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## Performances of Gender and Sexuality in Extreme Sports Culture

Carly Michelle Gieseler

University of South Florida, writecarly49@yahoo.com

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Performances of Gender and Sexuality in Extreme Sports Culture

by

Carly M. Gieseler

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Elizabeth Bell, Ph.D.  
A. David Payne, Ph.D.  
Garnet Butchart, Ph.D.  
Kim Golombisky, Ph.D.

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Carly M. Gieseler

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to expose the strategies through which extreme sports constitute gender through exaggeration, parody, queering, resistance, and transcendence of normative gendered binaries. I interrogate how extreme sports operate on the margins of sport, gender, media, and lived experience to better understand the processes and performances that retain, reinforce, and resist our notions of normative gender, bodies, and sexuality. Starting with the claim that performance is constitutive of gender and culture, I will focus on how extreme sporting performances create significant commentaries on mainstream assumptions surrounding sporting gender, sexuality, and corporeality.

These commentaries function in extreme sports' spaces: to critique how extreme sports reclaim oppressive language of gendered binaries; to give voice to sexual silences in performances that lampoon, retrofit, and transcend those assumptions; and, for athletes to reclaim corporeality through strategies of parody, resistance, and elision. Taking up the transcendent possibilities for gender, body, and sexuality in extreme sports, I suggest that these are also places to reimagine a phallogentric combat myth, revisit issues of class and performance, and speak of the invisibility of racial difference.

Using critical analysis, interviews, and personal narrative, I explore performances of gender, sexuality, and the body in mediated and live extreme events beginning with the revival of the roller derby phenomenon exemplified in the 2007 documentary *Hell on*

*Wheels*, the 2006 A&E series *Rollergirls*, and the multiple websites, leagues, and fictional representations such as 2009's *Whip It*. I then turn to MTV's pranks and entertainment playground of *Jackass*, *Viva la Bam* and *Nitro Circus* as well as the traveling motocross spectacle Nuclear Cowboyz. Finally, I attend to the extreme bodies of ultradistance running through multiple texts and conversations with runners as well as my own participation in the 2011 Keys100 in the Florida Keys.

My study will not repeat the many questions, critiques, or concerns of foundational or traditional scholarship on sports, media, or risk. Instead, I focus on several key issues across the chapters: how sport is housed as always already a masculine realm, how mainstream and extreme sports do gender corporeally, and the ways extreme sports challenge our mainstream notions of sexualities.

## Chapter One – Prismatic Identity: Performative Reflections in Extreme Sports

“The brave do not live forever, but the cautious do not live at all.” These words echoed across the arctic night air during a tribute at the Winter X Games in Aspen, Colorado on January 26, 2012. In these opening days of the X Games, dozens of the world’s best skiers and snowboarders gathered at the Buttermilk Mountain Superpipe. The imposing structure rises from the glistening white snow; built from ice and snow, it is an inverted igloo with walls reaching over fifteen feet in the air on either side of the cavernous floor, or U-ditch. Typically, when these extreme athletes visit the Superpipe, they are gliding across the U-shaped slope, shredding ice as it arcs gracefully behind their skis and boards. On this night, they stand silent and still at the bottom of the pipe, the only lights glowing dimly from the candles they hold in honor of fallen skier Sarah Burke.

Burke captured four gold medals and dominated her sport: Burke was the first woman to spin a 720, 900, and 1080 in freeskiing competition. She earned “unassailable recognition as the best female freeskiier ever” (Blevins, 2012). Not only did she lead the charge to successfully lobby the Winter X Games to include women in freeskiing events, she also worked as an advocate for her sport’s inclusion in the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Known for her remarkable daring and execution, Burke crashed in an attempt at a relatively simple stunt on January 10, 2012. In the 540 Flat Spin, a maneuver Burke had aced countless times, something went terribly wrong when Burke flipped over following the completion of the move, hitting her head on the snow-packed ground. The impact of

her fall ruptured her vertebral artery, triggering cardiac arrest. Nine days later, the official cause of death on January 19 was hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy, an oxygen deprivation to her brain. Burke was 29 years old.

ESPN lauded Burke, releasing a statement calling Burke one of “the most popular and accomplished freeskiers in history. She spent years lobbying to have female skiers included in the Winter X Games and played a crucial role in getting halfpipe skiing added to the Winter Olympics. The discipline will debut in 2014 in Sochi, Russia, where Burke would have been the gold medal favorite” (O’Neil, 2012). Peter Judge, CEO of the Canadian Freestyle Ski Association, knew Burke for over a decade and stated: “She always asked, ‘Why not?’ ...It was: ‘Why not ski with the men? Why not be in the Olympics?’” (Keh, 2012). Close friend and fellow skier Jen Hudak described the impact Burke had for women: “She was the first woman in this sport to prove...that women were good.” And in a completely different turn on the day of Burke’s passing, ABC News described Burke as “not only one of the best female skiers in the world but a red carpet regular and fashion plate who was once named one of FHM’s 100 sexiest women alive” (Sher, 2012). The attractive blonde with the dazzling smile served as the sport’s ideal ambassador through her skill, advocacy, and pop culture presence.

Three weeks after mourning the loss of her teammate, Canadian Roz Groenewoud captured the gold medal in women’s Superpipe – for which Burke was heavily favored – earning the highest score in the event’s history. Choking up in an interview after her victory lap, Groenewoud told the Associated Press that “the camaraderie between the female skiers was absolutely amazing...everyone trying to realize that we’re in this

together and to believe in each other and push each other to be our best...I felt like I had Sarah with me” (2012).

The story of Burke’s remarkable life and tragic death holds up a mirror to the many themes in extreme sporting culture that are especially problematic for women: the fight for recognition and legitimacy of women’s sports; the centrality of media coverage for that legitimacy; the camaraderie of women athletes; the commodification of beautiful, “feminine” bodies; and the performance of courage and daring central to our cultural imaginings of men’s sports. Men die on battlefields and on sports fields. But women? On the marginal stage of extreme sports.

Our cultural fascination with sports—as participants, fans, spectators, and consumers—not only indicates what we love but what we fear. Sports reflect our collective, cultural anxieties surrounding gender, race, sex, bodies, and class. Sports illustrate an actual making of gender through Olympic chromosomal testing which emerged in response to Olympic middle-distance runner Santhi Soundarajan (an intersexed athlete stripped of her 2006 medal). This making of gender only identifies “male” or “female” chromosomally and, in true phallogocentric style, only tests women if their gender is questioned because this “maleness” is perceived to be an unnatural advantage.

Race and sex intersect in the cultural anxieties surrounding images of violent black men in sports; the O.J. Simpson saga reinvoked this fear in his alleged slayings of his white wife and her white friend. This has been taken further through the Kobe Bryant rape allegations, when the NBA’s L.A. Laker was accused of raping a young white woman in a Colorado hotel. This violent black male sexuality is transformed in the Tiger

Woods' sex scandal as he spirals from golfing icon to sex addict; Woods alters the narrative with the popular addiction apologia which works to distance him from the sex act itself.

The idealization of men's bodies as "naturally" muscular and large is highlighted through the Major League Baseball steroid controversy: sporting men are supposed to be inherently dominant and strong, not made through other means. The positioning of women's bodies as "naturally" sexy abounds, most recently in the fallout over the 2010 Sports Illustrated cover of Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn in an overtly sexualized pose featuring the skier with rump in the air, smiling at the camera, as a phallic mountain rises suggestively in the landscape (which corresponded with a photo spread of Vonn wearing that most functional of snowskiing attire – a bikini).

Finally, issues of class and money in mainstream sports are constants, from the million-dollar-per-minute cost for a Superbowl commercial to the multimillion dollar contracts for athletes fresh out of college (or high school) over and against a society where teachers, firefighters, and police officers (to name but a few integral professions) barely make a living. These few examples speak to the ways that sport enacts gender, sexuality, and economics, mirroring the prominent themes for this study: the phallogocentric ideology of sport as inherently a masculine domain; the naturalness or madeness of gender and dominant masculine bodies or sexualized feminine bodies; the anxieties and invisibilities surrounding issues of race, sex, and violence; and the unapologetic capitalist imperative celebrating our mainstream sporting events and athletes. I propose that extreme sports—and stories like Sarah Burke's life and death--smash that hegemonic and problematic image of sport and culture, forcing a new way of

gazing at sport, gender, bodies, and sexualities. In the trails of glittering fragments and dangerous edges, those messy, complicated, layered reflections are finally made visible.

This chapter explores these issues by: introducing extreme sports as a specific and growing cultural phenomenon; articulating a purpose for a study of extreme sports; looking at the issues of gender, body, and sexuality in mainstream and extreme sports; assessing the power of a performative theoretical framework to study extreme sports; and previewing the chapters that critique my three compelling examples of extreme sports.

### *Introducing Extreme Sports*

As these sports grew in popularity, many participants and spectators grappled with a definitive idea of what classified as extreme. Tomlinson offered extreme sports as space-specific, naming 42 sports that took place in the air, land, or water (2001). These ranged from B.A.S.E. (an acronym standing for the four fixed spaces from which one jumps – buildings, antennas, spans, and earth/cliffs) jumping to ski surfing, aggressive inline skating to street luge, and barefoot water skiing to surfing. While some of these have been considered classic sports for years without the label of extreme, in other cases, athletes have chosen to push the edges of traditional activities to become or embrace the extreme. The most popular examples of extreme sports include: snowboarding, a fusion of skiing, skateboarding, surfing, and sledding; freestyle motocross on dirtbikes, which incorporate both Big Air jumping components and traditional motocross racing events; skateboarding, which has evolved from roots as a transportation mode to an event featuring increasingly difficult tricks and stunts; and BMX biking, which mirrors skateboarding in its shift from street tradition to bigger stunts and trick work. Throughout the literature, I've encountered the use of such terms as lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2000;

2004); alternative sports (Lavolette, 2007); extreme sports (Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003); and edgework (Lyng, 2005). Many resist the label 'extreme' as a purely mainstream media and marketing move to appropriate these various activities. I choose this term as a signifier recognizable to a larger audience unfamiliar with the depth of this culture.

Extreme sports boomed in the 1990s, capturing a new generation of exciting young athletes in innovative new takes on classic sports (Browne, 2004). Throughout these years, extreme sports have been introduced on a larger, mainstream stage. This occurred most notably with both the nationally televised X Games and the inclusion of several extreme sports in recent Olympic games. The sports reflected the evolution of several classic sports, in addition to the creation of new sports altogether. The athletes and fans reflected a youthful, rebellious spirit and neo-punk sensibilities. The role of the media was of particular significance in fostering the growth of these new sports (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Baker & Boyd, 1997; Billings & Hundley, 2010; Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Rowe, 1999; Wenner, 1998). For example, ESPN and parent company Disney marketed the X Games in a highly specialized way; it was "sporting eye candy, breathtaking stunts interspersed with hip graphics and interviews for viewers with short attention spans" (Jay, 2004, p. 233). Created by Ron Semiao, the X Games marked the entrance of big business (through ESPN's involvement) into the marginalized culture of extreme sports.

The extreme juggernaut proliferated across media and culture in ways that impacted all sports (Browne, 2004). The big four sports in America – football, baseball, hockey, and basketball – suddenly faced competition from the embryonic world of extreme sports. Extreme sports challenged the status quo of traditional sports, attracting

an ever-increasing population of participants and spectators alike (Gerdy, 2002; Wann, 2001). Epitomized by poster children such as skateboarder Tony Hawk or snowboarder Shaun White, extreme or fringe sports became a central focus of cultural attention. The labeling of any person, place, event, activity, or product as extreme has become an infectious marketing ploy that conveys a sense that something is a radical novelty. According to Rinehart and Sydnor, although the cultural appeal to the term extreme gives these sports “faddish panache, many participants are in for the long haul...they see these activities as lifestyle choices” (2003, p. 3).

From companies that use extreme to label their product as a marker of the lifestyle to the proliferation of over 10,000 websites devoted to the extreme sports lifestyle (Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003), the “extreme” mentality has sparked the cultural imagination, best illustrated in the staggering growth of the 2010 X Games and 2011 Winter X Games. Up 24% from the previous year, the 2010 X Games hosted 138,525 spectators at its Los Angeles site. In addition, ESPN covered 31 hours of X Games 17 and reached 35.4 million viewers with a key demographic of men ages 12-34 in its highest ratings yet (www.espn.com, 2012). The Winter X Games boasted 58,000 attendees in 1997 at its inaugural location of Big Bear Lake, California. Following this initial success, ESPN signed an eleven-year contract in 2002 with its new location, the affluent ski resort capital Aspen, CO. According to *Sports Business Daily*, within four years of debuting at Aspen in 2002, the Winter X Games had doubled in attendance. The 2011 Winter X Games, with an attendance of 114,200, marked the highest draw yet; the 39.7 million viewers brought the total viewing hours up 30 percent from 2010 (www.espn.com, 2012). Suddenly, stunt motocross phenom Travis Pastrana, legendary skateboarder Hawk, and

Olympic-medal winning snowboarder White were flanked by legions of celebrities and fans, creating a spectacle of edge-dwellers pulled onto the main stage of sporting culture.

Extreme sports are significant in our culture because of the fans, money, and media attention. Scholarship, journalism, and spectators of extreme sports have dealt extensively with these issues at the center of the extreme sports phenomenon; however, the importance of extreme sports in our culture has yet to be placed in conversation with gender, sexuality, and performance. At this time, no study has used a performance lens to reveal the implications of gendered performance in extreme sporting culture.

### *Statement of Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to expose the strategies through which extreme sports constitute gender through exaggeration, parody, queering, resistance, and transcendence of normative gendered binaries. I interrogate how extreme sports operate on the margins of sport, gender, media, and lived experience to better understand the processes and performances that retain, reinforce, and resist our notions of normative gender, bodies, and sexuality. Starting with the claim that performance is constitutive of gender and culture, I will focus on how extreme sporting performances create significant commentaries on mainstream assumptions surrounding sporting gender, sexuality, and corporeality.

These commentaries function in extreme sports' spaces: to critique how extreme sports reclaim oppressive language of gendered binaries; to give voice to sexual silences in performances that lampoon, retrofit, and transcend those assumptions; and, for athletes to reclaim corporeality through strategies of parody, resistance, and elision. Taking up the transcendent possibilities for gender, body, and sexuality in extreme sports, I suggest that

these are also places to reimagine a phallogentric combat myth, revisit issues of class and performance, and speak of the invisibility of racial difference.

Using critical analysis, interviews, and personal narrative, I explore performances of gender, sexuality, and the body in mediated and live extreme events beginning with the revival of the roller derby phenomenon exemplified in the 2007 documentary *Hell on Wheels*, the 2006 A&E series *Rollergirls*, and the multiple websites, leagues, and fictional representations such as 2009's *Whip It*. I then turn to MTV's pranksainment playground of *Jackass*, *Viva la Bam* and *Nitro Circus* as well as the traveling motocross spectacle Nuclear Cowboyz. Finally, I attend to the extreme bodies of ultradistance running through multiple texts and conversations with runners as well as my own participation in the 2011 Keys100 in the Florida Keys.

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### *Sports: A Guy Thing*

Sports create a mirror on our socio-political world, reflecting and refracting hegemonic identities of gender, political economy, race, class, and sexuality. It speaks volumes that when looking into this mirrored image of sport, it is most often a man's reflection looking back. Sports have always already been gendered by hegemonic institutional practices; however, even with legislation like Title IX or women athletes (like

Burke) who lobby for legitimatization and entrance to their sporting world, this fragmented image remains.

My focus on gender is informed by a diverse catalog of literature available (Bell, 1995; 2008; Burstyn, 1999; Cooky, 2006; Crawford, 2006; Drinkwater, 2000; Fuller, 2006; Golombisky, 2006; Hallmark, 2006; Hardin & Dodd, 2006; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Messner, 2002; Sandoz, 1997; Sandoz & Winans, 1999; Trujillo, 1991; Tomlinson, 2001; Wachs, 2006; Zieff, 2006). This gender studies scholarship illustrates how gender shapes bodies and images; objectification and commoditization; and the perpetuation of sport as authenticated through masculinity. When over “95 percent of national sports coverage pertains to male athletes” (Zimmerman & Reavil, 1999, p. xi), it reinforces the notion that culturally, men’s sports are understood to be the ‘real thing.’ Conversely, this delegates women athletes to the roles of athlete-“lite”, a lesser, lighter, or laughable version of their male counterparts. These cultural assumptions of gender in sports generated a body of scholarship that focused on these women’s performances and bodies as subordinate to the phallogentric structuring of sport (Fuller, 2009; Messner & Connell, 2007; Messner & Sabo, 1990). While these are critiques that must be made, it is also important to look toward women in sports that perform in ways that mock, resist, comply, and elude this phallogentric way of knowing gender.

The markers of the “big four” sports in the U.S. – baseball, hockey, football, and basketball – are aggression, competitiveness, and violence. As these are also traditionally characteristics associated with men rather than women (Fuller, 2009; Guttmann, 1991), women’s sports are automatically called into question. Sporting ideals link up with masculine ideals; the muscular, dominant body is traditionally masculine, thus, sport

becomes the vehicle to develop this masculinity (Crawford, 2006). This furthers the legitimization of sport as masculine and severely mitigates the authenticity of women's sports or women athletes. Masculinity is sustained and reflected through the codified language of sport, supported by gendered binaries of strength/weakness, dominance/submission, real/fake, masculine/feminine.

Following Butler's (1988) notion of performativity, I suggest that extreme sport athletes do gender in innovative new ways, playing with normative conventions, alternately and simultaneously making and breaking traditional borders. Gender is a performance within a space anchored by historical weight and conventional norms; extreme sports illustrate how gender is made: gender is an exaggeration, parody, resistance, or product of performance through its manufacture (Butler, 1988). In actively rejecting mainstream convention, the extreme sporting world creates a potential site to expose the strategies of gender that perpetuate sport as an inherently masculine arena. I suggest that with every swipe at convention, extreme sports unsettle the always already masculine reflection in our cultural mirror of sports.

#### *Corporeality and "Newbodies"*

Mainstream expectations and binaried language often dictate sporting bodies; in the extreme sporting culture, it is possible for athletes at the margins to reclaim their bodies through parody, resistance, and transcendence. Gender studies literature explores how sports are both reflection and producer of hegemonic masculinity, holding serious implications based on physical appearance that often has little to do with actual athletic performance (Burr & Hearn, 2008; Crawford, 2006; Fuller, 2006; Hallmark, 2007; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). Additionally, the elements of commoditization and

objectification become sites of exploration as media, marketing, and individuals perform, comply, and resist gendering bodies in and through sports (Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Burstyn, 1999; Cooky, 2006; Drinkwater, 2000). The dominant construction of mainstream sporting bodies calls up ideals of binaried gender as masculine corporeality is performed through a bigger, stronger, dominant typology and feminine corporeality becomes performed through grace, passivity, or a lighter emulation of the masculine.

Mainstream sports typically take up masculine and feminine body typologies then exaggerate these corporeal ideals. In addition to amplifying these gendered ideals surrounding the sporting body, mainstream sport also diminishes or erases the labor that goes into these physiques and physical performances. This fosters the cultural imagination elevating these sporting gods above the rest of us, reminding us of the limits of our own corporeal existences. I argue that extreme sporting performers take a decidedly different turn, defiantly pushing the risk, fear, abject, and injurious in our faces. It is primarily about moving the lines and limits of bodies disciplined according to fast/slow, big/small, ugly/beautiful, fat/thin, right/wrong. Extreme sports bodies emerge with and through the functionality of the extreme sporting performance itself.

I push beyond the previous scholarship surrounding sporting corporeality as I believe that extreme sporting bodies do not simply critique the mainstream ideals of appropriate bodies but challenge our notions and open up possibilities beyond these binaries. The making and remaking of the body occurs through embodiment strategies that: parody gender through exaggerated dress and performance; mock mainstream corporeal ideals through embrace and embodiment of the functionality of different bodies; and rework the limitlessness of the body through new vocabularies of sport.

Schechner notes how discourse for the performer becomes a matter of possession. This possession is “half of the dialectic of performing...the other half is ecstasy: a soaring away from the body, an emptying of the body” (1988, pp. 176-177). In meeting that full corporeal presence yet also creating this escaping ecstasy through performance, extreme sports athletes exceed those limits of corporeality in a performative *jouissance*. As the blood, sweat, and shit typically hidden from the imagery surrounding mainstream sporting superheroes is pulled into these marginalized performances in the extreme, this destabilizes the idealized masculine/feminine gods of mainstream sports, illustrating how performance permits new commentaries fully of and beyond our corporeal limits.

### *Sporting Sex*

Even as scholars and historians trace the development of sports as a cultural obsession, most overlook the erotic qualities inherent to athletic performance. According to Guttman, “critics of sports have deplored their sensuality and their ability to entice, excite, and sexually arouse participants and spectators alike” (1996, p. 1). Admittedly, while a focus strictly on the erotics of sport may lead to the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes – women as sexual objects and men as physical aggressors – it is also possible to envision extreme sports as a site for new performative strategies surrounding gendered binaries and silent sexualities. Extreme sports look beyond that mainstream sports looking glass that represents idealized hyper-hetero sexualities for men and objectified, invisible, or suspected sexualities for women. Instead, extreme sports shifts the mirror to reflect the invisible sexualities normative society casts out of its gaze.

Yet to suggest that the sporting world has never been sexualized is a huge misstep. The sporting world, filled with frenetic movement, glossy marketing, and

gendered expectations, has always been sexualized. The hyper-heterosexuality of men in sports, springing from the imagery of the “player” surrounded by throngs of adoring women, has become a marker of masculinity in culture (Brannon, 1976; Connell, 1992; Kimmel, 1994; Lipsyte, 2004; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Pollack, 1998; Pronger, 1990). However, women’s sports have been sexualized through either objectification, omission, or suspected lesbianism. ABC news chose to memorialize Sarah Burke not purely through her merits as a freeskiing icon and women’s sports advocate but instead by reminding us that she was a “red-carpet regular” and one of FHM’s “100 Sexiest Women.” This reminder follows a narrative that a woman athlete is either legitimized because she is sexualized or never legitimized because she is sexualized. Conversely, traditional women’s sports, such as gymnastics or figure skating, omit explicit eroticization as these are prepubescent bodies normative society warns against desiring.

Finally, the constant suspicion of lesbianism in women’s sports becomes reified through cultural jokes surrounding iconic women athletes, i.e. Dinah Shore and “lady golfers.” When photographs of Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan playing softball emerged in 2010, it caused a whispered debate surrounding the then-nominee’s sexual orientation. Appearing on MSNBC, Pat Buchanan stated: “Women’s softball has been associated with lesbians and being gay for a long time...sort of a signal like two men sunbathing together on a beach...the immediate implication is that they’re gay, and I’ve known that for a long time” (Turner, 2010, para. 2). Not to overshadow this earth-shattering insight from such a brilliant and unbiased cultural critic as Buchanan, the *L.A. Times* also printed an article stating: “If you play, you’re probably gay” (Wharton & Rohlin, 2010, para. 5). The newspaper continued to speak of how these questions and

stereotypes create a spiral of denial and rebuttal, which is encapsulated in the intense media focus on a player like the conventionally attractive U.S. Olympic pitcher Jennie Finch. Finch becomes the rebuttal of an entire sport sick and tired of being cast under suspicion and stereotype, forced to confess or deny their sexualities.

Thus, mainstream sports valorize sexuality in men's sports if it is heterosexual and preferably with many faceless women or one famous woman (Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and supermodel Giselle Bündchen). The hypermasculine ritualization of sport has (re)produced a culture of homophobia and sexism (Lipsyte, 2004). I suggest that these performances of hyper-hetero masculinity create a front against the fear of being exposed as somehow inadequate in masculinity for many men. Kimmel (1994) speaks to this use of masculinity as a strategy for men to prevent others from shaming or dominating them in some way, building homophobic and sexist performances around the anxiety of not being enough of a man. Taking up these ideas of the hyper-hetero sexualized sporting man and sporting woman's sexuality as objectified, invisible, or suspect, I push to explore how extreme sports might reinforce and reject these notions, perhaps even bringing these anxieties and desires, inadequacies and excesses, to the stage of sporting culture. I analyze the ways that extreme sports make visible the invisible in our culture; I work through the fragmented identities of sporting men who resist and rework the hyper-hetero identity and sporting women made to choose among reflections of objectification, omission, and suspicion.

Sports offer a reflection, a mirror image of our culture, which creates and recreates images of identity, language, performance, and practice. I suggest that extreme sports offer a new "mirror," taking those reflections of mainstream sporting culture beyond traditional

imagery to offer new ways of seeing gender, corporeality, and sexuality. I aim to draw attention to the images possible through this new cultural mirror; extreme sports shatters the traditional ways of thinking about sports as gendered, corporeal, or sexualized by creating new discursive and representational practices and performances.

### *The Theoretical Framework of Performativity*

Drawing from anthropology, folklore, art, history, and literary criticism, scholars began articulating the presence of performance in cultural products, social communities, and individual acts. Victor Turner (1976; 1986) uses liminality to advance Arnold van Gennep's (1908) ideas of ritual in social dramas as transformative, reflexive, regenerative processes that occur during societal crises and ritual play. This keys into Johan Huizinga's (1938) suggestion that there is a seriousness of play central to all culture. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke also makes several contributions to performance theory: he establishes the strategic nature of literature; locates the conflict necessary at the core of dramatic action; explores the potency of drama to explain human actions; posits the magic of language; and acknowledges how drama emerges from ritual. Performance opens up the possibilities of critique of identity politics through issues of materiality, representation, subjectivity, language, and spectatorship as articulated in Judith Butler's idea of performativity (1988). Ultimately, Butler helps reshift the focus of performance and feminism to the power of the body to cure, dramatize, and reproduce our historical situations. According to Butler, "if the personal is a category which expands to include the wider political and social structures, then the acts of the gendered subject would be similarly expansive" (1988, p. 523). Butler articulates gender as something "put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and

pleasure” (1988, p. 531). However, if this repetitive act becomes mistaken as an essential fact of language, we relinquish the potential to expand culture through subversive performances of our bodies. Performativity thus illustrates these mundane acts of gender and the political agency of subversive performances.

The feminist tradition and its impact on performance theory spark the move toward the politics of performance. Jill Dolan (1993) suggests that through performance, marginalized individuals can teach their codes and vocabularies to others “performatively and playfully” (1993, p. 32), creating transcendent possibilities in identity, action, and language. Following this, Jose Esteban Munoz analyzes disidentifying performances that theorize the socio-political power of performance and performativity. As Munoz suggests, it is “worldmaking” that shows how performances can “establish alternate views of the world...oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’” (1999, p. 195). Disidentifying performances, as one example, resist monolithic knowledge and emphasize fluidity of identity.

Scholarship in communication demonstrates the ways that performance constitutes identities, kinship, and culture. At the junction of communication and performance are the strategies constitutive of gender, sexuality, and the body. In Petra Kuppers’ performative work on disabled performers, she suggests that they share with performers of gender, race, sexuality, and other marginalized positions the opportunities to “undermine certainties about bodies and ways of being” (2003, pp. 120-121). As Bauman states: “If change is conceived of in opposition to the conventionality of the community at large, then it is only appropriate that the agents of that change be placed away from the center of that conventionality, on the margins of society” (1984, p. 45).

Moving away from that center of conventionality, I push previous scholarship on sport further through a performative approach critiquing the marginalized cultures of extreme sports to address issues of gender, sexuality, and the body. As Turner claims, “parody, satire, irony, slapstick” remain critical commentaries on normative structures, language, and performances. These critiques work within and without extreme sports to send up traditional sporting identities and normative notions of gender, sexuality, class, and the body.

The lens of performativity expands our knowledge as it takes up our assumptions regarding our world and crafts critical commentary, rejects traditional ideals, and in many cases reproduces all of these assumptions over and over again. Yet with each performance, something is made and remade in and through gender, sexuality, and corporeality. Extreme sports, viewed through the identity-crafting lens of performativity, creates, critiques, and resists its foundation of mainstream sporting culture.

### *Preview of Chapters*

In Chapter Two, I critically analyze media representations and cultural productions of roller derby. I look specifically at the Tampa Bay Derby Darlins and the Ft. Myers Derby Girls, comprised of teams all owned and operated by the skaters. I also analyze the 2007 documentary *Hell on Wheels*, the 2006 A&E reality series *Rollergirls*, and the 2009 film *Whip It* as textual representations of this rejuvenated sport. These representations celebrate athletic skill, team dedication, and a reckless violence that splays across the rink in a vibrant reconstruction of third-wave feminism. This third-wave performativity of identity emphasizes reclaimed sexual empowerment and expression, liberation from normative dictates of how “pretty girls” and “good girls” should behave,

and heightens individuality within a larger community. Within this cultural phenomenon and site of gendered performance, these women skate between complicity with mainstream commercialization and fierce resistance of objectification. The women of roller derby create, sustain, and dominate their sport, refusing an either/or of authentic athlete vs. authentic sex symbol. Instead, these women performatively parody their sexualized femininity while subversively shattering those ideals of mainstream sporting femininity through brutal violence and aggressive competition.

In Chapter Three, the critical analysis turns to an adolescent masculinity. Mainstream sporting masculinity functions through hyper-heterosexuality and dominant corporeality to silence one great vulnerability of men: being exposed as inadequate in their masculinity. Extreme sporting pranktainment does masculinity differently, establishing a retrograde adolescent masculinity that continues to uphold a boy code version of manhood while crafting new possibilities through three themes: kinship, corporeality, and sexuality. MTV's *Jackass*, *Viva la Bam*, *Wildboyz*, and *Nitro Circus*, celebrate the dangerous, ridiculous, and death-defying acts of perpetual extreme Peter Pans. I also look to the Nitro Circus tour and the Nuclear Cowboyz troupes which offer live events celebrating masculinity at the edge. I interrogate the extreme spaces of a retrofitted adolescent masculinity, where the playground boy code is both upheld through daring one-upmanship and hierarchal humiliation even as traditional scripts of masculinity are upended through the performance of kinship, corporeality, and sexuality.

Chapter Four delves into ultradistance running through a reflexive ethnographic approach. Using a narrative account within the extreme culture of ultrarunning, I take on the challenge of an ultramarathon – a 50 mile race – through the lived experience within a

culture of those pushing their bodies beyond normative limitations. I contend that ultrarunning pushes beyond binaried language and traditional performance, toward a transformative new vocabulary of pleasure-centered *jouissance*. A reflexive narrative and ethnographic interviews feature ultrarunning training, events, and culture, culminating in my participation running the 50 mile ultra in the 2011 Keys100 in the Florida Keys. I will fuse active participation and cultural observation to understand this unique community of runners and learn how to performatively transcend in ultrarunning.

In the concluding chapter, my analyses of roller derby, pranksainment, and ultrarunning set the stage for new ways of looking at sport. I propose that extreme sports smashes that hegemonic mirror image between sport and culture, forcing a new way of gazing at sport, gender, bodies, and sexualities. Extreme sports offer reflections of identity that keep us gazing at a new prism of possibilities reflected in the extreme.

## Chapter Two – Primal Scream: Performing Women’s Voices in Roller Derby

This is proving...that we can just have a really fun time, and start something from nothing, and have women’s voices, and make a coalition with other types of women who all came together for this one weird reason. (Nancy Haggerty in *Hell on Wheels*, 2007)

This quotation encapsulates how roller derby offers a space for a multiplicity of women’s voices united in the spirit of grassroots work. Roller derby offers the fusion of camaraderie, action, and expression where women can create a sport and space entirely of their own, all for the “one weird reason” of racing around a track and slamming each other out of contention. Roller derby tracks are stages for women to explore new identities and ways of being athletic, sexy, violent, entertaining, and unified. Roller derby allows women a unique space for a shared primal scream all of their own; perhaps this is why roller derby has resurged and spread internationally like a wildfire, running counter to so many things women are told *not to be* off the track.

Roller derby embodies the spirit of the extreme as a do-it-yourself sport; these women and leagues craft their own unique identities and skate sites to reflect their communities and cultures. The pioneering example of this spirit is exemplified by Austin, Texas-based Bad Girls Good Women Productions (now Texas Roller Derby or TXRD), the women-centered group responsible for engineering the rebirth of roller derby a decade ago. Yet to fold roller derby women into the yolk of extreme sports does little to address the specificity of gender in this culture. The diverse experiences and individual

stories of these women illustrate how “women’s lives orient them differently...traditional rhetoric cannot be used to evaluate their rhetorical activities” (Cai, 2008, p. 276). This is especially true of the highly individualistic, DIY women of roller derby who offer a new spin on third-wave feminism. The primary question that guides this chapter is: how is gender performed in roller derby?

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how gendered performances of roller derby play upon parodic exaggerations of sexuality and sexual empowerment, negotiate the commoditization of sexuality, reclaim violence through athleticism, embrace marginal identity and ritual play, and queer normative sporting traditions. Moving beyond the surface representations and performances of media and cultural productions, I engage in conversations with skaters and spectators both online and trackside, and I hope to account for the needs, desires, and performances not accounted for in mainstream media representation.

Following Butler’s (1988) notion of performativity, I suggest that derby performers materialize characters corporeally. This materialization features both physical embodiment and language use. Derby skaters do gender by playing with normative conventions, alternately and simultaneously making and breaking traditional borders that mark femininity and “womanhood.” To understand how extreme women athletes construct and perform gender differently, I analyze several mediated and cultural representations of contemporary full-contact roller derby. I assess how these women voice themselves and become represented in the 2007 documentary *Hell on Wheels* and the 2006 A&E series *Rollergirls*. I look at websites, fanzines, and fictional representations like the 2009 film *Whip It*. I also take a front row for the action at derby

events for the Ft. Myers Derby Girls and Tampa Bay Derby Darlins' leagues. I believe the women of roller derby are finding and reclaiming voices for their selves silenced in normative society within the space of the liminal extreme.

To analyze gender in these texts, this chapter first surveys traditional women's sports and athletes; it then moves to the history of roller derby as a DIY sport built by skaters and fans. With the stage set, the chapter analyzes specific texts to reveal the performances of sexuality and parody of sex work in derby, the traits of athleticism and violence encouraged in derby, the *communitas* created by derby, and the queering of convention across the sport. With each attempt to fix these unique athletes into the objectifying gaze, each mediated move to commoditize their rebellion, and each compliant wink to their spectators, these women keep skating past the grasp of normative confines.

### *Women and Sports*

To understand roller derby as an exciting space for resistant womanhood in sport, I regard women's traditional involvement in sports, sports that are considered within the feminine domain, and the values that women's sports reflect and produce. I revisit traditional women's sports scholarship that mark the disparities, dismissals, and differences between women's and men's sports. These issues produce a powerful mythos regarding our cultural assumptions regarding women athletes and women in general.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist scholarship began exploring the issues of sport and gender (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1994; Kaplan, 1979). As feminist concerns typically focused on issues of body politics through women's reproductive rights, contraceptive use, and health care, sports as a corporeal expression or performance

was relegated to “stepchild to feminism...but it is important, because at stake is how women view themselves in general” (Kaplan, 1979, p. x). The disparity between spectators of women’s and men’s sports, in which over “95 percent of national sports coverage pertains to male athletes” (Zimmerman & Reavil, 1999, p. xi), may suggest that as a culture we assume men’s sports to be the ‘real thing’ whereas women athletes are deemed lesser, lighter, or even laughable versions of their male counterparts. These cultural assumptions of gender in sports sparked a growing body of scholarship on women’s roles in the sporting world (Creedon, 1994; Fuller, 2009; Messner & Connell, 2007; Messner & Sabo, 1990). As greater media and scholarly attention shifted to women athletes and sports, it became evident that women in sports offered critical sites to explore gendered bodies, performances, and politics.

As aggression, competitiveness, and violence have traditionally been associated with men rather than women (Fuller, 2009; Guttman, 1991), women’s sports have typically been devoid of these characteristics. We can even see this in the symbols of sports teams; male sports teams are represented by Pirates and Tigers while women’s teams are “likely to be diminutive such as Tigerettes...or contradictory such as Lady Rams, Lady Bulldogs” (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989, p. 362). This dichotomy reflects traditional societal patterns and assumptions; the subsequent gendered division of sports further reinforces the beliefs that women are physically weaker and thus cannot compete with and against men. This perpetuates the harmful notion that “men’s activities and men’s power are the real thing and women’s are not...women’s sports, like women’s power, are second-class” (McDonagh & Pappano, 2009, p. x).

Cultural norms dictate “that muscularity is linked to masculinity, and that sport is a dominant vehicle for the development of this aspect of masculinity...contributing to a generalized social belief in the incompatibility of sport with femininity” (Crawford, 2006, p. 256). In his historical review of women’s sports, Guttman suggests that “sports have often – but by no means always – been a part of the rites de passage that mark the move from boyhood to manhood. For girls, puberty has often – but by no means always – meant the abandonment of sports” (1991, p. 3). This suggests that sport for girls and women is simply a matter of play which must be abandoned for a girl to grow up; this negates the serious dedication, grueling training, and sheer strength of women athletes. Coded within the language of sport, gendered terminology of power and weakness, aggression and submission continue to buttress our cultural binaries of masculinity and femininity.

Traditional women’s sports – tennis, golf, gymnastics, figure skating – have emphasized individual performance. Even though gymnastics assembles a team, it is still based on the individual performance of each participant rather than their collaboration as a team. This often serves to devalue the individual performances of these athletes as they have not worked together to learn the values of team participation (Peterson, Weber & Trousdale, 1967). As feminism is a movement of many voices working together to gain political power, women athletes must also locate a space to join each other toward greater power. In Nelson’s (1994) work on women in sports, women athletes who unite in teams are often able to work “together toward communal goals regardless of differences in race, class, physical ability, and sexual preference, female athletes create unity through diversity, laying the groundwork for empowering political change” (p. xi). Team sports

create a space where women trust and depend on each other; this sporting loyalty could become a springboard for women to forge transformative and empowering alliances in our world.

Despite this potential, many women athletes in traditional sports disassociate themselves from feminism. This type of disassociation works as women athletes take efforts to avoid controversy and reassure any who might oppose their athleticism and sporting participation (Nelson, 1994). When women athletes stress that the sport is their goal rather than feminist empowerment, it reifies a control placed on women seeking success in traditionally masculine domains. The internalization of a bias or hatred toward feminism emerges at turns when women athletes repeatedly insist on their femininity and heterosexuality (Heywood, 1998; 2004). Regardless of the factors that motivate women toward sport, the end result is inevitably a feminist move. The time, training, strength, and competitiveness all serve to challenge mainstream demands and ideals of womanhood.

Following Adrienne Rich's work on the body (1976), it is the work of women who repossess their bodies that bring significant transformation for our culture. Women in sports find opportunities to reclaim their bodies; however, these bodies are often strained through traditional ideals of grace, beauty, or smallness. The performances of these traditional women's sports often veil the arduous labor these athletes put into their bodies for the sake of their sport (Crawford, 2006). When we cannot see the work of women athletes, it reasserts the ideal of women as naturally graceful. We see the figure skater gliding effortlessly through the air yet we are shielded from the painful strains, falls, and physical discipline behind that performance. We watch the gymnast bend her

body in seemingly impossible ways yet we are not privy to the stretching, aching, and exhausting hours and means that produce that bending body. Thus, in traditional women's sports we are deprived of the strength, training, competitiveness, and work that create the performance of grace, flexibility, elegance, and beauty. To fully repossess and resist traditional ideals of femininity and women's bodies, women athletes need a space and a sport that refuses to hide the labor, violence, and competitiveness.

In reviewing feminist and cultural literature surrounding gender in sports, several prevalent themes emerge regarding gendered difference: blatant and subtle disregard for women's sports, individual success over team performance, and the reassertion of women athletes as graceful, elegant, and beautiful through the concealment of labor, violence, and competition.

### *Herstory Brought Up to Speed*

Gendered performances in contemporary roller derby involve many facets, including its history, audience, and the skaters themselves. In analyzing the performativity of gender within roller derby, I look at these aspects to reassert why roller derby is a significant cultural phenomena worthy of attention. According to the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) website, there are currently 98 WFTDA sanctioned leagues in the United States (2011). This does not account for the 43 apprentice leagues and countless unaffiliated leagues. At present, there are over 500 leagues in sixteen nations. These leagues incorporate an average of four to six teams, which thrive on the dedication of thousands of volunteers. Skaters serve multiple roles as owners, managers, and operators of the teams, leagues, and associations; this mirrors the WFTDA creed: "by the skaters, for the skaters."

The history of roller derby has been documented in several accounts that focus on the development of the sport (Brantley, 2011; Coppage, 1999) and its modern revival (Barbee & Cohen, 2010; Joulwan, 2007). Roller derby began in the 1920s as roller skating races. The racing format evolved in the 1930s when Leo Seltzer developed the Transcontinental Roller Derby; this provided the blueprint for the modern sport as it emphasized physicality, collisions, and falls. The popularity of roller derby varied wildly throughout the following decades, due to competition between franchises and economic strains. However, the early 2000s saw a contemporary women's roller derby revival as Austin became birthplace to the BGGW's Texas and Lonestar Rollergirls. This grassroots revival emphasizes athleticism, strength, and team solidarity (effectively ending the grandiose theatricality that dominated in the 1970s and 1980s). The governing United Leagues Coalition changed its name to the WFTDA in 2005, symbolically seeking "to re-imagine roller derby as a modern sport" (WFTDA, 2010, p. 3). From offering liability and medical insurance to its leagues in 2008, the 2009 expansion of the WFTDA into four regions, to the 2010 formation of Canadian and European regions, these derby milestones mirror the sport's growing popularity.

Popular culture has paid attention as well, as evidenced by several media treatments including: the documentaries *Blood on the Flat Track* (2007), *Roller Derby Dolls* (2008) and *Roller Warriors* (2009); feminist critiques such as Oler's "Holy Rollers: Is Roller Derby the new Burlesque?" in *Bitch* magazine (2005); and mainstream coverage such as ESPN's "Roller Derby Revival" feature on its flagship *Sportscenter* program (2008) and various newspaper and magazine articles from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to the *New York Times*. As I write this in 2011, *Only in America with Larry the Cable Guy*

airs a segment on the Sin City Rollergirls, and *Dinner Impossible* chef Robert Irvine must cater a South Jersey Derby Girls event. Both episodes aired in the same week; this illustrates how the derby phenomenon is rapidly reaching into new spheres of the cultural imagination. All of this escalating attention reinforces the popularity of a sport created by and for the skaters in our culture. The DIY nature of roller derby garners national attention and respect, creating a cultural commentary on the dedication and passion of these women athletes.

*A Growing Audience.* Although visible in the extending lines and screaming crowds attending derby events, the WFTDA identifies the spectators of roller derby in more quantitative terms: 60% active fans of other sports; 59% female; 41% at ages 25-34 and 41% at ages 35-54. Several fans work to perpetuate interest in their teams, promoting them through websites such as Braleigh.com (dedicated to the Carolina Rollergirls League) in which fans contribute bout recaps and photographs. In addition, every team in every league – 98 in the U.S. with hundreds more internationally – hosts its own website to recruit skaters, list events, and garner fan support. This has created an online community to connect not only the skaters with their communities but also with each team and league around the globe. The skaters within the league are consistently among the spectator population; the skaters not featured in the bout also help out by selling tickets, memorabilia, and concessions. Some bouts, like those for the TXRD or Gotham Girls Roller Derby, are held on banked tracks in large stadiums equipped with flashing lights and booming stereo systems. Others, such as the Tampa Bay Derby Darlins' bouts, are held on flat tracks in college gymnasiums or on outdoor tracks like the Las Vegas Sin

City Rollergirls' bouts. Whatever the actual location, all sites create a unique space where fans and skaters intermingle to cultivate the success of the sport.

*The Athletes of Roller Derby.* In addition to the spectatorship, the WFTDA accounts for the statistics of the skaters themselves. As the primary source for all sanctioned derby skaters to register their original derby name, the International Rollergirls' Name Registry provides the most current statistic regarding how many roller derby women skate: as of September 2011, over thirty-thousand skaters had registered names to the site. According to the WFTDA, 63% of skaters are between 25 and 34 years old; the majority of skaters hold a post-secondary education; and 31% have children under the age of eighteen. To understand how these static numbers transform into electrifying skaters such as Gotham league favorite Greta Turbo, the WFTDA offers the following statement: "Skaters are 'normal' during the day. We work; we're moms, students, etc. Roller derby is our escape from day-to-day life and our opportunity to embrace a tough, edgier side of ourselves. When you step into the rink, your derby alter ego takes over" (WFTDA, 2010, p. 7). This transformation becomes a pivotal component of the creation and maintenance of identity in roller derby culture.

*The How and Why of Texts - Hell on Wheels and Rollergirls*

The BGGW/ TXRD league created the model for league structure, team competition, and the business model itself. Thus, I look at the development of modern roller derby as told through the 2007 documentary *Hell on Wheels*. Directed by Bob Ray, the documentary follows the burgeoning years of roller derby for the BGGW/TXRD women. *Hell on Wheels* was originally released at the South by Southwest film festival in Austin and documented the events surrounding the 2001 formation of the BGGW/TXRD

roller derby leagues. *The Austin Chronicle* remarked: “The film is blessedly free of A&E-style jiggle and melodramatic pandering, and it makes clear the value of Derby for misfit girls who like to clothesline people” (Fagan, 2007). *The Onion’s* A.V. Club also praises the documentary: “adrenaline-fueled highs, heartbreaking lows, and lots of chicks in short skirts kicking the shit out of each other” ([www.hellonwheelsthemovie.com](http://www.hellonwheelsthemovie.com), 2012). Yet these are more than chicks in short skirts, and *Hell on Wheels* illustrates this throughout the film. The film stands as an exemplary text as it documented the burgeoning reformation of derby leagues at the birthplace of the revival; the documentary also earned accolades as an official selection at fourteen national and international film festivals. While critical acclaim and “indy-cred” fosters a sense of authenticity regarding the documentary, I selected this text primarily because it served as key to understanding the roller derby revival and the pioneering women that started it all.

A second primary text, A&E’s *Rollergirls*, works from a different chronological entry-point. Whereas *Hell on Wheels* focused on the women driving the revival, *Rollergirls* approaches from the other end of the story. Already caught up in the derby cultural juggernaut, the reality series attempts to unravel the woman behind the skater. *Rollergirls* typically juxtaposes two skaters’ storylines; the featured skaters are members of each team facing off in that episode’s bout. Each episode follows a standard format: each skater is introduced before the camera follows them at work, home, or preparing for the bout. The skaters discuss relationships, family, and careers yet the primary focus is always derby.

These texts are mirrors into ways that roller derby as a sport challenges conceptions regarding traditional women’s sports and athletes. In exploring the ways that

roller derby does gender and sexuality differently in and through sport, I assert that it is an exciting new space for women to embrace and enact performances that resist and rebel against cultural norms of womanhood.

### *Performing Sexuality as Reward and Punishment*

The performance of sexuality as both objectifying and empowering becomes central to roller derby identity and performance of gender. In Gayle Rubin's (1994) essay "Thinking Sex", she offers a "radical theory of sex" to effectively "denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression" (p. 275). Rubin locates the cultural oppression and silence surrounding several sexual practices such as obscenity, money, sexuality of minors, and homosexuality. Western culture has inscribed sexuality within a very punitive framework which follows blatant and subtle controls. Traditional women's sports have followed this format of control regarding the presentation of body and performance of sexuality. Roller derby flips this script, emphasizing performances and characterizations that flirt with: obscenity through the display of sadistic and masochistic demonstrations and pornographic imagery; money through the parody of prostitution as skaters trade sexualized fantasies for financial success; sexualization of prepubescence through the familiar Catholic schoolgirl costumes; and homosexuality through the open embrace of the "girl-on-girl" mantra.

A 2001 BGGW promotional video features the four team captains dancing against a wall in a campy call to exploitation cinema of the late 1970s. The clip captures the women in sexualized poses interspersed with shots of their roller skates. The tagline accompanying the mudflap silhouette fade-out reads "get ready for all-girl action." While this seems a selling of sex over sport, the skaters do not regard this as an either/or issue.

Anya Jack echoes this sentiment: “You know, sex sells. So what we’ve decided is that we’re going to play along with that...somewhat. And be sexy and be fun, and be kind of a fantasy, if you will.” The skaters embrace their on-rink personas, tailoring sexy images to suit individual personalities.

The embrace of sex and violence together is also represented and performed in various subversive ways. Several leagues feature penalties and punishments that tease audiences with sadomasochistic performances. Returning to Rubin’s work, people “equate sexual masochism with self-destructive personality patterns, sexual sadism with emotional aggression” (1994, p. 280). Pat Califia comments on the increased policing of S&M materials: “Sadomasochists are immensely useful as a metaphor for evil, for violence, for prejudice, for hate – and that metaphor is a big lie; it is nothing but projection” (1988, p. 25). Roller derby plays with S&M on a large cultural stage which helps not only strip the projection of evil onto these practices but also plays with it as normal, healthy, and fun.

The derby penalty wheel is a spectacle of S&M, as it requires exaggerated performances that link sex with violence, pleasure with punishment. The offending skater must spin a wheel-of-fortune creation with an assortment of punishments including “What a Jackass!” requiring the skater to sing aloud while bent over for the audience’s viewing pleasure. This enactment of embarrassment links with many S&M practices in which the participants surrender their bodies in acts of degradation. The “Pillow Fight” punishment keys into the fantasies of girl-on-girl action yet emphasizes the aggressive violence central to the derby sport and S&M mentality. Although many skaters express disdain for the wheel, they also realize it is a crowd-pleaser.

When Sara Rodgers (a.k.a. Miss Conduct) addresses the “Spank Alley” punishment, she says, “I’d probably do my own bending over for the crowd anyways...I’ve been spanked before, I’ll get spanked again.” While these remain fairly mild performances of sexualized sadomasochism, it is the merger of sexuality and pain central to the sport that plays on the cultural imagination of S&M practices. Through this embrace and performance of S&M, roller derby women give voice to sexual practices silenced as taboo, and play these scenarios out for all to see. This echoes the rebellious sexuality the derby women embody on the rink.

Yet there remain reminders that women’s sexuality – especially sexuality out-of-normative-control – might (re)position the women in a place of danger. In *Hell on Wheels*, during a bout between the Holy Rollers and the Putas del Fuego, there is a moment when the penalty wheel performance goes awry. When one skater skates past a line of spectators to get spanked, the skater is grabbed in the crotch by one male audience member. Immediately, “Wheel Girl/Penalty Mistress” Amber Diva Stinson – a gothic mutation of Vanna White and the Wicked Witch of the East combined – demands the offender identify himself over the intercom. Embodying the “Mistress” position of punitive dominatrix in roller derby, Amber Diva cuts a powerful figure emblematic of the S&M lifestyle. After Amber Diva chastises the offending audience member, she throws him out with the admonishment that “you walk a fine line between sexy and slutty, and crotch-grabbing is slutty.”

At the next league meeting, Stinson leads by talking about how each bout gets better, starting with the “Spank Alley” incident to which the league members cheer wildly for their Penalty Mistress. Despite the threat that the exploiter might punish the

skater for her sexual performance, the skaters' responses reassert their defiant resistance against objectification and exploitation. They change the game of reward and punishment by rewriting and enforcing the rules on their terms.

Women often weave between reward and punishment for their sexuality, between pleasure and pain, especially sexuality considered out of normative control. Merely a year and a half into development, the BGGW had garnered national media attention. The producer of Comedy Central's *Insomniac* with comedian Dave Atell caught on to the hype and immediately contacted the BGGW for a segment. During the *Hell on Wheels* taping of the *Insomniac* taping, Atell says: "That's what we're looking for... girl on girl action." In the next frame, a skater points out a stab wound (often skaters bring illegal weaponry onto the track) from an earlier bout. Atell's eyes widen as he asks "is this roller derby or a woman's prison?" Once Atell laces up his skates, the derby women pummel the comedian until brought to the punishment wheel; when the arrow lands on "Spank Alley" the skaters form a line to allow Atell a swat at each of them.

This filming works from "girl-on-girl" to "women's prison" and from a comedian beat-down to "Spank Alley," reinforcing the continuous fluctuation between sexualized fantasy objectification and empowered reclamation of sexuality and violence. Performing these negotiations of sexual identity and practice on a worldwide scale offers the derby women a chance to address and reclaim their sexuality with and against normative conventions. This also provides a cultural platform for parodying performances of commoditized sex, as derby women exaggerate sex work in sport to create a commentary on normative assumptions of women in sport.

*Commoditizing Sex: Parodying the Oldest Profession*

The women of roller derby also perform gender by using sexuality to turn a profit. They subvert the objectifying gaze, performing exaggerated acts and displays of sexuality for money. This functions as a parody of prostitution, a performance for the gaze to sustain the authentic sport. As Butler suggests, gendered identity becomes constituted through stylized repetition of acts and performances, thus constituting “the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (1988, p. 520). Repeated performances that parody traditional gendered rules of woman as object for trade offer cultural fictions that defy the conventions of acceptable or normative sexuality. As roller derby skaters create a parody exaggerating the standards of sex-for-money, they subvert the supposed naturalness of this gendered act of sexual trafficking. The derby women who parody prostitution subvert the historical and cultural tradition of oppression and objectification and reclaim it for themselves.

In *Hell on Wheels*, one of the Rhinestone Cowgirls pummels a Hellcat. The first turn of the penalty wheel lands on “Sold to the Highest Bidder.” The penalized Hellcat skates around the rink as audience members hold up bidding cards. The skater goes for the winning bid of \$45, which is promptly returned to the league. Derby leagues also work campy fundraising events at various bars, where they have wet t-shirt contests and oil wrestling matches to raise a few bucks. While these exploitive performances invoke the sense that these skaters sell-out sexuality for quick cash, these skaters remain keenly aware of the transaction and enact a sense of play at these events. Like the act of striptease, the skaters trade fantasy for money in parodies of prostitution.

There are repeated attempts to fix these skaters into normative frames by outside marketing machines or cultural representations. The cultural zeitgeist attempts to appropriate the sex appeal of the skaters. In both *Hell on Wheels* and *Rollergirls*, weekly radio interviews feature a lecherous host who continuously speaks of the attractiveness of the women and asks suggestive questions. In one interview, Lunatic from the Hellcats and Lux of the Rhinestone Cowgirls discuss an upcoming bout. The host immediately asks “do you girls ever, like, hook up...love on each other?” A savvy Lunatic responds: “We’re not telling you that...you have to be there.”

Skaters artfully straddle the border of marketing and objectification. This precarious space can be seen in contests in which skaters are auctioned off or offered as prizes for fans to take on dates. Even in the selection of derby names such as Switchblade Sister “Ellie May Tramp It” or Black Widow “Klymaxxx,” the skaters are hinging that entire derby identity on the knowledge that sex sells. Traditional women’s sports normalize, hide, or infantilize the sexuality of the participants (Heywood, 2004); roller derby women instead embrace their sexuality in a powerful performance of sexual identity that reveals the oppressive structural assumptions regarding women athletes’ sexuality.

While the tension between exploitive appropriation and empowered sexuality emerges in many cultural productions regarding gender, roller derby women at the edge of extreme culture provide a powerful model. Much like sex workers who operate on a capitalist model trading fantasy for money, roller derby offers a new way of doing sex on the stage of sport. Offering themselves up as sexual fantasies complies with the commoditization; yet the parody of prostitution sustains their success and the empowered

knowledge that they are in control. These skaters offer the possibility there need be no dichotomy between sexy and sell-out. In embracing their physicality and sexuality, these skaters cultivate rink identities of their own creation. Media appropriation and lewd catcalls may fall around these women; however, it is their individual identity and team loyalty on and off the rink that offer acts of daily resistance. These performances of gender and sexuality challenge traditional ideals of womanhood in sports; moving to the displays of labor through athleticism, injury, violence and competition demonstrate even more ways in which roller derby does gender differently.

#### *Athleticism and Injury: A Painful Passion*

While traditional women's sports often conceal the grueling and injurious labor involved in athletic strength and excellence, roller derby skaters show their work, athleticism, and pain. Despite the entertainment value and sexy marketing in roller derby, the skaters stress that the competition is their primary concern. As one skater remarks, it is imperative for the sport that the skaters be "as competitive as possible but also as entertaining as hell." Several of the league captains I spoke with describe grueling training strategies which involve a mix of skating practice, balance work, and exaggerated moves intended to thrill the crowd. One trainer urges the women to fall down not only often, but theatrically: "Make a storyline out of it." Yet as many skaters reiterate, the only way that roller derby is actually staged would be in the fact that skaters practice their moves beforehand so they know exactly what to do and how to react.

The Ft. Myers Derby Girls require a three-month training period in which they move from basic skills such as forward and low skating to jumps and rolls. Most leagues also stress other areas of training beyond the physical requirements such as attitude

training, basic knowledge of the sport, and the capability to listen and apply new knowledge. One skater remarks that despite all this planning and practicing, once on the track “primal” instincts seem to take over.

Derby is both performance of violence and authentic violence realized. Most of the women boastfully show their scars, cuts, and bruises as emblems of pride; several skaters express concern for wear-and-tear on their bodies and stress the need to train properly to avoid injury. Despite the fact that numerous derby websites offer pages devoted to pictures of skaters showing their recent injuries, these bragging rights seem relegated to show for the audiences. Yet this corporeal display may function performatively as a statement on gender expectations regarding injury. From the scarlet cuts and violet bruises to pink flaps of flesh exposing white bone, these are visible emblems that jar our cultural expectations of women’s bodies. These proud displays of injuries are a reminder that our culture expects women’s bodies to be under constant protection and control.

The skaters’ excitement and playfulness might evoke the notion that derby is all a game; however, derby skaters maintain that they are true athletes willing to do whatever it takes to win. As Haggerty suggests, “A lot of people just see it as a very fun and entertaining thing to do without realizing how very physical it is...you can get hurt.” In *Hell on Wheels*, the reality of injury became clear immediately to the newly formed league. Within the first short months of 2002, the league skaters racked up one broken wrist, a broken tailbone, two broken ankles, a broken leg, and a broken tooth. The women speak about the injuries, specifically one league member who had her ankle broken in

three places so badly that her foot was disconnected from the ankle. The injuries are both moments of despair and badges of honor.

Experienced skaters point out that many injuries occur when the skater has not already built the proper strength in muscle, tendons, and joint. League trainer Laurie Rourke (a.k.a. The Wrench) comments on the misconception regarding derby as lighthearted fun with little physical demand: “The thing that everyone said was ‘no, it’s not really like that...we’re going to skate, we’re going to wear nice outfits, we’re going to have cool nicknames.’ No! You are going to work out, you are going to work hard, and you are going to be an athlete.” Thus, the league trainers not only teach the skaters techniques of roller derby but strength and balance training as well. They learn proper ways to fall as well as how to hit. Rourke describes many new skaters as “a lot of tough-looking women who didn’t want to practice, didn’t want to give up drinking on Friday to go practice 8:00 am on Saturday.” As several skaters reassert, the grueling training and attendance policies ensure that only the dedicated and strong survive to skate on the track.

In a scene from *Rollergirls*, Lunatic is massaged by Mary Jane’s boyfriend, league massage therapist Clay. They discuss the wear and tear on her body and Lunatic admits she doesn’t think her body or personal life can endure another season. This is a common concern of the skaters, discussed by Punky in a later episode: “I really just enjoy being with everybody so much...you love it so much you never want to give it up...there are times you’re forced to because of injury.” The injuries to mind and body fail to keep these women from seeking the track in droves; derby continues to grow and more

importantly, so does a space for women to embrace aggression, competitiveness, and camaraderie through corporeal acts of resistance.

*Identity at the Margins: Evil Faces and Superheroes*

Roller derby allows the skaters to recognize there is a space where women can be sexy, violent, competitive, and feminine simultaneously. These multiple and spontaneous identities do not fit neatly into normative expectations of women; derby skaters perform the multiplicity of gendered identity through their performances both on and off the track. Working through alter egos, they create a spectacle to explore marginalized identity reminiscent of professional wrestling. Much as pro-wrestling parodies hypermasculinity in sports, the creation of identity through new names, outlandish costumes, and theatrical elements create a parody on violence for women in roller derby. Gender becomes located across various characteristics, as “in the West, women supposedly evidence nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, and noncompetitiveness; men supposedly evidence independence, autonomy, aggressiveness, and competitiveness” (Bell, 2008, p. 175).

Yet roller derby allows and engenders performances that resist foundational western approaches to gender through the play and parody of hyper-violence. Punky Bruiser recounts her childhood, saying: “I remember my grandmother telling me ‘girls that aren’t very attractive need to be very nice and pleasant.’ And I just remember thinking, screw that.” Whereas women consistently hear similar voices telling them to be pretty or be nice, roller derby and extreme culture offers a resistant alternative. Mary Jane echoes this sentiment, stating that derby skaters and women “can be entirely feminine and athletic...threatening and sexy at the same time.” Roller derby gives rise to the voices of

women often stifled, allowing these women to embody violence and beauty, strength and sexuality.

A recurring thematic in derby culture is the idea that roller derby allows these women to reclaim a rebel misfit identity shunned in normative life. Roller derby offers a space where the voice of women's aggression is not silenced but celebrated. As Miss Conduct declares with a grin, "I got back in touch with my aggression that I'd put on the shelf for a long time." Likewise, BGGW/TXRD founder Haggerty, who received her B.A. in English literature, realized that her tattooed image and wilder lifestyle did not fit the normative teacher mold. So instead she became a welder by day, skater by night. She talks about her motivation toward these passions: "I like the idea of making things, using your mind and body to create something. It's creative, it's physical." Many of the skaters come from wildly diverse backgrounds and hold different experiences. Yet all of them seem to gravitate toward roller derby as a space to seek out a part of themselves, an alter ego, typically cast out of normative life. Haggerty acknowledges the misfit image that embodies the derby spirit: "You do get a bunch of loners, hanging out together. And that's a beautiful thing, the girls that fall between the cracks, girls that never had their own space, we made a space for those girls. And that is the biggest impact...that I am most proud of."

This is clear in the film *Whip It*; the main character Bliss (played by Ellen Page) finds that pushed to the edges of mainstream society, she claims her identity – as roller phenom "Babe Ruthless" – within the derby culture. Not only does Bliss manifest in this derby persona, she excels at it. This illustrates how misfits in the mainstream might become stars on a fringe stage like roller derby. Bliss' embodiment of a young woman's

search for identity resonates; she experiences the limbo of wanting to claim her own identity yet cannot find anything available outside the normative ideals of womanhood. This changes after Bliss' first foray into the world of Austin roller derby. After attending a bout, the introverted teenager is encouraged by skater Maggie Mayhem (played by Kristen Wiig) to try out; Mayhem and the other Hurl Scouts become Bliss' role models and encourage the rookie throughout the film. This film, much like the other mediated texts, fansites, and conversations with derby skaters, focuses on the alliance of women unable or unwilling to conform in normative society. Roller derby permits this in an atmosphere of acceptance at the margins.

In *Rollergirls*, the filmic juxtaposition of identity serves well to stress the on/off rink split; digging deeper illustrates the identity play these skaters enjoy in the derby culture. In the second episode entitled "No Pain, No Jane," the show opens in an elementary school where teacher Sister Mary Jane reviews personal space with her students. As she asks them whether play-fighting and wrestling are acceptable, clips of her clubbing opposing skaters play. The clever play of derby clips against Mary Jane's schoolteacher image again emphasizes the dichotomous representation, yet the skaters' dialogue more deeply reveals the resistant identity play derby culture allows. At one point, scrub-clad Lux joyously comments that "people don't expect it from me...I laugh, I smile, I don't give them that evil face." Roller derby gives voice to the quiet, caring, and pleasant not against but in conjunction with the loud, callous, and brutal.

*Rollergirls* also explores how skaters communicate identity through their relationships with the people in their lives and each other. ChaCha reasserts the importance of roller derby in her life, stating that it has provided a site for her aggressive

nature. She details how roller derby became the demise of her former relationship, as she preferred skating and being with her friends over time with him. She further addresses her complicated life and dedication to derby, saying “now, I’m a single, working mom...it’s a lot to juggle but I’m never going to give up roller derby.” ChaCha talks about the violence and passion in roller derby while cuddling her daughter Mila. She asks her daughter, “Do you worry about me when I skate?” Mila responds: “Yes...you are a bad girl!” This juxtaposition between bad girl skater and doting mother illustrates the identity play so pivotal to this culture.

Mary Jane at home speaks about rearing her younger sister Kendall. She describes her role as a judgmental, controlling big sister yet her goal is to become more loving and understanding with Kendall. She ties this transformation to her role within roller derby. “This issue relates totally to my core,” Mary Jane says. “I need to feel important...without that, I feel nobody will want to be around me.” Her emotional revelation highlights a significant issue for women who constantly negotiate issues regarding responsibility and control. The parodies of violence, embodiment of marginalized alter egos, and negotiation of identity on and off the track all function as powerful strategies that subvert gendered ideals of womanhood and static notions of identity. It is at these margins of the extreme derby culture that a magical *communitas* emerges for the women of roller derby.

#### *Communitas and Play for Girls who Hate Girls*

The post-bout celebration, a derby tradition, exhibits the shared sense of purpose and fulfillment for both teams. Even after pummeling each other for nearly two hours, the team members always meet up at local haunts to support each other. This celebration

marks that sense of *communitas*, a respite at the threshold betwixt and between normative life and roller derby. Derby recalls *communitas* as the magical togetherness that develops for those experiencing “liminality as a group” (Turner, 2005, p. 97). There is a powerful sense of belonging, deep loyalty, a sense of personal sacrifice, and a shared commitment to a goal. This is evident in *Rollergirls*, where every episode ends with the skaters toasting each other and sharing accolades.

Mary Jane discusses how roller derby has changed her life, saying: “I don’t hate girls anymore, because now I’ve found a group of girls who hate girls.” On the surface, Mary Jane’s statement is disconcerting; but it can also be read as her rejection of traditional ideals of femininity. The beauty, grace, and refinement displayed in traditional women’s sports such as figure skating or gymnastics reifies the girly-girl ideal; roller derby women are expressing a new way of doing womanhood through their show of labor, injury, and violence. Cast out to the edges of society, these skaters bond to form unexpected friendships and build confidence in themselves and each other. Despite the vicious competition amongst skaters, roller derby becomes a defiant act of feminism that challenges traditional womanhood while tearing down the walls which mainstream society typically constructs between women.

While derby culture unfurls along rites of passage, it also moves as a state of play and cultural performance. According to Huizinga (1938), play is voluntary, springing from ordinary life and into a temporal space of activity. It creates limits of time and space, produces play for its own joyful sake, engenders its own rules, and promotes secrecy and social groups. The work of “group commitment and the emergence of alternative communities are enabled through play” (Bell, 2008, p. 133). As is true in real

life, the skaters illustrate the work needed in forging closeness between women. For these misfits at the fringe, this is a necessity for team success and individual strength.

In a *Rollergirls* episode entitled “Punky Needs a Life,” skater Punky Bruiser attempts to reveal the “glamorous life of an off-duty roller girl.” The episode follows the witty skater who dreams of becoming a stand-up comedian yet works as a server at the Texas Chili Parlor. Punky wants to do something creative that she’s passionate about: “Am I passionate about chili cheese nachos? What do you think?” The dialogue furthers the sense of restlessness many skaters express regarding their motivation toward derby culture. This restlessness stems from frustrations and stagnations in career, motherhood, relationships, and a general oppression experienced in everyday life. As they become indoctrinated within derby culture, these women realize moments of *communitas* which holds the values of “good fellowship, spontaneity, warm contact...unhierarchised, undifferentiated social relations” (Douglas, 1984, p. 104). Normative ways of doing gendered or sexual identity begin eroding as the liminal community constitutes its own internal structure (Homas, 1979). Liminal identity within *communitas* holds the potential “as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny for the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs” (Turner, 1969, p. 156). This strengthens the argument that roller derby and extreme culture offers a liberating space on the edges of normative society. It is a liminal shelter apart from the stifling responsibilities and roles required for women in our culture.

The Putas, arguably the tightest team in TXRD, exemplify this sense of *communitas*. In the *Rollergirls* episode “Warriors,” Chola introduces herself and her Putas. She immediately addresses the common assumption regarding the title “Putas,” a

derogatory Spanish term for “whore.” The team, as do many subcultural and oppressed groups, “takes back the word” to mean “sisterhood...we’re tough, we’re tight.” In a motivational exercise, the Putas go skydiving to prove that solidarity and fearlessness can carry them to victory. Chola proudly comments, saying that “every team has its personality...the Putas are about being a team.”

In the final seconds of a hard-fought battle that saw Putas captain Chola skate one of her best bouts, Holy Roller Sister Mary Jane breaks the tie for the victory. The Putas hold onto each other following the bout, teary-eyed and disappointed. As the individual Holy Rollers skate around the track, the Putas band together in the loss of any hopes to make the championship. This is an image recreated in *Whip It* in which the individualistic namesake Holy Rollers ultimately win the championship over rookie Bliss and her upstart Hurl Scouts. In the final scenes, the Scouts band together in loss to joyously chant: “We’re number two! We’re number two!” This echoes a league-wide sentiment that team loyalty exceeds victories. On every roster, strong, vibrant, powerful women come to the track for themselves; more importantly, they stay on that track for each other. Again, this stands against traditional woman’s sports in which individual success surpasses team collaboration. Derby women do sports differently and reassert the subversive potential for women to work together for each other. This strength of *communitas* is but one way derby women queer convention and permit new ways of doing gender together.

#### *Made for Each Other: Queering Convention*

The relational dynamic between skaters does not simply affect their work on the track; these women’s friendships and rivalries drastically transform their lives outside of derby culture. These women collaborate in a multitude of performances which queer

traditional conventions of gender and sexuality. The acts of queering function against traditional normatives through an epistemological linkage with rebellion, negativity, and anti-production (Edelman, 2005). As Judith Halberstam asserts, “queerness names the other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable future” (2008, p. 153). Derby women perform queer acts that implode traditional assumptions of gender, sexuality, and ritual by playing with and resisting these very conventions.

Roller derby creates a space to make visible the characteristics traditionally denied to women. An episode of *Rollergirls* entitled “Love Boat” opens with Lunatic and ChaCha describing their extremely close friendship. Their friendship and rebellious antics are infamous around the league. At a party, ChaCha asks Lunatic if she ever thinks about getting married. Lunatic responds, “What? To you? Or to some dude?” They both laugh, yet as they talk they realize that their love for each other outweighs anything they could feel for a man. The spontaneous ChaCha suddenly announces: “So let’s do it. Let’s get married.” In a compelling juxtaposition, the newly engaged pair talk about their upcoming bout on the radio, expressing their excitement about finally facing off on the track. Again, loyalty merges with competitive spirit in ways typically at odds in mainstream society.

ChaCha and Lunatic meet to discuss wedding details. ChaCha points out the to-do list in a bridal magazine, saying: “This is supposed to be a wonderful day of some lady’s life...do you see all the shit you have to do?” Her critical commentary expresses a rejection of mainstream rituals much as the ceremony promises a resistant performance of marital normatives. Lunatic suggests a boat party retreat for the league as the ideal

location. When other skaters discuss the upcoming nuptials, Lux says “they’re awesome...made for each other.” Conversely, Hades Lady is upset that their “faux lesbian wedding” will distract from the party. While Hades’ concerns are more selfish in nature, many other skaters express more serious concerns at a bridesmaid fitting. These bridesmaids admit that they feel it might mock the institute of marriage and specifically gay marriage. Upon watching the episode, I argue that the wedding itself does not serve as a mockery of marriage but instead functions as an embrace of an “other” ceremony embracing women at the fringe. This is visible in the ceremony. Following the skater bridesmaids wearing bikinis with cigarettes and drinks in hand, ChaCha emerges in black sequins and Lunatic follows in rhinestones and fringe. Much like their skating uniforms, the wedding attire reflects unique extensions of each woman’s personality. Every vow is marked by the minister saying “in all of roller derby” or “before all roller derby.” The brides exchange engraved brass knuckles, kiss, and throw cake at each other before diving into the water. In these scenes, ChaCha and Lunatic effectively queer normative wedding ceremonies in a performance of play and resistance.

While derby skaters might perform gender and sexuality in ways that challenge conventions of womanhood, in representation and interpretation there is adherence to the historical codes not of our own making. Even as ChaCha and Luna might effectively queer heteronormative wedding rituals, the representation of open lesbianism and bisexuality remains silenced. Openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is not even addressed beyond the heteronormative in *Hell on Wheels* or *Whip It; Rollergirls* may allude to homosexuality or bisexuality yet only in relation to the heteronormative. In one example, a hungover Lux tells her boyfriend that she woke up next to a naked ChaCha

after a wild night of drinking. Lux shrugs and offers an abbreviated apology, yet *Rollergirls* only whispers of the possibility in the context of Lux' heteronormative relationship. The void around Lux' apology speaks to the historical silencing of lesbians more than her suggestive confession. Through interactions with roller derby skaters who are openly lesbian or bisexual, I understand how their under- or non-representation in media is silenced save for the leering "girl-on-girl" marketing tags. Jessica Valenti, third-wave author of *Full Frontal Feminism*, puts it this way: "Women are taught that we're only supposed to have sex under these bizarre arbitrary guidelines: only if you're married; only if it's for procreation; and only with another girl if guys can watch" (2007, p. 20).

When asked how or why media have a blind spot to their authentic experiences, the majority of skaters simply shrug it off as irritating but unimportant. As one skater I spoke with suggested, "It doesn't really matter if they ignore us. It's not what we do in bed that matters. It's what we do on the track, on our teams." The casual acceptance of yet another slight on the LGBT community remains unsettling as it becomes indicative of a slippage in subversive performances on a mainstream stage. Lesbian and bisexual skaters are not granted voice for their identities unless it is marketed, represented, and interpreted for the eyes of others – other men. Yet in continued work embodying acts of rebellion, derby is an ideal space where silenced sexualities can be reproduced in resistant performances that queer norms. As Halberstam (1998) iterates, the masculine woman or tomboy becomes hidden or erased from our cultural imagination. When the masculine woman is actually visible, it is only as a misidentification or maladjustment from the cultural norm. Roller derby skaters defy this by queering traditional ideals of womanhood

in society and sport. Their rejection of normative cultural rituals, gendered identities, and sexual performances reclaims and reasserts women in sports by playing with notions of sex, sexuality, gender, and violence.

*Jamming Traditional Women's Sports with the Third-Wave*

At a Tampa Bay Derby Darlins' bout, I perched on old wooden bleachers to watch women of all ages, sizes, and talents whiz by in the Franky Panky tournament. The lively crowd spent their weekend packed in the gym, breathing stale air in the windowless upper floor of the USF recreation center, all to catch glimpses of their beloved skaters and favorite teams. Franky Panky brought in five teams from Houston, Ohio, Nebraska, and Florida; the tournament even featured middle-school aged derby girls donning gear in the style of their older idols with monikers such as "Peach Clob Her" and "Cup Quake." Looking around, I realized that this subcultural phenomenon has stirred something in the cultural imagination; it runs, slams, smashes into traditional ideals of womanhood.

Throughout this chapter, I have interrogated how gendered performances of roller derby used strategies of parody surrounding sexuality and sexual empowerment, worked with and against the commoditization of sexuality, recovered feminine violence through athleticism, performed marginal identity and ritual play, and effectively queered mainstream sporting traditions. In revisiting themes that emerge for women athletes, roller derby rejects traditional women's sports and athleticism and stages a new sporting site that allows women to resist, queer, and perform gender and sexuality differently. While traditional women athletes made great strides breaking into the male-dominated world of sport, there remain many troubling issues of regulation and compliance that

reassert conventional notions of gender, sexuality, and physicality on the mainstream sporting stage.

Roller derby does these things differently, playing and performing gender, sexuality, violence, and physicality against and with our conventional ideals. Whereas traditional women's sports are set aside and subordinate to men's sports, derby skaters reclaim a marginalized space apart and elevate it. Traditional women's sports focus on individual discipline and success, while derby women celebrate their misfit individuality through the loyalty and play of *communitas*. Traditional women's sports hide labor, violence, and competitiveness to reify the woman's body as naturally graceful, elegant, and beautiful. Roller derby women repossess their bodies in a performative spectacle celebrating women's capacity for work, pain, and aggressiveness.

Sport accentuates the gendered body to reassert the masculine and feminine poles of power and weakness, aggression and submission. Traditional women's sporting bodies have thus been controlled through a few select images: the slight, graceful figure skater; the innocent, prepubescent gymnast; or the beautified object of the male gaze. Women are taught to disappear by shrinking, slimming, silencing ourselves. Men go to the gym to get bigger; women go to the gym to get smaller. Women are then disenfranchised when we inevitably fail to disappear and deny all that we can be in the world. As the skaters discuss certain issues they have dealt with regarding their own body image or sexuality, it serves as a mirror for millions of strong, competent girls and women who still pause before the mirror to doubt the image before them. The pure athleticism and strength required for roller derby empower these skaters to embrace themselves in new corporeal ways of being that differ from traditional women's sporting bodies.

While traditional women's sports associate women with an assumed natural grace, roller derby women enact exaggerations of gendered womanhood to expose the fallacies of this naturalness. Traditional women athletes find that to combat the gender myth of biological weakness or emotionality, they "had to train harder and be even more focused and single-minded than our male counterparts...fit bodies and athletic performances were the outward expressions of our abilities to transcend biology and gender limitations" (Heywood, 2004, p. 3). In addition to the mainstream ideals of feminine sporting bodies, traditional women athletes also face physical control based on age, as the majority of these athletes are perceived to "peak" by the onset of puberty and the development of their womanly bodies. Roller derby obliterates this constraint, inviting women of all ages to participate in the sport.

This is particularly interesting in the youth leagues, where the hyper-sexual performances are denied yet the access to violence and competitiveness is granted for the young skaters—Cup Quake and Peach Clobber—puns on food rather than sex. And for the older league skaters, roller derby provides the space where acting your age can be as sexual, violent, or playful as you want. Roller derby not only reveals but revels in the performances of these characteristics traditionally shunned for women in sports. Roller derby women reclaim their bodies and "if in that process female bodies look unladylike – if they become bruised or bloody or simply unattractive – that seems irrelevant" (Nelson, 1994, pp. x-xi).

Roller derby skaters, much like younger generations of feminists, have also embraced their sexuality as a personal choice rather than a mechanism of oppression and objectification. Haggerty offers a potent assessment regarding the empowered sexuality

and feminism at work in roller derby, stating: “I think it’s maybe making a new bridge for people who have struggles with sexuality versus feminism or think that there’s a wall between the two...you can either be sexy or a feminist but you can’t be both. Maybe this will help make a link.” Traditional women athletes find their sexualities filtered through normalization of the male gaze, infantilized through the innocence of the prepubescent form, or completely erased from view.

The second-wave feminism that inadvertently essentialized or universalized women by blanketing the specificities of difference and multiplicities of identity engendered a response from younger generations of feminists in the 1990s. Third-wave feminism alternately emphasized, critiqued, and celebrated the differences among women (Cai, 2008), working toward individual empowerment as a foundation for greater social change. Third-wave feminism challenges the notion of a universal female identity and embraces the elements of individual difference in a post-structuralist approach. As Baumgardner and Richards suggest, third-wave feminists find empowerment not by “copying what came before but finding one’s own way – a way that is genuine to one’s own generation” (2000).

Through my exploration of gender in roller derby, I encountered performances of key third-wave principles including: a reclamation of sexual identity and empowerment through sex; resistant performances that command reward and punishment; the negotiation of mainstream commoditization in marginal cultures; and the embrace of individual empowerment. I offer modern roller derby as an illustrative microcosm of this wave: an extremely important claim given the frequent pronouncements on the “death of feminism.” Each skater enters the roller derby culture seeking a space for personal

expression, normative liberation, and heightened experience. The raw violence of the sport coupled with its campy punk aesthetic recalls the Riot Grrrl movement that reinvigorated a generation of younger feminists. They celebrate the bad girl iconography through sexual and gendered performances as a strategy of resistance against traditional women's sports. Roller derby captures the cultural imagination and reignites third-wave feminism through performances that parody, resist, and queer gender norms. Roller derby functions as a performative survival strategy illustrating how marginalized subjects might resist and transform oppressive conventions of gender. In a society that values women for what they are not, derby allows women to be all that they are in every complex, visible, transcendent way. On the track, women are made visible in all of their athletic, strong, beautiful corporeal glory. On the track, women indulge in fantasies of identity, sexuality, and spectacle. On the track, women reclaim themselves and rescue each other. They find their voices of aggression, passion, competitiveness, and play. As they roll around the track in a united primal scream, I cast my gaze on a proud grandmother, her derby daughter, and young Cup Quake as they sit proudly in derby gear, enraptured by the mighty sound.

### Chapter Three – Pranktainment Peter Pans: Performing Playground Masculinities in Extreme Sports

People have a love-hate relationship with fear, and applaud a degree of recklessness. The DSC (Dangerous Sports Club) was based on a recklessness of innocence nourished by a recklessness of contempt. There was an element of rebellion in risk taking. It was a time of innovation and excitement. (David Kirke, co-founder of the DSC, 2011)

As American heir apparents to the Dangerous Sports Club, extreme sporting men fuse spectacle with sport, daring with athleticism. As extreme or fringe sports have gained greater attention, their misfit athletes have suddenly found themselves on a larger national stage typically reserved for the stars of the gridiron or baseball diamond. Fifteen years ago, it was almost inconceivable that a group of kids spending their time in skateparks might capture the attention of major cable networks like MTV, let alone create their own television series and eventually foray into movies. Yet this is the very path Johnny Knoxville took, followed by his now similarly famous skating-obsessed prankster friends Bam Margera and Steve-O. Frequently, the embryonic passion uniting these fringe characters becomes obscured by the glare of mainstream media which seeks out greater risks, dares, and pranks for the camera. Thus, extreme sporting men become recognized on the mainstream stage not only for their athleticism or skill but also for turning adolescent pranks into an entertainingly juvenile spectacle.

Functioning as apart and a part of the mainstream cultural machine, these extreme men become problematic to our ideals of masculinity in many ways. The purpose of this

chapter is to illuminate how extreme sporting athletes perform an adolescent masculinity through performances that reassert a “boy code” in acts of playground cruelty, humiliation and one-upmanship that uphold the rules of manhood; and open up transformative performances of masculinity through kinship, corporeality, and sexuality in representation.

To better grasp these extreme masculinities, I look at MTV texts like the *Jackass* series and movies, *Wildboyz*, *Viva La Bam*, and *Nitro Circus*, as well as the apocalyptic-themed motocross stunt show *Nuclear Cowboyz*. I explore the traditional blueprint of men’s sports and athletes with and against the performances of masculinity in extreme sports. I analyze multiple media representations of extreme sporting men for the language they employ, the tests they create, the attitudes they embody, and the constructed drama of their extreme pranks and feats as representative of Pollack’s boy-code, the rules of masculinity created, enacted, and tested in the lives of adolescent boys.

As Kimmel suggests, sports are “both metaphor and reality of American masculinity – its language dominates other discourses as metaphor, while sports have become increasingly important among young boys as the arena of demonstration and proof” (2000, p. xiii). The mechanisms of control in mainstream society become replicated and reified by mainstream sports, teaching us what masculinity is and means. I suggest that with any marginalized group, specifically the extreme sporting world, there are opportunities to do identity differently away from mainstream controls. As Messner comments, “when our actions disrupt existing gender differences or hierarchies, we contribute to changing existing gender relations...reproductive and resistant agencies are simultaneously evident in contemporary sport” (2007, p. 3). Extreme sports tricksters

remain defiant regarding mainstream masculinity in many ways. Yet the language of “bro” and “dude”, the daredevil one-upping, and the incessant hazing practices reassert an adolescent boy’s club mentality. Thus, the men of extreme sports do not do masculinity the same as mainstream stars on the football field or hockey rink (Messner, 2001; 2007); they instead merge prank and sport in playground performances of retrograde adolescent masculinity.

### *Blueprints of Masculinity*

Theories of masculinity are integral to understanding the ordering of gender. Connell stresses the importance of opening up discourse regarding masculinities as necessary “if theories of masculinity are to connect with wider theories of gender and are to have any grip on practical issues” (2005, p. xviii). Various kinds of masculinity – hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities – are in constant negotiation with each other. While Connell (2005) highlights these cultural and institutional power relations through business, government, and military, I argue that sports provide an even greater stage for the performance, maintenance, and resistance of masculinities. Sport becomes a critical site for the exploration of masculinity in all its manifestations (Messner & Sabo, 1990).

For example, sport has provided a stage for racial gains in prominent, powerful masculinity. In baseball alone, Jackie Robinson (the first African-American player), Omar Minaya (the first Hispanic GM), and Rinku Singh and Dinesh Patel (the first Indian-born players) have opened possibilities for race in our apple-pie American pastime. Yet there are miles, yards, and bases to go beyond racial acceptance in mainstream sports; violence, sexism, and homophobia must also be addressed. While

scholars and activists may go far in shifting focus to these issues, it is the athletes, the audiences, and the sports themselves that can reach a far larger audience in changing dominant ideals of what being a man in sport – and life – ought to mean.

*On The Mainstage: Men and Sports*

To fully grasp the transformative potential at stake in extreme sports masculinity, it is first necessary to survey the cultural implications of traditional sports men and masculinities. In his 2004 text, “Surviving Jock Culture,” Lipsyte critiques the hypermasculine ritualization of sport, the sense of entitlement, the valued violence (which often seeps into athletes’ lives), and the homophobic and sexist atmosphere. These characteristics reproduce normative expectations of masculinity and accentuate them for the good of the team and the glory of victory. As Kimmel suggests, “what we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves” (1994, p. 149). These are the fears aligning boy-men through their constant work to play the hardest, risk the most, and take the greatest extremes in competition and in concert with each other. There remains an anxiety at the core of western masculinity that manifests and is exerted by and among all group members. For men, this incessant fear of being shamed or dominated by other men creates the need for an organizing tenet of American masculinity: homophobia (Kimmel, 1994; Leverenz, 1986).

Kimmel outlines his argument: Homophobic language and actions stem out of this unifying principle, having less to do with any homosexual individuals or practices and more to do with that fear of inadequate masculinity. Thus, homophobia spills out of a

terror that men might expose other men as fraudulent in their masculinity; moreover, any man exhibiting such fear is thus clearly revealed as lacking in masculinity. This leads to spiraling silence rather than the risk of exposure for this lack. The fear, shame, and silence emerges from a culture of masculinity in which men take painstaking efforts to police themselves and each other in an effort to prove their masculine worth.

Fearing shaming by other men has a flipside: Sexism is also a calling card for acceptance as a mainstream male athlete. The ideological mechanisms that created the binary of masculine bodies as strong, violent, and capable against women's bodies as weak, passive, and helpless inevitably granted men's and denied women's access to sports. Thus, this belief system actually shaped men's and women's bodies, furthering "our belief that men were naturally strong and athletic, while women were naturally frail and in need of protection" (Messner, 2007, p. 2). As Pratt suggests, sport remains an untouched place where sexism is taught and learned in society (2004).

Mainstream sport elevates the masculine form as superior to any feminine sport; this translates to the language used in sports. "You throw like a girl," "he hurt his vagina," or "he cried like a little bitch" are among common phrases linking athlete ineffectuality directly with femininity. As Valenti states, "the worst thing you can call a girl is a girl. The worst thing you can call a guy is a girl. Being a woman is the ultimate insult" (2007, p. 5). This is dominant language in mainstream sport, where demarcating lines remain firmly fixed between genders. Perhaps this is why coaches, players, fans, and media alike feel a certain freedom to revert to the sexist language typically shunned in other cultural productions. The language and performance of sexism in sport becomes buttressed by the "no sissy stuff" rule of manhood. These rules provide perhaps the most

crucial playbook in the making of masculinity on the mainstream stage of sport. Yet the resistant adolescent masculinity of extreme sporting men follows a similar rulebook cultivated in the proving ground of the playground – the boy code (Brannon, 1976; Kimmel, 2000; Pollack, 1998).

The boy code serves as a result and a mask against fear and vulnerability felt by boys and men. "Boy code" is the name psychologist Robert Brannon uses for the four essential rules of manhood: "no sissy stuff," "be a big wheel," "be a sturdy oak," and "give 'em hell!" (1976). Essentializing boys to "aggressive, competitive, rambunctious little devils" (Kimmel, 1999, p. 373) in our culture creates a boy code that becomes an acceptance, expectation, and demand of testosterone-fueled rebellion (Pollack, 1998). Pollack notes that boys typically grow more confident upon hitting adolescence; however, it is done through the "inauthentic voice of bravado, of constant posturing, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence" (Kimmel, 1999, p. 375). In U.S. culture, sports – especially the "big four" of baseball, football, basketball, and hockey – create a multi-faceted net capturing our traditional prototypes of manhood (Anderson, 2005; Pronger, 1990).

Looking at mainstream men's sports as a cultural backdrop for the nascent extreme culture highlights several themes: the dominance of men's sports in culture; the silencing of other identities or sexualities outside the hypermasculine ideal; and the repositioning of masculine physicality as muscular, large, and violent. Returning to Guttmann's notion that sports often function as "part of the rites de passage that mark the move from boyhood to manhood" (1991, p. 3), I suggest that while girls are encouraged to abandon or stop "playing" their sports at puberty, this is the point at which boys who

seriously take up their chosen sport truly become men. The demand and pressure for these boys to enact and succeed in this culture qualifies them as men; those uninterested or unskilled in these sports are thus seen as failing at this rite of passage and subsequently failing at manhood.

Away from those harsh lights of the mainstream stage of traditional hypermasculinity, extreme sporting boy-men both perform resistance through a rebellious, adolescent masculinity and reinscribe the rules of manhood through a playground boy code. Underscored by Brannon's four rules of manhood – “no sissy stuff,” “be a big wheel,” “be a sturdy oak,” and “give ‘em hell” – the performances of these extreme sporting boy-men may not do masculinity similarly to their mainstream sporting counterparts but they do it nonetheless, bolstering this boy code in a retrograde amalgamation of masculine performances harkening back to the playground at its best and worst.

*Playground Bottle Rockets: The Ascent of the Extreme Sporting Man*

As the colorful personas of extreme athletes gained greater attention, mainstream media outlets began flocking to these characters. This gave rise to networks like FUEL devoted exclusively to extreme athletes and sports as well as reality programming like MTV's *Jackass*, *Viva la Bam*, and *Wild Boyz* following the antics of extreme stars. This wildfire of cultural attention and spirited individuality merges spectacle and sport, stardom and athleticism, creating something both a part of and beyond sport. This fusion of creativity and practice, entertainment and sport, athlete and artist emerges in the media phenomena I call “pranktainment.”

To understand how extreme sporting men sprang from the margins to capture our mainstream imagination, I start with the text that merged mainstream spectacle with extreme sporting rebellion: MTV's *Jackass* (2000). As a child, Phillip von Trapp dreamed of becoming an actor. He would eventually earn this opportunity and has earned commercial and even critical success for his work in numerous films, including *The Ringer* (2005), *Lords of Dogtown* (2005), and *Grand Theft Parsons* (2002). He is also a producer (for his aptly titled Dickhouse Productions), writer, creator, and director for his own projects as well as several featuring his friends. However, he only arrived at this success after developing *Jackass* under the name Johnny Knoxville. Knoxville's brainchild emerged as a byproduct of his idea to test self-defense equipment on himself; this soon grabbed Knoxville the attention of the skateboarding world. Skateboarding magazine *Big Brother* captured hours of footage of Knoxville's stunts and this was later merged with skater Bam Margera's CKY series. Margera's CKY (Camp Kill Yourself) videos featured the skater and his friends and family performing wild pranks alongside skating footage. When film director Spike Jonze entered the fold, the underground skate/prank videos landed at the eternally juvenile detention center of MTV. *Jackass* became a cultural zeitgeist, spinning off several series and three feature films (2002; 2006; 2010).

I explore several of these *Jackass* spin-offs for relevant themes in this study of extreme masculinity. Margera moved from *Jackass* to create two series: *Viva la Bam* (2003) and *Bam's Unholy Union* (2007). In the former, Margera and his skater friends of Westchester, Pennsylvania spend hours and millions torturing his long-suffering but endearingly good-natured suburban family. The latter follows a similar vein, while

chronicling Margera's decision to "settle down" with his fiancé Missy Rothstein. While *Jackass* and the majority of its offspring focus incidentally on the close-knit group of extreme pranksters, both of Margera's series become thematically tied to the notion of family. Despite the torture he puts his family, friends, and fiancé through, Margera keys into the notion of kinship in ways typically ignored, dismissed, or stifled by mainstream sporting stars as significant.

In *Wildboyz* (2003) *Jackass* stars Steve-O and Chris Pontius continue their antics yet must interact with co-stars more unruly than their fellow "jackasses" – wild animals. Steve-O and Pontius, arguably two of the most daring (and therefore injury-prone) of the original *Jackass* lineup, travel around the world to challenge themselves and their stunts in much more unforgiving terrain with far more treacherous companions. Steve-O and Pontius both work to educate their audiences and themselves regarding the international wildlife and cultures, creating "educational pranks" where they are thrust into a perilous world where threats come not from friends but from sharks, snakes, alligators, and tigers – to name a few.

This leads to a text that is the most recent and possibly most relevant for my study. Created by Travis Pastrana, Gregg Godfrey, Knoxville, and Tremaine, *Nitro Circus* manifests as the culmination of these twinned tracks of sport and prank. The series premiered in 2006 on Fuel TV, following extreme sporting star and dirtbiking phenom Pastrana and his wily cast of Thrillbillies as they roamed the world performing pranks and feats. MTV took notice in 2009, picked up the Fuel TV miniseries and turned it into a reality series. After two seasons, cast members began hinting at an upcoming 3D feature film following the success of the *Jackass 3D* feature. *Nitro Circus* most recently sprang

from mediated confines to run a tour circuit featuring a Nitro North American Tour, European Nitro Tour, and an Australian Nitro Tour. Nitro Circus Live unites international action sports stars with the Nitro crew to perform grandiose feats in theatrical performances. Global Action Sports Managing Director Michael Porra sells the event: “The progression and innovation coming out of these guys is phenomenal and their favourite place to push their limits is on the NCL tour...spurred on by the insane crowds and healthy competitiveness of their Nitro family” (www.nitrocircuslive.com, 2012). The tour has earned \$25 million in ticket sales since its Australian debut in 2010; the next tour will coincide with the release of the first *3D Nitro Circus* feature film in early 2012.

The free-flowing energy of extreme sports becomes exemplified in live events at the Summer and Winter X Games, the countless tours of extreme athletes, and the epitome of sport at the apocalyptic edge: the Nuclear Cowboyz. The Nuclear Cowboyz’ 2011 tour, *Freestyle Chaos*, is the largest assembled cast of freestyle motocross riders. Set to a post-apocalyptic world, the show itself tells the tale of two legendary tribes of motocross riders. The Soldiers of Havoc and the Metal Mulisha challenge the rules of gravity in an aerial spectacle tailored to a narrative of chaotic battling for post-apocalyptic supremacy.

The assembled texts exemplify how extreme sporting boy-men are doing masculinity at both its schoolyard bullying worst and at its potentially transformative best. Through the culture of cruelty (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000) and boy code (Pollack, 1999), a posturing of stoic, fearless swagger becomes a (re)production of the playground mechanisms in which boys test their capacity to shroud any fear or vulnerability. Pollack’s “boy code” is especially significant for an analysis of extreme sporting

pranktainment and the ways in which these tests manifest in these texts. Pollack developed the “boy code” partly in response to diminishing academic success and rising frequencies of depression and suicide for boys (1998). Pollack recognized that a continuous process of humiliation becomes a means of indoctrination for boys regarding their identities and behaviors. Pollack states: “Confused by society’s mixed messages about what’s expected of them as boys, and later as men, many feel a sadness and disconnectedness they cannot even name” (p. x). Pollack suggests that this sense of alienation emerges as figures in the boys’ lives inadvertently use shaming strategies to force them into the “boy code.” The code dictates one possible path toward healthy, normal masculinity through: the denial of emotional expressivity (except anger); the shame on interests shown toward anything outside of sports; the reinforcement of separation and opposition to all things ‘girl’; and the creation of embarrassment over close bonds with mothers. As Pollack says, “the use of shame to control boys is pervasive...as soon as a boy behaves in a way that is not considered manly, that falls outside the Boy Code, he is likely to meet resistance from society” (p. 11).

Extreme sporting texts illustrate all of boy code’s characteristics, specifically demonstrating regular checks on masculinity in ways that harken back to adolescence. Testing themselves and each other, pranktainment is a game of playground bravado and bullying, choreographed with multi-million dollar production values for the masses. Below I analyze specific texts for manifestations of hierarchal cruelty and shaming games, perpetual one-upsmanship, and enactments of the boycott.

*Shame on You: Playground Culture of Cruelty and Humiliation through Hierarchy*

Knoxville taps into the cultural fixation on watching himself and his fellow “jackasses”: “It’s a real primal thing, watching someone get hurt...It’s funny and accessible.” Pain is accessible as we experience it every day; it becomes comedy when we get to watch it happen to others. Knoxville and his crew have managed to cultivate that unique space between pain and fun, prank and sport; they have done this beyond the limit of that embarrassment when we stumble, that fear of injury when we fly. And judging from the way MTV Productions has been milking this cash-cow for over a decade, apparently we love to watch it. The shame and cruelty set forth in reality programming holds a specific function for upholding the boy code in the resistant adolescence of extreme sporting pranks. As is often true in any culture, mainstream or marginalized, there is typically a hierarchy of power featuring a leader – the king of the playground. In *Jackass* Knoxville leads the group, in *Viva la Bam* Margera moves from the rank of *Jackass* jesters to reign, Pastrana is at the crux of *Nitro Circus*. These renegades work through sport, prank, and a mixture of both to gain control of the court – once they have it, they are afforded a level of respect and deference as they dictate the pranks, events, etc.; they may also opt out and delegate participation to others free from fear of being called a “pussy.” This reasserts a culture of cruelty, a playground proving ground made possible through a retrograde masculinity that rewards and punishes.

*Nitro Circus* exemplifies this playground hierarchy of power and humiliation, opening an episode with “Streetbike Tommy” Passamente perched precariously above a flight of concrete stairs on a dirtbike. “Streetbike Tommy” is a construction worker

willing to take on any *Nitro Circus* challenges rather than work a real job; as the bumbling common man among extreme athletes, Tommy becomes the playground dunce of the *Nitro Circus*. Atop the stairs, Tommy stops and looks back at his friends, a moment evoking the realization that the game of dare has gone too far. He hesitates and begrudgingly whimpers: “Dude, I don’t want to do this,” to which Pastrana brusquely responds: “You’re at commit-level now.”

The rest of the crowd eggs Tommy on as he enacts that moment when the goaded playground dunce must either admit fear – the calling card for inadequate masculinity – or complete the task at hand to prove his worth on the playground. After the prank goes (unsurprisingly) awry, Knoxville holds up a Polaroid of the defeated Tommy and laughs at how “sad” he looks. With the two pranktainment playground kings – Knoxville and Pastrana – dictating and delegating the injurious prank onto poor Tommy, there is a reassertion of that power structure. Despite the fact that these pranks require little more than a fifth-grader’s skill-set, the footage serves to reinforce a playground hierarchy sustained by the mentality that any feelings of fear must be stifled or exposed to mockery.

Pastrana’s *Circus of Wonder* offers another juxtaposition of hierarchy and humiliation. Pastrana is resplendently dressed as the ringmaster, commanding his crew around him. As he’s been riddled with sporting – and therefore legitimate – injuries, Pastrana instead designates an acrobatic jump to be performed by Andy Bell – dressed in a shimmering woman’s leotard. Bell, referred to as the “washed up FMX rider,” is repeatedly cast as the keg-loving frat-boy type, known for his hard-drinking ways rather than his sporting talent. This reasserts his specific place in the boy code and demands he execute these acts of great daring or playground humiliation. Between circus stunts,

Pastrana and Streetbike Tommy add touches of humor featuring both a live baby elephant and Tommy spray-painted gray, replete with a fitted trunk. When it's "time to wash the baby elephant," Pastrana holds up the actual elephant's trunk and sprays the doughy Tommy. These scenes crystallize the hierarchical structure of the pranktainment community, both created by and reproduced for an audience trained in elevating the sporting superstar to status of royalty and downgrading the experience of the common clown. This is a complicit correlation with mainstream constructions of masculine superiority and the boy code culture of cruelty as the "kings of the playground" must have their clowns, commoners, and adoring fans.

In the *Thrillbillies Double-Wide* feature compilation, one prankster parachutes off a bridge only to become weighed down by dangerous rapids. As his friends gaze on, wagering on their floundering mate's potential to drown, the action on the screen serves as a microcosm of our own engrossment with violence, danger, and death at the edge of extreme cultures (Lavolette, 2011). It also makes the spectator complicit in these cruel games of schoolyard domination. When another friend immediately jumps into the water from the shore, the Thrillbillies taunt him for panicking. Teasing and calling him "Hasselhoff", they enact a moment of performance that eases from guilt over their inaction and embarrassment for their concern toward a safer masculinity of mockery. Fear, vulnerability, and concern must be rejected according to the boy code in the sphere of pranktainment, where a fetishizing of adolescent pranks and self-inflicted violence is intrinsic to the extreme lifestyle. Through the majority of these pranks in extreme sporting texts, constant challenges and acceptance of risk become strategies to ascend the hierarchy of the playground and reassert the "boy code."

*Truth or Dare: Making the King of the Playground*

Extreme sporting men move beyond the necessary risks of their sports, often pushing themselves and each other on toward greater dares through perpetual one-upmanship in a never ending game of “I Dare You” in pranktainment. In one *Thrillbillies* adventure, Pastrana and his crew attempt the “Hydro Jump.” The first rider, Jim DeChamp, speeds down the motocross trail into a lake, skidding into the water to hit the jump. After DeChamp splays awkwardly into the water, Pastrana takes over and successfully sails upside down off the ramp to the cheers of the crowd. “He’s always got to do better than everyone else,” DeChamp says. Pastrana greets him, saying “thanks for going first, Jim...thanks for not making it, Jim.” This dialogue suggests the awareness and maintenance of power within this playground culture of one-upmanship.

In watching mediated performances of pranktainment, it appears that the editing of the episodes emerge as products of chaos. *Jackass* created the blueprint for this format, with cast members crouching toward the camera to blurt: “This is firehose rodeo!” or “This is mousetrap!” to introduce skits in which pranksters ride naked on a blasting firehose and cast members dress in mouse costumes with mousetraps snapped across their genitals. The crude introductions later become titles used online in an endless stream of Facebook compilations and internet blogs heralding *the* list of ultimate Jackass pranks. The assembled scenes follow this raw production model with nonsensical progression from one errant stunt to the next. For example, following *Nitro Circus*’ four-wheeler “Rainbow Ride,” in which crew members ride across an old arching rail balanced on a four-wheeler, they immediately cut to the “Gimp Race,” in which the freshly injured Pastrana, Knoxville, and Bell sprint a 100-yard dash. “Injured bozos with a hundred-yard

dash...we've all got money riding on the line...it's gonna be pretty funny," laughs Erik Roner. Here, the kings get to play the fools; ultimately, it is mere filler before the kings of these playgrounds reassert their superior skill and supremacy. This correlates with the familiar construction of pranktainment programming – random pranks and stunts interspersed haphazardly while seamlessly leading up to the pinnacle of bravado and skill in an ultimate athletic stunt at the end. This is the ultimate one-up constructed carefully throughout each episode to reassert who truly is the king of the playground.

In an exemplary demonstration of the one-upmanship episodic arc, one *Nitro Circus* episode culminates in a daring Pastrana jump across two hundred-foot buildings. The rooftops are fitted with bike ramps to launch Pastrana across the 75-yard gap between these buildings. Knoxville makes an appearance and greets Pastrana, looking at the set-up and proclaiming: "Holy shit that just looks awful." Producer Rawle turns to the camera to remark: "On these big ones, there's a lot of joking and kidding around, but kind of not...not right now." Further indicating the brevity of the jump, Pastrana storms onto the roof in his dirtbike gear and immediately signals to start with no fanfare. He circles the roof a few times, revs the motor, and makes the jump. On Pastrana's next jump he does a backflip mid-air, landing less than six feet from the edge of the next roof. As he gauges how close he'd come to the edge, a flash of terror appears as he stops mid-sentence. It is the rare moment when the fear of falling off that edge catches these extreme pranksters; yet it is a moment that reveals a great deal about their pursuits. Constantly pushing past normative edges, they must also face the terrifying realization of how close they come to falling off those edges. Yet those brief flashes of terror must be

snuffed out if this adolescent masculinity is to follow the boy code that demands concealment of fear, especially in the game of one-upmanship.

This game of escalating dares works in texts that carefully craft progression from smaller feats or humiliating stunts to one death-defying act (typically executed by the playground king) in the culmination of each episode. This signals the end of the one-upmanship game and heralds the fearlessness of the leader. Reading these acts of cruelty, humiliation, and one-upmanship recreate the significance of Pollack's boy code and Brannon's rules of manhood in the development of masculinity. In moving through these necessary guidelines formulating masculinity, the culture of cruelty reasserts these rules of manhood forged from the fear of not actually deserving that manhood.

*No Sissys Allowed.* Blatant sexism in language and exclusionary behavior is not a theme in extreme sports as it is for mainstream sporting men. However, extreme adolescent masculinity ultimately reinforces the underlying code through their positioning of women as barometers of masculinity – motocross star Jolene Van Vugt in *Nitro Circus* or Missy Margera nee' Rothschild in *Bam's Unholy Union*. In addition, the playground mentality demands an erasure of all displays of fear and emotionality as “sissy stuff” (Kimmel, 2000; Messner, 2007); these athletes take painstaking strides to bury any evidence of such vulnerability even in the most life-threatening of activities rather than submit to the mockery of failing the boy code.

Unlike the mainstream sporting men of the “big four” (baseball, basketball, hockey, and football), extreme sporting men welcome extreme sporting women into their world. They are not relegated to the sidelines as cheerleaders but on the mainstage performing the same feats as their masculine counterparts. Yet even as these extreme

sporting boy-men exhibit no outward exclusion or sexism against women, their language choice reflects a thoughtless sexism weighed down by the boy code. For example, when Nuclear Cowboyz motocross star Nate Adams describes his experience with the traveling motocross troupe he says: “We ride contests all year long, come for three months to be on tour... hanging out with the boys, riding, putting on a show rather than competing, it’s great.” Lost in this statement are the women – namely the Nuclear Cowgirlz – working right alongside the men, putting on that same show.

Extreme sports grant access equally to men and women; although the men take center stage in most events and spectacles, girls “who can hang” are welcomed and given every opportunity to take on the same death-defying, mind-boggling stunts – to the limited extent allowed by the mainstream media production. In an approximately three-minute piece, *Thrillbillies Double Wide* offers a segment entitled “Nitro Girls.” This features three women (unnamed) who are shown diving into the same activities of the men within this extreme culture; the mainstream glare has already cast these extreme women further to the side. While women who perform in the extreme pranking world may go through the same paces as the men do, their very presence becomes markedly different. While the increased levels of dangers legitimize and valorize the “man” in extreme pranking, the women – regardless of their acknowledged prowess and fearlessness – function as markers for the boys’ club. Thus, pranking remains a performance fixed in masculine identity. It is an open-door policy as girls are allowed (if they exhibit a certain level of daring and skill) yet these few women ultimately function as gauges of the masculinity of the boys within that club. More importantly, they often figure as buffers against any glimmering homoeroticism beneath the testosterone-daring

on this playground. As this underlying homoeroticism in extreme sporting pranks creates a fascinating problematic for the “boy code,” I return to this theme later in the analysis.

Surveying Pastrana’s fellow *Thrillbillies/Nitro Circus* crew, I grew cautiously excited when I saw motocross star Van Vugt third on the *Nitro Circus* billing, hoping that the transgressive space of a marginalized sporting culture not only accepted but featured women. Yet upon reading her bio, my hesitancy proved justified: “Jolene is one of the few girls that can handle her own in this testosterone driven crew...She adds an interesting element as she tries to compete with the boys while the boys will do anything to avoid getting beat by a cute girl” ([www.nitrocircus.com](http://www.nitrocircus.com), 2011). While the entire crew consistently gives credit for Van Vugt’s remarkable fearlessness, her accomplishments are reduced and realigned with her “girl”hood. Van Vugt’s presence poses a disciplining effect on the “boys” around her. She is the barometer and not in a good way; the boy-men accept and appreciate Van Vugt’s prowess yet when one of the male members of the crew fails in her wake he is mocked for being beaten by a girl.

Thus, the progressive inclusion of extreme women becomes mitigated as they demonstrate a means to judge the “sissidom” of the men. They are the way these playground boys can negotiate their own fear and mock others for failing to meet the standard of “a cute girl.” Thus, the extreme pranksters continuously push boundaries to test their willingness, reflecting the careful sidestepping of the humiliation placed on the sissy who refuses to participate or fails to exceed the (apparently low) performance expectations of a girl. As Kimmel suggests, “the stakes of perceived sissidom are enormous – sometimes matters of life and death...we take enormous risks to prove our

manhood, exposing ourselves disproportionately to health risks, workplace hazards, and stress-related illnesses” (1999, p. 151). In the world of extreme pranktainment, the risk of life and limb is not nearly as much of a concern as the potential loss of masculine face in refusing to enact the stunt.

*Be a Big Wheel.* Western masculinity also becomes measured by status, wealth, and power. In describing this rule of manhood, Brannon returns to the Reagan-era phrase that “he who has the most toys when he dies, wins.” The images of our big wheels spills across representations from the *Wildboyz*’ enactment of American imperialism as Steve-O and Pontius conquer over twenty exotic locales to the entire production of *Nuclear Cowboyz*, which interfaces the once bare-bones sport of motocross with the spectacle and narrative of theater. Sporting innovation through capital means reasserts the American ideal of masculinity in an extreme reinvention of the big wheel.

In these texts, countless examples crop up that resonate with the meld of improvisation and fun beyond mainstream sensibilities. When Knoxville and Margera want to prank Ryan Dunn and Dave England on *Jackass*, they set up a fake photo shoot and subsequently throw bee hives into Dunn and England’s limo – this is hardly the average “kick me” sign on a five-cent Post-it. When *Wildboyz* Pontius and Steve-O decide to go fishing, they travel around the world and settle on hooking Steve-O through the cheek to “fish” for sharks. When the crew from *Viva la Bam* follow Margera to a skateboarding exposition at the Mall of America, they then rent out the world’s largest shopping mall to set up pranks and challenges in an epic slumber party. While this harkens back to the DSC ideals of innovation beyond normative limits, I suggest that in pushing further at these representations, it becomes clear that the type of “improvisation

and accident” made possible in pranktainment comes at a huge cost. No expense is spared as the daredevils rig things to fly, speed, or simply explode. It is an extreme extravagance both perpetuating the manhood rule of “be a big wheel” through its display of wealth and reinforcing the rebellious adolescence through its careless disregard for that almighty dollar.

An effect of the flux between consumerism and rebellion (Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003) within modern pranktainment occurs in the representation of the extreme sports men in their “real lives.” While mainstream sports narratives often feature a young, impoverished athlete rising to the ranks of wealth and status based on natural talent and hard work, the men of the extreme sporting culture are represented differently. Extreme men are typically represented as spoiled suburban brats – again keying into that notion of extended adolescence – who have the luxury of time and capital to burn on their chosen activities. In *Viva la Bam*, Margera lives with his parents and extended family of fellow extreme stars in a lavish Westchester, PA estate. Margera exemplifies the suburban brat image, putting the majority of his time and energy into tormenting his family and friends with outlandish pranks and expensive adventures. Yet he and his crew also rebel against the cookie-cutter suburban aesthetic with their gothic-punk representation and imagery, creating a vacillation between Westchester luxury and skatepark streetpunk.

The spoiled suburban brat imagery is infused with a neo-punk aesthetic across most of these tests; however, *Nitro Circus* does this a bit differently. The Thrillbillies’ emphasis on “redneck” language and performance fosters identification with the earthy mentality that shuns mainstream convention and oppressive rules much as the punk or hip-hop appropriation in white suburban America functions for these adolescents.

However, it also runs counter to the idea that someone like Pastrana pulls in approximately \$3,000,000 each year – hardly what one would consider a working-class hero’s income. Thus, Pastrana’s performance as the redneck renegade multi-millionaire might ring false or provoke ire within his marginalized culture. Perhaps it is Pastrana’s choice to continue pushing the limits in sport – even after earning fame and fortune – that affords him a sense of credibility by those in the extreme community. He has earned his manhood through his “big wheel” status.

Whether looking to *Jackass* and *Viva la Bam* where the pranktainment stars openly showcase million-dollar estates while blowing thousands on a single prank to the *Nitro Circus* hillbilly sensibility captured in carefully documented shots of fans drinking beer on truck beds along mud-pits, there remains an awareness that these extreme sporting men represent sponsorships, entrepreneurships and media empires that undermine the very spectatorship they intend to represent and invite. At the end of the trajectory resides the noted “godfather” of extreme sport, Tony Hawk. Hawk, now a forty-three-year-old father of four children and a multi-billion dollar franchise, recently published a business text entitled: *How Did I Get Here?: The Ascent of an Unlikely CEO* (2010). The cover features the lanky skateboarder dressed in a business suit while mid-air on his board, thus visually encapsulating the conflation of extreme rebellion and mainstream consumerism – the biggest wheel on wheels.

*Be a Sturdy Oak.* Masculinity is the capacity to remain strong and dependable in the face of crisis; we see this when the icily calm goalie saves the hockey match at the buzzer. In addition to Brannon’s “no sissy stuff” and “be a big wheel,” “the sturdy oak” suggests an inanimate object, void of emotion but hardy enough to weather any storm and

shelter others. This reinvokes Pollack's most prevailing feature of the "boy code" as it requires boys and men to shun any expression of emotion outside of anger. The masculine iconography of pillars, rocks, and trees may seem counter to the world of thrilling chaos that extreme men typically pursue in their ventures. I suggest the very creation of this helter skelter lifestyle permits them a stage to prove their masculine worth; each feat becomes a manufactured crisis to test the sturdiness of boy-man masculinity.

Despite the constant chaos splayed across these texts, the reassertion of control for the "sturdy oak" is illustrated in several examples. In *Viva la Bam*, Bam and his crew take his parents, Phil and April, and Uncle Vito on a camping trip to a tiny spit overlooking three-mile island. The original plan is to desert the three "grown-ups" overnight. However, April catches on and turns the prank on her son. As the "adults" drift away on the pontoon, Bam yells: "Ape, what a bad move on your part...I have connections...it's going to be the worst decision you've made." Bam proceeds to call his friends to drop in party supplies, cameras, and all the necessary fun for a camping party while plotting his revenge. Producer Tim Glomb arrives with a stack of wood and tools and the crew builds a half-pipe to skate while on the island, encapsulating Bam's ability to transform sheer upheaval into the ultimate camping trip and thereby save the day.

Pastrana reached legendary status in the extreme (or action, as he calls it) sport world by the age of twenty-seven. After winning double-digit amounts of medals in the supercross, motocross, and rally events at the X Games, Pastrana continues branching out: he has formed Pastrana-Waltrip Racing with NASCAR's Michael Waltrip and plans to race NASCAR's Nationwide Series in 2012; with his broken leg in a cast, he recently

finished 11<sup>th</sup> in the Big Buck shooting competition; he is also dabbling in freestyle monster truck racing – as much as one can “dabble” on the monster truck circuit. While Pastrana’s persona recalls the rebellious adolescence and reckless daring of his *Jackass* predecessors, his focus on his sporting success remains his primary motivation thus setting a standard of upstanding masculinity and tenacity. The competition, the play, and the chaos draws Pastrana: “I’m never nervous about losing, it’s nervous about playing the best you can...it doesn’t matter if you’re playing ping-pong, badminton, or racing for a national championship – you wanna do the best you can” (Smith, 2011, para. 6). Similar to the majority of those who’ve reached the pantheons of superstardom in the extreme sporting world like Hawk or White, Pastrana’s sharp business acumen and ability to market himself as a brand reveals the highly responsible and shrewd side to his on-screen goofball daredevil persona. This constant triumph over injury, pain, and fear correlates with that ability to sustain themselves and those around, thus bolstering these oaks and reinforcing this rule of manhood.

*Give ‘em Hell.* Daring and aggression, danger and risk permeate the cultural imagination surrounding masculinity. Thus, in addition to the rules of “no sissy stuff,” “be a big wheel,” and “sturdy oak,” extreme sporting men most typically exemplify the code of “give ‘em hell.” The men living life on the edge, willing to risk anything and take on any comers are the men that exude swaggering masculinity – our most masculine icons in popular culture tend toward pirates, spies, and athletes. Extreme sporting boy-men enact and enforce a devil-may-care adolescent masculinity, living this code with a vengeance.

This extreme swagger surpasses the concern of injuries, pain, and death. At the end of each day, the X Games coverage reads like a triage roster; remarkably, most of the injured athletes continue competing with broken bones, torn muscles, and bloodied flesh. In the 2011 X Games, Pastrana attempted a Rodeo 720 on his motorcycle in the opening days of the games. After falling and breaking his right ankle and foot, Pastrana promised to resume competition for the RallyCross final days later not merely to the delight but the *expectations* of his fans. As Messner suggests, “heroically taking risks while already hurt was a constant theme in extreme sports commentary” (2002, p. 121). As their audiences typically expect extreme athletes to fall, these sports figures must not only accept and overcome injury but also continue with these injuries, giving ‘em hell by stretching their own physical capacities.

In an episode of *Nitro Circus*, Pastrana knocks himself out in a practice run and instead has to sit in one of the stock-trucks so that he can still “go big but stay safe.” Bell suggests that this particular stunt is of great magnitude: “Today we’re totally varying from the normal *Nitro Circus* way of doing things, we’re actually practicing and timing...when you have this much horsepower going all together, you’ve got like fourteen things going fourteen different directions, if you’re not precise, people are getting hurt.” The stunt, “Chaos Crossover,” features pro-trucks, dirtbikes, monster trucks, and helicopters flying from different directions over various ditches, gulleys, and ramps. It is a wildly dangerous stunt, complete with a multitude of “toys,” that exemplifies the direction of extreme sports – taking U.S. masculine dominance and aggression and (re)producing the bigger, faster, crazier version. Extreme sports recreate

these ideals and entrench themselves as integral to an American tradition of masculinity by giving ‘em hell through reckless bravado.

The swaggering willingness to take on all these feats of risk, humiliation, and degradation in a perpetual game of one-upmanship creates an adolescent masculinity, a “king of the playground” mentality that cultivates laughter and cruelty. The terror at the heart of masculinity in our culture stems from anxiety of being revealed as inadequate in one’s manhood. This recalls a survey in which women listed their greatest fear as being raped whereas men confessed their greatest fear is being laughed at by others, mocked or lessened as a man (Noble, 1992). Extreme sporting pranks takes up the fear of laughter and cultivates it to an extent that it is made public performance. Indeed, all playground antics are “public performances” of gender; pranks elevates these performances—in dollars, danger, and attitude—to a truly public playground, with audiences that number in the millions. Both the pranksters and the audience are complicit in a perpetuation of this boy code of laughing at other men; this furthers the incessant self-surveillance and policing of others men confront in everyday lives in order to prove they adhere to this boy code.

The undertaking of extreme sports provides an exhilaration, an escape, and an evasion of masculine anxiety. Despite the feminist and social models suggesting men have all the power, there is a rupture; outside of institutional structures, individual men feel a sense of powerlessness (Keen, 1991; Kimmel, 2000; Moore & Gillette, 1993). Opportunities to prove mastery over hazard permits the man as individual to reclaim a sense of fearlessness and empowerment; furthermore, it reasserts his claim to full masculinity in the group by giving ‘em all hell. And following this spirit of rebellion, our

extreme sporting men also create adolescent masculinities that create new sites of possibilities beyond the reinscription of the boy code. These new sites revolve around constructions of kinship, corporeality, and sexuality that transcend cultures of cruelty and boy code.

*Resistance through Adolescent Kinship, Corporeality, and Sexuality*

Dan Kiley's (1983) psychological treatise on the Peter Pan Syndrome captures a cultural moment in which men suffering from an alienation or avoidance of the emotional demands of society resist adult responsibilities. In applying this concept to extreme sporting athletes, I suggest we look with a fair amount of wistfulness upon these extreme boy-men because they actively reject mainstream demands to grow up in favor of embracing resistant childhood. In taking up eternal adolescence and resisting mainstream masculinity, our Peter Pans of pranktainment further undermine what we know and expect of fixed masculinity. Through resistant performances of extended adolescence, extreme sporting men create new ways of doing kinship, corporeality, and sexuality that reignite the Peter Pan myth for the current cultural, political, and economic climate when "growing up" simply isn't fun.

*Friends 'til the End: Kinship Matters.* As Franklin and McKinnon suggest, kinship no longer functions as "grounded in a singular and fixed idea of 'natural' relation, but is seen to be self-consciously assembled from a multiplicity of possible bits and pieces" (2001, p. 14). To understand how these kinships form shared practices, I explore how a cultural movement such as extreme sports pranktainment illustrates kinship as a way of 'doing' togetherness. As Butler draws from Levi-Strauss, kinship becomes the "allegory for the origin of culture and a symptom of the process of naturalization itself,

one that takes place, brilliantly, insidiously, in the name of culture itself’ (2002, p. 24). Thus even as marginalized communities continuously come together, forging a communitas of kinship against the traditional and the ritual, these cultures remain bound to the very idea they are claiming to resist and transform.

The importance of kinship within the adolescent pranktainment culture emerges as a recollection of childhood existence, in which a fight with your parents increased dependence on your peers and vice versa. Thus in resisting traditional familial or institutional kinships, extreme sporting cultures forge their own interdependence which ultimately reinforces (vis-a-vis the boy code) those same cultural practices. Yet there remains transformative power in the acts expressing kinship with and against that boy code. In *Viva la Bam*, when April scolds her son – rightfully so after pranks involving an alligator in her kitchen or an elephant in her backyard – he gathers his friends to plot retaliation in nearly every episode. Spinning out from familial ties, this is the moment when the sense of self connects outside of the home through shared acts of play. This theme becomes reproduced through pranktainment programming as the crews of these sports and programs often feature childhood friends and bonds that remain untouched by the demands of adulthood. In *Nitro Circus*, Pastrana’s childhood pal Jim DeChamp becomes his collaborative partner in creating the Nitro stunts. This mutual relationship works through adolescent pranks toward a successful and legitimate adulthood venture, as Pastrana and DeChamp “started their stunt career as kids on big wheels and pedal bikes and have graduated to motorcycles, race cars, off-road trucks and anything else that goes fast and jumps far” ([www.nitrocircus.com](http://www.nitrocircus.com), 2012). These extreme kinships illustrate a compelling support system typically ignored or supplanted in mainstream

representation for masculine sporting men. Whereas traditional sports bring unrelated men together to form team bonds which become priority over their personal kin structures, extreme sporting men cull from old and new bonds, personal and professional, to craft their own kin in a powerful demonstration of loyalty.

Although the sense of kinship in extreme sports becomes a prevalent theme across the texts, *Viva la Bam* most singularly exemplifies this Peter Pan togetherness. The texts suggest that this crew lives together, plays together, and pranks together; these friends seem happily frozen in their adolescent existence supplemented by their pranktainment funds. The compelling blend of friendship and family continues in the representation and inclusion of Margera's actual family members. As Margera and his crew torment April, Paul, and Vito on an episodic basis, this echoes the adolescent tendencies to mock the familial structure, especially in the presence of peers. The Margeras first made appearances in *Jackass*, most memorably in a decision to bring an alligator into April and Phil's kitchen and set firecrackers off in their bedroom. The kinship structure, ironically played out in an "us against them" series of pranks, seemed to strike a chord with audiences as it became the foundation for *Viva la Bam*.

In one example of *Viva la Bam* kinship, April and Bam placed a wager that she could not hold her temper over the course of one day regardless of how many pranks Bam and his crew throw her way. After long-suffering April wins the bet, she asks for one thing: to see her son dressed up in a suit so they can sit down together for a nice meal. Bam walks dejectedly through their mansion, the picture of embarrassed little boy forced to play dress-up for his mother. With prankster Brandon DiCamillo playing maitre'd and the other crewmembers watching in laughter, Bam gives in before the soup

is served and starts a food fight. Despite putting his mom through a day that involved dyeing the laundry red and throwing a midnight metal rave in their house, Bam can't completely concede; it is a performance of decidedly resistant adolescence that must be maintained for the cameras, the audience, the fans. April's attempt at mainstream normalization must be rejected by her extreme pranking son. This is adolescent kinship as a lifestyle choice portrayed in *Viva la Bam* and largely, extreme sporting masculinities as a whole.

In the episode when Bam and crew are stranded by the Margera parents along Three Mile Island, April begins to worry about Bam's potential revenge and recalls how many times she has been at the receiving end of his pranks: "He's painted the kitchen completely blue, and what about the skatepark (in the living room), and what about the elephant? And I'm supposed to feel bad about him being on an island?" This utterance evokes the negotiations between parent and child, especially the child caught in those rebellious adolescent years in which pranks and trouble are the order of the day. In watching this dynamic, it seems natural, normal even – a performance of parental angst and adolescent mischief. It is only when pausing to remember that Bam and his crew (as well as most other pranktainers) are fully grown men that the bizarre nature of this dynamic is exposed.

At the end of the episode, Bam gets his revenge, sending local television news reporters with faked footage of their house exploding to April at another location. She races home to find her son and his friends drinking beers in lounge chairs in the driveway. After they taunt each other for their mutual pranks, April hugs Bam and he lovingly puts his arms around her, then promptly tackles her to the ground. "Ape and I

are friends again,” he says in the afterword; his friend Ryan Dunn comments: “Let that be a lesson to you mommies out there.” This is a clear reassertion of the mother-son dynamic as all play, no responsibility, all trouble erased when a hug for mom is given by her beloved, spoiled brat. This close-to-saccharin moment is a reminder that Peter Pan sought out Wendy to be the mother to the Lost Boys. This hug is a decidedly resistant representation of kinship made possible through its evocation of adolescent masculinity.

*The Junk Food Diet: Corporeal Adolescence.* In addition to adolescent kinship, there is a corporeal act of resistance against mainstream masculine adulthood in extreme sports. Tall, large, muscular bodies not only ensure physical dominance but are markers of cultural assumptions regarding mainstream masculinity (Brownmiller, 1993). As Bryson suggests, sport at its most violent called upon “the association of males and maleness with valued skills and the sanctioned use of aggression, force, and violence” (1987, p. 29). As male violence or dominance over women becomes shunned in contemporary, civilized society, sport remains a sphere for this embodiment of dominant physicality. Messner states: “Men are rewarded when they successfully objectify their own bodies as weapons to be used against opponents, who are in turn objectified as legitimate objects of violence” (2001, p. 6). I argue that the men of extreme sports physically embody resistance to the traditional masculine ideal. Typically lean, tightly wired bodies are not built as weapons enforcing masculine power over others but as tools to ride, fly, and zip through their respective sports (Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003). These are bodies of resistant adolescence – the activities of the extreme demand and produce juvenile, boy-men bodies that become the desired typologies for masculine extreme sporting athletes. They are Peter Pan forms that can, indeed, fly.

Much as mainstream sports produce an ideal body type, the extreme world and its specific activities necessitates the construction of what makes an extreme body. This correlates with the shift toward an adolescent masculine corporeality that manifests in the lithe, slim figures of Knoxville, Margera, or Shaun White; this is also made apparent when a body is introduced that contradicts these extreme demands.

This contradiction occurred when Tony Hawk, arguably the most successful skateboarder of all time, first landed on the skating scene. At a muscular 6'3" and 170-180 lbs., Hawk's body was more suited to that of a professional baseball player. Yet as a child, the precocious Hawk failed in this and other mainstream sports. His parents suggested skateboarding as an outlet for his energy. Taking up this sport and garnering increasing notoriety, Hawk was frequently doubted based on his larger frame. Although Hawk's story turned into one of the most successful pages from the extreme sporting playbook, this illustrates how extreme sports are now constructing new ideals of adolescent physicality for men.

The corporeal typology of the adolescently wiry masculine form, unfettered by large muscles of mainstream dominance, serves as the ideal and the visual embodiment of resistant adolescent physicality. The majority of extreme sports and pranks entertainment stars reassert this corporeal adolescence; however, others offer a paunchier version more akin to that beer-belly frat boy corporeality. This serves to reinforce the authentic athlete in the group insofar as the impressive lean musculature of Pastrana, often shirtless in the *Nitro Circus* series, stands in contradiction to many of his comrades. Additionally, these lithe athletes are liberated from the form of the mainstream masculine athlete, typically

encased in the pads, helmets, and protective gear of hockey or football that create that hypermuscular profile.

In the majority of pranktainment footage, these boy-men are not spending hours at the gym, slurping down protein shakes or counting carbs. Their bodies ingest that which would compose most adolescent dietary requirements: junk food, energy drinks, and sugar in all its forms. They are consistently shown drinking beer and staying out all hours in tireless party-mode – hardly the regimen of the ideal mainstream masculine sporting body. In addition, the sponsors they court are often energy drinks (Pastrana) or chewing gum (White), typical adolescent skatepark concession fare. This diet seems to suit these perpetually adolescent bodies as their physicality functions in their chosen sports. One of the most notable examples of masculine physical difference occurs through Wee Man – the dwarf in Jackass whose daring is greater than his stature. Wee Man embodies physical resistance as he continuously outmaneuvers and outpranks his cohorts; extreme sporting pranktainment thus creates a space where non-traditional sporting bodies may perform as well or better than that traditional corporeal ideal. These bodies call into question the construction of masculine mainstream sporting bodies locked in an ever-increasing growth toward physical dominance. These bodies become sites for resistant adolescence, opening up new vistas for masculine physicality.

Perhaps the embrace of extreme sporting boy-men runs concurrently with the media message that “adulthood must be actively avoided...our culture is becoming so focused on those who stay child-like, who look young and act young, that it’s becoming harder to grow up” (Donahoo, 2007, p. 47). Perhaps this culminates in the booming media and cultural attention to the extreme Peter Pans embodying perpetual adolescence.

Through the performance and embodiment of Peter Pan kinship and corporeality, the boy-men of pranktainment create transformative opportunities that flip the script of adult masculinity. This perpetual adolescence also provokes a deeper discourse surrounding the ways that these boy-men trouble our mainstream assumptions regarding masculinity and sexuality, adulthood, and pain.

*Seven Minutes in Heaven: S&M, Adolescent Sexuality, and Homoeroticism.* As scholars have recently begun addressing the possibilities of wounding and the male body (Ashe 2008; Carrera, 2002; Seidler, 1997), it is increasingly possible to look at the corporeal wounding of men under that same erotic spectator gaze. Silverman (1992) takes up the idea that the masochistic wounding of men creates a subversive moment in cultural productions. Following Thomas (2002), I suggest that the wound as penetrating into men through performance and representation creates a site of transformation in identity and society. While the masochistic nature of extreme sports has been hinted at (Burr & Hearn, 2008; Le Breton, 2005), I expand the concept to witness how extreme sporting men trouble the waters of masculine sexual representation. Exploring the taboos of adolescent eroticism and homoerotic kinship within pranktainment, I further the study of extreme masculine sexuality to create a dangerous triptych of the erotic featuring S&M, adolescent sexuality, and homoeroticism.

Extreme sporting performances allow men to do sexuality differently than mainstream men performing masculinity as aggressively adult and overtly heterosexual. The boy-men of pranktainment create a sense of “virtuality and openness with such insistence that it seems to call attention to the trouble and murkiness not so much hidden underneath as running along all the seams” (Rose, 1992, p. xii). In coupling the embrace

of masochism with eternal adolescence, extreme men create a difficult and unsettling space for both childlike innocence and adult desire to come to the forefront. This is not a performance that our mainstream sporting men could enact without calling their virile, heterosexual, dominant masculinity into question. Yet this is made possible by an extreme culture of boy-men. The internalization of pain is one calling card for many of these sports; the resistance to adulthood in all of its masculine demands of performance becomes the other.

Thus, sadomasochism and adolescence are married in a disturbing yet familiar way – the mere thought of childhood games and dares in which the ‘winner’ sustains the most pain or torture becomes the blueprint for a game such as *Jackass*’ electroshock therapy stunt. When Knoxville and crew sit nude in a circle, attaching electrodes to their genitals to endure increasing levels of electric shocks, is it the immaturity of this act that prevents us from glimpsing the homoerotic S&M at play? Or are we made to squirm at the notion of boy-men in a taboo-triptych of childhood sexuality, sadomasochism, and homoeroticism? When the element of homoerotic kinship becomes introduced, extreme sporting performances create a mirror of the most repressed notions of sexuality and masculinity in normative society.

The bonds of kinship, so strong within extreme representations of pranktainment, also call into question the silence surrounding homosexuality within sports. Although none of the well-known athletes and stars of these sports has ever come out as openly homosexual, there is a homoeroticism present in the unquestioning closeness of these boy-men. These men do not just perform, work, and compete with each other; in multiple representations they travel and live together. Aside from Van Vugt in *Nitro Circus* and

Rothschild in *Bam's Unholy Union*, the women accompanying these texts are typically nameless friends, random faces in a crowd, or brief stars in a montage to “Nitro Girls.” The fact that I can name only two after reviewing all these texts speaks to their afterthought status. Women are peripheral to the construction of the extreme masculine prankster, according to the “no sissy stuff” code; however, women’s presence also might be read as a normalizing effect to silence any other interpretations of their boys’ club kinship. Yet closeness is not the primary marker of homoeroticism within these texts as the acts of S&M become represented in visual presentations that feature a master/slave dichotomy. The fact that this is enacted between men conjures that whisper of homoeroticism vividly.

In mainstream sporting locker rooms, boys and men have physically attacked each other when one feels a glance or touch implied something homosexual. This emerges from that unifying principle of homophobia that staves off the fear at the soul of the man who needs his shroud of hyper-heterosexuality (Kimmel, 2000). Yet in the extreme sporting world of pranks and pranks, the men not only look at each other, they cannot look away. And neither can we.

In a brief assemblage of textual examples I illustrate how these men unseat that carefully constructed rule founded on homophobic fear in *Jackass* alone: the men have a day at the beach in which Margera ties a kite to anal beads with interesting results; Pontius dresses his penis as a puppet and feeds it to a snake; Steve-O performs a self-explanatory “butt fireworks” display; Margera must serve as human bell-ringer in a strong man competition in which he must decide on the mechanics of being struck by the blunt metal lift or insert a metal dildo as his seat – he opts for the latter; McGhehey

allows his friends to glue their pubic hair to his face; and Ryan Dunn uses a condom and lube to stick a Hot Wheel toy car up his ass – therefore encapsulating the “big wheel” manhood rule in an intriguing new way.

In taking up homoerotic toys and actions, unabashedly displaying their nude bodies, and losing no masculine face while doing so, extreme sporting pranktainers affect transgressive performances that dismantle that fear-fueled homophobia. Ironically, this harkens back to the “way to go!” spanking administered on the sidelines of the football field or along the bleachers of the basketball court. When the traditional sporting “ass-slapping” was called out in pop culture outlets and gender jokes, it was quickly extinguished as it was far too dangerous, far too homoerotic for the big four of masculine sports. Even as traditional sports move away from the erotics of the butt in favor of chest bumps or slaps on the back, it is the active distancing from the spank that speaks more loudly for shame and homophobia than the act itself. Yet at the margins of extreme sports, the thrill of the dare transcends the terror of inadequate masculinity.

While the eternal boyhood of these extreme men seemingly neutralizes any representation of sexuality akin to the self-labeled and aggressively heteronormative “players” of mainstream sport, in intentionally flinging their bodies into depths of pain they are performing a sadomasochist sexuality outside the realms of traditional ideals. Moreover, in interrogating the Peter Pan ambiguity of boy-men further, in the act of eliding childhood and adulthood the extreme sporting men engender an even more difficult conversation regarding adolescent sexuality. Finally, the homoeroticism of primary kinship and hierarchal power practices that reproduce elements of S&M confound our expectations of sexualized normatives and deviance within a playful culture

that most likely did not intend to produce these effects, yet under the performance of subcultural masculine difference managed to do so anyway. I contend that the men of extreme sport may be able to performatively queer taboos regarding practices of S&M, homoeroticism, and adolescent sexualities, calling into question the boy code itself.

### *One Last Trick*

Through this chapter, I have exposed how extreme sporting athletes and pranktainers both reinforce and implode the boy code through retrograde adolescent masculinity. While these textual and live performances comply, counter, and confront mainstream constructions of masculinity and normative expectations of what it means to be a ‘real man,’ extreme sporting men work differently from their unique space at societal and sporting margins.

Through a reassertion of the playground boy code, extreme sporting men build their culture of pranktainment through acts of humiliation and one-upmanship to dictate a hierarchy of power. The distribution of power, from the king of the playground down to the lowly dunces and clowns, reasserts a masculine proving ground in this marginalized culture. I suggest they are upholding the rules of manhood yet these tricksters do so through a retrograde masculinity that muddies the waters surrounding what is complicit, resistant, and transformative: they allow women into the fold, yet use them as gauges of which men fail at the boy code of “no sissy stuff”; they showcase “big wheel” status through their lifestyles and stunts yet maintain a disgruntled rebellion against corporate money; they wreak havoc on an episodic basis yet one king stands as the perseverant “sturdy oak” to save the day; and, they push the limits of recklessness in a sparkling

display of “give ‘em hell” that has lit up extreme sporting culture like roman candles over the concrete playground.

Yet in their willingness to move past normative limits, to truly give ‘em hell in increasingly bombastic stunts and through unapologetic swagger, extreme sporting men hold the potential for transgressive masculinity. The embodiment of a resistant Peter Pan adolescence proves possible through three themes: kinship, corporeality, and sexuality. Extreme sporting men open up new ways of doing kinship through a *communitas* at the core of each cultural production. Their inextricable bond with their buddies, their group rituals and pranks of play, and the suspended immaturity against “growing up” create a space to open up and enact new forms of kinship outside those dictated as normal for grown men. Even as many of the extreme sporting men grow into marriage and fatherhood, they often marry repeatedly (Knoxville) or suffer troubled marriages or relationships (Margerita). Thus, it appears that despite the traditional move away from the kinship of friendship or immediate family upon marriage or children, extreme sporting men do not and perhaps cannot leave their parents or friends behind. Extreme sporting kinship grows from the concrete floors of skateparks and sustains these suburban brats through an arrested development funded by their Peter Pan ventures.

Additionally, the very bodies of these Peter Pans offer decidedly different representations than those found within the mainstream masculine sporting world. Bodies are not built and chiseled for dominance and power over others; these bodies are frozen in an adolescent state (and typically reflect an adolescent lifestyle), intended for functionality in their sports. This corporeal embodiment of adolescent masculinity may work similarly to mainstream masculinity insofar as it often serves as a disciplining

factor against other body types; however, in its form and performance it can be seen as a tool for play, sport, and prank rather than the mainstream body work typically used for dominance.

I also suggest that extreme sports break through the punitive silences surrounding sexualities outside mainstream sporting masculinities. Although this is most likely unintentional, their very presence as resistant Peter Pans, linked through close kinship, corporeality, and sexuality, exposes undercurrents of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and adolescent eroticism. These sexualities not only deviate from the mainstream prescription of hyper-heterosexual masculinity; these sexualities become silenced, shamed, and even disciplined for that deviance. These performances of kinship, corporeality, and sexuality open the seams of mainstream sporting hyper-heterosexuality and allow a conversation of new possibilities.

The assembled texts of extreme sporting masculinities create a collage of both complicit and defiant traditional sporting manhood. Extreme sporting men embrace adolescence while keying into a no-girls-allowed homoeroticism and one-upping embrace of sadomasochism that turns traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity on its head. They become playground punks, glorifying the boy code through spoiled suburban brat status that reasserts that same masculinity through a retrograde performance that stubbornly refuses to grow up. And they create new ways of expressing kinship and masculine bodies that open up our ideas of what it means to be a man.

## Chapter Four – My Eros, My Thanatos: Reflexive Performativity of Ultrarunning

There's something so universal about that sensation, the way running unites our two most primal impulses: fear and pleasure. We run when we're scared, we run when we're ecstatic, we run away from our problems and run around for a good time. (McDougall, 2010, p. 11)

These words feel like home to me. Eros and thanatos in action, running pours out our darkest pains and fears along with our most ecstatic hopes and triumphs. As Bale suggests, “few have recognized that breaking into a run has, in the span of human time, been as important in the history of time-space compression as the stagecoach, the railway, the aeroplane, and the telephone” (2004, p. 1). For those of us who have invested painstaking efforts into this lifelong obsession, we are aware of the significance of this act in the making of our identities. Through the experience of training and running the ultramarathon, I formulate performances that move beyond the limits of mainstream gender production.

The purpose of this chapter is to posit performativity in ultrarunning as a transformative space enabling new vocabularies of sport. These transcendent vocabularies push past binaries and hierarchies that dominate ways of thinking and writing about experience; these new languages and performances dissolve old boundaries of male/female, mind/body, pleasure/pain, and exaltation/abjection. In this chapter, I argue that ultrarunning is a performance of transformation through the elision of gender, the product and production of corporeal difference and resistance, masochistic

performance and the negotiation of pleasure and pain, the merge of abject resistance and peak experience, and the engagement with pleasure-centered *jouissance* to erase scripts of normative historical, political, and cultural weight. Before moving into this pleasure-centered vocabulary, it is necessary to restate that slippery definition of *jouissance*. In the mid-sixties, Lacan began reformulating the death drive to account for the idea that it is not its own voice but a whisper in every other drive. Thus, *jouissance* emerges insofar as “every drive is virtually a death drive because every drive pursues its own extinction, every drive involves the subject in repetition, and every drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to the realm of excess *jouissance* where enjoyment is experienced as suffering” (1966, p. 848).

I use my first ultra experience in the 2011 Keys100 distance classic as a test for myself to participate in the 50 mile race and a lesson from others who push themselves in the 50, 100, and relay events. I engage in ultrarunning discourse through: conversations with others in the community; the published writing and online commentaries of other ultrarunners; and my own reflexive ultrarunning experience. The training, racing, environment, and runners all engage in this cultural act, drawn together by one aching passion. One of my fellow ultrarunners whispers conspiratorially: “We keep running the same distance over and over, like the definition of insanity.” Yet even as ultrarunners indeed “do the same thing over and over,” the results of making and remaking our bodies and our selves creates a perpetual (dis)appearing act, a move off the grid of normative binaries into a subcultural *jouissance*.

Butler (1988) suggests that performativity illustrates how we perform multiple roles through embodiments that answer not *who* but *how* we become subjects.

Performative strategies operate through embodiment in our historical, linguistic, and material contexts, thus constituting identity. Butler critiques Goffman's theories of identity in performance as they lean toward the construction of a foundational self, the linchpin beneath the various masks we put on and take off in everyday interaction (1988). Yet Goffman also suggested that there was an interactional performance of the self created by and through these scenes of life. As Goffman puts it, "the self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location...it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue...is whether it will be credited or discredited" (1959, pp. 252-253). Thus, the self emerging from scenes of my running body becomes markedly different than the self performing in scenes from everyday life or in academic settings; yet for each of these "scenes" my self must meet standards of earning that "credit." The questions of self underscoring, producing, or borne of performances becomes the crux of postmodern identity theories; in my lived experience running and writing the ultramarathon, I hope to assess my own identity construction and deconstruction in ways that explore these larger questions of the production and product of self.

Here, I pause to review the performances of gender in roller derby and extreme sporting pranktainment before leaping into the ultrarunning world of extreme sports for two reasons: ultrarunning is decidedly different from the gender work done in roller derby and pranktainment; and, my method shifts from textual analysis to a reflexive ethnography in the ultrarunning experience. My interrogation of gendered performances in roller derby illustrated how these texts revealed parodies of sexuality and sexual empowerment, commoditization of sexuality, recovery of feminine violence through

athleticism, performances of marginal identity and ritual play, and the queering of mainstream sporting traditions. Following extreme sporting pranktainers, I revealed how they both reinforce and implode the boy code through retrograde adolescent masculinity adhering to the rules of: “no sissy stuff”, “be a big wheel”, “be a sturdy oak”, and “give ‘em hell.” I also demonstrated how their embodiment of Peter Pan adolescence resists the code through kinship, corporeality, and sexuality. While these burgeoning spheres of gendered performances spring from riveting and popular texts, I now turn to a more personal project that takes a path off the middle of the road, toward the ditch less tread.

As a site of study, ultrarunning sheds the weight of so many things that made roller derby and pranktainment fascinating in terms of performance, gender, and the body. Issues of sexuality, so prevalent and provocative in roller derby and pranktainment, suddenly evaporate in the discourse of ultrarunning. Media casts no glare on the dirt-packed paths and graveled patches of ultrarunning; the one or two runners making it into the media spotlight become, to varying degrees, cast out from the insular community in which they’ve excelled. Money is perhaps tied to this, as capital gains become a relative non-issue in ultrarunning. Whereas financial struggles are tied to the issues faced by the women of roller derby and financial glory becomes a mainstay and bragging right for the spoiled brats of pranktainment, ultrarunning floats above and away from class concerns yet remains tethered to those same categorizations. Finally, ultrarunning performs gender in ways that confound all the work done in the previous areas of study. While roller derby and pranktainment loom large in the visible world, leaping across the gathered texts in outlandish costumes and spectacular stunts, ultrarunning demands a new methodology, from textual analysis to an ethnographic, reflexive account.

Yet ultrarunning does share something crucial with the extreme sporting worlds of roller derby and pranktainment – pleasure. In ultrarunning, a pain discourse dominates a great deal of the scholarship and conversations surrounding the sport. Following traditional ways of speaking about pain, this discourse situates pain oppositionally to pleasure. However, I believe that extreme sports and ultrarunning specifically provide a means out of this restrictive binary. For ultrarunners, pain and pleasure are heightened sensory experiences not at odds but in conversation with each other. Therefore, in an effort to dissolve this binary through both the writing and experience of ultrarunning, I offer pain in conjunction with a pleasure-centered study of performativity. Pain and pleasure become twinned in my proposed vocabulary of *jouissance* at the core of ultrarunning.

As addressed previously in this study, the sporting world creates, sustains, and reproduces certain “givens” cast along gendered binaries and hierarchal structures. The binary of femininity and masculinity is replicated in sports: femininity is the lighter, passive, pretty version of the legitimate hyper-hetero masculine sporting world of aggression, competition and violence. In addition, certain binaries emerge specifically when looking at the extreme sporting world of ultrarunning: mind/body, exaltation/abjection, pain/pleasure, shame/pride, and corporeal constraints/liberations emerge in my study and experience of this extreme sport. Yet to stop here does little in advancing the communicative and performative possibilities of transformation. As Golombisky suggests, “Because we reify a gender line, gender is binary. There are only two options” (2012, p. 23). Moreover, in gendered binaries there is always a sense that the feminine is subordinate to the masculine, the homosexual subordinate to the

heterosexual. One side of the binary becomes the deviant and one side becomes the normative, as exemplified in the binary of pain/pleasure. Therefore, reifying these binaries or flipping the hierarchy is insufficient; moreover, this scholarly move does not do justice to the transcendent experience of ultrarunning in the transformative world of extreme sports.

Instead, I make strides to dissolve these binaries altogether. Following Haraway's cyborg manifesto (1991), I propose a move beyond the binary language available through our culture. Haraway offers the cyborg as a "matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century... the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (p. 149). While Haraway develops a transformative third language heralded by the cyborg as a creature both animal and machine, natural and crafted, I suggest that ultrarunning provides a compelling site that generates the transcendence to create a new vocabulary of experience beyond binary language. In weighing ultrarunning with and against mainstream sport and language, I unearth and reclaim the vocabulary of the epicene, proud flesh, sensorial, and etherreality in the transcendent language of *jouissance*. Each of these terms is a transcendent one: moving beyond binaries of male/female, mind/body, pleasure/pain, and exaltation/abjection.

Prior to introducing this vocabulary of *jouissance*, I review ultrarunning with and against the values of mainstream sport and ultrarunning as a specific subculture of running; I then explore issues of gender, corporeality, pain negotiation, and the experiences of abjection and peak exaltation to produce this transcendent new vocabulary beyond binaries.

### *Running and Sports Reviewed*

Running itself is still outside the mainstream construction of sport in the U.S., far from the team and male dominated “big four” of football, baseball, basketball, and hockey in our culture. Thus, rather than differentiate between mainstream sports and ultrarunning, I distinguish mainstream running (specifically marathons) and the subcultural mutants of the ultra extreme. Key themes emerge as central to mainstream marathon running: competition, speed, and placing as ideals; the middle-classedness of running; idealized physicality as leanly muscled and gracefully sleek (thus discouraging potential bodies of difference); and the transformation from distance solitude to tourist site and spectacle.

Individual competition, speed, and placing are thematics of the mainstream running world from the flashy sprinters of the Olympics to the traveling core of internationally-ranked marathoners (Collinson & Hockey, 2000; Johnsgard, 1985; Markula, 2000; Tulle, 2007). Speed ties to our cultural fixation with the efficient and fleeting, our need to “overstimulate and accelerate the body in unnecessary physical exertion” (Botting & Wilson, 2000, p. 66). As a microcosm of culture, sport reifies this obsession in arguably no greater example than competitive, mainstream running. Yet there is the possibility for resistance in these running demands; there is potential for sport to unbind us from our mainstream obsession with the blue-ribbon, gold-medal standard for constant and exhausting forward motion.

The middle-class contingent of runners in our culture is a subject often noted by those in sports, cultural, and media studies (Abbas, 2004; Wheaton, 2004). Although running requires little more than supportive shoes (although many cultures forego even

that), it does pull a decidedly middle-class group that have enough time to engage in the activity, funds for registrations fees, and supplies for the duration of the trek. As Abbas notes, “in the case of running it is found that it promotes an embodiment of middle-classness that naturalizes gender and age inequalities whilst also individualising responsibility for them” (2004, p. 159). Yet with a new volume of anthropological, sociological, and sports studies professionals looking to tribal running and its significance, marginalized ultrarunning cultures might prove a site of resistance against U.S. middle-classism in running (Biggers, 2006; Bramble & Lieberman, 2004; Gorney, 2008; McDougall, 2011). Ultrarunning cultures have begun taking up this track, often casting aside hefty entrance fees or showy prizes in favor of minimal exchange that reasserts the value of the run in and of itself.

The mainstream running world has also defined the normative running body through mediated (re)productions of sleek, lean bodies perpetually springing into graceful stride. The effects of this ideal running body have been thoroughly studied across sporting, sociological, psychological, health, and gender scholarship (Greenleaf, 2002; Heikkala, 1993; Markula, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Weight & Noakes, 1987). Mainstream running media typically (re)produces ideals of the running body as muscular yet lean, built for speed (Abbas, 2004; Markula, 2000). In Chase’s (2008) study of “Clydesdale” runners, she posits that larger or heavier bodies act as physical embodiments of resistance within the marathon culture yet they are not accepted overall as running bodies. Thus, even in a study of bodies outside the running norm, that ideal body remains the disciplining force (Hanold, 2008).

Additionally, the sporting acts that create a physically performing body simultaneously attain and reassert an ideal body for women. Chase (2008) notes that recreational marathoners often run these races to control their weight; Thompson (2007) and Weight and Noakes (1987) touch on the physiological implications surrounding female distance runners and eating disorders. This scholarly focus on the ideal running body as intrinsically linked to weight and image issues remains a necessary subject of discourse. However, I contend that both the continued media and academic fixation on the ideal running body only serves to perpetuate this myth. Resistant bodies can and will be found when we look beyond the visibility of *Runner's World* magazine covers toward the multiple and unmarked corporeal possibilities of the extreme.

Distance running as a cultural event has recently re-emerged as it typically does in times of economic and political instability (Abbas, 2004; McDougall, 2011). Since the dawn of the new millennium, marathons in the U.S. have increased and been re-imagined as major events merging spectator and athlete, sport and entertainment. One need only look at the “Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon Series” and its twenty-four city North American “tour” to recognize that even that most solitary of sporting acts – distance running – has now become a major tourist attraction. The growing popularity of U.S. marathons draws more athletes and even more spectators to an endless calendar of weekend-long events in major cities, shifting toward the common mythos of mainstream sport, as “defined by what we see on television or in the newspaper – a big business of spectators and fans and money” (Johnson, 2001, p. 6). Yet for those of us who find nothing more blissful than slipping on our running shoes for a few precious minutes or hours outside the normative

lived experience of hustle-bustle and bling-bling, this trend in running follows a mainstream current rather than our resistant tributaries.

Despite a wealth of work on running technique, history, and athletes, there remain relatively limited studies interpreting the act itself (Bale, 2004). As Hanold argues, previous literature on running often overlooks the distinction of ultrarunning as a separate sport; “findings suggest that ultrarunning is a sporting space which gives rise to more diverse subjectivities than previously found in distance running literature” (2008, p. 160). This contributes to my argument regarding the unique production of sporting performances and identities in extreme spaces and subcultures. Also, as many scholars focus on ultrarunning subjects of an elite status (Greenleaf, 2002; Hanold, 2008; Tulle, 2007), I instead turn to those within my immediate ultrarunning community and experience. We are first-time ultrarunners such as myself, veteran runners who have never finished in the top twenty, and your basic middle-of-the-pack runners testing our mettle on a treacherous playing field.

Many scholarly inquiries interrogate the motives of runners (Johnsgard, 1985; Markula & Pringle, 2006). Through this literature, a spectrum of responses emerges: at one end there is Eichberg’s (1998; 2010) neutral assessments that reasons for running include fitness, sport, achievement, or fun; at the other end stands Guttmann’s more controversial position that the start of a running race is a single moment filled with “that strangely masochistic sexualized sensation of mingled pain and pleasure” (1996, p. 153). I hope in working between these external perceptions and my own internal experience in the ultrarunning culture I can illuminate how this extreme sport transcends the binaries

associated with identity, gender, and the body to create – in and through its performance – the possibilities of new corporealities, histories, and discourses.

### *Tracing the Miles of Ultrarunning*

Technically, any distance beyond the traditional 26.2 miles/42.195 kilometers qualifies as an ultra. In addition, there are two quantifying measures for ultraraces: the specified distance runs and the specified time runs. The most popular and common races include the 50 km, 100 km, 50 mi, 100 mi, 24-hour races, and multi-day races. The single greatest demographic distinction between ultrarunners and the rest of extreme sporting participants is their age: “the average ultramarathon runner is older and more conservative than counterparts in the other so-called extreme sports” (Ruibal, 2005, para. 20). Despite having significantly lower visibility in mainstream media and online sites, ultrarunners are a rabid group in constant contact through the American Ultrarunning Association (AUA) and its few supporting sites. Where marathons and shorter races promote urban atmospheres filled with spectators and glory, ultrarunning promotes series such as the purgatory-themed “Dances with Dirt” (through Hell, MI; Gnaw Bone, IN; Devil’s Lake, WI; and Big Ma’s Way, FL): “Expect to get out near the edge where life is full color...expect a day that leaves you knowing you are fully alive, awake and crankin’ on all cylinders...expect insanity, stupidity and nirvana” (danceswithdirt.com, 2011). This is a common theme for ultrarunners, as knowing glances reveal that we are well aware of the depths of hell and heights of nirvana crouching behind every mile.

Ultrarunning was male-dominated for decades due to international restrictions against women competing in distance runs until the early 1980s (Hanold, 2008; Milroy, 2001). Yet as U.S. women were finally granted entrance and the sport itself began to

grow, the 1990s marked a dramatic increase in ultra participation; women's performance alone has grown from 4% to nearly 30% (Medinger, 2009). Yet with the average international number of ultra participants hovering around 70,000, this remains a fairly limited subculture of the running population overall. For every spotlight shone on rare ultra-stars such as *Runner's World* poster boy Dean Karnazes, there are thousands of ultrarunners who sought out this extreme sport specifically because the lights grew too bright, the crowds too noisy in marathons. As one of my fellow runners said, "I ran one of those rock n' rolls in Vegas and there were dance crews, rock bands, parties before and after, just constant noise...my run was being invaded." Ultrarunning holds true to what most runners love about our sport: minimal fanfare, solitary space, and engagement with nature outside the noise of everyday life.

Karnazes himself describes ultrarunners as "the small hardcore group of runners, a kind of runners' underground" (2006, p. 12). As the mainstream darling of the ultrarunning world, Karnazes has enjoyed meteoric popularity yet he draws disdain from the majority in ultrarunning as he represents the threat that others might invade, exploit, and commercialize our sport. Yet the rare blend of terror and temptation coupled through ultrarunning keeps it off-the-grid in reality while elevating its notable events as mythical. One of the most famed annual ultramarathons, the Badwater Ultra in Death Valley, has become the standard-bearer for the sport and its growing population. Runners endure extreme temperatures of over 120 degrees through the exacting 135 miles over an elevation gain of 13,000 feet. *There is no prize money awarded.* Marshall Ulrich, the first successful unaided Badwater Solo runner, wrote a riveting account of his trek in *Marathon & Beyond* magazine. He states that "the events are but a vehicle... hopefully I

internalize it all effectively, and that is what allows me to evolve – it is the ‘process’ that is so compelling” (Ulrich, 2000). He recalled the toughest race of his life as stripping away “one layer after the other until I was totally exposed to myself....the Solo becomes a vehicle for exposure of the inner self and psyche.” Locked in the body with only your thoughts to keep you running, ultrarunning is voluntary solitary confinement that can only be survived beyond the limits by trusting the self of mind and body together.

*There’s No Crying for Epicenes: The Elision of Gender in Ultrarunning*

The discourses of ultrarunning often invert the hierarchy of male over female; however, my experience of the sport demonstrates that this is not a binary either/or, but a both/and performance of gender. As Allison states, “in no area does ultrarunning differentiate itself more from other sports, even endurance sports, than in the excellence of women” (2001, p. 7). Yet specific research into ultrarunning women has been fairly limited (Hanold, 2010; McDonagh & Pappano, 2007); this provides further motivation to study ultrarunning as an extreme space permitting new performances of gender. My research furthers the scholarly literature regarding ultrarunning as it not only envisions this as an extreme performance of the body but actively engages within that physicality as a participant within that culture. In terms of gender and ultrarunning, “the similarity in responses of male and female ultramarathoners contrasts with reports of gender differences in athletes” (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992, p. 250). While this perception seems to flip the hierarchal script of gender in sports, it also reasserts that binary by upholding that division between women and men. I instead argue that the binary does not simply become realigned, it disappears altogether.

Thus, I find a third way to conceive of gender in ultrarunning vis-à-vis Haraway's concept of the cyborg. While cyborg becomes Haraway's third term beyond the binaries of animal/machine, I instead offer the possibilities of the epicene, a creature belonging to and partaking of both/and femininity and masculinity. Used as an adjective to suggest an erasure of gender distinction, it furthers the dissolution of binaried language available through the ultrarunning experience. Interestingly, epicene stands in for words that have only one form or both male and female referents in linguistics. Its Latin and Greek origins point to the use of the term as "common" or "common to", and it has transformed to signify androgyny and asexuality (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2000). As a term that associates with both genders, the epicene has evolved to incorporate meanings of effeminacy; this reasserts the assumption that in gendered binaries, moving beyond the masculine creates a lack, a femininity as subordinate. As Golombisky states, "the feminine is always derivative of and/or subordinate to the masculine" (2012, p. 23). Yet in reclaiming this third term based on its origins as both/and feminine and masculine, I offer a way out of that stifling and asymmetrical binary.

In Hanold's study of elite ultrarunning women, many participants spoke of a "blurring of gender in rather ambiguous ways such as feeling 'feminine' and 'masculine' at races...the high performance body appears to create enough dissonance between the 'athletic self' and the 'female self' that the gender binary is questioned" (2010, p. 171). This does reassert the normative ideal that masculinity becomes tied to excellent sporting performance; however, it is notable that this extreme activity and physicality pushes beyond limits to create new subjectivities and experiences of gendered possibilities. My

fellow runners considered this, and one responded: “I guess I never thought about it...but then, isn’t that a good thing?” I suggest this “good thing” relates to ultrarunning as a promising area to interrogate performances that both complete and elude the physicality of gender, thus permitting the embodied, empowered epicene. Another runner reiterated these possibilities beyond gender: “It’s weird, ‘cause I’m aware of my body and what it needs, what I need it to do for it when I’m running...but I’m also sort of not aware of it the way I am when I dress to go to work or when I worry about how I look or if people are looking at me everyday...the bad stuff about my body isn’t there anymore.” In becoming so completely attuned to our physicality as means of survival and sustenance, we are somehow liberated from the “bad stuff” – the weight of historical, political, and cultural gazes shaping our bodies on an everyday basis.

The ultrarunning culture and experience also generates results and participation that challenges mainstream expectations of gender success in sport. While men ran faster in standard marathon lengths, women possess far greater “fatigue resistance than do equally trained men” (Bam, Noakes, Juritz, & Dennis, 1997, p. 244). Sports psychotherapist Bruce Gottlieb claims that women possess an affinity for endurance that comes through in their ultrarunning success: “Men tend to think ‘harder, faster, stronger,’” he says, “women tend to think with more determination and tenacity. Especially the kind of woman who tackles ultra endurance events” (as cited in Jhung, 2010, para. 13). Ultrarunning icon Pam Reed exemplifies this reconstruction of gender assumptions. Reed’s rivalry with Karnazes created a stir in the ultrarunning community, as she first achieved what he could not: running 300 miles over 80 hours without stopping to sleep (McDonagh & Pappano, 2007). In 2010’s Hardrock 100-mile endurance

race in Colorado, 39-year-old Diana Finkel led the entire field for ninety miles before a leg cramp forced her to walk to her second-place finish; Darcy Africa finished in fourth overall, second woman in behind Finkel. Thus, not only does ultrarunning allow subjectivities beyond normative limits, it provides a field for evenly matched physical performances. These scholarly observations flip the hierarchy of male dominance in sport yet do little to elude or dismantle that binary. In offering the epicene, I hope to illustrate the ways in which ultrarunning is a performative site not of either/or but of both/and.

Using Butler's notion of performativity allows for focus on bodies and embodiment yet does not allow the weight of the body to dictate or create gender. Performativity also refuses to leave the body blameless as a tabula rasa upon which culture inscribes its gendered rules. Gendered performativity might allow us to arrive on the stage yet it is a stage that has always already been occurring and will always continue occurring; thus, our bodies are produced and transformed through history. Certain modes of performance reconstruct these codes of gender performativity through positioning, interaction, and movement of the body (i.e. ballet, ice skating, or even music videos). This is true of sport, which features the strength and aggressiveness of masculine bodies typically cheered along the sidelines by the supporting feminine bodies; these feminine bodies are on display as well but simply as objects to be 'seen' rather than 'do'. The vocabularies of traditionally men's or women's sports create specific codes for gender that reestablishes the difference between masculine and feminine cultural values. Ultrarunning rejects these binaried scripts; the epicene can both spit over her/his shoulder while muscling through the pack and luxuriate in her/his post-race spa pedicure for those damaged feet.

My soul blooms recalling the flipped script of traditional masculine/feminine sporting performances: my support crew-of-one happily assembled flimsy poster boards with giant magic marker scrawls of my last name to slap on the car while he paused every three miles to cheer me on from the sidelines. Beyond this binaried example upending the man as athlete/woman as cheerleader, I act as the epicene embracing my space as the toughened ultrarunning athlete while also allowing myself to be carried up the hotel steps when too weak to walk after the run. The ultra dissolves the binary of gender and allows performances of both/and within its unique space. In ultrarunning, gendered performance creates a vocabulary of transformation through the figure of the epicene partaking of both/and gendered characteristics.

Many of the men running the ultra seemed puzzled over my questions regarding gendered bodies. While I initially chalked this up to a code of male hegemonic shortsightedness (or perhaps the entitled blinders of male privilege), I realized that these same men simply didn't see themselves or the women ultra runners as different. Yet two lifelong running men did grudgingly admit specific doubts about their own bodies. In regards to the mainstream sporting world, one of my fellow ultrarunners said: "Sure, when I look at other (male) athletes, I know they are bigger, all yolked out. So sometimes, yeah, that feels bad, especially knowing how many miles I put in every week. But I can sure as hell outrun any one of them." My other ultramarathon man spoke of his own body issues within the ultrarunning world; as he grasped his protruding belly with a self-mocking laugh he said: "I mean, look at this shit...I know I don't look like I can do this...but I also know my buddy's waiting at the end with a case of Miller I'm gonna finish right after this."

And sure enough, this man – in his early sixties with a patch of gray hair and a “crew” numbering one, just like mine, became a beacon for nearly twenty miles as my kindred running spirit, an ally in something beyond battle or embrace of our world and ourselves. This silver fox of paunch and purpose ran twenty of the last twenty-five miles at an even pace with me, despite our physical disparity. This is the magic of an extreme sport that erases the normative pros and cons that mark up each of our bodies; these categorizations of faster, slower, older, younger, man, or woman have no bearing on our performances on that day in that race.

While the concerns of measuring up, out, or in to traditional masculine bodily ideals might plague ultrarunning men, a completely different perspective on the body occurs for women ultrarunners. While concerns of weight control and body image do motivate a large percentage of these women to begin running, the actual process of running, adding miles, and finishing first, second, and third events seemingly frees women of our corporeal weight. Sitting in a circle stretching before a warm-up run, I asked my small group of running women why they started running. Five of my fellow runners (who’d started running in the last 4-5 years) said they started running to get healthier, lose weight, and tone up. For the remaining four of us (who had been running for at least ten years), high school/collegiate running had ingrained running in our lives even after our sporting days were over. Yet what had led us to this running path seemed unimportant compared to why we do it now: “Escape!” yelled one of my running women, who had only paused her renewed running passion for the last three months before the birth of her third baby: “When I need out, I throw my shoes on, glare at Ken (her husband), and he nods toward the door.” In a pleasure-centered performative aesthetic,

ultrarunning may allow women the sole ownership of their bodies while also riding that pleasure beyond the limits of the corporeal form, recouping the agency and materiality of these acts.

Although many ultrarunners speak to the possibilities of the run to transcend gender boundaries, I do not intend to articulate that the body becomes desexed in any way. A read of ultrarunning that simplifies the experience in such a way diminishes the pleasures of it as a performance for runners and audience alike. As one of my fellow women runners said, “no matter who I am or how I look or what I do in every other minute of my day, nowhere else am I so entirely myself and my own self than during that time I’m running.” To think of myself and my women runners in a performative light, I/she “gives herself – pleasure, happiness, increased value, enhanced self-image. But she doesn’t try to ‘recover her expenses’” (Cixous, p. 87). In a sport where women suddenly, finally find their sneakers at the same starting line as their male running counterparts, there is exaltation without demand of submission or negation of either gender. Both and all are “alive and different” (Cixous, p. 79) in this newly recognized space to renegotiate performance and desire, power and jouissance. Yet as Butler suggests in *Undoing Gender*, Cixous’ sexual difference theory refuses to think beyond the possibilities of gender binaries. Thus, it becomes my task to find a space and build a vocabulary beyond that binary language through the performance of the epicene.

For myself and my ultrarunning epicenes typically falling on the feminine side of gendered binaries, our experiences and performances confront us with the sensory pleasures and pains of conquering those miles and living in our glorious, aching bodies. I must confess that within the world of academia, I have often felt I must shun the physical

part/performance of my self that is as crucial to my existence as the completion of a doctorate. Thus, to find that both performances conflate in this moment is particularly humorous. My academic brain screams at my disappearing body: “Do not succumb! Foucault taught you this shame over your body is a disciplinary mechanism!” My body screams back: “Do not succumb! *Runner’s World* taught you to add three miles to your long run each week no matter how much time that takes from your dissertation!” I have often felt that as a woman in the normative world my body becomes my marker of existence; I coincidentally feel that as a woman in the academic world my body must disappear for my existence. After all, to “admit” that I’m training for an ultramarathon in everyday life engenders responses regarding lunacy but to “confess” that I’m training for an ultramarathon in the academic world instantaneously makes me feel that I’m betraying both my hidden body and my prominent mind. As a woman in academia, the concerns of physicality are a betrayal; I am a gender-traitor for an obsession that uses my body even as I have no obsession with my body. Several women shared these frustrations regarding responses to their running endeavors in other “scenes” of their lives. After sharing her ultrarunning goal as a New Year’s resolution, one of my fellow women ultrarunners faced this response from her family: “Well, at least you’ll take that holiday weight off.” Another response: “I was at a Superbowl party, freakin’ licking the buffalo cheese dip out of the platter when my friend said ‘you’re lucky you run so much,’ like the only way I can eat like a normal person is to run and the only reason a normal person runs is to eat.” More importantly, a normal *woman* engaging in any physical activity becomes essentialized to her corporeal image.

On the heels of a friend stating: “I’d seriously hate you if I didn’t know you ran so much,” which followed a roundtable discussion amongst more friends regarding my boundless appetite, I realized that some serious negotiations of identity were happening for me through my body. In a normative existence bound to women’s bodily images, our running forgave or explained our bodies to others. In the academic world, my running became a confessed compliance with those bodily standards of the normative world. And in the ultrarunning world, I simply ran amongst other bodies – similar and different to mine – in order to finish those miles. Distance runners, especially the lunatics sentenced to hours of solitary with ourselves, recognize that our minds are every bit as essential to our running performances as our bodies. For my academic self, my sense of shame over using my body to run had no correlation with my mind – in fact, I felt my mental presence sharpened, attuned by the sensory experiences with the world this training demanded. For the self engaging with the world, I should have punched my friend in the trachea and spat the sentiment so many of my fellow runners angrily said: “That is NOT why I’m doing this.”

In a world where women have to explain and apologize for their bodies, doing the constant work of riding two treadmills of mentality and physicality, in ultrarunning we might find the space for a performance embracing and expecting both. Enacting the epicene allowed me to find a space where my feminine body became liberated from its constraints; through the ultra, I was both fully in my body and performatively exceeding it. In the epicene move, I no longer chose between either shame or pride in my body. I instead move to a third term beyond these liberations and constraints surrounding women’s bodies – proud flesh. A synonym for pride yet an embrace of the body, proud

flesh works for an epicene running past dissolved binaries. I would be lying if I said I didn't fall in love with my body throughout the ultrarunning experience; I felt I was the embodiment of strength and tenacity. Yet more importantly, I learned that I did not need to feel shame over this pride but instead a proud flesh. As Bell suggests, "an aesthetics of pleasure is inseparable from a pedagogy of pleasure and the possibilities of learning to desire and to see differently" (1995, p. 114). My mind and body helped me conquer miles and write this study; my pleasure over this becomes a teaching performance of joyful resistance for women in society, academia, and sneakers.

*The Proud Flesh of Difference: The Resistance of Ultrarunning Physicality*

I challenge the academic and cultural idea that normative running bodies become the primary desire for ultrarunners (Abbas, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Hanold, 2010; Heikkalla, 1993). I also reject the notion that ultrarunning events are primarily strategies for weight control or means to attain an ideal image (Parker, Lambert, & Burlingame, 1994; Weight & Noakes, 1987). The scholarly perpetuation of a link between running bodies and eating disorders and weight control is a contentious point for myself and my fellow ultrarunners. My oldest friend and fellow runner David chortled as we discussed why we continued pounding the pavement years and miles after our competitive cross-country days: "Everyone always asks whether I run to stay in shape. There are a thousand other things I could do to stay in shape instead of freezing my ass off for six miles winter mornings...*in South Dakota.*" Yet this becomes a crucial point in terms of making and remaking the body through the ultrarunning process, especially in terms of gender. Working through the transcendent possibilities of a new vocabulary beyond dissolved

binaries, I reassert the idea of proud flesh to speak of bodies of difference in the ultrarunning world.

For ultrarunners, our extreme culture creates a critical awareness of the making and remaking of bodies; this “resulted in practices that shaped their bodies according to what they can do rather than what their bodies look like” (Hanold, 2010, p. 170). One of my fellow runners echoes this sentiment: “Look at me, I just had my third kid! I’m no skinny-minnie! But I can run this race and will probably run another after that.” Another runner chimed in, professing gratitude for her body as intrinsic to her ultra success: “You better have something to work with, you know? If you’re, like, zero-percent body fat, how’s your body going to carry you through a hundred miles?” The ultrarunning body is constructed with greater possibilities, “more broadly than and frequently in opposition to the normative running body” (Hanold, 2010, p. 168). It is this body of difference that becomes maximized and tested beyond normative expectations through the ultramarathon experience. As one runner said: “When you line up you see fat, thin, old, young, hot, ugly, whatever...even though your body is pretty much the whole...thing that gets you there...it just counts different here.” In these interactions and through my own observations, I agree that there is no ultrarunning prototype, or that whatever it is “counts” differently through an embrace of proud flesh.

Bodies of all shapes, sizes, ages, and conditions gathered around me at the race start and cheered me on through the finish line. Before the race, I talked with a slim-bodied woman in her late sixties who was “only doing the fifty today, I usually do the hundred but my son wussed out at the last minute and I didn’t want to run through the night alone.” One of my most enduring running mates throughout the race was a middle-

aged woman who had support crew pacers (volunteer family/friends that run legs of the race with you to keep your pace up) including her husband, daughter, and son-in-law. Ages and body types ranged drastically in this family; their determination – as competitor or support crew – was uniform. For all of these runners and our crew members, ultrarunning exemplifies the possibilities beyond limitations to provide the satisfaction in and through the body that links to self-empowerment (Hanold, 2010; Weight & Noakes, 1987).

When Luce Irigaray speaks of the wonder at the instance of sexual difference, she calls up the notion of an awakened appetite (1993, p. 75). In dialogue with my fellow ultrarunners, I suggest that we too experience this moment of wondrous recognition and difference, an appetite-awakening precipice as knowing that our bodies are now both the same and remade in some way through our running performances. The wonder lives through the first training run that exceeded any mileage I'd ever run in one day through daily existence with this beautiful beast of a run that crouched in the corner of my life – a growling, hungry reminder – to the constant negotiation of my body as both achingly familiar and remade as this new ultrarunner's body. This experience promises liberation by starting with the body and transcending it; the ultra pounds out proud flesh through a resistant reclamation and awakened wonder of the body.

*The Masochistic Sensorial: Negotiating Pain and Pleasure in Ultrarunning*

Pain is an intrinsic narrative for the ultrarunner (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hanold, 2010). Runners risk dehydration, injury, hypothermia, hyperthermia, nausea, and fatigue. And haunting the edges of this sport is the knowledge of those ultrarunners lost to grueling races, marked in cultural myth surrounding certain race registration fees that

include body bags. Although pain is typically linked with masculinity in mainstream sports i.e. “taking it like a man,” not gender, age, nor any other identity marker signifies pain discourse differently in the extreme ultrarunning world. For many runners, pain is “the deposit, the investment, through which speed is extracted. Pain is a form of bodily or physical capital, a bearer of symbolic value” (Bale, 2004, p. 68). Physical anguish and mental exhaustion become the ultrarunners’ valued production in this extreme world, resisting mainstream scripts and working our proud flesh past normative binaries. Rather than restating and abandoning these binaries as such, I again work toward that transformative vocabulary beyond pain/pleasure. I propose sensorial as that third term, incorporating the both/and experience of heightened pain and pleasure at play in ultrarunning. Taking the base term sensory, meaning of or pertaining to the senses or sensations, I move beyond the biological term to create a third term both sensual and sensory in meaning. To reinvoké the transcendent experience of ultrarunning, I move off the pages of dictionary definitions to craft sensorial as that term that evokes both the sensory experience and the sensual pleasure in the sport, springing from the senses and embodying the heightened jouissance of feeling.

The thematic of masochism peppers much of the scholarship regarding ultradistance running, moving from the sensational merge of pain and pleasure (Guttman, 1996) to the possibility of driving toward death itself (Baudrillard, 1988). Sociological literature (Roderick, 2006), psychological work (Bale, 2004), social construction and phenomenology (Loland, 2006) form an intersection for interrogating the meaning of pain. Bale further suggests that in long-distance running, athletes pursue pain, choosing “to torture themselves” (2004, p. 66). As one of my “lifers” gasped in

response to another runner's absence due to plantar fasciitis: "She must be so pissed! What's she gonna do?!" Writing this now I can see how outsiders might read our passion as fanatical or masochistic. And I can back that up for every time I've "tried out" a freshly injured sprain, strain, or tear because I cannot stand to let the run get away from me. Running liberates us from our practical and theoretical constraints; it allows us to become invisible, unmarked, and absently present through corporeal performances that finally unshackle us from the very bodies that carry us.

As Schechner suggests, certain performances of deviance become marked by "an intensity, a concentration, a seriousness that we do not often see" (1988, p. 195). While the majority of my fellow runners scoff at the notion that we are drawn to this extreme sport because of a certain masochistic streak, they also acknowledge that this is a common response from others. It is a community simultaneously commanding respect and drawing confusion from those outside the culture, as evidenced in one representative text message I received after my ultra: "Are you out of your fucking mind? Congratulations, crazy lady." It is a community that even those inside have a difficult time explaining, as exhibited in my pithy response: "I couldn't move for two days. I must be crazy (confirming the outsider perception)...yeah, I waited about four days and started running again (begrudgingly admitting that that perception may be true)." This was later reinforced by a fellow runner who excitedly whispered in a conspiratorial manner: "I started again too! I was still sore but couldn't stand it (not running) anymore." Another runner responded: "well, my mother-in-law did call me a freak when I said I was doing this...maybe that's what she meant." Freak, masochist, lunatic – these are common words

ultrarunners hear from others. Yet there is no shortage of those willing to watch this performance of insanity.

Following Schechner, performances of ultrarunning or extreme sports unveil our tabooed desires sparkling with danger, violence, and death (1988). In ultrarunning, we do harm to our bodies out on the open stage of the land where our desires for the sensorial cue those associations with tabooed masochistic performances. As McDougall suggests, “running seemed to be the fitness version of drunk driving: you could get away with it for a while, you might even have some fun, but catastrophe was waiting right around the corner” (2011, p. 9). And ultrarunners keep chasing that pleasurable disaster, the elusive crash of fun and risk in the sensorial.

*Etherreality Bites: Embodying the Abject and Embracing Self-Actualization*

Women and men running ultramarathons are doing new things with gender both through their physicality and by abandoning social norms that filter our identities through gender. In many cases, this is simply because as my beloved support crew member uttered: “runners are gross.” Indeed, runners are gross; we operate at the basest level of physicality as ideals of decorum tend to fall into the ditch in lieu of the demands of the body. Despite our normative culture’s continuous demarcation between the mind and the body, ultrarunning manifests the inextricable link between the mental and physical, at the highest and basest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. As a runner, I was surprised a communication scholar made an appearance in my thoughts somewhere around my thirty-third mile but there he was: “Hey! I just waxed philosophical on gender fluidity while riding the fumes of peak sensation as I ducked into the men’s room at the gas station!” As a scholar, Maslow drifted in with the stubborn explanatory power that I

swiftly affixed to my ultrarunning experience. I am not the only academic to touch on the so-called “runner’s high” within the context of distance running (Le Breton, 2000) yet I suggest that ultrarunning pulls us simultaneously to the abject level of physiological needs. Yet in the spirit of transformative language and performances beyond binaries, I offer etherreality as the combination of the ethereal realm of self-actualization and the base reality of the abject. In another move beyond previously accepted dictionary definitions and binaried meanings, I merge the terms of the ethereal and reality to capture that unique experience of twinned abjection and self-actualization. The ethereal is defined as “light, airy, or tenuous,” “heavenly or celestial” (“ethereal”, n.d.); this temporal, supernal experience mirrors the peak moments of exaltation. The abject is much more firmly rooted in reality in the sense that we are all bound to real facts of our bodily needs and functions. In an effort to craft something both partaking in and pushing beyond the ethereal peak and abject reality, I offer etherreality as both transcendent of the binary and the limitations of previously accepted definitions.

*The Abject.* Ultrarunners embody and perform the abject, chasing the heights of transcendent symbolic experience while exposing those cringe-worthy places normative society shoves under rugs of decorum and fear (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2003). As ultrarunners can attest, nothing poses the twinned possibilities of sheer animality and peak invincibility more than conquering that first ultra. Returning to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) concept of the abject, the process of abjection occurs in the expulsion or release of something we would instinctively wish to keep. Housing abjection at Maslow’s base level of needs, we recognize these expulsions as both a part taken from our bodies yet a part forever leaving traces of itself behind. The normative response and

repulsion from corporeal issues of death, illness, excrement, and other corporeal matters resituates us within the symbolic order; however, an experience like the ultra reawakens us to the possibilities of embodying and embracing the physiological abject as a continuous process of becoming whole selves. Gallons of sweat leave my body and shreds of flesh rip from my feet after the run; somehow what I'm leaving behind in the run becomes part of what makes me more whole than ever before.

Inexplicably, I am reminded of a childhood crush on a professional wrestler (*I know*). I recall an interview in which he responded to the question of what he found beautiful: "a woman sweating after a good workout." As I read and re-read that quotation, the weight of my time in academia tries to build bridges of hegemonic objectification out of those words. Before the ultra I could probably make those leaps: "of course, because sweating happens during good, vigorous sex," or "yeah, because men want women in the gym to look good for them." Now, I see the simplicity in why that statement reverberated throughout these years. Any 'body' performing to the utmost capacity and beyond is offering a performance of desire. Our culture constructs strategies of looking in desire at ideal bodies minus the messy sweat; ultrarunning as performance allows us to recapture that mess, that sweat, that grit of making and remaking our bodies as ideal for our performance. These are bodies performing the repressed abject, the animal, the primal – out on performative display without shame or fear of the gaze. The abject and peak experiences, the physicality and mentality performed here creates these possibilities beyond these marked normative borders, recalling Haraway's cyborg that permits "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (1991, p. 154). Similarly, ultrarunners populate an extreme

culture both exceeding the limitations of the mind and body, animal and machine yet also breaking those limitations down altogether in performances that erase categorical markers of the body.

Again, I must return to the delightful phrasing of my support crew member who stated “runners are gross.” Sparing unpleasing details for sensitive ears, I will simply state that not only does the ultrarunner deal with the daily physiological demands we all face but also with the extreme situations of the most abject in nature. And we do so with only thoughts of crossing that finish line. This probably resembles lunacy to our mainstream running counterparts in perfectly matched running tops and bottoms; for us, all the bodily fluids and materials typically shunned in everyday life are suddenly, unfalteringly brought into the light. And we simply can’t take the time to care. In addition to this restroom-phobic’s lesson of how I stopped worrying and learned to love every available port-a-potty is the memory of changing my entire running outfit (to avoid chafing) in a bank parking lot shielded only by a family of fellow runners. For my friends and family members who placed bets on when I would vomit, their much-anticipated answer came on the final bridge on Overseas Highway into Key West. For my fellow runners who stopped to check if I was alright, I graciously sputtered: “I’m okay, I throw up every race I run” - to which they casually shrugged, as we’ve all been there. As I clutched my stomach and began moving again, my fear of passing the two innocent women who bore witness was alleviated as they began wildly cheering me on. And the unceremonious ten-mile ritual of tossing my stinking, drenched socks toward my poor, foot-phobic crew member? Unfathomable behavior – except in the extreme where we embrace and embody all that is abject in a move toward etherreality.

*Peak Experience.* In conquering and embracing the depths of the physiological abject, ultrarunners are brought to sheer animal physicality and instinct. Yet at the other end of Maslow's spectrum rises the far more common shared experience of runners; known as "runner's high," the peak experience of ultrarunning occurs at the height of one's powers and abilities (Maslow, 1943; 1970). This is the feeling of being fully unified, spontaneous, expressive, natural, free-flowing; and one who is "here-now, most free of the past of the future in various senses, most 'all there' in the experience" (Maslow, 1970, pp. 65-74). To return to the description of the "Dances with Dirt" ultra-series, it is truly living "life in full color." The immediate and visible things experienced, such as the shared sense of community in fellow runners and our few brave fans, the engagement with stunning elements of nature over an elapsed space of time, and the rewarding promise of a post-race beer and copious slices of pizza...all of these sensory appeals whispered to me above the immediate physical agonies and ailments. Other, more abstract ideas and questions floated through my free-flowing consciousness; for runners, "many thoughts were either existential (philosophical thoughts questioning the purpose of their running experience and lives) or spiritual (gathering strength and purpose from God)" (Acevedo et al., 1992, p. 250). This recalls the egoless quality Maslow referred to insofar as we are so completely present in the moment that we can reflect on the bigger things our daily lives do not grant us time to consider.

At the time I was training, especially on my lengthier mileage days, I felt an unexpected sense of atonement. This speaks to the common theme for ultrarunners as "running seems to have a cleansing effect, to be self-fulfilling" (Acevedo et al., 1992, p. 251). This cleansing catharsis works not simply on the physical level but through the

runners' unique psychological make-up. On race day or on my longer training runs, I can say that the thoughts springing to life were splayed apart, picked through by my alternately scathing and forgiving self-analysis. In a rare moment outside the internal and external pressures of a rushed normative existence, the ultra provides the space and time for a runner to really work through some issues. In erasing the binaries of abjection and exaltation, ultrarunning uses the body and mind in performative conversation thriving in the sphere of etherreality.

*Ultra Jouissance: A Vocabulary of Pleasure*

Babcock-Abrahams (1975) talks about the potential of the open road, where tricksters create new ways of being. Unencumbered by mainstream sporting borders, equipment, and conventions, running tethers us to the earth as we reach into nature (Guignon, 2004; Hull & Michael, 1994; Hull, Stewart & Yi, 1992; McNamee, 2007). It is a transcendent space where the epicene stands as a figure unbounding us from the masculine/feminine binary, proud flesh reclaims our empowered bodies, the sensorial unravels the dichotomy of pain/pleasure, and etherreality offers a possibility beyond exaltation/abjection. Recalling my first ultra, I realize that the sensorial nature of this experience crafts a performative dialogue across binaries that implode such illusory divisions. I share these sensorial details in working toward the ultimate third term of jouissance.

The day *before* I ran the fifty-mile race in the Keys100 that spanned from Marathon Key through Key West in Florida, gentle rains and hovering clouds were predicted for race day. The day *that* I ran the ultra, the sun blazed throughout the southern tip of Florida and the temperature ranged from 90-95 degrees throughout the first eight

hours. The sun beat us senseless, the lengthy bridges our only respite as we could glean a few cool breezes running across those expanses. The sheer irrationality of nature in its constant changes and unfamiliar surprises confronts the ultrarunner as challenging yet sublime in its difference from daily lived experience. As McNamee suggests, “unpredictability contributes to the development of our epistemology because it offers new perspectives, challenges old ways of thinking, and demands quick reevaluation of those things we need to survive and flourish” (2007, p. 46). In reaching beyond normative limits to embrace the chaos of nature, we join a community ready to throw out gameplans and live in the moment of the run. Gliding across the seven-mile bridge that springs from Marathon Key to cap off the first ten miles, I felt the bliss of sea wind and saw the beauty of the gulf expanse. I ran way too fast in that first fifth of the race, carried on a sense of oneness with the swiftly moving waters and wind. After touching down in Bahia Honda Key, I was engulfed by swamp-smelling marsh, cut off from the relief of breeze to run an uphill grade in blistering heat and putrid odor that erased all the joys of the previous seven miles on that beautiful bridge expanse. I sailed through the peak experience only to crash into the depths of putrid earthly abjection. Ultrarunners face nature in all of its untamed beauty and danger, revealing things about our world and our selves typically concealed in the steel and concrete air conditioning of normative existence.

Not simply a matter of kinesthetic movement, ultrarunning incorporates sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell in ways permeating the divide between performer (runner) and audience (support). While there were miles passed with my eyes firmly on the ground, there were sudden, surprising moments in which I raised my gaze to the rawness

of the landscape surrounding me. As one of my fellow runners said, “I think we see it (the world) differently because we sort of conquer it. When I drive past the park day after day I might stop and think how nice the lake looks but when I run in that same park even on the same day it’s kind of mine in a new way...like I discovered it.” And perhaps this is part of that narcissistic streak in the ultrarunner psyche; talk of conquering and discovering the land around us reverberates.

Additionally, my many years of running have typically been connected to sound – not so much from the world around me but through the tiny earbuds spinning sounds from my iPod (or earlier, my SONY cassette walkman). That soundtrack marks each song as part of my performance; even if it was a song I’d heard and will continue to hear in years surrounding the race, it becomes intrinsically tied to that moment on the stage of running as part of my sensory experience. Furthermore, I’ve tasted Gatorade before and will taste it again. Yet throughout the course of the experience, it acted as the nectar of the goddess and much later, a sticky sweet reminder of what would be rejected by my body in the final miles. The smells of the Florida marsh on that ninety-plus-degrees day became a new private torture; the salted breeze of the ocean both rejuvenated me throughout the heat and later confused me in its infinite reach around the last few miles. These memories, shared and private, contribute to that aesthetics of a performance rooted in sensory experience. There is a feeling of possessiveness to these raw sensuous moments in the ultrarunning performance demanding a renegotiation between the physical contact zones between the runners and those in the world around us. While scarfing down a peanut buttered bagel in between gulps of water after the race, I watched as the volunteer crew indulged in hot, cheesy slices of pizza. I suffered a brief moment of

spite: “Who are they to take our food? We earned it and they’ve been sitting there all day.” In this way, ultrarunners somehow selfishly queer the traditional space of performance as shared between performer and audience. Whereas the “sensory apparatus of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell are the operative mechanisms for performer and audience alike” in the zones where “arousal and desire are appetencies created and shared, tensive and negotiated, veiled and counterveiled,” (Bell, 1995, p. 109), ultrarunning distances (ha) itself from its audience even with the knowledge that we desperately need their support through this experience.

For all that has been explored regarding extreme sports and physical exertion, the pleasure at the core of these corporeal performances often goes unnoticed. Rather than latch onto the multitude of death drive psychoanalytic theories and risk-taking psychological principles, I argue for pleasure. The tense, heightened moments of mental preparation in the days prior to the race...the flickering jovial dialogue among runners at the starting line which masks merged anxiety and anticipation...and that unleashed flow of energy as we break through the gates onto the running stage...the body is aroused in ways mirroring the intensity of sexual pleasure through anticipation, tension, and of course, release. As Haraway posits, the “orgasm becomes the sign of mind, the point of consciousness, of self-presence, that holds it all together well enough to enable the subject to make moves in the game, instead of being the (marked) board on which the game is played” (1989, p. 354-356). The economy of sexuality, power, and performance in ultrarunning does not elude the performer or her/his body; in owning and dictating our run we hold the agency and materiality of our sporting acts. As Vance states, “feminists are easily intimidated by the charge that their own pleasure is selfish” (1992, p. 7). This

notion that the discussion of sexual or bodily pleasure is unimportant in the face of danger, violence, or the “more pressing” material issues of oppressed people becomes quite damaging. This reasserts the stale idea that all academic work must explore the woes of the world; is that the only way we learn of performance?

I argue that we must also learn through the performances of bliss, transcendence, and pleasure. And in dialogue with my fellow ultrarunners, I understand how important the pleasures of the body – sexualized, gendered, injured, aged, or otherwise – truly become to their lived experiences. As one formerly reticent fellow runner blurted, in surprise to herself and all of us: “It’s like fucking, isn’t it?!” After a blushing self-admonishment, she continued: “I’m just saying, it’s the build-up of the race...” as another runner interjects: “no way, not just the race – there’s a build-up in the training, in choosing your first race, all the way to the first day you really say you’re going to do it.” These remarks plucked threads from my memory of the experience – I might run an average of 350 days every year but the moment I uttered the words: “I’m training for an ultramarathon,” a new performance began and my identity shifted from lifelong runner to ultra runner.

Jouissance marks the ultrarunning experience as real and unrepresentable insofar as there is a complete participation in the experience yet something eludes or glimmers with the promise of even more (Wing, 1986). My fellow runners agreed with this idea, as many shared my sense that with each race accomplished, there lurked another waiting. As one runner said, “I started with 10Ks about fifteen years ago. Call it restlessness or whatever, but then I needed to try for a marathon. Huge goal, huge accomplishment, but I wasn’t satisfied...so here I am, trying for an ultra.” The run recaptures jouissance as we

give ourselves so completely to the experience of the race, yet something of desire escapes that achievement; we must chase after it or it haunts us with its taunting call. I know I felt an overwhelming and escalating sense of empowerment throughout the course of my training and running the ultra. I gained a sense of self-in-community by discovering these shared feelings of liberation, accomplishment, and pride with other ultra runners. Yet as a woman and academic negotiating identity and body in both the normative and scholarly world, I realize that my body becomes both a calling card and liability. Thus, I traipse carefully across the tightrope of caring too much about my physicality despite the knowledge that it is my body that can carry me across these miles I so desperately seek to conquer. In making my body a vessel for this journey, does my body become a site of exploitation or shame in reinforcing a script of corporeal ideals? Am I complicit in re-casting the body as important in a woman's construction of identity? Or am I resisting the notion of any ideal body through a journey that empowers me with strength and beauty despite and because of my gender? These questions may or may not be answered through my running/writing endeavors, yet the fact that my performativity and ultra performance engenders such issues "of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects" (Diamond, 1996, p. 5) creates a discourse necessary for any identity proudly, shamefully embodied.

This leads me to the potential of very real matters that emerge from corporeal performativity that eludes the visible sphere and its disciplining markers. Noting that shame for performing outside normative boundaries creates its own communicative expectations and behaviors (Sedgwick, 2003), I offer ultrarunning as a space where shame of and over our bodies evaporates in the face of that grueling fight to the end. For

myself and the majority of my fellow runners, the greatest potential for shame is in a DNF, not in vomiting over an interstate overpass before passing traffic into Key West on a Saturday night. Ultrarunning creates a performance of necessity insofar as the trappings of shame typically created around the visibility of the body suddenly fall away. Even as I escape the shaming markers through the act of running, as I write and (re)create my experience I realize a new shame surrounding my selfish liberation gained only out of my position of privilege – a privilege of a white, healthy, capable body that can afford the time and cost of the training, the event, and the race itself. Should I be apologizing for my privileged position or should I offer my experience as a new case for resisting shame through a reclamation of the body? I argue that even as I perform as ultrarunner within a history and matrix of power constraints, my performance can serve as a critique on that history and power.

*You're Almost There!: Final Thoughts and Miles*

Ultrarunning is the unsettling, scathing comment on a culture willing to stay safely inside the lines. As an ultrarunner proudly embracing a vocabulary of *jouissance* to help move beyond boundaries and binaries, I hope to create a discourse and pedagogy about performance “capable of thinking risky thoughts, that engages a project of hope, and points to the horizon of the ‘not yet’” (Giroux, 1991, p.52). Teaching my students that they do not have to check their bodies at the door on their way to higher learning is one byproduct of my experience. I want to teach them that their bodies and minds together can be recuperated in the name of sheer pleasure of being through performance, criticism, and pedagogy.

In my experience, crossing that finish line certainly trumped all other concerns that seem to make more “common” sense – injury, pain, death. Yet this concern emerges as a result of that decision to push the self beyond the limits of what is known and normative for the human body. The greatest challenge came not after the seven-mile bridge in which I seemingly flew across the gulf nor after the three dazed miles overheating after I missed my support car. The most challenging moment came after the halfway point, at which time I realized I had already finished a sensible marathon length and that was a perfectly acceptable ‘limit.’ Yet in the ultrarunning world limitlessness becomes key to our pleasure-centered aesthetic of performance. It is not stubborn will that conquers nature, injury, or exhaustion; it is the patience to wait out the low points for the next high. It is an active resistance against the force of the clock in our normative lives; unrushed by the demands of time, we are suddenly listening to our bodies and minds. More importantly, it is the sense that we are a part and beyond the limits of binaries toward new vocabularies and performances of transcendence.

Johnson echoes the potential of learning in the ultrarunning experience, describing how his first ultra taught him the necessary cost of breaking his body down to break through. He states: “running these races didn’t just mean running longer, it meant running deeper into the places in yourself that had to be found and conquered” (2001, p. 6). As Reed says: “Most people are frightened about what’s going to happen to them when they break through a threshold...they think they’re going to die, and they might die – to their old ways of looking at things. Really, they’re going to live more fully” (Yehling, 2004, p. 1). When we move beyond normative limits we embrace the

possibilities of transcendence; we vanish from the fixed gaze of the visible sphere to become unmarked escape artists performatively queering identity in sport.

Through this chapter, I have shown that ultrarunning produces small acts of resistance which taken together illustrate great strides in: our epicene performativity dissolving the masculine/feminine binary, resistant corporeality of proud flesh erasing the constraints of shame and pride surrounding our bodies of difference, our embrace of the sensorial dismantling the demarcation of pain and pleasure, and our simultaneous moves toward etherreality eradicating the division of the abject and peak. This is all done through an embodied and performative vocabulary of *jouissance* creating transcendent new possibilities for gender and bodies in sport.

“The ultra-marathon turns the mirror inside out and backward. It lives at the margins, coming to life while most of us are blinking or sleeping or looking away. It’s sports under a rock. And the rock that must be turned over to find it is inside each of us” (Johnson, 2001, p. 6).

As one who has looked into that mirror, ran at those margins, and unearthed that rock, I close by sharing those last painful, precious miles. After crossing the last splash of gulf water, now so dark that its horizon was indecipherable from the night sky, I began the last grueling trek through Key West. Past the bustle of the outskirts of town, swerving along the eerie quiet of Smathers Beach, a sense of absolute stillness passed over me. It was so dark and so quiet I began to fear I’d missed the finish line. Perhaps I’d pushed past so many limits that I could no longer find my way back to the path; perhaps I’d collapsed long ago and this was a surreal dream where I would never stop running. Finally, my dutiful support crew member appeared as an absolute vision; in breathless

and obscene language I inquired about the finish line. He chuckled, having anticipated my frustration and responded that I had less than a mile to go. And I went. Suddenly, runners who'd already finished began appearing, having jogged back along the beach to cheer the rest of us through to the end. Floodlights from the makeshift finish tent beamed and beckoned, sirens from two loaded ambulances began wailing, and I glided through that finish line with the grace of a wounded animal. Bruised, aching, delirious...whole, alive, and certain. After spending an hour or two cheering on more runners, downing water and bagels and eventually (yes!) beer and pizza, I would crawl into the hotel bed – after being carried up a flight of stairs by my dutiful support crew – for the best sleep of my life. In the days that followed, along with the anticipated physical exhaustion and pain, I realized what the experience had opened up within me. When I looked in the mirror, I saw the same me with a new gleam of ferocity, pride, accomplishment. I felt a primal wildness, a sense that nature and the elements had shredded my body to reveal a raw and fierce self hidden before the run. I began thinking – and still think – that I am somehow made new, broken down yet risen up in that veil of invincibility and hubris: I quickly became wistful for the race which days before seemed never ending. I began searching again – inevitably and inexplicably – for the next 50...maybe 100? This insatiable, incorrigible, unimaginable drive toward the edge of this limitless culture has marked me, scarred me, elevated me, and left me forever wanting another mile.

## Chapter Five – Beyond the Finish Line: Lessons in Extreme Sporting Performativity

When trying to figure out a hook to introduce this closing chapter, I stumbled upon an e-mail from Change.org with the subject line: “A bizarre new rule at the Olympics for female athletes.” Feeling adventurous (and procrastinating on the task at hand), I opened the text to read about a possible new rule for the much-awaited debut of female boxing in the 2012 London Olympic Summer Games: “female boxers might be required to wear miniskirts in the ring.” The Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA) proposed the new dress code as it would create an “elegant” look for the women athletes that might better distinguish them from their male counterparts. After years of fighting (literally) to gain access to international recognition long afforded their male counterparts, these boxing women expressed anger and resistance over this consideration, petitioning against the proposed code and speaking out (Hale, 2012). As three-time world champion Katie Taylor said, “I don’t even wear miniskirts on a night out, so I definitely won’t be wearing miniskirts in the ring.”

The need to distinguish between men and women athletes perpetuates a tradition of binaried thinking, practices, and language that has survived scholarly and activist strategies to tear it down. It is no longer sufficient to simply call out the hegemonic, heteronormative structures that oppress and subordinate in our society. I suggest that in looking to marginalized cultures – such as extreme sports – we find strategies that operate in parodies against mainstream normatives, retrofit our traditional binaries, and dissolve binaried language altogether through a vocabulary of jouissance. In other words, we find

ways to fight against language and performance that demands a choice between boxing trunks and miniskirts.

*Purpose of this Study*

In this study, I critiqued the resistant and complicit performative strategies in which extreme sporting athletes “do” gender. Through textual analysis of mediated and live events, discussions with participants both in person and online, and the ethnographic work of observer/participant, I have demonstrated how the extreme sporting community becomes a unique product and production of gender through the resistant third-wave feminism in roller derby, the complicit and rebellious adolescent masculinity of pranktainment, and the erasure of binaried language and performance in ultrarunning. In the three analyzed sports of roller derby, pranktainment, and ultrarunning, athletes leap from the confines of everyday life to enact and embody identity differences across the liminal gates of their extreme worlds. Against a traditional sporting world that perpetuates hegemonic scripts of man-as-dominant and woman-as-passive, extreme sports create significant performances and commentaries surrounding gender. While at times these (re)productions do reinscribe oppressive narratives, extreme sports more often manage to create something both (a)part of and apart from these mainstream (re)creations of hegemonic ideals.

In the second chapter, I appraised the performative mechanisms of parody, commoditization, violence, marginal identity and play, and queering taken up with zeal by the women of roller derby who give a new spin on third-wave sporting femininity. In my exploration of gender in roller derby, I located performances of key third-wave feminist principles including: reclaimed sexual identity and empowerment through sex;

resistant performances commanding the both/and of reward and punishment; the negotiation of mainstream commoditization through marginalized cultural performance; and the embrace of individual empowerment in larger communitas. Modern roller derby offered an illustrative microcosm of third-wave feminism: individual skaters enter the roller derby culture seeking a space for personal expression, normative liberation, and heightened experience. The gritty violence of the sport coupled with its campy punk aesthetic recalls the Riot Grrrl movement that reinvigorated a generation of younger feminists. Thus, roller derby reignites a certain bad girl iconography through sexual and gendered performances that function as strategies of resistance against traditional women's sports. Additionally, even as this marginalized sporting culture celebrates difference rather than conformity, it illustrates the possibility of both/and rather than either/or as these defiantly individualistic women unite in teams, which further unite in leagues, and so on. Roller derby reignites third-wave feminism through performances: queering gender norms to reveal and reclaim the labor, violence, and physicality for women in sports; recuperating and reproducing tabooed sexualities on a sporting stage to expose mechanisms of control; and reasserting the power of communitas to bring marginalized women together in acts of transformation. Derby women, our sporting third-wave feminists, explore new ways of being inside and outside of the normative world; they celebrate the choice to enact any role and take up any opportunity across the liminal threshold of identity.

Chapter Three proved how extreme sporting men demonstrate not an either/or of resistance/compliance to that boy code but rather a both/and of retrograde adolescent masculinity. These pranking Peter Pans uphold the boy code rules of manhood

through this retrograde adolescent masculinity: they invite women into the fold, yet use them as barometers of which men fail at the boy code of “no sissy stuff”; they strut their “big wheel” status through lifestyles and stunts yet maintain a disenfranchised rebellion against corporate money; they craft chaos on an episodic basis yet one king stands as the perseverant “sturdy oak” to save the day; and, they push the limits of risk in daredevil displays of “give ‘em hell.” Yet despite these reassertions of those boycode rules, extreme sporting pranktainers create new possibilities through three themes: kinship, corporeality, and sexuality. Extreme sporting men do kinship outside forms dictated as normal for grown men; this kinship is built on inextricable bonds, group rituals and pranks of play, and suspended immaturity against “growing up.” The corporeality of these Peter Pans remains frozen in an adolescent state (and typically reflects an adolescent lifestyle), intended for functionality in their sports rather than mainstream masculine ideals. Finally, extreme sporting pranktainment breaks through the punitive silences surrounding sexualities outside mainstream sporting masculinities. Although this is most likely unintentional, their rebellious Peter Pan status, linked through close kinship, corporeality, and sexuality, exposes undercurrents of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and adolescent eroticism. These sexualities not only reject the mainstream prescription of hyper-heterosexual masculinity; these sexualities become silenced, shamed, and even disciplined for that deviance. Thus, these pranktaining performances of kinship, corporeality, and sexuality open the seams of mainstream sporting hyper-heterosexuality and allow a conversation of new possibilities.

Chapter Four marked a decidedly different section of the study as it moved from the gender work done in roller derby and pranktainment both through topic and method.

Thus, my work as an ultrarunner and ethnographer created a space to understand how ultrarunning produces new discourses surrounding the performativity of gender, corporeality, and pain. Ultrarunning provided a space to move beyond traditional binaries of masculine/feminine, mind/body, pleasure/pain, and exaltation/abjection en route to creating a transcendent new vocabulary of jouissance. In running and writing my ultrarunning experience, I offered ultrarunning as a performance of transformation through the elision of gender, the product and production of corporeal difference and resistance, masochistic performance and the negotiation of pleasure and pain, the merge of abject resistance and peak experience, and the engagement with pleasure-centered jouissance to erase scripts of normative historical, political, and cultural weight. Ultrarunning offers small acts of resistance which illustrate great strides in: epicene performativity imploding the masculine/feminine binary, resistant proud flesh erasing the constraints of shame and pride surrounding our bodies, embrace of the sensorial dismantling the demarcation of pain and pleasure, and strides toward etherreality eradicating the division of the abject and peak. This is achieved through an embodied and performative vocabulary of jouissance creating transcendent new possibilities for gender and bodies in sport.

To date, research surrounding the burgeoning world of extreme sports has focused on sports science, psychology, media, audience, and gender. However, none have accomplished this through a study of gendered performativity unleashing the transformative liminality among normative existence, mainstream sports, and the culture of the extreme. As a cornerstone of my study across roller derby, pranktainment, and ultrarunning, performativity offers a gauge for how we become subjects through sporting

acts of embodiment. I suggest that extreme athletes materialize subjectivity through both physical embodiment and discursive practices. Through reinscription and rejection of normative conventions, derby skaters, pranktainers, and ultrarunners simultaneously craft theories of gendered identity, create critical commentaries on gendered performances, and generate political agency.

I began my study of extreme sports hoping to prove the ways that this marginalized culture rejects stifling mainstream scripts regarding gender, sexuality, death, and liminality. Yet throughout my study of roller derby, pranktainment, and ultrarunning, I realized my own preconceived scripts functioned as a bulwark against any new means of knowledge production or living insight. I was not saying anything new; I was repeating the lessons I had learned, the myths I had assumed. In recognizing that I could not script a finale to something I had yet to truly experience, I finally began learning lessons from extreme sports.

In this final chapter, I share these lessons that spring from: issues of phallogentrism, a push beyond previous scholarship and methodology, performative embodiment, the myth of life and death, and the extreme rewrite of tabooed gender and sexuality. As “jouissance is prohibited to whomever speaks” (Lacan, p. 306), I chose to learn by watching and living pleasure rather than trying to speak it into my presupposed knowledge. And in the spirit of jouissance, I conclude this chapter with a look at the tragic-comic spirit of the extreme.

#### *Lessons Learned from Extreme Sports: Phallogentrism*

In a statement issued by the Women’s Sports Foundation, the benefits of sports for girls and women is not simply a matter of physical health but one of psychological,

physiological, and sociological significance. The report suggests that as sport has served as a vital socio-cultural learning experience for boys and men over the years, these same benefits “should be afforded our daughters” (Lopiano, 2011, p. 1). The foundation provides a wealth of information surrounding the increased confidence, positive body image, psychological well-being, and future success in the workplace. The foundation strives to establish this link between sport and success by stating that “it is no accident that 80% of the female executives at Fortune 500 companies identified themselves as former ‘tomboys’ – having played sports” (Lopiano, p. 2). While I strive not to mistake correlation for causality, this statement seems to reassert the notion that girls and women are successful if they have emulated normative modes of masculinity in sport and life. *As girls and women gain greater access to the sporting culture, there is a tendency to universalize the gendered experience through a masculine lens; I suggest we look to the marginal extremes that upset this phallogentric model in acts of parody, retrofitting, and transcendence.*

Additionally, the foundation posited the following “masculine” skills in the workplace based on sporting experience: teams chosen based on individual competency, practice at the illusion of confidence, acceptance of errors yet rejection of those errors upon repeat, team loyalty and hierarchal establishment. Certainly, the foundation does good work in stressing the importance of sport as a socio-cultural building block for all genders. Team sports—here written as men’s team sports, is decidedly phallogentric, using the male model as the only one to be emulated by girls and women. This emulation, and the unproblematic label “tomboy,” reifies the binary of male as dominant, strong,

powerful and woman as submissive, weak, and perpetually lacking. The tomboy is a copy, an inferior, junior version, of the “real thing” – the male athlete.

Phallogentrism conflates two independent sexes into a universal or phallogentric model which remains congruent only with the masculine. The two sexes become represented as one ‘human’ model that resituates the feminine in masculine terms. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that “phallogentrism is the abstracting, universalizing and generalizing of masculine attributes so that women’s or femininity’s concrete specificity and potential for autonomous definition are covered over” (1988, p. 94). This phallogentrism perpetually seeps into the grand narratives of sporting texts and scholarship; however, I find ways that extreme sports disturb this phallogentrism. In roller derby, the feminine becomes accentuated and exaggerated; masculinity in pranktainment reverts to an adolescence both reinforcing and upending boy codes; and while ultrarunning seems to create the same abstraction of gender, it does so with corporeal performances that transcend binaries toward a new vocabulary of jouissance.

I began this study with the intention to locate extreme sporting culture as a negotiation between the mainstream and the margins; however, I conclude by suggesting it is not enough to simply recognize and reinforce these types of binaries. The ways that this study truly adds to our knowledge about communication and gender, identity, and performance emerge in imploding discursive and performative binaries to push toward new vocabularies. Extreme sports provide a space to make this move, be it through a recuperation that takes the “Putu” back through performances of sexuality and violence, the retrograde rebellion that serves a dangerous plate of subversive sexuality in the guise

of humor and daring, or the race past dichotomous binds that offer transcendent limitlessness.

*Beyond the Limits of Previous Scholarship and Method*

Scholarship surrounding sport, culture, performance, and gender creates an intricate tapestry from which my study emerges. In this dissertation, I have both improved upon and extended the previous literature surrounding extreme sports. This work advances the gender, performance, and sports studies while contributing to a greater discourse in the field of communication. This is achieved through a performative approach that recognizes the uses of the body as political, material, and in acts of agency. Bringing extreme sports into conversation with performance theory, I filled a gap in performance theory dealing specifically with gendered sporting bodies and performances at the margins. While performance theory often looks to marginalized cultures to assess issues of ritual and liminality, extreme sports provide a burgeoning field to interrogate gendered performances at the margins of mainstream society. Engaging performance theory with extreme sports and communication illustrated how sport reflects the economic, political, and cultural forces reproducing social realities, dramas, and performances. Extreme sports further possibilities of transcendence and ambiguity that implode our normative scripts of gender, sexuality, and the body. *My work addressed these gaps, creating new knowledge through analysis and a methodological approach that transcended the border of participant/observer, representation/performance, self/other.*

The methodological structure of my study deviated from a normative format, merging critical analysis with a reflexive ethnography. Moving between the borders of

participant/observer becomes one of the most significant ways we can use conversation, experience, and performance to better understand lived experiences. Working through a pleasure-centered study demanded an account of my own pleasurable work in this extreme sporting world, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share this experience in addition to the countless conversations shared with others. My methodological approach does not rest on the representational surfaces of textual analysis but instead moves further into the extreme to communicate directly with extreme athletes and experience live events. Following the leaps and leads of my extreme sporting athlete/performers, I pushed past the boundaries of traditional methodology to play with the limits of this study.

My attempts to consistently prove the resistant and empowering possibilities in these marginalized texts were quickly refuted when I looked deeper into the multiple ways each sport reified oppressive typologies or cultures. Through the writing and learning, I realized that there is no either/or but a both/and at work in both the writing process and extreme sports. My sites of study illustrate the ways in which dominant structures and binaries are upheld yet also prove the possibilities of moving beyond these structures and binaries by creating new vocabularies.

#### *Lessons Learned about Embodiment*

My study reads the performativity in extreme embodiment by gauging how performance perspectives engage with the ambiguity of gender, how commoditization reasserts the mainstream culture necessary for the rebellion of marginal cultures, and how the extreme experience beckons us toward these edges in and of an allure of difference. Rather than focus on media or audience-oriented effects from the rise of extreme sports, I

have proven the performer as powerful. This is not simply a theoretical claim but is written through and on the bodies, language, and performances of my extreme sporting performers. These athletes, through text and conversation, wrote and spoke openly and evocatively regarding their own lived experiences weaving between everyday existence and upon the growing stage of extreme sports. Throughout the course of my training, racing, and participating in the extreme ultrarunning culture, I realized that we are a unique group bonded by our cognitive orientations, extreme physicality, and magical togetherness often misunderstood by those outside our margins. Our desire emerges as a personal quest that goes largely unnoticed by the mainstream world. We gravitate toward these margins where “the sport-specific profile, the lack of differences between finishers and nonfinishers, and the lack of gender differences” (Acevedo et al., 1992, p. 250) generates performativity marked by the acceptance of difference and rejection of limits. *Taking up the hyper-visibility of mainstream masculinity through pranktainment, the invisibility of mainstream femininity through roller derby, and the escape of all corporeal ideals through ultrarunning, extreme sports create transcendent performances of embodied jouissance through the destabilization of traditional limits and binaried language.*

Sporting bodies are often constrained through mainstream mandates accentuating the binaried values of either masculinity or femininity. Extreme sports create moments for all athletes to reclaim their bodies on stages that parody, resist, and elide the trappings of gender demands on and for the body. There is no effort to hide the labor and risk that goes into extreme sports as these bodies are built for function rather than display, calling into question the dominant construction of mainstream sporting bodies of masculinity or

femininity. In roller derby, the accentuation of femininity in dress functions as a parody of sexuality yet the skaters' bodies are built to sustain the brutality and speed of the sport. In pranktainment, the adolescent Peter Pan forms spring out of needs for flight and speed rather than dominance as in mainstream masculine corporeality. In ultrarunning, bodies of all shapes and sizes emerge in an elision of normative gendered ideals. Extreme sports become untethered to performances replicating gendered bodies and instead perform new possibilities in a reckless abandon of these previously held corporeal typologies.

Mainstream sporting performances often create a sense of artful ease; even in mainstream masculine displays of brutal violence, these are images re-crafted with a certain easy grace. These images resound through the football players taking ballet to build grace into the game off-season or the gymnast struggling on a broken ankle to rise in a triumphantly beautiful final stance. Art, ease, and grace course throughout the veins of our magnificent sporting bodies reminding the rest of us that these are sporting gods demanding our worship and respect. Extreme sporting performers create opportunities to embrace all that is ugly and laborious in their dangerous acts at the edge. Refusal to hide labor, violence, strain, injury, competitiveness, and pain – the opportunity to truly let them see you sweat, fear, and bleed – offers a new way of liberating ourselves from the normative construction of gendered ideals.

Mainstream sports often replicate masculine and feminine body typologies, then extend these bodies to their exaggerated gender ideals. Masculine sporting bodies represent the normative ideals of men and extend this to become bigger, stronger, and more dominant. Feminine sporting bodies represent ideals of feminine passivity, prepubescent thinness, or a replication of lighter masculinity to become sport-lite,

smaller, and less visible. Yet extreme sports draw new lines of corporeal pros and cons springing from normative binaries of fast/slow, big/small, fat/thin, right/wrong. It is about the extreme sporting performance; this functionality in itself creates another performance of corporeal resistance and multiplicity beyond binaried thought. This is possible through performative jouissance which necessitates full corporeal presence and performance yet also creates a pleasure that exceeds the limits of corporeality to reclaim the agency and materiality of these bodily acts. Extreme sports liberate by beginning with the body and then transcending its limits through performance. The making and remaking processes moving beyond limits in extreme sport creates both a corporeal reclamation and reinvigorated wonder of the body.

For the defiant reclamation of femininity and violence in roller derby, the unspoken adherence and violation of the boy code through the homoerotic adolescent masculinity in pranktainment, and the always disappearing bodies of the ultrarunning world, this evokes a reach beyond that which we can grasp and fix with a normalizing gaze. More significantly, the erasure of categorical and binaried markers drawn from the visible world of normativity emerges in the unmarked identities of extreme sports. Performance becomes the art form which most fully reveals the possibilities of transformation off the stage of mainstream culture; as such, I argue that “extreme” performativity creates fleeting transcendence through its fluid movement, its already goneness, and through its escape of political, cultural, and historical markers that rely on visibility and fall apart in this limitless sphere. In the extreme sporting experience, the athlete/performer flirts with traditional gender normatives yet simultaneously rebels against these same ideals. There is no either/or but a both/and insofar as derby skates

toward exaggerated parodies of femininity while crushing those same gender expectations. There is no either/or but a both/and insofar as pranktainment upholds the rules of a playground “boy code” while laughing in the face of those same adult hyper-hetero masculine standards. There is no either/or but a both/and insofar as ultrarunning pushes past these stale binaries of language and performance to create transcendent new vocabularies.

As Langellier speaks to the limits of performance that match rather than exceed (1983), *jouissance* reinvokes the discomfort and disgust surrounding those bodily abjections that are part and parcel of what makes our bodies desirous of sport and desirable for our audiences. The sheer physicality of our bodies, be it through ecstasy or agony, reminds us of the inevitability of death (Landau et al., 2006). Whereas scholarship typically links the physical act of sex with death as the terror awaiting our animal instincts, I argue that in the extreme we encounter, embody, and embrace our corporeal performances fully. This heightened physiological performance negates and eludes our normative responses to suppress or regulate the pure physicality of any act. The wonder of the transforming body in performance and the *jouissance* made possible in the extreme sporting experience offers powerful means to recognize and assess the “physicality and sexuality of performance, for placing the power of the performance on the performer, and for engaging in a relational ethics of desire” (Bell, 1995, p. 109). These conversations exemplify *jouissance* in which the complete, annihilating experience of total participation, access, and ecstasy might still permit a potential for excess beyond that total (Wing, 1986).

*Beyond the Limits of Living and Dying*

While Munoz (1999) posits disidentification as a strategy for survival created through the performances of minority groups, extreme sport serves as disidentification for each athlete with and against the oppressive and stifling mandates of everyday existence. In a world dictated by the grid of historical weight and institutional power, our choice to take up “insane” activities permits escape and disidentifies our everyday identities within the grid. We are made new by pushing past the boundaries of normative assumptions and binaried language surrounding our identities. We are made and remade limitless at the edges of life and death, or so the discourse tells us. *I argue that the discourse of life and death at the border of extreme sport functions as a phallogentric myth that disregards the gendered terrors and desires that mark our experiences through power negotiations.*

Sports, sociology, and leisure studies have noted the growing trend toward extreme activities in Western society; this is often seen as a space where the intensity and endurance required by the sport provides something outside of everyday life. In a world where all must prove themselves on a daily basis based on often arbitrary and contradictory standards, people are seeking a different mental and physical test in extreme sports. As le Breton suggests, “the more intense the suffering, the more the achievement has a reassuring personal significance, the more fulfilling the satisfaction of having resisted the temptation to give up” (2000, p. 1). The survival of this symbolic dance with pain, injury, and death provides a performative embodiment of surpassing normative limits by choice. As Moller suggests, “whether it is standing on the roof of a speeding train, climbing high up on a tricky cliff face, whizzing down steep mountainsides or free-diving deep down towards the ocean floor, the fear is real” (2007,

p. 191). And the fear is thrilling, beckoning us beyond those safeguards of everyday existence and limits. We want to see how the thrill of life at its most furious limits might exhaust and exalt us. In many ways, culture teaches us that the liminality of extreme activities provides a space beyond lived experience all the while holding the utmost limits of life. However, there are many things that mainstream culture fails to teach us regarding this discourse of life and death.

It is not merely the present possibility of death, but also the victory over that death that occurs with successful fulfillment of the activity. In “looking for the seriousness of death,” overcoming that possible death “becomes essential when life is laid on the line” (Moller, 2007, p. 192). For many, each success in the chosen activity only drives them to greater challenges and higher risks. This in turn demands even greater focus insofar as “when survival demands complete alertness and concentration, our relation to ourselves is erased, and this can give rise to ecstatic experiences of being fused with the situation and of being at one with everything” (Moller, p. 193). This liminal space becomes marked by vulnerability and invincibility. We could lose everything in one false step, yet if we triumph we feel a surge of the sublime. We get a taste of omnipotence.

These representations and the cultural mythos of life and death at the edge of extreme sports reinforce the masculine combat metaphor which replays splendidly in football locker room speeches that craft language of life and death on the field and sacrifice of self for the glory of the team. Prior to taking up extreme sports through both writing and experiencing this marginalized realm, I assumed that extreme bodies and performances that seek out the risks at the edge of life and death create moments of resistance and transformation. These somewhat romantic ideals spring from an extreme

theatre that permits play with life and death in representation; however, in writing and living in the extreme I found that this life/death binary functions as a fiction of that theatre. This fiction sells the extreme lifestyle yet recasting extreme sports with and against mainstream sports exposes the life/death binary as myth. The standard discourse surrounding extreme sports tends to reify the flirtation of the sport with the edges of death; a more transcendent move might be to forego the typical phallogentric hype and explore what terror means in gendered performances.

To stress the binary between life and death does nothing to advance the discourse; to conflate life and death echoes of a phallogentrism that universalizes these differences. In a return to how terror becomes gendered, I recall the pranks chapter where men's greatest fear is being laughed at while women's greatest fear is being raped. This fear stems from combat, battle, war. It is not life and death but power that dictates these terrors. While men's fears become transformed in the face of war toward an iconography of courage that crystallizes the moment of death as one that instills that epiphany of life, women's fears are not theorized in this way – or at all. Extreme sports creates a space where women's fears of being dominated, raped, violated, injured, or killed push past combat discourse; this is the phallogentric discourse valorizing men's fears as life-realizations in the face of danger while ignoring women's fears altogether. Extreme sports create new channels for women to recapture and reclaim that power that always threatens to dominate and exploit them. Quite possibly, this works to expose the power balances of combat, rape, war, and fear in ways that allow entirely new transcendent ways of recuperating and engaging with that fear.

*Lessons on Shredding Taboos of Gender and Sexuality*

This study critiqued the “madness” of gender in extreme sporting performances that exaggerate, parody, queer, resist, and elude normative binaries surrounding femininity, masculinity, sexuality, and heteronormativity. Third-wave feminism at play in roller derby and its campy punk aesthetic reinvokes the Riot Grrrl movement, mirroring the gothic punk suburban brat status of the pranktainment boys. Bad girl/bad boy iconography functions in two very different ways through roller derby/pranktainment; ultrarunning dissolves these empowered stances and styles altogether to create a transcendent new vocabulary of jouissance. Runners are gross, and runners get high; this is a both/and embodiment beyond binaried language of the body. *In playing with and resisting tabooed conventions, extreme sporting athletes queer traditional language and performance through bonds with rebellion that expose and implode assumptions of identity.*

Taking up repressive binaries and typologies of gender, extreme sports permit new ways of playing with sexuality and sex as performance. Roller derby skaters parody prostitution, sadomasochism, prepubescence, and homosexuality; pranktainers call up issues of adolescent sexuality, homoeroticism, and sadomasochism. Ultrarunners move beyond these performances toward a space where the epicene body eludes gendered demarcation and language through a sadomasochistic embrace of pain and pleasure. These performances of sexualities outside the binaries of normative/deviant pull sexual acts of difference onto a stage that strips the shame of oppressive silences. This creates an opportunity to transform the historical and cultural traditions of oppression, objectification, shaming, and silence surrounding taboos in society. Echoing

Halberstam's notion of queerness, it suggests the "other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable future" (2008, p. 153).

Exploring the taboos of prostitution, S&M, adolescent sexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, homoeroticism, and corporeal abjection, extreme sports perform these anxiety-riddled issues and force them onto the cultural stage of sport. The willingness to shove a skater to the rink, strap electric shocks to genitals, or run until your toenails fall off become extreme sporting performatives of pain that generate the binary of victim/abuser. However, extreme sports move beyond this binary by creating a site where active choice to dominate and be dominated simultaneously offers a transcendent new vocabulary a part of and beyond the traditional ideas associated with pain/pleasure. While extreme sports ideology becomes partially rooted in the need for "fun, hedonism, involvement, self actualization...living for the moment" (Wheaton, 2004, p. 11), extreme sporting performances also reflect and recreate many of normative society's most tabooed notions of sexuality, gender, and the body. These athletes performatively queer our notions surrounding tabooed practices of sexuality, gender, and corporeality to call into question the oppressive and binaried structures producing these disciplining forces.

In a critique of the "erotic totalitarianism" of our culture, Pat Califia suggests that an insistence on sexual uniformity "does hidden violence to dissidents and perverts...our desire learns to curb itself, and we come to depend on the strength of self-repression for our safety" (1988, p. 9). That anxiety over being discovered suppresses the very beginnings of desire before that desire is even fully known. As a writer and sadomasochist, Califia struggles with the limited choices available: omitting desire to

assume invisibility or diluting the acts of sadomasochism to gain greater acceptance. Speaking to the core passion that drives written work, Califia stresses that there must be raw, unflinching truth surrounding desire in order for the writing to continue. As Califia says, “the power of the censor within is awesome” (1988, p. 14). There must be images, performances, and texts that challenge the status quo and demand more. Despite a tendency to defang sport as mere entertainment, amusement, or “just a game,” sport in culture is anything but trivial. The public outcry surrounding Tim Tebow’s devout religious faith off the field or Tiger Woods’ sexual exploits reasserts just how significant we find our sporting figures outside of those sporting contexts. As Califia stresses, “if you live in a society that wishes you didn’t exist, anything you do to make yourself happy disrupts its attempts to wipe you out...institutions that provide amusement always come under attack by puritans and fascists” (p. 15). The tradition of silencing those who seek pleasure and fun illustrates just how threatening these “games” might be to the status quo.

Rather than join the spiral of silence surrounding gender and sexuality binaries in sports, extreme sports poke the proverbial bear. Even as roller derby women take up the commoditization and exploitation of feminine sexuality, they parody this to an excess that becomes a shocking subversion through the marriage of beauty and violence. Even as pranktainment men adhere to the boy code of playground masculinity, they open up the wounds around the silence of homosexuality in masculine sport by flirting with it through adolescence, homoeroticism, and sadomasochism. Even as ultrarunners embrace a tortuous corporeal passion, they create new vocabularies of transcendence springing from and eluding the body itself.

In traditional sporting discourse, any message beyond the passive grace, prepubescent beauty, or athletic lesbianism of women athletes becomes stifled. Any message beyond the violent competition or hyper-heterosexual dominance of men athletes becomes silenced. In the extreme, notions of policing the self run counter to the rebellion inherent to these cultures and athletes. And this permits a leap beyond binaried ideology toward the creation of entirely new vocabularies of being.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

From the inception of this study through these concluding remarks, I have experienced a wild transformation in thinking, performing, and writing; often the ideas that drove me toward this study became transformed, minimalized, or even abandoned in the throes of compelling new ideas and material. In other instances, new theoretical possibilities arose that threatened to pull me too far off the path of my study. Yet as every squirrel beckons my golden retriever away from our morning jog, sometimes you just have to let those little thoughts scurry away for the long run. Fortunately, I can now return briefly to my mind-rodents with suggestions for future studies into extreme sports.

*Class and race.* My study has illustrated the power of performance in gendered acts of resistance and compliance to generate discourse surrounding the ways that performativity unleashes normative ideals and binaries surrounding femininity, masculinity, un-gendering, sexuality, and corporeality. Although this study explores gender, sexuality, and the body in and through performance, I also touch on issues of class weighed differently among derby, pranktainment, and the ultra. The mainstream sporting narrative for men traditionally works through ideals of the poor, disenfranchised, black athlete who rises from the direst of circumstances through his physical stature, raw

talent, and dedication. The mainstream sporting narrative for women traditionally works through that same physical stature, raw talent, and dedication; however, mainstream women's sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and ballet become markers of a decidedly wealthier class status. Roller derby and pranktainment manage to upend these scripts entirely. In terms of class, the embodiment of extreme sports differs from the hegemonic ideals of mainstream sports in ways that provide a clue as to how extreme sporting bodies become linked differently with class – derby bodies as blue-collar tough, pranktainment bodies as adolescent suburbanite spoiled brat, ultra bodies as perplexing and elusive, escaping their middle-classedness toward a disappearing subcultural aesthetic.

Additionally, I feel that race and ethnicity speak volumes surrounding their virtual invisibility within this study and extreme sports as a whole. I have not been the first to mention this glaring hole in the fabric of extreme sporting cultures; however, I hope that in addition to mentioning this void, scholars in academia can make strides in questioning where and why these voices get lost, if they are even spoken at all. While a great deal of edgework theory has contributed to research rooted specifically in the “unique experience of white, middle-class, adult males” (Lyng, 1990, p. 11), this creates a critical void for those subjects engaging in these liminal acts outside of that perspective (Miller, 1991). In my exploration of roller derby, pranktainment, and ultrarunning I have both revisited the white, middle-class, and male demographics yet have also managed to work through issues of gender, age, and class that allow new perspectives to voice themselves in the edgework of extreme sporting communities. I would reassert Kusz' (2007) critique of extreme sports regarding race as these types of activities and events provide “a cultural

space where whiteness was the unquestioned social norm” (p. 361). There is also a reinforcement of a middle-class sensibility through many of these activities (running) yet breakthroughs in others (roller derby).

Extreme sports is traditionally white, male, heterosexual, and economically privileged; as more and more women enter the extreme sporting world, issues of gender, class, and race become foregrounded in decidedly different representations. Therefore, further investigation into the experiences of how extreme sporting cultures support classed and raced identities could advance these studies. This is particularly important as these once-marginalized activities continue gaining popularity and attention on a national scale.

*Communitas*. Despite the disparate nature of my three specific studies, I found one unifying principle that held true. Individual motivation toward resistant or complicit performances still proves unifying in a mythic ritualization of the cultures surrounding these extreme sporting communities. The extreme sporting *communitas* invites a specific brand of rebellion and play, a spritely adolescence beyond the pranktainment world and a wise mysticism beyond the ultrarunning peak. Extreme sports engender *communitas* as a celebration of and against the history of gender oppression and liberation. Turner’s work on liminality and *communitas* offers a blueprint for spaces where heightened experiences and marginalized figures experience performative ritual and play. Returning to Butler’s (2002) idea that kinship serves as a parable for the genesis and evolution of cultures, I suggest that extreme sporting athletes embrace a rebellious ambiguity surrounding identity. This ambiguity functions to destabilize and disidentify normative traditions and binaried structures. This reasserts the state of heightened sensory experience, suspension

of normative existence, and the resituation of the marginal at the center so key to Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas*.

Returning to Turner's concept of liminality as "betwixt and between" (1967), I suggest that extreme sports occupy this allness and noneness at the borders of many worlds yet further accentuate these borders. While I originally conceived of extreme liminality as marking a space between normative stability and extreme chaos, I now suggest that extreme sporting experiences create something beyond these borders. This is something I believe communication studies, specifically cultural and performance studies, might take up and advance in future scholarship.

*Imperialism.* There is a specific white American ideal reproduced throughout extreme sport that springs from the American ideals of innovation and largess. The rich historical tradition of American innovation becomes (re)produced through cultural performances featuring elements of modification and "madness." The athletes and pranksters of extreme sports are no exception; every prank, stunt, vehicle, and trick becomes amplified and made extreme through innovative and often ludicrous embellishments. It is a move toward bigger, better, faster, more insane. This emphasis on madeness resonates with the idea of performance; madeness marks performances and bodies of difference against and with normative assumptions. Recalling Schechner's (1988) idea that performance is twice-behaved, bending the notion of time to recreate that which has always already been there, the extreme sporting move toward innovation takes up the American ideal of innovation and reproduces it on a performative sporting stage. It is a rescuing of the mainstream, the everyday, the bottom line transformed through sport and spectacle into a "nitro" charged or "super" sized performance.

Although I touch on the balancing act that extreme sports as marginalized culture must do with mainstream appropriation, I feel this is an issue that will continue to provide ample area for study. The pranktainment ingredients of commercial appeal and outlaw rebellion splay across the MTV-dominated landscape. Venturing even further into extreme cultures, as in *WildBoyz*, is made possible through the big wheel spending available to these pranksters. Taking their American pranktainment to an international stage, Steve-O and Pontius each learn of the local cultures by trying exotic foods, learning cultural traditions, and of course, recreating stunts with the animal and insect kingdoms. In moving these stunts out into the world, extreme sports simulate the performances of exploring and conquering exotic locations in a reproduction of American imperialism.

*Homophobia.* Homophobic actions and language have thankfully begun crumbling on the mainstream stage as homophobic statements are taken to task by scandal-hunting media. This remains a different story in the lived experiences of homosexual sporting men; with the exception of retired athletes, not one athlete from the U.S.'s "big four" of baseball, football, hockey, and basketball has come out as openly gay while active in their chosen sport (Smith, 2010). Illustrating this point, Gareth Thomas, the picture of brute masculinity in the most macho of sports – rugby – granted *Sports Illustrated* a 2010 interview regarding his decision to come out. Thomas commented on the overwhelming support he received from his Welsh teammates and the ironic silence surrounding homosexual athletes in the U.S.: "America's at the top of the table in everything! So why...? A rugby team...in Wales. A country of coal miners. I thought that would be the harshest environment for a man to come out in, but no..." (Smith, 2010,

paras. 8-10). This follows Pronger's (1990) suggestion regarding the distinct expectations of gender and sexuality in sports, "women athletes are often expected to be lesbians; men athletes are seldom expected to be gay" (p. xi). Sexualities deviating from the hyper-masculine, hyper-hetero in mainstream sports are thus made invisible, a void ever-present yet unaddressed.

As is my hope in all scholarly writing, I believe it necessary to take theory into practice and performance into pedagogy. Thus, extreme sports, as a fascinating and resistant culture that speaks to the youth of our society, provide a specific site for further explorations of pedagogical work through sport as performance and identity constitution. Locating the pleasure of performance and agency of performers becomes key in teaching ways to live and do gender, sexuality, and corporeality. Furthermore, being unable to locate the performance, agency, or presence of performers becomes instrumental in understanding why certain pleasures and voices remain unheard. The silence and invisibility surrounding issues and performances of race, class, and homosexuality in extreme sport must be further called into question; I also suggest that work on liminal communitas, commoditizing imperialism, and silenced homophobia will push these ideas further. I would try, but my finish line is finally in sight.

### *Final Thoughts*

Laviolette explains "deep play" as a moment or experience of "deep and dangerous play for the purposes of physical gambling where the stakes so highly involve the danger of serious accident or death" (2011, p. 13). Although this is a common assumption regarding extreme sports, it is made painfully apparent when that threat becomes all too real. I began this study with the story of the death of world-class freestyle

skier Sarah Burke. Burke died at the age of twenty-nine, just two years shy of the 2014 Olympics in which Burke was so instrumental in pushing for women's halfpipe skiing to finally debut alongside the men. Nor do Peter Pans actually live forever. Ryan Dunn, the *Jackass* and *Viva la Bam* mainstay, died while driving intoxicated, taking a passenger with him. In the wake of Burke's sport-related tragedy or Dunn's fatal crash, extreme sport and extreme lifestyles seem to lose that fictional cape of bravado. This rupture, seen in the blogs dedicated to Burke's memory and Margera's breakdown at the site of Dunn's crash, reveal real consequences amidst the high-risk, high-play world of extreme sports.

While the very real, very tragic deaths in extreme sports, or in all sport, serve as chilling reminders of the consequences of living life on a performative field, court, or ramp, the relative rarity of these deaths elevate the threat to a somewhat mythic status. Skating closer and closer to performative death creates a fascinating tension that brings a release through pleasure. Extreme sports foster a sense of play and humor through a gallow's laugh in the face of death.

Jouissance, that moment of ecstasy that escapes even in our complete surrender to it, that possibility that we continuously attempt to move beyond the pleasure principle toward that realm of the excess where enjoyment transforms into pain, creates a space where subjective existence becomes called into question (Lacan, 1966). It is not merely significant to locate this jouissance possible in extreme sports, but also to address its emergence in the face of possible risk, injury, and death. Normative society is the watchful parent telling us the burner is hot; extreme athletes are the children burning curious fingers just to find out how much heat they can take. We are told, in essence, that we must choose boxing trunks or miniskirts to perform our gender, sexuality, and

corporeality “correctly.” In those hot minutes at the edge and beyond, extreme sports illustrate the possibilities to transform ourselves and our worlds through performances that glide, fly, and race past normative borders toward transcendent jouissance.

The liberating laughter of the extreme – in sexualized parody, playground pranking, and the laughable abject – bursts forth from the constraints of normative society. The disciplining force of normative society constrains the activities and athletes of mainstream sports; the laughter brimming from extreme sport instead permits something akin to Cixous’ Laugh of the Medusa. Cixous writes: “Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogocentrism, hasn’t been ashamed of her strength?” Extreme sports respond with roller derby skaters and epicene ultrarunners.

Cixous asks: “Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives, hasn’t actually accused herself of being a monster?” Extreme sports reply with skaters embracing themes of prostitution and sadomasochism as pranktainers take up the dangerous desires at the triad of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, and adolescent sexuality.

And when Cixous states that upon feeling sickness at the desire stirring within, that “shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.” Extreme sports sparkle with the laughter in that resistance of death, troubling our notions of deadly fear and lively joy.

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