BEING "ROLLER/DERBY GIRL":
SUBCULTURAL FEMININITY, EMPOWERMENT,
AND THIRD WAVE PRAxis

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This thesis is presented as part of the requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Communications with Honours in Communications and Media at Murdoch University.
29 October, 2012.
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at a University or other Tertiary Institution.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE ...................................................................................................................... i

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: POST-FEMINISM .............................................................................. 6
  1.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 6
  1.2 Commodity Feminism, Contemporary Media, And Marketing to a Post-Feminist Audience ................................................................................................................. 10
  1.3 ‘Doing Gender’, Femininity, And Women’s Psychological Development In The Context of Post-Feminism .................................................................. 12
  1.4 Third Wave Feministing and Femininity .............................................................. 19

CHAPTER TWO: SUBCULTURE .................................................................................. 24
  2.1 Subcultural Definition and Practice .................................................................. 24
  2.2 Subculture and Resistance .............................................................................. 26
  2.3 Women and Subculture .................................................................................... 30
  2.4 Women and Alternative Sports ........................................................................ 38

CHAPTER THREE: ROLLER DERBY ........................................................................ 43
  3.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 43
  3.2 (Re)Presenting Roller Derby ............................................................................ 43
  3.3 Constructing and Contextualising “Roller/Derby Girl” as Empowering Subcultural Femininity ................................................................. 47
  3.4 Embodied Empowerment, Women-only and Women’s Leisure Spaces .......... 52
  3.5 Third Wave Praxis and DIY Without Feminist Theory .................................... 56

CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................. 64

WORKS CITED .......................................................................................................... 68
“If only they could see us now
in leather bra and plastic shorts
like some ridiculous new team uniform
for some ridiculous new sport”

Ani DiFranco, ‘Little Plastic Castle’¹

“... that’s what I truly feel roller derby is. It’s the biggest ‘fuck you’ to the status quo (sports status quo, male-dominated-anything status quo, corporate-Satans-running-everything status quo, etc.). To be a guy involved in a revolution run by women is a special privilege”

Randy Pan the Goat Boy (announcer), quoted in
*Down and Derby: The Insider’s Guide to Roller Derby*²

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¹ DiFranco.
² Barbee and Cohen 179.
PREFACE

It’s 4pm on a Saturday afternoon in suburbia. Twenty women and men, some in brightly coloured uniforms and stockings, some in regular ‘civilian’ clothes, are rolling bags and boxes into a recreation centre, waiting for the basketball games to finish. As soon as the last buzzer goes off, they begin taking over the space, setting out chairs around the outside of an oval track upon which a crew in striped ref uniforms – “Team Zebra” – are taping down raised rope to mark the boundary. The group load consignment beer into the bar area, set up sound equipment borrowed from friends, organize scores of volunteers to staff the door and ‘merch’ booth. One woman, lanyard denoting her “Attila – Head Bouting Wench” flapping around her neck, is rushing around, briefing the hired security staff on the liquor licensing, making sure the trackside floor seating – the “suicide zone” – is the correctly insurable distance from the track, and overseeing the placement of chairs to ensure adherence to council guidelines on fire exits and wheelchair accessibility. In another room, a family are preparing for their daughter’s wedding.

By 6pm the crowd has lined up out the door, the music is pumping, the beer is chilled, and there are 28 uniformed women on old-fashioned quad rollerskates slowly skating circles around the track. They chat casually to one another, stretch out their muscles, practice moves on one another. As the spectators slowly file in – families gathered together in the seating, over 18’s only in the suicide zone, young men with beers in the licensed stands – the atmosphere builds with the crowd eagerly anticipating the night’s...
smashes and crashes. An announcer’s voice booms out over the PA: “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to rolllllllllerr derrrrrrrrrryyyyyyyy!” The first lineup gather on the starting line – five in red, five in black – and when the whistle blows, they begin the strategic and physical manoeuvring of heavy blocks and quick agility that will help them win the game. They use their hips, bottoms and shoulders to throw each other off-balance; falls and pile-ups are common and by the end of the game many are sporting rips in their stockings and bruises on areas not covered by their safety equipment. After the game, skaters cross the floor to hug members of the other team, and all line up to high five one another as each team do a victory lap for a bout well-fought. Brave members of the crowd line up to talk to their favourite player, and after all the spectators have left, the skaters begin the process of restoring the venue to its usual state before heading to the requisite after party. The neighbouring wedding has concluded and the party which has dwindled to ten curiously peer in the doors of the now-deserted stadium.

The sport of flat track roller derby is complicated, with two half-hour periods broken into jams which last a maximum of two minutes. Each team fields a lineup of five skaters ir each jam – one jammer who scores the points, three blockers who hit other skaters and play both offense and defence, and one pivot who plays as a blocker while communicating strategy. In a jam, the first whistle allows the blockers to start skating and the two whistles shortly after allow the jammers to sprint towards the pack; the first jammer through the pack without a penalty is the lead jammer, and has the power to end the jam at any point before the two minutes is up. On each following pass, jammers
score one point by passing each opposing player’s hips; the blockers use their bodies to legally knock the opposing jammer down or out of bounds while trying to help their jammer past the opposing blockers unscathed. It’s fast-paced, physically aggressive, and wildly entertaining.

Roller derby started as a profitable spectator sport in 1930s America, the brainchild of businessman and promoter Leo Seltzer. The rules evolved over the course of the twentieth century and the various incarnations of the sport from the original endurance races to include co-ed teams, staged fights, and pre-written WWF-style storylines. With the advent of television, broadcasting bouts brought a greater audience, but eventually the live immediacy of the sport was choked and it waned in popularity in the 1970s. The current revival grew out of the alternative music and punk communities of the West coast of America, and Austin, Texas is widely regarded as the birthplace of modern roller derby, starting the first team in the early noughties and continuing to be the headquarters of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) today¹. It has evolved from a burlesque- and punk-inspired performance to a legitimate sport boasting over 1000 leagues and is being considered for inclusion in the 2020 Olympic Games².

Most modern roller derby leagues operate with a grassroots, do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic where members participate in all aspects of management and production. This is embodied in the WFTDA’s central governing philosophy of “for the skater, by the

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¹ For a more detailed history of the evolution of roller derby, see Barbee and Cohen; Mabe; Storms.
² Grohmann.
skater³, which means that "[f]emale skaters are primary owners, managers, and/or operators of each member league and of the association"⁴. Aside from bouts – the publicly-spectated events described above – the women spend between two and five times a week training together, as well as fundraisers, league meetings, informal social events and countless hours spent behind the scenes in organizational roles. League members participate in every aspect of management and event production, including financial planning, media relations, coaching, writing policy, and so on. In his study of the importance of do-it-yourself (DIY) in the roller derby revival Beaver states "the DIY ethic is about nonalienated self-activity"⁵, and this can be seen in both the on- and off-track interactions of roller derby participants. They physically work together on the track, and off the track collaborate in the running of the league. The collectivity of the roller derby community leads Beaver to assert that "rollergirls subscribe to a ‘do-it-ourselves ethos’"⁶, and this networking and formation of friendships are central motivators for participating in roller derby. Thus, derby is both an ‘alternative’ sport, and a subculture dominated and defined by women.

Within the subculture, the physicality of sporting elements combined with the gendered dimensions of a female-dominated space allow for experimentation with "doing gender"⁷, and the participants engage with this on several levels. Firstly, they adopt pseudonyms, which are often word plays and puns playing on sexual, aggressive and/or

³ WFTDA.  
⁴ WFTDA.  
⁵ Beaver 6.  
⁶ Beaver 17.  
⁷ West and Zimmerman 125.
ironic themes, such as ‘Storm in a D-Cup’ or ‘Lawrence of a Labia’. In addition, the standards of dress and presentation within the roller derby space – both bouting and training spaces, those in which participants are on skates – embrace an aesthetic which draws on punk, vintage, pinup, rockabilly, camp, and sexual subcultures. While this is partly a function of wearing protective gear including knee and elbow pads, wrist guards, helmets and mouthguards, it is also a conscious and public engagement with gendered identities and the creation of what Finley deems an “alternative femininity”\textsuperscript{8}, one which takes elements of marginalized femininities and reappropriates them as sources of empowerment. These outward signifiers of resistance are an important element in the self-promotion of leagues as well as the interpretation of roller derby by the mainstream media and the wider community.

Despite elements of empowerment and collective action, roller derby is not immune to the discourses and cultural values of the wider socio-political landscape in which it exists. Internal political differences and personal disagreements certainly occur within the community and in extreme cases cause members to leave the subculture or split leagues. The internal dynamics of roller derby leagues highlight the tensions between a mainstream culture in which women are not often offered routes to collective action and diverse support networks, and a subculture that encourages agency, participatory democracy, and collaborative decision-making. Many, if not all leagues, struggle with balancing off-track politics in a tight-knit community and a competitive on-track sport which has to fight to maintain its credibility; however, the continued exponential growth

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\textsuperscript{8} Finley 365.
of the sport stands testament to the abilities of participants to overcome such obstacles through their passion and dedication to the subculture, the athletics, the 'revolution'.
INTRODUCTION

The modern incarnation of roller derby has occurred within the era of post-feminism. This period is characterized by a “taken into accountness”1 of feminist politics in everyday Western life through the idea of “feminist success”2; that is, the idea that gender equality is something that has already been achieved and “the politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed”3. From within this milieu the ‘third wave’ of feminism has come to prominence, differentiating itself from the ‘second wave’ through an explicit embracing of diversity, and an emphasis on individual experience and expression, aided by democratic technologies and participatory ethics.

Roller derby is an example of a subculture that responds to the post-feminist context of the new millennium, taking elements of this and third-wave feminism in creating a subcultural space, which is empowering for participants in ways that other subcultures may not allow. Derby is a sporting spectacle which forces the audience to confront the performance of gender in this cultural moment and appropriates and re-presents the often masculinized dimensions of both mainstream and subcultural sporting practice in a theatrical and ironic way. Thus, any examination of roller derby must be bipartite, taking into account the politics of both a publicly entertaining sport spectacle and a grassroots, DIY, female-dominated space. These two elements are necessarily related, and the ‘final product’ — roller derby as a spectator sport — is fundamentally related to the functioning of the off-track community. Participants shape these internal dynamics and just as no

1 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” 256.
2 Ibid. 256.
3 McRobbie, “Young Women and Consumer Culture” 533.
subculture is entirely removed from its context, members implicitly incorporate dominant discourses of women’s agency and collectivity into the workings of the subculture.

Through analysis of their various resistances and appropriation of cultural values, theorists often tie subcultures’ function and dynamics to the wider social-political landscape in which they occur. Subcultures’ codes of behaviour serve to legitimate authentic membership, and in turn, can marginalize and consolidate the participants’ identities. For instance, roller derby uses the public ‘queering’ of gender display to experiment with identity categories as a form of resistance to a hegemonic gender order. Simultaneously and parallel to this, the empowerment implicit in the participatory collective action behind-the-scenes adds another dimension to the ways participants may engage with resistive activity within the subculture. Resistance is complex and multifarious. “[W]hat is perceived to be resistance in one context may at the same time be oppression in another as people, despite their resistant intent, may not be able to recognize their complicity in the reproduction of oppression” ⁵. Thus, while participation in elements of roller derby may outwardly appear resistive, there is potential to reproduce various oppressions.

This thesis speaks into the space opened up by other work specifically focused on roller

⁴ Queer theory developed from post-structuralist approaches to gender and sexuality, which questioned essentialist claims to gendered ‘natures’ and heteronormativity, and destabilized the links between gender and sex, performance and selfhood. A ‘queer’ gender performance is one which visually disrupts the culturally accepted ideas of ideal gendered display. For further explanation of queer theory, see Butler.
⁵ Raby 161.
derby, such as Finley's assertion that "[f]urther research should examine whether internal dynamics have a salient place in studies of 'undoing gender'"\(^6\), and Beaver's call for "additional research that focuses on the day-to-day operations of DIY sport organizations, including the types of conflict that occur within them"\(^7\). Both of these important articles, on different aspects of roller derby, recognise that there are particular internal elements of the subculture, which warrant further investigation. In examining several of these internal elements through the lenses of feminist politics, and subcultural theory and participation, and personal involvement in the roller derby community, I unpack and examine some of these dynamics.

In Chapter One, I consider the cultural and temporal specificity of the post-feminist moment in Western culture and its impact on white, middle-class women and girls' psychological development\(^8\), taking into account the backlash against the 'second wave' of feminism, contemporary ideas of commodity feminism and the emergence of the 'third wave' of feminist politics. Intrinsic in this is an examination of gender identity and identity production in the context of post-feminism and commodity (post-)feminism, and the activities which may constitute feminist theory, practice and space in this context. Using McRobbie's studies of young women, subcultures, and post-feminism as a basis, I consider the ways a post-feminist context may promote different types of subcultural engagement and formations, particularly amongst women, and the

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\(^6\) Finley 383, quoting Deutsch 106.
\(^7\) Beaver 22.
\(^8\) This thesis is limited to examining the effects of hegemonic femininity within a subcultural context, which is itself bound by ideas of race and class. Roller derby participants are predominantly (although not exclusively) white working- and middle-class women, and while derby may offer some alternative ways of 'doing' differently raced and classed genders, a specific exploration of these elements is beyond the scope of this work.
ways in which attitudes towards feminism and feminist practice may influence the limitations and boundaries of membership. I use the example of Riot Grrrl as a female-dominated DIY subculture formed in similar circumstances to roller derby, and discuss the presence of explicitly feminist politics in its functioning.

Chapter Two examines subcultural participation and inclusion and whether and in what ways subcultural practice may be considered resistive to cultural hegemony. In particular, I focus on women's participation in subcultural practice and the production and reproduction of mainstream cultural norms within subcultural contexts, particularly within sporting (sub)cultures, and female-dominated subcultural spaces. I discuss previous work by Leblanc and Schippers on the effects of subcultural participation on the formation of gendered identities amongst young women and such participation as a source of potential empowerment or marginalization. I also examine the construction of various femininities within mainstream and 'alternative' sporting spaces.

Chapter Three, draws on theories of feminist praxis and female participation in subculture to analyse the modern roller derby movement as a female-dominated, but not necessarily explicitly feminist space. I examine modes of participation, which govern inclusion and subcultural norms, in the context of post-feminism and third wave politics, and analyse this specificity through the community of roller derby. I argue that the function of subcultural participation, and specifically participation in the complexity of roller derby, can be seen as a crucial mode of expression, empowerment, and identity articulation for participants, particularly in the context of post-feminism in the new
millennium. Participation in roller derby as a sporting subculture can be seen as implicitly third wave feminist praxis; however, the lack of specific feminist intentionality in the space creates flaws within it, which allow for the reproduction of certain mainstream gendered discourses.