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Derby Girls' Parodic Self-Sexualizations: Autonomy, Articulacy and Ambiguity

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ABSTRACT

When behaviours or character traits match sociocultural expectation, heteronomy is a natural suspicion. A further natural suspicion is that the behaviours or character traits are unhealthy for the agent or for objectives of social justice and liberation. Second Wave feminism therefore includes a robust narrative of unease about female self-sexualisation. Third Wave feminism has more upbeat narratives of the latter, in terms of confidence and empowerment. The preceding tension is refracted through cases such as Ronda Rousey and 'derby girls', as well as those of many less ostentatious women. It is argued that such self-sexualisation can be autonomous as opposed to heteronomous. It is argued, furthermore, that it is not a priori unhealthy for the agent and that autonomous female self-sexualisation admits of degrees of self-consciousness and articulacy. At the same time, such self-sexualisation takes place within gendered social structures, with consequences that legitimate the reinvocation of Second Wave motifs such as the commodification of female sexuality and the privileging of precise images of female sexuality.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy; articulacy; ambiguity; derby; feminism

Introduction

Societies encourage certain behaviours and character traits in their members. A trait is articulated by Flanagan (1991, 277) as 'some sort of standing disposition to perceive, and/or think and/or feel and/or behave in certain characteristic ways in certain situations—which situations are partly designated or defined as situations of a certain kind by the standing disposition(s) in question.' Traits are therefore cognitive, affective and behavioural in their composition, have a complex, interactive relationship with the environment and are an efficacious instrument of social control. The preceding social encouragement ranges from the mild to the very strong, with penalties for non-compliance covering an equivalent range. Grounds of encouragement include ideologies¹ of social class, ethnicity and gender. For instance, a society of rigid traditional gender roles will have strong social and sometimes legal penalties for men considered insufficiently tough and protective of wife and children, and for women considered insufficiently caring towards their children or insufficiently submissive to the wishes of

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their husbands. Gender ideology, however, has (like ideologies of class and ethnicity) liberating as well as repressive elements. Pavlidis and Connor (2016, 1353) note Butler's observation that 'not all aspects of gender are constraining or limiting and both masculinity and femininity has both damaging and liberating aspects that can be negotiated and influenced in a range of ways.' Elaborating Foucault's account of power, Sailors and Weaving (2017, 434) similarly observe that 'if power only functioned to repress and coerce individuals, no one would allow its control to continue by obeying it, except in the most extreme cases of state-sanctioned brutality (and, even then, one might resist, for example, by refusing to recant one's beliefs)'.²

Feminism is concerned with the repressive effects of ideologies of gender. While feminism is bound to have a special concern with women and girls, some feminists believe that any feminist programme worth wanting must challenge all sexism. Hooks (1981, page number unknown), for instance, asserts that 'To be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression.'³ Gender ideology works to limit behaviour and character traits in both sexes, by creating and recreating dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity at the level of culture and therefore at the level of heart and mind. It has long been platitudinous that top dog among masculinities ('hegemonic masculinity') is defined by physical strength, physical courage, combativeness, domination and excess, while the counterpart femininity is defined by physical weakness, restraint, co-operation, submissiveness, beauty, sexuality and nurture (see, for instance, Connell 1995; Mackinnon 1987, 118). The disproportionate cultural importance placed upon female appearance is well-documented (see, for instance, Chapkis 1986).

The ramifications of the preceding disproportion for female athletes is also well documented. Recent articles by Fink (2013) and Konjer, Mutz, and Meierm (2017), for instance, expose the persistence and manifestations of media sexualization of female athletes. Sports feminist scholars, again, have written much about how the femininity norms inscribed in female athlete sexualization reinforce the historical belief that sport and real women are incompatible (Cahn 1993; Schneider 2000; Weaving 2010). Feminist analyses of sport have played a key part in challenging the wider structural and cultural context that trivialises women's sport and sexualises female athletes (particularly in elite, commercial sport) (Beaver 2016; Weaving 2010, 2014), while 'reinforcing the "natural" association of athleticism with maleness' (Lindner 2011, 327). Research has shown that the apparent paradox between female athleticism and the heterosexual notion of femininity exerts pressure on female athletes to demonstrate typically feminine traits (see, for instance, Cahn 1993; Davis-delano, Pollock, and Vose 2009; Krane 2001). As a result, female athletes often develop an 'apologetic' as a device to 'negate or negotiate the negative stereotypes associated with their involvement in sport by embodying the traditional, or hegemonic, heterosexual notion of femininity' (Hardy 2015, 156). By cultivating 'essentially' feminine traits, emphasising beauty, attractiveness, playfulness, eroticism and so on, female athletes strive to live up to expectations of femininity and avoid accusations of 'mannishness' (Beaver 2016; Cahn 1993; Hardy 2015). As Beaver (2016) explains, 'Previous research on gender and sports finds that women athletes emphasize their femininity to mitigate criticism from those who conflate female athleticism with mannishness and lesbianism.' In this sense, gender is something we achieve through performance in everyday social interactions (Channon 2014). Gender is not something we are, but

something we do. As West and Zimmerman (1987, 127) famously argued, ‘doing gender’ involves negotiating one’s conduct ‘in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category ...’. From this perspective female athletes might present themselves as attractive and sexual, for example by wearing sexy clothing or engaging in various beauty practices, in order to limit their accountability for flouting gender norms (Beaver 2016). However, female athletes’ efforts to comply with societal expectations of women come at a cost. Feminist accounts draw attention to the harmful effects of sexualisation in sport, for example. As Beaver (2016) explains:

Some scholars contend that the sexualization of women athletes – requiring them to wear revealing uniforms, focusing on their sex appeal over athletic prowess, and media commentary about women athletes that includes sexual banter – serves an ideological function. By reducing women athletes to sex objects and thereby trivializing their athleticism, men retain dominance in the realm of sport, which plays a key role in naturalizing men’s dominance in other social realms.

Roller Derby

Roller derby (‘derby’ from now) is essentially a full contact, ‘simultaneous offense/defense team race’ (Breeze 2015, 3). The aim is to score points by lapping members of the opposing team. Games are referred to as bouts; a bout is made up of 60 minutes of play divided into two 30-minute halves. Teams consist of five members who roller-skate around an oval track in the same direction in a series of two minute ‘jams’ (Kearney 2011). Each team identifies a scoring player, known as the jammer, who scores points for every skater they pass on the opposing team. The other four members of the team are ‘blockers’ who attempt to prevent the opposing jammer from lapping members of their team, while at the same time trying to get their own jammer through (Sailors 2013). In a recent ethnographic account, Breeze (2015, 3) provides a vivid description of derby in action:

Both jammers line up slightly behind the other skaters [*the blockers*] ... At the whistles signalling for the jam to begin, both teams jostle strategically for position; skaters plant themselves in the way of their opponents, skate full force into members of the opposite team, form ‘walls’ with their teammates, and begin to move in roughly the same direction, anti-clockwise, around the track. Both jammers must pass through, and over-take, the ‘pack’ made up of blockers from both teams. Blockers ... use hip-checks, shoulder-checks, and full-body checks to knock their opponents down or off the track, as well as tactical variations in speed, direction of travel, and pack formation.

Derby re-emerged and expanded rapidly from 2001 in a new form—it was driven predominantly by women. Since then, derby has become a unique sport insofar as it is ‘created by and for women’ (Beaver 2012, 26). Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013, 422) note that in the last decade derby has been ‘reinvented and reclaimed by women as an empowering leisure space where gendered subjectivities are played out through desires for fierce competition, creative expression, and collective pleasures.’ These women are dubbed ‘derby girls’ and their gendered subjectivities take precise forms. Kearney (2011, 285) explains that, ‘Key to understanding contemporary derby and its unique place in women’s sports is its convergence of campy theatricality and fierce athleticism.’ Derby has historically incorporated playful and theatrical qualities, integrating ‘style, costume and attitude’

with elements associated with so-called 'legitimate' sports (Pavlidis 2012, 165). For example, one of the distinctive features of derby culture is the creation of skaters' on-track alter-egos via individual pseudonyms, such as *Miss Creant* and *Joan of Dark*. Skaters' names reflect the parody and inventiveness in derby culture, creating potentially subversive personae, 'foregrounding femaleness while playing with rebellion and power' (Kearney 2011, 285). Similarly, skaters' uniforms (or costumes?) contribute to derby as an alternative sport where women 'eroticize their athletic bodies in ways associated with burlesque via heavy makeup, tight tops, short skirts, and thigh-high stockings' (Kearney 2011, 285). Therefore, the sexualisation of derby players is critically different from that bemoaned by Beaver (above), since it is executed by the actors themselves instead of being exercised upon them from without. Moreover, derby is a physically tough, full contact sport that, in Kane's (1995, 194) terms, offers opportunities for women to 'experience their bodies as strong and powerful and free from male domination'. It is for these reasons that derby is often espoused as a 'feminist' sport (Finley 2010; Kearney 2011; Pavlidis and Connor 2016). Sailors (2013) affirms an emancipatory potential through a sweep of qualities characteristic of the sport and its subcultural scaffolding: (i) the sport's DIY character; (ii) a core aggression constitutive of the definition of masculinity and ideologically at odds with conventional femininity; (iii) simultaneous attachment to elements of conventional femininity such as the preceding revealing clothing; (iv) the extension of the said clothing to women of different body shapes and ages; (v) the parody of conventional femininity; (vi) inhospitality towards 'girl drama' and (vii) the bonds between players.

The preceding characteristics of derby have generated writings that frame the sport as a site for the interrogation of the constellation of questions around heteronomy and autonomy, the normativity of choice and the ambiguities of female sexual expression (see, for instance, Beaver 2016; Carlson 2010; Glorioso 2011; Paul and Blank 2015; Sailors 2013). In this essay, we consider three questions. First, can the preceding parodic hypersexualization of derby players be considered autonomous? Second, if this question is answered in the affirmative, what is the relationship between this autonomy and articulacy? Finally, should the practice be autonomous, might there be features of the sociocultural context which make the parodic hypersexualization ambiguous in its ramifications?

Derby Players' Parodic Hypersexualisation: Autonomous?

The discussion of the remainder of the essay requires some unpacking of two concepts: sexualisation and autonomy.

Sexualisation

Sexualisation is conceived here as a heterogeneous set of first, second or third person practices, responses and attitudes. These practices, responses and attitudes admit of degrees of self-awareness and articulacy. While sexiness, beauty and simply 'looking good' are not identical qualities, the latter two are also in this treatment part of the denotation of the concept elaborated. (These qualities can exist in probably all combinations.) Again, sexiness, beauty and even looking good are not revealed only in a singular 'up and down' episode of looking but are also revealed in temporal trajectories of

experience of persons and their agency. First person practices of sexualisation might be done to get the attention of others, but they need not be. Second and third person practices, responses and attitudes of sexualisation might involve decontextualization, but they need not. Similarly, they might involve objectification, but need not. These characterisations repay some unpacking.

Sexualisation, under this conception, can be performed on one's self, with different objectives and with different degrees of awareness and articulacy. The person who leaves the house of a weekend evening explicitly looking for sex (maybe with a specific individual) might well carry out actions (clothing, scent and comportment, for instance) with luminous self-awareness of their intention to secure sex (maybe with a specific individual). This is likely, however, in its objective and explicitness of the same, to be a comparatively rare frame of self-sexualisation. A more common objective is likely that of appearing sexy, without commitment to the further objective of sex, far less sex with a specific individual. (It is well-known that the wish to appear sexy admits of a range of motivations.) Nor need this objective be articulated to one's self as that of wishing to appear sexy. Furthermore, common modes of self-sexualisation are illustrated in casual, sometimes rushed and sometimes even desultory judgements such as 'Think I look better in this jacket' and 'My hair looks better with the fringe', and also in judgements not articulated but manifest merely in action, such as a quick grab and use of the hairbrush. Derby girls are clearly explicitly aware of their self-sexualisations (and their parodies of the same).

Again, the preceding and more can be done with no intention and even no desire to stimulate sexual interest in anyone else. Richards (1980, 249) observes, 'Women's dress is by no means all designed to please men ... It is *quite* (emphasis in text) possible, as a matter of psychology, for women to wish they were more beautiful without thinking that they would as a result be pursued by a single additional man.' (Richards is at this point critiquing the 'unadorned feminist', who is ideologically opposed to the female sexual pleasing of men, including the pleasure occasioned by appearance. She would likely agree the equivalent about non-heterosexual women, and the point extends to them in any case.) There is no guarantee that derby girls, again, all have the same wishes for the responses they would like to stimulate in spectators.

Second and third person sexualisation should perhaps be separated into two types. There is, first, a type that does not involve any action from anyone, but only the contingent perception of someone as sexy or sexual. (There might be a distinction between sexy and sexual, but it is not important here.) Sexualisation of this kind can be expressed in attributions, e.g. 'You look sexy' (second person) and 'He is sexy' (third person). There is, second, a type that involves extraneous action intended to make someone sexy or sexual or to make them more sexy or sexual. There are many possible examples of this. For instance, someone might buy their wife, husband or partner a carefully selected item of clothing ('You will look sexy in this'), while deliberate media efforts to frame public figures (more often women) as sexy or sexual are legion. Self-sexualisation can naturally coexist with attributions from without. At the same time, persons can be thought sexy (whether vocalised or not) when they have made no effort to be so, or when they do not wish to be so, or when they do not wish it to define or frame them in context.⁴

The unpacking in this paragraph is continuous with the last. Sexualisation from without might involve decontextualization (see, again, Endnote 4 for a pungent example). Davis (2010) offers three species to be found in newspaper and television coverage of sport:

- Deliberate focus on particular, sexually significant body parts for the purpose of sexual titillation
- Attunement to bodily postures that, through freezing or emphasis, are intended to be sexually titillating
- In the case of photographs in either of the preceding categories, an accompanying, frequently punned caption that confirms the moment as one of sexualized comic relief

By objectification, we intend the casting of someone as less than fully human, a mere means rather than an end-in-themselves. Again, sexualisation from without might but need not have this consequence. Objectification arguably comes in degrees and fragments into practices, responses and attitudes, which need not all be present. (See Mcleod 2010; Nussbaum 1995)

Autonomy

Autonomy, literally translated as ‘giving the law to one’s self’, is (like ideology) a diffuse notion. Dworkin (1988, 6) elaborates: ‘It is equated with dignity, integrity, individuality, independence, responsibility and self-knowledge. It is identified with qualities of self-assertion, with critical reflection, with freedom from obligation, with absence of external causation, with knowledge of one’s own interests.’ The preceding conditions are not all the same and it is likely fruitless to try to unpick and fit them into a decontextualized ranking. Similarly, the application of any of them is liable to be difficult in context. They should not be thought to yield an easy test of whether someone’s behaviour or character traits are autonomous or heteronomous (the *other* giving the law to one). They provide, instead, a framework which can be applied in context-sensitive ways. Again, they do not commit to an artificially atomistic subject whose autonomy depends upon extrication from one’s social, cultural, economic and political situatedness. The latter is an arguably incoherent ideal, neglectful of Foucault’s point that situational conditions such as the preceding are *required* for subjecthood and are unavoidably inscribed with power relations (see Sailors and Weaving 2017, 433–435). Nor do they cast autonomy and heteronomy as concepts that cut psychosocial reality ‘at the joints.’ In this way, the concept of autonomy is arguably like the concepts of education, religion and culture. What is it to be educated or religious or cultured? (For powerful treatments of education and culture respectively, see Carr 2003; Eagleton 2000.) How educated is ‘educated’? How religious is ‘religious’? How cultured is ‘cultured’? While there must be limits to what can count as education, religion, culture and autonomy if these notions are to retain conceptual purchase, there would seem no context-free answer to how educated is ‘educated’, how religious is ‘religious’, how cultured is ‘cultured’ and how autonomous is ‘autonomous’. Where the social pressures of gender are concerned, particularly pertinent to the question of autonomy, arguably, are critical reflection and the absence of obligations contingently arising merely because of one’s sex. Therefore, a woman who uncritically

holds a socially inculcated belief that as a woman, she fails if she does not succeed in a heterosexual relationship and raise children does not act autonomously if she jejunely marries the first willing man and strives for immediate pregnancy regardless of circumstance.⁵ Nor does a man conscripted into military service against his wishes.

If persons act and mould themselves in ways that map neatly onto the ideological desiderata of their milieu, it seems legitimate to ask if their choices to do so are autonomous or heteronomous. The ‘cultural dope’⁶ view, as Sailors (2013, 255) casts it in the case of gender pressures upon women,

denies any degree of agency to women as it sees any choice that agrees with the values of society as determined by society and as compliance with the aims of society. If a woman chooses to act in accord with convention, she is seen as passively accepting the norm rather than actively choosing to embrace it. Any act that is consistent with the desires which a society encourages one to have disqualifies the actor from agency.

However, that a certain behaviour or character trait is strongly encouraged by one’s environment does not entail that one cannot make an autonomous choice to do or manifest it. There must be conceptual and existential space to autonomously converge with social pressures in one’s behaviour or character. For instance, there must be conceptual and existential space for the autonomous choice of a black man from a relatively poor, racially stratified and socially illiberal environment to become a boxer,⁷ of a woman to devote a period of her life to home, husband and children, of a white working-class man to work in heavy industry as the family’s sole or main ‘breadwinner’, of someone with a strict religious upbringing to devoutly adhere to their native faith, and of a woman to pose nude, enter beauty contests, work in the sex industry or hypersexualise (maybe parodically) herself in the derby arena. As Sailors and Weaving (2017, 6), again, put it for the case of women athletes, ‘We need some way to grant women athletes autonomous agency even when they act in a way that is consistent with the desires society encourages them to have.’ Whether such actions are personally and socially healthy are, again, open (albeit regularly difficult) questions, not foreclosed by the fact that they converge with social pressures. Such convergence might coexist with knowledge of one’s own interests and a critically aware judgment of societal interests.

Derby Girls and Autonomy

Do the hypersexualising derby girls typically have, for instance, a critical awareness of the relevant sociocultural force fields within which they are situated? Do they, again, assess external influences rather than just react to them? Do they have knowledge of their own interests? Scepticism might be a temptation, since hypersexualising female practices seem to ring sonorously of patriarchal power. But, again, we should not be so quick to cast derby girls as cultural dopes.

First, the notion of the ‘female apologetic’, i.e. the performance of emphasised femininity or sexualised self-presentation, fails to account for women—such as derby girls—who use emphasised femininity or sexualised self-presentation as a way of parodying gender norms (Beaver 2016; Broad 2001; Hardy 2015). Research on roller derby, again, points to ways in which female athletes attempt to subvert femininity through

exaggerated use of traditional feminine markers. In a recent study, Paul and Blank (2015, 65), following Butler (1990), suggest:

... roller derby could be read as a parody of exploited sexuality, in which adopting a practice out of its usual context can show the instability and contractedness of the norm being parodied.⁸

Carlson (2010) similarly concludes that female roller derby players combine hyper-feminine dress with an aggressive full-contact sport as a means of satirizing gender norms.

Second, the 'female apologetic' and its conceptual cousin of the cultural dope cast expressions of femininity and sexuality solely in terms of male domination and female oppression. Only women who behave 'unapologetically' by eschewing or parodying gender norms are celebrated for their expression of agency in resisting gender pressures. This picture is incomplete. It leaves no room to consider the experience of joy or sense of empowerment that some women feel from performing an overtly sexualised or feminine persona. The view of women as passive victims of oppressive masculine ideologies (Davis 1991) is implausible against women's own accounts of why they act in accordance with the cultural requirements of femininity. This is evident if we consider the example of female athletes who choose to pose nude for mainstream magazines. A recent example comes from Ronda Rousey, a high profile Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighter. According to the Foucauldian approach of Sailors and Weaving (2017, 432), Rousey can act as a transgressive agent, participating in a hyper-masculine combat sport with an uncompromising and aggressive attitude, while 'embracing and enacting the image expected of society' by posing in body paint photos for *SISI* and nude for *ESPN*. While acknowledging that such acts can be both empowering and alienating, Sailors and Weaving (2017, 437) conclude that 'Rousey acted autonomously even though she acted in accord with convention'. This conclusion is grounded on Sailors and Weaving's (2017, 436) premise that 'one governs oneself by working through the ways in which power relations seek to constitute the self and choosing to be identified in some particular ways rather than in others.' Rousey's 'Glamazon' persona embodies this species of choice. ('Glamazon' appears to be Sailors and Weaving's label and not one self-attributed by Rousey.) Similarly, a number of recent empirical and conceptual studies of women's roller derby have suggested participants construct hyper-feminine, sexualised personae as a 'pleasurable expression of their sexual agency' (Beaver 2016, 639), not as a means to 'apologise' for their involvement in a full contact and aggressive or violent sport (Sailors 2013). In Beaver's (2016) ethnographic study, 'roller girls' described the decision to wear provocative and revealing uniforms as 'both pleasurable and playful'. As one participant revealed:

... I am an athlete but there's also a part of me that's like, 'You know what? I'm thirty-one and when I put this on, I'm damn sexy. Oh my god, I'm damn sexy.' Right? And so, it's kind of that feel good about yourself and being an athlete and again that sex entertainment, and athleticism all come into play. What woman doesn't want to be sexy, entertaining, and athletic?

The preceding paragraph illustrates the critical point that, as Eagleton (1991, 45) puts it, 'a successful ruling ideology must engage significantly with genuine wants, needs and desires.' Ideology cannot create subjects from scratch. Here, if women have no prior inclination to be sexy or cannot find in a manufactured inclination a connection to something they already value, then an ideology that oppressively champions female sexiness has

no prospect of success.⁹ At the same time, subject positions that essentially outdistance ideology create the Achilles' heel of the latter, as Eagleton (1991, 46) again articulates:

Any ruling power requires a degree of intelligence and initiative from its subjects, if only for its values to be internalized; and this resourcefulness is at once essential for the smooth reproduction of the system and a permanent possibility of reading its edicts 'otherwise'. If the oppressed must be alert enough to follow the rulers' instructions, they are therefore conscious enough to be able to challenge them.

The derby girls provide luminous illustration of such challenge and 'alternative' reading.

Autonomy and Articulacy

The essay so far has tried to stake out a conceptual and existential space in which one can act in ways encouraged (maybe at least partly for repressive reasons) by one's society, and yet act autonomously. The foremost site of illustration is women's self-sexualisation and the practices of derby girls in particular. If the account so far is sound, then a woman can robustly sexualise herself, yet do so autonomously.

It might be that a conspicuous feature of the preceding illustrations is their self-conscious, articulate character. Roller derby is scaffolded by a conscious mythology of sexual stereotype and parody (most luminously expressed in the player stage names), and the immediately preceding research reinforces the encouragement of players to reflectively articulate their sexualising behaviour in the context of a society which has repressively sexualised women and cast aggressive sport combat as femininity's antithesis. Similarly, Ronda Rousey's case involves a transformation into, as Sailors and Weaving (2017, 11) put it, 'a certain mode of being with which she wishes to identify-a Glamazon'. Sailors and Weaving (2017, 438), again, summarise the condition of autonomy that they consider Rousey to have satisfied:

She has engaged in a self-reflective process - examining the aspects of her identity, realizing that these aspects are the effects of power relations which she has the capacity to resist in refusing acceptance, concluding that she wishes to accept identification of an aspect of herself as sex-object.¹⁰

Sailors and Weaving (2017, 438) acknowledge that the preceding self-reflective process is not open to the view of others but take it to be evidenced by 'various acts of transgression' they cite in their essay. This is continuous with something else that should be observed, namely that in using 'sex-object' as they do above, Sailors and Weaving are not employing the conception of objectification to which we subscribe above. They are not saying that Rousey chooses to identify as a mere means to an end, as something less than fully human. They are saying, in our taxonomy, that Rousey chooses to be aggressively sexualised. Again, all we seem to know about Rousey suggests that she would not embrace any sexual identity that were not proactive and strong.

The preceding illustrations raise intriguing questions. How articulate need self-identification be in order to count as autonomous? How conceptually advanced need the 'self-reflective process' be in order to safeguard one from heteronomy? Ronda Rousey, for instance, seems someone of considerable ideological- and self-awareness. Derby names, again, attest to stage personae, understood and chosen for their piquant signifying properties. However, it is unlikely that all derby players, for instance, have equal felicity in the

articulation of patriarchal power and their acts of resistance. Furthermore, it is likely that many women, again, sexualise themselves in workaday fashion, enjoy doing so, have clear awareness of female sexualisation's implication in patriarchal power, but do not articulate and theorise their self-sexualisation to a particularly advanced degree. One banal reason is that many women's lives are too busy and congested for high definition ideological awareness, far less burlesque or otherwise arresting troubleshooting of ideology's most potent objects. It might be that a substantial number of women would understand and accept the rationales advanced by some derby players and some other women, but have not articulated such for themselves and in some cases might struggle to do so, despite the hyperreal hullabaloo of social media identity performances in names, photographs, videos, pastiche, and habitation of diffuse discourses and dialogue. When such women sexualise themselves, should they therefore be considered to exercise—at most—only a lesser form of autonomy? Are their actions and psychologies something less than fully autonomous? It is not clear that this is so. To help see this, it is useful to recall McNamee's (2008, 37) recognition that sportspersonship might be properly attributable to

young children who have been properly habituated in the best standards of human excellence in their sports, or indeed those who lack moral maturity but are nonetheless uncritically reflective but good, or even those incapable of critical self-reflection or with severely diminished capacities for self-critical awareness ...

We should, furthermore, recall McNamee's (2008, 37–8) self-chastening story from a short sabbatical in 2006 at the Norwegian University of Sport Sciences. He attended an international competition-festival (Ridderenet) for disability skiers, an event that included competitors who are amputees or blind or deaf or suffering from 'other debilitating conditions.' McNamee first pitied the athletes, but in the process of instruction out of what he came to view as that 'untoward' emotion, he (McNamee 2008, 38) realised luminously that they too are capable of sportspersonship—'that they may have appreciated, recognised, taken on board the exemplars of courageous, honest, tenacious competitors and imitated their conduct so as to make it their own.'

Neither of McNamee's immediately preceding cases should be thought to straitjacket us into a binary choice between articulacy and non-articulacy. Despite the primacy of habituation and exemplars, there are unlikely to be any children or any disabled skiers unable to articulate to any degree a rationale for sports person like behaviour or to invoke any constituent virtues (such as courage or honesty) in its defence. Many a 7-year-old, for instance, will be able to say and understand, 'She was lying there injured, so we couldn't just play on.' And it might be that women who autonomously self-sexualise, including derby girls, similarly figure at different points on the line of articulacy and are similarly indebted to early (and maybe later) exemplars. Such a woman need be neither a self-ironist nor a demon of ideological insight and eloquence. She need only have learned to a serviceable degree the material and symbolic histories that have scaffolded patriarchal subjugation of women, the role female sexualisation—from without and within—has played in that subjugation, and the legitimate value (and legitimate self-pleasure) in making herself sexy.¹¹ The autonomous choice of a woman to make herself sexually provocative (or beautiful or desirable), even in ways encouraged by her society, should not be over-cognitivated. There are plenty such women who are autonomous as said, but who inhabit different discursive, symbolic and intrapersonal worlds from (say) Ronda

Rousey or the most self-consciously significant¹² of derby girls. These women probably include some derby girls, who should not be considered to manifest a less genuine form of autonomy in their self-sexualisations and accompanying parodies. They have, in words used by Wolf¹³ (2008, 508), minimally sufficient ability cognitively and normatively to recognise and appreciate the world for what it is. They see the point of the parodic flourishes in relation to how the world is and has been.

Social Context and Ramifications

So far, we have discussed the importance (and the complexity) of recognising the agency of female athletes who choose to act in ways that chime with convention. We have argued that the decision to embrace prevailing femininity norms cannot be cast blithely as heteronomous. Nonetheless, it would be premature to dismiss traditional feminist concerns about the oppressive features of femininity and the role of sport in confirming discourses that promote masculine hegemony. The above discussion raises a number of important questions for sport feminism. For example, to what extent is the autonomous choice to embody emphasised femininity or hypersexualised personae empowering? Are such choices potentially liberating for the individual or for women collectively, or both? There are several issues to consider in relation to these questions.

First, there are the possible limitations of gender parody as a feminist strategy or intervention. As outlined above, numerous authors (Carlson 2010; Finley 2010; Gieseler 2014; Sailors 2013) have examined the potential for roller derby to act as a means of parodying and mocking gender norms. It seems clear that derby skaters might in part emphasise their sexuality as a means to ‘undo gender’ and challenge the gender norms that equate athleticism with masculinity (Beaver 2016). For some researchers, parodying sexualities in roller derby has significant subversive potential. Gieseler (2014, 772) argues, for example, ‘Derby functions as a performative survival strategy, illustrating how marginalized subjects might resist and transform oppressive conventions of sexual embodiment and expression.’

Yet, while recognising that parody has the ‘potential to undermine gender norms’ (Sailors 2013, 252), it is important to recognise that the possibilities of gender parody are *promising* but not *limitless* (Beaver 2016; Cohen 2008; Sailors 2013). One problem is the possibility of the ‘subjective meanings’, which female athletes attach to sexualised self-presentations being misinterpreted by others. In relation to roller derby, for example, the ‘parodic nature of the skaters’ hyper-femininity’ (Sailors 2013, 252) might be misread by the audience (or relevant others) as the enactment of conventional gender norms.¹⁴ Finley (2010) argues that some of the ‘derby theatrics’ are played out to ensure that ‘the audience is in on the joke’. Even so, as Beaver (2016) points out, ‘context and audience reception matter when analyzing sexualized feminine self-presentation.’ So, while women in roller derby might experience the sexualised and parodic aspects of the sport as empowering, ‘they cannot control the meanings that others attribute to their performances’ (Beaver 2016, 652). They are vulnerable to decontextualized third person sexualisation and even objectification.

Second, it is important to recognise that athletes’ choices about self-presentation remain situated in gendered social structures. At the same time as acknowledging the potential of individual agency and the possibility of autonomous choice, it is also

important not to lose sight of 'structural inequalities that exist in male-dominated societies' (Beaver 2016, 643). The derby athletes in Beaver's (2016) study who described the sexualised, feminine uniforms as empowering were all too aware of the pervasive and oppressive features of sexualised femininity. For example, Beaver (2016) suggests that the choice to wear hyper-sexualised attire 'was at least partially informed by the need to draw a crowd'. The need to draw a crowd and measures towards satisfaction of that need are not a priori problematic, but the measures are problematic when they appeal to contextually problematic spectator appetites. Paul and Blank (2015, 64) therefore find it appropriate to note that '... a number of derby athletes feel it necessary to increase interest in their sport by "selling sex"'. Displays of sexualised femininity in roller derby (and sport generally), again, cannot be understood as *either* oppressive or liberating *tout court*: 'For many skaters, wearing short skirts, fishnets, and halter-tops can be *both* empowering *and* oppressive' (Beaver 2016, 654). In a parallel example, Davis (1991) considers the possibility that women who decide to undergo cosmetic surgery can at once become 'agents of transformation', experiencing 'exhilaration about the decision *while* disapproving of the practice itself' (emphasis ours). Indeed, some reflections of Davis's (1991) seem to position such women as embodiments of the critical awareness that Dworkin and Wolf see as constitutive of autonomy:

Taking agency seriously does not mean that a critique of the oppressive features of femininity and the 'fashion-beauty complex' must be abandoned. In fact, women who willingly undergo cosmetic surgery will presumably know better than anyone just how oppressive the norms of feminine beauty can be. Although women who engage in cosmetic surgery are complying with the cultural constraints of femininity, they do not necessarily agree with them. It is important to uncover how women reproduce cultural discourses of beauty and femininity while displaying awareness of the oppressiveness of these very same discourses.

Within a broader heteronormative society, it is problematic to view hypersexual self-presentations (parodic or otherwise) of roller athletes as 'an end point of women's empowerment' (Beaver 2016, 654). Whether these 'alternative femininities' (Finley 2010, 383) are of temporary value or whether they have a lasting effect on problematic discourses is unclear. The extent to which 'choosing to be sexy' while engaging in a full contact, aggressive sport brings lasting individual or political empowerment is also uncertain. Thus, while there is good reason to reject the idea that sexual expression is inevitably repressive, we ought to be equally suspicious of what Beaver (2016) calls the 'rhetoric of choice' that positions women's sexualisation as 'beyond reproach and constructs feminist critiques of women's objectification as outdated' (Beaver 2016, 643–44).

Finally, insofar as sexualised self-presentations are potentially empowering, we need to consider the extent to which such self-presentations are liberating in individualistic terms or collectively for women (a question that can be posed in the Ronda Rousey case, too). In an extensive discussion of the possibilities and contradictions of media representation for female athletes, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) discuss female athletes who consider their appearance and sex appeal as source of empowerment. They argue that women who construct sporting identities that call attention to their sexuality are not 'naïve women who buy into a false sense of power' (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 85). Instead, they argue that female athletes who embrace sexuality and, more specifically, heterosexuality '... know exactly what they are doing' (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 85):

They know, and they do it all the same, both because they do not experience themselves as manipulated and powerless, and because like many others in the MTV generation who are fighting high debt-to-income ratios and diminished job prospects, they see rightly visibility in the media as the only “real” outlet for the achievement of selfhood this culture offers (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, 85).

Similarly, Bruce (2016, 370) argues that feminist accounts of sport and sexuality need to ‘recognise female athletes’ agency’ and take into consideration ‘the current, commodified, mediascape in which bodies of both male and female athletes are re-presented as sexy and attractive’. According to Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce (2017, 366), the market potential of femininity and female sexuality fused with athleticism embodies ‘the increasingly common “Pretty and Powerful” third-wave sportswoman’. Third-wave feminists reject what they describe as the Second Wave feminist critique of objectification and argue instead that beauty and sexiness can communicate power, self-possession and achievement (Bruce 2016; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017).

Nonetheless, despite the recent optimism about female athletes who do not have to choose between femininity, sexuality and athleticism (Bruce 2016; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017), it seems clear that there is a counterpoint in need of recognition.¹⁵ Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017, 378) draw attention to the ‘complex workings of power on and through sports women’s bodies’ by applying three feminist critiques—third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism—to the social media self-representation of professional surfer Alana Blanchard. The authors draw attention to the limitations of neoliberal discourses for feminism. First, they recognise that the ‘mode of femininity’ personified by sportswomen such as Blanchard—‘athletically competent, strong and beautiful’ (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017, 366) is not available to all:

... it is primarily sportswomen like Blanchard who embody desirable White Western femininities who appear to be best positioned to be valued for, and exploit, their embodiment for strategic gain.

They report increasing concerns among professional surfers, surfing journalists and academics, that the focus on ‘young, blonde, bronzed, semi-naked female surfers is effectively silencing and marginalizing the increasing diversity of female surfers’ (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017, 374).

Second, they point to Blanchard’s failure to engage with the oppressive gendered structures within professional surfing that continue to affect female surfers. Instead, they argue, ‘Blanchard’s public representation is predominately individualized’ (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017, 376). In a related discussion of women in professional surfing, Brennan (2016) disputes the optimistic reading of the feminist potential of sports avowed by third-wave feminists such as Heywood and Dworkin (2003). He argues that such praise of surfing’s emancipatory potential ‘fits within a wider neoliberal feminist movement that, rather than asking wide-ranging questions about collective social justice for women, instead looks to frame liberation in individualistic terms’ (Brennan 2016, 910). Burke (2004) similarly observes that the said tendency towards sexualization, alongside the economic subordination of women’s sport, leads a few women athletes to profitably collude in their sexualization, reinforcing an underlying definition of the situation that disempowers the majority of women athletes.

The preceding reflections are by no means perfectly applicable to roller derby. There is, for instance, probably no one in derby of the status of Alana Blanchard (or Ronda Rousey), and probably no small set of performers similarly colluding profitably in their sexualization. However, the reflections suggest vital currency in traditional feminist critiques of oppressive gendered structures in sport, critiques that derby cannot afford to ignore. While Heywood and Dworkin (2003, 51), again, argue that sport has the potential to advance feminist goals by *stealth*, drawing attention to feminist issues ‘without provoking the kneejerk social stigmas attached to the word *feminist* ...’ (emphasis in-text), Brennan (2016) rightly warns against ‘... rejecting wholesale the value of second-wave critiques of oppression’. Third-wave feminist critiques that focus on ‘women’s embodied forms of agency’ (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce 2017, 376) must not overlook the broader social forces which continue to shape the lives of female athletes and women in sport (and broader society).¹⁶ Derby’s very acts of parody look over their shoulders at these forces, which they require for their intelligibility. While this might not inscribe the parodic acts with a ‘crippling ambiguity’ (Willis 1994, 39), it does reinforce the significance of the forces and (in turn) the underlying definition of the situation considered apt for parody.

Conclusion

If the argument of this essay is sound, then actions or character traits that converge with societal norms are not *ipso facto* heteronomous. Such actions or character traits are autonomous when they are not coerced and belong to one who has adequate critical awareness of their sociocultural moorings. There is, therefore, conceptual and existential space for the autonomous choice of a woman to hypersexualise herself, illustrated vividly in ‘Glamazon’ Ronda Rousey and in the parodic hypersexualisations of derby girls. Such autonomous choices are not essentially characterised by conscious and advanced articulation but are manifest also in the workaday self-sexualisations of less articulate and less self-conscious women and quite possibly in the parodic hypersexualisations of less articulate and less self-conscious derby girls.

However, the broader ramifications of female sexualisation in sport in general and in derby in particular are apt for interrogation and cannot be swatted away by the Third Wave feminist motifs of choice and empowerment through beauty and sexiness. Female hypersexualisation, parodic or otherwise, takes place within gendered social structures. In derby, the need to draw a crowd (not an a priori problematic motivation) and the possibility of socially scaffolded, jejune spectator misinterpretation of parodic hypersexualisation yield interstices of ambiguity. Derby’s parodic flourishes, again, essentially look over their shoulders at the decontextualized sexualisation from without of women in sport and elsewhere. Furthermore, the empowerment which can accrue from an athletic feminine sexuality might be equally ambiguous in its ramifications. The empowerment of individual women might not generate a collective social justice for women in sport, but might, given the preceding gendered social structures, court the reinforcement of the epistemic and political subordination. Therefore, abandonment of Second Wave feminist critiques of oppression seems premature.

Notes

1. For systematic treatment of the heterogeneous concept of ideology, see Eagleton (1991).

2. Strictly, there could be outlying counterexamples, such as consensual sado-masochistic relationships and possibly sports such as boxing and mixed martial arts. We are grateful to a reviewer for this observation.
3. For powerful argument that sexism that disadvantages women cannot be eliminated without attending to all forms of sexism, see Benatar (2012).
4. A well-known case occurred in 2015 on the professional network, LinkedIn. (Currey 2015) This is an example of the contingent perception of someone as sexy (the vocalising of which was unwelcome).
5. Eagleton (1991, 110) adverts to the connotations of 'structural dissemblance and mystification' the concept of ideology must have if it is not to be 'entirely vacuous'. Structural dissemblance and mystification are not hard to find within gender ideology. For instance, girls are regularly socialised through fairy tales and other sites of mythologizing into visions of romance, marriage and romantic male figures that tend to bear scarce resemblance to the reality they experience.
6. This term is originally Davis's (1991). 'Dupe' and its cognate, 'duped', have sometimes been used. In this essay, we follow Davis and Sailors by using 'dope' throughout.
7. See Wacquant (1992).
8. Saltman (2010) argues in similar spirit that male bodybuilding speaks parodically to the constructed character of hegemonic masculinity.
9. In her compelling treatment, Paglia (1995) asserts that 'feminism has been simplistic in arguing that female archetypes were politically motivated falsehoods by men' (17), that sexuality 'cannot always be understood by social models, which feminism, as an heir of nineteenth-century utilitarianism, insists on imposing on it' (19), and that stereotypes are 'the west's stunning sexual personae, the vehicles of art's assault against nature'. (57)
10. Gleaves and Lehrbach (2016, 321), in a powerful treatment, observe that 'Gender forms powerful organizing principles in individuals' lives and can constitute significant and positive aspects of individuals' identity. Gendered narratives can include a positive sense of traditionally defined masculinity or femininity as well as ways individuals might wish to express their unique sense of gender identity.'
11. Richards (1980, 227) notes wisely, 'There really is a world of difference between deciding you must reluctantly stop putting much effort into something which has been given too high a priority by tradition, and in treating that something as inherently *pernicious*' (emphasis in text).
12. This description is that of Carlson (2010)
13. These words are part of an essay that treats free will and responsibility. The treatment might be problematic, but the said description can be invoked without importation of the treatment's questionable elements.
14. Davis (2012, 7–9) makes the equivalent point about the repertoires of the Ladies of Besiktas.
15. Gill (2012) observes that 'there is often a problematic elision of pleasure, agency and empowerment, such that merely getting enjoyment from something is held up as intrinsically transgressive and empowering for women and therefore to be championed.' Gill (2012) also notes portentously how some academics seem to echo marketers who use a postfeminist language of 'liberation' and 'empowerment' to promote to women everything from vibrators to burlesque shows, while similar products or experiences are never sold to men in such terms.
16. For some commentary on how these forces have been thrown into sharp relief by the Covid pandemic, see Davis and Weaving (forthcoming).

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