in bars, the space features a familiar setup, consisting of a lighted stage with the darkened audience directionally seated or standing facing it, and the expectation of framed performance. While these spaces are only temporarily used and separates contemporary burlesque from the romantic notions of old clubs, the premise of the show is still fundamentally the same. Performers, usually women, remove articles of clothing as part of a choreographed routine to music. The space, however, is not the only shift in the contemporary performance. Despite the romantic or exotic notions and links to the occupation of stripping, neo-burlesque exists in a new and unique form of performance, as seen through the performers, the audience, and the performance itself.

As a convention of the performance genre, burlesque shows emphasize openness

towards individuals who do not fit into a heteronormative binary. The communities are intended to be welcoming for multiple gender identities and sexual orientations. In my conversations with dancers however, there is often a perception that mainstream burlesque (versus the queer burlesque subgenre which I later explain) mostly consists of heterosexual women as performers and within the audience. That is, while being open to people of all sorts, participants and audience members place an emphasis on straight women. From my observations as a scholar and discussions with members of burlesque communities however, burlesque has a complex relationship to those who identify as queer. One cannot assume the performers or audiences are heteronormative or heterosexual, nor can they assume a large queer presence. But, even if a burlesque show is not explicitly intended for a queer community, it is presented as a supported space for differently gendered individuals.

As described by Allen in *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, burlesque "is one of the several nineteenth-century entertainment forms that is grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque" (Allen 1991, 26). While giving a historical overview, Allen states that the striptease aspect that is so prominently associated with the art only became incorporated into burlesque in the 1920s. Previously, beginning around 1868, the focus of the performance was comedy and overall shock value through drama and dance. Performers would use tactics that would offend the audience through vulgarity and slapstick routines. Sexuality was still a large factor, but disrobing only came in later.

It is also this grounding that, despite many associations, makes burlesque distinct from cabaret. In modern contexts, the terms are often used interchangeably or

misunderstood. Contemporary burlesque features the striptease and embodies the grotesque, such as routines involving blood. Cabaret can still include stripping but features more showcases of talent, with the inclusion of singing, live instrumental accompaniment, recitation, or drama but without the crudeness. Burlesque consists of on-stage performances that feature a mostly separated audience, which is different from occupational stripping.

Every burlesque event is its own experience with specific combinations of performers, themes, the audience, the venue, and even the emcee. For the most part, performance routines consist of one person. With troupe shows, however, such as the Island Belles, there will be multiple group dances as well as paired performers throughout the evening as well. It is also important to note, that while there may be an overall theme, the routines themselves are still stand alone acts. The use of space, such as coming into the audience, is up to the performer's discretion, but also depends on the location. Burlesque shows are often held in bars, meaning the performance is mostly directed to those who already drink and get rowdy. Though there is usually a cover, these bars are public and open to anyone over the legal drinking age. Overall, the shows mostly draw friends and those who identify as “alternative,” or as part of subculture that are counter to the mainstream, as spectators or performers.

There is a joke that the most unifying element of burlesque shows could be the essential presence of glitter. Being on stage with varying degrees of distance from the audience, anything with a shine is a way to draw and keep attention to the performer. Costumes, exaggerated makeup, props, and playing with loose glitter all work towards that effect, as well as the juxtaposition of combining black and brightly colored clothing

and makeup.

Pseudonyms, Personas, and Personalities: Burlesque Performers

Burlesque dancers have been predominantly female since the 1800s, increasingly so until the genre we have today. Historically, as discussed by Allen, there was a time of male and female partner comedy acts that gradually fell out of use as the focus became more sexualized performance, emphasizing the role of the woman as an object of male desire. Today, despite the growing number of male dancers and male-only troupes, the female burlesquers still dominate the scene. While there is a diverse range of the performers' body types, ages, and styles, the performers are mostly white women. As is common with occupational strippers, female dancers have stage names. There appears to be no set formula or spirit to the names, but they are often made up of two or three words. Many performers use props as part of their routine, including chairs, giant feather fans, and narrative elements that relate to their persona or music choices. Some of these personas may relate to an event theme, while others could be inspired by a performer's fandom identity.

As previously mentioned, burlesque as a performance is distinct from occupational stripping despite the spotlight on the removal of clothing. This is largely in part to the lack of arousal of the audience as mentioned earlier, but also in the lack of standardized tipping rituals for individual performers. In her book *Strip Show* (2002), Katherine Liepe-Levinson analyzes these rituals and the power dynamics involved. Stripping is an occupation that revolves around the performers working for tips in various ways: interacting with ring-side seats, giving individual and off-stage attention, table and lap dances, and on-stage invitations. Although this is predominantly for the male gaze,

the economic transaction gives the dancers a degree of agency as they are only playing a fantasy part because they are paid for it. In situations of male strippers for a female audience, some scholars argue that women still seek to be the object of desire (Liepe-Levinson 2002, Siebler 2015). Through paying for such attention, however, even as audience members they still maintain that same agency through choice. Tipping rituals overall are a large part of what makes the analysis of stripping contentious. In burlesque, tipping mostly functions in the background, and usually in the form of general collection. There are often buckets for donations or a fundraiser aspect (such as raffle tickets) that benefit the performers as a cohesive unit rather than individual dancers. Furthermore, performers are typically doing burlesque as a job. The Island Belles, for example, participate just because they love it. There is no financial reimbursement aside from donations. While there are some troupes who encourage tips for individual dancers, the object of the ritual is still celebration of the dancer and their performance rather than paying for a fantasy.

Like occupational stripping, burlesque does embrace elements of fantasy. According to Liepe-Levinson, fantasy is essential to the success of the performance within the strip event. Not just in terms of ambiance and costuming, but in the effect on the patrons. The dancers want to enthrall their onlookers, have them believe the fantasy, because it means more tips. Going to these shows is referred to multiple times as a "vacation" by the author, meaning as a change of scenery (Liepe-Levinson 2002, 50), but also as a voyage into another world. The audience member travels, through the performance of fantasy, to a point of erotic arousal, which can then create various micro-performances by them as well. In burlesque, fantasy is similarly created through

costumes, including occupational uniforms, and themed events but also through imagined reality and the proximity to near-naked bodies. For many burlesque dancers, agency includes ideas of having control over one's own body as women. The event also works as a supported space for equality pertaining to gender identity and sexual orientation which does not exist in our society today (drawing on issues of the wage gap, bathroom regulations, and other forms of discrimination that women and LGBTQIAA individuals experience).

I barely remember my first experience at a burlesque show. I believe it was the one or two burlesque numbers within a larger dance production during my first year of university at the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2007, which is now only a rough memory of feather boas, corsets, and lots of pink and black. What I do remember is when burlesque first had a profound impact on my worldview: my first Island Belles event in 2012. Having attended a handful of burlesque shows by this point, I thought it would just be entertaining and full of glitter and glam like the others. And to be fair, it was. But it also had me contemplating what spaces exist for women in American and Canadian society, especially women identified as "plus-sized", and their sexuality. I saw women taking charge, taking up space, and celebrating themselves. Though I have never participated as a performer, becoming a frequent attendee has inspired me to place more confidence in myself and a high value on women's relationships with each other, and with their own bodies. It is thought the event space that these shifts become possibly as a result of performances and interactions with the audience. I have found similar experiences at the Wayward Lamb's queer burlesque show "Unveiled" in Eugene, Oregon.

Island Belles Burlesque:

When I asked Wanker Girl why she does burlesque, she responded "I could see the influence that it had on people and the influence that it had on me. It was really important for me to make people feel comfortable with expressing what they found beautiful." Directly pertaining to wanting people to find larger-size women beautiful, the event space for the burlesque show makes it possible to subvert expectations of gender and sexuality. Hosting shows every three months, the Island Belles Burlesque draws in a large and noisy crowd to the Rockhouse on George Street every time.

Coming into the space, there is a table with candy and informational flyers, either about the Belles or other Rockhouse events, which funnels event goers through for tickets, wristbands, and ID checks. The main floor is mostly open, with pillars throughout with ledges for drinks. There are three bar stations, two on the main floor and one upstairs. When entering the Rockhouse, one is met with music, people chatting and dancing, low lighting. The burlesque shows (like most shows in Newfoundland) do not start on time, so there is always time to kill beforehand by getting drinks and finding a place to stand. There are tables and chairs closer to the stage for the "VIPs", also known as the glitter pit or sparkle seating, often made up of close friends, organizational supporters, and photographers who have paid a higher price for their ticket. This area has the highest interaction between the audience and the Belles, as well as the audience with the emcee and stage kittens. "Stage kittens" are responsible for clearing the stage in-between routines and setting up for the next act. This includes picking up the discarded clothing, removing and bringing out props, and often sweeping the stage of excessive glitter and other costuming debris such as feathers from boas. The kittens are usually not one of the dance performers, but still play up their sexuality and respond to audience

cheers and whistles as they clear the stage. When bending down to pick up clothing, they often wiggle their buttocks towards the audience or shake their shoulders to draw attention to their breasts. Kittens are usually women, and have similar costuming practices to the dancers such as corsets and lingerie.

Each event is themed and lasts approximately an hour and a half, with an intermission in the middle. Photos are allowed, and encouraged with a hashtag. Each show has a theme, past ones including “Fever,” “Full Frontal Nerdity,” “Shaken and Stirred,” and “Belles and Wheels.” Under the low lighting and the pressure of other people present, the main goal of the burlesque show is entertainment, but also supporting women and their bodies. Unlike occupational stripping, the aim is not to turn on the members of the audience and feed into their sexual fantasies. Instead, the performer directs their attention to the audience as a whole, and uses it as a source of empowerment. As Wanker Girl described, the show acts as a medium to show that larger women are beautiful and sexy. Usually beginning with the traditional “Baby Belles” number for first-time performers, the routines are a mix of formulaic and individualized. The costumes are varied, but the majority are highly feminized with polka-dots, lace, glitter, and bright colors.

With all of the eye-catching aesthetics, the thing that grabs my attention the most as an audience member is not the lights or colors or glitter, but the confidence with which the performers move and interact with the audience. Wanker Girl is especially skilled at demanding attention and support from the onlookers while also being clear that her performance is not about them but rather herself. She is sexy and she owns it. Hearing the crowd going wild with cheering and whistling to a plus-sized performer with attitude is

amazing. As a woman, she is given space where she can be loud, sexual, and demanding rather than the perceived passivity women are often associated with. For those in the audience who do not conform to expectations of gender, seeing her (and others) on stage then becomes a validating representation. They too can be curvy and sexy and powerful and confident and exist on their own terms rather than someone else's.

Unveiled Queer Burlesque:

Though neo-burlesque is thought to be progressive and subversive, attending a queer burlesque show highlights how much there is to be improved upon. Unveiled: Eugene's Queer Burlesque hosts such shows once a month at the Wayward Lamb, a queer bar in downtown Eugene. The Lamb is split between two areas, the dim event space in the back where burlesque (and other events) takes place, and the front warm lighting and tables and seating for general socialization. Both sides have their own bar and an "all-gender bathroom" with two stalls. The event space has dark walls and a small, removable square stage and a curtain leading to a backstage area. For Unveiled shows, there are a handful of tables around the stage with tea light candles and stools, with the majority of attendees standing around. The events fill up quickly, with so many people that it is impossible to be a bystander.

The show starts with an introduction by the emcee Paultini and a rotating partner, who provide guidelines for the event and emphasize how the night is about celebrating difference within the community. Paultini stresses multiple times throughout the introduction that "consent is sexy," followed immediately by "and mandatory," meaning audience members should not touch the performers (and vice versa), and photographs are prohibited. There is also often commentary on contemporary social issues and how the event relates to them, especially as a space for queer and trans individuals. Paultini and

his co-host also introduce each performer as they come onto the stage, telling the audience what the act is intended to express and providing context. These introductions also include what pronouns the performers use, and often their sexual orientation. There are gender-queer and gender-fluid performers, people of color, large bodied individuals, drag queens and kings, and more who actively turn the performance genre on its head by redefining what stripping and sexy look like.

My time attending an Unveiled show, I commented to my friend that it achieved what mainstream burlesque thinks it does in terms of overt resistance to American society and the systemic issues coming out of its colonial past and patriarchal present. The commentary on expectations of gender, sexual orientation, political circumstances, violence, and racial privilege overtly comes out in every performance and through the range of participants. It would be difficult to go to one of the Unveiled shows and objectify the dancers because their intentions are explicitly stated. In comparison, the audience at a mainstream burlesque show has more freedom to make their own meanings out of the performances due to the lack of such guidance by event organizers.

Performance of Gender in Burlesque

One iconic image of burlesque is often thought to be a sultry, curvy woman with long hair, bright red lips, and retro clothes that show off her assets. She's got style, sass, and confidence, all with a hint of dainty femininity. With women (and sometimes men) in pearls and fishnets, the performance of gender is a prominent aspect of the neo-burlesque event. Even with traditional markers of femininity, however, burlesque routines can challenge expectations of gender for the performers and audience members. For the women, the performance is a display of agency, of resistance, and of their ability to be sexual beings. This is achieved through the act of stripping itself, but also through

choreographed expressions that give the message of look but don't touch. For the men, it can be a challenge to dominant masculine ideals and an inversion of subjectivity. Each dancer has individual motivations for why they participate in burlesque, and these motivations are influenced in varying degrees by gender.

In her article “What's so feminist about garters and bustiers? Neo-burlesque as post-feminist sexual liberation,” Kay Siebler critiques the celebration of neo-burlesque as feminist, finding the art form limiting and problematic as they “re-inscribe the patriarchal myth that female sexuality can find 'empowerment through commodification" (Siebler 2015, 563). Drawing on issues of class and objectification, Siebler states that “overt feminist critique is what is largely missing from today's burlesque” (571) even if there is intended feminist commentary. Instead, she says contemporary burlesque shows as reinforcing the male gaze and a false sense of empowerment.

Siebler offers some powerful critiques of neo-burlesque and the limitations of stripping as empowerment. While an individual dancer, whether an occupational stripper or burlesque performer, may gain individual power by removing clothing, they do not gain cultural power in society overall. The distinctions made between the two genres are also often classist and degrading, negating any feminist associations with stripping. Classism in burlesque, according to Sieber, occurs in how the performers talk about what they do, elevating burlesque striptease as “classy” and avidly disassociating with stripping as if it is beneath them. There is also a perceived difference in the performer’s education, which “is not based on any thoughtful or thought-provoking performance, but the cultural and classist value of the woman performing and her degree/social status” (568). Siebler also effectively complicates sexuality, especially when placed on a stage,

by illustrating how burlesque performances still engage in objectification.

What Siebler's article fails to address, however, is the role of the audience. As previously established, it is through the interactions between performers and audience members that transgression of gender norms can occur. In my experiences attending shows, and discussed in my interviews, audiences are full of women. Not only are the people there to support the performers rather than objectify them, but the audience members also have agency. Even without explicit commentary, they can interpret the routines and performer intentions in accordance with their own experiences. In relation to gender, this means that women, trans, and gender-queer individuals would not necessarily interpret the event the same as a man. Heather, a frequent attendee of both burlesque and derby, describes her experiences as an audience member at burlesque by saying "I feel like a lot of people at burlesque, they find it sexy but I don't think they're in it to like, see nude women, ya know. The last one we went to it was me, three straight chicks, and several gay dudes. I'm the only person there who, you know, wants to have sex with a woman. And they were all cheering too." While Siebler is correct in that many burlesque shows could improve by making the feminist commentary more explicit, that does not mean the commentary does not exist or that it is not valid. Like the performers, the audience members have agency, and gender plays a large role in how that agency interacts with interpretations of the event.

Corsets and Costumes: Analyzing Gender Play and Performance

In her doctoral dissertation, Peluso discusses how roller derby and neo-burlesque allow women to transgress cultural norms regarding gender and construct "alternative femininities." Alternative femininities refers to "femininities that reject the culturally

mandated characteristics of hegemonic femininity" (Peluso 2010, 14). That is, "womanly" characteristics that do not reaffirm men as dominant and women as subordinate. Peluso's argument is that femininities are constructed and negotiated through interactions, performances, the body, and rhetoric in derby and neo-burlesque. Building on this using Avery and Coles, I argue that rather than "alternative femininities," contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque allow for *multiple femininities* through the creation of a liminal space, presence of an audience, and the physical body. As events primarily produced by women, and with overlap in participants and audiences, bouts and shows express hegemonic femininities, dominant femininities, and alternative femininities simultaneously.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theories on sex and gender, where the performance of gender occurs to repeated, daily habits (1993), burlesque performers contribute to the social constructions of hegemonic gender norms. That is, despite the subversive undercurrents, the female performers are still performing roles associated with "femininity." They wear traditionally feminine, or at least form fitting, clothing complete with long gloves, stockings, jewelry. Then, as they take the layers off, they are exposing the expected female form. Although the body shape can be diverse, the dancers show their breasts, upper thighs, butt, all of which play a role in the bodily definition of being a woman. As explained in *Strip Show* by Liepe-Levinson, Butler discusses how "traditional female and male gender roles in everyday life are choreographed, like sundry forms of dance, through specific stylizations of the body" (Liepe Levinson 2002, 108). These stylizations of the feminine and masculine, despite seeming natural, are internalized cultural repetitions of body language that are further perpetuated or opposed on stage.

While Butler writes about gender performativity in everyday life, there is more room for variation in staged burlesque performance because of the heightened expectations of the audience. Yet, while stripping at a mainstream burlesque show, whether their intention is to reinforce or resist gender, the performers are usually inescapably doing so as females or as males.

In roller derby (and queer burlesque), there is more nuance about gender, which is facilitated through the announcers and shift in how leagues present themselves. That is, there is more awareness and explicit mention of gender identities that do not fit into the male to female binary. Many leagues, including Emerald City Roller Derby and 709 Roller Derby, are changing their name to incorporate these identities by replacing "girls" with "derby". There is however, still the expectation of the sport being dominated by women, and that it is by women for women, therefore Butler's theory of gender as a social construction is still relevant. Even the rejection of the binary through gender neutral language acknowledges this construction. In the same way that burlesque dancers cannot escape the audience viewing them as masculine or feminine, derby skaters are also bound to being defined by their perceived gender by the audience as the spectators each bring their own conceptions of femininity and masculinity to the events. This constitutes a performance of gender, whether that gender is male, female, transgender, or non-binary.

For those who perform in both derby and burlesque, participants experience a complex understanding and expression of gender. Their participation in both challenges the societal definitions of the binary, expanding on what it means to be feminine or masculine, neither or both. By redefining what it is to be beautiful and sexy or athletic and strong in front of an audience, burlesque and derby events comment on the social and

cultural expectations of women in the United States. This is due, in part, from participants simultaneously critiquing and embracing those expectations in their performances through their costuming, use of the body, and how the audience interprets the events. They can wear revealing clothing, but it does not mean others have permission to touch them. If a woman is aggressive, it is not that she is adopting "masculine" qualities but redefining feminine ones, and she is allowed to take up space. "Playing like a girl" is a strength, not an insult.

Event organizers have an obligation to explain the guidelines for the event spaces, the intended purpose of the events, and the expectations of the audience. In turn, the audience has to respect those guidelines and participate appropriately, which includes being supportive of the skaters and dancers. By not participating appropriately, the spectators risk being chastised by other patrons or the performers and skaters or removed from the event. It is through this presence of an audience, which creates the possibility for simultaneous interpretations of the event by multiple people, that gender play becomes possible.

Gender play, in regards to these activities, means exaggerating or reversing expectations of gender such as behavior and adornment. It could also be considered engaging subversively with the traditional associations of gender, or experimenting with what it means to be identified as "woman". By encouraging such play, derby and burlesque allow for participants and audience members to redefine what is associated with or expected of each gender and push against a gender binary, as well as create the space for a range of feminine identities. In our interview, Tequila Bodyshot (burlesque name Rebel Riesling) stated "I feel like derby kind of tips stereotypes about athleticism,

physical activity. It flips that, changes that. But as far as burlesque goes, there's more opportunity for self-expression and so if you wanna, you know, if you wanna come out and have an androgynous costume, you can come out and you can be dressed like a man. But then underneath it all there's a lovely corset and garter belt. You can play up your gender however you want, which is what I find really cool about that."

In the United States, sports and stripping are often associated with men, with them either as participants or consumers. Roller derby and burlesque instead allow for this participation and consumption to be done by women while also challenging the definition of what it means to be a woman. On the track, women are physically strong and aggressive, strategic, and communicative with each other. On stage, they are commanding and sexual, sweet, confident, and coy. In both arenas, the women are powerful and in control. And they are all different in appearance, style, and personality. There is no one size fits all. Everyone is an individual and brings it into the space, challenging any expectations that women are all alike or need to be a certain way. That is, burlesque and derby both have spaces where the participants can ideally bring their individual personalities, with all of their flaws and complications, and challenge what they allowed to do, wear, say, and be.

CHAPTER III

SPECTATORS OF THE SPECTACLE: AUDIENCE INTERACTIONS

The role of the audience in any performance, as described by Bauman, is crucial as a means of evaluation. As he states, "the engagement of an audience is a necessary constituent of performance. Indeed, performance must be viewed as a joint achievement of performance and audience" (Bauman 2012, 101). In his essay "Performance," he elaborates:

> "Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable; it assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment." (1992: 44)

As performances and weekend entertainment activities, audience interactions are essential to the success of derby bouts and burlesque shows. Through vocal approval, the audiences at both derby and burlesque events judge the competence of the performance by responding with cheers and shouts. The louder and more rowdy an audience is, the better the bout or show is for everyone present. They are intended to be fun, and the most effective way to achieve that goal is through high energy interactions between participants and audience members. It is also through these interactions that the communication of multiple femininities and gender play occurs.

In this chapter, I discuss how exchanges between the participants and the audience members at derby and burlesque events create a communicative frame that allows for resistance to, and subversion of, gender norms and identities in the contemporary United States. Drawing again on Bauman's approach to performance, I

analyze what the interactions look like in each event, what they do for the participants and for the audience, and how they might be interpreted in relation to performer intentions. The chapter ends with what the interactions and interpretations look like in relation to multiple femininities.

Though each with their own goals, roller derby and burlesque each create a space that allows for a challenge of mainstream gender norms. With a primary function of entertainment, they both create liminal spaces that separate the attendees from their daily lives. Entering a bout or a show, there are new social norms where audience members are supposed to be rowdy, intoxicated, and celebrating women in positions of strength and power. For instance, derby has ridiculous rules for a sport and cat-calling is sanctioned in burlesque despite usually being considered unwanted attention in other settings. Through such spaces and the presence of an audience, participants and audience members alike challenge and redefine what constitutes feminine or masculine. In "Neo-Burlesque and the Resurgence of Roller Derby," Owen states "in both contemporary burlesque and roller derby, there is a two-way communication between the audience (both male and female) and the performers/athletes that celebrates what the women (and sometimes men) on stage and on the track are doing" (Owen 2014, 34). This communication and celebration of women then leads to the validation of women's ownership of their bodies, their individuality, and the recognition of their athletic achievements. By cheering for a range of performers, personalities, and bodies, the audience is validating the existence of multiple ways to be a woman. This in turn means the audiences are observing and accepting multiple femininities and the refusal of a strict gender binary.

Both roller derby and burlesque rely on having a supportive and active audience

to achieve their goals. Spectators must be familiar with the intentions of the events, or be open to learning them, for a bout or a performance to be successful. This creates a mutual sense of responsibility between the audience and the performers and skaters. The organizers of the events have an obligation to explain the guidelines for the event spaces, the intended purpose of the events, and the expectations of the audience. In turn, the audience must respect those guidelines and participate appropriately, which includes being supportive of the skaters and dancers. This is especially important in burlesque, as there is a fine line that distinguishes appreciation and objectification. By not participating appropriately, the spectators risk being chastised by other patrons or the performers and skaters or removed from the event.

Audience Participation in Roller Derby

In derby, audience participation begins with individuals making the choice to spend their Saturday night watching the bout. They buy their ticket, mostly in advance online or at some of the local sponsors, which creates a commitment to attend. Once there, that participation branches into a variety of possible experiences. First, there is a distinction between those who are familiar with roller derby and those who are not. The programs that are handed out have some of the basic information about the sport, but mostly it is communicated orally throughout those sitting on the bleachers. During the time prior to the start of the game, announcers will also ask those who can explain derby to raise their hands then invite "clueless" people to ask those with their hands up if there are any questions. Having that openness to share information helps welcome newcomers to the sport and affects the level of participation. I have heard dozens of conversations between strangers in the stands as those unfamiliar to the game ask others about what is

going on in an attempt to understand it. The announcers also provide explanations during referee calls, penalties, and time-outs. Second, there is participation through choosing a team to support. Audience members will support the Flat Track Furies, the Church of Sk8in, or the Andromedolls for their own reasons, whether they know someone on the team or like their style or any number of individual reasons. The first level of participation is sitting in the delegated section with like fans, some of which bring homemade signs, and many of whom are wearing team or league shirts. During group cheers or especially good plays by one team, these sections will explode with noise made by stomping and yelling. Sometimes these moments are lead by people affiliated with the team such as mascots, team officials, or in the case of the Andromedolls, the lead jammer's husband. After a visit to the merchandise table, audience members can also participate with themed items such as plastic laser blasters for the Andromedolls, light up headbands with the Furies' colors that create the impression of snakes (their logo incorporates a medusa-like figure), and devil horn headbands for the Church. The blaster is especially effective as something that can be waved around, with lights and sounds, during the bout.

Third, there is also a degree of "encouraged participation." By encouraged, I mean a step beyond the choice of buying the ticket, coming to the bout, and the choice of visiting the merchandise table. These choices function more as a "there if you want them" experience whereas encouraged participation includes constantly being engaged by others to participate in a more involved manner. One way this is achieved is through the fundraisers that occur throughout the evening at each bout. The fundraiser volunteers are somewhat relentless with their encouragement to participate, walking back and forth

across the front of the stands throughout the event, aided by the announcers and various signs. Though they make their presence fun in a variety of ways, such as with dancing, the continued call for donations or buying tickets does create a feeling of pressure to contribute for some in the audience. While most likely not their intention, this encouraged participation may be considered a forced participation because of that pressure to support various aspects of the league.

Those seated in the Furies section have an additional source of encouraged participation that the others in the audience do not. One of the team officials gives out handmade banners for people to use in unison, such as by one after another raising theirs in rhythm to a chant. Individuals are given a choice to pass them on or refuse, but those initially approached usually take on the task. The same official will then come to the front of the section during the Furies games and lead chants, sign maneuvering, and cheers. As participation, this encouragement is especially interesting because of the level of required dedication by the audience members. The members did not have to take time outside of a derby event to think of slogans or make signs. They merely have to be in attendance and willing to make themselves noticeable. Along with being encouraged to use the signs, they are then told when to do so, making the investment almost minimal compared to other aspects (such as paying for merchandise).

The most engaging aspect of participation at a roller derby bout is sitting in the "crash zone," situated around the curve of the track that is closest to the rest of the audience. There is still a slight forced distance from the track, marked with tape, and there are often age restrictions. During the bouts, this space is filled with non-skating players and avid fans, including player spouses. Some even bring small chairs, beanbags,

and other cushioned items. Although players rarely fly into the crash zone, it is considered a dangerous space that allows for the highest fan participation. Many of the audience members in this section have the blasters and signs that are waved around. It is also not uncommon to hear them (specifically the other skaters) critique the referee calls and directly address the players as they go around.

Overall, participation at an ECRD derby bout is active as the audience is expected to be supportive of the skaters through cheering, contributing to fundraisers, and buying concessions and merchandise. Spectators can be seen wearing shirts for leagues from across the world and waving signs, but mostly yelling loudly to support their favorite players. If they do not receive enough energy from the audience members, players will often wave their hands up to encourage cheering, try for ridiculous moves such as jumping across the middle of the track, or the team mascots will guide participation.

While one could come and sit quietly without interacting with the other people in the audience, the merchandise, or the team pride, it would be a drastically different event than what is intended. From my continued attendance, I would argue that most of the attendees are very comfortable within derby spaces, and would be even if new to the area. There is an enormous amount of nationwide derby paraphernalia present among the audience, from t-shirts to patches to stickers. When the announcers invite those familiar with the sport to raise their hand, the majority of the people in the stands participate. Through people watching, it is also apparent that many individuals in the room know or are familiar with each other, giving the impression that the derby bouts are an inviting and fun space accessible to everyone who attends. The downside, however, is the possible exclusion of those who may be introverted, socially anxious, or uncomfortable with large

crowds or unfamiliar situations. The event still may not be a supported space due to the expectations of participation and noise, and the encouraged participation or sitting in the crash zone may be intimidating and uncomfortable.

Despite the many associations it can have, roller derby is, at its core, a sport. It focuses on competition through two teams trying to score points for themselves and stop their opponents. Most of the bouts are fairly uniform aside from associations with teams and specifics of gameplay, such as winning outcome. The most obvious goal is thus the celebration of athletic skill and entertainment. And, when at a bout, the skill is visible even to those unfamiliar with the training it involves. Even falls, which appear to be a failure of those skills, have an element of discipline in order to minimize damage to all players on the track. There are, however, additional goals aside from the competition and winning for both the players and the audience. For the skaters, there is a desire to do their best on an individual level, and to work well with the rest of their team in a way that feels satisfying for themselves. This in turn feeds the sense (and goal) of camaraderie felt by the team members. For the audience, attending derby bouts is about entertainment and celebration. Whether or not they know someone who participates as a derby player, attendees most likely have a favorite skater or specific team that they cheer for. As is the case with some other sports, derby also encourages the audience to be rowdy. This encouragement comes from the announcers who emphasize aggressive hits within gameplay while also inspiring the audience to yell and drink. Because of the atmosphere, derby can also fulfill a goal of cathartic release. Bouts are escapist, a way to get away from daily life, with sanctioned noise (despite being inside), alcohol (even though there are children), and a lift of social expectations. Whether in line with the overall goals of

the event, players and audience members also have their own individual goals that brought them to the event which can include the physical exertion on the track, the ability for self-expression, or just for a good time.

No matter where they are held, derby bouts have a mixture of goals and functions in relation to the audience, beginning with athletic entertainment. For skaters, this means derby serves as an athletic outlet that pushes the limits of their physical capability. Whether their specialty is endurance, footwork, blocking, or breaking through the pack, the bout functions as a performance of skill. If a team wins or plays especially well, they receive recognition for that skill. As the leagues are owned and operated by the skaters themselves, they also function as a mostly self-sustaining entity with community sponsorship. The bouts then function as one of the ways to fulfill the financial needs of the league. Providing entertainment as well as athleticism is thus crucial.

Because roller derby is an aggressive full-contact sport, physical safety is a key goal for everyone involved. The players, with the extensive training they go through and WFTDA regulations, have a responsibility to the safety of everyone on or around the track, including officials, volunteers, and audience members in the crash zone. Before going out on the track, officials check every player's gear. Volunteers are also nearby to wipe up any wet areas that occur or fix the tape around the track, both of which can be hazardous.

In addition to physical safety, there is the responsibility to host a supported space which is an important part of most derby communities. Announcers and players emphasize repeatedly that anyone, of any age or body type, can play derby. The ECRD are especially proud that there is a 75-year-old who plays on the men's team. This idea of

inclusion is reinforced through recruitment opportunities such as documentary screenings and fundraisers. One of the key components of “derby culture” is the way it embraces body types and ages that larger mainstream media such as magazines and commercials can deem unattractive (i.e. larger or older women). One of the associations with derby, stemming from initial trends in the sport, is also skaters wearing fishnets and other revealing apparel. That is, the derby girl as an icon of sexuality. While that image is not necessarily accurate of derby as a whole, there can still be a fear of audience members who will be disrespectful. As discussed by Travis Beaver in his article on derby uniforms, there are some players who have experienced negative interactions with the audience. All of the players he interviewed “talked about male fans who lack respect for rollergirls and treat them as sex objects” (Beaver 2014, 14). There is then a responsibility to create a supported space for the players and other audience members who share the anti-mainstream values and the belief in a woman's right to wear what she wants without it communicating open access for all. The bout should be a comfortable and supportive space for those who may be dealing with anxieties related to body, age, sexuality, and even gender identity. In my experiences at 709 Derby and ECRD bouts, they achieve both measures of safety, physical and spatial, and fulfill the responsibility to an entertaining, smooth running event.

In the United States roller derby also has a significant social function of celebrating women in sport. Despite the progress in gender equality, there still remains an assumption that sports are male-driven. In my experience, and echoed in my fieldwork, the NBA, March Madness, Superbowl, and the World Cup are all celebrations of men's sports and, even if a women's counterpart exists, there is not the same level of hype or

support. Roller derby, though an amateur sport, challenges that norm through inversion. Although men's derby does exist, including in Eugene, it is the women that people come to see. A recent Lane County Concussion (LCC) bout still brought in an audience, but not nearly to the same extent as an ECRD or 709 Derby game. Tickets were not sold out, there was no line at the door when doors opened, and the bleachers were half full at the most. The bout also had an amateur feeling to it, and lacked the same level of energy as the women's games. Comparing my experiences at the different bouts implies that even with men's derby on the rise, derby is a women's sport. As stated by Mary Pile'r Moore in our interview, unlike many existing sports, roller derby functions as a sports event that is "by women and for women", even with men in the audience. It is a subversive celebration of women being physically powerful and, at times, aggressive. This ties in with the responsibility of a supported space for marginalized individuals. As a venue where women are celebrated, ECRD and 709 Derby embrace all women, feminine or not, but also those who identify as gender queer. Being gender queer, or gender fluid, means identifying outside or across both ends of the gender spectrum. That is, a gender queer individual considers themselves to be either both masculine and feminine or neither. Looking at all event participants, there is a mix of acceptance and rejection of traditional gender norms and roles. Derby thus functions as a community for individuals who may or may not fit in with mainstream trends and representations, which then results in a broader definition of femininity.

When discussing roller derby, whether as viewed in academic research or in talking to participants, community is a reoccurring theme. One derby girl (not of ECRD or 709) is quoted as saying "'The real power lies in the social and financial network we

have created... I buy skates from a roller girl. I get my hair cut from a roller girl... Everywhere there is a roller derby team, derby girls are turning to other derby girls..."' (Garber and Garber-Pearson 2012, 99). Although often not the main drive for people joining the culture, either as a skater or audience member, it appears to be the biggest benefit that people experience. In personal discussions with various players and fans, one skater (HomiSlice from ECRD) talked about how her whole social group has gradually and accidentally become derby-centered since moving to Oregon from Minnesota. This sense of community is pervasive throughout derby, both in my own experiences at the bouts and in recreation league as well as through the academic literature. Roller derby creates a community for marginalized, anti-mainstream, counter-cultural individuals through the themes previously discussed: support, safety, and subversive celebration of all types of people. This community begins in the event spaces such as bouts, and then trickles out. As cultural programming, roller derby straddles the line of official and grassroots to create a safe and fun event that celebrates women as athletes and welcomes those who identify outside of the gender binary. While every player, skater, and official has their own reason for participating, they are involved in the creation of a program that allows for "athleticism and personal growth in a supportive and positive environment." This environment also becomes a supportive and positive environment to experiment with one's gender identity and expression of that identity.

Audience Participation in Burlesque

Interactions with the audiences at a burlesque show are dependent on the spatial layout of the room, but there are some standard forms of participation. First and foremost, the emcee provides ground rules and expectations for the event, usually accompanied by asking for the audience's acknowledgement and acceptance of those rules through verbal

conformation. Once the show starts, the audience is expected to make noise for the performers, usually timed with the removal of an article of clothing and at the end of the routine. Attendees make noise through whoops, hollers, “OwOws”, and whistling. Parody is also prominent aspect of the performance genre, making laughter a common audience reaction.

Along with being loud and rowdy, a large part of audience participation is through the various tipping rituals present at a burlesque show. Most troupes will have a communal tip jar or “tip fairies” going through the audience, the proceeds of which get equally divided among the performers of the evening. Some shows, such as Unveiled, also allow (and encourage) tipping of individual dancers via throwing bills on the stage. Though very rare, there are also instances where audience members place the money on the dancer’s person, similar to tipping rituals in occupational stripping. This style, however, can play into an individual’s fantasy or desire, which is not encouraged in burlesque.

Some shows have an additional high-interaction space known as the “splash zone” or “glitter pit,” where audience members often participate through the exposure to glitter (which gets everywhere) and catching the nonessential props a performer throws. For instance, in one of Wanker Girl’s routines, she tossed large, imitation money with her own face on it into the glitter pit. Audience members could then throw them back at her, keep them, or give them to someone else. I even observed someone who feigned tipping the bartender using the prop money, which the bartender accepted with a laugh.

For burlesque, in most cases, the performers cannot see the audience due to lighting, so an audible response is vital to the overall success of each act. The emcees will

usually encourage the audience to make as much noise as possible, providing a sanctioned space for "cat-calling" while also acknowledging that it applies only to the space of the event. While this explicit statement of consent addresses verbal issues, there is implied consent of visual content. The performers, through their act of performing, give consent to be viewed as sexual objects. There is, however, a limit. Photography by regular audience members is usually forbidden. The Island Belles are an exception to this, as they allow it and put all their routines on YouTube after the show, but in each of my other experiences, the emcee states the policy.

The policy regarding photography, whether allowable or not and each in different ways, gives the event a feeling of safety for both the performers and the audience. While encouraging patrons to get out of their comfort zones, there is also an expectation that the audience is not there to be aroused to the point of discomfort for others. This is in direct contrast to older burlesque and stripping, both of which have functioned mainly as a venue for the desire of men. Two aspects of contemporary burlesque could contribute to this shift: the audience now is mostly female dominated, and there are few opportunities for a member to feel like a performance is just for them, as is the case in lap dancing typical of occupational stripping.

The primary social function of burlesque is to celebrate feminine bodies and all the various shapes and sizes they come in. While not every burlesque troupe has a range of participating body types, it is what fans have come to expect. The events are considered, by audience members and core participants, to be empowering spaces for women. Experienced skater and single-time burlesque performer ShamPain enthusiastically told me that at a burlesque show, "You want to see it all!" The ideal event

includes big, small, and differently-abled people. In order to be successful entertainment, burlesque has to show a variety of people in a position of power and confidence. For those in the audience, men and women, who do not fit into mainstream ideals of appearance and behavior, the show then becomes validation. Through this celebration of variety, burlesque also functions as a way to accept difference overall. While my interviewees discussed the communities as full of like-minded people, there is also the emphasis on the individual and their personality.

Aside from entertainment, burlesque's goals will vary depending on the location and focus of the event, and the people involved. If there is a specific purpose for the show, or something the performers want the audience to keep in mind, the emcee will provide guidance for the intended goal. The Island Belles, for example, used one of their shows as a fundraiser for medical bills for someone within the community. At one Unveiled show, the performer Button dedicated their performance to the victims of the attack at Pulse, a gay bar and nightclub in Orlando Florida, where a gunman open-fired at on June 12, 2016, killing forty-nine people and injuring fifty-three. Dancer Wanker Girl uses her routines to process breakups from toxic relationships. In these (and many other) instances, the events drew attention to the lived experiences of women, of people of color, and of queer individuals with individualized goals while maintaining the larger goals of celebration and entertainment. For the performers and audience members, these shows then offer catharsis, acceptance, encouraged, and empowerment.

In his description of the history of burlesque, Allen addresses the performance genre's history as a male-oriented event (Allen 1991). While the dancers have been predominantly female since the 1800s, historically burlesque consisted of male and

female partner comedy acts. These gradually fell out of use as the focus of the performances became more sexualized and placed the women as objects of the male desire. Neo-burlesque is therefore a reclamation of an event that historically exploited and objectified women as the event challenges the male gaze. Most burlesque organizations are run by women, placing their well-being at the forefront of the shows. This means emphasizing women's ownership over their own bodies and their sexuality through strip performance that lacks an individualized experience and highlights agency and empowerment.

Interpretation and Intention

Interpretation and intention are two important concerns that need to be addressed, for both the audience and the performers. Every person in the room will have their own reason for being there, whether it is purely for entertainment, support of friends, appreciation of the female form, and so forth. Social relationships between the performer and the audience take the issue of interpretation out of the performer's hands. In burlesque, this is problematic as it modifies the dancer's agency as they cannot control what the spectators get out of their participation in the event. Even with explicit statements of motivations or meaning, no one can control the interpretation of audience members. Because of the communicative frame between participants and audience members at both events, it is important to address the issue of "the gaze" and how it relates to the interpretation of gender performances. To do so, I draw on Jill Dolan's work on desire and representation.

As discussed by Dolan in "Desire Wrapped in a Trenchcoat," sexuality and representation create a provocative relationship. She addresses this relationship using pornography as a model to illustrate general representation, stating that it is "addressed to

the gaze of the male spectator. He is invited to identify with the active male protagonist portrayed in the narrative through voyeuristic and fetishistic viewing conventions. The male spectator shares in the pleasure of the hero's quest to fulfill his desire for the story's passively situated female" (Dolan 1993, 121). That is, representation is always through the male gaze. The author goes on to address issues of subjectivity and objectification of the performers and spectators within the frame of the female always being subordinate to male desire. Offering an alternative, she then gives an epilogue discussing lesbian representation and concludes with afterthoughts on representation as a whole as being complicated. Dolan's initial argument is that "sexuality is as large a part of spectator response as gender and that, by altering the assumed sexuality of spectators, the representational exchange can also be changed" (125). She maintains the latter aspect by acknowledging agency, claiming that "such counter hegemonic practices now seem available to heterosexual female, as well as lesbian, spectators and audiences" (131).

Applying this to burlesque, I would argue that the "hero's quest" becomes that of a heroine. Subjectivity, objectification, and representation are all challenged due to a often largely heterosexual female audience and their collective agency. While there are straight men in the crowd of burlesque shows, their objectifying of performers is, in a sense, kept in check. This check is partly done by the performers themselves, but also by other audience members. I have seen female spectators chastise men for not giving the performers the proper respect. The male gaze is further diminished by having an open audience, meaning there is a combination of all genders and sexualities despite the dominant female presence, and they are all interacted with as a group. There is little direct involvement with single audience members, no implication of one-on-one

intimacy, and the dancers do not play into an individual fantasy or desire. I would also argue that many of the performers take part in burlesque for the other women at the event, as an inspiration of confidence, body ownership, and agency and not for the male gaze. For Wanker Girl, the effect on perceptions of femininity is especially important when it comes to beauty and being seen as beautiful. She participates in burlesque because:

> "In a strange way, it became important to me for men to feel comfortable expressing the fact that they found larger-size women beautiful. Because women are always calling each other beautiful and everything... I wanted those men to see women of my size or larger, or smaller, 'cause it takes all sorts – odd-looking, weird-looking, you know the weirdos of society or the normal people of society. I just wanted them to see – Larger-sized women just aren't viewed as sexual. It's just this aspect that's sort of stripped of their lives to a certain extent, when they completely are. The fact that there's an arena where guys can freak out and scream over the size 22 girl, who's like totally owning it, is really awesome to me because I know how much personally body size and body image can plagued a person."

Similarly, roller derby also shifts the hero's quest to a heroine's journey as women are the primary focus in the sport. That is, they are in positions of power as the point-scorers, the blockers, and the driving force behind the sport of roller derby. Women draw in the audience and, while it is also entertainment, use the events as an opportunity for commentary on the social tensions that women face. Again, while there are men present (and even men's derby), bouts are not intended for the male gaze. If the players play up their sexuality through their costuming, it still communicates to the audience that they can observe, but it is not really for the observers. In addition, there is the aggressiveness of game play that presents the women as powerful and at times intimidating. The entertainment factor is on the player's terms, and the audience is at the

mercy of the skater's agency. That is, skaters actively choose their "boutfits," how much they directly engage with the spectators, and how much they present a derby "persona." As a sport with international rankings, many derby bouts will occur without the presence of an audience. Skaters will get something out of the experience whether or not spectators are entertained. They can, however, choose to bring in more theatrical components to make it more interesting and thus play with audience expectations of gender, athleticism, and sexuality.

Burlesque performances and derby bouts also addresses Dolan's argument of representation as the events are portrayed as ideally utopian spaces. In burlesque, this is seen through the sanctioned cat calling, emphasis of agency, and gender inclusion. Dancers have the power to self-represent, seemingly with no consequence. The interaction with the audience, although mostly as a cohesive group, also adds to the presentation of equality. Derby bouts have a similar ideal where everyone is on equal footing in the name of empowerment and entertainment. Rather than utopian, however, the female dominance of these spaces could be considered as counter hegemonic through the incorporation of resistance of gender norms and agency. Female performers use exaggerated personalities that can be challenging and aggressive while keeping up the "sexy" expectations.

Sexual orientation becomes counter-hegemonic as well by becoming, in a sense, obsolete. As previously mentioned, Dolan's theory is that the "representational exchange" can be altered from the male gaze if altering the assumed sexuality of the audience. The audience at burlesque shows and roller derby illustrate this by consisting of the full range of sexual orientations. Some of the loudest cheering at an Island Belles event come from

men who identify as gay or queer and are in no way sexually attracted to female bodies. As Trudy Bauchery stated as the emcee at her variety show, her view of burlesque is that it allows for appreciation of the female form. This appreciation can come from straight women and gay men (or anywhere in between) just as much as, or even more than, a straight man in the audience. The performance is instead about respect, recognition, and celebration. If framed in relation to athletic achievement and the emphasis on accessibility and inclusion, the same could be said for bouts. Despite many queer-identified individuals in derby communities, derby is still a sport, and sexual orientation has no effect on athletic skill. In both instances, the events are for women and not the male gaze as the participants and audiences are not solely heterosexual.

The Audience and Multiple Femininities

While the audiences are first and foremost part of the events' entertainment, they also play a crucial role in the performance of gender and the possibility of resistance. Each individual who attends a bout of show, comes to it with their own life experiences and expectations, and therefore their own interpretations. In regards to gender, this means each audience member will understand displays of femininity, acts of resistance, and the reinforcement of gender norms differently despite participants' intentions.

As is the case with most performance events, the presence of an audience means the experience may transcend the event itself and bleed into lives outside of the space. Both burlesque shows and roller derby bouts encourage participation with the ideals they emphasize once back in a normal, everyday setting. When asked if the activities had a larger effect on women's lives, Heather replied "I think if you have a bunch of badass women in a place doing badass things, that is definitely the focus of the event, it's very

women-centered […] I would hope that has a lasting impact on whoever attends, and probably the women more-so than anything." There will be some derby fans who watch the bout and leave still thinking the skaters are performing masculinity rather than expanding the definition of femininity. For others however, the lasting impact Heather mentions could be witnessing and embracing expressions of multiple expressions of gender identities and femininities. By interpreting the events in relation to their own experiences, each audience member then complicates conceptions of femininity even further by adding in their own associations and practices. Women then can be, in each instance, simultaneously rough, strong, fun, cute, in control, glamourous, raunchy, passive, dominant and so on into seemingly endless possibilities.

CHAPTER IV

EVERY(BODY) EVERY(WEAR): THE ROLE OF THE BODY AND COSTUMING IN CONTEMPORARY ROLLER DERBY AND NEO-BURLESQUE

Women in the United States are constantly defined by our bodies and attire, scrutinized by the degree of which we comply with social norms and expectations of gender. Normative expectations about what it means to be a woman often comes down to physical features such as having a large (but not too large) bust and curvy hips, not being too tall, and wearing clothes that accentuate such attributes. Contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque are no exception to this focus on the body as it is an important part to each activity in contrasting ways. For derby, the body is the crux of the sport and therefore the focal point of entertainment. The physical body is the tool for athletic achievement in the game, and the bodies used for the sport are on display. In burlesque, the body is put on display in a dance performance or skit, often with some degree of stripping that reveals the body form underneath. It is through this contrast of athleticism and staged performance that I will expand on the different role of the body as well as costuming practices for each event, focusing on individuals who participate in both activities.

It is through this cross participation that the events allow for *multiple* femininities as opposed to *alternative* femininities. That is, by having the same bodies on skates and on stage, one individual can embody different femininities simultaneously. For those in the audience who recognize Wanker Girl as Bettie Pain, or any of the others who participate in both, she is aggressive *and* sexy, rough *and* playful, strategic *and* charming, even outside of a specific event space.

Hit Like a Girl: The Derby Body

The basis for the "derby body" is that such an ideal body type does not actually exist. Instead, event announcers and derby players stress how anyone can play derby, no matter what size they are or how old they are. Derby is ideally a sport for everyone, with any body type, and with any skill set. As a full-contact sport however, roller derby engages the player's whole body as a tool. Use of the body is what creates the spectacle that brings in audiences through competition and the performance of athleticism, skill, and teamwork. A "derby body" is therefore one that can withstand the necessary physical aspects of game play and exhibit the type of necessary athleticism such as endurance skating and impact with other skaters. In contrast to other women's sports, such as gymnastics or ice skating, many skaters are bigger, curvier women with many visible tattoos.

As mentioned previously, a basic explanation of game play is that the jammer (point scorer) must push through the rest of the players on the track (blockers) to score, receiving a point for each person they pass. Blockers try to stop the opposing jammer from getting through while also aiding their own. While there are restrictions about where players can hit and what they can hit with, the game includes a fair amount of skaters trying to push through others and attempting to knock others out of the track boundaries. The body is thus the central component of the game as a marker of athleticism and skill. Bigger bodies are celebrated as being able to push through the blockers, while smaller ones are also celebrated because they can sneak past them. The entertainment for the audience comes from watching physical female bodies maneuvering dangerous situations in the name of competition. Almost every game has some form of injury, with varying degrees of seriousness. Many players have permanent issues they have to be aware of and

work around, and it is not uncommon to have blood or other "unidentified fluids" on the track. Before participating, players have to sign waivers that warn of injury and even possible death. Because of the high risk of injury, players are required to wear protective gear including helmets, elbow and knee pads, wrist guards, and mouth guards, while some take additional precautions such as crash pads (overall projection for the pelvis area).

The "derby body" extends to the sport's emphasis on equality and inclusion. Roller derby communities celebrate diversity of body shapes and sizes with a general appreciation for the female form. This also extends to racial and ethnic diversity though the two scenes I studied were predominantly white. Leagues have their own personalities and guidelines for attire, but they do share a notion that anyone can play derby, no matter what age or shape, and it will be a supported space for them. This supported space comes through the rejection of the mainstream beauty standards projected through mass media, including expectations of femininity. Derby girls do come in all shapes, sizes, and ages. Larger women are celebrated and viewed as sexy, but not necessarily above the other, smaller players. Rather than an interest in physical appearance, many comments surrounding player appreciation are based on their physical skills and confident demeanor. That is, players and fans comment on a skater's ability to exert force efficiently or general maneuverability rather than beauty. For instance, it is common to overhear audience members exclaiming that "I want to move like her" instead of "I want to look like her." This mentality is not just found among audience conversations, but also between players. Bettie Pain/Wanker Girl, for instance, described beauty in roller derby as how her teammate Sophie Brutal has the most beautiful crossovers on the track and

Kristen has the most amazing stop when she's going backwards. The sport relies on a great deal of cooperation on the track, and the physical skills are heavily tied to working with others. No matter their social class, compliance with mainstream beauty standards, or perceived power, hierarchical markers are rendered irrelevant. All players are considered equal, and they must work together in order to achieve the goals of the game.

The acceptance of body diversity is discussed in depth by Andrea Eklund and others in "Participation in Roller Derby, the Influence on Body Image." Using a survey of derby player in the United States to gauge the effect of roller derby on body image, the authors found a positive relationship between the two. As the conclusion states: "it is clear from the qualitative and quantitative data that participation in roller derby affects body image. The environment of roller derby challenges the cultural ideal, promotes a healthier body image, and shows an acceptance of a variety of body sizes and types" (Eklund 2014, 61). The results indicated that derby impacted body image in relation to achieving an athletic body (rather than weight loss), overall body acceptance, and clothing choices in practice and daily life. Through ethnographic research, the authors found that skaters expressed "empowerment, satisfaction, and enjoyment through physically assertive sports" (59). The effect of roller derby continues from the track into skaters' daily lives in regards to perceptions of the body. The derby players I interviewed expressed that they are comfortable in their own skin, carrying the liminality and subversion of the bouts with them even when the skates come off. For instance, derby player ArachnaPHreek, who identifies as gender-queer, described feeling comfortable enough with their derby team to take their clothes off in a group setting, which never would have happened before participating in derby. PHreek knew their teammates would

not judge them, instead saying “they see me regardless of how my body looks.”

The Boutfit: Costuming in Roller Derby

One of the biggest associations with roller derby for many people is the elements of costuming. As previously mentioned, each league has its own guidelines, including ones regarding their uniforms. Some, like multiple leagues in Texas, are known for their elaborate “persona” outfits such as sexy cowgirls or the extreme use of leopard print. Others, like the Emerald City Roller Derby (ECRD) and 709 Roller Derby, have standardized outfits including uniform shirts. There is, however, individualization of those shirts and personalized choices of leggings, helmets, and other gear. Protective gear largely depends on the user's personal preferences in relation to efficiency and skating style, as well as financial ability. The visual effect of this personalization is a hodgepodge of styles, colors, and personalities. This visual contrasts with most mainstream sports (such as basketball, football, and soccer) where all players match, appearing only as part of the team identity. Instead, in roller derby, Wanker Girl said “I was extremely attracted to the visuals … and I’m sure you can agree when you first see roller derby girls, it’s such an impressive visual. It’s like ‘oh my god these girls look amazing and they seem so strong and they seem so interesting, they seem so cool.”

A common element of costuming is masking which, due to helmets and the dependence on peripheral vision in derby, takes on another form. The required gear almost acts as a costume and mask, and there are ongoing jokes about not recognizing people without half their head covered. Some players have even lifted their hand to cover the parts of others’ faces, claiming that is the only way they know who they are. Many players compete with their faces painted, whether related to their derby name and overall

persona or not. For example, Sundown from Terminal City Roller Girls (Vancouver, BC) wears Joker-style makeup from the latest Batman franchise. One of their team mates had an elaborate sunken skull. Scald Eagle, from Rose City (Portland, Oregon) as well as Team USA, sports a bright bird-like design over half of their face.

While not every player engages with this playful aspect of derby, most teams have at least one or two players who mask themselves through face paint and makeup. The imagery is often sinister in some way, such as the skull or other monster-like features, as if to intimidate the other players. Others make it more celebratory with rainbows or team colors. Such practices can be read as part of the separation of derby from other sports and a challenge to conformity, or as just for fun. It could also be seen as a subversive use of makeup, which is frequently associated with normative femininity. Women in the United States often face criticism for wearing too much or not enough make up, and they are the targeted audience for ads telling them they need it. In roller derby, make up is not necessarily delicately applied or aesthetically beneficial. It instead becomes an element of play, and the means for masking. For instance, one of the ECRD skaters for the Church of Sk8n uses eyeliner to draw on a fake mustache for bouts. Another player wears bright red lipstick, but also paints her face with a pale white, conjuring a character from the horror-genre. Rather than as a means to improve on one's appearance, makeup becomes a way to exaggerate or even reject what is traditionally viewed as beautiful. The participants are athletic and feminine, but feminine on their own (and subversive) terms.

While one of the most pervasive images of derby involves fish net stockings, which could be considered an element of costuming, many leagues no longer use them as part of player outfits. In part, this is so the sport can be taken more seriously as roller girls

are fighting against the triviality associated with the sport. With this serious emphasis, however, the fishnets have just been replaced. Many derby players still draw attention to their body, specifically their legs, through wearing bright, colorful, and patterned leggings or exercise pants. As athletic apparel, these pants serve as stronger protection than fishnets and reduce the trivial associations while still being playful. Again, the choice of pattern and look is individual for each player, but they often have “powerful” imagery, such as lightning bolts or animals. Depending on the player, they may also embrace the grotesque body's “outside in” as well, with multiple skaters wearing ones with realistic exposed muscle and tendons (that is, an internal view of the muscular system). Like the masks, the leggings may directly relate to a persona or personality, but not necessarily. During game play, they serve as a tool for distinguishing the different players within a mass of bodies, but they are mostly a playful part of the sport. And, despite the intended distance from sexualization by rejecting fishnets, these leggings still emphasize the female form. Though not directly a costume, this apparel can be seen as serving a similar function. They help mark the event, celebrate the female form, channel power, and overall affects the atmosphere of derby that distinguishes it from other sports.

According to Beaver, uniforms in roller derby have a complex role in the presentation of sexuality and athleticism. In his article "Roller Derby Uniforms: The Pleasures and Dilemmas of Sexualized Attire," he discusses how for some players, the non-traditional uniforms diminish the effort and skill required for the sport, but for others, it is that playfulness with sexuality and gender that makes it inviting. Beaver states “the decision to wear mini-skirts and fishnets becomes a symbol of empowerment, a means of claiming ‘ownership’ of their body and sexuality. […] Some rollergirls

interpret wearing these uniforms as a feminist act, particularly when they view this decision as a 'choice' and not as a compulsion" (Beaver 2014, 9). While dealing with a degree of choice, rollergirls cannot control the interpretation of their attire by others, and they are still bound by the need to attract an audience. The uniforms overall act as a simultaneously empowering and oppressive aspect of the sport. Whether playful, athletic, sexy, individualized, or congruent, the skaters each have their own interpretation of how their outfits interact with their derby experiences.

Many derby players embrace a Do-It-Yourself ethos when it comes to their uniforms and gear. Rather that partaking in societal and cultural norms of consumerism, many derby players customize their own gear. Some skaters do their own silk-screening at home and craft their own number indicators for their upper arms. Official uniforms or merchandise are often modified through changing the shape and fit or adding components. Helmets are individually decorated with stickers and sharpie designs. As a grassroots sport, the leagues and skaters must fund themselves, and find ways around financial restrictions. They do this by adopting the Do-It-Yourself culture and subverting consumerism. The effect, as Jones writes, "demystif[ies] creativity and the production process with its egalitarian message of anyone-can-do-it, a rhetoric of amateurism, raucous style, and the inclusion of new and often taboo-breaking topics..." (Jones 2002, 2). For Jones' punks, the DIY ethos was a response to economic decline and bringing attention to a down-to-earth reality. In derby, the ethos serves as a rejection of North American consumer culture and unnecessary expense that funds corporations. Placed on the body as a part of the uniform, it can also be read as a way to reclaim ownership of one's body from the policing standards of American culture.

Underneath it All: The Burlesque Body

Much of neo-burlesque has a similar body-positive mentality as roller derby, with a diverse range of body types participating in performances. Also similar to derby, there is no uniform "burlesque body." Instead, as long as the performers are confident, the activity creates a space for a variety of shapes, sizes, and ages. As most dancers are women, and the majority of performances include stripping, it could be said that a burlesque body is that of a "traditional" woman. Through the act of revealing one's body (or at least undergarments) in front of an audience, there is an emphasis placed on moments when one's breasts or buttocks are uncovered. The main source of entertainment is the revealing of a typically feminized body. This could be seen as problematic, as gender does not necessarily correlate to anatomy or the physical body. There is also adornment to consider, as it contributes to conceptions of the burlesque body and what is defined as feminine, as many associations with the activity focus on fishnets and lingerie or a style of 1950s aesthetics.

The main social role of the body in burlesque is entertainment, but it also acts as a site of resistance to the expectations of women in patriarchal society. Many of the performers do not look like the women on the cover of magazines or the lead actresses in television or movies. Instead they are larger and curvier, sometimes with cellulite, with all of their inconsistencies and blemishes on display. Burlesque is therefore a performance genre where the participants are taking a stand in front of an audience and claiming themselves to be worthy of attention and praise, whether or not they fit the typical ideal of what constitutes "sexy".

Most burlesque events prohibit touching the performers unless they explicitly communicate that they are comfortable with it. The body is displayed with the clear

message that communicates “look, but don't touch.” With women's bodies constantly being outside of their control (drawing on issues of catcalling, abortion, violence against women and sexual assault, health, and so forth), burlesque is one way to reclaim it. Some women even participate to overcome trauma or illness. KeiKei de Murre, one of the dancers in St. John's, participates in burlesque in order to celebrate overcoming breast cancer and having a mastectomy. With her body being affected in such a way, she felt like she had limited control and experienced insecurities about her body being attractive. Through her burlesque performances, she was able to regain the idea of that control and feeling sexy again.

The mechanics of the body in burlesque are primarily related to how the performer takes their clothing off, but also how they move about the stage, interact with props, and the costuming. In conjunction with the social role, the performer also uses certain movements to guide the audience's reactions or encourage more support. For instance, Wanker Girl will cup her hand to her ear in a “I can't hear you” motion, which makes the crowd go wild every time. There are also particular movements which, as part of the burlesque formula, are met with cheers such as glove removal or cupping breasts. These movements have a practical function on top of the social one, where they not only draw attention to the specific parts of the body, but also guide audience participation. As Wanker Girl described, “my teacher Helen said it is the body part you are ashamed of the most is the part you will expose the most on stage.” For those who have felt unattractive or unworthy of attention, the movements allow the performers to use their bodies in order to redefine what is acceptable and sexy.

Girls, Glitter, and Glam: Costuming in Neo-Burlesque

Aesthetics are perhaps the most important aspect of a burlesque performance. A

dancer must be visible to those in the audience, and they are meant to be looked at and watched. Having a costume that glitters and sparkles is not just a feminine association, but also essential to visibility. Similar to derby, costuming in burlesque plays both a social role and a practical one. Many female performers, such as Keikei de Murre, customize their own bustiers, bras, and pasties by modification or through bricolage. Decorative aspects can come from many sources, including re-purposing jewelry or other clothing, or even old costume pieces. Keikei once bought a bracelet with large block fake gems, exclaiming immediately about how excited she was to work pieces of it into her burlesque closet. While troupes or burlesque dance classes occasionally offer workshops on customization, most performers embrace the DIY method. Despite the solo nature of the do-it-yourself movement, methodology is shared and passed around the community, both locally and through social media. The costuming overall works as a symbol of the performer's ability, dedication, and community involvement.

Most costumes in burlesque also engage with traditional markers of femininity, such as pearls and corsets, often appealing to stereotypical attire for arousal. The primary goal is to accentuate the female form during removal. There is also, however, social commentary through the costuming as it can play on icons and role models, popular culture, and sexiness. At the “Bechdel Test Burlesque” show at the University of Oregon, the entire event played on familiar cultural icons in order to “smash the patriarchy” through striptease in boots and heels, with bodies, brains, and women-identified voices. Presented as a space for feminist critique and “radical agency”, the show included routines featuring characters from *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Avatar the Last Airbender*, *Titanic, Star Trek*, *Bob's Burgers*, and more. Through the use of these known franchises,

the emcee and performers actively provided commentary on contemporary issues pertaining to gender and sexual orientation, including “Bury your gays,” “sexual awakenings,” making a space for women in pop culture and fandom, whitewashing, and intersectionality. This commentary draws attention to issues of queer representation in television (where queer characters have a high death rate), girls exploring their sexuality (especially around puberty), Hollywood roles for people of color being given to non-people of color, and so forth. Performing to “I'll Rise,” participant Lady B's piece included background dancers who removed clothing to reveal words on their torsos that read “Black,” then “Lives;” then “Matter” in solidarity with the movement. Forming in response to Trayvon Martin’s murder in 2012, #BlackLivesMatter is “working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. We affirm our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (stated on BlackLivesMatter website, December 4, 2016). Through the “traditional” markers of femininity, such as dance, makeup and jewelry, and even disrobing, performers such as Lady B used their bodies to challenge contemporary issues that affect women as well as men and gender-fluid individuals and people of color.

Gaudy and Bawdy: Analysis of the Body

Though burlesque is a framed performance on stage and derby is a sport, the two events can both be considered performances through their shared motifs. They each have skits and costuming which contribute to the theatricality component, a marked beginning and end, and feature an audience that is interacted with and who interprets the events. Within these performances, the participants are also performing their gender as both roller derby leagues and burlesque troupes are grassroots organizations primarily run by women. That is, they are marked as women’s activities. It is important to note that while

there is this association, derby is becoming increasingly accessible for those who identify as gender non-binary and transgender individuals, and both mainstream and queer burlesque frequently feature male performers. Though there is a distinct subgenre of queer burlesque, there are also gender queer participants and fans at both mainstream and queer burlesque shows. With the variety of gender identities among the participants and audiences at events, playing with gender presentation is a common theme in bouts and shows through drag, cross dressing, and parody. It is through the construction of the event space and the role of the physical body that a bout or show opens up the understanding of gender and allows the performance of it to be challenged, resisted, or altered.

Katherine Young introduces the term “bodylore” in “Whose Body? An Introduction to Bodylore” (1994). She uses the term to address how the self is inserted into the body and how the body anchors the self's experience. Among its main concerns, attention to “bodylore” includes looking at who has discursive access to the body, how the body instantiates the self, and issues of embodiment and disembodiment. In other words, bodylore looks at how people inscribe culture on the body. The role of the body in roller derby and burlesque is two-fold: There is, as previously established, the physical aspects of the bodies on stage or on the track. The other role comes in how bodies are talked about, and how they are talked about in relation to the self.

In both activities, the bodies are physically distanced from the audience members, either by the stage or the track. Onlookers are physically limited in how close they can get to the performers. There is also, an implied distance as the performers and skaters give off an air of intimidation. Even while the dancers are removing their clothes in burlesque or the skaters come close to the crash zone in derby, there is a sense of “you

can look, but don't touch." The participants own their bodies and are in control of what they do with them, meaning they have control over who has access to them as well. In burlesque, the dancers can choose to interact with specific audience members by throwing glitter, caressing, dragging them up on stage, exaggerated lap dances, and so forth depending on the show. At an Island Belles or Unveiled event, such attentions are directed towards friends or loved ones, whereas the performers interact with (perceived) strangers at a Trudy Bauchery Variety Show. All interactions are at the discretion of the dancers as they control the discursive access to the body. In derby, the skaters control the access through the safety regulations and the air of intimidation.

Mikki Malevolent/Pearl E. Buttons joked that one of the requirements for playing derby or performing burlesque is that you have to have a lot of personality. She continued by describing the crossover between the two activities as "They both really have a great, strong sense of community, both with women. You have strong women on definitely both ends of the burlesque as well as derby. Sometimes really strong personalities." And it shows. The participants have tattoos, brightly colored hair, great fashion sense, and display their interests on their bodies. Even without talking to the participants, one gets the feeling they know what is important to them based off of bodily displays. Young states "the body is not simply inscribed into its discourses; it takes up its discourses. Postures and gestures of the body are perceived and experienced as manifestations or representations of states of mind" (Young 1994, 5). In other words, the body itself can be read as discourse rather than just imposing interpretations on it. In both derby and burlesque, this manifestation comes through in confidence. Having a diverse range of body types, the physical body becomes its own agent in discourses about women and

their bodies. Burlesque performances and participating in derby are therefore activities where bodies are the site for the embodiment of power and change as women redefine what is acceptable or sexy.

According to Mary Douglas, the body can be taken as a metaphor for society by applying a structural analysis. Described in *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (2002), this structural analysis proposed by Douglas consists of four rules (79). The first is that "the style appropriate to a message will co-ordinate all the channels," or that there are patterns within experience that create a sense of conformity that is then replicated in media. Second, "the scope of the body acting as a medium is restricted by the demands of the social system to be expressed." This rule states there is a limit to the use of the body as a vehicle for experience and style due to socially controlled factors. The third is that "strong social control demands strong bodily control." Because the body serves as a reflection of society, control of one needs simultaneous control of the other. The final component to the structural analysis is that "along the dimension from weak to strong pressure the social system seeks progressively to disembody or etherealize the forms of expression; this can be called the purity rule." The purity rule is how the social system maintains, through varying degrees of pressure, a distinction between different bodies and social beings through types of acceptable expression. As Douglas describes, a society's interaction with the body is indicative of its social structure, group cohesion, perceptions of safety, and religious behavior. It also can yield insight on how an individual interacts with that society and how much control they have over their behaviors.

In regards to contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque, Douglas's theory on the symbolic role of the body as a metaphor becomes especially interesting. Celebrating

diversity in body types and uses of the body could be read as a reflection of social shifts towards more tolerance of difference and therefore a future end to systemic oppression of difference. That is, with activities that celebrate rather than ridicule perceived imperfections, we can then look towards a society focused on empowering women, trans, and gender queer individuals, as well as non-white bodies. It also creates a space for scars, pigment differentiation, curvy and athletic bodies on women, bodies with disability, and so forth. In a more abstract sense, it could potentially (and ideally), bring emotion into conversation with logic and the brain. Using the metaphor of the body as a social system, one could interpret the brain as the leader. While there are some checks and balances in place, the brain still tells everything else what to do, much like the head of a social system. In the west, there is an emphasis on these positions being filled by people with practical, logical skills. There is no room for emotion in leadership. I personally find, however, that separation to be restrictive and damaging. Both derby and burlesque actively put the heart in the center of things. There is no way to separate one's heart from what they are doing, and emotions are not something to be feared and avoided. In an ideal world, these events allow the value of the heart to be inscribed into the larger social systems through the use of the body.

In the introduction for *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Susan Bordo states that her aim is to "demonstrate the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women […] are vulnerable. Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self-loathing" (7). With the gender binary being such a prominent

part of American society, men are presented as the embodiment of strength and value while women are perceived as weak and insufficient, both of which are reinforced through habitual and social practices. Bordo implies that by getting rid of dualistic negotiations of gender, and "bringing margins to the center" (41), many of the social and cultural conditions of women would greatly improve.

One of the biggest strengths of roller derby and burlesque is the way it challenges the guilt, shame, and self-loathing that Bordo discusses in relation to the body. Instead, women are encouraged to take up space and embrace or redefine their "femaleness." There is a large emphasis on being proud of one's body and celebrating differences. Performers, skaters, and audience members are encouraged to challenge the internalized and habitual diminishing of themselves and other women. The body is an instrument of power, and in this case, an instrument for change. "We are the Wheels of Justice," a video by Allyson Woodard featuring members of a Portland, Oregon's derby team, focuses on the effect roller derby has had in their lives and the impact it has had on how they interact with their bodies. The skaters describe how derby has helped them accept their size (whether larger or small) and feel worthy of taking space. One player called the derby community a "pocket of safety where I can exist physically however I am" while another overcame her eating disorder through participating. Rather than being ashamed of having larger thighs or feeling guilty for the space they take up, these skaters are proud of their bodies and have found physical, emotional, and mental confidence.

Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo discuss the two leading theoretical approaches to the body, identified the body as "symbol" versus the body as "agent," and look at the body beautiful as a site for the construction and performance of gender. Because beauty

is an integral part to women's experiences in the West, the symbolic ideal body influences behavior and has physical ramifications. After establishing the body as a site of symbolic resistance to the image of an idealized woman, the authors then discuss how the body also creates social meaning rather than just reflect it, providing historical examples and the correlating social change. Part of the negotiation of beauty in regards to femininity, according to Reischer, is through the athletic or muscular body ideal extending to women. The body is an agent for social change by creating a new image of femininity which embodies the "social values associated with muscles […such as...] strength, discipline, and other such socially valued qualities" (Reischer and Koo 2004, 314). That is, women with an athletic body are making muscles an acceptable characteristic of women and part of femininity.

One of the common things to overhear at a derby bout is how much audience members want to be like the derby players, either being strong like them or to move like them. Bettie Pain/Wanker Girl describes little girls wanting autographs after bouts. The athletic body is on display as an integral part of a women's sport, giving muscles a feminine association for those in the audience. As the Island Belles troupe shares many of the same participants, when the skaters perform their routines at a show, the athletic body is then on display again for those who recognize the cross-participation. In this context, however, it has additional associations with stripping, making the athletic (and often large, curvy) body sexy as well as powerful. Through these events, the body plays an agentic role by redefining femininity, what constitutes an attractive body, and challenging ownership over one's body.

"Taking what you got and working with it"

The body is a primary source for reinforcing and challenging gender norms in contemporary American society, especially when placed as the focal point in events such as derby bouts and burlesque shows. With the event space and presence of the audience, the possibility of interpreting participants' behavior creates the possibility for greater social change. Women who deal with low self-esteem or issues of body image can see larger women looking good and kicking ass.

Described by ShamPain, roller derby and burlesque both present an opportunity for "Taking what you got and working with it." The two together work to expand on stereotypes about women and their behavior. By participating in both derby and burlesque, the participants show that being athletic does not compromise the ability to be sexy, just as embracing sexuality does not compromise one's capability in athletics or other areas of their lives. In burlesque, "working with it" means being confident and alluring. In derby, it entails being part of a team and engaging with one's physical body.

As performance events in front of an audience, the physical body is the focal point of derby bouts and burlesque shows as the source of entertainment. These bodies, in all their shapes and sizes, also command the audiences' attention through costuming and movements. Whether bright colors and sparkles or hard hits and hand flourishes, the bodies demand "Look at me," and that they are worthy of attention. For example, in derby this demand comes in the form of successful athletic maneuvers and rough play such as hip-checks and breaking through the opposing team. Being in the audience, it is also not uncommon to hear the smack from bodies colliding or when a player hits the floor as aggression is a crucial part of gameplay. In each of these instances, the physical body is often jiggling, moving in a way women are often shamed for.

This emphasis on large and soft bodies also challenges the common assumption that such bodies are lazy and unhealthy, and the expectations of capability. Seeing a "plus-sized" maneuvering around on skates as a capable athlete defies the common representations of women in sports and the assumption that fat bodies cannot be active and athletic. In reality, larger bodies are not worth any less than those that fit within more mainstream models of "success." In my interview with Mary Pile'r Moore (burlesque name Minnie Flirt), she described her feelings about derby, burlesque, and the physical body by saying

> "You get on the track with your skates on, and you're hitting people, or just holding a line, and keeping people behind you. Or you get on stage in your underwear, basically, or some variation of whatever costume you want to wear, and you come away from that feeling like you're on this ridiculous high. You can do anything at all in the world. … That's how I feel when I come off stage or when I come off the track. … I can do anything I want. There's no limits. … When you're a fat kid, and that translates into overweight adult, there are a lot of people who tell you that you can't do things because of your size. You know, people don't ask you on dates because you're a bigger girl or they don't… they don't wanna take you on a walk because 'oh you're slow' or whatever, but with derby and burlesque it doesn't matter."

In addition, by participating in a full-contact sport, the players are saying women are not fragile or in constant need of protection. They can crash to the floor, get back up, and continue to kick ass in a full contact sport.

In burlesque, commanding attention begin with costuming, but primarily happens through various movements and motions to the audience. Coming out onto stage, burlesque performers usually glimmer under the stage lights, whether due to glitter, shiny dresses and jewelry, or body art. Once the audience is watching, the demand to keep their eyes on the dancer comes from the progression of the striptease. The first of these

movements is most often the slow removal of a glove and flinging it across the stage, followed by the other. As the routine continues, the performer may engage with the audience by motioning for them to make more noise, grabbing their breasts and pushing them together and shaking them, and a wide array of facial expressions.

Looking at the two events together despite the differences is interesting because women are so often presented as one dimensional. Whether as the love interest in action movies or celebrity role models, women are socially taught that they can either be sport or girly, rarely both. By "owning it" in the two different venues, the cross-participants in roller derby and burlesque show the women in the audience that they are worthy no matter what their size, and that they can do it all.

CHAPTER V

FINAL JAM AND ENCORE: CRITIQUE AND CONCLUSION

While it is not the case for everyone, I feel quite comfortable at roller derby and burlesque events as a straight, white, female academic and I find them inspiring and empowering. I see people who look like me owning it, displaying confidence and competence despite perceived societal obstacles such as body size or gender. These women are not passive or delicate, or any less worthy of space and respect because they have larger bodies or identify as female. My experiences however, as a fan and as a researcher, have been ideal and are easy to romanticize. Not all burlesque shows include the level of body diversity that I have become accustomed to in my fieldwork, and not all derby leagues feel as welcoming as the sport seems. Overall, the celebration of equality, community, diversity, and women and their lived experiences does not always achieve a sense of resistance by failing to create an inclusive and intersectional space. It is therefore necessary to engage critically with some of the areas where the ideal fails, particularly in regards to resisting versus reinforcing harmful gender norms, inclusion and accessibility in relation to communities of color, and controlling audience interpretations.

Squirmy Factor: The Critique

Though derby and burlesque events challenge what it means to be feminine and resist the devaluation of femininity, it is important to note that these events can also reinforce social expectations of women and the gender binary. By having the exchanges with the audience, it becomes difficult to control how the appearance, actions, and behaviors are interpreted. Even with the guiding commentary from the emcees and announcers, people still come to the events with misconceptions, and the audience can still objectify the skaters and dancers. The space at a bout or show is largely idealized in

regards to function and impact, especially with the variation across leagues and troupes. Relying on traditional aesthetics for femininity such as tights and pearls, and using costuming that is often aligned with the male gaze, burlesque events could be reinforcing the norms they claim to challenge. Those in the audience are not always critically engaged with the performances, instead possibly interpreting the sex appeal as for their own consumption. Objectification can also occur in roller derby, with form fitting or revealing apparel and pinup style logos. Agency only goes so far as women still have to be found attractive by others at the events for them to be considered successful. That is, breaking through the gender binary and conceptions of femininity is still limited.

Not every woman who participates in these activities is supportive and empowering for other women, not every community is welcoming and accepting, and there are still issues pertaining to race and class. The distinctions made between stripping and burlesque often present stripping and other sex work as degrading or unclean. Roller derby can still experience transphobia and misogyny. Both events also emphasize the goals of "White Feminism" rather than succeeding as intersectional resistance, meaning that there are still limits to the number and types of femininities in the events. La Chica Boom, a queer burlesque performer of color, stated in an interview that "I started Kaleidoscope because I thought that neo-burlesque needed critical thinking about representations of race and minstrelsy within the genre of burlesque. I wanted us to really critically think about what we were watching onstage and how we were consuming and performing certain images" (Martinez 2011). In neo-burlesque, it is easy to limit critical thinking to empowerment through sexual liberation. To be truly feminist, and truly a resistant force, it needs to engage more with race and queer issues, directly speaking to

the systems of oppression in American society. In other words, there needs to be more intentional, explicit disruption of the norms and discomfort for the audience. As roller derby is also predominantly compromised of white, middle-class women, the same critique can apply. As it is, both derby and burlesque claim accessibility, inclusion, and empowerment, but often still fail to engage issues of race and class, colonialism, and cultural appropriation. They each play within the established power structures rather than truly challenging and dismantling them.

In roller derby, the sport is also becoming more official, more streamlined, and more uniform as a way to counter the event's history of triviality. While still important in terms of women in athleticism, this formalization loses a lot of the potential the sport has as a venue of resistance. By becoming more cohesive, women's creativity and self-expression are then becoming devalued in comparison to mainstream sports which are typically associated with masculinity. Rather than redefining femininity and placing more value on such traits, it comes down to adapting them to meet patriarchal expectations. The result of this adaptation then leads to restricting the possibility for multiple femininities and the reinforcement of the traditional norms the events claim to be resisting.

These critiques aside, however, as activities organized by groups of women, and that give back to women within their communities whenever possible, roller derby and burlesque are important pieces of resistance for marginalized identities. While they both need to improve when it comes to race and accessibility, the impact on gender identity cannot be ignored. Through the event space, and role of the body, and individual experiences, gender is played with, challenged, and redefined. In both roller derby and

burlesque, the events are considered forces of resistance by many of their participants as the activities challenge the expectations of heteropatriarchy, the perception of a gender binary, the passivity of women, and so forth. In some instances, they also call attention to issues of class division or trauma. In derby, women are physically strong and aggressive, strategic, and communicative with each other, while they are commanding and sexual, sweet, confident, and coy on stage. In both arenas, the women are powerful and in control. And they are all different in appearance, style, and personality. There is no one size fits all. By establishing a liminal space that welcomes the exploration of gender, celebrating large and curvy bodies, and redefining what constitutes "femininity," derby and burlesque are at least one area where it seems possible to turn the cultural tides and give women more social power.

Tearing Down the Track After the Curtain Falls: Effects Beyond the Events

As performances, roller derby bouts and neo-burlesque shows are temporary, liminal events that are bounded by time and space. That is, they come to an end, there is clean up, and people leave. Whether participants and attendees had a transgressive experience or not, they return to their daily lives that operate within larger institutions and structures based upon a heteronormative, hierarchal gender binary. For some people, however, the events can lead to positives changes that continue even after the events end.

The burlesque show is unique for everyone, performers and audiences alike, and everyone is there for a different reason. Whether attending for the entertainment, inspiration, support, or even just to see people take off their clothes, as long as you can cheer loudly and treat everyone with respect, you will fit right in. As for the performers, they may just be there to get paid, or as stated on the Island Belles website, it could be "to promote positive self-image and confidence for all, while offering stand out, jaw

dropping performances." As a persistent form of subversion, burlesque has helped change the conversation over agency, public sexuality, body ownership, and dominance of women in the public sphere. Allen states "The history of burlesque since 1869 demonstrates the transgressive power of the union of charismatic female sexuality and inversive insubordination, as well as the strategies employed by patriarchal culture to disengage, marginalize, and/or contain these two aspects of public, commercial gender representation" (Allen 1991, 281). The performers, the audience, and the performance of contemporary burlesque still embrace this power. As the figurehead of "low culture" burlesque gave performance back to the working-class, and the dancers today still leave the audience wanting more while challenging norms, displaying identity, and overall, having a grand evening.

Roller derby bouts also have this transgressive power by simultaneously celebrating sexuality, aggression, athleticism, and community in relation to women as well as those who identify as gender non-binary. My interviewees discussed how participating in derby has increased their confidence in their daily lives and made them more assertive in situations that they would have previously compromised themselves. For instance, skater ShamPain described the effect derby had on her daily life with the following encounter:

> "For me, [derby] helped me reject a lot of sexisms that I have been experiencing my whole life. I was hired [at a] job that I had for five years … only because I was pretty. For the three years before I started derby, part of my job was just accepting sexual harassment and being like 'yeah! That's great.' And I started derby at the same time, I became the food and beverage manager and suddenly – things like changed for me. I realized I didn't have to take so much shit from people and that that shit was bullshit. And going on retreats and stuff, and talking to women who didn't let people treat them like

> that, I just learned a lot about how to be a real woman rather than just like an accessory. And it's been fucking amazing. I actually went back for a tour, because I was going to join that gym about six months ago, and I saw some of the men who were the members there when I was working there, and they were trying to give me hugs. Men who had asked me to go on dates with them as their pretty person to go with. And one guy was like 'You've changed a lot!' and I'm like yeah... Because I was just fucking rude to him. I was like 'Hi Joe, it's nice to see you' and tried to keep going and said something rude to him. And he said 'I don't know what's going on... this is really weird.' And ... I was just like ew. I was just like, blatantly rude to him. It felt *so* good! And then I did not join that gym."

While this is one occurrence, it is not an isolated result of participation in either activity. Through the experiences in the event space, women are standing up for themselves and taking ownership over their bodies. The communicative frame between audience members and participants can help women deal with a variety of issues, including body image issues, trauma, cancer, eating disorders, and self-esteem. Though a single event is a small scale, even one woman leaving them feeling more empowered can make a difference as they can then be more assertive in their everyday lives, as seen with ShamPain.

Through the combination of the two activities, roller derby and burlesque, participants play with gender and performance to comment on the expectations of women and those who do not fit into the gender binary. While the skaters/dancers cannot control how the audience interprets the events or performer's actions, they create the setting for a conversation that can lead to social change. For myself as an attendee, roller derby and burlesque serve as reminders to embrace differences, recognize similarities, and to appreciate one's place in their own lives. Walking out of these events, I feel inspired, though not always in the same way. Sometimes it comes as a small feeling to be more

assertive, to reduce unnecessary apologies, or to wear what I want. Other times, it feels like my worldview has drastically shifted in regards to the effect of our patriarchal society on my daily life, who I am and who I want to be. Through the theatrics and comedy, I find derby and burlesque to have something for almost everyone and they challenge audience members to see the world slightly upside-down for an evening while also staying mostly recognizable. Most importantly, and to this outsider, these communities show what is possible when women work together and are celebrated for it, and that there is no one way to be a woman. Instead, one can straddle between hegemonic femininities and alternative femininities and use elements from both to challenge norms. Young girls across North America are learning they too can be fierce and powerful, be in control of their sexuality, and have fun while doing so. They are taught the value of equality, inclusion, community, and that some conventions need to be challenged. Contemporary roller derby and neo-burlesque show a generation of girls, women, transgender, and non-binary individuals that sometimes, things just need to be shaken up. And that it is possible to do so, either wearing a hot pink tutu, pushing people out of the way, on an oval track or while surrounded by lights, glitter, and feather boas.

REFERENCES CITED

Allen, Robert Clyde. 1991. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Angela Riley (the StrangeHer). Personal Interview. February 15, 2015.

Arden Guinn (ArachnaPHreek) and Kelly Boylen (ShamPain). Personal Interview. January 20, 2016.

Avery, Anthony P. 2005. "I Feel That I'm Freer to Show My Feminine Side": Folklore and Alternate Masculinities in a Rave Scene. In *Manly Traditions: The Folk Roots of American Masculinities*, ed. Simon Bronner, pp. 157-70. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1992. "Performance." In *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook*, ed. Richard Bauman, pp. 41-49. Oxford University Press.

Bauman, Richard. 2001. "Verbal Art as Performance." *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*. Alessandro Duranti. Oxford: Blackwell. 165-188.

Bauman, Richard. 2012. Performance. *A Companion to Folklore*, eds. Regina Bendix and Galit Hasan-Roken, pp. 94-118. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Beaver, Travis D. 2014. "Roller Derby Uniforms: The Pleasures and Dilemmas of Sexualized Attire." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, pp. 1-19.

Bordo, Susan. 1993. Introduction. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, pp. 1-42. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Butler, Judith. 1993. "Introduction." *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'*" New York: Routledge.

Coles, Tony. 2009. "Negotiating the Field of Masculinity: The Production and Reproduction of Multiple Dominant Masculinities." *Men and Masculinities* 12(1): 30-44.

Dana Hawco (Wanker Girl/ Bettie Pain). Personal Interview. August 26, 2015.

Dodds, Sherril. 2013. "Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease." *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3: 75-90.

Dolan, Jill. 1993. Chapter 5: Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat In *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance*, pp. 121-34. Ann Arbor:The University of Michigan Press.

Donnelly, Michelle. 2014. "Drinking with the Derby Girls: Exploring the Hidden Ethnography in Research of Women's Flat Track Roller Derby," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, no. 3-4, 346-66.

Douglas, Mary. 2002. *Natural Symbols : Explorations in Cosmology*. London, US: Routledge.

Eklund, Andrea, Barbara A Masberg, Karen L LaBat, and Hye-Young Kim. 2014. "Participation in Roller Derby, the Influence on Body Image, "*Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 32, no. 1: 49-64.

Erica Norse. Personal Interview. August 25, 2015.

Garber, Elizabeth and Erin Garber-Pearson. 2012. "Tramps and Bruises: Images of Roller Derby and Contemporary Feminism." In *Girls, Cultural Productions, and Resistance*, edited by Michelle Bae, 93-108. New York: Peter Lang.

Heather Reid. Personal Interview. August 27, 2015.

Jones, Peter. 2002. "Anarchy in the UK: '70s British Punk as Bakhtinian Carnival," *Studies in Popular Culture 24*, no. 3: 25-36.

Kearney, Mary Celeste. 2011. "Tough Girls in a Rough Game: Televising the Unruly Female Athletes of Contemporary Roller Derby," *Feminist Media Studies*, no. 3: 283-301.

Liepe-Levinson, Katherine. 2002. *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire.* New York: Routledge.

Martinez, Marta. 2011. "Interview with La Chica Boom." *Art Practical* 25, April 11. Accessed November 3, 2016. http://www.artpractical.com/feature/interview_with_la_chica_boom/

Mikki (Mikki Malevolent/Pearl E. Buttons). Personal Interview. August 31, 2015.

Nally, Claire. 2009. "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-Burlesque and the Performance of Gender." *Textual Practice* 23, no. 4: 621-43.

Owen, David. 2014. "Neo-Burlesque and the Resurgence of Roller Derby: Empowerment, Play, and Community." *Canadian Theatre Review* 158: 2, 33-38.

Pavlidis, Adele and Simone Fullagar. 2013. "Becoming Roller Derby Grrrls: Exploring the Gendered Play of Affect in Mediated Sport Cultures," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, no. 6:673-88.

Peluso, Natalie Marie. 2010. "High Heels and Fast Wheels: Alternative Femininities in Neo-Burlesque and Flat-Track Roller Derby." PhD diss., University of Connecticut.

Reischer, Erica and Kathryn S. Koo. 2004. "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World." *Annual Review of Anthropology.* 33: 297–317.

Sara Tobin (Rebel Reisling/Tequila Bodyshot). Personal Interview. August 28, 2015.

Siebler, Kay. 2015. What's So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers? Neo-Burlesque as Post-Feminist Sexual Liberation. *Journal of Gender Studies* 24 (5): 561-573.

Turner, Victor. 2004. "Liminality and Communitas." In *The Performance Studies Reade*r, 2nd ed.,edited by Henry Blais, pp. 89-97. New York: Routledge.

Vanessa Crocker (Minnie Flirt/ Mary Pile'r Moore). Personal Interview. August 30, 2015.

Woodard, Allyson. 2014. "We are the Wheels of Justice." *Vimeo*. https://vimeo.com/107804536

Young, Katharine. 1994. "Whose Body? An Introduction to Bodylore." *The Journal of American Folklore* 107, no. 423: 3-8.

Zemeckis, Leslie Harter. 2013. *Behind the Burly Q: The Story of Burlesque in America*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Zonan the Barbarian. Personal Interview. January 24, 2016.