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Important ethnographic and autoethnographic study of roller derby

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Who can we become through sport? And can we imagine a sport that is feminine by its own means and not just in comparison to the masculine? These questions underpin the ethnographic and autoethnographic study performed by Adele Pavlidis and Simone Fullagar and the results presented Sport, Gender and Power: The Rise of Roller Derby. Gender, Bodies and Transformation (2014). The authors critically investigate roller derby, a sport espoused with feminist values, and that celebrates diversity and freedom. However, as demonstrated in the book, roller derby is still a most regulated sport with its own norms and exclusionary practices.

The authors Adele Pavlidis and Simone Fullagar are to be considered to be interdisciplinary sociologists. Pavlidis is a lecturer at Griffith University in Australia, and is engaged in research concerning the sociology of sport with critical approaches to the management of sport, sport for development and women in sport. Pavlidis' scholarly work is directed by feminist theory, such as sociocultural theories of affect and emotion, drawing on insights from sociology, human geography, and cultural studies. Fullagar is a professor at the University of Bath, UK, with a particular expertise in the sociocultural analysis of physical cultures and leisure, tourism and health/mental health practices.

Roller derby has its historical origin in the US in the late 1920's as a sport for men and women but has since re-emerged in different forms. The more recent version of roller derby took form in the early 2000's in Texas as a mostly all-female sport with links to the Riot Girrl scene, and is described in popular literature as being powerful, aggressive and sexy. The sport is tough and rough as it involves tackling of members of the opposing team around the oval formed track. Today, there is an increased prevalence of roller derby leagues in the world, especially in the US, UK and Australia. As predominately an all-female sport, and with the explicit ‘by the skater, for the skater’ ethos, roller derby has been positioned as a space for female emancipation through physical culture. However, Pavlidis and Fullagar are, by using an interdisciplinary approach, critically examining the emancipatory quality of roller derby and the considered general ‘good’ of sport and leisure activities.

The introductory chapter provides a concise overview of the development of roller derby from its first appearance in the 20th century to the contemporary form(s) of today, and describes roller derby as an opportunity for a “…feminist reconceptualization of sport as a site of physical and digital culture where new possibilities exist for
different desires, forms and embodied experiences.” (p. 5). It is also acknowledged that previous research concerning roller derby within a feminist framework to a large extent has examined the sport as a cultural site that re-inscribes sexualized hyper-femininity while un-problematically adopting masculine aggressiveness. However, this kind of approach manifests a dualistic thinking and the prevailing binary division of masculine and feminine. What Pavlidis and Fullagar provide in their book is a focus on an affective dimension of experience, and the way in which women constantly negotiate gender contradictions as they put their bodies on the line and their identities at play, and therefore are trying to reach beyond this dualism.

Thereby the authors are questioning the gender binaries that subordinate women’s sport and embodiment compared to a masculine ideal when recognizing the gendered aspect of becoming “derby”.

This theoretical framework is elaborated in chapter 2 as they draw upon cultural studies of affect theory which acknowledge emotions as culturally constructed, and that the ‘self-management of emotions’ is how we ensure that we feel the ‘right’ emotions at the ‘right’ time within a specific rule governed context of social life (p. 33). Thus, by tracing affects one can illuminate power relations within the social, and demonstrate that such relations have material effects on the body, the becoming body. Thereby the authors are questioning the gender binaries that subordinate women’s sport and embodiment compared to a masculine ideal when recognizing the gendered aspect of becoming “derby”. However, this does not imply a mere celebration of ‘the feminine’ of roller derby; rather, Pavlidis and Fullagar are critically examining the power relations that are produced by and through participating in roller derby practices. The use of affect theory is therefore aided by a post-structural theoretical framework provided by Rosi Braidotti, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Delueze and Felix Guattari and others within the field of feminist physical cultural studies. This situates the book within the field of physical cultural studies, and it is positioned by its authors as a feminist text aimed at transforming the social relations of affect in roller derby into the broader social, technological and organizational context within which it is embedded.

The methodological approach of the research is accounted for in chapter 3. By means of ethnographic and autoethnographic methods, in that Adele Pavlidis is engaged in roller derby both as a player and as a participant in the management of one roller derby league, her own narrative alongside the participants' stories through interviews, as well as material from official and informal media concerning roller derby, make up the base of the data collection. Three roller derby leagues were included in the study, all of them situated in Australia, and the collection of data were conducted between January 2010 to late October the same year. The following three chapters, 4, 5 and 6, present narratives of ten women that highlight different territories of thought and are organized according to discursive themes – ideas around love, becoming, belonging, inclusion, exclusion, anger, aggression and feminine subjectivity. Thus, what is being explicated is the multiplicity of becoming ‘derby’ and the problematics of engaging in a physical cultural site where diversity and inclusion are being produced simultaneously as the norm which creates affects of belonging and inclusion as well as of exclusion and detachment. The concluding chapter reiterates the authors’ aim to contribute to interdisciplinary research within physical cultural studies, and by turning to affect they try to evoke new imaginaries of what the meanings of sport can be, trying to conceptualize a new ethos of ‘derby girrrl’, which recognizes multiplicity in forms of provision/participation and identities.

The structure of the book is clear and well defined in the introductory chapter. The content is consistently following a logical thread along a narrative of relations of power through affect in physical culture. The language of the book is affective in itself by the use of poetic references. One of the main strengths of Pavlidis and Fullagar’s work is that the book in itself argues for an interdisciplinary approach to physical culture, and highlights the constructive properties of feminist theory when used as a tool to better understand the meaning of sport and what sport can be. This book of affect is a much needed injection into both feminist work and sport studies, as it underlines the importance of investigating sport in new and critical ways in order to be able to elucidate new imaginaries of sport beyond constraining binaries of masculine and feminine.

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